

PERFORMATIVITY AND GAMEPLAY: Gender, Race and Desire amongst a team of
League of Legends players

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DECLARATION:

This work has not been submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work or works of other people has been attributed, cited and referenced.

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ABSTRACT

Computer gaming is an important and growing form of popular media that has many cognitive and social benefits for players. It has also developed a reputation for being a white-male pastime and barring access for people who fall outside of that social grouping. While statistics show that this is increasingly not the case, certain games, particularly those that fall under the category of eSports, do attract largely male player bases. *League of Legends* is one such game.

With Butler's Performativity Theory as a theoretical starting point, a qualitative sociolinguistic study was undertaken into the gendered dynamics of a male-dominated clan of *League of Legends* players. The data, collected primarily via audio-recordings of player interactions between games, is used as the basis for a sociolinguistic case study that looks at how performativity plays itself out in an environment that is characterised by a strong gender bias. With a focus on a Coloured female gamer in a *League of Legends* team, this paper explores the ways in which she and her teammates construct their own genders within this particular sociolinguistic context.

The relationship between identity and desire, which has been a point of debate in sociolinguistics, is discussed in the context of the clan's interactions. Here I focus on the debate between Cameron and Kulick on the one hand and Bucholtz and Hall on the other. The paper looks into ways in which desire and identity interact with each other during sociolinguistic interaction. Moreover, issues around the construction of gender, race and sexuality are central to the study. The paper uses the data collected to look into the ways that social identities are collaboratively constructed, and contested. The discussion shows that while the team members replicate the gender binary, they do so by simultaneously reifying and challenging gendered norms. The study provides a compelling look into the ways in which gender identities are played with in interaction, and sheds some light on the fluidity of performative identity while simultaneously sketching out the ways that such performance is limited by its environment.

Keywords: Gender, race, desire, identity, sociolinguistics, performativity, computer gaming, language, interaction

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recent literature suggests that gaming, as one of the fastest growing forms of mass media today, is increasingly attracting a more diverse crowd, drawing in, especially, more female players than ever before (Yee, 2008). Over the past ten years, the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) has collected gaming industry statistics in their annual publication: *Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry*. Much of this statistical data focuses on the US and China, and, while important, is of limited use in understanding the South African context. The US data shows an increase in female gamers as well as a consistently higher average age than the stereotypical image of a young, white, male gamer would have one believe (see Table 1). However, there is limited information about which games female gamers are playing (Ratan et al., 2015: 440). This makes it difficult to draw reliable conclusions from the ESA statistics. According to Ratan et al. (2015: 439), “research points to an ongoing gender disparity in the play of *competitive games*” (my emphasis). The focus of this study is one such competitive game: *League of Legends*. According to Riot Games’ (2012) statistics about the game’s player base, over 90% of its 32 million players worldwide were male (see Figure 1 below). Thus, it seems that in spite growth in the overall number of female gamers, there are still barriers to equal access to all games for female players, not to mention gamers of colour and gamers who identify outside of the gender binary. These barriers will be discussed further in this chapter and the chapters to follow.

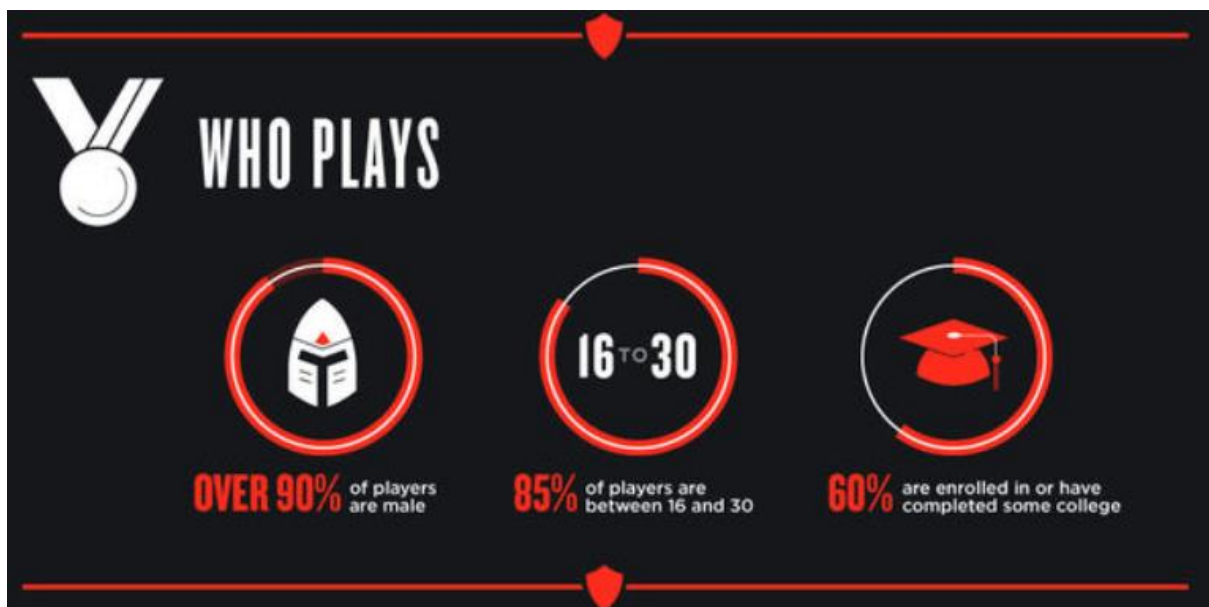
Table 1: Gender statistics for US gamers

Year	Average age of players	% Male players	% Female players
2008	35	60	40
2009	35	60	40
2010	34	60	40
2011	37	58	42

2012	30	53	47
2013	30	55	45
2014	31	52	48
2015	35	56	44
2016	35	59	41
2017	35	NOT AVAILABLE	NOT AVAILABLE
2018	34	61	39

(ESA, 2008-2018)

Figure 1: *League of Legends* gender statistics



(Riot Games, 2012)

It is important for gaming to become more accessible, and that the numbers represent an equal distribution of genders across all gaming genres. Studies have shown that gaming, especially

competitive gaming, can enhance perceptual and cognitive skills (Bavelier and Green, 2004; Feng et al., 2007). It also benefits education, and helps self-esteem and social skills (Griffiths, 2002; Boyle et al. 2016). The development of gaming skills has further been linked to an increased interest in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM; DiSalvo, 2012; Steinkuehler & Duncan, 2008; Ratan et al, 2015: 439). In spite of its benefits, it has consistently been marketed to a largely white, male audience (Carr, 2006), further contributing to the global and South African white male domination of STEM fields (Joubert & Gunter, 2018).

This thesis looks into the ways that gender is constructed and performed in a competitive gaming environment. The focus is on South African players, an area that has not seen much research (see Section 2.4.1). The competitive game that I will study is *League of Legends*. It is a game that shows a persistent male dominance in its global statistics (see above), and is part of the growing eSports culture, which is also male dominated (Kim, 2017).

League of Legends (LoL) is an example of an eSport (electronic sport). eSports are defined as “an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies” (Wagner, 2006: 182); or, “as a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the eSports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces” (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017: 2). Hiramani and Sjöblom (2017: 2) go on to put it in “more practical terms”:

“eSports commonly refer to competitive (pro and amateur) video gaming that is often coordinated by different leagues, ladders and tournaments and where players customarily belong to teams or other ‘sporting’ organizations who are sponsored by various business organizations”.

Like traditional sports, eSports are played by individuals and teams in competitive environments and they have developed large audiences as well, with a peak (global) viewership of 127 million viewers during the 2018 annual Mid-Season Invitational event, and a total of over 15 billion viewing hours for 2017 (ESports Charts, 2018). In the past few years, eSports have enjoyed an increase in attention, viewers, players and revenue. In 2016, viewership of eSports had increased by 43% over the previous two years from 204 million to 293 million, and global revenue had seen a 293% increase in those two years, from \$194 million to \$463 million (Big Fish Games, 2017). As a Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) game that is played competitively in teams, *League of Legends* is one of the most played and viewed eSports online (ESports Charts, 2018).

The participants in this study are members of a South African team of *League of Legends (LoL)*. The team goes by the team name *Dragons of War*. The data was collected over a period of two months in 2013 and again for a few sessions in 2014. The team practised on Mondays and Wednesdays for a few hours at a time. Data was collected via recording the gamers' spoken conversation while playing *LoL*, as well as before and after the games. It is the pre- and post-game interaction that I am particularly interested in: it frames the in-game interactions and is rich in social and linguistic performances.

Many gender/queer theorists (Butler, Halberstam, Sedgwick and others) have argued that gender is socially constructed. Our understanding of gender as something innately tied to the body and as a binary system is borne out of a long history of Western heteronormativity, colonialism and the division of labour (Lugones, 2007; Wood & Ridgeway, 2010), as well as an understanding of sexual activity as having a primarily reproductive function. Biologically, a person's physical sex is much more complicated than what genitals they have (Ainsworth, 2015; Herdt, 2012); yet our social system of gender is based almost entirely on what genitals we are born with. This affects both the individual and society on various levels (Wood & Ridgeway, 2010). Through looking at this team of gamers' interactions with each other, I will explore the ways in which the gender binary is constructed and maintained in this social and linguistic space, as well as the ways that it is transgressed, transformed or rejected. The thesis looks into the interactional dynamics of the team, and into the ways the gender binary operates in practice.

1.1. AlienObserver and *Dragons of War*

Dragons of War (DoW) is a so-called 'clan' of *League of Legends* players consisting of 34 members, only three of whom identify as women. This study will focus on the 24 players who belong to the more serious subdivisions of the clan (i.e. the members who meet at least once a week to practise and compete together). Among these 24 players, there are only two active female members. The central participant, AlienObserver (her online pseudonym, used with permission), self identifies as a 30-year-old woman of colour, and the only female member of the clan to captain one of the sub-teams. The data features AlienObserver interacting with other members of the clan, some of whom show up more than once in the data, others who are present for only one session. All of the players know each other from playing together and at the time of recording had been playing together for about seven months. Some of the players have met in real life, but since they are scattered across South Africa the majority of their interactions occur online.

The players are between 14 and 34 years of age, but the data discussed will be that of the over-18 players. The players come from various socio-economic backgrounds, but the majority are white and male, thus AlienObserver is in the minority in terms of both her gender and her race.

1.2. Data Analysis

The data analysis chapters are guided by Butler’s theory of performativity (1999 [1990]) and the methods of Critical Discourse Analysis (van Dijk, 1995). I focus on how gender is constituted in the DoW space, and how the gender binary is maintained in said space. Part of the discussion is underpinned by the 2000-2005 scholarly debate between Cameron and Kulick (2003), on one hand, who advocated a desire-centred approach to the study of language and sexuality; and Bucholtz and Hall (2005), on the other, who defended an identity-centred approach. This debate will be used to discuss the performances of the team both as a reflection of their desires as played out in the group (this will not be limited to sexual desire, but covers social desires as well), as well as practices of identity construction. This serves a dual purpose of exploring the gender constitution of the group, while also reflecting on the literature and determining how far either approach can be taken and whether or not they can be used simultaneously.

1.3. Research Question

How do the players in the gaming environment performatively constitute gender and in what ways do their performances reproduce or subvert the gender binary?

1.4. Transcription Conventions

Table 2 provides a brief key for understanding the transcriptions that are excerpted in the paper.

Table 2: Transcription convention key

Keyboard symbol	Meaning
.	1 second pause (i.e. a three second pause will be transcribed as ...)
,	A pause of less than a second
/	Indicates a point at which two utterances overlap
:	Indicates the lengthening of a syllable
?	Indicates raising intonation

[]	Contain descriptive information about how an utterance was produced
-----	---

1.5. Conclusion

The thesis comprises six chapters (excluding this Introduction) and is structured as follows: The Literature Review contextualises the study in terms of the current prevailing literature around gaming. I discuss the relationship between gaming and the gender binary; the question of gender representation in games; game preferences and types; and the South African specific gaming context. In addition, I look at previous sociolinguistic work on gaming. The Theoretical Background section, which forms part of the Literature Review, details the broader frameworks for embarking on this project in terms of gender, identity, and desire, as well as outlining the methods of data analysis used. This chapter is divided into sections on performativity; identity and identification; the gender binary; and identity and desire. Foundational authors cited include Butler; Bucholtz and Hall; and Cameron and Kulick. Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2010; 2012) is introduced as the project's analytical method, concerned with relationships between language and power.

Methodology and Background introduces the game, *LoL*; the team I (*DoW*); and AlienObserver, the primary subject of this study. The methods and technologies used to collect data are also detailed in this chapter.

Data Analysis Part 1 analyses communicative acts of the team in relation to gender, sexuality, and race. It focuses particularly how the team establishes and naturalises differences between masculinity and femininity *via* language.

Data Analysis Part 2 draws on Butler's conception of performativity (1990) as a guiding theory. In addition, I introduce sexuality, desire, and homosociality as central concepts (Kiesling, 2005: 695). The chapter analyses the players' performance of both their constructed discrete identities as well as their more ambiguous and diffuse desires.

The Conclusion summarises my findings and reflects on the limits of my study. I further outline possibilities for future research on the intersections of the identities and desires of eSports players.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

The literature suggests that gaming is one of the fastest growing forms of mass media today: in 2013 alone, \$67 billion were spent on games worldwide (Fox & Tang, 2013: 314). Gaming is increasingly attracting a more diverse crowd, drawing in not only more female players, but a much older crowd too (Yee, 2008; Fox & Tang, 2013; ESA 2008-2018). However, in spite of this, there is still the sense that the community is largely male (Yee, 2008; Fox & Tang, 2013), a perception that is reinforced by the marketing around the games. Further to this perception, there are in fact gaming sub-communities (such as the *LoL* community) that remain male dominated, in spite of the growing global numbers of female players (Ratan et al, 2015). It is important to note that there is extremely limited data reflecting the presence of players who fall outside of the gender binary. Yee (2017) conducted an online study involving 270,000 gamers worldwide, and only 1.1% identified themselves as non-binary. As none of the participants of this study identify as non-binary, the discussion of gender will centre on how people, who identify as one of the two dominant genders, performatively reproduce or challenge gender norms and the gender binary.

2.2. Why Gaming Matters

Studies have shown that gaming can enhance perceptual and cognitive skills (Green & Bavelier, 2004), computer literacy (Bertozzi and Lee, 2007) and also has broader educational benefits, helping, for example, with self-esteem and social skills (Griffiths, 2002). Gee (2004; 2007; 2008), especially, has argued that video games are not only fun, and an increasingly relevant pop-cultural force, but sometimes have better learning practices built into them than those taught at schools. Boyle and colleagues (2016) discuss the positive influence computer games have on knowledge acquisition and motivation and, as mentioned in the Introduction, gaming is also cited as an access point for further computer science and technology careers (Kafai et al, 2008; Gorriz & Medina, 2000; Bryce & Rutter, 2006; Steinkuelher & Duncan, 2008; DiSalvo, 2012). All these remain male dominated fields (Gorriz & Medina, 2000; Beede et al., 2011; Su & Rounds, 2015). Beavis and Charles (2007: 692-693) discuss online gaming's potential as an informal education tool, and note that access to video game culture and to certain styles of playing might impact on access to the field of Information and Communication Technologies.

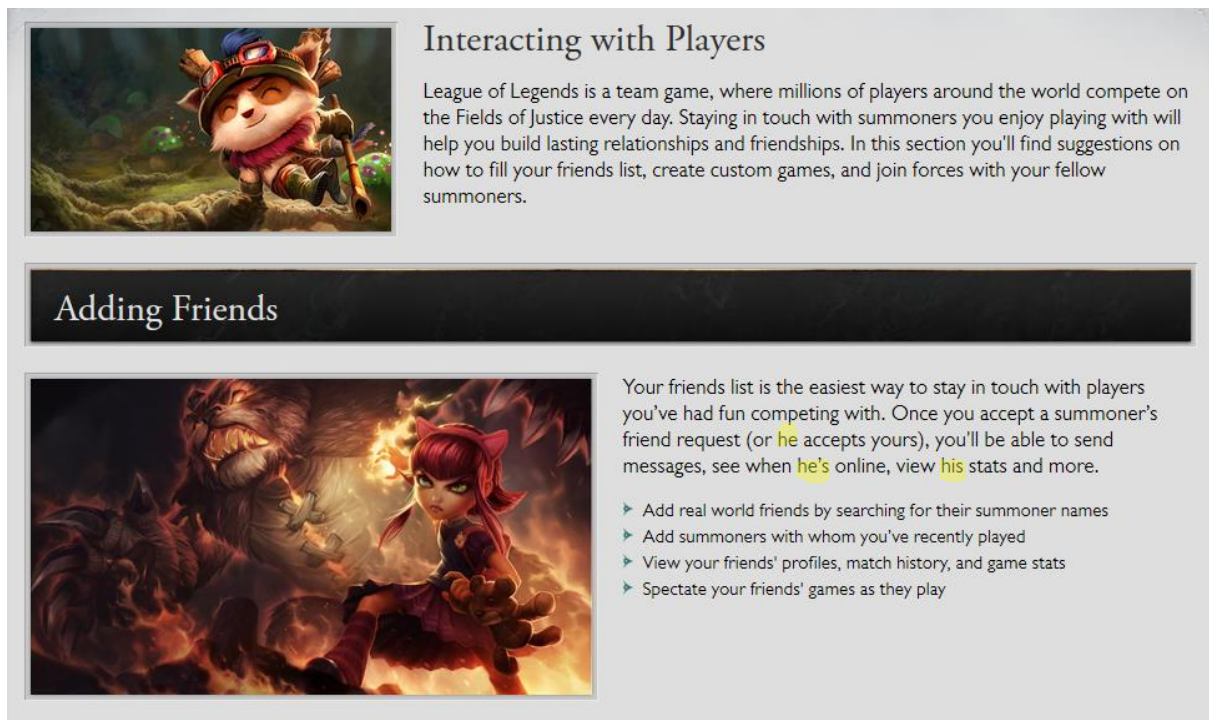
Thus, if the competitive gaming industries, like eSports, continue to favour a male market (based on a gender model that divides people into two gender groups and treats one group as the dominant social and economic power), it follows that male players will be the ones to get the full benefit of game design (which involves social learning as well as skills development). On top of that, as with any practice that divides participants based on their perceived gender, the industry will continue to reify the binary gender model.

2.2.1. The Gender Binary and Gaming

The issue of gender and gaming has been under discussion since the 1980s (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998; Bryce & Rutter, 2006; Carr, 2005; Yee, 2008). The games and gender discourse of the 1990s and early 2000s tended to focus on the kinds of games that are specifically designed for a female market, such as *Barbie Fashion Designer* (released in the mid-1990s), and what this says about the cultural perception of femininity. Questions were also raised about the role that gender plays in the games market, where a culturally specific ‘boy’ was the target market for most games, and games for ‘girls’ tended to be pink or lavender, catering to stereotypically ‘feminine’ needs (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998). Today, the majority of games are developed by a predominately male industry and marketed largely to male consumers (Heeter et al. 2009: 75). Moreover, the marketing seems to either assume an unmarked male market, or a marked female one. There seems to be little to no room for people who identify outside of the gender binary. Generally, the understanding of gender indicated by the design and marketing of the games is formulated along the supposition of a binary opposition of genders.

To illustrate a game marketed to an assumed male user, Figures (2) and (3) show screengrabs from the official *LoL* website.


Figure 2. Screenshot from the *LoL* (na.leagueoflegends.com – retrieved 06/02/2019)



Interacting with Players

League of Legends is a team game, where millions of players around the world compete on the Fields of Justice every day. Staying in touch with summoners you enjoy playing with will help you build lasting relationships and friendships. In this section you'll find suggestions on how to fill your friends list, create custom games, and join forces with your fellow summoners.

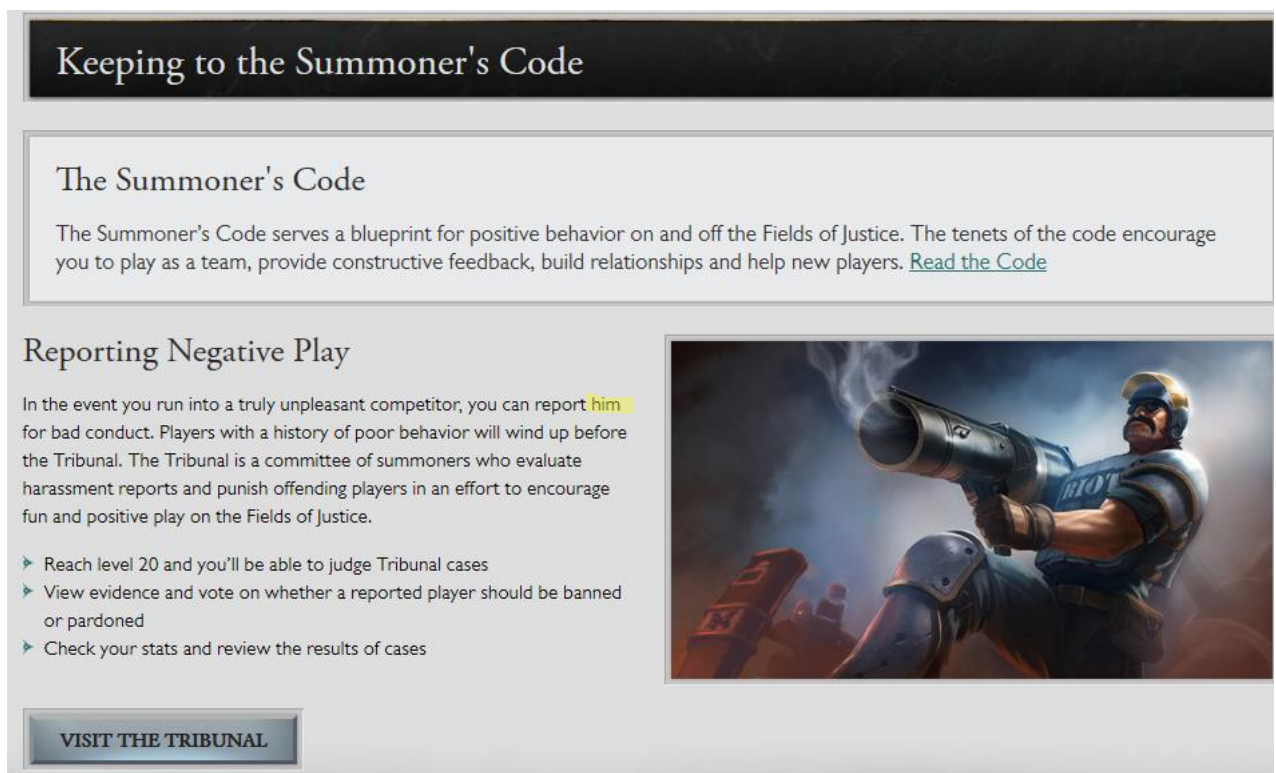
Adding Friends



Your friends list is the easiest way to stay in touch with players you've had fun competing with. Once you accept a summoner's friend request (or he accepts yours), you'll be able to send messages, see when he's online, view his stats and more.

- ▶ Add real world friends by searching for their summoner names
- ▶ Add summoners with whom you've recently played
- ▶ View your friends' profiles, match history, and game stats
- ▶ Spectate your friends' games as they play

Figure 3. Screenshot from the *LoL* (na.leagueoflegends.com –retrieved 06/02/2019)



Keeping to the Summoner's Code

The Summoner's Code


The Summoner's Code serves a blueprint for positive behavior on and off the Fields of Justice. The tenets of the code encourage you to play as a team, provide constructive feedback, build relationships and help new players. [Read the Code](#)

Reporting Negative Play

In the event you run into a truly unpleasant competitor, you can report him for bad conduct. Players with a history of poor behavior will wind up before the Tribunal. The Tribunal is a committee of summoners who evaluate harassment reports and punish offending players in an effort to encourage fun and positive play on the Fields of Justice.

- ▶ Reach level 20 and you'll be able to judge Tribunal cases
- ▶ View evidence and vote on whether a reported player should be banned or pardoned
- ▶ Check your stats and review the results of cases

VISIT THE TRIBUNAL



The Tribunal section features a large image of a character in blue armor holding a large gun, set against a dark, smoky background.

(Riot Games, 2016)

Noticeable in the text that accompanies the images in Figures (2) and (3) is the use of the masculine pronoun 'he'/'him' when referring to potential players of the game. Considering Riot Games' (2012) claim that 90% of *LoL*'s players are male, the use of the male pronoun use might appear motivated. However, it does indicate a possible disregard for the 10% of female or non-binary players (the statistics are not specific about the makeup of the 10%), and signals a lack of interest in garnering more female or non-binary users through making their product more inclusive. It is my contention that the large number of male players feeds into the marketing, which, in turn, continues to address and attract male players, and erases or excludes others. This creates a constitutive cycle of identity production, belonging, and labour division, which mirrors the one that underpins Butler's notion of the performative (1990), which is detailed in the 'Theoretical Background' section.

In recent years, the focus of coverage of the gaming community has been on harassment issues, with a series of reports from female developers, analysts, reporters, and gamers who have experienced gender-based harassment (including rape and death threats). Sarkeesian, whose work on gender tropes in videogames (2009-2018) aims to illustrate the way female game characters work to perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes in society, was attacked for highlighting these issues, and she was subjected to a hate campaign in an attempt to silence her (Sarkeesian, 2012). Game developers/designers and other women working in the gaming industry have also been subject to gender-based harassment, with some also mentioning being targeted for their race (Kotzer, 2014; Alfonso, 2013; Takahashi, 2015).

The exposure of the problem of gender-based harassment in the international gaming community reached a peak in late 2014, when an organised campaign – known as GamerGate – was launched against women, who were speaking out against misogyny in gaming (including Anita Sarkeesian and game developers such as Zoe Quinn; see Todd, 2015; Gra et al., 2016). The campaign was largely staged over social media platforms such as Twitter, Reddit and 4chan, but also included a practice known as 'doxing' (the online sourcing and distribution of personal details of an individual – in this case, the women targeted by the campaign); the sending of rape and death threats; and ultimately (as a result of doxing) calls and threats reaching the homes of those targeted. Thus, Anita Sarkeesian and Zoe Quinn both had to leave their homes for a time to protect themselves. This extremely violent campaign exposed the misogyny that had defined women's interactions in the gaming world, and the experience served as a springboard for activism in the community (Todd, 2015). The issues are ongoing, but awareness is increasing. Scholars like Carr (2005), Kuznekoff & Rose (2013), and Downs and Smith (2010) have begun exploring why this harassment occurs and whether it is inherent to the games themselves. Kuznekoff and Rose (2013) measured gamers' reactions to perceived 'male' and

'female' voices during in-game spoken communication (using microphones). They found that when players perceived a voice as female, there was more likely to be a negative response. The form of communication (i.e. the spoken chat between the players) thus contributes to "an environment conducive to generating hypernegative effects, particularly toward women" (Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013: 12). Fox & Tang (2014) further suggest that games are used by young men as spaces to explore their masculine identities and to bond with other young men, creating an in-group of male players and an out-group of female players (and, one would imagine, anyone who falls outside of the gender binary). This, they suggest, may contribute to a culture of hypermasculinity.

Thus, it can be concluded that, in spite of the growing numbers of female gamers, the fact that some sub-communities, such as the competitive gaming circuit, remain male dominated leads to environments that are not welcoming to female gamers and can be actively hostile toward them if they do manage to enter into them at all. Given that *LoL* is an eSport and claims to be very male dominated, we can expect the environment to be one that women have to work harder to be a part of.

2.3. Representation: Why does it matter?

Downs and Smith (2010) conducted a study into the representation of the female body in 60 top-selling videogames that comprised a total 23 of 489 game characters, only 14% of which were identifiably female. Of the female characters that were represented in the games covered, 25% were depicted with unrealistic hypersexualised physical features, and 43% were partially or completely nude (as opposed to 4% of male characters). This creates an environment where a white, heterosexual, cisgender male consumer is the anticipated norm. It further perpetuates a stratified gender binary as female bodies are noticeably different to the masculine-presenting bodies and play into cultural stereotypes

Of the 144 playable avatars (known as 'champions') in *LoL* only 33% are coded as female, and all but two of them are depicted with exaggerated female physiques and often in revealing clothing. There are only fifteen champions (10%) that appear to be racialised as people of colour, though many of these are ambiguous and could pass as Caucasian (only five of them have darker skin tones, with the rest appearing to be East Asian). There are only seven champions (5%) that are both coded as female and as people of colour. As noted above, of the 20+ core members of *DoW*, the team of *LoL* players I will be focusing on, only two are female.

Since the stereotypical gamer is not only assumed to be male but also white, racial representation in games and in the gaming community is important for understanding the full picture regarding representation. In their 2009 study, Williams et al. found that of 8,572 characters from 133 games, 85% of the characters were male and 15% female (with no mention of characters outside of the binary). Moreover, 85% of the characters were white, 10% Black¹, 4% Mixed Race and 2% Asian. Shaw (2011: 37) points out that the ESA never collects data on the racial make-up of game players, focusing only on age and gender. This may contribute to a perception of gaming as a very white community as there are no statistics to show otherwise. This perception may make it harder for people of colour to enter certain gaming communities, in the same way that it does for women and non-binary people. Fraser (1995: 73) seeks to clarify the intersection of cultural and economic oppression when it comes to such socially constructed categories as gender and race:

Cultural norms that are unfairly biased against some are institutionalized in the state and the economy; meanwhile, economic disadvantage impedes equal participation in the making of culture, in public spheres and in everyday life. The result is often a vicious circle of cultural and economic subordination.

In her writings on justice, Fraser (1995; 2007) made a distinction between redistribution, i.e. justice predicated on equalizing the distribution of wealth and resources, and recognition, i.e. justice predicated on equalizing the recognition (through addressing issues of representation, identity and difference) of different cultural groups within a society. It is Fraser's contention that the feminism of the late twentieth century had begun replacing a 'quasi-Marxist' politics of redistribution with a politics of recognition that drew the focus away from class dynamics and onto issues of gender identity (Fraser, 1995; 2007). Fraser argues that this ultimately serves a neoliberal end (Fraser 2013).

In her discussion of how cultural injustices would be remedied, Fraser (1995) lists recognition (with representation as one of the primary forces of cultural recognition) as just one of the means for such a remedy. She makes it clear that a politics of recognition cannot be easily separated from a politics of redistribution, i.e. a politics that has economic justice at its core (Fraser, 1995). Gender and race are cited as examples of collectives that are subject to both cultural and economic injustice and are therefore in need of simultaneous redistribution and recognition.

Fraser seeks to clarify the interlinkedness of cultural and economic oppression when it comes to such socially constructed categories as gender and race. She points out that any politics that seeks to achieve redress on only one axis runs the risk of performatively reproducing the grounds of

¹ In this paper, 'Black' will be capitalised, as argued for by Tharps (2014) but 'white' will not as Perlman (2015) points out that white supremacists tend to capitalise 'white' but not Black and I prefer to flip that.

oppression by reifying difference. However, she also recognizes the importance of representation in rectifying cultural oppressions. Here she very clearly sets out how the relationship between what she has laid out as two spheres are inextricable from and reproduce each other:

[F]ar from occupying two airtight separate spheres, economic injustice and cultural injustice are usually interimblicated so as to reinforce one another dialectically. Cultural norms that are unfairly biased against some are institutionalized in the state and the economy; meanwhile, economic disadvantage impedes equal participation in the making of culture, in public spheres and in everyday life. The result is often a vicious circle of cultural and economic subordination. (Fraser, 1995:73)

As discussed above, representation in games does not stop at the games themselves, but extends to the gaming industry and also has an impact on the gender makeup of, for example, those work in STEM fields. Moreover, the minimal representation of women and other genders in the games, in the communities around games, and in the industry is either harmful as in the case of overly sexualized game characters, or indicative of what Fraser would call a neoliberal victory of a few women being granted access to an oppressive system, rather than being indicative of a true egalitarian shift.

Crenshaw takes a different view of identity politics. According to her assessment, “the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite – that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences.” (Crenshaw, 1991: 1242). Crenshaw developed her concept of ‘intersectionality’ “in the late 1980s as a heuristic term to focus attention on the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics” (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013: 787).

While their arguments differ on a few fundamental points, both Crenshaw and Fraser are proposing a means to integrate what Fraser marks out as the spheres of redistribution and recognition and what Crenshaw breaks down into groups such as gender, race and class. Both theorists are proposing a politics that seeks to form an integrated response to oppression’s multifaceted and complex nature.

Meaningful representation should result in a change to oppressive systems, rather than just allowing access to a few previously excluded members.

2.4. Game Types and Preferences

In the United States, the Entertainment Software Association (ESA of America) reports that female gamers make up 39% of US gamers (ESA, 2018: 3). This is an increase from the 1990s and early 2000s

when US scholars reported only 25% of female gamers. There are, however, multiple subgenres of games. Ensslin (2011: 85) states that games typically preferred by female players make up 53% of the types of online games played most often. Thus, the blanket reading of 39% of all gamers is likely skewed by the individual readings of the different game types. Games especially associated with white male gamers are those referred to as 'hardcore games' (Jenkins and Cassell, 2008). These are contrasted with what Jenkins and Cassell (2008) refer to as 'fringe games,' or what Kafai et al. (2008) call 'edge' forms of gaming. The latter include games associated with a more female user base. I will refer to this grouping as 'casual games', since this is the term most commonly found on gamer websites, blogs and forums. Winn & Heeter (2009) report that significantly more females play casual games than males. According to Wohn (2011: 199), "[c]asual games are simple in interface and are mainly played on web browsers, mobile devices, or downloaded to the PC. They include arcade games (e.g., matching same colour tiles, popping bubbles), brain teasers, word, board, jigsaw, trivia, hidden object, mahjong, card, simulation, and puzzle adventure games." These games typically follow a simple, repetitive structure that is easy to learn and to perfect. 'Hardcore' games, on the other hand, tend to take longer to learn. They include role-playing games (RPG) such as the *World of Warcraft*, where one must familiarise oneself with the elements of the game universe before one can start developing one's skills. Competitive games such as fight games (like *Streetfighter* or *Tekken*), battle arena games (like *LoL* or *DotA 2*) are also considered 'hardcore', and players can develop their skills until they are able to play in international, high-stakes competitions. These competitive games are known as eSports, as defined above in the Introduction. 'Hardcore' games like eSports tend to receive the most attention from marketers, media and academics alike (Scimeca, 2013). ESports also have a large audience who watch the matches, much like traditional sports. Thus, even though female gamers are nearing the numbers of male gamers overall, they are still highly underrepresented in the games that define the more visible games market and even though the numbers are increasing, the divisions are still in place (Kafai et al, 2008: xxi; Todd, 2015: 64). Statistically, most hardcore gamers identify as male.

2.4.1. South African Statistics

In terms of game titles, the South African games market reflects the global market in that the majority of game titles distributed here are international, and local players frequently interact with international players. South Africa is at the forefront of internet usage in sub-Saharan Africa, with an estimated 53% of households being equipped with internet access, compared to the continent's 16% and the world's 52% (International Telecommunications Union, 2017: 173-174). Online gaming is reportedly the fastest growing games segment in South Africa, with a preference for casual games

that can be played for free on social media platforms (Smith & Dorasamy, 2012). With the growing rate of internet usage and a growing games industry, gaming is becoming an increasingly relevant cultural practice in South Africa.

The research on South African gaming tends to focus on education and literacy (Titus & Ng'ambi, 2014; Lemphane & Prinsloo, 2013). Past studies have shown that more South Africans have access to cell phones than they do to computers (Kreutzer, 2009; Fiorito, 2011) and that more gaming takes place on cell phones too (Walton & Pallit, 2011). As e-sports require players to at least have access to a laptop computer, this makes it very unlikely that there are especially high numbers of e-Sports players in South Africa. Consequently, this study is looking into what is still a minority in terms of online practices. Lemphane and Prinsloo (2013) showed that access to the internet is affected by class in that middle class youth were more likely to have access to computers and other gaming platforms, while working class youth would likely access the internet from their cell phones. As South Africa's class lines are largely racialised, due to the country's history, these discrepancies would likely mean more white people have access to computers and other gaming tools than South African people of colour.

2.5. Gaming and Language

Much of the literature on language and gaming focuses on second-language learning (Thorne, Black and Sykes, 2009; Thorne and Fischer 2012; Rama et al. 2012). Research has looked, for example, at the role that the MMO (massively multiplayer online) game *World of Warcraft* can play the acquisition of a second language. The immersive, communicative and, importantly, social space of an MMO like *World of Warcraft*, along with its global reach, is shown to be a strong basis for the learning of a second-language.

Ensslin's (2011) book *The Language of Gaming* is the most thorough exploration of the subject yet. It covers game genres (from abstract games to strategy games) as well as discussing data from a corpus of written and spoken samples from 'videogame magazine articles, gamer fora threads, gamer chat threads, and live conversations during gameplay (oral)' (Ensslin, 2011: 12). The book approaches the topic of language and gaming on a metadiscursive level as well as discussing the language used in the games and by the players.

In terms of language used by the players, Ensslin discusses common gamer slang such as 'pwn' (translates as *own* as in *defeat*) and 'n00b' (*newbie* or *newcomer*; Ensslin, 2011: 64). She discusses the requirement for a gamer to be familiar not only with general 'gamer lingo', for purposes of social

cohesion and fun, but also game-specific terminology, which she refers to as technical jargon or 'techspeak' (2011: 66). For example, in order to play *LoL* successfully, one must know what it means to 'feed' in the *LoL* context (it means to strengthen the other team by dying repeatedly and giving them wins), what a 'minion' is (non-player characters that assist your team to victory), or what 'bot' means (the bottom lane of the game map). Without this knowledge, it will be very difficult to follow the instructions of the team, and the match will most likely end in defeat. She also discusses word formation processes (2011: 69-74) and cites the following as the most productive formation processes: acronyms and initialisms, such as *DotA* (pronounced 'dough-ta') and *LoL* (pronounced as 'L-O-L'); affixation, such as *respawn* (used to refer to the revival of a character recently killed in gameplay); blending, such as *Wiimote*, the name given to the remote controller for the Nintendo gaming platform *Wii*; clipping such as *mid* (in *LoL*) for middle lane; compounding such as *joystick*; and semantic and functional shifts such as the use of the word *tank* to refer to a character whose role in the game is to withstand and inflict damage (Ensslin, 2011: 71-73). These word formation processes will be discussed further in the data analysis.

Ensslin (2011) also discusses metaludic discourses; that is, discourses that affect the ways in which gamers express themselves in a gaming environment. She identifies three dominant discourses: the discourse of cool, the discourse of fun, and the discourse of appreciation (2011: 108-113). The discourse of cool, according to Ensslin, "manifests itself in a variety of ways, verbally and nonverbally" (2011: 109), and includes in-group slang and expressions. While recording the *DoW* matches with AlienObserver, there were a number of times I had to ask her questions like "what does it mean to take blue", or "what's *ganking*" and so on. These are expressions that any *LoL* player will need to be familiar with in order to play with a team, as they allow for efficiency and clarity in gameplay. However, there are also terms specific to the *DoW* clan, such as *Baron's baby*, which is a name that AlienObserver made up for one of two demons that appear on the game map. The demon is officially called Dragon, but as the smaller of two (the bigger of which is called Baron), it looks like a baby. This is a group-specific name for a shared game character and knowing about it requires being part of this specific team. Using the name indicates a kind of belonging and playfulness with the game context. Other common features in Ensslin's discourse of cool are expletives, 'general youth slang', and 'inverted and fragmented syntax' (2011: 110).

The discourse of fun is the discourse around enjoyment of the game as well as playful competition in a non-stressful environment, due to the fact that "infinite replayability removes potential feelings of anxiety *vis-à-vis* defeat and metaphoric death" (Ensslin, 2011: 110). A feature mentioned by Ensslin is written laughter in chat as an expression of fun or enjoyment. In spoken communication (as in the

case of *LoL*) jocular expressions and teasing of the other players on one's team, or of the enemy team, or even the avatars, might fall under the discourse of fun.

The discourse of appreciation refers to the appreciation of the gameplay and is linked to ideas of immersion in that it involves an emotional/attitudinal response to the gameplay. Value judgments of the game can take the form of criticism, praise or more neutral appraisal (Ensslin, 2011: 112). They will tend to involve modifiers such as *really* and *totally* as well as expletives and other markers of strong emotion (*ibid*).

2.6. Theoretical Background

2.6.1. Judith Butler and Performativity

Butler's theory of gender and performativity, along with the work of other theorists such as Halberstam and Sedgwick, informs this project's approach to gender. In *Gender Trouble* (1999 [1990]), Butler sets out a critique of feminism as representational politics, that is, as an attempt to represent 'women' as a stable, knowable category. This gives way to her idea of gender as something that is performatively constituted on a moment-to-moment basis. In attempting to represent 'women' there is usually an assumption that the category exists in some way outside of, or prior to, the 'regulatory structures' of power that have shaped human history. Instead, Butler argues, gender is a set of culturally imposed ideas that do not exist outside of culture and that do not originate from the body. Rather, they are played out through a set of performative practices and are thus reified as gendered acts. Thus, representations of gender need to be understood as representations of a set of cultural norms that – in being repeated – feed back into those norms that, in turn, regulate the representational norms. Those who control representation (e.g. game developers amongst others) have a hand in informing social norms and have the power to advance or disrupt such norms.

2.6.2. The Performative

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1999 [1990]) refers to the social construction of gender as something that is based on an assumption of some 'interior essence' She writes that the social construction of gender

“operates as an interior essence that might be disclosed, an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates” (1999 [1990]: xv).

In other words, gender is a set of behaviours (linguistic and otherwise) that have developed based on the (Western historical) idea and expectation that gender exists as an essence. These behaviours end up producing the very effects by which we come to view gender as being in some way essential to the sexually dimorphic body. Thus, gender is both the cause and the result of the same set of acts. In further words, it is the socially held belief that gender stems from an interior essence that produces the circumstances which make that seem true.

Building on Butler's work, Schechner (2002: 110) defines performativity as "the construction of social reality including gender and race". Performativity refers, therefore, to the social constructs that give rise to 'social reality', or rather; to the constitutive cyclical relationship between actions and expectations, which produce the sets of norms we come to understand as social reality. Performativity theory is particularly productive in a study of language and gender (and/or sexuality), because it looks at social and linguistic practices as both constituting and being constituted by the relevant gender discourses.

The notion of the 'performative' arises from Austin's (1997 [1975]) *How to do Things with Words*, in which he describes the performative as an utterance that in being said, performs the very act that it describes. He gives examples such as christening a ship, or pronouncing a man and a woman 'husband and wife'. Under his conception, a performative utterance can be felicitous or infelicitous, the former requiring the appropriate context and speaker intention, and the latter being the result of these things not lining up as they should (Austin, 1997 [1975]). There is one infelicity condition, in particular, that Austin raises and then discards, and which Derrida (1991 [1972]) considers in *Signature, Event, Context*. This is the idea of citation or 'cited performatives'. Cited performatives are, according to Austin's analysis, performatives, which, under *normal* circumstances would be successful, but when they are cited (in a play, a poem, etc.) they become 'void' (Austin, 1997 [1975]:16). Austin sees these forms of language as somehow other to what language actually is. Derrida, in his critique of Austin's argument, suggests that the fact that these kinds of citations are possible is a fundamental aspect of language. Moreover, Derrida positions citationality as a condition for the existence of the performatives that Austin dubs 'felicitous'. He suggests that the citations that Austin deems 'unhappy' or infelicitous are merely a form of what language always does: language works because it repeats (and in doing so also changes).

Butler develops Derrida's thoughts on repetition and iterability further. She shows that an understanding of language as achieving a certain effect (for example positioning a speaker or described object as female, or heterosexual) is flawed in that it fails to take into account the notion

that language is malleable; that it is not always received the way it was intended, and can always fail or be forged (Butler, 1997: 147-148). As summarized by Cameron and Kulick (2003: 127):

“[P]erformatives work because they embody conventional forms of language that are already in existence before the speaker utters them. Performatives work, and language generally works, because it is quotable.”

The repetition of a sign is what gives it meaning, and allows it to be used again, and this repetition also opens the sign up to resignification and thus malleability. Through this performative iterability, certain linguistic forms have developed gendered meanings, and thus can be drawn on and played with in a performance, or an imitation, of that gender. Butler notes that the fact that gender is performative does not imply that it is a choice that the subject is able to freely make. Rather, “[g]ender is performative insofar as it is the effect of a regulatory regime of gender differences in which genders are divided and hierarchized under constraint” (Butler, 1993: 21). However, this does not preclude creativity and play, and in fact provides the grounds for such linguistic manipulation.

It is the aim of this project to look into the (linguistic) acts performed by the members of the team: What are they? How do they constitute gender? And how are the bodies of the players and the characters they play constructed as gendered? What are the mundane acts performed by the group, and particularly by AlienObserver, that constitute the “illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler, 1988: 519)?

2.6.3. The Gender Binary

Integral to a study of gender performativity is the notion of the gender binary. The gender binary is a system of dividing people up into two categories based on perceived biological sex (which itself is based on external sexual characteristics, namely, genitalia). The gender binary’s persistence in Western and Westernised cultures is partly based on the belief that the difference in external sexual characteristics points to two natural and separate sexes, and that biological sex is ‘real’ and lies beyond human social constructs. There is a long held belief in Western social sciences that sex is natural and biological, while gender is a social construct that describes the norms of behaviour, activities, appearance, speech, etc. that we prescribe according to the supposedly immutable sex held in the body. However, even this seemingly biological system of assigning sex to infants based on their genitalia has been argued to be a socially constructed system (Butler, 1993; 1995; Hird, 2000).

The gender binary governs social life in myriad ways: the kinds of clothes we wear, how long our hair can be, what kind of television we should enjoy, how we talk and laugh, how we interact etc. One of

the most pervasive ways in which the gender binary works is through language use. In the case of English, an obvious place to start is with the gendered pronouns *he/she*, but there are subtler ways, such as turn-taking and length of utterances, that the binary manifests itself and is maintained in the use of the English language, that form a part of the “stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 1988: 519) that constitute gender performativity. The gender binary is fundamental to our understanding of how gender is performatively constituted through language and it has its roots in a Western colonial system. Lugones (2007) explores this connection, stating that “[b]iological dimorphism, heterosexuality, and patriarchy are all characteristic of what I call the light side of the colonial/modern organization of gender. Hegemonically, these are written large over the meaning of gender.” (Lugones, 2007: 190). It is Lugones’s contention that the way that gender is organised in contemporary society has its roots in the same system that has resulted in the racial stratification that we are faced with in today’s world, namely, the system of colonialism and coloniality. The ‘light side’, as she puts it, is the effect of whiteness and coloniality, an act of making dark and wrong that which falls outside of the gender binary, and of other colonial systems of organisation.

Due to colonialism and neo-colonialism, these systems of gender and race have become globalised and are enforced in multiple ways, affecting the lives and behaviours of people all over the world. The gender binary must be acknowledged in order to understand how it plays itself out in interpersonal interactions.

2.6.4. Gender, Sexuality, and Desire

In 2003, Cameron and Kulick published *Language and Sexuality*, which discusses the ways in which sexuality affects, and is affected by, language use. Sexuality in this case is used in its erotic sense, rather than as sexual orientation/identity, as the term is often used in the social sciences. A year after the book was released, Bucholtz and Hall (2004) published an article that engaged critically with the text by Cameron and Kulick. Their critique centres on Cameron and Kulick’s “call to set aside *sexual identity* in linguistic research” (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004: 472, my emphasis), focusing instead on *desire* as the object of sociolinguistic study. Bucholtz and Hall express concern that this call to focus on desire undermines the importance of work on sexual identity.

However, foregrounding desire does not necessarily mean abandoning identity. The two concepts can, and in my opinion should, be addressed simultaneously. Desire interacts with sexuality and other aspects of identity, and sexuality interacts with gender. What Cameron, Kulick, Bucholtz and Hall are all discussing is the manifestation of these things in human social interaction. People’s private desires

can, of course, not be linguistically analysed, except for where they are played out *in interaction* (Cameron 2005: 487).

It is important to remember that there are various forms of desire that may play out in language. The two kinds discussed here are sexual and social desire, with a focus on 'homosocial desire' (Sedgwick, 1985). The latter constitutes a particular form of interaction that regulates space and establishes both a binary gender system and a gender hierarchy. Expressions of social desire are things such as acts of bonding with another gamer; that is, acts that indicate a desire for closeness or social cohesion that are not founded on sexual desire. Both will be discussed in relation to identity construction in the *LoL* environment and how performing desire linguistically is a performative act that interacts with the articulation of a speaker's identity.

Bucholtz and Hall draw up a model for understanding identity interactionally, focusing on such concepts such as *indexicality* (a concept first developed by Sliverstein, 2003). They suggest that an identity-centred approach to sexuality can have more nuance than they feel Cameron and Kulick acknowledge. Indexicality, especially, is useful in discussing linguistic data that indexes (i.e. 'points to') "aspects of the communicative context" (Bucholtz and Hall 2004: 475), which may, in turn, index identities indirectly. Thus, there exists, for example, a non-direct correlation between a particular linguistic form and masculinity. Rather, a linguistic form may index assertiveness, which, because of the specific social and historical context in which it occurs, evokes notions of masculinity.

In a later publication, Cameron and Kulick (2005) note that they were not making a "call to set aside sexual identity in linguistic research" as Bucholtz and Hall (2004) have claimed, but rather that they were attempting to shift the focus beyond a conventional, and rather static, identity-centred approach. Ultimately, Cameron and Kulick (2005) take pains to show that they were advocating for an approach that considers both identity and desire as important aspects of social interaction. What I attempt in the two data analysis chapters is to look first into "acts of identity" (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 1985), and then into performative acts of desire in the following chapter. My aim is to show how these two approaches work together and interact, and to consider the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, and how they are perhaps strengthened by their relationship to each other. An understanding of desire, i.e. the urges that underpin our interactions, can help us understand the ways people perform their identities socially.

2.6.5. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a school of discourse analysis that emerged in the late 1980, led by Fairclough (Blommaert and Bulcean, 2000: 447). It is concerned with addressing social inequalities as

reflected in language, especially those borne out of the inequalities of contemporary capitalist societies. In this project I will attempt to deconstruct the discourses of gender and sexuality that are at play in the *LoL* team using CDA. As gender is an effect of its social context, CDA's critical and socially situated approach is a useful tool in tackling gender and sexuality in a social setting.

The term 'discourse' is used in a few different ways in linguistic research. At times it is used simply to refer to "talk-in-interaction" (Zimmerman, 1998: 87), but the definition I am interested in is more in keeping with Fairclough (2012: 453), who defines discourse as "a category for designating particular ways of representing particular aspects of social life". In other words, it refers to the different ways that social realities are packaged and discussed by social actors at micro, meso and macro levels via intersecting sets of relations. Discourse in this sense refers to the ways things are commonly understood and discussed in society; the discourses of gender produce our understanding of gender and how we are able to talk about it, which then feeds back into the discourse. Thus, discourses are performatively produced.

Fairclough (2013: 11) also stresses that CDA is not a purely descriptive enterprise, and that part of the CDA approach is to address social wrongs. In other words, there is some element of value judgment in CDA. Applying CDA to an area of study requires analysing the ways in which the discourses in question contribute to systems of oppression, and addressing potential ways of righting those wrongs.

2.7. Conclusion

Gaming has long been held to be a white male activity, with male developers far outweighing female developers; with male characters in the games taking centre stage more often than not, and female characters relegated to the side-lines, or depicted as hypersexualised 'eye-candy'; with players being predominately (white) male. Mainstream games are binaristic in their representation, with characters tending to be either male or female, and often sporting exaggerated physiques or sets of behaviours associated with one or the other dominant binary genders. While US statistics are showing an increase in female gamers, they tend not to take into account that different types of games tend to draw different users, and gamers who identify as female are still underrepresented in the 'hardcore' games that receive the most attention in popular culture; the kinds of games that tend to top the best games lists every year. The statistics overlook non-binary players altogether.

This thesis brings together the fields of gender, gaming, and performativity theory, foregrounding the role of language in the performative construction of gender in the online gaming environment. It looks at how language in online interactions shapes the gendered roles the gamers are able to play

and, in playing those roles, how they feed back into that construction, that set of norms. The thesis will address the interplay between language, identity and social interaction.

3. METHODOLOGY AND BACKGROUND

3.1. Introduction

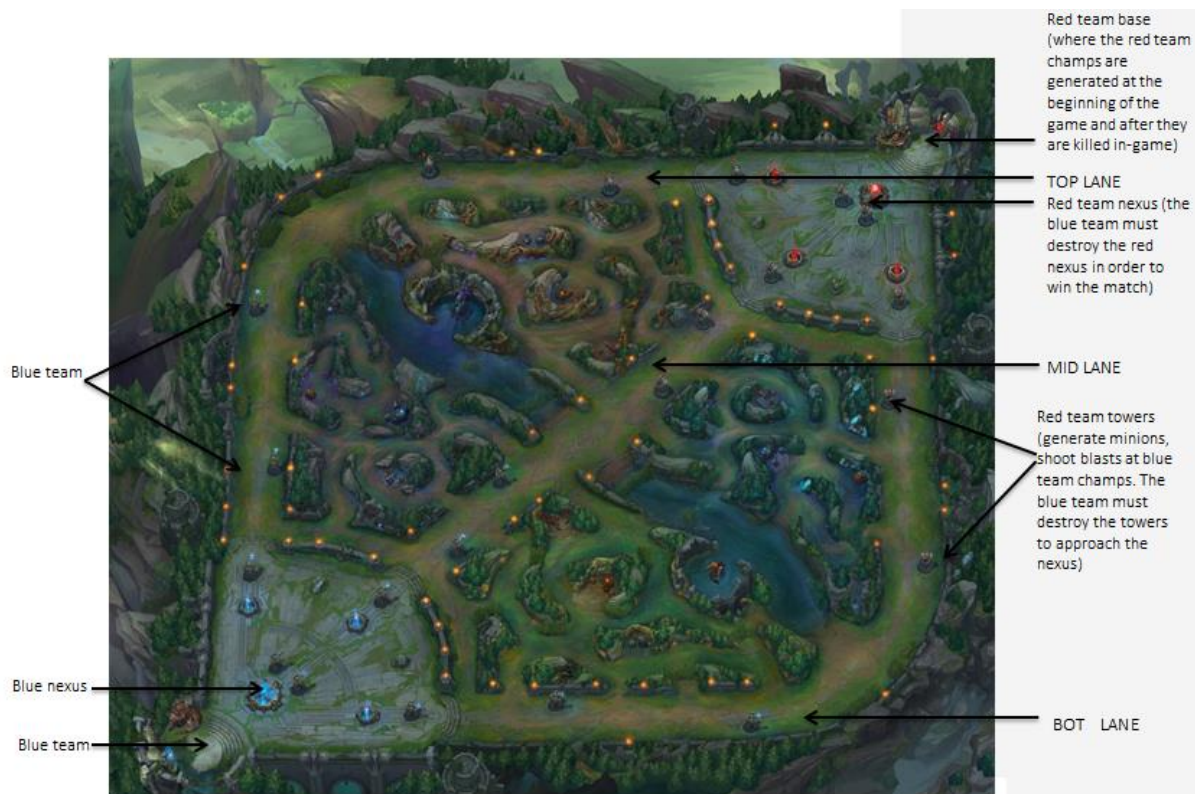
This chapter introduces the game, the team I'm focusing on, and the central participants of this study, as well as discussing the methodology used to collect, code and analyse data. The team's name is *Dragons of War (DoW)*. About half-way through this study, the team split up into smaller groups, still under the umbrella clan of *DoW*, but consisting of approximately six members each. Initially, *DoW* had a single captain and other members played various different organizational roles within the clan. They would practise on Mondays and Wednesdays with whichever players were available. After the clan split up into smaller teams, the teams each had their own captain and would only practise with each other. The central participant and the one constant throughout was AlienObserver.

Below I will outline the basics of the game and how it fits into the broader gaming context, the team, and its members, with the focus on AlienObserver. After this I will discuss the methodology for data collection and analysis.

3.2. *League of Legends (LoL)*

In 2012, *LoL* (Riot Games) was declared by *Forbes* magazine to be the most played PC game in the world (Gaudiosi, 2012). At the time it had 70 million registered players and 32 million monthly active (registered) players (Riot Games, 2012). The game is free to download and play. It is a multiplayer online battle-arena (MOBA) PC game. Players battle other players in an online space known as a 'battle arena', which is a simulated space in which two players, or two teams of players, go head to head to fight for victory. In the case of *League of Legends*, the battle arena is a space, which consists of three 'lanes' as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4 (overleaf): *League of Legends* game map



(Riot Games, taken from redbull.com article published February 4, 2015 – Annotations mine)

During the course of the data collection, AlienObserver repeatedly likened the gameplay to sports such as rugby. Given *LoL*'s classification as an eSport, the comparison is apt.

The gameplay takes the form of matches of 20 minutes to an hour in which two teams (of three or five players) use strategy and combat skills to defeat each other and win the match. Players may choose an avatar from a roster of 117 so-called 'champions'. Victory is achieved by destroying the enemy's 'nexus', which is a tower-like structure located at the heart of the base, at the end of the three lanes, and protected by two turrets.

The nexus spawns minions that attack enemy minions and champions. Minions are AI-controlled and serve to assist the champions. Once the enemy nexus is destroyed, the game is over (Riot Games, 2016). The game requires that the players communicate with each other to strategize and plan their attack. Players tend to talk strategy before and after games, as well as during games. There is a built-in written chat component that allows the players to send messages to their whole team, to individual members, and even to the enemy team. It also has a 'muting' option, for cases where the chat gets out of hand or distracting. There is also an add-on that players can download that allows for spoken chat. Many players prefer spoken chat as it allows for faster communication.

Players select their champion based on the role they are to play in the game. The champions are then further customisable and certain abilities or features can be enhanced by what is called 'Runes' and 'Masteryes' (Riot Games, 2016). Thus, the *LoL* player is not able to create their avatar from scratch, but selects and customises the avatar. Players develop favourite characters that they will play repeatedly, and on any player profile you can see the player's top three champions. Team members will try out new champs every now and then, but tend to go back to their favourites. Figures 5 and 6 give two examples of champions.

Fig 5. Darius

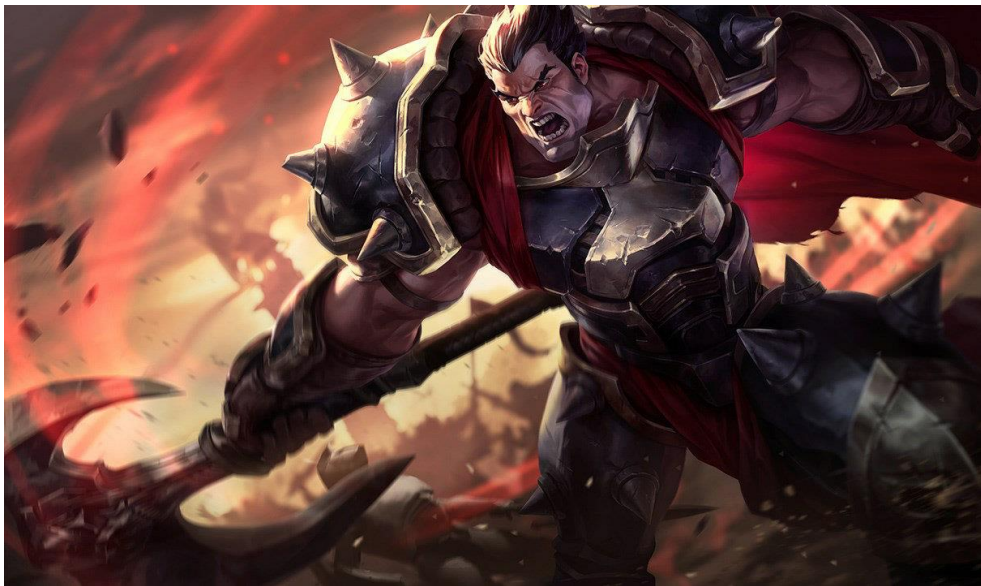
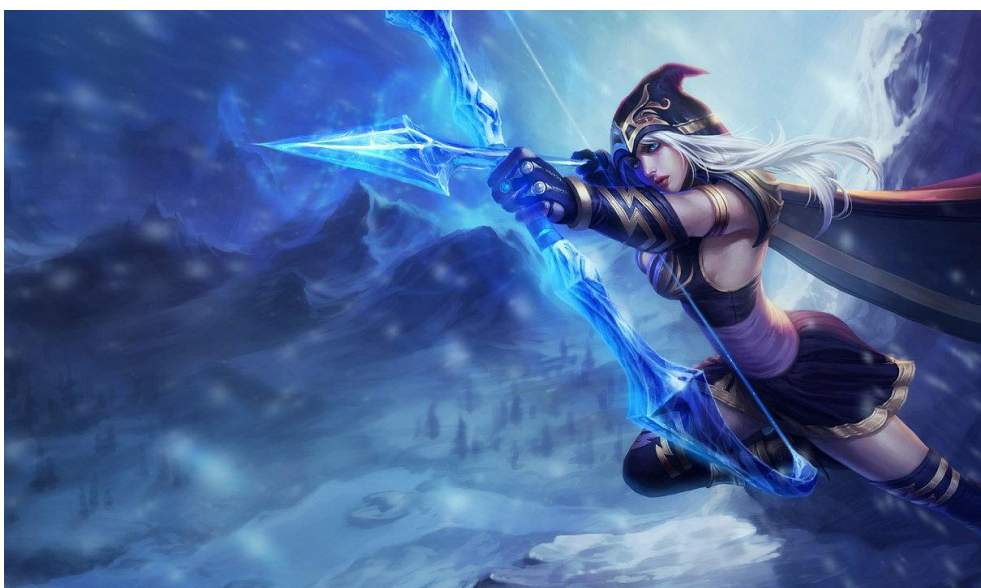


Fig 6. Ashe



(Riot Games, 2019)

Players are ranked based on the Elo rating system, which is a system originally developed by a man named Arapd Elo, in 1978, for ranking chess players. For *LoL* the ranking is based on the players 'kill ratio' and percentage of ranked games won. This allows for measuring the experience and skill of the players. As they gain wins in ranked matches (as opposed to practice matches, in which your wins or losses do not affect your rating), their Elo score goes up, allowing them to progress through the ranks from bronze to diamond (League of Legends, 2012). This system allows players to advance their skills until they are able to play at a competitive level.

LoL is also a fantasy game in that it comprises mythical creatures and settings, and the characters are able to perform magic. It is a mix of medieval and fantasy elements such as swords, armour, dragons, golems, etc., and more modern details such as guns; or simply less specific fantasy details such as some of the magical abilities, or the sometimes medieval appearances of characters and settings.

3.3. The Participants

3.3.1. *Dragons Of War*– The Clan

Dragons of War is a *LoL* clan made up of 37 members ranging from 14 to 41 years of age. They are all South African, with only three of the 37 players identifying as female in their online profiles. They have varying socio-economic backgrounds. According to AlienObserver, all the players who she played with in the course of the fieldwork period were white. Of the 37 players, only 24 play for the more serious sub-divisions of the clan. These subdivisions were determined in an in-clan tournament, which sorted the players into three 8-player teams. Each team is headed by a different captain. The overall clan is captained by its founder, KwaggaZA. Of the 24 central players, there is only one female player other than AlienObserver, a white Afrikaans woman whose pseudonym (and gamertag) is RoguePhoenix. She isn't part of AlienObserver's smaller team, but she plays with *DoW* so occasionally plays with AlienObserver. The 24 players speak a mixture of Afrikaans and English when gaming. Some are bilingual with equal fluency in English and Afrikaans, while some are more proficient in one or the other. Communication between teammates was predominately English in the sessions I recorded, with occasional codeswitching into Afrikaans. The team was about a year old at the time of data collection. The clan members generally seem to get on well, chatting and joking in the pre-game sessions, and issuing and responding to commands with little dispute in-game. If any issue needs to be discussed, administrative members of the team will set a time for the clan to meet on a TeamSpeak, or if it is an administrative issue, they will meet in a private chat room.

3.3.2. *Aqua Draco* – The Team

Aqua Draco is the sub-team that AlienObserver captains after being elected by *DoW*. It has eight players, five of whom play more regularly, with the other three acting as reserves. Below I introduce the four main players (excluding AlienObserver) by summarizing information from the interviews conducted with them.

Deamos

Age when interviewed: 19

Gender: Male

Race: White

Level of education: Was busy with an NQF4 qualification (Matric equivalent) with a junior management course through College SA

Languages: English and a bit of Afrikaans

Occupation: Studying and works part time as a presenter on an East London radio station

City of residence: East London

Years playing games: 13

Estimated number of hours gaming per week: 36

When asked if he enjoyed having Alien as a captain he responded, “Yeah, surprisingly enough. She’s a really good *LoL* player.” When I asked why that was surprising, he responded, “I’ve played *LoL* with a few girls and most of them were really bad and Alien was like very good.”

Bloualak

Age when interviewed: 28

Gender: Male

Race: White

Level of education: BScIT Degree at Univ of Pretoria with a specialisation in information and knowledge systems

Languages: fluent in Afrikaans and English (grew up in an Afrikaans-speaking home)

Occupation: Software Architect at Connectnet Broadband Wireless

City of residence: Pretoria

Years playing *LoL*: 3 years

Estimated number of hours gaming per week: 10-20

Length of time with *DoW*: A year and a half

When I asked him about AlienObserver he said she was fun and an overall “great captain”. However, he sometimes thought she was “too nice to be captain”. When pressed on that point he extrapolated by saying, “She doesn't really know how to get the message through that someone in the team is screwing the game up” and that she needed to work on her reprimanding skills, explaining further that he usually gets “to be the guy that gets everybody quiet”.

KingOfGames

Age when interviewed: 18

Gender: Male

Race: White

Level of education: At the time of interviewing he was completing high school via home schooling

Languages: Afrikaans and English

Occupation: Still in school

City of residence: Pretoria

Years playing games: Approximately 10 years

Years playing *LoL*: 3 years

Estimated number of hours gaming per week: 50-60 hours total per week; *LoL* 15-20 hours

Length of time with *DoW*: 3 months

He said described AlienObserver as “nice” but “a little inexperienced”. When I asked in what ways she was inexperienced, he said, “not knowing how to organise the team, when to tell players to leave and she is not sure what the team is capable of”.

SanguinePaws

Age when interviewed: 21

Gender: Male

Race: White

Level of education: Was supposed to matriculate in 2011, but was forced to leave school after an incident with a teacher

Languages: Afrikaans and English

Occupation: Unemployed due to mother’s illness requiring him to be home most of the time

City of residence: Cape Town

Years playing games: 14 years

Years playing *LoL*: 4 years

Estimated number of hours gaming per week: 40 hours, 24 hours *LoL*

Length of time with *DoW*: 5 months

When asked about AlienObserver as team captain, he said, “She is a kind person but as a captain she lacks being strict and often makes choices based off of emotions which doesn’t often help the team grow stronger.” He developed that further, saying, “when inner team conflict comes up she doesn’t handle it in a way where it ends right there and then. She often just lets them keep quiet and keep it in instead of working the issue out.”

As captain of this team, AlienObserver is leading four white men who were either surprised by her skill or frustrated with what they characterised as a soft touch and emotional decision making. This is the environment from which the bulk of the data was collected and will form the background for the analysis to come in chapters 4 and 5.

3.4. AlienObserver

AlienObserver identifies as female and as a 'Coloured'² South African.

At the time I interviewed AlienObserver, she had been playing *LoL* for about four years, and was a level 30 player (the top level you can achieve). AlienObserver said that she is determined to advance through the ranks and become a professional. This would mean that she could begin to compete at an international level and earn an income from her gaming. During my time of working with AlienObserver, she was trying to whip *DoW* into shape so she could start ranking up to go pro, with an eye to competing at a higher level and start getting paid to play.

3.4.1. Managing the *Aqua Draco* team

AlienObserver enjoyed the games she played with her team but often expressed frustration at the team's slow progress. This, she felt, was holding her back in her personal goals with the game and her desire to become a professional. When I asked her about whether she ever felt the team treated her differently based on her gender, she made the following points:

Yes, I found people unnecessarily trying to protect me, even though I didn't need it or want it, which made things a little difficult at times as others eventually thought we were feminists blocking out all the guys. Other times being a female would either annoy them, or make some of them nervous as most of them never go out to meet females who are not in their family, or excite them because they felt they could teach us and be the grandmaster of all our abilities learned whilst gaming. Sometimes, but most of the times, I felt they were just allowing me to speak because I was female. I find being in a male team, you kinda have to take a back seat even if you are a stronger player, because most of those members where afrikaans [*sic*] and traditionally the females in that culture has little say when it comes to important decisions. I might be generalizing a bit, but thats [*sic*] how I felt I required to act to retain their acceptance :) Basically, I mean they werent [*sic*] rude, but I got the impression I just needed to say less than I wanted to (From Facebook interview conducted 15 October 2015; spelling as in the original).

She mentions both struggling to speak and only being allowed to speak because she was female. She seems to have felt both limited and condescended to by her male teammates, and this resulted in her feeling that her voice was not valued by the team and when it was allowed, it was only allowed

² 'Coloured' is capitalized and written in inverted commas as there is some contestation around the use of the term and AlienObserver herself seems hesitant to use it for herself.

because of her gender, not because they were interested in her opinion as a member of their team. She also mentioned that members of *DoW* would occasionally make passing comments about her race as the majority of the team was comprised of white men, but that she wasn't bothered by it as she is "quite strong willed" (Facebook Messenger interview 15 October 2015), and tends to just brush those things off.

When asked about AlienObserver's leadership qualities, Aqua Draco team members confirmed this gender bias, as shown in their comments above. The team members' responses to Alien's leadership as well as Alien's own assessment of her position in the team is important when analysing the team's linguistic interactions. Alien's sense of restriction in the team space and the team's perception of her as 'too nice' provide some insight into the role that gender and race might be playing in the group and how they are enacted performatively in the group's interactions.

3.5. Method

Over the course of two months in 2013, the team interactions of *Dragons of War* were recorded using a program called TeamSpeak, which allows gamers to converse verbally and in real-time, while playing their matches. Approximately 18 hours of pre- and in-game chat were recorded. This thesis focuses on pre-game chats, which were transcribed in full, a data set totalling 39 746 words, with parts of the in-game chat transcribed where necessary. The games last between 20 minutes to an hour, and the moments between games tend to be defined by conversation about the upcoming game, or the most recently played match. Players also discuss their lives outside of *LoL*, they make jokes and tease one another. The pre-match sessions can be up to half an hour and provide an important stage for social interaction between the members of the team. There is also a written chat function in TeamSpeak, which members use between games to share links and sometimes make jokes. They also use it to contact members who prefer not to use the spoken chat function (some members find it distracting or don't have microphones). The team practised together every Monday and Wednesday, and as this study focuses on performativity and interaction, these team sessions were of primary interest. I was physically present in AlienObserver's house in order to record the sessions. AlienObserver was also the only member I met face to face. The other members were interviewed via Facebook's chat function. Conversations with AlienObserver about the game, and about the team, also took place alongside the recording sessions at her house and excerpts of these conversations were recorded in a notebook by hand. I also conducted a semi-structured, hour and thirteen-minute long tape-recorded interview with AlienObserver, which took the form of a general discussion of her experiences as a gamer, as a *LoL* player, and of other areas of her life. Over the course of the fieldwork, AlienObserver

and I struck up a rapport and had many informal conversations about her role in the team and her experience of gaming, mostly in her kitchen in between games. Where I could, I took field notes about what we discussed.

In early 2014 I returned to do more recordings after the team went through a series of changes that resulted in it splitting into smaller teams of around six players. Focusing on the team that AlienObserver was captaining, I recorded two more practice sessions using TeamSpeak and conducted interviews over Skype chat with the members of the team to gain further insight into the running of the smaller team and how they were responding to Alien's leadership. Alien and I spoke a lot about the changes she was trying to implement as captain and how she was taking to the role.

I also conducted a later interview with AlienObserver over Facebook chat (2015) to explore, especially, issues of race that weren't covered fully in earlier interviews. During this interview, we were also able to discuss some misgivings she had about the *Dragons of War* team, since she had recently left and taken her place in an all-female *League of Legends* team. She told me that she was much happier in the all-female team.

3.5.1. Ethics

The ethics protocol for this thesis was approved by the Linguistics Section, School of African and Gender Studies, Anthropology and Linguistics, University of Cape Town. All recorded members were over the age of eighteen, and verbal consent was sought at the beginning of the interviews, after explaining that their words would be used for academic study and their names and personal details would not be shared. Consent was recorded before the game recordings. Players were always made aware when I was recording and could also see on the TeamSpeak interface that I was recording. I was introduced to every member of the team by both my real name and my TeamSpeak name. They were given the room to ask questions of me if they had any. Beyond such moments, however, they did not communicate much with me. My presence was made less intrusive by the fact that most of them could not physically see me, and by the fact that I did not have a microphone (and could therefore only communicate with them using Alien's microphone). However, they were aware I could hear them and was recording their interactions. Players were also made aware that they could withdraw their consent any time.

Where gamertags are used in this thesis, the player's consent has been obtained. As gamertags are self-selected, replacing them is very difficult as the identity work done by the player in selecting the tag is lost. The tags are themselves used to provide the gamers pseudonymity in the gaming world,

and they do the same here. However, both in the gaming and world and here, they also say something about how the gamer views themselves and how they have chosen to be received in the gaming environment. In other words, the tags also express an identity. I was unfortunately unable to interview all the members of the *Dragons of War* team so there are occasions where I had to draw assumptions from online profiles as to their gender identity. As most online profiles only offer a choice between male and female, I cannot be sure that there were no non-binary members of the team. As far as I'm aware, none of the players I recorded identified as non-binary, at least not openly in the space I was studying.

3.6. My Positionality

To clarify my own position in relation to the collection and analysis of the data, I am a white non-binary trans person who was born in 1988 and raised in South Africa. At the time of collecting the data I presented as a cis female, so my perceived gender was the same as the central participant in this study (AlienObserver). I have since come out as a non-binary trans person, and this has been affected by and affected my work on this project. As I am white and my central participant is a person of colour, my racial privilege cannot be discounted as a factor in the collection and collation of the data and I will try to acknowledge this where necessary.

3.7. Conclusion

League of Legends is a complex game played by millions of gamers worldwide. By taking a single South African team and focusing on it as an example of a gaming community, this project explores the ways in which gender is performed in the context of the team, with the pre-game chat as a site for interaction. The data collected as well as the interviews with the team members form the basis for this analysis. *League of Legends* is a game that is becoming increasingly relevant as an eSport, and with the growth of eSports, games like *LoL* are becoming important sites of social and cultural behaviour.

The data was collected over two months using the TeamSpeak program which allowed me to record the conversations the team had before, during and after play. I also conducted a long-form spoken interview with AlienObserver and interviews over Facebook and Skype's (written) chat functions with her and the members of *Aqua Draco*, the sub-team of *DoW* which was run by AlienObserver. I transcribed all recorded data myself resulting in nearly 40 000 words of data to analyse.

The data will be analysed qualitatively in the next two chapters in order to shed some light on how gender interacts with gaming in this one small South African team, and will be compared to global data where possible.

4. PERFORMATIVITY AND IDENTITY IN DOW'S DISCOURSES OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY

4.1. Introduction

In their interactions with each other in the pre- and post-game context, the group of gamers that make up the Dragons of War clan display discourses of gender, race, and sexuality. They also express, implicitly as well as explicitly, their ideologies about appropriate gamer behaviour.

This chapter describes the communicative norms of this group by exploring the discourses of gender, race and sexuality that contribute to the social context in which the performative acts of the team members can be understood and analysed. The gender discourse perpetuated by this group frames femininity as explicitly different to masculinity, thus perpetuating the model of gender as a binary that is based on opposition and difference.

As is laid out in the literature review, this chapter defines discourse as the linguistic/textual background to social life; that is, how people are able to understand and discuss concepts such as gender, sexuality, race, etc.

4.1.1. Discourses of Gender and Sexuality and their Relationship to Desire

Any discussion of gender is incomplete without a discussion of sexuality, which in turn, as argued by Cameron and Kulick (2003a, 2003b, 2005 as well as by Cameron 2005, and Kulick 2005), would be incomplete without a consideration of desire. In Western society, people's social understanding of gender is inextricably linked to the now dominant Western history of human sexuality, which privileges heterosexuality and reproduction as the sexual norms (Foucault, 1978). Heteronormativity normalizes, requires and reproduces both heterosexuality and the gender binary. If we are to understand sex as having a reproductive purpose, and that that purpose requires two different sets of sexual organs, we foreground the difference in the bodies required for reproduction, and therefore for sex, which gives rise to an understanding of there being only two sexes. This, in turn, normalizes the idea that there are only two natural genders, and that gender is linked to one's external sex characteristics (Shepherd, 2010:5-6).

The cultural practices and expectations around the act of sex separate it from its purely natural or biological function. Sex interacts with culture in that it is gendered in various ways; it interacts with identity, and it interacts with political power. It is important to understand the actual erotic practices that underpin sexual identities in order to make sense of those identities and how they intersect with gender identities and the performance (Shepherd, 2010). Foucault (1978) links the foregrounding of the reproductive function of sex to the development of capitalism in 17th century Europe. He holds that the repression of all forms of sex but that which has a reproductive function, serves capitalist concerns in that it represses any distraction from work unless it “enabled [labour capacity] to reproduce itself” (1978: 6). Thus, heterosexuality, and the gender binary it presupposes and enforces, are an integral part of the maintenance of a dominant capitalist world order.

Gender, sexuality, and desire are discussed here under the same heading as they are often encountered simultaneously in the data. Whenever desires manifest themselves, whether sexual or social, in the language of the teammates, discourses of gender and sexuality tend to show themselves too.

4.2. Claim-Staking and Interpellation

4.2.1. Interpellation

Interpellation, a concept initially introduced by Fanon in 1952 and later developed by Louis Althusser (2014 [1971]), provides an important site for an understanding of identity and how identities are formed within particular social structures and groupings.

Interpellation calls a subject into being “in and through ideology” (Purvis & Hunt, 1993: 482). The structure from which the call is issued is in some way external to the subject – though there is arguably room to suggest that a subject can interpellate themselves through performative gestures of claim-staking. In the marketing around gaming, and the form that games like *League of Legends* take, the subject being called into being seems to be a male one; more specifically, a young white heterosexual male (Please see my discussion of representation in Chapter 2, Pages 16-18 for more).

When female players are interpellated into a competitive gaming space such as eSports, it tends to be as ‘girls’ or, specifically, as ‘girl gamers’. For female gamers to play games not specifically marketed to them, they almost have to defy the call, or actively respond to it, thus completing and challenging the interpellative act. People who identify as women have to work harder for subjecthood in a gaming space. They have to prove themselves worthy of responding to the call. If the process of interpellation

is the prerequisite for intelligibility and subjecthood (Davis, 2012: 883), but the call is explicitly or implicitly directed away from people who identify as women, this will mean that women's subjecthood in the gaming environment, in the social world of gaming (rather than the marketing and design elements) is fraught before they've even stepped up to the plate.

In other words, the subject position of 'gamer', particularly that of 'hardcore' or competitive gamer, as defined by the industry. The communities that have developed, and the players who form those communities (i.e. the subjects who have been constituted by the interpellative call and in turn call on others), affirm identities that often do not extend to female players. In the case of a game like *League of Legends*, where female players are rare and the meta-discourse around the game pre-supposes male players, the female player has to go further in order to be able to respond to the interpellative call, or risk not being interpellated at all, which often results in the silencing of female players.

4.2.2. The Relationship of Claim-Staking and Interpellation

Cameron and Kulick (2005) discuss a particular 'act of identity' that they refer to as 'claim-staking'. Claim-staking is described as the process by which social actors explicitly refer to themselves as belonging to a particular 'identity category'. Examples given are "speaking as a working-class lesbian, I..." or "I'm not a feminist, but..." (Cameron and Kulick, 2005: 112). By uttering these phrases, speakers either express belonging to, or distance from, a social category or categories. While Cameron and Kulick point out that "the 'claim-staking' notion of identity is insufficient on its own to ground the study of sexuality and its relationship to language", they do not deny that it has "real-world relevance and political utility" (*ibid*).

Claim-staking acts as a kind of self-reflexive form of interpellation. The subject calls themselves into being by calling themselves 'girl' or 'gamer' or 'not aggressive', etc. Claim-staking is a performative act in that it simultaneously names the subject and creates the possibility for the subject to exist, much as interpellation does. The act of naming oneself is an act of constructing gender/race/sexuality/etc. – "in response to the interpellative 'call' of discourse and the law" (Salih, 2002: 95) – outside of which, the subject does not exist. The interpellative act does not require an external body as the subject is always simultaneously the individual and a construction of law and discourse. In other words, the subject's co-occurring systemic and individual social nature can create the discursive conditions for them to interpellate themselves through acts such as claim-staking.

In the remainder of this section I will discuss examples of claim-staking. In (1) AlienObserver and I were discussing the kinds of games she prefers to play. She comments:

(1) AlienObserver: I don't like blood and gore, like I'm a girl, you know... *League of Legends* is okay, when you die it's not so bad... so *LoL* is okay, *Starcraft* is okay, *DoTA2* is okay

[Recorded via tape recorder]

Here, the word 'girl' is used in such a way to mean 'a person who does not like blood and gore'. Her status as a 'girl' is enough to explain this aversion, and she claims this identity in such a way that takes for granted that others will have the same understanding of 'girl' as she does, and therefore understand why she prefers games like *League of Legends* that are less explicitly violent, and more strategy-based. However, under different circumstances, someone might just as easily claim that they don't enjoy strategy-based games for the same reason, going on the assumption that 'girls' don't enjoy strategy (though there are many examples to the contrary, such as AlienObserver herself). Thus, this definition is contextually specific; defined in the moment of utterance and in the discursive context but also speaks to a larger social context in which a woman who likes gore might be seen as unfeminine. Her use of the discourse marker 'you know' in the sentence indicates that she is tapping into what she believes to be a shared discourse. The gender discourse Alien is articulating here is one that exists beyond the boundaries of *DoW* and *LoL* players.

AlienObserver explained to me that she rarely informs unknown teammates that she is a 'girl', unless she feels the circumstances call for the revelation. An example of this is shown in (2) (excerpt from a one-on-one recorded interview between Alien and me):

(2) AlienObserver: Normally if there's a girl in the team like who's playing, who's on your team, like, sometimes girls are like 'oh ja, like you've never seen a girl play this before, da da da', and I'm like 'oh my god, another girl that's awesome', I'm like 'hey I'm a girl too!' that's normally when I come out (laughs), when I come out of the closet, when there's someone else like me I'm like, 'yay, it's the two of us' and then we normally like stick together and we like 'yay' (laughs).

[Recorded via tape recorder]

In other words, it is only when another female player reveals herself that Alien feels the desire to reveal her gender, to 'come out of the closet' as she puts it, and this revelation may lead to solidarity between Alien and the other female player. The language used in the above excerpt provides important insight into Alien's perception of the role of 'girls' in the *League of Legends* environment. The use of the phrase 'come out', which calls on sexual identity discourse (i.e. the commonly used phrase 'coming out' or 'coming out of the closet' to describe the process of disclosing a non-

normative sexual identity to others), indicates that the gender identity 'girl' is a marked or non-normative identity in the *LoL* space.

AlienObserver prefers not to reveal her gender online (to unknown players), but she will when she feels she has to, such as "if the guys say something like very sexist, or they go 'ah my girlfriend doesn't want me to play and I'm so irritated and stuff', and I'm like 'Oh well I'm a girl and I play *League of Legends* so like...'" (AlienObserver, 2013 tape-recorded interview). Thus, AlienObserver generally avoids claim-staking in an in-game environment, but will if she feels compelled to by certain actions on the part of the other players. This could also be seen as an example of Alien being indirectly interpellated by the actions of her teammates. In other words, the actions of the other *LoL* players produce the circumstances in which AlienObserver feels the need to claim-stake. The groundwork for the claim-staking act is laid by the other players.

Also of note is the hypothetical utterance attributed to the other 'girl' in (2); "you've never seen a girl play this". While this is not a real quoted utterance, it likely reflects interactions that AlienObserver has had while playing and indicates the status female players have and are aware of when playing the game. This hypothetical player is establishing herself as a player of the game whilst acknowledging the fact that she is not the norm; she has to stake her claim, creating the circumstances for her own gendered subjecthood and calling AlienObserver 'out of the closet' to do the same.

The examples Alien gives of the occasions in which she does in fact reveal her gender seem to carry a kind of political weight, as she does so only to show solidarity to other female players, or defend herself or others from sexism.

4.2.3. Why 'girl'? Gendered Terms in the Data

Throughout the interview data, AlienObserver frequently refers to herself as a 'girl'.

Studies have shown an asymmetry in the use of terms for men and women, such that women are much more likely to be called 'girls' than men are to be called 'boys' (Messner, Duncan & Jensen, 1993; Slama & Slowey, 1988; Lipton & Hershaft, 1984). Slama & Slowey (1988: 212) hypothesise that the higher use of 'girl' for women may be due to the infantilisation of women in Western socialization processes.

AlienObserver refers to herself and other female gamers as 'girl', 'woman' and 'female' (used as both a noun and an adjective). In our first conversation, which was a face-to-face spoken interview conducted in 2013, she referred to herself as a girl 8 times, and to other players as 'girl' or 'girls' 10

times, making a total of 18 uses of the term. She refers to herself as a woman twice in the interview, and does not use 'female' at all in the spoken data.

Outside of the broader societal implications of the use of 'girl' as a possible infantilising term, the term 'girl gamer' tends to be used more frequently in the gaming community than 'female/woman gamer'. This may be due to the perception that the gaming community is comprised largely of younger players (the perception, while false, may have impacted on the language used around female players of the game, despite the actual age of the specific players). However, given the common use of the word 'girl' to denote women over 18, this seems unlikely to be the full picture, and of course, Alien knows her own age and still uses the word to refer to herself, so age cannot be the only factor.

In the second interview, conducted over Facebook's written chat function, two years after the first interview, AlienObserver favours the term 'female' both as a noun and an adjective. She refers to herself as 'a female' (noun) twice and to others as 'female' or 'females' three times. She uses the adjective 'female' twice, once for herself, once to describe the team she began playing with after DoW was ended. In this later interview, she used the term 'girl' four times, and never to refer to herself. This shift might be due to the difference in the interview forms, with the second interview being written, and not face-to-face, therefore allowing Alien more time to consider her answers and her phrasing. The first interview was also longer, yet there is no use of the word 'female' at all. There is not enough data to draw any solid conclusions from this discrepancy, but perhaps the difference in media and the added room for consideration might indicate that Alien carries a sense that 'female' is the more appropriate term to use to refer to herself and other people who identify as women. It might also indicate a shift in ideology on AlienObserver's part, perhaps a result of the move to an all-female team and a growing awareness of women's issues in the gaming environment. 'Female' might feel less semantically loaded than 'girl' or 'woman'.

It is possible that, at times, the term 'girl' is used to show solidarity between female-identifying gamers. Alien's use of the term seems to occur mostly when she is speaking about interactions with other gamers who have identified themselves as 'girls'. The most frequent uses of the word in her solo face-to-face interview occurred when she was speaking about 'coming out' as excerpted above, and in the following two excerpts:

(3) Me: *Just quickly before we wrap up, to get back to harassment for a second, have you ever experienced bad sexism, or had to speak to anyone about that?*

AlienObserver: Sexism, ja. Um, I've never verbally spoken to someone about sexism, but I have like typed to someone, um, what happened, we went into a game, and the enemy team

had a girl, and they, and they said, 'ah, we're going to beat you because, um we've got a girl on our team and whatever', and then my team was abusive to her, and then obviously I had to stand up and say 'I'm a girl, like, this actually does not work with me, like I do not agree with what you're saying', and then they started attacking me and it was just...

[Recorded via tape recorder]

And

(4) *Okay. Do you get like chatted up or anything?*

Uh, ja, (laughs), I mean they have no idea what I look like, it's a really weird thing. I mean, there's this one guy who every time I go online he like sends me messages like [breathless] 'Oh you're online, how you doing, um, um, how many games did you play today, do you wanna play now' I'm like 'Um, I'm actually gonna play with my team now', he's like 'Oh okay, what time are you finishing, da da da', and I'm like 'Ah my god like every time I go online this guy has to message me' it's like hectic. Ja. I actually sometimes if I do have to say I'm a girl or if the guys say something like very sexist, or or they go 'ah my girlfriend doesn't want me to play and I'm so irritated and stuff', and I'm like 'Oh well I'm a girl and I play *League of Legends* so like', so then like sometimes I say something, and then um, ah what was my point now, um, ... I can't remember my point... oh ja! um then they chat they chat me up, um, oh no, they think I'm lying, they think I'm a guy pretending to be a girl, that's what they think, they like 'whatever, whatever, kid', they like 'whatever kid, you 16 year old kid pretending to be a girl' and I'm like 'Oh my god okay whatever', and like I never lie when I go online, I'm like one of those people, I can't bullshit.

[Recorded via tape recorder]

Excerpt (4) shows a juxtaposition between her feeling compelled to 'come out' as a 'girl' as in (2) and her being accused of faking being a girl. The latter is important in terms of Judith Butler's theory of performativity and gender, as it shows an awareness of the performance of gender on the part of this reported 'guy' on the other side of the interaction. The fact that a teenage boy could 'pretend' to be a girl online shows that the performance of gender in this space can be adopted by those who do not necessarily identify with the gender they are performing. Thus, the limits of the gender binary can be played with in online spaces. Even when the speaker does in fact identify as a woman, her performance is not necessarily believed, as the environment is so male dominated that some players cannot accept that a woman might be in their midst. Removing the physical body from the interaction and thereby erasing bodily performative cues, means that all that is left is written language (in cases

like this, where the other players in the team are unknown to AlienObserver, she will only use written chat with them, not TeamSpeak, which is why her voice cannot be read as gendered either). With only written language to go on, the performance of ‘girlness’ often boils down to claim-staking, at least as Alien reports it in the above examples. The female gender only seems to enter the interaction if someone volunteers the information, and the performance can be accepted or rejected by the other players, based on their understanding of the social norms of the environment they are interacting in. This kind of interaction reflexively reconstitutes the space as a male space, which in turn results in the need for female players to ‘out’ themselves if their gender is to be known. Alien says that she often stays silent on her gender until she is perhaps indirectly interpellated into staking her claim as a ‘girl’. This silence will also reify the sense of the space as being male dominated, all of which constitutes the way gender can be performed in that space. It is a feedback loop, which delimits how gender can be performed when the players are unknown to each other.

What can also be seen in the above examples is that the closest corresponding male-gendered term seems to be ‘guy’. Where female and male players are discussed together in the interview, the words ‘girl’ and ‘guy’ are used by AlienObserver. ‘Guys’ is also used as a neutral collective term when addressing the whole team, and appears frequently in the recorded team interactions.

The male players are never referred to as ‘boy’. Alien once addresses the team as ‘boys’ when trying to get their attention before a game, but that is the only use of the term. Conversely, ‘guy’ or ‘guys’ (as a masculine term, rather than the neutral use of ‘guys’) are used a total of 28 times, and ‘the guys’ is used 8 times. The generic use of ‘guys’ to refer to groups of mixed gender is used a total of 122 times. This indicates the neutral use of the word might be more frequent than the masculine, at least in this group.

4.2.4. Terms of Address

Table 3 summarises the gendered terms used in the pre- and post-game chat sessions (i.e. one-on-one interview data is not included).

Table 3: Gendered terms used by *DoW* members in data

Term	No. of uses	Term	No. of uses
Guy (masc)	23	Guys (masc)	5
The guys (masc)	8	Guys (generic)	72
You guys (generic)	50	Man	3
Men	3	Dude (specific)	2
Woman	7	Women	5
Oke	4	Boy	0

Boys	1	Girl	2
Girls	0	Female (noun)	0
Female (adj)	2	Chick	1
Chicks	2	Person	3
People	10	<i>Seun</i>	1
<i>Mens</i>	1	Dude (term of address)	74

There is a marked difference in the terms used by and for the members of the team. The most commonly used term of address is 'dude' which is used a total of 74 times by four different male members of the team to address other male members. It is never once used to address AlienObserver. This is perhaps unsurprising since the term is historically used by men to refer to other men (Kiesling, 2004). However, Kiesling (2004) shows that, at least in American youth culture, the word is no longer restricted to male-to-male uses. Moreover, while female-to-female uses are significantly less frequent, they are more frequent than female-to-male uses and male-to-female uses (2004: 285). Since Kiesling's study is situated in America, it cannot be held as a guide for the use 'dude' in South Africa. However, it is generally agreed that word is originated in the United States (ibid.). Therefore, one can conclude that its use here is a United States import, and that the shifts in the US use may be similarly imported here³.

Kiesling (2004) further states that, in American English, the term 'dude' is "used mainly in situations in which a speaker takes a stance of solidarity or camaraderie, but crucially in a nonchalant, not-too-enthusiastic manner" (Kiesling, 2004: 282). Deamos used the term more than any other player. He used it to address people he had just met as well as those he had known for longer. The fact that this term is never once used to address AlienObserver suggests that there is an underlying ideology of difference, and she is unable to access such easy camaraderie with the other members of the team. Other terms used are 'bro', 'oke', 'ou' and 'man'. However, these terms are used far less frequently, and only by male players to address other male players. Terms used by AlienObserver are 'darling', and 'love', and once 'boys'. The plural 'guys' is largely neutral and used by male and female members of the team to address the group.

Twice in the data, Alien is referred to as *tannie*, by two different male players. *Tannie*, being the Afrikaans word for aunty, is used by Afrikaans speakers to address women who are older than them. It is a show of respect to one's elders, but can also be used mockingly. Alien is only referred to as *tannie* twice in the data. The first example is below:

³ I can anecdotally say that I have definitely heard people of all genders use the word 'dude' to refer to people of all genders. However, in this data, it is used by male players to refer to other male players only.

(5) AlienObserver (A): I'm sorry if I suck a bit with this ADC⁴, [but it's only my second time playing her, okay? [matter of fact], I hope/

KwaggaZA (K): /Dis reg so tannie

A: I hope I'll be good

K: Okay tannie

A: (laughs) 'tannie'.. Every time you say 'tannie' I, keep thinking, you calling me, little teeth

K: No I'm actually calling you aunty

A: I know: but you know like tande, is teeth, and tante is auntie, and then tannie is aunty as well, but like it just is, I keep thinking you calling me little teeth, and if you knew: my teeth, you would not be calling me little teeth (laughs)

[Recorded via TeamSpeak]

[This data that was collected while the team was in game. It is transcribed from the recorded TeamSpeak files]

The second use of 'tannie' was by another male player, when bidding AlienObserver farewell after a game, "goodbye tannie". What strikes me about the use of the term *tannie* in these cases is that – unlike terms like 'dude' as used between male players – it acts as a marker of difference. Tannie marks AlienObserver both in terms of her gender and age. KwaggaZA is five years younger than Alien, making him 25 at the time of this interaction. The two players get along well and engage not only as team members, but also as members of the clan who play a role in the organization and running of the clan's activities. KwaggaZA is the captain of the *DoW* clan, meaning he holds a slightly higher position to AlienObserver. Thus, this use of *tannie* can be read as a playful mock of AlienObserver's age in relation to the other members of the group, as well as of her status as one of the only female gamers in the clan. While terms like 'dude' seem to indicate a homosocial bonding (the social bonding between two or more people of the same gender, usually used to refer to male bonding practices), 'tannie' seems indicative of difference and playful mocking. Alien's response to the use of the word *tannie* shows her willingness to enter into the joke and make fun of herself a bit while exhibiting her knowledge of Afrikaans and her phonological linking of *tande* and *tante*. This creates an opportunity for her to play around and to possibly mock the term of address.

⁴ ADC stands for Attack, Damage, Carry and it is a role that can be played in *LoL*.

4.3. The Discourse of Gender, Skill, and Difference in *LoL*

There are times where gender is conflated with player skill. Deamos, for example, commented on his surprise at Alien's skill as a *LoL* player (see Chapter 3). As noted above, unless they have a gamertag that is perceived as feminine, *LoL* players are assumed to be male. In one such example, there was a player who was unknown to two male members of the team but known to Alien. The gamertag of the player was *lolo00*. The two male members assumed that the player must be female. This is presumably because the name sounds like 'Lulu', which is traditionally a name given to female children, and is also the name of one of the game's female champions. However, both expressed disbelief that it could be a female player when they saw how high the player's rank was. When, eventually, the player was revealed to identify as male, they were much more ready to accept the player's high ranking as authentic. The widespread idea that women are less likely to be good at games is also reflected in the following extract from the interview with Alien, which follows on from excerpt (3) above:

(7) AlienObserver: What happened, we went into a game, and the enemy team had a girl, and they, and they said, 'ah, we're going to beat you because, um we've got a girl on our team and whatever', and then my team was abusive to her, and then obviously I had to stand up and say 'I'm a girl, like, this actually does not work with me, like I do not agree with what you're saying', and then they started attacking me and it was just

What were they [the gamers] saying?

They were like 'Ah, hand your computer back over to your boyfriend, why', it's like that type of thing, like ja, it's like stupid

{Recorded via tape recorder}

In this case, Alien was playing with a group of unknown players, not players from her clan, so they were unaware of Alien's gender before the above incident. As mentioned above, Alien does not use Team Speak with unknown players (i.e. the communication would have happened over *LoL*'s in-built written chat function), so they would not have been able to guess her gender based on her voice or any other verbal cues. The first time they would have had any idea of Alien's gender was when she was placed in a position where she felt compelled to reveal herself.

What is interesting here is that there are two conflicting discourses of gender at play in these excerpts (7 & 3). In the first case, the term 'girl' is used as a boast, or a taunt. The enemy team states that

they're going to beat Alien's team *because* of the presence of a girl on their team. Alien's team's response to this revelation is to attack the enemy team's 'girl', resulting in Alien's claim-staking. This leads to her team redirecting their abusive language toward Alien herself and implying that Alien does not have the skill to be playing the game because of her gender. Thus, we have the one team implying that the presence of a girl will make them more likely to win, and the other implying the opposite. The term 'girl' seems enough to trigger these connotations, without the players' actual skill being discussed or put to the test.

Thus, there exists a perceived correlation between gender and skill in *LoL*. The presence of women is marked either way, and this shapes the environment in which players interact. In a written interview conducted over Facebook Messenger, AlienObserver mentioned, "most of the times I felt they were just allowing me to speak because I was female," while also stating, "I got the impression I just needed to say less than I wanted to" and that, "I find being in a male team, you kinda have to take a back seat even if you are a stronger player." Thus, she felt simultaneously pandered to and silenced as a woman in the DoW space. She seems to have felt that the space she was given was only given to her because of her special status as a female gamer, and that in order to maintain that space, she had to engage on their terms.

4.4. Discourses of Race in DoW

As with gender, "racial production occurs through a historical process of repeated acts" (Warren, 2001: 96). In other words, race, like gender and other cultural constructs that are used to distinguish social identities, is performative. We are interpellated into racial subject positions: "interpellations do not just "call us" into sex, sexuality and gender, but they are also "racializing" imperatives that institute racial difference as a condition of subjecthood" (Salih, 2002: 63-64). Fanon first developed the idea of interpellation through such explorations of race and racialisation as *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967 [1952]). Chapter 5 of the book details the experience of Fanon being racialised by a white child on a train. Where he had hoped to be just a person among many, the child calls out, 'Look, a Negro' and in so doing interpellates him into a racialised subject position that brings with it the long history of how Black people have been viewed by white people (1967 [1952]: 109-115). The body does not have race prior to its interpellation into discourse and law, into a system that has historically privileged certain racial groups over others. It may be tied to differences of pigmentation but race is a system, like gender, that is imposed on and embodied by people as a result of the colonial imperative.

Warren (2001) discusses how whiteness, though this can be extended to all racial performances, is embodied through performative acts, showing how race becomes something we can read on bodies

in the same way we can with gender. Warren goes on to discuss the ways that whiteness and race get played out in interactions, both in its mundane moments, and also in its 'staged performances'. In Warren's case, the performances were literally staged, as their focus was on a performance studies class. In the case of *DoW*, there are racial acts performed by the team members that I would consider staged as well as the more unconscious performative acts of race.

4.4.1. Performances of Race and Racism

An interesting effect of the digital space where the voice can be heard, but the body remains largely unseen is that race might become less visible than gender. AlienObserver identifies as a Coloured woman, but her accent is not easily coded as 'Coloured' – it is more likely to be understood as the accent of a white South African (based on the criteria given by Lass, 2002: 104). Because of this, her racial identity is, at times, overlooked by the other predominately white players in the team. This is not to suggest that race is not visible or perceivable in online spaces, but that AlienObserver's accent does not stand out as racially marked in a way that would differentiate it from the 'white accents' of her teammates.

When asked about her racial identity in the Facebook interview, Alien had the following to say:

(9) I'm considered coloured in South Africa, so that's how I refer to myself. Fortunately whilst playing games from home my race doesn't [sic] really matter as you can't identify skin colour over the internet, though a couple of times people have referred [sic] to my skin colour in a passing joke as it is uncommon for a female of colour to play pc games professionally. I definitely think that in meeting gamers at tournaments they are slightly surprised at my appearance, most of them are welcoming but there are a few who are complete assholes with no filter in a social environment.

{Recorded over Facebook chat}

The claim-staking language here is quite different to that used in discussions of gender. AlienObserver notes that there tends to be an element of surprise when other gamers first see her and recognise her physical appearance as belonging to a set of discourses around race and the racialised self. This implies that there is an assumption of whiteness in the gaming space, particularly, as AlienObserver points out, when the gamer is a woman. Racialization also plays a role in some of the team interactions. In example (10), AlienObserver and RoguePhoenix, the other active female player in the team, are doing most of the talking. The numbered participants are male players (who did not give

permission to use their gamertags). They are discussing the *League of Legends* World Championship, which was on at the time, and the Korean team was doing very well in the competition.

(10) AlienObserver (A): But, aren't the Koreans awesome though?

2⁵: Yes they are currently beating

1: They are born to play games

RoguePhoenix (RP): Yup

A: Boo

1: They are OMG, and they are the only teams that haven't been beaten at world so far

A: Y:up (singsong) they are amazing: I love those Koreans have you guys been watching the games?

1: Not really

RP: No I haven't had time

A: I've watched, s:o many you must see that strategy guys, s:o differe:nt, it's like they swap lanes, all the time like and they, you know, there was this two bot and then suddenly there's one bot and the ADC goes top and the support goes mid and it's like hectic it like such different strategy that that they use now. it's very, very cool

RP: I think they start playing games when they were three

A: M-mm. I must take smite⁶

2: When they were in the womb their mom gave them a playstation remote

A: (Laughs a lot) I think so.. (sighs). but I: do like them, they're so cute though, don't you think like the Koreans are very cute, they're like a cute you just like wanna scratch their heads

?: (laughs)

A: (laughs)

⁵ Numbers are used here to distinguish between different speakers as they were not frequent players and I couldn't pin the voices to a specific player – I did get their permission to use the data though!

⁶ This is a spell that players can cast during the game to deal damage to enemy avatars.

RP: I wouldn't say cute

A: Not like, not like attractive, not like 'oh my god I'm I'm like sexually attracted to you' but more like, 'aah look at this little animal' like that type of thing

RP: (laughing) Oh okay

A: (laughs) like when they sitting behind their computer

RP: Ja, they all look nerdy, doesn't matter what they do they, they look like nerds

A: (laughs) They do absolutely

[Recorded via TeamSpeak]

In this interaction we see a performance of racism⁷ through the essentialising of the racialised body ("They are born to play games"), stereotyping ("I think they start playing games when they were three", "When they were in the womb their mom gave them a playstation remote"), and dehumanisation/desexualisation/infantilisation (the rejection of them as potential objects of sexual desire, as well as AlienObserver's description of them as cute, and as animals).

These gestures serve to other the Korean players and create a moment of social cohesion for the interlocutors. Othering is understood as "a process that identifies those that are thought to be different from oneself or the mainstream, and it can reinforce and reproduce positions of domination and subordination" (Johnson et al, 2004: 253). In this case it reinforced a perception of the Korean team as less than human and geeky since birth. This may also provide a social function of alleviating the DoW team from feeling inferior to the Korean team's *LoL* prowess because they are described as having been "born to play games" so their skill and success is not fully attributed to their own work and agency. By desexualizing and dehumanizing the Korean team and resorting to stereotypes about them, they maintain their sense of personal superiority, in spite of the Korean team's obvious success in the world of *LoL*.

Example (11) addresses South African racial groupings. The interaction takes place between AlienObserver, Deamos, Blouhlak and a fourth player who joined the channel for a few games, but doesn't usually play with the team. He will be referred to as 'M' as his gamertag is his real name and he agreed to be part of the study as long as none of his personal information was revealed. M is a white male player, as are Deamos and Blouhlak.

⁷ I define racism as an act of discrimination against systemically oppressed races (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

(11) M: Where do you live?

Deamos (D): I can't tell you that's personal information

AlienObserver (A): (laughing) oh shit (laughs)

M: Are you white or are you

D: Are are you dumb?

A: (laughs)

M: I can tell your Black

Blouslak (B): I'm pissing myself at this moment (laughs)

M: (laughs) ophou so wit wees {stop being so white}

D: Stop talking Afrikaans dude

M: Stop being so white

D: Not all people in/ South Africa are white dude

M: [louder] Stop being so white please!

D: Oh okay, ek sal jou bliksem, seun, is that better? {I'll hit you, son}

B: (laughs)

M: (laughs) sjoe, eina

D: Okay wait wait wait, I'll stop being white

A: There's no revive! What the hell, there's no revive!

M: Well, (laughs) welcome to life. No um: just get flash and teleport coz that's like the awesomest thing

B: It requires someone at level 1 (laughs)

[Recorded via TeamSpeak]

M's statement that he can tell Deamos is Black and then his later admonishment to "stop being so white" points to an understanding of race as something more than skin colour. M's positioning of

himself is hard to interpret here. Both speakers are white (although it is unclear if they know this about each other), but M seems to be distancing himself from a particular linguistic performance of whiteness that he perceives in Deamos, but this seems very much at odds with the initial distancing of himself from this whiteness that he is marking as 'too much' here. He performs this distancing by singling Deamos out and, it seems, by speaking Afrikaans. In so doing, he sets the terms for a successful performance of whiteness within this interaction, which Deamos then takes up.

Deamos's linguistic attempt of being 'less white' is to playfully threaten M in Afrikaans. Deamos is a first language English speaker and in this excerpt tells M off for speaking Afrikaans. His performative gesture of being less white is to adopt Afrikaans. Specifically, he threatens to beat up M using the Afrikaans colloquial phrase 'ek sal jou bliksem'; a phrase, which is more likely associated with white Afrikaans men than any other social grouping. He also mocks the idea that he can somehow become less white, but this notion that threatening M in Afrikaans might be 'better', might be accepted by M as a performance of a less white racial identity is complex.

Afrikaans is a contact language that emerged in the context of contact between European settlers, Indigenous Khoe people, and enslaved peoples from Africa and Asia (Roberge, 2002: 79). Thus, it has a multi-racial history and its speakers remain multi-racial today. However, given that Dutch – the lexifier of Afrikaans – was a colonial import, and that Afrikaans was enforced as a medium of instruction in schools during Apartheid, the language also has strong associations with whiteness. Thus, it is a surprising choice for Deamos to make here. It seems that M's utterance of 'ophou so wit wees' linguistically set the standard by which whiteness can be measured in the context of this interaction. By saying 'Oh okay, ek sal jou bliksem, is that better' Deamos is accepting that standard and using the moment to tease M. The correlation drawn between race and language is interesting, particularly given the histories of the two language used.

Alien's own performance in this excerpt comes through mostly in laughter, and then an assertion of her gamer identity with her exclamation about the lack of revive. 'Revive' is a game function in *LoL* and allows you to revive your avatars when they've been knocked out. For the most part, she remains on the side-lines of this performance of racial identity.

In this last example (12), Alien performs a similar gesture of foregrounding her gamer identity in the midst of the other players' performances of racism.

(12) Blouvlak (B): Do you guys drink red wine?

AlienObserver (A): Ooh, /(gasps loudly)

Deamos (D): /Is it rosé?

A: Ah: no: I forgot we're going into an ultra rapid fire, and now I cancelled the chick I wanted to choose (laughs)

B: I'm on a Nederburg Baronne

D: A what?

B: Nederburg Baronne

D: Is it, is it, is it rosé

B: No no /it's a red wine

A: (still laughing) oh my god

D: Well, normally red wines are rosé dude

B: No man, /a rosé is a mixture of, white and red wine

A: (laughs) sorry Sanguine⁸

D: And it's sweet

B: /It's 'n half breed

A: /(laughs) such an idiot

B: It's a: mix breed

D: (laughs) mix breed

B: It's a coloured

A: Guys what ban, what ban⁹

D: Amumu¹⁰

A: Amumu:./ are you serious

⁸ This is a player's gamertag (full tag is SanguinePaws).

⁹ AlienObserver is asking which of the champions she should ban the enemy team from playing. This is done at the beginning of each match.

¹⁰ This is the name of a champion.

D:/ I'm joking I'm joking

A: No who, quickly quickly quickly

D: Um, Nidalee Nidalee Nidalee¹¹

[Recorded via TeamSpeak]

Deamos and Bloualak liken Coloured racial identity to blended wine. Their use of phrases as 'mixed breed' and 'half breed' is a dehumanising gesture similar to that seen in the Korean example above in that it reduces a complex historical identity by using degrading language (using 'breed', a term that refers to animals). Given that they are both white and male, this moment serves as one of homosocial bonding and the interlocutors show little regard for the potential offence that the comments might cause. AlienObserver, rather than objecting to this othering, gets on with the business at hand, which is made more urgent by the fact that there was a time limit for banning certain avatars. Here we see AlienObserver's gamer identity take precedence in a moment of racial/racist performativity on Deamos and Bloualak's part.

Her silence on this instance of racism stands out when compared to her claims of 'coming out' in defence of her gender when issues of sexism come up. It may be because her race is less 'visible' (in the ways discussed above) in the gaming space than her gender, so she has less experience of dealing with it. However, in our one-on-one spoken interview, she does mention dealing with racism in one particular instance:

(13) AlienObserver (A): So ja, I just I find the Americans very difficult. I've actually had a personal fight with someone on Skype

Me: *Oh woah, about what?*

Um, he was being extremely racist to another guy, um, and I just I couldn't handle it, so I just literally, I asked him if 'do you just wanna come in to a private call with me' and he was like 'like why' and I was like 'no I just wanna I wanna tell you something'

So this is all verbal¹²?

Ja it was all verbal, and um, I think we probably spoke for about an hour and a half, ja, eventually he apologised, but um, ja it gets like that, but the thing is, it's easier for someone to become irate and angry because they, it's not a face to face thing, it's not like they can see

¹¹ Nidalee is one of *LoL*'s champions.

¹² i.e. spoken

you, all they have is this random voice, you know, so like, it's easy for someone to become angry or rude or racist or sexist, you know, because, they're sitting in front of their computer all by themselves, you know, they're miles away, and like I'm hectic, I'm very stubborn, so I don't stand for it, and I always make a point to like message, sometimes yes I dig my own grave, I have, I dig my own grave and like I get myself deep into like, like the depth of like conversation and then I'm like 'oh my god I could have played like two games' (laughs)

I get that though, it's sometimes just so hard to let things go

It's very, very difficult, and especially as a woman, I think for men, it's easier to just go like 'fuck off and die' and then like move on, but for a woman, like, I don't know what it is, maybe it's empathy or I dunno what it is but I feel I have to, I have to say something, so this person knows that it's not right, ja, so ja, so um, I mean, sjoe there's been so many crazy moments, and like, ja sho I've met so many people online, so many, and I know them, this guy, who was a racist, I know everything about him.

[Recorded via tape recorder]

Unlike the gender examples, AlienObserver here removes the offender from the initial interactive environment and engages him in a private conversation elsewhere. She invests a lot of time and effort to make this person understand why he was being offensive and to get him to apologise. She even ends up learning all about his life and his family and claims to still speak to him occasionally. Without primary data of this exchange it is hard to determine why she felt it was necessary to move him out of the gaming space to have this conversation. Perhaps she wished to avoid a larger debate, which could derail the whole team, maybe she is more sensitive about conversations on race, perhaps she didn't want to have to 'come out' about her race in front of the other players. Whatever the underlying reason, this act of making the conversation private allowed AlienObserver and this American player more room to discuss the issue, but it also gives race a different status to gender, at least in her practice.

Also interesting is the balancing of her intersecting, but sometimes conflicting, identities here. She mentions 'digging her own grave' because she can't let these instances of racism or sexism go, but it can result in her losing out on time to practise and get closer to her goal of being a professional gamer. So it seems in cases like this that her identity as Coloured person and as a 'stubborn' person who 'can't let things go' conflicts with her gamer identity. However, the intersection of her identity as a woman plays a very different role. She claims that part of her inability to let things go is her identity as a woman, which she ties to her sense of responsibility to stand up for people and herself. The

intersection of her racial and gender identities in this environment shape the ways that she interacts with other players when issues arise.

4.5. Conclusion

In the course of their team interactions, the members of DoW voice various social discourses. Of chief interest here has been on how the discourses of gender, sexuality and race were communicated by AlienObserver and the rest of her team. These discourses play an inextricable role in how gender, sexuality and race are enacted as identities. Each member of the team contributes to the ways in which these facets of social identities can be constructed in the space.

There are overt and covert ways that gender and the gender binary are maintained by the team. The binary is reified, first and foremost, by the fact that none of the players mentioning any gender beyond the two dominant genders of male and female. In the gaming environment, female is a minority identity, and genders that fall outside the binary do not seem to exist at all. This is hardly surprising in an environment where women make up only 10% of the players (Riot Games, 2012) and are further invisibilised by other players. In this very binaristic space, the power dynamic inherent in a patriarchal society is even more visible given the overwhelming number of men. Alien must perform her identity as a woman, a person of colour and a gamer simultaneously.

This chapter has shown some of the ways in which the *DoW* team perform their discourses of gender and race in the conversations they have before and after playing *LoL*. Through Alien and the team's performances we can begin to get some sense of how the discourses of gender, sexuality and race shape their interactions in the gaming environment. This chapter has focused more on gender than sexuality, which will be discussed more fully in the following chapter.

5. PERFORMATIVITY AND DESIRE

5.1. Introduction

As has been established in the previous chapter, being a woman means that Alien stands out in this context. This chapter will explore how Alien and her team performatively constitute their social and sexual desires in the DoW space.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the pre- and post-game chats often consist of periods of waiting for players to come online, or for teammates to go for bathroom breaks, etc. Consequently, they are often characterised by social interactions that are not necessarily game related. Pre-game chat tends to include a discussion of champion selection, and which role the team members will play in the game. Post-game chat usually includes some reflection on the game. In between-game conversations, the team members talk about all sorts of things, often joking with and teasing each other, creating social bonds and structures that are then carried over into the game. In this context, desires – both social and sexual – are enacted. The notion of social desire, as noted in Chapter 3, expands the idea of homosocial desire to include all expressions of a desire for social cohesion and bonding.

In an exploration of homosocial desire in men's language, Kiesling (2005) asks the following questions:

How do men use language to "do friendship" in a heterosexist atmosphere? How do they talk in a way to make themselves attractive to other men? How do cultural discourses of masculinity structure the men's desires, and thus who they find most attractive, or "cool"? Ultimately, how does the way men create their relationships re-create patterns of dominance - how do their everyday conversations re-create wider cultural discourses? (2005: 695)

This chapter addresses some of these questions in the context of the DoW clan. However, the chapter will not be limited to the homosocial, but also look at how the erotic enters into the performative space of gender and sexuality.

The previous chapter illustrated the ways that the players perform their social identities in interaction with each other, and this section aims to show how they perform their desires, while also reflecting on whether it makes sense to differentiate between identity and desire (see 2.6.4.), and whether a truly desire-centred approach can ever be fully achieved.

5.2. Performances of Desire and Sexuality

As this chapter discusses sexual and social desires, I will be looking at how these manifest in different kinds of spoken interactions in the team, and what ends the performances meet. As with the preceding chapter, this analysis will be informed by Butler's theory of performativity and will address how the gender binary is maintained or flouted by members of this team.

5.2.1. The Manifestation of Desire in Humorous Exchanges

The pre- and post-game chats tend to comprise a lot of humorous language, and playful teasing and joking characterise much of that data collected.

Humour often goes beyond the simple act of making someone laugh and plays an important role in the development of interactive norms, creating and maintaining solidarity (Coates, 2007: 32). Humour also plays a role in the establishment of group dynamics and can affect how certain members of a group interact with each other. This section will address how humour interacts with desire, and how it affects the context in which these gamers are interacting, and what discourses are at play in the humorous exchanges that take place.

In order for jokes to work, they rely on shared discourses. For example, in order for a sexually explicit joke to work, the participants in the joke need to share discourses of sexuality and gender (since the two commonly overlap).

Exchanges like the following two contribute to the naturalisation of heterosexual masculinity, which is achieved through interaction in various ways. The first example (Extract 14) is a discussion about a video that was shared on the group chat (TeamSpeak allows players to also type messages and share links and pictures with each other). Bloualak has shared the video with the team and introduces it into the conversation by expressing his desire for the 'barlady' he spotted in the video. The video showed a party where a lot of people were dancing in various states of undress.

(14) Bloualak (B): Oh my word

AlienObserver (A): What?

B: Look at this barlady

A: Which barlady?

B: That one

A: Where

B: At the beginning of that video

A: Which video?

B: The one that I just posted

A: Posted where? Oh

B: Check that first barlady...pragtag

Deamos (D): (laughs) Oh my god this is so bad, "I asked my girlfriend 'can I come in your ear?', she said 'oh god no I might go deaf' and I told her 'bitch I always come in your mouth and you never [shut the fuck up]" [laughs]

A: Sies guys

D: I'm sorry:

SanguinePaws (SP): Go to, go to: uh sorry go to 28 minutes, 28 minutes and 40 seconds.. I forgot this is one of those that I actually

D: Is it normal for my left nipple to be bigger than the other two?

A: Which barlady:?

B: Go to 4- 28 minutes and 40 seconds

A: Oh: okay, still coming up

[13 secs]

B: Barlady now

A: This is just like half naked people: dancing

B: Ja, everywhere

A: I don't get it

B: I dunno where she is now, sorry

A: No:, sorry no: I don't wanna watch this, /okay guys let's go

D: /I would

D: I would call heaven

[9 sec silence]

[Recorded via TeamSpeak]

There are two performances of male sexist heterosexual desire in this excerpt. These provide the grounds for AlienObserver's performance of her own gender identity, rejecting the sexism displayed by members of her team. Bloualak begins by referring to a barlady that he finds attractive in a video he has shared. Alien initially reacts with interest, expressing her own desire to see the barlady, but when she realises that the video contains partially naked bodies, she disavows that desire, and changes the topic. She distances herself from Bloualak's performance of masculine heterosexuality, by keeping the space more focused on the game. This is not the first time we've seen AlienObserver do this, and in the previous chapter this was discussed as AlienObserver's performative assertion of her gamer identity over her gender/ sexual/racial identity.

There is a blurring between the performance of desire and identity. Performances of desire will always in some way be performances of identity because all linguistic performance locates us in a discourse within which we can be understood as social subjects. Expression of desire makes no sense outside of such discourse. However, that does not mean that desire is not worth looking at more closely. The moments in the data in which the players' desires are articulated provide important sites for understanding how these gamers have engaged with, and are shaped by, such social structures as the gender binary, the racial hierarchy (especially, white supremacy), and heteronormativity. These moments show less awareness of one's social status than moments of overt claim-staking, and thus allow for a more subtle and nuanced exploration of performativity.

In this extract, Bloualak voices his heterosexual desire for a woman who is being presented in a sexualised manner, and in so doing, he identifies as a heterosexual man. His desire, once voiced, becomes a part of how he presents himself in this interaction, and contributes to the discourses of gender and sexuality in the space, which in turn defines how the players are able to present themselves, and so on.

The second performance of male heterosexuality in this extract is Deamos explicitly sexist joke. Following Coates (2007: 30), Deamos's joke can be analysed as a speech act that abides by the

standard structure for joke delivery, with the notable addition of a disclaimer. By saying, “this is so bad”, Deamos distances himself from the joke before the telling of it. By doing this he allows himself the room to tell a sexist joke and laugh at it without openly supporting the underlying ideology of it. He has recognised that the joke is problematic, yet he relays it anyway, as he also seems to think it is funny. When AlienObserver demonstrates her disapproval of the joke, Deamos apologizes.

In both examples above, AlienObserver’s reaction is to dismiss and direct the interaction away from the performances of male sexuality that Deamos and Bloualak are engaged in. In so doing, she is interactively constituting her own sexuality and gender: she positions herself in direct opposition to Deamos and Bloualak’s performances of heterosexual masculinity. Both are examples of Alien’s expression of her identities and identifications as a woman and as a gamer. She does not let a potential social desire to conform get in the way of the performative constitution of herself as a woman who ‘can’t let things go’. At the same time, she keeps the conversation focused on gaming, and thus affirms her identity as a gamer.

The next excerpt also involves Alien, Deamos and Bloualak:

(15) Deamos (D): What you laughing at?

AlienObserver (A): (laughs)¹³

D: Bloualak?

Bloualak (B): No one of one of the guys in my in my, other group uh: sent me like, like a girl, and this like little video on WhatsApp and she’s a girl who’s brushing her tee:th and everything, a:nd then they scroll down they move down with the camera and there you see the boobs and everything, and it’s nice and everything, and then you get to the bottom part/ and then it’s a dick [laughing] swinging around]

D: /Ja, ja, it was a dick, and it’s going left and right, left and right, ja I’ve seen it

B: (laughs) fuckin hilarious

D: Ja dude I’ve seen it, it was. Okay so we practising

[Recorded via TeamSpeak]

The woman in question is in fact a trans woman who acts in pornographic films. In this excerpt both Deamos and Bloualak perform a normative heterosexual male identity through reading the video as funny, rather than erotic, as soon as the woman’s penis is revealed. Bloualak’s performance is also one of desire as his description of what is read as a female body is described as “nice and everything”. This performance of desire for what is culturally inscribed as markers of the female body such as the

¹³ Unclear what she is laughing at – possibly something offline.

woman's breasts is simultaneously a performance of Blouhlak's heterosexuality. By articulating his approval of the parts of the woman's body that are typically read as female, he is enacting his role of a heterosexual male, which is then reified by his gesture of distancing himself from the depiction of this woman when it is revealed that she has a penis. This whole performance of sexual desire and disavowal serves as an instance of homosocial bonding between Demos and Blouhlak as they are able to share in their humour over the video.

The closest AlienObserver comes to a performance of sexual desire is in the example discussed in the previous chapter about the Korean gamers, which can be interpreted as a performance of a lack of desire. Her sexuality (in the sense of expressing a heterosexual identity) is at other points enacted through reference to her boyfriend, but she does not discuss her attractions at any other point.

The ways that the discourses of masturbation and pornography manifest in the group interactions shed an interesting light on the relationship between these discourses and the discourses of gender and sexuality of the members of the group. The following extract (17) follows an exchange about Deamos's computer set-up. His TeamSpeak wasn't working on his PC so he had his laptop set up next to his PC for TeamSpeak and was playing *LoL* on the PC. This caused great amusement in the group and he was asked to send a picture over WhatsApp. The picture included a roll of toilet paper on his desk, which prompted the following exchange:

(17) Blouhlak (B): Hoekom het jy kakpapier op jou ['Why do you have toilet paper on your [desk]']

AlienObserver (A): (laughs)

B: (laughs)

Deamos (D): What

A: Blouhlak I saw that as well but I chose not to bring it up, and/ you're just like 'hoekom het jy kakpapier, op jou tafel'

B: /But you know:

B: (laughs)

A: (laughs)

D: [laughing] oh shit] oh ja, I have the flu

A: (still laughing)

B: But I net vra 'just ask' where's the hand cream hey?

A: (laughs)

D: Uh it's hiding behind the cup hey

B: (laughs)

D: (laughs)

[Recorded via TeamSpeak]

Deamos's response here is to play along, explaining that he has the flu. But then Blouhlak's comment about hand cream brings in a sexual dimension: it is a reference to using hand cream as a lubricant for masturbation and then using the *kakpapier* to clean up after. Deamos continues to play along, saying that the hand cream is out of sight, behind the cup.

Cameron and Kulick (2005) state,

To fully understand the workings of "desire as social semiotic", it is necessary to ask "who can say what to whom and when [and be intelligible as meaning what]?" (2005: 110)

In the above excerpt AlienObserver says, "Blouhlak I saw that as well but I cho:se not to bring it up, and you're just like 'hoekom het jy kakpapier, op jou tafel'". There is explicit acknowledgement here that she recognised the potential for embarrassment or humour in the presence of the toilet paper (though whether or not she saw the potential for a masturbation joke is unclear), but chose to uphold her idea of politeness by deciding not to say anything about it.

The use of Afrikaans in this extract is worth commenting on. Blouhlak's initial use of Afrikaans could indicate that he was not making the joke for Alien, who they know not to be a fluent Afrikaans speaker, but her reproduction of the joke in Afrikaans shows a transgressive moment of taking up that joke even though she states that she was going to respect the politeness norms of not teasing Deamos about the toilet paper. She takes a moment that might have excluded her and inserts herself into it.

Masturbation and pornography are aspects of sexuality that are addressed by the group but only in the form of teasing and jokes. The references to masturbation in the team interactions largely seem to contribute to the homosocial bonding between the male members of the team. Alien's main contribution is initially one of avoidance, followed by laughter to show her understanding and

amusement and then her playful reproduction of the joke. She notes that the joke is somehow impolite but she still takes it up and enjoys it.

The following extract (18) shows AlienObserver as the object of teasing by a male member of the team. For some time before this exchange, AlienObserver had been having difficulties with her computer, which seemed to have a virus and was preventing her from playing *LoL*. Eventually, this led to the following exchange:

(18) AlienObserver (A): My computer's fucked guys, I can't, I can't log into League, I think my antivirus has stopped working, and I think there's a virus on my computer, because, I can't open windows, and when I- um Windows Explorer, and when I do open it, like a thousand windows just start opening for no reason, um, it's hectic.

Pepsakdoek (Psd): Do those thousand windows, do they contain porn?

A: No, I dunno it just says 'try and connect' and then it never connects to anything, obviously I tried to close them down so I dunno what it is. Why, is it porn?

Psd: I dunno I'm just saying that that's a typical

Staalbeer (sb): (laughing)

(laughter)

A: (amused) How do you know Reenen? How often have you had this virus, please tell me

(laughter)

Psd: Doesn't sound like a virus, it sounds like a problem

sb: (laughs) it's a problem

?: Do you wanna share with us, Alien

(laughter)

A: What do you want me to share with you? (small laugh).. I can't even move, I can't even move my window:s

[some interference]

A: I dunno what's going on with my computer, I'm disconnecting, I think I'm just gonna have to switch it off tonight hey?

[Recorded via TeamSpeak]

If there is something similar about the two examples it is that Alien takes up these jokes and plays with them. She never initiates them, and sometimes she shuts them down before they get very far, but she also laughs and teases in response. These moments show that in spite of the maintenance of the binary and the dominance of men in the space, there is room for agency, for creativity and play in Alien's interactions with the team, even though playfulness tends to be introduced by male players.

Conversations around masturbation are often treated as a taboo (Hogarth & Ingham, 2009; Evans-Grimm, 2011), and the way that it tends to manifest in the data is via teasing. However, there seems to be a difference in the way that the male and female members of the team engage in such teasing, at least in the context of these pre- and post-game interactions. Firstly, masturbation- and pornography-related teasing is only ever initiated by the male members of the team, and the reactions to the teasing seem to differ as well. In the case of Deamos, instead of trying to defend himself or deny the accusation, he joins in the teasing. AlienObserver, on the other hand, deflects attention away from herself. It is of course unclear whether this is because she is a woman or because she is in the minority as the only woman present. Either way there is a gendered dynamic as her status as a woman makes it harder for her to speak.

5.3. Sameness and Difference

Social grouping is a process not merely of discovering or acknowledging a similarity that precedes and establishes identity but, more fundamentally, of inventing similarity by downplaying difference. (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004b: 371)

For the most part, differences are downplayed between the members of the team that identify as being of the same gender. Thus, RoguePhoenix and AlienObserver speak more like each other when they interact with each other than they do when they speak to the male members of the team (see 5.4. below). The male members of the team, Bloualak and Deamos for instance, relate more to each other in the team interactions than to AlienObserver even though the two come from very different backgrounds: Deamos is predominately English-speaking and Bloualak's first language is Afrikaans, and the fact that Bloualak has known AlienObserver longer than he has Deamos. However, the gender 'differences' are downplayed the most when game-related issues are under discussion. I will illustrate this by discussing some excerpts where the conversation is focused on game issues and show the ways in which AlienObserver and the other players relate to each other.

The following is an excerpt from a discussion after a game of URF or Ultra-Rapid Fire, a newer game mode that requires a different strategy to win:

(19) Deamos (D): Okay so I've I've found a loophole in this game mode/ it's just

AlienObserver (A):/Okay, please tell me

D: All it is is, everybody take teleport wh- when they busy pushing, you kill them, you defend, kill and then teleport, as into a lane everybody and then just push from there, then you gotta push mid, that's basically

A: Let's try it let's try it do you guys wanna try it?

Blouhlak (B): ja that's pretty much what we just did (laughs)

D: Ja that's what we just did

A: Hmm

B: [laughing] well at least me and Deamos] (laughs)

D: Ja, /jeez dude

A: /Kay let's try

A: Let's try it as a team then (laughs)

D: Okay, ja let's do that

[Recorded via TeamSpeak]

Deamos and Blouhlak are the most vocal members of AlienObserver's team. In spite of AlienObserver being the leader of the team and a generally talkative person, the pre- and post-game interactions are often characterised by long stretches of conversation between Deamos and Blouhlak alone, who only met after the formation of Aqua Draco. They both describe themselves as 'friendly guys' but seem to favour homosocial bonding when interacting with the team. The above excerpt is an example of them showing solidarity with each other and referencing a shared experience. AlienObserver has to assert her desire to maintain cohesion with the team.

Extract (20) illustrates another interaction between the three teammates.

(20) AlienObserver (A): /Come Deamos

Deamos (D): Sorry, I'm having a woman problem, or

A: Oh, what?

D: No wait, not a woman problem, actually a woman solution

A: Oh, I like that

D: A woman solution

A: You're having a woman solution

D: Yes, she is also ginger which makes me feel so much better about myself

A: She is ginger as well?

D: Yes

A: Awesome

D: I know right, gingers need to repopulate the earth. Did you know, did you know gingers cannot donate sperm?

Bloualak (B): (laughs) no I never asked

D: How swak is that dude, dude it's swak

A: Why?!

D: Because there's not a high enough demand

A: (gasps)

D: There's no market for ginger kids, like nobody wants ginger kids

A: I want a ginger kid! My grandmother's ginger

B: 'It's a ginger kill it' (laughs)

D: No dude

B: No like there's like a lot of memes where

D: Ja, I love, I love all of them dude

[Recorded via TeamSpeak]

In extract (20), AlienObserver shows her approval of Deamos's use of the phrase 'a woman solution'. It is only when Deamos starts talking more generally and enters humorous territory again that Bloualak enters into the interaction and while AlienObserver attempts to continue responding supportively to Deamos's claims, Bloualak begins to playfully tease Deamos for having red hair and the interaction shifts into a more humorous and playful discourse dominated by the two male gamers (not excerpted fully here).

Extract (21) is similar to the one above in that it begins with a straightforward discussion of Bloualak's relationship with his wife until Deamos diverts the attention onto himself. He interrupts the conversation between AlienObserver and Bloualak to playfully ask Bloualak if he is his friend, after which AlienObserver jokingly competes for Bloualak's affections, which he goes along with, but from then on the interaction becomes much more centred around Deamos and Bloualak again. Once again we see the homosocial bonding between Deamos and Bloualak resulting in the exclusion, or at least marginalization, of AlienObserver.

(21) Bloualak (B): My wife is in Cape Town at the moment

AlienObserver (A): Oh aweso:me

B: Ja, she got her course well, she got her course there by: UCT

A: So aren't you supposed to be spending time with your wife?

B: Uh no I'm not, I'm not

Deamos (D): (laughs)

A: (laughs) Does your wife, does your wife tune you as well when you play so much, LoL

B: No: she, she learned that um, it's better to leave me alone when I do the LoL thing, uh because she, it's a lot of tension in our relationship if she doesn't

A: (laughs)

B: Coz she's got her, this is her thing, is, I'm a very social guy I've I've got, lots of friends, and I make friends like nothing/ it's not even

D: /Are you, are you my friend Bloualak?

B: I fucking love you Deamos

D: (laughs)

A: No!, he's my friend, Bloualak is my friend / you can't come steal him away from me

B: Ja but I love, I love Alien more

AlienObserver (laughs)

D: You, you remind me of my friend dude, we got really high and then, we went to go make something to eat, and I'm like 'Dude do you want bread, I mean do you want butter on your bread' he's like 'I fuckin I:ove butter'

B & A: (laugh)

D: And when you did that dude I was like 'okay, ja'

B & A: (laugh)

B: You see the thing is, everybody calls me awesome man

D: Coz you are awesome dude

B: that's, ja that's my: my nickname everywhere, and the thing is, I walk into a pub and I, I'm really, I'm two meters tall and 110 kgs so

D: Yoh, you're a bi:g ou

B: I'm quite buff it's not, and the kak is I walk into a place like that, and you, you can look for kak with everybody, but then, you get all these guys that are bigger than you, and then you go: 'he:y fuck, hoe lyk it, you want a dop?' (laughs)

D: Ja dude, you make friends with those okes, that's what, that's what people do with me

B: I, I'm one of those guys I, I'm always friendly, if you're a dick, I'll kick your ass but, there's no reason to be a dick, so: be my friend

A: Mm

[Recorded via TeamSpeak]

Thus, there seems to be a pattern of the types of things Alien and the male members of the team talk about, and the kinds of things the male members talk to each other about, and there is little crossover. AlienObserver talks to them about their relationships and lives; Demos and Bloualak tend to joke and tease each other more. The interactions between AlienObserver and RoguePhoenix, the other female member of the clan, mirror many of Demos and Bloualak's interactions in being almost entirely dominated by the two of them. However, the content of their discussions is different. This will be illustrated in the next section on boasting.

5.4. Boasting

AlienObserver declares boasting a part of the fun of gaming, and something gamers are allowed to do in each other's company:

(22) if you're a gamer you allowed to boast [...] I'll rather boast when I'm having fun and when I'm with fun people and be like 'oh ja I play no I play professionally and it's so much fun', but not when you're fighting with someone. (AlienObserver, 2013 interview)

[Recorded via digital audio recorder]

The example of boasting cited by Alien here does not in fact sound all that boastful. Playing professionally is not necessarily a boast, and if it is, it is a very tame one. This is of course only a cited, possible utterance, and may not be the kind of thing she would actually say in interaction, but, based on the data I collected, she doesn't boast much in the team interactions at all. In fact, there is only one real example of her boasting, and it is co-constructed with the other female member of the clan, RoguePhoenix:

(23) RoguePhoenix (RP): Good game

AlienObserver: Ya:y that was a great game

?: (Gg?) guys

...

A: Mm: guys thank you so much for letting me play: jungle (laughs), I'm so sick of playing ADC I h:ate it like I wanna cry: when people say 'Alien you have to play ADC', a little tear runs down my cheek

RP: So Alien what do you think of my Sian?

A: Very, very cool

RP: Thanks thank you thank you

A: Very cool, ja super super super awesome and you have, you didn't even die

RP: Mm-m

|?: Was playing support

A: And, what do you what role do you normally play Sian

RP: Hey?

A: What role do you normally play Sian

RP: Um, I um, top support or bot support

/User disconnected from your channel/

A: Okay, cool, cool, very very cool hey?

RP: Thank you? Coming from mid Ari to that

A: Sure

A: I, I know:!, that's awesome and what do you think of my: jungle Ramm-ass

RP: Very, very good

A: I've been practising him for a long time now, I love him, and the thing is what people don't know is, that Rammass is almost like Amumu ? But everyone's more scared of Amumu than Rammus because,

RP: Oh, ja

Oh um, Amumu's got that the CC where you can he's got a crowd control over everyone

RP: Yes

A: Bu:t they forget that Rammass has a taunt, and he can and his ulti:, has got such a quick cool down

RP: ja

like if I have blue and I have u:m, and I have a little bit of cool down in the items that I buy, u:m, I literally my ulti's back in like 20 seconds

RP: Ja that you need

A: Exactly

RP: Ja no you played it excellent, really really excellent

A: ja:, ja, you also played (singing) super super we-ell:, Okay now, wat gaan ons nou doen?

[Recorded via TeamSpeak]

RoguePhoenix begins by asking AlienObserver what she thought of how she played the champion named Sian. She knows she played well, and wants the recognition for it, but, for whatever reason, she is unwilling or unprepared to do so for herself. AlienObserver then asks in turn what RoguePhoenix thought of how she played the champ called Rammus (who Alien often calls Ramm-ass), and after Rogue has answered her, confirming that she played really well, Alien takes over with an explanation of how to play Rammus to get the best out of the champ, but frames it as what "people don't know" about the champ, rather than what she does know. Alien and Rogue seem to have assumed supportive roles for each other and use terms of endearment.

Examples (24) and (25) illustrate how the male team members boast:

(24) Bloualak (B): Guys I don't wanna feel like superior but, uh I got an A ./for mathematics (laughs)

Deamos (D): /[quickly] hey shut the fuck up, shut the fuck up Bloualak]

AlienObserver (A): Wha:t?! You got an A for Maths, higher grade or standard grade actually, tell me

B: No no no higher grade I got a h-, I got, pretty much, As for everything except English and Afrikaans

A: (laughs)

D: Hey, hey Bloualak Bloualak

B: (laughs)

D: [quick] shut the fuck up]

A: (laughs)

[Recorded via TeamSpeak]

(25) Blouhlak (B): That guy I played with him the other night I played uh because his um- they ADC. I play- I played with him, I supported for him, and he's like 'no fuck off, come, come to my team' (laughs). I played a Lulu but I think my support was something like 35 just like 5/5/35 it was crazy

Deamos (D): Dude I was offered a sponsorship to play Call of Duty Ghost, and compete for DGL, but. but I said no (laughs)

B: Ja coz Call of Duty: Ghost is a bit more (sighs)

D: No uh only reason I said no was because I'm still in school and I wanted to focus on my studies before I take, anything seriously, but I mean, League I don't mind

B: I must say um, competitive gaming, uh: in South Africa is becoming a huge thing

D: I know dude

B: But check the sponsorships from last year to this year the sponsorships went up 250%

D: Jeez dude

B: Crazy

D: Ja like uh the guy offered to pay for me to upgrade my PC and buy me Call of Duty: Ghost, and a Razor headset, to come back and play for them coz, I founded the clan with them, back in Modern Warfare 3, and then I left, the

[Recorded via TeamSpeak]

Both examples involve Blouhlak and Deamos again, with some input from AlienObserver in the first excerpt. The differences between AlienObserver and RoguePhoenix's interaction and these two examples are striking. Firstly, neither Blouhlak nor Deamos ask the other for approval. They both use active declarative sentences and congratulate themselves on their own performance. They are also competitive. In the first example, because Blouhlak's performance at school was better than Deamos's

(who has already admitted to doing Maths Literacy as opposed to Higher Grade Maths, and has also mentioned dropping out of school in previous sessions), Deamos's reaction is to dismiss Blouslak's achievement and teasingly tell him to "shut the fuck up". In the second case both players mention being scouted by other teams to play for them, and each tries to outdo the other with the bonuses they were offered to join these other teams. It is not done maliciously and seems to contribute to the bonding process, as does the interaction between Alien and Rogue cited above, but in markedly different ways. Boasting could perhaps be understood as a performance of a desire for recognition from one's peers.

5.5. Conclusion

To respond to the Cameron/Kulick vs. Bucholtz/Hall debate, the players' various desires play out performatively and help to situate them in the group. Their sexual, social and professional desires reveal themselves in different ways, and interact with performances of their identities in pre- and post-game chats. It is very difficult to isolate the performance of desire from the performance of identity. While what I will call 'acts of desire' differ from 'acts of identity' (such as claim-staking), the performance of desire in a social environment is also usually a performance of one's subject position in that environment. The *DoW* players' interactions show the ways in which the team enacts and interacts with their own desires and those of others, and illustrates the ways in which their identities are enacted through these discourses of desire. Thus, while it can be productive to shift the focus onto desire-centred language, this cannot and perhaps should not be done without some understanding of identity.

This chapter has attempted to shed light on the interactive norms of the group and how they are able to situate themselves and perform their desires and identities in the space, and how this is limited/shaped by the binaristic construction of gender and heterosexual division of labour that they operate amongst. I have done so by looking into humour and teasing about topics such as masturbation and pornography. I have also discussed examples where players have spoken about their sexual desires, leading to reactions from teammates, which in turn are projections of their own sexual identity. I have shown how players establish their identities via acts of othering and competitiveness as well as through supportive acts.

6. TOWARDS SOME CONCLUSIONS

As gaming continues to be an important part of contemporary culture, and as eSports gain more popularity with players and audiences, games will increasingly become important sites for social interaction, both in how they represent the world and in the power they could have to change it. This study has shown how player interactions in what is a very binaristic space serve to reproduce and also occasionally challenge that binary. *League of Legends* is among the most popular games in the world and is a significant feature of the eSports world. By looking at the performative constitution of identity and desire in a South African team of *LoL* players, I have illustrated the ways in which this game and its players reflect and reify social norms, and how the environment shapes those norms.

The prevalence of the gender binary, heteronormativity and racism are in part a result of colonialism and coloniality and is constantly reinforced through the performances of cultures that are shaped by those ideologies. By looking at this team of *LoL* players, I have attempted to show how performativity of gender, race and sexuality reify the very structures that produce them.

The six chapters in this paper have shown how gender is constructed and performed within a group of game players. The Literature Review situated this study within the current literature on gaming, language, gender, identity and desire. It also set up the theoretical background against which the later data analysis chapters were viewed, with a particular focus on Butler; Bucholtz and Hall; Cameron and Kulick; and Fairclough.

The Methodology and Background gave an introduction to *League of Legends* and *Dragons of War*, the team that the central participant, AlienObserver, was a central component of.

The two data analysis chapters illustrated how the members of *DoW*, and AlienObserver in particular, performatively construct ideologies around gender and how they perform their own identities and desires through their use of language with each other.

This paper has attempted to show that eSports are a rich and promising area of sociolinguistic study and that they set the stage for complex and varied acts of identity.

6.1. Limitations

As this was a small, qualitative study, it is difficult to make broader pronouncements about the potential impact of this work. What is perhaps needed are comparative studies of other *LoL* teams, which was difficult to do considering the fact that the study of eSports is still relatively new. Since the end of my data collection, AlienObserver has joined an all-female *LoL* team, and it would have served the analysis well to be able to compare her performances in her new team to that of the ones explored here, but limitations of time and resources had to be considered.

As a qualitative study, the research could perhaps have benefited from more quantitative data, and large-scale quantitative studies of South African gaming would benefit this developing academic field greatly.

This links to another limitation, namely the paucity of statistical data. As the study of games develops, large-scale surveys of various areas are needed. The available statistics usually cover the USA, Europe or East Asian countries, which makes it difficult to situate other contexts accurately. The study of internet use in general is an area that warrants more attention worldwide.

6.2. Future Study

Given the rate at which the technology advances, the communities around games will keep adapting and will remain a rich source for future study. Perhaps in the not too distant future, the distribution of *all* genders in *all* gaming communities will begin to represent the world's population. It would be wonderful to see studies that focused on the experience of genders that fall outside of the gender binary.

The study of eSports is a developing area and will become increasingly relevant as the teams and audiences continue to grow. The games that fall under the banner of eSports are important cultural artefacts, in that they reflect the discourses and ideologies of the culture that produces them, and they are also constantly changing and updating to keep up with their consumers. They are also shaping their consumers as they do so, feeding into the performative cycle that determines who their consumers are and how they can behave within the eSports environment. With increasing cultural and political awareness of gender and racial oppression, and the impact this awareness is beginning to have on other forms of popular culture such as film, it will be important to keep an eye on how eSports change and how its changes impact on its players.

As a nascent field of academic study, eSports are rich in sociocultural data. ESports audiences are just as interesting as their players and warrant study of their own. The differences in the positioning of eSports in different countries is also worthy of study. What I hope I have been successful in communicating in this dissertation is that this is a socially productive environment, that it can show us things about human society and cultural norms that are important for us to understand and develop on, that there is so much more to see and to look into in this environment than could ever be constrained to one paper.

7. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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