

Louvain School of Management

Women in Esport: Exploring the overt and subtle barriers of women in Esports

Author(s): Le-Anh VO
Supervisor(s): Prof. Dr. Jammaers
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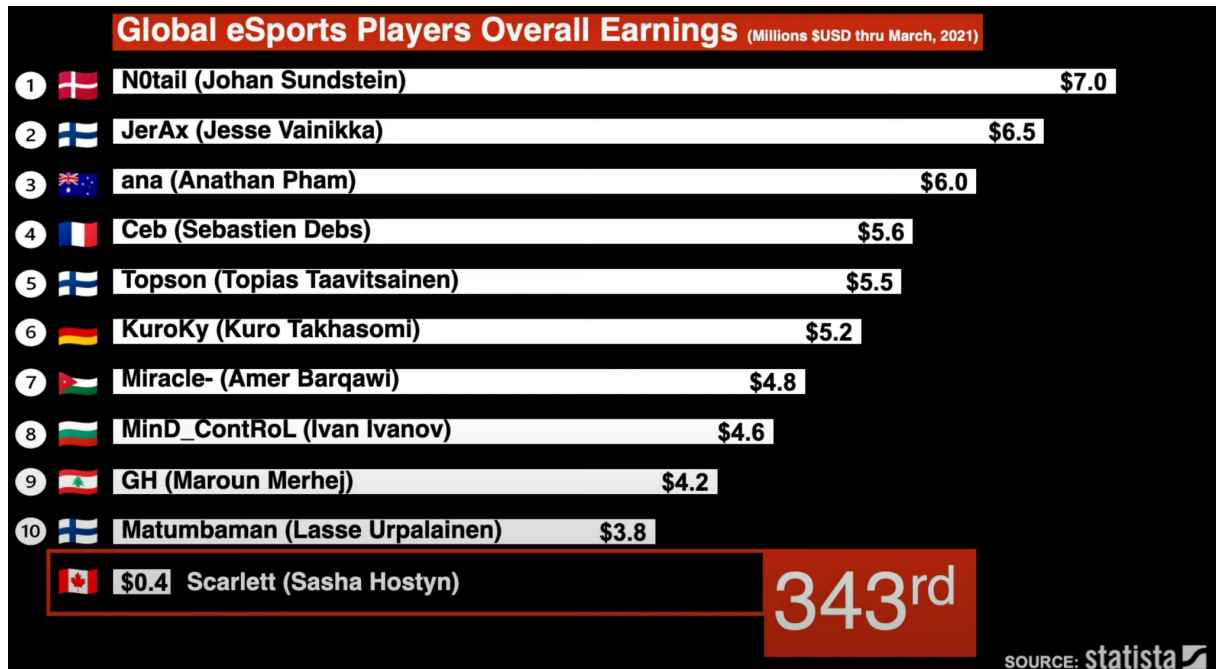
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Introduction

The history of Esports goes back to the 1950s. This one has changed a lot from its birth to its economic model which has evolved from small competitions to global competitions in stadiums. Players and teams are now under contract and are mostly sponsored by big brands. There is also an evolution in the broadcasting methods.

Today, there are very few women in competitions and in the video game industry. They are very few on the podiums of Esport. We observe a very big inequality in competition. The industry has been around since the 1950s and has grown globally to be worth over a billion dollars. The rapidly growing pile of dollars and esports is not just made up of the revenues of game developers such as Sony or Epic Games, but rather consists of top professional gamers who are paid millions to play. If we look at the top 10 earners in the esports industry, the lowest earn 3 million US dollars. All of them are men. The same goes for the top 50, the top 100, all the way down to the 343rd Canadian player Scarlett who only earns a little over \$400,000. (Baldino, 2022)

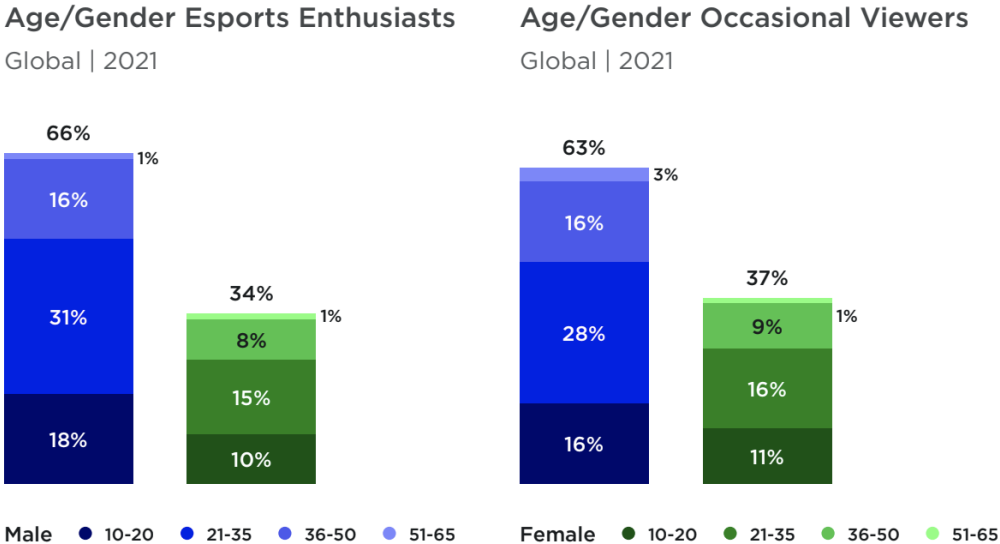
Figure 1. Global Esports Players Overall Earnings (Baldino, 2022) (Statista, 2022)



While women make up nearly 50% of video game players, they only make up 20% of the esports industry, including gamers, designers, programmers in the business operations behind them.

Studies show that women comprise 35% of eSports players (Interpret, 2019), but only 5% of professional players (Hilbert, 2019), which means that women players rarely compete at the topmost level of eSports (Rogstad, 2021). The numbers are improving over the years but the gap is still very wide among worldwide esports fans. While worldwide esports fans tend to be young and male, the percentage of women interested in esports has increased over the years. In 2021, women represented 34% of esports enthusiasts. Of the esports enthusiasts, 24% are between 21 and 65 years old, while the remaining 10% are between 10 and 20 years old. (Newzoo, 2022)

Figure 2. Percentage of Esports enthusiast & Occasion viewers by Age and gender (Newzoo, 2022)

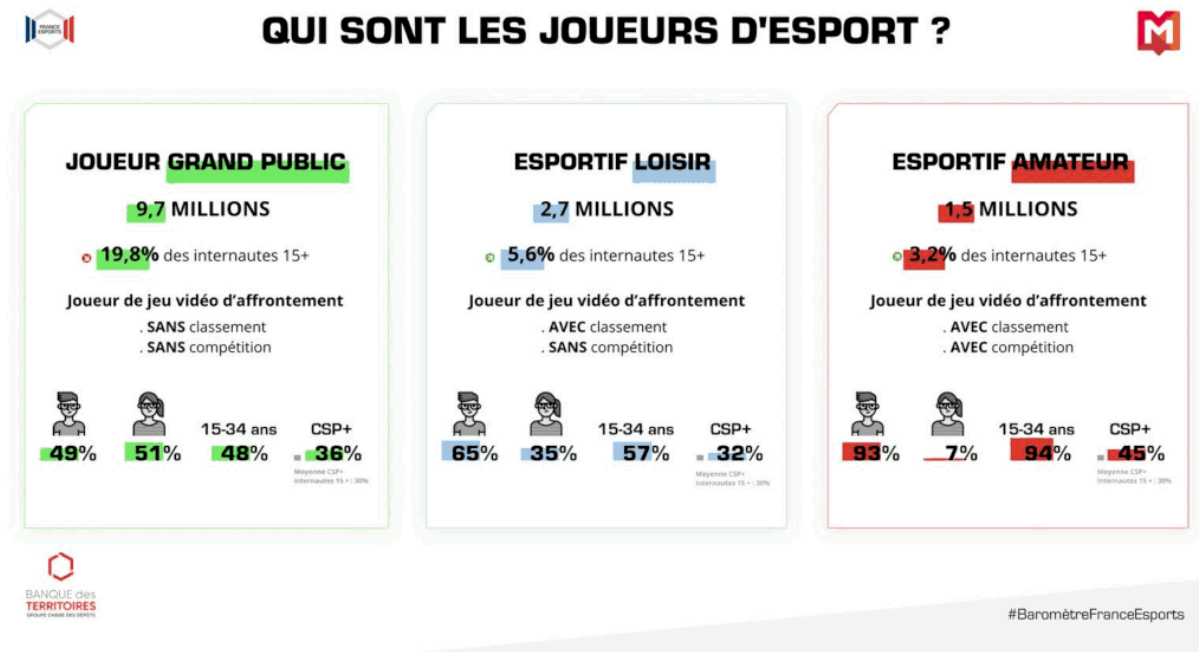


Women are discriminated in game and even generally. The Esport competitions are, however mixed, there is no reason not to include women in the Esport world. However, just their presence causes the public and spectators astonishment. They find themselves judged and are sometimes forced to prove themselves on stage to silence their detractors. All this because of stereotypes, "women would not have the level or not the mental strength, not enough winning to evolve in competition". (Newzoo, 2022)

Le Baromètre France Esport published figures concerning the number of esport players in France in 2021. It constitutes first of all the number of occasional players who play video games for the general public, including also mobile video games, as a hobby, that is to say people who play without competition and without ranking. We can see that out of 9.7 million gamers, the number of women even exceeds men by 2% in 2021. There are as many women who play video games as men in the world of the general public. However, in the world of

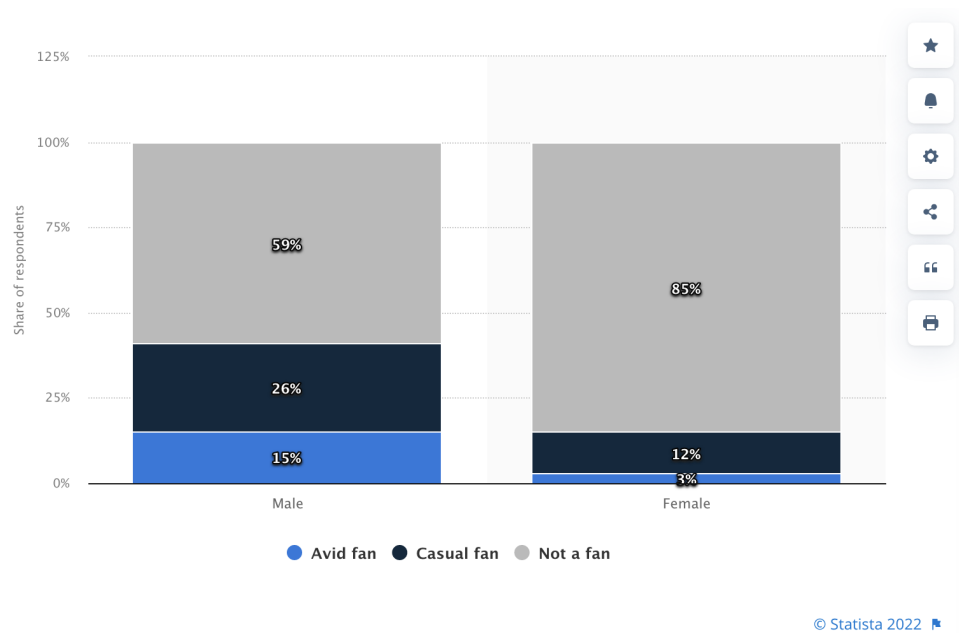
lucrative esports, i.e. esports with a ranking but without competition, out of 2.7 million people, the number is already starting to drop drastically to 35% compared to 65% of men. Finally, even worse without the amateur esports with ranking and competitions where the number of female players is in free fall at only 7% against 93% of men. (Le Baromètre Esport France, 2021)

Figure 3. Who's the Esports players in France ? (Le Baromètre Esport France, 2021)



Furthermore, the following graph shows us the low level of interest of women in esports in the United States in September 2021. There are only 12% of women who are casual fans compared to 26% of men. For avid fans, there are only 3% of women compared to 15% of men. (Gough, 2022)

Figure 4. Level of interest in eSports in the United States as of September 2021, by gender
(Gough, 2022) (Statista, 2022)



In this work, I will talk a lot about sex and gender, so it is imperative to differentiate between them. The Council of Europe differentiates them and defines them as follows: "Sex" refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that differentiate males from females (such as gonads, reproductive organs, chromosomes, hormones)." Furthermore, "sex is assigned at birth and sex can be changed in the case of transsexuals who are born with a different "gender" identity, so sex change surgeries will be performed. On the other hand, "gender is a social, psychological and cultural construction that is carried out within the socialization process. Different societies and cultures may therefore have different conceptions of what is "masculine" or "feminine"". "Gender is very personal and unique to each individual: some people recognize their gender identity from childhood, others only later. Gender intersects with other categories, such as social class, skin color, ethnicity or disability. Gender is something we express (gender expression), sometimes intentionally, sometimes unthinkingly. We communicate our gender in many ways, such as the way we dress, move, wear our hair and interact with others." (Le conseil de l'Europe, 2022)

The topic was chosen because it is interesting to discover the reason why women are so little represented in the Esports industry. Esports is still a very young industry, but it is already of a colossal size. Moreover, there are very few studies about esports that gather barriers and obstacles for women in the field. It is therefore interesting to add a contribution with this thesis. The objective of this thesis is to question all the barriers that women players encounter in the Esport world, to be able to identify the different discriminations that they encounter. I

already played a lot of online video games but I had never asked myself questions about the fact that women were discriminated against and about the fact that women were so little valued. That is why I chose this topic to research and try to determine the obstacles and solutions that are available to them despite the fact that Esports is basically mixed thanks to the various interviews conducted with 16 players and stakeholders.

This thesis is divided into different parts: The first is a literature review with a section on gender stereotypes and their impact on women's careers. The second part of the literature review describes the history of esports, its stakeholders, its different games and shows women known in esports. The next part of this review shows the different barriers that women may face in esports. The final part of the review will talk about the gender stereotypes in Esport found and their impact. Then, the thesis will detail the methodology applied: the interest of doing a qualitative study, the themes addressed in the questionnaire, the diversity of the sample and the presentation of the results. The next part will present the findings and discussion of the answers of the 16 professional and occasional players and stakeholders interviewed. It will review the different types of remarks experienced, their responses to these remarks, stereotypes and the barriers that hinder them in their participation in Esports and it will link my impressions and findings from the different stakeholders and my theoretical research.. As in any thesis, this work will talk about the limitations encountered during its conception. Also, Recommendations on how to improve gender balance in esports will be presented along with their advantages and disadvantages. The thesis will end with a conclusion that will summarize the entire research topic.

Literature Review

I will start by talking about gender stereotypes and their impact on women's careers. Then, I will describe esports, its definition, its history and evolution, its stakeholders, the different types of games that make it up and the female role models in the esports universe. I will talk about barriers to women's equal participation in esports too. We will be able to distinguish different barriers related to the context as well as to the individual level. Finally, I will talk about the gender stereotypes in Esports.

Gender stereotypes and their impact on women's career

Gender stereotypes are a serious obstacle to true equality between men and women and fuel sexism. They are preconceptions that arbitrarily assign women and men to gender-determined

and gender-restricted roles. Gender stereotypes can limit the development of girls' and boys' innate talents and abilities, and can limit women's and men's experiences in school and work, and life chances in general. Gender stereotypes are the result and cause of deep-seated attitudes, values, norms and prejudices towards women. They are used to justify and perpetuate the historical superiority of men over women and the sexist behavior that prevents women from succeeding. (Conseil de l'Europe, 2022)

The Brussels Gender Equality Council defines it as follows: "Stereotypes are shared beliefs about personal characteristics, usually personality traits, but often also behaviors, of a group of people. Stereotypes about men and women in the labor market concern the performance of certain occupations or behaviors that are perceived as typical of one sex and therefore natural for people in that group. On the other hand, this behavior or this profession is perceived as unnatural when it is performed by a person of the other sex. For example, we find a majority of women nurses and men in computer science and we find that women are by nature good with others and men are good technicians. Stereotypes lead to a 'naturalization' of women's and men's skills." (Conseil Bruxellois de l'égalité entre les femmes et les hommes, 2016)

These gender stereotypes may be due to several factors. A press article mentions that since childhood, parents, teachers, peers, or society in general (via advertising, for example), give often unconsciously small seeds in the brain, orienting future choices. And sometimes, these little seeds are impregnated with stereotypes. The classic pattern: children are usually taught early on that there are typical girl activities and typical boy activities. This learning can even be embedded in very small actions. It has been proven, for example, that parents, from the moment a baby is born, adapt their behavior according to the child's sex. This can be seen, for example, in the way they carry a baby: more vigorously for a boy and more carefully for a girl. The process is exactly the same in traditional sports, little boys are generally pushed towards team sports and competitive sports and little girls towards more artistic sports such as dance or gymnastics. As children grow older, these contrasts can become more pronounced, as in the case of math and geometry. The stereotype that women are "not as strong as boys in math" is a strong one. Moreover, a person who is the victim of prejudice loses his means when he has to face it. The victim of a prejudice loses her ability to cope with it, so she performs less well and ends up confirming the cliché. (Predko, 2020) In society, men are often mocked when they want to go into so-called feminine professions. This is the opposite of women, who are less mocked for their choice of professional orientation but who have a harder time once they are in a company. (Buscatto & Fusulier, 2013) Even more pernicious,

women would be victims of what is called benevolent sexism" which refers to subjectively positive sexist attitudes, tinged with chivalry and condescension. By over-protecting their female colleagues, these employees show that they underestimate their abilities. (Sarlet & Dardenne, 2012) These stereotypes have an impact and have several effects. Indeed, they are the basis of social discrimination and exclusion. Gender stereotypes make it difficult to achieve equality between men and women and have repercussions on the labor market. A study of The Brussels Gender Equality Council found that gender segregation is very visible in the information and communication technology sector, where there are many more men, and in health care, where there are many more women. This reinforces that some occupations are "more male" and others "more female. This occupational segregation can be explained in particular by people's choice of professional orientation linked to stereotypes concerning the characteristics of so-called "masculine" or "feminine" occupations and skills. Social representations characterize women as more gentle and good listeners. While men are frequently associated with technical skills. Hiring criteria value technical or social skills depending on the job. (Conseil Bruxellois de l'égalité entre les femmes et les hommes, 2016)

Description of Esports

Definition

Esport is not a traditional sport because indeed, the word Esport comes from the contraction of electronic sport. The electronic dimension is actually linked to the practice of video games. The dictionary defines it as « the practice of multiplayer video games, especially networked; all competitions dedicated to this practice » (Larousse, 2022). It can also be defined more precisely as video game competitions on a local network or via the Internet on consoles or computers. We differentiate between professionals and normal players because pro gamers who play individually or in teams have to train for several hours a day. These players participate in competitions around the world and live off the winnings (Zaffagni, 2016). These are competitions that can be local, national or international. They can be conducted face to face locally or on the internet. Most of the time, these are organized and supervised by the gaming community, by associations or companies specialized in the activities, or by game publishers themselves (France Esports, 2019).

The term Esports dates back to the late 1990's and the emergence of internet video games and is considered the professional practice of video gaming. Therefore, the competitive aspect

stands out in many games, tournaments or competitions and when players play individually or in teams. With nearly 400 million viewers in 2017, half of which are considered regular fans, Esport is starting to gain some media recognition in Belgium through articles, interviews and reports. (CJG, 2018) In Belgium, nearly 1,1 million Belgians play video games (this number rises to 4 million if you count various games on tablets and smartphones), for a total revenue of 270 million. On a global scale, the gaming industry is currently worth \$100 billion, more than the film and music industries combined. (CJG, 2018)

Here are some Esport numbers presented by the CJG (Center Jean Gol):

- The video game industry is currently worth \$100 billion, more than the film and music industries combined.
- It is currently the second largest industry after the book industry.
- Every night, there are approximately one million viewers on the Twitch platform, which broadcasts various Esports games and competitions.
- The biggest competitions are watched by nearly 50 million viewers.
- The revenue from these various tournaments is huge. The biggest cash prize to date was a competition of the game Dota 2, The amount was 20 million dollars.
- The top Esports players earn millions of dollars a year.

History of Esports

To give an insight to the history of Esport, I summarize the chapter of Scholz's (2019) book on "Esports is business" in the following paragraphs. This book clarifies how the Esport phenomenon is not recent. In fact, it goes back to the beginning of computer science. Since then, Esports has been an integral part of the evolution of computers, and thus experienced its first popularity in the era of arcade game boards.

Foundation of Esports

The beginning of competitive games is closely related to the "Tennis for Two" videogame, created by William Higinbotham in 1958. Although there were other video games invented before that period, like the « Nim » game launched in 1940, "Tennis for Two" is the first game with a competitive element between two players implemented in the design from its inception. That is why it is considered the starting point of the modern video game industry. Importantly, for the first time, Tennis for Two was created for entertainment purposes only, unlike the Nim game whose purpose was the meticulous display of technical possibilities, and could be used as a first tournament match, with an audience watching the players (Scholz

2019). Indeed, it was possible to follow the game between two players, which attracted the attention of the public.

However, from a commercial point of view, it remained impossible to create a video game industry for a much longer time: computers were expensive, so there was no video game market for entertainment purposes (Scholz, 2019). The only computers in use at the time were those in corporate offices . It took until the 1970s for computers to become accessible to a wider public and this at once meant the democratization of arcade games and game consoles. (Scholz, 2019)

In 1972, companies like Magnavox, Atari, and Vectorbeam introduced their first products, and held the first Esports tournament in Stanford, United States of America (USA). At the time, the prize money to be won only took the form of one-year subscriptions to Rolling Stone magazine, but it was the start of competitive video gaming, nevertheless (Taylor, 2012). In the following years, the video game market developed and the number of consoles and arcades increased exponentially but the commercializing companies are having a hard time finding enough financing.

In 1980, the first popular "Space Invaders" competition took place at the international level, gathering 10000 participants and including regional qualifications in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Fort Worth, Chicago and New York (Ausretrogamer, 2015). Given its success, Atari announced the world championships in 1981, with a cash prize of 50,000 dollars. However, only 174 participants showed up, at an event planned to welcome between some 10 000. Due to a lack of organizing, absence of rules and no official referees, the event was a flop (Smith, 2012).

In the meantime some innovations did become successful, like the invention of a database keeping high scores in arcades. This database became the official scoreboard and allowed the organization of tournaments and championships (Seppala, 2018). Starting in the 1990s, Nintendo intervened with its world championships to promote its video games. The cultural and economic foundations for the future development of Esports were played (Borowy and Jin, 2013).

The pioneers of Esports

Thanks to the personal computer and its ease of access for many people, video games experienced a new growth in the 1990s. Consoles such as the Playstation, Game Boy and other video games reached a large number of people. But it is thanks to the multiplayer games

playable in local area networks (LAN) or on the Internet that the Esport experienced considerable growth (Scholz, 2019). This meant a huge change as it allowed different players from all over the world to compete against each other. One of the first Esports competitions was the Red Annihilation Tournament from the video game Quake in 1997. The prize now was no less than a Ferrari 328 GTS owned by John Carmack, the game's lead developer. Approximately 2,000 participants registered for this competition (Adanai, 2013).

It is in the following years that several tournament organizations were created in the USA, with tournaments funded by sponsors like Intel or Advanced Micro Devices. The business model soon turned out not to be profitable. Indeed, this money was reinvested each time only for the organization of the tournaments (Scholz, 2019). In addition, opportunities for live broadcasting, allowing spectators to watch the competitions at home, were still missing. In the meantime, Asia was hit by a crisis and South Korea tried to overcome it by modernizing itself. Its government invested greatly in high speed internet. It was also at this time that the cybercafé became very popular, the aim being to allow people to rent a PC to play video games. With the release of Blizzard Entertainment's Starcraft, the country soon became the number one Esports nation, which led to the establishment of the Korea Esports Association (KeSPA). As part of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, the association became responsible for the broadcasting of tournaments, the implementation of a regular league schedule and an ever-growing fan base.

The Korean multinational corporation Samsung funded the World Cyber Games competition, an event comparable to the Olympics but for video games. The first global competition has a total prize money of 300 000 US dollars. With 430 players from 37 countries it is considered to be the first truly international Esports competition in 2001 (Syrota, 2011). Despite the global scale of competition, many video game developers remained unaware of the full potential of Esports and did not support Esports communities or tournaments. In 2000, Counter-Strike, which was created as a modification of Half-Life, was bought by Valve, the developer of Half-Life. This was a turning point for video game developers who started to see the business potential behind Esports. Despite improvements to the game itself, spectators remained neglected until in 2001, Valve introduced Half-Life TV, with dedicated servers for streaming Counter-Strike matches. After that, more and more video game developers supported Esports capabilities in their video games. Finally, the main revenue in Esports was sponsorship, and this sponsorship was mainly for tournament organizers and top Esports teams (Syrota, 2011).

Toward a phase of stability

Esports had by now survived the pioneering phase and was growing steadily. A few more events took place, critical for its survival. For example, the CPL (Cyberathlete Professional League) World Tour in 2005 was a tournament for the game Painkiller and consisted of nine stages (Istanbul, Barcelona, Rio de Janeiro, Jönköping, Dallas, Sheffield, Singapore, Milan and Santiago), ending with a final tournament in New York. The prize money was 1 million US dollars, the largest ever awarded to the CPL. More importantly, the final match was televised by MTV (Kane, 2008). At the same time, the World Esports Games (2008) were announced, a tournament for players in China and South Korea. This was China's first time involvement on a grand scale.

Although more and more people had access to the internet, which was increasing in speed, content production of Esports remained expensive for many companies. It seemed the take off of professional gaming relied on its television broadcasting, as was the case in South Korea, (Lingle 2016). Despite various attempts (a reality show called Play Us in 2005, which followed the women's Counter-Strike team Les Seules ; MTV 's broadcasting of the World Series of Video Games (WSVG), and the broadcasting done by CBS Sports Network), Esports could not translate into a viable business model on television. In the meantime, internet streaming video became cheaper and cheaper, and the Esports ecosystem shifted away from television to online streaming exclusively. (Scholz, 2019)

The modern Esports

Despite turbulent times brought along by the economic crisis, three events marked a new era of substantial development in Esports: the announcement of StarCraft II in 2010, the release of League of Legends in 2009 and the founding of Twitch in 2011. Unlike was the case in previous hype phases, many Esports organizations by the late 2000s were now able to move into a sustainable business model with stable revenue streams and less risky, stable growth.

In May 2007, at a tournament in Seoul, StarCraft II was announced by its maker Blizzard, who although busy working on the game for the next three years, gathered a storm of people to come together and play the beta version of the game. Even professional gamers were switching from traditional StarCraft and Warcraft III to the new game, and tournaments were being held. This was unprecedented at the time, as usually an Esports scene evolves after the game's release and, if nothing else, acted as a form of rallying cry for Esports and revitalized many Esports enthusiasts. StarCraft II has helped Esports fundamentally (Partin, 2018).

Although the MOBA (multiplayer online battle arena) genre was invented in 2003 with Defense of the Ancients (DotA), the genre only gained popularity with the release of League of Legends in 2009. Its bi-weekly changes and constant addition of new heroes were unheard of at the time (Riot n.d.). This kept the game fresh and entertaining for players. Over the years, Riot Games, the developer, has supported the Esports scene by making the game more spectator-friendly and hosting the first World Championship in 2011. Later, in 2012 and 2013, Riot went even further by creating the League of Legends Championship Series (LCS) (theScore, 2017). Backed by Riot Games, this league system brought stability to the Esports scene, and Esports organizations were able to build a sustainable business model around the game. It even allowed professional players to have a chance at a fixed salary (ESPN, 2017).

Still, watching Esports was still a struggle for spectators. This changed with Justin.tv, a platform launched in 2007, focused on streaming live content. Video games soon became the most important content streamed on Justin.tv, so the company announced the creation of the Twitch gaming division in 2013 (Taylor, 2018). Along with tournament organizers using Twitch, professional Esports players were suddenly able to stream their workouts and create other events (Scholz and Stein 2017). The streaming aspect now has become a regular source of income for professional gamers, and for some players it can account for a third of their annual income. Twitch became a stabilizing factor for the sector; moreover, it showed the world what was going on. Tournament watching was finally accessible to all. For nearly a decade now, Twitch and Esports have been intimately connected. The dynamic Esports landscape of today would have been unthinkable without their symbiosis (Partin, 2018).

The stakeholders in Esports

Game developers

Esports are nothing without games, and games are nothing without developers. Game developers are companies that develop and create video games that are played in Esports competitions. Game developers, also known as studios, vary greatly in size depending on the type of game they create. The most popular Esports titles are made by larger studios. Some are openly traded, such as Activision Blizzard (Call of Duty, Overwatch). The current models of most Esports developers revolve around the "Games as a Service" model. Most games are free with built-in purchases. Most of these purchases are for cosmetic enhancements commonly referred to as "skins". Skins do not provide performance benefits in the game and are intended to allow players to represent themselves and their favorite characters. The competitive Esports scene is highly dependent on the role of the developer. Riot Games and

Activision Blizzard develop franchise leagues for games similar to the National Basketball Association (NBA), and the entire league is managed by the developers. This includes creating a code of conduct, facilitating player exchanges, and providing broadcast and sponsorship for Esports. In this scenario, the developers often have complete control over all tournaments and prevent other organizers from creating tournaments in their games. (Hauk, 2020)

Team & players

A team is a group of players competing together to win in an Esports event. (Peng, 2020) It is a team of people who compete at the professional level and regularly earn huge amounts of money. These Esports players are contracted to play in different organizations, just like soccer and basketball players. These teams train and compete in the game, just like soccer players and other athletes. Hundreds of thousands of tournaments and events are held each year, depending on the game they play, from games like League of Legends to various other genres. These teams earn dollars with prizes that sometimes reach millions. Each competing Esports organization often has a large number of teams in the ranks across multiple games. Fnatic is one example. Founded in 2004, it has teams in 10 different games, including Fortnite, League of Legends and PUBGMobile. Other examples of leading organizations include G2 Esports, Team SoloMid and Team Liquid. (James, 2020)

Sponsors

Some teams build a real brand image, attract sponsors and finance their activities. This sponsorship is a partnership with an existing team (Adidas, sponsor of the Vitality brand, one of the major French teams participating in eight e-sports games, etc.), or the creation of a team directly by the brand. In addition, more and more sports clubs are participating in Esports adventures. Examples include Paris Saint-Germain with Dota 2 and Golden State with League of Legends (San Francisco NBA team). These investments allow clubs to offer a different brand to the usual audience. In the case of PSG, the organization has partnered with a Chinese team to promote the Paris PSG brand in Asia. Therefore, these investments are a function of an overall strategy focused on brand promotion. (Louis, 2020)

Spectators

Spectators watch the media that broadcast the games (mainly streaming platforms) and can support them financially. On Twitch, a streaming site specialized in video games, users can subscribe to the content providers to allow them to finance their activity. Spectators can also

go directly to the venue and pay for tickets. If they are also players of the games they are watching, publishers give them the opportunity to purchase in-game items such as banners in the colors of their favorite teams. Spectators can also support their favorite teams by purchasing items in the team's colors. Some professional gamers broadcast video games to allow fans to directly support and communicate (with a subscription or donation). This allows players to create a sense of community with their fans and further restrain them. (Louis, 2020)

Different type of games

There are 8 main categories of competitive video games which will shortly be introduced and defined in the following paragraphs and are summarized in Figure 5. (Vallade, 2020)

Real Time Strategy games (RTS)

RTS games are one of the most popular categories of games in the gaming world, especially by professional gamers. In these games, the goal is to put forward one's skills as a strategist to better manage one's resources and win battles. In these games, the principle is often to defend your base while destroying your opponent. The construction of structures often goes hand in hand, allowing you to create a barrage of defenses against other players, ready to do anything to destroy and plunder the wealth of your opponent. (Le guide du gamer) Some well-known games of this type are Starcraft 2 or Warcraft.

Multiplayer Online Battle Arena games (MOBA)

MOBAs are hybrid games that combine strategy and action. Most MOBAs are team-based games in which groups of virtual characters compete against each other. In these games, players control a character and then must strategize effectively with their teammates to accomplish the tasks they are given. Among the most common tasks, we specifically found the destruction of enemy camps. (Le guide du gamer) One of the most famous games is League of Legends but there is also Dota 2.

First Person Shooter games (FPS)

FPS games are also one of the most popular games in gaming. Nowadays, these games are super immersive and have a very detailed world that gamers love so much. The fundamentals of FPS are still the same: players see the game through the eyes of the characters they play as on screen. Players will find themselves propelled into a world whose settings can be inspired by different universes (modern, post-apocalyptic, etc.). To fight the enemy, the player has a set of firearms and edged weapons depending on the game. He then advances the game by

completing various missions and gaining combat experience. (Le guide du gamer) We can talk about Overwatch, Counter Strike GO, Call of Duty,...

Fighting games (RTS)

Fighting games are the classics of video games. The fighting game was indeed one of the first games released on the market. The principle is almost always the same: the player chooses a character, and this character appears on the screen. Each player must then develop his character by winning battles in duels. The more battles he wins, the more experience and skills he has. To this end, each battle is usually timed and the goal is to inflict as much damage as possible on the opponent during that time. (Le guide du gamer) Those games are Street Fighter, Tekken, Soul Calibur,...

Sport & Racing games

A racing video game is a video game that usually consists of some kind of vehicle that competes with other vehicles on a different set of tracks or levels and aims to reach the end faster than anyone else. Racing video games do not necessarily require the use of vehicles. In some games like Sonic R, only the character runs. (Codex Gamicus, 2001)

Battle Royale games

Battle Royale is a game based on the survival of a player or team playing against many other players on a map with smaller and smaller play areas. This type of game is completely new as it was popularized by the H1Z1 license, especially the King of the Hill released in January 2015. It is now famous for Esports such as Fortnite, Call of Duty: Warzone and Apex Legends. (Corbisier, 2020)

Digital Trading Card games

Another category of Esports games is Digital Trading Card Games (D.C.C.G.). These games are played one-on-one, where players compete with their decks to zero their lifebars. This style of gameplay has been popular in the game Magic: The Gathering™ since the 1990s. Currently, one of the most popular games is Heartstone, which is based on the world of World of Warcraft, but there is also Yu-Gi-Oh! Duel Links, a digital version of the physical Yu-Gi-Oh! Trading card game. (Pesonen, 2022)

Other games

All other games are classified in this category because they are very few in their genre to be represented on the scene. We can talk about World of Warcraft, Just Dance or Tetris 99. (Vallade, 2020)

Figure 5. The 8 main categories of video games represented in Esport (Vallade 2020)



Famous women Esports players

Within the non-competitive world of video gaming, there are as many male as female fans. In fact, a survey in France in 2017 showed 47% of the video game players were women. On the contrary, within the competitive scene of video gaming, very few women can be found. For example, during the important competition taking place in France in 2018 (Rubio, 2018), there was only one female team out of the 64 represented during the competition. This gave rise to much public astonishment and sparked a debate. Are women being less included within the domain of professional Esports? And if so, why? Are they simply biologically less interested in the competition aspect, or are there barriers related to gender-based discrimination taking place? In the following parts, we present the different possibilities as outlined by existing research, but first we introduce a few famous women Esports players.

One out of two gamers is a woman, and she only represents 22% of the employees in the studios, which is not much. 4 years ago, it was only 15%. The world of video games is a male world created by men and marketed to men. Women's talent is now recognized in the video game world. The image of women is changing in the real world but also in the Esport world but there is still work to do. They are underrepresented among Esport professionals and

semi-professionals. Only 6% of the players playing in competitions are women. In contrast, in amateur competitions, there are 35%. So why this loss? What we assume is that women are simply victims of their online harassment of their sexism and must constantly justify their right to be in this world. (Esport Inside, 2022)

Of the more than \$200 million awarded to date in Dota 2, 2% have been won by women. And it is not just Dota 2. No woman has ever lifted the biggest trophies or won the biggest purses in an Esport, A study by Esportsearnings.com, shared exclusively with the BBC, revealed that no female player is in the top 100 or top 200 of the highest earners. You have to go all the way down to 338th place, which is the place of transgender player Scarlett, to find a female player. The next highest female earner is not until the 680th spot. (BBC, 2021)

In fact, women have been present in Esports for a very long time. Indeed, we have Pam Hart who is the first female competitor to win a major tournament in the video game which is the *Intergalactic Space World Olympics* in 1972. We also have Heather Martin who won the *Nintendo World Championship* in 1990 (Lecourtois & Fischer 2018). The problem is that we do not talk about them and we do not make them role models for young women wishing to enter the world of Esport today, which is a shame.

We have the League of Legends player Marie Creveling who plays on the Renegades team in one of the biggest competitions in the United States, the League of Legends Championship Series. She was already receiving a lot of criticism when she was playing in the "low-ranking" league, but the criticism increased as soon as she joined the major league. That is why she hesitated a lot about her decision to join the League of Legends Major League. Unfortunately, she passed away at the age of 24 of unknown cause. (Millenium, 2015)

Another very famous player is Marie-Laure Norindr known by the nickname, Kayane (See Figure 3.). She is the player who has received the most Esport awards in fighting games. She specializes mainly in the game "Street Fighter". She says that from the age of 9, when she was playing games with other internet users and her brother online, he asked her to pretend to be an 18 year old boy to avoid being harassed by other players. As a teenager, she was already subject to mockery when she was already winning video game competitions, with montages posted online to criticize her. (Kayane, 2018)

Figure 6. Kayane, Versus Game Star (Regge, 2021)



Even if the situation of most of the female Esport players is complicated, there are some who managed to shine by their great talent and who are respected by all the players of all sexes. This is the case of the Canadian player of StarCraft 2 from Blizzard Entertainment, Sasha Hostyn (Scarlett) who managed to win over 350 000 US dollars during one single competition (Choi et al., 2010).

Finally, other women stand out completely differently on the scene. Laure Valée (Bulii) is the number one League of Legends journalist. She participates in the analysis of the different games taking place at the League of Legends World Championships in 2016. Despite her success, she is often the target of sexist criticism. (4RedBull, 2017)

Career barriers for women in Esports

To begin with, there are already similar problems in traditional sports compared to esport. Indeed, we notice that there are also quite important power and domination relationships. The first thing is the problem of non-mixity. Moreover, esport does not really require qualities of strength where it is said that the body is not really put into play, which is somewhat related to traditional sports such as horse riding, shooting, sailing. These sports are judged because it is often said that it is only the horse that works and does everything. Nevertheless, they are also mixed sports where men and women compete in different categories with different times, scales and records. I am interested here in the barriers to entry for female players in esport competitions, so I will refer mainly to journal and scientific articles that talk about gender discrimination in esport, stereotypes and barriers they can bring. Sex based performances are very negligible because women face many gender stereotypes. Barriers can be context related

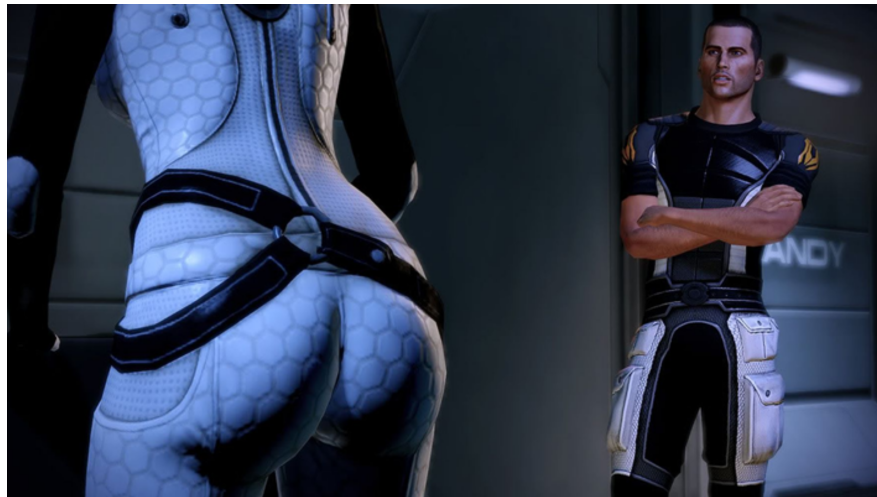
(e.g. toxic environment, exclusion by gatekeepers etc.) but there are also barriers on an individual level as the context and environment can for example create a lack of confidence.

Barriers related to the context

An interesting barrier comes from the marketing context. Indeed, Lien (2013) documented some of the historical and reciprocal influences of gaming habits, market research, video game design, and marketing that may have produced perceptions of gaming as male-dominated. For example, there is a predominance of male gamers in game market research, and thus games are produced and marketed primarily to these male gamers in ways that exclude and/or objectify women (Kerr, 2006) . In addition, these production practices have influenced the marketing and content of the games themselves. For example, advertisements for games are rife with stereotypical and sexualized depictions of women (Peck, Ketchum, & Embrick, 2011). In the games themselves, male characters are overrepresented compared to the frequency of men in the general population (Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009). It is interesting to talk about and study gender in video games. Indeed, we often talk about princesses who are passive and have to be saved and who are very sexualized without being the main character of the game at the beginning of the 80's like for example, Peach with Mario. The first heroine is Miss Pacman who is simply a copy-pasted version of her male counterpart, which is the same principle as the Smurfette character, the only female character in the Smurf world. These characters are stripped of their personalities and are rather present and integrated in order to have a certain "quota" of women in the story. We can talk about tokenism. We observe since and still today a sexualization of the characters. Indeed, we have characters who are naked for no reason, for example the female characters of Soul Calibur who wear almost no clothes. Sometimes, it makes sense because it is hot for example. Another example is a scene from the famous game Mass Effect 3 where a female character tells a tragic and dramatic story to the hero and at the same time we are shown a close-up of her buttocks (See figure 7). At the end of the 90's, we start to integrate strong female characters but although they have a personality and are independent, they are still very sexualized as for example the character of Lara Croft in Tomb Raider. Today, there is progress. For example, Ellie in *The Last of Us* is a well built character with a personality, lesbian and not sexualized except when she is in a sexual relationship but that is necessary to the story and therefore not disturbing. Some people are bored of playing the character compared to the first opus where he played Joel, the male character in Last of Us 1. Others don't like playing female characters at all. Zelda in *Brave of the Wild* is no longer a character to save, it is now more important because she has a role to play and she holds back

the antagonist Ganon. Unfortunately she is still very sexualized because of her screams and her clothes. Aloy in *Horizon Forbidden West* is a sensitive and kind independent hunter and helps humanity to fight machines on earth. Despite all this, some people are disgusted with her physique because she is portrayed rounder than the first opus and with visible hair when all human beings have it, finally, it is just fluff. (Willemme, 2022)

Figure 7. Mass Effect Butt Shots (Fischer, 2021)



Also, Lynch (2016) argue that it was in light of the losses suffered by the economic crisis of 2008, that the video game industry invested heavily in aggressive marketing towards male teenagers. This marketing was characterized by women's sexualization, through the depiction of naked women on the packaging of game cartridges to boost sales (Lynch, 2016). This arguably was a strong influencer in the development of a sexist culture of video games for young players. Indeed, social and marketing construction is historically very gendered. We have always educated little boys to be competitive and to confront each other and therefore to play video games, which are oppositional activities. On the other hand, girls are helped to cooperate and collaborate, which are artistic activities. So we are already not helping women get into Esports because of this gendered environment. Also there is the marketing of the 80's and 90's focused on video games for boys as mentioned above. This also affects the consumption of the product. Technological, commercial and cultural forces that have focused on men's games and excluded non-men from play (Fron, Fullerton, Morie and Pearce, 2007) have influenced patterns of game consumption. The exclusion of women often occurs by minimizing and de-prioritizing their participation and games of choice. So-called "casual" games played by "casual" gamers typically on smartphones or tablets are feminized as opposed to male "hardcore" games played by "hardcore" gamers typically on other platforms, such as consoles (Vanderhoef, 2013). Additionally, women make up the majority of the

casual game market, and casual games are often produced with a female audience in mind (Jenkins & Cassell, 2008)

There is also the fact that it is a world that is predominantly male dominated by numbers. Indeed, The fact that there is additionally limited representation of female gamers in the media, among game reviewers, on voice chat, at conventions or other fan gatherings (Paaßen, Morgenroth, & Stratemeyer, 2017), and at competitions (Taylor, Jenson, & Castell, 2009) means that when women attempt to enter the masculinized domains of gaming, masculine norms of gaming and gaming communities are resentfully policed, including hostile and misogynistic responses to women in the game (Jenson & De Castell, 2013), systematic harassment(Jenson & de Castell, 2017 , O'Rourke, 2014), and negative responses to women's voices in game voice chats (Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013).

Some research has outlined the role of sex-based differences in personal preferences and on different performance outcomes in Esport. These differences are psychological, physical, and congenital in nature and have revealed a perceived gender gap in participation and performance, suggesting that men play more and better than women. (Shen et al., 2016). For instance, women are more interested in collaboration and pay more attention to communication and goal achievement, rather than winning and overcoming challenges (Cassel & Jenkins, 1998; Ray, 2004). Earlier Miller's research too found men to be motivated more by competition and getting the highest score, while women cared less about success or failure (Miller, 1996). Moreover, women are more willing to give things another try, and less punished for their failures as men (Miller, 1996). More recently, a content analyses of discussions held during competitive Overwatch gaming showed women's absence from the scene was more often discussed as result of biological sex differences than the result of culture (Friman 2018). One survey revealed how women themselves often do not want to participate as a distinctive "player", although it helps seeing other women participate in active Esport roles (Friman 2018). Male forum discussants seemed to believe that women (only) play Mercy¹ because of their assumed physiological or biological qualities (Friman 2018).

Other studies argue it are not biological sex-based difference by themselves that lead to different playing behaviours, but rather they way women are socialized (or not) into video game playing (Blumberg & Sokol, 2004). In this sense women lack an interest in playing, because it is deemed more suitable for men, much like professional fields of science,

¹ Mercy is a support character in Overwatch who provides care to her teammates. He is very passive and does not require any special aiming or skills.

technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) are constructed in society as more suitable for men (Ratan et al., 2015). This study compares the context of video games to that of a computer science classroom as men are more interested in “STEM”. Indeed, stereotypical environmental cues such as Star Trek posters and, particularly for this study, video games in computer science classes were also found to be perceived as more masculine, thus decreasing women's interest in pursuing computer science (Cheryan, Plaut, Davies, & Steele , 2009). Also not affecting males, stereotypical computer science classes that included these stereotypical objects triggering computer science stereotypes decreased women's sense of belonging to the class, thereby decreasing their interest in pursuing computer science (Cheryan et al., 2011 , Master et al., 2016) .

There are also gatekeepers who keep women out of the esports scene. A study studying the underrepresentation of women in esports also found evidence of "gender zoning," which is discriminatory treatment and sexual harassment by male gamers who effectively categorize specific games and online communities as toxic and unwelcoming to women and girls, thus preventing their involvement in zoned spaces. In video game culture, the term "zoning" refers to tactics in fighting games that players use to keep opponents at a distance and out of a specific area; thus forcing the opponent into a disadvantaged state (North, 2019). Gender zoning refers to the use of treatment discrimination and harassment by male gamers to prevent women and girls from participating in specific games or game genres and online communities how unwelcoming certain esports titles and genres were to women and girls, discouraging them from remaining in the space (Darvin, 2021). Drawing on the literature studying the effects of gendered cyberstalking, it is argued that gender zoning undermines the social rights of women and girls by excluding them from online games, genres, and communities; thus limiting their personal and professional opportunities in electronic games (Citron, 2001).

Furthermore, an article that examines the underrepresentation of esports describes a toxic environment. While e-sports also attracts millions of simultaneous viewers online (Robbins, 2015), underneath the veneer of a booming sports business is a toxic environment. Male toxicity in e-sports poses a major threat to the industry's growth and legitimacy (Smith, 2019). A Twitter feed in June 2020, which detailed over 70 allegations of sexism and harassment in the gaming industry (Lorenz & Browning, 2020), once again prompted the need for the industry to take action to combat the pervasive harmfulness. The lack of civility toward women in e-sports, in particular, has created a culture of toxicity that flows from the top down, originating from the companies that produce the games and extending to professional and recreational gamers (Senier, 2019). The problem is so pervasive that on May 6, 2019,

over 100 Riot Games employees walked off the job to protest sexual harassment within the company (England, 2019). Sexual harassment also played a role in the end of Maria "Remilia" Creveling's promising career in 2015 (Senier, 2019). Remilia was both the first woman and the first transgender woman to compete in esports' most popular tournament, Legends Championship Series (LCS). Remilia passed away four years later at the age of 24, and although the cause of death was not made public, she revealed through tweets days before her death that she was going through a difficult time (Ennis, 2019). One study found that the pool of video game players is different, but the abilities between men and women do not differ. The most important factor for gender equality is female participation in video games. The stereotype that women are inferior to men only widens the gap, preventing women from fully joining an already male-dominated market. The positive side is that women are not prohibited from joining the Esports boom and that men's attitudes towards them are mature and supportive. (Kim, 2017)

Barriers at the individual level

A consequence of a hostile and toxic social climate for women is that female gamers will have less confidence in their abilities than gamers who do not experience similar remarks (Ratan et al., 2015; Arneberg & Hegna, 2018). Factors such as online harassment may prevent female gamers from developing their confidence and performance. This is because they may feel trapped and perceived as outsiders to the video game and esports culture, which will ultimately reinforce gender stereotypes (Ratan et al., 2015). This lack of confidence is a result of gender stereotypes about female gamers (Smith, 2004).

An example in one of the most popular Esports games is Valorant, a first-person shooter. At a recent tournament, only four of the 30 participants were women. Gender segmentation in traditional sports is not a new concept. Yet these same limitations do not exist in a genderless virtual world. A 2015 study of female online gamers' experiences found that the lack of women in competitive gaming cannot be attributed to skill. But rather, women had less confidence in their own abilities. But why is it important that women are left out of the Esports industry? Young women who are into video games more than any previous generation deserve to have a safe space to practice what they love and have the same chance to make money doing it. The gender hypothesis in video games has yielded several negative results as to why women do not have a fair chance of entering the Esports industry. Questions were

asked of women, whether they were casual gamers or great Esports players, their answers were similar. A toxic culture has been created online, in gaming lobbies, streams, social media and in the workplace. In online gaming lobbies, if women have gender-identifying gamer tags or voice chat is enabled to allow them to be gendered, they are often beaten on their skills or treated in a sexually derogatory manner. These interactions, which are referred to as locker room talk, often deter women from spending as many hours as their male counterparts in these Esports games. When women reach higher levels of competition, it is no longer just the private messages they receive, but also the public reactions on social media. (Baldino, 2022)

Female players' abilities are often underestimated. For most male gamers, female gamers are not efficient and do not have good gameplay skills (Witkowski, 2013). As a result, some female players deliberately hide their gender in an online game (Witkowski, 2013) and prefer to use male names to avoid gender stereotypes. In a team-based game such as massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), most teams are composed of one gender. However, some teams have a mix of male and female players. In a team with both genders, female players often feel depressed, especially when their team loses. Victims of gender stereotypes, female players are seen as affecting their team's performance (Kaye & Pennington, 2016) due to their incompetence and lack of skills (Gray, 2012), which leads to the team's losses. Thus, female players prefer to form women's groups to avoid negative comments that could affect their emotions and confidence. Stigma and stereotyping of gender roles starts from the socialization process in their early education and environment. Similarly, as women are socialized into being modest and sweet from a very early age, it is no surprise research finds that women are not as confident in their gaming skills as men, even in cases of similar skill levels. (Shen et al., 2016). Indeed, the lack of self-confidence which is reinforced by negative stereotypes of female players, further contributes to women being afraid to play and hinders their opportunities for performance development (Chan, 2008). Moreover, the fact that women players take more passive roles as compared to active ones, according to Shen et al. (2016) have to do more with their novice status and experience than sex-based ability.

Sexual harassment can affect female athletes both emotionally and physically, not only in traditional sports but also in esports. It can indirectly cause emotional stress (Koss, 1991), low self-esteem, anger and frustration (Brackenridge, 2002). In addition, the stigma that female gamers cannot perform as well as male gamers in online games has prevented female gamers from moving forward and succeeding in the eSports industry (Fox & Tang, 2014). This creates in some situations that female players have been removed from the game or replaced by a male player due to gender stereotypes, which has caused female players to work harder

to be in the highest rank (Lowrie & Jorgensen, 2011) in an online game. Finally, wages and prizes are also not the same for female and male players.

An important external barrier to professional Esports for women is gender-based discrimination. This form of discrimination seems to take various shapes and form. Ratan et al. (2015) argue that Esports present a rather hostile social climate to women. They point out the role that powerful stereotypes like « women do not belong in Esports » or « women are incompetent gamers » play in the development of women's Esports careers (Ratan et al., 2015). Ruotsalainen and Friman (2018), using survey data from both male and female video game players, also reveals how women saw their gender as an important reason preventing them from participating in Esports. Female respondents further made mention of a toxic Esports culture in which comments on their appearance and gendered harassment were common. The survey also revealed how some respondents believed the field to be suitable only for men, and were convinced that women's participation in Esports was detrimental to the status of Esports.

As an example, we can take the case of the Korean Overwatch player named Geguri. Indeed, she was accused of cheating and this triggered a controversy about women's participation in Esports (Choi et al., 2019). Geguri's status as a female pro player became questioned in the Nexus Cup qualifying competition, broadcasted live, as she was suspected of cheating through the use of « aiming software »² in the tournament. Although Blizzard Entertainment conducted an audit of the tournament and concluded that Geguri was not cheating, the scrutiny of her playing skills persisted. Then, Geguri's tweets exposing her post-feminist stance fueled both pro- and anti-feminist rhetoric. As a result, Geguri was "forced" to film her hands, mouse, and keyboard to prove that it was her playing and not someone else.

During this livestream, many commentators focused specifically on Geguri's appearance, particularly her lack of feminine signs; these comments are emblematic of judging women on the basis of their appearance, with commentators' discourse reducing Geguri's value as dependent on the degree to which her presentation conforms to heteronormative norms of femininity. By focusing on appearance instead of actions, they showcased a sexist tendency to evaluate women through a male-dominated gaze, reducing her to an object rather than a qualified player. While the debate among viewers and fans was inconclusive, Geguri's tweets, regardless of her intent, fed into the logic of misogynistic harassment that equates

² Automatic aiming system in game. The player does not have to aim anymore, the software does it for him.

commenters who raise their voices for women's rights with online bullies who simply enjoy attacking people and causing trouble. (Choi, 2019)

In Esports, women represent 32% of the public in 2022. The parity between men and women is far from being reached. However, the competitions are mixed and open to women. It is a societal problem, women are victims of sexism and are victims of the prejudice that video games are reserved for men. In the competitive field, there is also a fear of being judged not on the basis of performance, but on the basis of gender. Many female gamers are forced to turn off their mics to play or take on a gender-neutral screen name to avoid being potentially harassed. (Esport Inside, 2022) But the Geguri case is certainly not a stand-alone incident of sexism in the video gaming industry. It is often said that women do not have the level, there are already very few women and if they are not given the chance to train and level up, the skills will logically not be there. There is also a hypersexualized representation of female characters because it is a content created by men for men but it is getting better. We can take as an example the characters of Overwatch which are of different shapes and different ethnicities (Lecourtois & Fischer, 2018).

Ruvalcaba et al. (2018) investigated women's experiences of positive and negative feedback and sexual harassment in the male-dominated space of competitive video gaming. In a first study where they compare the proportion of positive and negative feedback reported by male and female players, it appears that the results are mixed regarding women's experiences in e-sports video games with other players. In the study, no differences were found with respect to criticism by men or women. In a second study, they analyzed streamer comments³ and sorted them along positive (e.g. encouraging phrases or complementary to the game) and negative (e.g. insults towards the streamers⁴ or chastising a strategic mistake) comments, but also sexual comments (e.g. sexualization of body parts, sexual acts, or sensual or sexual desires directed towards the streamer). It finds that there were more sexual harassment comments received by female streamers than by male streamers.

Given the gender-based discrimination and the toxic masculinity within the videogaming sector, it is no wonder women currently do not thrive at the competitive stage. One study findings playing Mercy (which is often ridiculed as for the unskilled) can be seen as one of the ways to negotiate their membership in the gaming community: playing Mercy, a hero who is still very useful and necessary to the team, but who creates no "threat" to the

³ The streamer comments are the comments left during the live broadcast in the chat.

⁴ The Streamer is an individual who broadcasts live his "video game sessions". In other words, he broadcasts live the sessions of games he plays, to viewers, through platforms such as twitch.tv.

male-dominated culture. It is also constantly suggested to women players that they take up this support role. Mercy thus « functions as one of the narrow places where women can be present in games, and yet they simultaneously remain almost absent, as one cannot claim full "gamer citizenship" (nor aspire to become a professional gamer) by only playing "Mercy" (Friman, 2018, p. 12).

Also, people think women are being put off because of a misogynistic and immature culture in grassroots gaming, something female gamers are increasingly highlighting online. People are particularly sexist towards women in games and make very rude comments. Every day, women are literally harassed in the game and it is really hard to play in that environment. According to one player interviewed by the BBC, In most games, it goes both ways. On the one hand, they say, "Oh my God, baby, I love you." That kind of stuff like they've never seen a girl in their life. And sometimes it is more toxic. They don't like women and they make remarks like "Go back to the kitchen." It is a pretty general language. (BBC, 2021)

For example, last year, the popular Esports game Rocket League made several attempts to promote female players on its social media pages. However, the comments are always geared towards physical appearance, downplaying their skill as well as sexist, outdated jokes at their expense. If women decide to not enter the industry as a gamer, but rather one of the many jobs industry provides, such as art game development, event planning, or production, it is because the toxic culture still runs deep. Blizzard Activision, one of the largest game developers for titles such as Call of Duty, Overwatch and World of Warcraft, are currently being sued by the state of California over their alleged sexist culture. Their workforce consisted of 20% female and the allegations stem across unfair wages, inconsistent sexual harassment at work. One instance was when a woman took her own life during a business trip. Now we are no longer just talking about women being soft, about being called names in a game lobby, not complaining about the statistics of representation, but rather talking about women's safety in the future in a booming industry. That even here in this digital space that is free from the biological constraints of the gendered physical world. Women are not safe. Women are not safe to engage in the entertainment they want to, women are not safe to compete against men in the large stadiums filling up for Esports tournaments. Women are not safe sitting at our own desk writing code for the next best Esports game. (Baldino, 2022)

All these discriminating speeches and behaviors are also linked to the Internet and concern all minorities and not only women. Being anonymous allows us to let go and insult more easily because we feel protected behind our computer screen. (Lecourtois & Fischer, 2018)

Another problem is the lack of support and community. Indeed, several communities and associations have been created to fight against female discrimination in video games but many of them are no longer there because they are simply closed because there is very little financial and human support, the association is very hard to manage in the long run. "Pink Ward", an association of this type, had launched a mixed tournament supported by the publisher of League of Legends, Riot, which was one of the first initiatives and thus a good will to say that girls and boys can play together. (Lecourtois & Fischer, 2018)

Darvin talks about the need for girls and women to possess a "mindset" or courage in the face of harassment from other players and even other esports professionals. The term "mental" is borrowed from esports gameplay examples to describe a player with high levels of in-game endurance. In this context, "mental," or courage, has been defined as a fierce determination that includes both resilience and a strong work ethic as necessary complements to determination and leadership (Duckworth, 2016). In this sense, the term "mental" similarly aligns with the idea of being a "tank," an additional concept from the esports vernacular. A tank is a video game character who exists primarily to absorb damage so that others can achieve objectives in the game. In Darwin's context, women and girls in games and esports must have high levels of "mental" and/or courage in the face of harassment and toxic geek masculinity to the point that they resemble the "tanks" in the games they play. In this sense, female gamers could be described as "tanks", absorbing substantial amounts of damage in the form of harassment to "break the barrier" by securing space for themselves and future generations of girls and women gamers in online games and esports. (Darvin, 2021)

Gender stereotypes in Esport

Unlike traditional sports, in which men are often considered to have a physical advantage over women, esports does not require a physical attribute. This normally allows women and men to participate in the same competitions and events. (Shen et al., 2016; Paaßen et al., 2017). However, esports is no exception to gender stereotypes (e.g., Ruvalcaba & al., 2018 ; Ratan et al., 2015 ; Taylor, 2012). Stereotypes are, by definition, sets of traits or characteristics considered true of a social group. Indeed, the esports industry is dominated by men, with women representing only a tiny fraction of esports participants, fans, and leaders (Entertainment Software Association [ESA], 2018). According to some studies, women represent 35% of esports players, but only 5% are professionals. We conclude that there are very few women at the highest level of esports. (Rogstad, 2022)

There is a persistent belief among men and women (gamers and non-gamers) that the majority of people who play video games are men, even though men and women play at about the same rate. (Duggan, 2015).

Like traditional sports, the esports industry has been largely organized by and for men, making it a highly masculine institution (Witkowski, 2013; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). Indeed, this ranges from the promotion and marketing of video games to the representation of male and female characters in games (Taylor, 2008). The development and different types of esports video game categories are also traditionally considered masculine activities, such as shooting and war games and sports simulation games (Paaßen et al., 2017). The limited number of female players in the esports scene gives rise to gender stereotypes and assumptions that women do not play video games, are not skilled in the field, prefer less competitive game formats, and ultimately cannot compete at the same level as male players due to gender disparities (Shen et al., 2016). Male/female stereotypes appear to be pervasive and pose potential barriers to women's participation and success in gaming contexts such as gaming. (Wasserman & Rittenour, 2019)

A study that aims to test whether in-game gender exchange is a good solution to gender stereotyping in esports states that gender stereotype threat exists in e-sports and causes a significant gender imbalance in the esports industry (Hao, 2020). This study also points out that esports is still generally male-dominated and rife with negative stereotypes about women, such as men being more skilled (Vermeulen, 2014). The study finds that gender stereotype threat discourages female participation in e-sports. As a result, female players receive unfavorable comments and are discriminated against in esports (Kaye, 2017). People view women as inferior and in need of more protection (Brehm, 2013), and hypersexualized female avatars do not help and lead male gamers to associate female players with sex, which reinforces gender stereotypes and has a very negative impact (Yao, 2010). This study also shows us a particular stereotype such as male characters in video games being more aggressive and powerful than female characters, which reinforces the gender stereotype that men are stronger. Furthermore, these stereotypes cause female gamers to experience greater discrimination in the game (Vermeulen, 2014), which may force them to leave esports. Furthermore, although more and more women are participating in esports, the title of "gamer" is still considered to be reserved for men (McDaniel, 2016). For women, there are too many threats and stereotypical discriminations (Gray, 2012). But although female gamers have enough gaming skills, some of them still think that their ability is inferior to men of the same level (Shen, Ratan, Cai & Leavitt, 2016), which will lead to a lack of female gamers in the esports community (Ratan, Taylor, Hogan, Kennedy & Williams, 2015).

From my personal experience as a player, all of these issues create a succession of stereotypes and misconceptions for me. I also observe that women in the industry are often referred to as "egirls". This derogatory nickname is used in a negative sense to accuse female gamers of taking advantage of their femininity to attract a male audience to their Twitch stream or to get help from more advanced male gamers to move up in the game rankings. (Stream'her, 2022) On Twitch streaming chats, female players are treated differently by other players, both in a negative and positive sense. Some change their in-game nickname to a male name to cope with this problem or even decide to disable in-game chat. But such "hiding" does not work in the real world of on-site competitions, where women cannot hide their identity.

Ratan et al. (2015) argue that esports present a rather hostile social climate for women. They highlight the role that powerful stereotypes such as "women do not belong in esports" or "women are incompetent players" play in the development of women's careers in esports (Ratan et al., 2015). Ruotsalainen and Friman (2018), using survey data from male and female video game players, also reveal how women viewed their gender as an important reason preventing them from participating in Esports. The women surveyed further cited a toxic Esports culture in which comments about their appearance and gender harassment were common. The survey also revealed that some interviewees believed the field was for men only and believed that women's participation in esports was detrimental to the sport's status.

In addition, a study on gender in esports looked for stereotype threats. It shows that, as in traditional sports, criticism and derogatory perceptions about women and games impact women's performance in online video games (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). A consequence of a hostile and toxic social climate for women is that female gamers will have less confidence in their abilities than gamers who do not experience similar remarks (Ratan et al., 2015; Arneberg & Hegna, 2018).

Another study that identifies perceived gender-based game stereotypes says that these stereotypes can impair performance (Kaye & Pennington, 2016), impede learning (Rydell et al., 2010), and reduce participation (Cheryan, Ziegler, Montoya, & Jiang, 2017) among those negatively stereotyped. Factors such as online harassment may prevent female gamers from developing their confidence and performance. This is because they may feel trapped in video game and esports culture and perceived as outsiders, which will ultimately reinforce gender stereotypes (Ratan et al., 2015). This lack of confidence is a result of gender stereotypes about female gamers (Smith, 2004). The perception of negative gender stereotypes decreases female players' performance (Kaye & Pennington, 2016) and excludes them from the mainstream eSports circle (Vermeulen, 2017), which weakens their intention to participate in eSports; in other words, the more aware women are of gender stereotype threat, the more

likely they are to stop eSports. Eliminating this gender stereotype threat will play an important role in improving women's participation in eSports. (Hao, 2020)

Methodology

Within the framework of this thesis, empirical research is conducted in the Esport environment. The central research question goes as follows : « What are the barriers of women in Esport? To answer this question, a qualitative study with 16 male and female video game players, including professionals, semi-professionals and casuals and some esport stakeholders was conducted. I prefer to use the qualitative study methodology because it offers great flexibility and would allow me to truly understand why there are so few women in the competitive world of Esports. Indeed, I will be able to better understand their motivations and their problems such as sensitive subjects like sexism that affects them.

Sampling of respondents and overview of collected data

To find respondents, I used my own experience as a player. Indeed, since I was a teenager I have been able to play many games and each game for a long time. We could say that these are phases of my life. Thanks to this, I was able to keep in touch with several players who were able to evolve in their field until they became professionals. Others were met during my studies through different ways like a student association promoting video games and Esports. These allowed me to get in touch with professional and semi-professional Esport teams. Also, I'm part of a trading card game team where I could interview one of my teammates. A coach from Valorant was interviewed thanks to a contact made with the association "AGEM" from Mons. The sponsor is a well known sponsor in the world of yu-gi-oh! Duel links. He sponsors one of the best teams in the game. The developer is part of a structure of the city of Mons "Fishing Cactus". The rest of the players interviewed are friends of mine.

I interviewed active players, male and female, professional or casual and some stakeholders (see Table 1 for overview).

Table 1. Overview of key characteristics of respondents and interview

Nickname	Main Game	Type of Game	Gender	Age	Game State	Language	Nationality	Location
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Myamore	World of Warcraft	MMORPG	Female	24	Pro	Fr	Be	Louvain-La-Neuve
Chef Barnaby	League of Legends	MOBA	Female	28	Pro	Fr	Be	Saint-Symphorien
Fossylvie	League of Legends	MOBA	Male	22	Pro	Fr	Be	Mons
Peluche	Yu-Gi-Oh! Duel Links	TCG Online	Male	23	Pro	Fr	Be	La Louvière
Salade	Overwatch	FPS	Male	24	Pro	Fr	Fr	Online
TeemoOT P	League of Legends	FPS	Male	21	Pro	Fr	Be	La Louvière
Lannister	Teamfight Tactics	Other	Male	26	Pro	Fr	Be	Jemappes
A3tos	Valorant	FPS	Male	25	Pro/Team Captain & Coach	Fr	Be	Mons
Kimiaow	League of Legends	MOBA	Female	23	Casual	Fr	Fr	Online
RaionDC	Overwatch	FPS	Female	20	Casual	Fr	Fr	Online
Dranayéal	League of Legends	MOBA	Female	20	Casual	Fr	Fr	Online
Capseum	Teamfight Tactics	Other	Male	23	Casual	Fr	Fr	Online

anhmINT	League of Legends	MOBA	Male	23	Casual	Fr	Be	Mons
Hurluberlulu	Valorant	FPS	Male	20	Casual	Fr	Be	Online
Arcasias	League of Legends	MOBA	Male	25	Fishing Cactus Developer	Fr	Be	Mons
Olli-Baba	Yu-Gi-Oh! Duel Links	TCG Online	Male	27	Sponsor	Fr	Be	Online

This allowed me to cover a large panel: some are young players who are just starting out in the world of sports but also in the world of gaming and others are accomplished players who have had all kinds of experiences and rebounds, remarks,... All these players have had different or similar experiences in terms of sexism in video games but also have their own opinion on the Esports scene. Players are players who have not participated in any tournaments or played competitively. Others are accomplished professional gamers who participate in tournaments with trophies and cash prizes, and who have a substantial career in their respective games. Others are players who play in organized online tournaments containing some cash prizes.

In order to ensure a certain diversity in the research sample, I tried to interview players from different games with distinct gameplays even if League of Legends comes up most often due to its popularity. This sample is therefore quite diverse thanks to the level of experience of each speaker.

I decided to interview men and women. First of all I find it very interesting to have both points of view. It is very important to interview women because they are the main subject of my thesis. These women can provide me with a very objective opinion on my research question because I am sure that many of them have directly experienced many discriminations and gender stereotypes on a daily basis while playing video games. They are for me frontline people. Moreover, it is logical that the majority of gender stereotypes are applied by men. It is therefore interesting to illustrate and verify the different opinions of these men on these

gender stereotypes and whether they apply them or not. This allows me to observe their different behavior related to gender discriminations that is not necessarily aimed at them. The opinions of men and women could be different.

I also decided to include several players because it is interesting to check if these discriminations can come from the whole esports industry. First of all, I interviewed players because they are of course the most important stakeholders as they are directly the subject of the thesis. A coach and team captain was also interviewed in order to get an overall opinion on female skills in video games because it is these coaches who make the majority of the selections for their teams. He will be able to explain to me if it is an advantage or a disadvantage to have women in an esports team. Then, interviewing a video game developer allows me to see his opinion about game design and to answer main questions about "video games are created by men for men". Finally I also interviewed the sponsor of our esports team which is a video game store to have their opinion but also to know if it is interesting and profitable to sponsor a woman and a team composed of women or mixed.

Of course all this will allow me to have an overall opinion on the different gender stereotypes to be able to determine the different barriers linked to different levels of esports. Interviewing different stakeholders of the esports will allow me to have information which can be complementary between it.

The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour each at the players' convenience. The 16 people were interviewed individually, either orally on site or online via a video call.

The semi-structured interview process

Before each interview, conditions were set up such as authorizing the recording and future transcription of the answers.

The interview guide covered questions about several stages in respondents' lives and their subsequent discoveries of the world of video games and Esports. The first 3 parts of the interview guide were very practical in order to understand and identify the profile of the player and allowed for a better understanding of the answers given in the last central part of the questionnaire which is sexism.

Also, the object of my research was specified before each interview. I also made sure to adapt my questions and questionnaires according to the level of the players interviewed. Indeed, the occasional players did not have to answer typical questions about their Esport career. Each

player had the freedom to develop his opinion on the questions asked without being forced by the questionnaire.

The questionnaire is composed of 4 distinct parts and can be adapted according to the profile of the player (professional or occasional). The first part concerns the beginning and the entry of the player in the video game world and allows me to situate the path of the individuals and to contextualize their video game career. The second part talks about their first contact with the Esport world and seeks to understand and determine the factors that encourage them to become interested in the Esport scene. The third part talks about their experience and career in Esports and allows us to situate their path in their professional practices and see the challenges they face, this part is only dedicated to professionals. The fourth and last part is about sexism, which is the most important part and specifies the gendered events and the difference between the male and female scene, the different stereotypes that can remain. In this part, I interviewed women about their personal feelings and their sexist experiences but I also interviewed men to see if they had a similar or opposite experience and to tell their feelings about sexism to women in video games. This last part also seeks to understand and to know if there are recommendations to protect oneself from this sexism. For the different stakeholders, questions concerning their profession were added. In addition, questions that are basically about the players have been rotated so that the targeted stakeholder can answer them correctly.

Data analysis method

The results are meant to be an exhaustive presentation of different opinions, remarks on male and female gamers but also notably the ways to protect oneself and also the different stereotypes of the female gamer. The barriers cited by the speakers are diverse and varied. For they differ from different points of view at the level of the sex of the person interviewed but also at her level of play and other factors as well as the game and the platform on which the player plays. The set of remarks, stereotypes and advantages and disadvantages of being a female gamer will also be presented as well as various proposals for solutions and recommendations that will result from the interviews or the empirical analysis conducted in this work. To proceed with the qualitative analysis of my data, I resorted to data reduction because of the large amount of data provided by the different interviews. Indeed, I used a coding method that allowed me to reorganize all my data into different categories and sub-categories. This allows me to have more readability and organization. The coding method allowed me to notice similarities and differences in the data and information I collected

grouped by category. The purpose of coding is to help you to draw meaningful conclusions about the data. (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016) As for the different categories, the data was grouped according to; (1) The inappropriate remarks about playing video games; (2) The different ideas and stereotypes about female and male players; (3) The consequences of discrimination; (4) How to respond and protect oneself from remarks; (5) Other information that could be relevant. Once all the data has been collected and the coding has been completed. I decided to display the data in order to have an overview of the different data. This will make it easier for me to draw conclusions to determine the different barriers of women in esports that I am looking for.

Self-reflexibility

To conclude, I think that being a Belgian video game player had an impact on my data collection because I had a lot of ease to reach the Belgian and French-speaking authorities but it was complicated if not impossible to reach other international esport organizations. Moreover, I had no problem with the women who answered my interviews because most of them are my friends and I was not afraid to "force" some questions in order to get the desired answer, maybe if I had interviewed other women I didn't know, it would have been harder because of my identity as a man. Indeed, I think that it is difficult to confide on sensitive subjects such as sexual harassment to a stranger but moreover to a male player because they are the main actors of discriminations on female players. Then, I think that the level of play also plays a lot in the collection of data because I could only touch "small" professionals and I also had a lot of refusals or non-response because I am maybe not good enough to be visible. Indeed, the highest level I could interview was the "Solary" team. Having a higher level of play could have given me even more credibility with some players. It would have allowed me to have more people in my sample and moreover with even higher levels of play.

About the data analysis, I had no trouble understanding the majority of the people interviewed as video game player. Indeed, there was a lot of "déjà vu" thanks to my numerous gaming sessions. In addition, some terms used in games did not need to be explained. As a gamer, I was also able to identify barriers myself, some of which I already knew from my gaming experience, and I was able to confirm many of the statements made by the respondents in my interviews. Finally, the fact that I have not experienced and been discriminated against in-game except for my level of play has probably made me less sensitive to the answers given by male and female players than other people who may have experienced gender stereotypes. This did not prevent me from being as understanding as possible.

Findings

In this section I present the empirical findings in order to answer the research question of my thesis « What are the barriers for women in Esport? ». I move from clear and overt barriers that keep women out of the professional scene (e.g. sexual harrasment, not rejected from teams) to more subtle ways that make women feel uncommon or even unwelcome (e.g. stereotypes, benevolent discrimination).

After all these testimonies, we realize that being a girl in video games is very complicated. It is a received idea that most of the players have in their head even before playing with female players. They are most of the time judged very quickly as soon as they arrive in the gaming rooms. Multiple remarks and insults are made calling them "egirl" or telling them to "go back to the kitchen" even if they don't make mistakes in game. And on the other hand, they also receive advances from players called benevolent discrimination. Men are mostly judged in-game for their playing style but not before the game starts. Women can also be judged objectively by some people like any other human being on their playing style and on their lack of competence at high levels of play and competition.

Overt barriers for women in Esport

Sexual harrasment from organizers

It is not uncommon for cases of sexual harassment, rape,... to occur in the video game and esports industry. We can take as an example a recent event where a former champion of the Brazilian competitive league of League of Legends, Alanderson Meireles, was found guilty of sexual harassment and indecent assault (Rhayds, 2022). Moreover, these cases can also come from the developer of the game, we can also take the case of the CEO of Riot Games, Nicolas Laurent, who was accused by his former assistant of sexual harassment (Gayte, 2021).

“The organizers are quite serious, and are the first to crack down in case of abuse. An example is the story of Pyrax, considered the best French player, captain of the French team which led it to the final of the world cup against Japan and then leader of the "world" team which gathers the few best players of the world outside Japan to confront them, confrontation won by the world team this year. It was discovered that he had harassed some young players a few years earlier. He was instantly banned, and legal action was taken.”

(Peluche, Male, Pro-gamer)

“It can happen anywhere from players, to organizers, to the structures that produce the games. From memory, I remember the CEO of Riot Games committing sexual harassment. It was very well followed in the gaming world and on social networks.”

(Arcasias, Male, Developer)

“It can happen anywhere from players to organizers to the structures that produce the games. From memory, I remember that the CEO of Riot Games committed sexual harassment. It was widely followed in the gaming world and on social networks. Even more recently, it was Activision-Blizzard's lead shareholder director, Bobby Kotick, who came out with some scary stuff.”

(Olli-Baba, Male, Sponsor)

As quoted by "Peluche", we observe here another case of sexual harassment at an esports team coach and one of the best French players of Yu-Gi-Oh Duel Links. This one also organized tournaments. We notice that these sexual harassments can come not only from esports players but also from all the esports instances from player to coach to video game CEO. Arcasias also describes more about the case of Riot where these events occur not only in the esports world but also finally in a workplace. Olli-Baba added another case with the Activision-Blizzard's lead shareholder director, Bobby Kottick, who has also committed harassment.

Sexual harassment from organizers prevents women from accessing esports. If this happens, they are severely punished and banned from the game. This creates an uncertain environment for a woman who would like to try to compete but also a profession that touches esports.

Gatekeepers keeping women out

Gatekeepers are barriers that prevent women from accessing the entire esports, and keep them out of the scene. If women want to participate in the esports, managers, organizers and players simply block their access. We have a case of a female player who knew an organization that clearly did not want a girl on their team (Bouakaz, 2021).

“There are difficulties of access because managers do not let people in easily. There are managers who don't want girls because of sexual tension, drama, while there are also homosexuals in the teams today.”

(Salade, Male, Pro)

“I had a friend who played with me in college and we were more or less at the same level, I would even say she was stronger. We applied for the same role and I was accepted because, and I quote: “A girl doesn't belong on a pro team”

(TeemoOTP, Male, Pro)

In Salade's words, it appears that managers don't want women on their esports teams because they may distract other players by creating sexual tension or dramatic stories that may make the team less focused during a game session. TeemoOTP says that if a choice has to be made between a girl and a boy in a team, the boy will be chosen even if they have the same level in the game. Gender stereotypes also affect managers and coaches, who refuse to add women to their teams. For various reasons, men are clearly privileged over women.

“The barriers are perhaps already the recruitment methods that do not look first to the girls, biased by the idea that they may be less strong. But it's not so sure because Geguri was chosen quite quickly in the overwatch league and she was excellent individually. It's probably more a question of player selection, we prefer to take the best player in the competitions, if there are few girls, there will be less excellent players for this genre. But it will come, the more female players we get, the more we'll see.”

(Myamore, Female, Pro)

Here, Myamore explains that in the esports world, there are more men than women. Coaches want the best for their esports teams. Given the lack of women, it is probably easier to find a better player among men than among women. But for him this trend should be reversed if the number of women increases in the future

“People already think that video games are a world reserved for men. But in the profession of developer, I think that since women are less interested in computer science studies, there are already a lot less in game development because these studies are indispensable. And if they manage to present themselves, they may not be chosen and a man will surely take their place.”

(Arcasias, Male, Developer)

In the developer's job, computer science studies are essential. Women have little interest in these studies and are very few. Their number is not very high, so recruiters are more likely to choose a man.

Managers, organizers and esports players simply block women from accessing esports. A team may refuse to add a woman to its roster because it would lower its level. This can also create

tension and conflict between girls and boys on the team, which would be a distraction. Moreover, in the esports industry, there is a lack of women. If a team and a coach is looking for a member, he will more easily find a male member than a female one. In game development, computer science and development studies give very little interest to women. So there are less of them too.

Sexist hostile remarks upon room entrance

As soon as the women arrive at the game session, they are immediately subject to remarks. These are sexist remarks that directly put off female players before they even start playing the games. Men don't want to play with her and vice versa.

"When I arrived in a voice chat, they knew I was a girl and that I was automatically bad" (RaionDC, Female, Casual)

*"if it was a girl playing, it's normal that she plays badly."
(Dranayael, Female, Casual)*

*"Women are e-girls, girls are less strong than boys."
(Capseum, Male, Casual)*

The respondents agreed sexist comments to female players were inappropriate. This was a phenomenon all had witnessed before, either directly or indirectly. As described earlier in this work, female gamers receive a lot of discriminating comments about the simple fact that they are playing video games. Indeed, female gamers receive comments most of the time on their in-game chat but also on the Twitch chat when they try to stream content. When a girl arrives in a gaming room, she is very quickly judged as one player said. A preconceived notion quickly takes hold among players.

*"Sexist remarks of course - it's often due to a failure on the game, the failure will be directly associated with me being a girl"
(Kimiaow, Female, Casual)*

Another player answered that it was due to a lack of gameplay. It happens to everyone to make mistakes in games, to not necessarily be the best in the game in question but these mistakes are accentuated on being a woman in video games.

*"I don't hear so many remarks, but innuendos, as if to put down a little those who play.
In game, the famous "go back to kitchen", it's not rare, especially in voice chat "*

(Hurluberlulu, Male, Casual)

"I often hear sexist remarks and "go back to the kitchen fucking egirl"

(Fossylvie, Male, Pro)

"Sexist remarks obviously, especially in soloq to be honest (go back to the kitchen, etc. ...) it is a fairly male environment the video game and sometimes in real life but are more subtle "

(A3tos, Male, Coach)

These players give us examples of remarks that are mostly said during game sessions. We can see that these are often the same ones that come up most often.

"I take it lightly, I tell myself that unfortunately it's always easy for people behind a screen to insult and sexist or racist insults come out very easily when you're not in front of the person"

(Kimiaow, Female, Casual)

"Women, of course, not for their competence but often hearing the voice is enough to animate the stupidity of a player."

(Olli-Baba, Male, Sponsor)

Most of the time, a woman's voice and not their skills are enough to animate the remarks that men make to them. Sexist hostile remarks upon room entrance are really common in the esports world. The esports world is dominated by men. Women are not allowed to play according to men because they are just women. In case of failure, the remarks are directly directed to the fact that they are women. These remarks are often similar and are all sexist (go back to your kitchen, you are an egirl,...). The remarks are easy to make because the people are untouchable and inaccessible because they are behind their screens. They have a feeling of protection and allow themselves everything.

Women's segregation into support roles

Support characters in video games are mostly a less aggressive role and are often used to heal other players in the game for example. The gameplay of these characters can sometimes be more passive.

The reason why women are the most targeted by these criticisms and remarks, according to some respondents, has to do with playing more passive and less aggressive roles and characters performing a supporting role. This role segregation again reinforces coherent gender stereotypes of women only good for support.

"I think maybe it's the passive play. Girls are generally less aggressive, so being passive will be directly associated with that stereotype"

(Kimiaow, Female, Casual)

"Of course, women playing support is the quintessential cliché or thinking when you hear the voice of a woman playing DPS (Damage per seconds) that she is necessarily less good than another but male; typical"

(Myamore, Female, Pro)

"I think so, given that it's a hobby that is more easily attributed to men, it's sometimes complicated for a woman to let people know that she plays, that she likes to play, or even that she would like to have a career."

(Hurluberlulu, Male, Casual)

"If we were to make a study, I think that yes, women play more care characters and often the same ones. Now, I have played other things with other friends too. We would have to look at the statistics."

(Chef Barnaby, Female, Pro)

"Yes I think that the most sensitive women are the ones who play the supporting role in the games"

(anhmINT, Male, Casual)

"people tend to think that a girl has to play utilitarian characters, more than people who can really bring the victory alone it's more for men we'll say."

(A3tos, Male, Coach)

For some players, women are destined to play these characters because they better fit their style and type of gameplay. On the other hand, if they want to play a more aggressive role or other. Men do not accept this and prefer to leave them as support characters. Moreover, it is very easy to determine in game what women play. This is partly an advantage because you know directly the advantages and disadvantages of these support characters.

"I think it's because women have immature minds and they are generally less successful, lower level of play."

(Lannister, Male, Pro)

"All her remarks are based on the cliché that a woman only plays the role of support and finally for me this cliché is confirmed because we only see that."

(Fossylvie, Male, Pro)

"As I play mostly female characters and often the same ones, I used to get judgments "oh, go back to your kitchen", "another e-girl", etc."

(Chef Barnaby, Female, Pro)

Also, some of the players interviewed agree that the cliché and gender stereotype is confirmed because for them many women really play the supporting role but also perform less well with a lower level of play. Lannister explains later that for them the objective is not to win, or at least they can't put their emotions aside to put all their energy towards victory. The mentality of the players ultimately plays on these gender stereotypes and unfortunately reinforces them according to both Lannister and Fossylvie. Playing a female character is necessarily associated with a weakness for some and people directly think that it is women behind them.

“The fact that women play as support has made the developers think that female characters in games are necessarily support.”

(Arcasias, Male, Developer)

“ Besides, many companies make their first support character a woman, it's really entered in the mentalities, maybe indirectly, that the woman has a support role in a team. But we are seeing more and more people taking a stand against this, and companies are purposely changing the trend and making women aggressive characters and men supportive ones, but the change sometimes seems a bit forced to go against the commercial habit.”

(Olli-Baba, Male, Sponsor)

Gender stereotypes about women only playing these less aggressive roles has undoubtedly influenced the development of some female characters who will mostly be support role. This may be part of the mentality now. Video game companies are making efforts to counteract this stereotype but it can be a bit forced and it can look like tokenism. (Willemme, 2022)

The segregation of women in support roles is very common in the esport world. The gameplay of these characters are generally not as edgy as the high damage characters. Players associate the fact that a woman is more passive with these passive characters. Finally, in gameplay, we often find this case of women playing support characters. The stereotype is confirmed in some way and reinforced. The stereotype is so strong that some developers create characters that fit this stereotype and therefore sexualized, feminine, and support characters.

Subtle barriers for women in Esports

Common stereotypical beliefs about (female) players

Women in video games and in social life are subject to many gender stereotypes that can hinder their desire to participate in video games and esports.

According to the testimonies of the interviewees, the most common stereotypes are that « women do not play well », that « women are not as strong as men » in general or that « women just play the supporting role ». Here are some examples collected:

“People think that girls are more passive and therefore will play the support role more favorably”

(Kimiaow, Female, Casual)

“Women are supports or e girls who are there for attention”

(Fossylvie, Male, Pro)

"if it's a girl she can't play while if it's a player it's "normal", a man, it won't be the same."

(Dranayeal, Female, Casual)

“I play most of the time on Overwatch as "Mercy" the support character, before I enter the game and turn on my mic, the other players directly expect me to be a girl. They are quickly surprised when I'm not”

(Salade, Male, Casual)

“On the female players, it is they play anyway support it will be easy. Or we have a girl in our game we lost automatically”

(anhmINT, Male, Casual)

We can see here again that the support stereotype and the segregation in this role are really All these targeted remarks are highly detrimental to the game experience. Finally, even if a boy begins to play the supporting role that ultimately is essential to a team. There will always be doubt about the person's gender identity until the microphone proves otherwise.

“These stereotypes are based on the statistics that there are more men in competition than women”

(Capseum, Male, Casual)

"I think before we didn't see as many players as female players so we think the girls suck more."

(Dranayeal, Female, Casual)

"No idea, it's always been like that when two people argue, one insults the other's life by saying that he has a worse life than he does"

(Myamore, Female, Pro)

What are all these stereotypes based on the players? For them it is simply related to sex and gender, on nonsense but also for some it is real facts, real statistics that there are more men in the world of video games and Esports.

“Yes, it has a weight, it reinforces the stereotype that women suck. People are really starting to believe it.”

(anhmINT, Male, Casual)

“Yes, they have a weight because women's competitions are much less promoted because of these preconceived notions, there are not many mixed teams either.” (Kimiaow)

“We realize that there is a lot of abuse from men, and it doesn't miss on the professional scene (take any competitive scene, there has always been at least one problem concerning a harassment on a woman)”

(Myamore, Female, Pro)

“the ideas themselves hurt the women's community who feel that they have fewer opportunities and this spills over into the professional community where it will be much less highlight. It's still a very male-dominated scene.”

(Fossylvie, Male, Pro)

All these stereotypes have a certain weight in the Esport world. Indeed, we can talk about a focus on women that is not very strong. This creates problems in the competitive scenes, as said before, the woman who is shouted at by her teammates. Women are not allowed to enter the Esport scene as much as men. Women also have less confidence in themselves because of these preconceived notions. These stereotypes are propagated in the professional world of esports which gives them less opportunity and they are much less highlighted compared to men.

“You just have to look at Twitch and the huge debate around the streamer in a pool that attracted a “particular” clientele; there will always be people interested in this kind of thing and they take advantage of it, they are not the problem at the bottom but it is certain that it transmits a vulgar image and that concerns only one of the two sexes”

(Myamore, Female, Pro)

“Some girls will take advantage of this to attract men in need of sex in order to get favors, gain advantages, some will activate their camera, put on teaser outfits”

(Kimiaow, Female, Casual)

Another important stereotype is the idea that « women use their sexual capital to their benefit ». Women were perceived as having a sex benefit, by being better able to attract

audiences to the streams (Twitch), to make money and to gain advantages. These stereotypes are often related to the streaming world. Indeed, most of the interviewees mentioned twitch as a stereotype of seeing women in swimming pools. Finally it is not a problem in itself to broadcast this kind of content but it transmits a vulgar image that only concerns the female gender.

“It is useful for her maybe to earn more money or views but it is degrading”

(RaionDC, Female, Casual)

“It is useful for them because they receive more donations but for me it is not ethical”

(Dranayeal, Female, Casual)

This may help women advance in their career, but was at the same time looked upon by other women as bringing more hard than good. Finally, we find ourselves with a degraded image of women and moreover it is not very ethical for some to use its image to receive more donations.

“I think it doesn't help to diminish the clichés, but can you blame them? The field of fashion and modeling is extremely competitive and is also based on looks. These streamers have just been smart enough to enter a new market, the video game and streaming market, where the competition is much less.”

(Peluche, Male, Pro)

Another player is more dubious about the issue and wonders if it is not society that decides this and induces them to choose to show themselves in this denigrating way.

“Gamers suffer from the stereotypes of unhygienic nerds (for both sexes) which are specific to those whose main passion is gaming, who only live to play and who sometimes neglect the rest when it's bullshit, it's not because you don't like fashion that you're a nerd or that you lack hygiene”

(Hurluberlulu, Male, Casual)

“I think that these stereotypes disappear between people who meet around this passion, for women, the clichés still persist a little I think but the scene is progressive”

(Hurluberlulu, Male, Casual)

“The pro scene is clearly not perceived as a profession by the general population. The clichés are certainly what they are based on, but I think it's mostly due to a lack of communication and knowledge. Tell a 40 year old adult that you can make millions, many won't believe it, not based on clichés but because it sounds insane when you don't know.”

(Peluche, Male, Pro)

In general, many stereotypes about male and female video game players persist in today's society, like « gamers being geeks » and « gaming not a real money-making profession ». Respondents do point out things are getting better over time.

The characters whether they are female or male are super sexualized in the games. When we think of a female character we think directly of Lara Croft from Tomb Raider or princesses, weak characters or supports. If it's male characters, they are super muscular, super strong, macho characters.

(Arcasias, Male, Developer)

Finally, the development of video game characters contributes to the gender stereotype that people have of female gamers and does not help. Women will either be sexualized characters or weak, supporting characters.

“At the moment, women have a special place on the professional scene. They are real rarities, moreover they are unfortunately recruited not for their level of play but rather because they are “marketable”. There are some women's teams of course, but most of the time they only serve as a mascot for their team because due to their small number they gather a wide range of people, whether they are interested in the particular case of the player or because as a girl you prefer to follow another girl on the competitive scene.”

(Olli-Baba, Male, Sponsor)

Women are very rarely represented in esports teams. When they are present, they are perceived as a "mascot" figure. This mascot figure is often there to promote sponsors. Olli-Baba gives the example of Geguri who was replaced by another male player less talented according to him. She was relegated to the role of "mascot" of her team despite her individual talent. Her team was only known because of her.

There is a lot of stereotypical belief about female players and women in esports. The segregation of women in the support role is part of it. Women are weaker than men. These stereotypes may be based on statistics and the fact that there are fewer women than men in the industry. A known stereotype is that women take advantage of their status in order to make a profit in the streams. Moreover, women do not escape the basic stereotypes. Developers also apply these stereotypes in the characters they create. The sponsors consider women as mascots that serve them more to make profit than to play. These stereotypes create a certain weight in the esports industry. Women are harassed on stage at work, they are denied access.

This creates a lack of confidence. Stereotypes are propagated in the industry and give women less opportunity to join and if they play they will be less highlighted than a man.

Negative comments related to 'bad' play

It is common for players to make mistakes in games. Game mistakes are often not rewarded and many insults can result.

"I got remarks because I missed an action, because I was not the person they wanted me to be."

(Capseum, Male, Casual)

"Physically, I wouldn't know. But maybe in terms of their ability maybe. If they are less good at video games"

(Chef Barnaby, Female, Pro)

However, women are not the only ones to receive criticism about the game, but the criticism of men is more present when they make big mistakes in the game during the game and not directly at the entrance to the game room.

"I get these remarks from randoms on the game, rarely from friends I used to play with except in jest."

(Kimiaow, Female, Casual)

"These remarks are not justified, it's more an excuse to insult someone bad than a real reason to hate"

(Hurluberlulu, Male, Casual)

"Globally, the problems come more regularly from men than from women, which is why some try to hide it as long as possible"

(Myamore, Female, Pro)

Most of the time, these remarks that often happen are made by strangers, men, teenagers, team members or opponents and none of them are justified according to all the players interviewed. As mentioned before, the comments are easily given because these people feel protected and untouchable because they are behind their screens (Lecourtois & Fischer 2018).

"The remarks are justified in part, in a competitive environment, and in view of a game that was taking place in a few weeks, nothing was done on the part of the player to address her strategic shortcomings (lack of versatility and adaptation) despite advice."

(Lannister, Male, Pro)

On the other hand, a player justifies that the comments on certain players are justified at high level of play because advice is given to them but they sometimes do not apply it.

“Again, a girl will be insulted as a girl if she plays badly and will be insulted by idiots if she plays well, I think that the one who plays by being girls may make more remarks than the others.”

(A3tos, Male, Coach)

Unfortunately, it doesn't matter if a woman plays well or badly. She will get some remarks anyway.

Comments about the way players play are common in the video game world. It can go as far as insults. These are comments made by other players in the game most of the time and comments that are easily made because of the feeling of protection that other players have because they are behind their screens. Comments can be justified because some tips are not applied. But in the end, women receive negative comments regardless of whether they play well or not.

Benevolent discrimination through flirtation and compliments

These remarks can be positive and can finally start from a good intention. It seems that, because of the fact that there are very few girls in the game, some men feel obliged to make advances to these players by saying compliments such as "I love you" or "you are beautiful or you have a beautiful voice". These type of comments can be labeled as positive or benevolent discrimination. However, since the players are not on a dating site but are there to play like everyone else (Witch Gamez 2022), it should not be taken too lightly. A professional player interviewed said this as she positioned herself at a certain level :

"The girls' place was not in front of a video game or they took advantage of seeing the girls play to hit on them, but it's rarely in the right way (besides, we're not there to hit on people but to play, so it's necessarily in the wrong way)"

(Myamore, Female, Pro)

"When a group is made and there is a girl she gets a lot more attention we will give her resources for example"

(Dranayael, Female, Casual)

"I often use the in-game voice chat on Overwatch to indicate my positions and hear others' positions. Whenever there is a girl in the chat who talks, she directly gets the wrath of other players because they

immediately think that the game is lost and if she plays well, finally they are most of the time flirting”
(Salade, Male, Casual)

Being a girl can sometimes be very difficult in-game because they can draw a lot of attention to themselves either positively or negatively. When a female player plays well, the players can turn around and like insulting and harassing them they can start flirting.

“Girls play less well, game girls are attractive because of their personality”
(Chef barnaby, Female, pro)

One of the stereotypes that can create this flirtatious effect may be that the female player is attractive. This is enough for men to give them compliments.

Some women receive benevolent comments through flirting and compliments. This can easily distract the female player. A woman who plays the game usually draws attention to herself because there are so few of them. She may find herself being hit on by men in the game a few times. Stereotypes may also be the cause of this. For some players, the woman is there to be attractive.

Men’s shaming when losing from girls

The world of video games and esports is dominated by men. These men may think that women are not meant to play because they are weaker than them. They feel ashamed if they lose to women.

“The famous "I lost to a girl" often hurts the ego and is accompanied by a good dose of rage. Some teams with several girls are also called "faggot" teams”

(Peluche, Male, Pro)

“Yes, I've heard them before, such as "you're a woman, you can't beat me".”

(TeemoOTP, Male, Pro)

“mentalities essentially, men are not ready to see women surpass them in this field but I am convinced that these mentalities will change.”

(A3tos, Male, Coach)

Another player also described that men can also have an ego and pride issue and that losing to a female player can have an impact on that.

"Female streamers or well-known female players in general, because they become public figures, are the most targeted by these criticisms."

(Myamore, Female, Pro)

"I think the female streamers are the most criticized because they are more exposed, I also have an example where on Twitter, a woman is yelled at in the middle of a competition by her teammates in Overwatch"

(Salade, Male, Casual)

Finally, the female players most targeted by these criticisms are public figures, whether professional players or streamers, because they have more visibility. This does not prevent men from criticizing "lambda" players directly when they discover that they are women.

In a male-dominated world, women are sometimes harassed by men when they lose to them. Men have ego and pride, and losing to a woman is not an option. These women are often criticized because they have a lot of visibility.

Women's lack of confidence, motivation or skill

When interviewees were asked about the obstacles and barriers that hinder women from participating in the Esport scene, one of the most common responses was lack of self-confidence. In fact, they say that women do not dare to try their chances because it is a very strong male world that can put them off.

"I think they are afraid to show themselves in public mainly because of the remarks they might get I think."

(RaionDC, Female, Casual)

"I think that for me there are a lot of girls who play and don't dare to participate, maybe a lack of motivation, I think they don't dare because there are a lot of men, and then it's a very male environment as in traditional sports."

(Dranayeal, Female, Casual)

"There is also the fact that there is a lack of confidence in the player because there are very few female pro players so it affects the lack of confidence."

(Salade, Male, Casual)

“the only thing it really changes is the number of girls who get discouraged by insults and stereotypes but once you get past all that I don't think it has an impact in part.”

(A3tos, Male, Coach)

Then, we also see that perhaps because there are many stereotypes or other reasons, their own motivation is affected.

“I think it's their own motivation to become competent at a game.”

(Lannister, Male, Pro)

“Public opinion is one, video games are still something "masculine" and even more so competition. However, even if the number of female players is increasing and the clichés are decreasing, we don't see more women on the pro scene. This is probably due to the fact that the number of entries is low (the male/female ratio remains very high) and therefore inclusion in the teams remains complicated. Afterwards, in the other pro scene, it is not impossible that from a biological point of view, the reflexes for example are different, and therefore the men have better performances. In this case the creation of a women's league as in sports makes total sense.”

(Peluche, Male, Pro)

One player does not rule out that there may also be a biological reason for women's absence from the professional scene, in addition to the general public opinions and the difficulties of entering the scene.

There is a lack of confidence on the part of women who want to enter a video game development structure because very few women are represented.

(Arcasias, Male, Developer)

The fact that the video game world is dominated by men. Women are naturally insecure when it comes to entering a structure, whether it's to work as a profession or as a player.

One of the barriers that comes up is the lack of self-confidence in participating in the esports. This is due to the large presence of men in the scene. It can be due to sexist remarks. This is similar to traditional sports. It also affects the motivation of women. Indeed, the public opinion is turned in a way that esports and video games are "male". The creation of a women's league could solve this problem of confidence and motivation and can make sense. This also

affects the development and design of games, where women are also poorly represented unfortunately.

Women's coping mechanisms to overcome barriers

Some mechanisms and techniques exist in order to avoid barriers and to bypass them. The women developed different techniques during their many play sessions to overcome these barriers. They may or may not be effective.

"I prefer to ignore, it's difficult but it's better"

(Myamore, Female, Pro)

"I mute the players, often this is the only option that really works"

(Hurluberlulu Male, Casual)

"I advise to mute the people who insult you and not to get into the person's game."

(Capseum Male, Casual)

"Generally I don't pay attention and I advise them to ignore them because they will get bored very quickly."

(RaionDC, Female, Casual)

"I advise to ignore because it's useless to put the person back because I find that people use too much the fact of being behind a screen to protect themselves, it's like talking to a wall if you answer"

(Dranayeal, Female, Casual)

Through the testimonies of the interviewed players, several answers and recommendations have been given in order to respond to negative or sexist remarks. Many advise ignoring, muffling unwanted players. This allows the players to not be disturbed during their games but at high level and in competition it is very complicated to ignore these remarks because it is important to stay in communication with your teammates to have a good vision of the game.

"At high level and in competition on Overwatch, I know that women can't really turn off their mics and are forced to communicate with others. So they have to either answer them or prove how good they are at the game in order to deny all the remarks but sometimes that's not enough."

(Salade Male, Casual)

"In game, I tell them to shut their big mouths, it doesn't work but it makes me feel good"

(Hurluberlulu Male, Casual)

"I think the best way to respond is to tell them but it depends on the situation, to move them, to put them back in the game and to go to the people who could sanction them, there is no point in making a fuss."

(Fossylvie, Male, Pro)

"Usually people don't react but I found this unacceptable and went to complain to the organization."

(TeemoOTP, Male, Pro)

When the solution of ignorance is not enough, another option is to respond directly to the detractors but this often does not help because it creates discord and a bad game experience. Another good solution according to some players is to report undesirable people by notifying the game managers for bad behavior.

"In this person's place, I would have filled my gaps by training more seriously, you have to be strategically infallible, not like a robot but at least take the team game seriously, try new things and adapt to the needs of the team."

(Lannister, Male, Pro)

One player also said that in some cases it is also useful to accept these remarks, and learn from them as they may hold some truth.

"If the players react badly to the remarks, they can be supported by other girls which creates female solidarity. It can work because they know they are not alone in front of this kind of problem and moreover it can create strong links"

(Dranayael, Female, Casual)

"What works best is when the community stands up against it. It shows impressionable youth that it is "not cool" and the fear of rejection is effective in making them understand that it is not something to do."

(Peluche, Male, Pro)

Another very interesting solution is to find the support of close people, friends, other people, and the game community in case of a problem. For example, there are several groups and communities of female gamers who fight against female discrimination in the video game world in general. These communities will be described later in the work.

"So for me, I would say that leaving the game will have more impact (if the person is in my team). On the other hand, it also has negative consequences on my side: ban, ranking going down, I also condemn the other players." (Chef Barnaby)

Another radical solution is to leave the game but this cannot be done in a tournament on stage.

"I don't know for sure, I don't think the players can protect themselves from it. I think the solution is in the creation of the game."

(anhmINT, Male, Casual)

To decrease the risk of harassment due to gender stereotypes, the interviewee thinks that it is useful to solve this by changing the way the game is created such as changing some characters that can increase gender stereotypes like hypersexualized characters.

Some mechanisms and techniques exist in order to avoid barriers and to bypass them. One of the solutions that has been most mentioned is to ignore the stalker, to "mute" him in order to have no messages in play. Players making these remarks eventually get tired of talking to themselves. Unfortunately this solution may not be enough. In fact, at high levels of play, in-game communication is essential for success. Some other players resort to replying, others punish them by reporting them to the game moderators. Sometimes it is also useful to accept remarks if they are constructive and help to improve the game. The solution of leaving the game can also be considered but it is very extreme. If these solutions are not enough, it is important to have psychological support, friends and family who can help. There are also organizations that promote gender equality in video games. Finally, it is also interesting to solve the problem of sexism at the source, i.e. by changing the development of a game or the design by changing the characters that are too sexualized and that can create gender stereotypes.

Discussion

The combination of literature and empirical research allowed me to better understand the world of Esports and its evolution, its history but also to better understand the issue of women's inclusion in this field. In the course of this research, I discovered the harsh realities that female gamers face and the reasons why they are very little present in the Esports scene.

I discovered more in depth the barriers of women in Esports. First of all, the overt barriers, in empirical research we found that discrimination could come from the comments of spectators of other players, but we can see here, thanks to the interviews, that it can also come from the organizer and even in some cases from developers and CEOs of video games like the example of Riot Games. Indeed, a player tells us about a case of sexual harassment from a video game tournament organizer where he was subsequently excluded from all competitions. There are also gatekeepers who prevent women from entering, we see that gender stereotypes are also

affected by the managers of professional teams. They don't let them into the teams because it can be counterproductive because there can be for example internal conflicts or women are just not as good as a man or because there are just more men and it is easier to find good players in men. Second, the interviews determined that there are also unpleasant sexist remarks when women simply walk into the game room. Gamers simply do not want her in video games. Just knowing that they will be playing with a woman is a sign of defeat for them. In terms of the video game development profession, it was found that women are often less interested in computer studies so there are far fewer of them. This can influence the opinion of recruiters who may choose to take a man instead for development positions. Also, there is a lack of investment and interest from tournament organizers to allow women to play in women's leagues. People have little interest in women in esports. So women have to fight to find structures that will help them. The interviews also revealed that most players hold to a supportive image of women. Indeed, there is a segregation of women in the support role in games and gamers believe that women are more passive and are only capable of playing support characters, more passive characters, easier to play. For them, women are not capable of playing other types of characters or they are less strong than a man on those characters that do damage for example. This can also be a disadvantage in terms of strategy, as you can quickly guess which characters are being played when you come across a woman in a game session. Moreover, female characters, according to the developer interviewed, are often designated as support characters.

Second, there are the subtle barriers. We note that there are stereotypical beliefs about female gamers, but also about gamers in general, that also apply to women. As mentioned earlier, women are breadwinners, e-girls, women can't play and aren't as strong as men. We are aware that these stereotypes carry some weight in esports. They are linked to the fact that managers do not want to integrate a woman in their team. This creates a lack of confidence in women to enter the esports world. There are also many stereotypes about the Twitch world that women are only there to use their assets to get perks, donations and money. Some of them do, but it gives a bad image and reinforces that stereotype. The general stereotypes about video game players like lack of hygiene, lack of style,... also apply to women. But in addition, there are also stereotypes common to female video game characters. Indeed, when we think of female characters we think directly of characters such as Lara Croft in Tomb Raider who are hypersexualized. In addition, developers also end up getting it into their heads that women are supporting characters and create them accordingly. More generally, many people think that the gaming and esports world is only for boys. For some esports teams, women only serve as

"mascots" for the team and are only profitable because they attract people to promote the sponsor. There is also benevolent discrimination through flirting and complementation. The fact that there are not many women in the game means that some male players take the liberty of flirting with women in the game and complimenting them. This spoils the experience of playing women in the game. We also find that men have a lot of ego in the game. As soon as they lose, they sometimes come to the conclusion that their defeat is not justified. For them, women are less strong. This happens very often in the big competitions but also in the streams. The mentality of men is that they are not ready to see women surpass them in this area. Another subtle barrier is that women lack confidence, motivation or skills. An almost exclusively male world automatically creates a lack of confidence in women for esports. Motivation is also affected because of the many stereotypes that are out there. The general public opinion does not help. Moreover, for the profession of game developer, there is a lack of confidence from the beginning of the studies, indeed, there are already very few women in the development studies but they also drop out very quickly.

Finally, these interviews highlighted mechanisms to combat these barriers such as ignorance, deferring, reporting, overcoming and support from family, friends or a community.

Links can be made between the literature review and the interview results, but they also complement each other by adding information to each other. Firstly, in the marketing context on the fact that game characters are very sexualized, we have the example of Lara Croft. But also the video game companies use women in order to promote their games to young teenagers. Some teams use women as mascots or "stars" of their organization to promote their brand. Video games were created for men by men. The consumption of games is mainly turned to men. Secondly, research shows that women are much less interested in technology, science and mathematics than men. Many links have been made to women in game development jobs. Indeed, since they are less interested in these fields like computer science studies, they are very few to join the development but there will also be a lack of motivation in the profession but also in esport in general. Research has shown us a gatekeeper called "gender zoning" which is a succession of discrimination and harassment done by men in order to keep their dominance in video games. Some interviewees pointed out that it was indeed a rather masculine world and that it was difficult for a woman to enter. A link can be made with the gatekeepers who keep women out that the interviews showed. Indeed, many remarks and discrimination are made before women enter the game. In addition, some interviews say that men have a hard time accepting defeat against women, they have ego and a bad mentality . Moreover, a domination of men is also present in the development of games. This can also

make women afraid. We also notice that each factor begets another. For example, sexual harassment creates a toxic environment that will create a lack of motivation and confidence in women. In addition, stereotypes are created that may force them to play the role of support because it is easier to control and is less highlighted. The interviews confirm that there are many stereotypes about women that they don't belong to and that they don't have the skills for video games. Interviews repeatedly point to the fact that women only play supporting and easy-to-play characters because they are simply women and are less strong than they were meant to be. The empirical research argues that playing these characters is related to their novice status. The lack of motivation can be due to the lack of women, because of the fact that it is a male dominated world. Society also plays a role. Indeed, the education and socialization process of women is generally different from that of men. Women may therefore be more passive and have different interests at stake than men, such as collaboration versus victory. Repeated cases of sexual harassment cause heavy stress to the victims and frustration as in traditional sports. This can lead to cases of female suicide. These cases are taken very seriously. Cases like Riot Games and Blizzard Activision are very well followed and many other cases are reported on social networks like twitter. These sexual harassments can be of several types such as remarks on the appearance of female players like the case of Geguri in addition to suspicion of cheating due to her gender. There is a link between remarks due to bad play due to gender. This sexual harassment is strongly found on streaming platforms such as Twitch with many remarks about the physical. Interviews mentioned that the most affected women are public figures, empirical research complements this. Indeed, at a high level of play and in competition it is no longer private messages that women receive but public reactions on social networks. These remarks can be benevolent remarks and discriminations that can be positive but also considered as toxic because they have no place in the esports especially in game sessions. In order to remedy the problems of harassment, the interviews also mention that the support of organizations or families is quite important but unfortunately the research states that there is a lack of support from these communities due to the lack of investment and interest in them. In addition, women have to stand on their own two feet and have a strong "mindset" in order to withstand the large amount of harassment.

Another link can be made to research on gender stereotypes and their impact on women's careers in society at large. First, esports professions may be considered more technical professions. Indeed, many components of "STEM" are involved. Men being more interested in this field it is normal that there are more men in these jobs. In addition, it is mentioned that women are people who are more likely to be gentle and that there is also a dominance of female nurses over men. This may reinforce the fact that women may be more attached to

supportive characters who also provide care to other characters as would a nurse for example. It is also said in the research that a person who is the victim of prejudice loses his means when he has to face it. The victim of a prejudice loses her ability to cope with it, so she performs less well and ends up confirming the cliché of what also happens in esports. Moreover, women would be victims of what is called benevolent sexism" which refers to subjectively positive sexist attitudes, tinged with chivalry and condescension in women's careers like during some gaming session. Over-protecting their female teammate shows also that male players underestimate the abilities of female players.

The relevance of a qualitative study was confirmed: interviewing different actors of both sexes and stakeholders allowed me to draw some conclusions. There are also many similarities in some of the discourses and in the answers to the questions. The topic is vast and each type of discrimination could probably be researched. In this thesis, I wanted to stay global and try to cite all types of discrimination, barriers of women in Esports. The interviews globally confirmed these assumptions, stereotypes and barriers related to the context and individual level and the empirical research while bringing more precision to all these cases.

Limitations

Contrary to expectations, the study could not find significant differences in the different types of esports games. In fact, despite an attempt to have as many different games as possible, the League of Legends game was often the most popular. These are also mostly games that are played in teams. Maybe interviewing players of Versus and fighting games could have given me different answers about their playing style, their experience with gender stereotypes because these games are not played in teams but solo so these players do not depend on a team. It is also possible that the stereotypes cited by the participants overrode the differences between the different games. Moreover, some games like Yu-Gi-Oh! Duel Links! have a much less known and less represented esports scene which is perhaps not as demonstrative compared to a scene like League of Legends. It would therefore be interesting to add other types of games to the sample, such as the versus games mentioned above. In addition, the sample was very limited and contained only 16 people. Many more barriers could have been added to this. There is a presence of some stakeholders like a developer, a team leader and a sponsor but it

is only a small fraction compared to the numbers of players interviewed. Maybe interviewing other different stakeholders would also give me more nuance in my research with more different stereotypes that may extend beyond the game scene with more abuse in the offices for example. Future research could gather a larger number of interviewees, both player and stakeholder, in order to bring more information to my research question in esports with more precision or difference.

Moreover, all the participants interviewed are French-speaking people from Belgium or France. Increasing my sample beyond these borders could have allowed me to have more differences like for example South Korea where the gaming culture is totally different and where it is really taken seriously by the country and where Esport stars are made at a young age and that the vision of Esport is totally different and rooted in the culture (Stephen, 2020). Finally, the majority of the players and people interviewed are between 20 and 28 years old. So I could not find any information about people of a younger or older age. Maybe if I had interviewed younger or older people, my results would have been different because it is possible that the mentality of a person of different age is different in different times. Future research should include participants with more diverse identities and ages to further explore the influence of identity and cohort on perceptions of gender-based stereotypes in games.

Policy recommendation

Because women are empathetic and enjoy friendly introductions, the method of introducing the game should be changed. Some of these issues can be addressed if game designers present information in an intuitive manner (Ray, 2004). In addition, game designers and researchers need to expose the characteristics of men's and women's play and try to combine common attributes to engage men and women. (Ray, 2004)

To address the core issue of gender stereotyping, men, who are in the majority, should work to counteract these stereotypes. New systems should be created in online games to encourage those who try to make the gaming community more welcoming, regardless of gender. In addition, penalties for those who harass others should be stepped up, thereby purging the online world. If an honorary policing system is put in place, the gaming community will be more quickly intact and both genders will be welcome in the Esports industry. (Kim, 2017)

There are many ways to help women who experience discrimination and harassment in video games. There are networks and communities. I take for example the project "Stream'her"

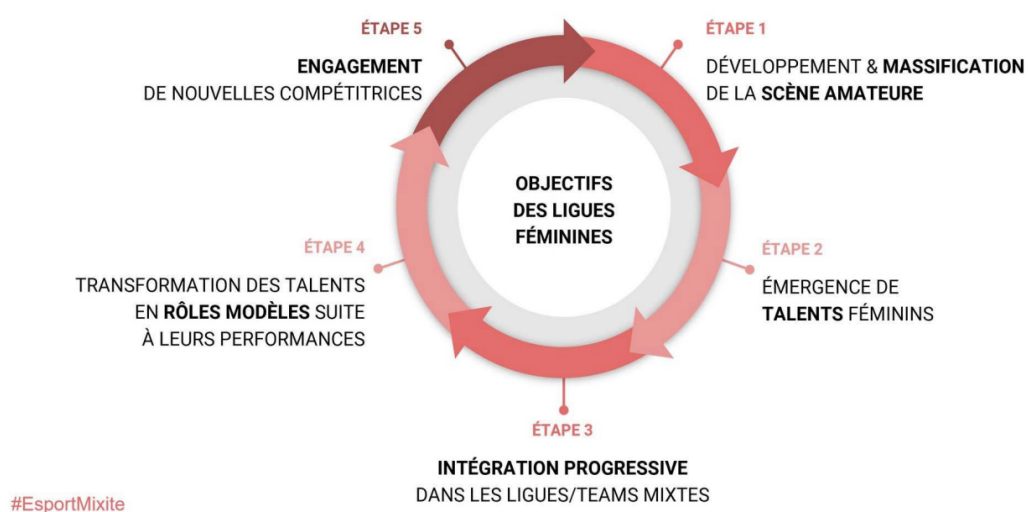
which is a community of mutual aid and promotion of women in the world of video games and Twitch streaming. The goal of these communities is to gather people who have the same passion for video games. For "Stream'her", the goal is not only to support but to highlight the fact that there are very few female gamers and streamers in the world's top, especially since women are not highly regarded for their content but rather for their looks. We notice that the clips of female players are rarely about pure gameplay but more about funny moments, moments when the player stands up... We analyze more the person than the gameplay. This kind of community is also there to show that women can be strong. They set up a Discord channel (voice chat platform used by many players) so that women can tell their stories, their worries but also promote their own twitch channel. The main objective is to help each other and promote their twitch project. (Ilaria, 2022)

Another Belgian collective that fights and raises awareness about sexism in video games and Esports is "Witch Gamez". It shows how sexism is expressed in the video game world. The women concerned can share their experience, they are given resources and existing legal tracks. They also used the high-fact system which is a symbolic trophy system very present in video games. It is a way to take back some power in a way that is a little ironic for women. Their goal is to raise awareness and sensitize to the sexism experienced in the practice of video games. People can share their experiences. This goes beyond solidarity because Witch Gamez is trying to move the lines on a legal, political and social level. The Witch Gamez website also provides a platform for resources and support. The collection of experiences will allow them to call on video game development companies by inviting them to support the approach and strengthen the fight against sexism in the worlds they create, to call on esports teams by encouraging them to develop a real protocol to support minorities in the teams, and to call on public authorities by alerting them to the lack of clear legislation framing sexist aggressions in the video game world. In addition, they provide self-help techniques, avenues for action and reflection on sexism, and documentation on possible legal avenues. Indeed, Witch Gamez advocates for legal support adapted and accessible to any person targeted by sexism and online harassment. (Asty, 2022).

It is very important to develop and encourage these associations and organizations that promote gender diversity in esports. Indeed, these associations and organizations are gathering to discuss the issue of gender diversity during various events and conferences in order to make suggestions to fight against the under-representation of women in esports.

One way to increase gender diversity in esports and invite more women into esports is the emergence of ambassadors and role models who will support the development of esports and promote gender diversity. These are key individuals who have participated and are still participating in the development of esports. It is therefore necessary to support these actors in their actions, men as well as women, who participate in the development of esports but also in the mixity by their actions. The goal is to allow young women wishing to participate in sports to identify with the path of these female role models, recognized in esports. It is very important to have female role models who have succeeded in the Esports world despite all the obstacles that have been put in front of them such as Kayane, Geguri, Laure Vallée who have been quoted several times in the thesis. But it is also essential to have male allies who can commit themselves to gender diversity in Esports, such as journalists, presenters and team coaches. Other ways of improvement are also to be taken into account, one of the most appreciated are the exclusive tournaments for women players. This is a complementary feature. The objective of the women's leagues is to first develop and massify the amateur Esports scene, which will create an emergence of female talent. Then, we can progressively integrate them into leagues and mixed teams. This will turn these talents into role models following their performances and finally provoke the engagement of new female competitors. (Lecourtois & Fischer, 2018) (See Figure 7) The goal here is to promote these competitions and women's leagues to give visibility to the players, to encourage the competitors to invest in an amateur practice, to possibly invest in a semi-professional/professional practice if opportunities arise for them.

Figure 8. Women's Circuit (Lecourtois & Fisher, 2018)



But not everyone agrees. "I think each of us individually would be like. It wouldn't be fun, like we wouldn't have any competition or we would only have to play other women's teams. Like the whole point of playing every day is to get better. But I wouldn't do that," says a player from the women's team "Cloud9" from the game "Valorant". (BBC, 2021)

Unfortunately, women-only tournaments are not yet perfected because there are many cancellations and very few tournaments. The men's circuit is still more developed with a greater visibility of competitions and players with the media, a greater number of male teams. The fact is that it is impossible for a woman to support herself with the status of Esport professional. She has to find another job. This makes it impossible for women to fully invest themselves in the practice of the video game unlike other players who are 100% and who play it daily. This finally reinforces the difference in level between men and women. It's a bit of a vicious circle since the female gamer finally plays and trains in an inferior circuit. One solution might be to put female players on men's teams and then bring their knowledge back to the women's circuit. This would not only allow women to enter the men's mixed circuit, but also bring added value and upgrade the women's only circuit. The women-only circuit does not only have its drawbacks. Indeed, if it can lock the women players in a limited scene with less good stakes than the men, the women's circuit can increase the visibility of the women players who have the possibilities to evolve at their level without facing continuous sexist remarks or conflicts with male players. It is an opportunity to make the women play in a less complex framework in the sense that they can be integrated quickly where the little presence in the mixed-male scene would bring additional pressures for the women players. This is why organizers should organize many more women's tournaments to help them in their cause.

One of the solutions could be to participate in women-only tournaments in order to "take refuge" in a way but also to continue to play in mixed tournaments in order to get closer to the level of play of the players participating in these tournaments and thus find a tougher competition. Another alternative would be the mixed team. Indeed, the main idea is to integrate one or more female players in a team, the male players being in majority in the teams. It happens that the opposite configuration with just one man exists but it is much rarer. Moreover, Riot Games, the publisher of League of Legends, prefers this solution because it considers the game to be mixed and therefore does not want to develop the women's circuit. The popularization of the presence of women playing video games, especially competitively, may allow for a greater acceptance of female players in the competitive scene. Mixed teams thus have a certain advantage in integrating female players into the mixed circuit, but are not as popular as one might think. There are opinions that the presence of a single woman on a

team could result in her being cast in a "mascot" role that is present as an extra and not as a player. In addition, while this may be agreed upon, there may be conflict within the team. If the mixed team is a good alternative to the confinement of women in an exclusively female circuit with fewer opportunities, the entry for women is nevertheless very difficult. They have to make an effort to prove their level of play. Finally, there is an additional pressure to prove to other players that a woman can play video games and be a woman player in esports. This can lead to internal conflicts, a fear of competing, and a questioning of a possible difference in the level of play. One tournament actually used this solution. In fact, the aim and the interesting point of this competition was the compulsory participation of the players in the mixed competition in addition to the exclusively female competition. This is a very good initiative and can allow a better integration of the players who could alternate between mixed and women's competition. This would give them more visibility on two stages. Also, getting exposure and having a lot of visibility can be double-edged. It helps their opportunities but exposes them to more criticism and negative remarks about their performance and appearance. As such, they can choose to play in an all-female setting or a mixed-male setting, where the majority of the players are men. Both have their advantages: The first one allows a visibility around the different competitive players in a secure environment which can allow an easier integration while the second one allows to be competitive with the best players in the world but with a possibility of over-visibility which can lead to harassment and criticism. (Borkowski, 2018)

Personal reflection

The work has also enriched my personal general culture thanks to the study on the history of esports and its evolution as well as its different components such as the numerous stakeholders who participate in it. During this work, I discovered the harsh reality that women face in video games and the reasons why they are so little represented in esports. I knew that there were problems and discriminations with my experiences as a gamer but I had no idea that it was so serious. Before that, my vision was very vague and I even believed in some of the gender stereotypes and I didn't investigate why these existed in the world of video games and how it affected them so much to the point of disrupting their play style. I sometimes met women in my gaming sessions, and sometimes they were discriminated against by other gamers, but I ignored all that.

This thesis has allowed me to know and learn a lot more about discrimination, barriers and gender stereotypes not only in esports but also in society in general. I didn't know either the

existence of a women's league in esports as in traditional sports. Through my research I was able to differentiate between gender and sex where I had very little knowledge. One thing that really surprised me during this work is that the level of harassment can go very far up to sexual aggression and also rape from players but also from organizers. Indeed, some videos really shocked me. This one showed the sound of orgasms repeated by young players while a female player was playing quietly.

Finally, this thesis would awaken me and make me want to defend this cause that is the inclusion of women in the esports world. I feel today somehow involved in it on one hand in the games but also in the society.

Conclusion

Women are underrepresented in the Esports industry. As a result, the thesis highlighted different gender stereotypes that women experience in society and how these impact their careers. In addition, contextual and individual barriers were determined through empirical research as well as gender stereotypes and their impact in Esports.

This thesis, through its empirical research and qualitative study conducted with sixteen video game players and stakeholders, sheds light on the various barriers that women face in esports. But not only that, it also provides a basis for reflection on solutions and ways to overcome this problem.

In the course of this research and interviews, several barriers were highlighted. There are overt barriers that prevent women from entering the professional arena (e.g., sexual harassment, not being rejected from teams) and subtle barriers that make women feel out of place or even unwanted (e.g., stereotypes, benevolent discrimination). In the overt barriers, we have the discrimination of organizers who block the entry of women into the esports world, we find that many sexual harassment is committed by organizers. There are also sexist remarks as soon as women arrive in a game room. Gamers don't want women in video games, a male-dominated world makes it very hard for a woman to simply enter the esports industry, managers don't want them in their teams either. In addition, there is a segregation of women in the support role in games. This reinforces the stereotype that women can only play this role with players but also with developers.

Then, in the subtle barriers, there are many stereotypes about female players that carry some weight in the esports world (e.g., electronic girls, women can't play,...). This creates a lack of confidence to enter Esports. There is also some benevolent discrimination based on flirting and complementation that can easily destroy a gaming experience. Pride and male ego issues have also been observed. There is also a lack of motivation, confidence and competence on the part of women. Women do not take risks because it is a predominantly male world.

We can see that the majority of the facts observed in the empirical research were confirmed and reinforced by the interviews with the women players. The interviews also gave us more details about the research and vice versa. All this creates a rather bad environment. But this can be improved little by little thanks to the solutions proposed by the support groups and a possible effervescence of a women's league that could in the future give way to a possible mixity in the world of Esport. These recommendations can have advantages but also disadvantages.

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