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E-boys and E-girls: Constructing and Performing Identity in League of Legends

Yelim Lee

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The Degenerate Game

“Video games will get you nowhere, no job, no love,” my mother says, scolding me for playing a game for hours on end during the weekend. There are far more productive activities, she said. I remember her pointing to my violin case (untouched until I am forced to practice) and ‘recreational’ math worksheets. I sit down for work, but I cannot help thinking about the vibrant world that I had just left. Within my games, I would be transported to a kingdom with political intrigue with the threat of betrayal around every corner, a tragic love rivalling the likes of Romeo and Juliet, beautiful desert ruins that I cannot hope to visit except in my fantasies. I couldn’t help but think that it was unfair that books were so lauded as a means of escape while video games were scorned by so many.

Perhaps this was why I was so eager to pursue the anthropology of video games today, as if I was restoring the agency of my childhood. Perhaps I want to prove in some part, that video games do, in fact, have a place in society. As the virtual world gains increasing eminence in today’s society, games—online games—have provided a platform for young people to meet from all across the globe. For some of those young people, this online connection is perhaps the only social interaction they will have. Others will most likely be influenced by the community, bringing and mixing elements and vocabularies of that online world, such as memes (short memetic jokes) or trolling (bringing grief to others for the sake of watching their reaction) into the offline world. There have been mixed reactions to this meeting of two different subcultures, offline and online, and the video game community is still seen as fringe. For example, pro-video gamers, those that play video games live in front of an audience much like how athletes perform

in a stadium, earn a salary comparable to baseball and football superstars. Faker, one of the most prominent pro video gamers, turned down a 1 million dollar offer to join a team in China and is rumored to be have his salary priced at 5 million in his own team in Korea. Esports, electronic sports, is a rising scene in the industry giving hope to many young gamers who want to take their hobby to a professional level. However, these pro gamers, despite appearing on ESPN, still receive criticisms that their career isn't "legitimate." However, with the rise of the popularity and growing acceptance of the online world, video game communities online are here to stay and may provide a significant portion of a young peoples' social web. Thus, there is a need to research how these young people interact online, how they find intimacy despite anonymity, and what kind of norms are being reproduced and maintained within these online cultures. To that end, I am delving into the famous—infamous—League of Legends community: described, even by its own residents, as a "cesspool of degeneracy."

Yelim: I'm warning you all now. I'm not very good.

Clair: Relax, we're all having fun.

Clair and Archer quip at each other about their relative skill level. Clair is convinced that he will get the best score in the game. Archer thinks that Clair plays like a monkey. The game finally starts and my champion, my character, a small monster that resembles a squid, tumbles out onto the lush cartoonish field. Clair is busy making his champion, a small girl dragging along a ragged teddybear, dance in a corner. Archer is no nonsense, and quickly buys the items he needs and speeds along, searching for a victim to kill. His champion, a hooded man with a large hammer, looks the part of an executioner—reflecting how many enemies he killed that game.

Soon, I stop wondering at the visual attention that went into the field, the lush greenery and the deer perched precariously at the edge of the field. I can't let my attention wander, as the game just started. I'm quickly kept busy dodging bullets and flinging back attacks of my own. I'm quickly whittled down and I die. Again. And Again. And Again

Archer: Lol Yelim you're not that good at the game.

Yelim: Haha...I warned you.

Archer: It's fine, lol. We'll just have to learn together.

We had just finished a game and had lost. My score was abysmal. A tiny part of me regretted not playing more over the summer, to get better and impress my informants. The rush that a simple congratulation gives after a good game is addicting. Archer is incredibly skilled, and currently makes money by entering small time tournaments. He dreams of becoming a professional gamer—something he's kept hidden from the rest of his family. He wants to represent America as a pro gamer. League of Legends has an international tournament, like the soccer World Cup, every year and the American team has sadly never gotten past the quarterfinals. He's a regular college student now, but maybe in the future, or in a different timeline—a pathway not taken—he'd be on stage with a team, competing against players from around the world.

As I, and many other people, played video games at such an early age, games were an important medium in the creation of my own identity. League of Legends, as one of the biggest online computer games, is certain to have a significant impact on the younger population. Though it has only been released for 7 years, the company, Riot, claims that the game receives about 100 million unique active users monthly. The game is known as a MOBA, or Massive Online Battle Arena, which describes any online game in which players fight in large teams

against other players. The games are often unable to be paused and rely on stable internet connection for everyone involved. In League of Legends, each game session takes about thirty minutes to an hour and connects ten people, five on each team, on one field to fight each other. League of Legends requires immense strategy and knowledge of the game but is accessible to people of all ages and genders. I have met boys as young as 13 and women as old as 60 through the course of research. Throughout the many hours spent playing with online friends made through the short 5 months of the semester and closer, intimate conversations about the game and life I have grown fond of the unique community and its peculiar gender norm reproduction through Language and play—the consequences of which manifest themselves in identity manipulation and the exchange of cultural capital based on gender interactions.

There have been other works that researched the virtual world and gaming communities; *Coming of Age in Second Life* by Tom Boellstorff (2015) and *My Life as a Night Elf Priest* by Bonnie Nardi (2010) are two examples that delve deep into a community and uncover insights about identity and gender online. World of Warcraft and Second Life are quite different communities compared to League of Legends. Both World of Warcraft and Second Life create a lush, adventure-able world for the player to explore. There are no set matches, no set end or start times to play in these communities. The players inhabit a character, their avatar, and are free to roam as they please without a straight direction. League of Legends, on the other hand, have a primary goal set into the game: to destroy the enemy team's base. The game ends when either team loses their base, and each match is a different coupling of scenarios and patterns that lead up to either victory or loss. Thus, the research obtained at these field sites are fairly different. The primary difference, however, between Boellstorff and Nardi's works and my own research is the fundamental identity creation that is afforded by both Second Life and World of Warcraft.

Boellstorff observed in Second Life how many people could choose to make their own avatar into whatever gender they pleased. Certain players played with their race and the humanity, or lack of it, of their avatar. Nardi observed this freedom as well in World of Warcraft: players could customize their Characters' gender and aesthetic appearance to a minute degree. Nardi herself commented on how she spent hours making her avatar look perfect. However, in my field site, players do not create an avatar for themselves. Instead, every game, the player can choose which champion to play out of a set number: 136. While in Second Life or World of Warcraft, the player would view their avatar as an insertion of themselves into the game, there is little personal connection between the person and the champion they play. In League of Legends, the people don't view themselves as their champions, while in Boellstorff's work, the people viewed their avatars as an extension of the self.

The avatar creation process allowed the players to experiment with identity or even pretend to be someone else. The players could experience life as a different gender, and, in Second Life, were not criticized for choosing to play a someone completely different from the offline physical self. In my field site, such identity play was limited. Not only did the people present themselves as they are in "real life," and not as their characters, but the advent of voice communication makes it difficult for the players to assume another gender. In fact, as Boellstorff was wrapping up his research, voice communication was being implemented in Second Life's client with mixed reactions. Players were worried that voice communication will add a layer of physicality that would cut into the pureness of their online experience. Certainly the advent of voice communication may have restricted the identity play that the second life players enjoyed during the time of Boellstorff's research. One could imagine that the effect it has on my fieldsite would be seen in Second Life as well.

Linguistic patterns and rituals are an integral part of this analysis. To analyze the data, I used terms and analytical insight from Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick's *Language and Sexuality* and Deborah Tannen's *You just don't understand: women and men in conversation*. The work is important in framing the importance of linguistic differences and why they occur. Cameron and Kulick states that such differences, consciously or unconsciously done, are performative in nature. A woman is not born, she is made in society. What type of linguistic rituals she engages in and how she interacts with others in her community all work to define her identity as a heterosexual female. Additionally, Cameron's work on "Performing Gender Identity: Young Men's talk and the Construction of Heterosexual Masculinity" (1999) helped me understand identity and speech within the community. When one cannot play with their identity through the creation of a new avatar, the performance of gender using one's speech becomes all that more important to create an identity for oneself.

Eli Dresner, professor of communication studies in Tel Aviv, details examples of such gendered performance in the form of emoticons in "Functions of the Non-Verbal in CMC: Emoticons and Illocutionary Force." As interactions in the community take place almost solely online, one would think that non-verbal communication is impossible. However, what non-verbal communication that exists is integral to analyzing the difference in the ways women and men present themselves within the game. Dresner expands on one such non-verbal communication, emoticons (expressions or objects made through typography intended to convey a user's emotion or expression), and breaks down how people use them and what the emoticons may mean during a conversation. Whitney Phillip's "This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the

Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture,” and Gabriella Coleman’s *Phreakers, Hackers, and Trolls*, on the other hand, focus on verbal communication and linguistic rituals of online denizens. Using their works as a basis, I expound on toxicity of League of Legends, and how it is so integral to a player’s identity. Toxicity, like the lulz of trolls in Whitney’s works, serves as both a marker of intimacy and a gatekeeping device for those that aren’t “worthy.”

Another influential, perhaps one of the most influential, anthropologist whose works provided guidelines for my research is Victor Turner. His works regarding performance, ritual, and social drama were integral in analyzing the performative aspect of gendered language in the field site as well as the social conflicts that began to question the basic norms of such gendered language. The Anthropology of Performance was important in framing the how the user “performs” their social roles as a social actor within a community. In “Dramatic Ritual/Ritual drama”, Turner explores what happens when social actors deviate from norms and try to enact change within the community—what happens when gender norms and rituals in the online community are challenged by its members.

A sociological study conducted by Lavinia McLean and Mark Griffiths also proved to be useful in comparing the women on my field site against other female gamers they studied. In this study, McLean and Griffiths gathered several female gamers together and interviewed them about their experiences. Surprisingly, the results contradicted what was observed in my research. The women that were interviewed talked about how they tended to hide their gender online, going so far as to choose or create a male identity for themselves. “I usually keep my gender to myself when playing online due to stuff like this [gendered harassment], [as this] makes for a much more relaxed playing experience,” said one of the interviewees (2013). Another girl said

that if she did not hide her gender, the other male players did not want to play with her. I have observed the opposite in my field site: many women flaunt their gender quite openly. Of course, there are certain benefits that these women are afforded. The frequency to which women in my field site choose to reveal their gender and play to their gender stereotypes makes me wonder if this is a phenomenon that is specific to my field site or if McLean and Griffiths were not able to interview female gamers that approached their gender and gaming with an unfamiliar perspective.

Even though Avi Marciano is not an anthropologist, and rather a communications/media professor, his work in “Living the VirtuReal: Negotiating Transgender Identity” is an important journal article to this ethnography for its work in detailing how transgender individuals interact with the virtual world. It is especially important in that Marciano writes about the transgender user who interacts with the Internet as part of an online community rather those that use the internet as an extension of their offline life--such as the casual user who writes only on Facebook and Twitter. His opening words: "A transgender woman who maintains a virtual romantic relationship for more than a decade – a relationship she believes she cannot experience in the offline world," are analogous to the stories of transgender individuals in my field site. He interrogates why so many transgender individuals may find themselves congregating online and how the anonymity of the online identity provides them solace. The motivations of his informants, the desire to re-invent themselves without the stigma of being transgender, are similar to the motivations of my informants. There is, however, one key difference. Marciano states that he does not want to make a judgment on whether the Internet empowers transgender users. However, he has an optimistic view of how transgender identities are accepted online, perhaps due to the difference in field sites. I have found that throughout my experience in the

Discord server, transgender individuals must navigate the discriminations that they face offline, online as well. The internet is not a haven of anonymity just yet.

As League of Legends is a team-orientated game, I had wanted to find large groups of players who play with and interact with each other on a constant basis. After digging through many online forum, discussion board, sites, I was invited into the League of Legends Discord chat for Reddit. Reddit is a popular forum site that encompasses everything from gaming to politics. Discord is a site that advertises itself as a “chatroom (a place for people to talk to each other online) for gamers,” and it provides free voice and text chatting. Essentially, I had found a private chat room full, over 1000 users, of gamers dedicated to League of Legends. From there, I had become close to an informant, Charlie, that invited me to his private server, private Discord chatroom. Though there was one “large” Reddit Discord for gamers, several users made their own private areas, only accessible by those that they invite. In essence, we can think about the Reddit Discord as a school, and the private servers as individual classrooms only accessible by the teacher (the owner of the room) and the students (those that the owner invited). This particular server contained about 40 active—regular—members with new members joining and old members leaving in a flux that seemed to make interactions transient, and yet, paradoxically, I experienced the opposite. I had gotten close to almost all the 40 active members. As these interactions occurred online, I would only know details about their private lives that were offered up to me either privately in a separate message system called DMs, direct messaging, or publicly in the server chatroom. Direct messages are only viewable by the two participants in the conversation whereas the public chatroom is available for anyone, and members could search back through the chat records to find previous conversations. Much of the sensitive information

detailed in this ethnography were private thoughts offered through the DMs, and conversations with three or more people took place in the public chatroom.

When one disappeared for a few days, the people of the server couldn't help but get worried about their disappearance. For the members of the server, other members were just as important, perhaps more important, than offline friends. In some cases, users have told me how the server was their family—dysfunctional but caring. For the member who had a troubled home and social life offline, the Discord community became their refuge. I slipped easily into the community and was dumbfounded at how much people seemed to care for one another in the server. In one memorable instance, I had not gone online for four days due to strenuous exams; when I had gone onto Discord, exhausted, the night after the exam had taken place, I was pleasantly surprised to find the server name changed to “Yelim Where Are You???” (The name of the private server is constantly changing to reflect the moods and jokes of the admins, the administrative members who make sure that the server is operating well.)

Every member of the server has a username and a profile picture. When one clicks on the member's profile, there will be space for a short blurb indicating the user's status in life or their general feelings. Though I was hesitant to open myself up to scrutiny, I quelled my fears about internet exposure and created my profile—my photo, my name, and the details of this project were all loaded into that description box. I wanted to be as honest and open as possible with the people that I was studying. For the other members of the server, very rarely did anyone go by their real name. Dodan, for example, is a nickname that he created for himself for the Discord server. Similarly, the profile picture is often not a picture of the member: often people like to use cute images of animals or their favorite character in Japanese animation or Western media.

The Discord itself has several channels, separate chat rooms, that are designated for special uses: for example, there's a general channel for people to talk about various occurrences in their life, the "serious" channel is restricted to discussions about world issues or politics, or the selfie channel allows the members to post pictures of themselves and their daily lives—important for those that want to "prove" their identity online. In addition to text communication, the members can choose to enter "voice rooms" or voice channels. In these rooms, the members can talk to each other as if they were in a large group phone call. Voice communication and text communication are not mutually exclusive: those that join "voice rooms" can still text simultaneously in the chatroom channels.

The diversity of the server is quite impressive, each of the members are so distinct yet are brought together by the mutual love of a game. Quite often, the active members of the forum stay online constantly, leaving the server in the background and participating in active conversation periodically throughout the day. The age range of the active members of the server usually go from high school to college years, though there are a few exceptions. Muse, for example, is a 13 year old boy in middle school. Quatran is a 60 year old grandmother who kept to herself most of the time. As such, most of the members are students, though there are a few that have already started to work or are unemployed. Some are college drop outs and others are trying their hand at a professional gaming career with mixed results. I found that most of the members were male, though I made significant connections with 5 women that provided contrasting perspectives from their male peers. Those who are used to the politically correct environment of an academic setting may be shocked by the racial slurs and insults that get flung around quite commonly in the server. It is a common sight to see members greet each other with "Cunt," or "Faggot," and it certainly took a while for me to understand that these slurs were meant as terms of endearment.

Over the course of the semester, I would “log onto,” enter, the Discord server maybe three to four days a week, partially for the purposes of the project and partially because I have grown fond of many of the people there and consider them friends. Once online, I would actively engage in conversation in both voice and text rooms. I have conducted a few ethnographic interviews, but most of my research information has been garnered from casual conversation. The interactions are saved as textual chat logs, records of our conversations, and these “logs” have proven integral as I have been able to retrieve many conversations at leisure. Excerpts of these conversations are scattered throughout this ethnography. Since this is a League of Legends Discord server, many of the members will play the game and ask others to join in. I had found myself playing one or two games, each lasting anywhere from thirty minutes to an hour, each time I logged onto the server.

League of Legends is a difficult game to understand. In essence, League is a MOBA (Massive Online Battle Arena). The game is played in series of matches that pit 5 players in a team against another team of 5. The players are then tasked to protect their “base” and kill the other team’s base. The players take control of “champions” or avatars within the game with unique skills and strengths. Annie, for example, is a small young girl who controls a sentient teddy bear. She has control over the element of fire and is responsible for dealing large amounts of damage to the other team players. Thresh, another champion, is an intimidating grim reaperlike being who can “hook” another player in place and transport other team members across large distances. Each champion is different and fulfills a different role in the game. Thus, the players are tasked to create a balanced team capable of overwhelming the enemy team.

Individual skill is quite important to the community. A player's relative skill levels is shown in the form of what's called a "rank," in game. Bronze rank is the lowest and Challenger rank is the highest. (The ranks go from Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum, Diamond, Master, to Challenger. Each rank is then divided into divisions, 1 through 5 with 1 being the best and 5 being the worst.) These ranks are displayed quite prominently on one's online profile, thus people are quite conscious of their own and other's ranks. Getting to a higher rank is one of the primary motives of those that play the game. Players in the Challenger rank are hailed as the best of the best. These players often find jobs in the professional gaming scene or as streamers, people that share their screen online as they play video games so that viewers can follow along with the streamer.

My own rank, Silver 4, is not particularly impressive. Riot, the company that owns the game, published that a player in Silver 4 is better than 37% of the player base. I am personally quite satisfied with myself, as I never played competitively before the semester began. However, for those in the server that are on average gold ranked with a few in diamond and master, I must have seemed so unskillful. As such, when I played with the other members of the server, I found myself apologizing for my mistakes in game. Whenever these members wanted to play games that would affect their ranking, called "ranked games," I was not allowed or invited to play with them. (Besides "ranked games," I played "normal games," games that would not affect one's ranking, with the members of the server.) Though I did not experience first-hand these important "ranked games," I was able to observe those playing and talk to the players in the voice channels. Thus, I feel as if I was able to capture the experiences of both "games," ranked and normal. The nature of my research required me to be more of a participant than a participant observer, a sentiment shared by Nardi during her research. I don't believe someone can study these games

and the community that forms around them without fully immersing themselves into the lush circuitry and colorful visuals, participating as any other player would.

As I am so new to the community, it feels as if every other interaction is a breach experiment, as I constantly stop the participants and ask them to explain to me this or that joke. I must wonder if my online naivete endears me to them or annoys them. In a way, some of my informants have authority over me, as they have administrative or moderating abilities (the ability to permanently excommunicate a member from the server) over the entire online group. Some members of the server have decided to become my teacher in League of Legends, taking me under their wings as their apprentice. Players like Bard or Hy have offered to play with me and teach me to improve my skills.

However, I find that I have influence over the players in other ways, through my presence and identity. My gender, for example, holds a sway that I had not expected. Since I had begun to speak in the general forum, there have been many unknown friend requests (friends in Discord are allowed to talk to each other privately even when the two don't share a common server) and direct messages from guys that wish to interact with "gamer girls," a common term for women who play video games either online or on a console, like me. My gender proved to be both a platform of conversation and a supposed invitation for attention. Perhaps my attention to their words and my interest in knowing more about their stories and lives caused several players to misconstrue my intentions.

Allon: I don't want to make this awkward

Yelim: Awkward?

Allon: Yea, but I feel real comfortable around you.

Yelim: Aww I'm glad. I don't want to make you uncomfortable.

Allon: Yeah. I trust you. Do you want nudes (photos of his naked body)?

Yelim: Umm what??

Yelim: Sorry, I'm not really into receiving nudes.

Allon is a young male in college who was online at the later hours of the evening, around 12 to 4am. After playing a few games with me, Allon began to talk more about his personal life, particularly his romantic pursuits or lack thereof. My friendliness must have seemed like an invitation as a week after prolonged conversation, the above interaction occurred. This conversation in particular made me pause and think about past interactions with many of the male members in the chat room. Though I may find my words innocuous, stemming from pure academic curiosity, I wonder how many people thought that my attention was a green-light for an online relationship? Such a relationship isn't uncommon: over the course of the semester, I have seen many couples form in the Discord server. Gender, in a strange way, holds authority over these men's emotional beings as they seek validation from another female player; perhaps they are not receiving this needed validation "in real life."

Some people, like Hash, had taken to calling me "Best Big Sister" and changing his username for a short while to "Yelim is the Best." Others have begun considering my words as representative of the female population, though quite untrue, and have been asking me questions like "Do girls like stubble or not?" One administrator of the server gave me the joke title, a role similar to administrator or moderator, of "Server Psychologist," due to the nature of my research: in asking people to share with me details about their lives and their day, he found our conversations very therapeutic.

I have been careful to receive my informants verbal consent during the research process. For example, a man who went by the username Popo, messaged that he was scared that people would

find out about his identity through this project. Another, a woman named Krissy, seemed suspicious of me, as she refused to talk to me at all, dodging any voice calls that I join. Though she didn't explicitly say to me that she didn't want to be a part of this project, I can assume that my presence and project makes her uncomfortable. To anyone that has explicitly told me or doesn't seem to want to be a part of this project, I would immediately reassure them that there will be no mention of them in my paper.

In the chapters that follow I include many of my conversations, both in the chatrooms and through voice communications. The nature of my online research made it easy and possible to go back and recover any conversation I have had with another member online. Furthermore, I could obtain public conversations that I was not a part of and was absent. This dearth of information has made it possible for me to compile a number of ethnographic material and analyze speech patterns amongst the many members of the community. I could see how the men and the women of the community conformed to a standard and when they broke that standard. For example, I could examine how members chose conform or not to the masculine standard in this game community, fondly and notoriously remembered for its acerbic and shocking anti-politically correct language.

“You’re a Gay Nazi”: Toxic Language and Performing Masculinity

It’s late at night and two members of the Discord server (a site specifically advertised as a platform for gamers to chat and play together) are arguing heatedly. One member, Tahiti, states that he “never wants to play with Clay (the player with whom he’s interacting) again because he’s “toxic.” Clay scoffs back with overzealous emoji usage—common on the internet—and retorts “your retarded ass can’t get carried without me”—Tahiti cannot win games without Clay’s help. This argument is a familiar sight on the Discord, and the two jab at each at least once a week. The conversation devolves into lines of insult and jokes at the other’s expense. The next day, Clay and Tahiti are playing together again as if the argument never happened.

I ask if their argument was settled, and Tahiti laughs.

Tahiti: That’s just us being toxic, LOL.

Yelim: Just toxic? Lol?

Tahiti: Yeah. Lmao, Clay and I are good friends. It’s all good.

At first, I had a tough time understanding Tahiti’s words. Throughout the course of the argument, each lobbed colorful homophobic and racial slurs (like the words “faggot” and “nigga”) at the other that would not be brushed off as friendly bantering in my own social circles. However, as I grew to understand the League of Legends Discord community, this paradoxical relationship could be explained in part by the communities equally complex relationship with the ambiguous term “toxic” and “toxicity.”

The definition of “toxic” seems incredibly difficult to narrow down to a rigid and set description at first, as toxicity has different connotative meaning to the members of the same

community which may change from situation to situation. The definition of the word is different from when Clay calls his friend Tahiti “toxic” and from when Clay angrily reports a player after a game to the game administrators for “toxic” behavior. However, through further observation, it becomes clear that they are distinctly two different ways that the members of the community describe each other as “toxic.” The change in definition hinges on the intimacy between two members of a community.

At its core, “toxic” behavior is behavior in which one player *might* make the game less enjoyable for other players through, for example, usage of insults, refusal to cooperate with the team, and deliberately trying to “break” the game by cheating or handing over an unfair advantage to the enemy team. However, not everyone regards traditionally toxic behavior as a negative aspect of the game. Many players find enjoyment from being toxic or watching others be toxic.

Tyler1 is an infamous streamer (someone who plays video games online in front of an audience for money) notorious for—in both his own words and the words of others— “toxic” behavior. Though he is a talented player, when games don’t go his way he will rage and scream at his fellow teammates. Often, he decides to die in game on purpose so that the rest of his teammates will lose alongside him, also known as “inting,” intentionally losing. In League of Legends, players regard “inting” as a crime of the highest degree. Losing or winning the game is directly linked to one’s hierarchy or rank that is displayed within the game client. Those that continue to win games are promoted into a higher rank and those that continue to lose in their current rank get demoted. Most players view climbing up the ranks of League of Legends as a

primary goal of the game and desperately attempt to become an elusive Challenger, the top 100 players in a region.

Tyler1 is one such challenger, and is no stranger to the struggles of climbing up ranks. Players that have been on the wrong side of his temper become angry at the fact that they have lost games due to his behavior. Echoing statements often voiced online, one forum-goer said “He was an asshole that made fun of people and had a hate list.”¹

Pix: Tyler1 is an angry bald asshole that likes to yell. And his fans are immature idiots that like that kinda stuff.

Cool: Whoa there. That's extreme.

Pix: So? They're all manchildren.

Thus, people should have been happy that the streamer got banned (permanently denied from creating an account in the game). However, there has been a giant outcry from fans and non-fans alike speaking out against his punishment.

Yelim: You don't think the ban was fair?

Naga: Tyler1 is the man! He's reformed now!!!

Yelim: Reformed?

Naga: Besides, it was all a joke. His act I mean. He acted toxic in front of the camera for the audience, he wasn't REALLY toxic.

Homu: #freeT1

As seen by the above interaction, many of the people in the League of Legends community did not view Tyler1's toxicity as something to be abhorred and punished—rather, they viewed it

¹ https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/comments/73lvem/why_tyler1_should_stay_banned/

as entertainment. “It was all a joke.” When the streamer screams and breaks his keyboard yelling at his teammates, it was an act to please his viewers. Implicit in this discussion is the idea that there’s certain types of “toxicity” that is okay—for entertainment—and certain types of toxicity that isn’t.

There is, perhaps, a knee-jerk reaction to take these insults and jokes that the community generates at face value. Simon Weaver, a lecturer in political and social science in Brunel University of London, in “Rhetorical Discourse Analysis of Online Anti-Muslim and Anti-Semitic Jokes,” alongside many of the “normies,” internet slang for people that don’t go on the internet, holds an opinion that the outcasts of society were left to fester and generate offensive and racist rhetoric on the internet. He posits that “the internet has developed as an unfettered site for the expression of racism, and the global reach of the internet allows for the spread and connection of racist ideologies.” Racists jokes and slurs are but one way to disseminate those controversial ideologies. While it may be true that there are communities that are intentionally racist, and that there are racists in the League of Legend community, toxicity is far more nuanced than being just incendiary language.

I have talked to the admins (administrators of the server) about their banning policy regarding to toxic language. These administrators are select members of the community that have taken it upon themselves to police the members’ conduct and language. These administrators are chosen from an applicant pool by the owner of the server. I have observed that not everything seems to pass muster and there are people that are banned due to their toxicity. I wanted to know what passed as appropriate versus inappropriate toxicity. Khadame, one of the admins, answered “*It’s all about intent. I call people fag all the time. It’s when they say ‘gas all gays’ and mean it that it’s not okay.*” When playfully jabbing at each other, fag ceases to have the originally

insulting message and become more like a term of endearment. Pupper, a recently banned member of the forum, was banned for harassing another member of the community, Jess. Jess is transgender and most of the other community members accepted that fact gracefully. However, over the course of an argument about Jess's gameplay style, Pupper wrote *"You're so goddamn stupid, you dirty fucking homosexual."* He was immediately removed from the community server and the other members comforted Jess. *"There was always something a little wrong with Pupper,"* the admin dmk said later, *"I just let it go, but sometimes the things that Pupper said rubbed me the wrong way. I guess I know why now."*

Though other members have called each other "dirty fucking homosexuals" before, Pupper's intentions were to hurt Jess and not to joke with her. In the eyes of the community, this distinction was paramount. Viewing all the racist terminology as inherently offensive and abhorrent is problematic because often, the meaning behind such slurs does not unveil a member's ideologies nor do they necessarily intend to further a racist framework. However, one cannot deny that the use of such racist slurs sometimes do end up hurting other members or reinforcing the idea that marginalized groups are the targets of jokes.

This nuance to navigate between appropriate and inappropriate toxicity seems to be a valued skill within the community. As soon as I had entered the Discord chat server, I was confronted with the excessive use of colorful language. One 16-year-old was telling anyone who'd listen that another member of the server was "autistic beyond help." Once people had learned I was bisexual, one of the informants I had been close to called me the "cutest fag." It was clear that the member did not intend to offend me and was offering a compliment. One of the administrators, people who run the Discord server and are responsible for punishing unruly members, informed me, when I asked him if this language is normal, "That's how you know

you're close. You're not afraid to insult them." He paused, then said: "You're too nice to be toxic though."

***Magnowser:** I don't think Toxicity is always okay. But yeah, I'm the sarcastic Toxic type.*

***Hraesvelgr:** It's more annoying when friends do [toxic things]*

***Magnowser:** But I don't overdo it.*

***Hoodwink:** My friends and I casually call each other bitch.*

***Magnowser:** It's just that you can't do it with randoms. Unless they don't take anything serious. Like casual people.*

***Yoobum:** Kids just love fanning the flames of scandal and drama. It annoys me to no end.*

***Hoodwink:** I think Humor is the deciding factor. If it makes someone laugh... I think team games bring out [toxicity] the most. When things don't go your way, it's easy to scapegoat a teammate. That's how you get the ban hammer tho.*

***Magnowser:** Straight ban.*

Magnowser—a self proclaimed toxic person—says that he's mostly toxic around his friends. To them, his toxicity is an entertainment factor. For many people who play league, being toxic is almost synonymous to joking around with friends. Insults are just another way to show a certain intimacy in the friendship. As Boelstorff says in *Coming of Age in Second Life*, "Intimacy is predicated on language's ability to mediate selfhood" (149). Toxicity became a means for the members of the community to mediate and measure relationships within the community. When a member is being—appropriately—toxic, he is staking his identity as a member of the League of Legends community. Elise Kramer, in "The playful is political: The metapragmatics of internet rape-joke arguments" wrote that "meta-humorous speech...gives hints to the humor ideologies

that enable individual jokes to belong to types, and those types of jokes to be associated with types of people. The result is that telling. Laughing at, or disapproving of a rape joke becomes a socially significant act through which one can index one's identity as a "type" of interlocutor, person, and citizen." Those that participate in his insulting banter affirm their intimacy with the member. When Tahiti told me that he and Clay, from the opening anecdote, are toxic he underlines the intimate friendship that the two have. While Tahiti was supposedly the only one displaying toxic behavior within the game, Clay still insists that the two of them were toxic together. There is camaraderie in the mutual toxicity that is forged from shared experiences and the reiteration of linguistic rituals, the insults, that is conducted both in and out of the game. Especially on the internet, where members of the community may never see the face of another member and details about gender or age can be fabricated, what "type" of person a member is may ultimately be more important than the physicality of the member. Race and age do not matter so much as whether or not one can navigate appropriate toxicity and stake their identity in this virtual space.

In "Performing Gender Identity: Young Men's Talk and the Construction of Heterosexual Masculinity," Deborah Cameron, a linguistic anthropologist interested in the performance of gender through talk, explains further that a person's use of insults such as "gay" or "queer" is not necessarily intended to denote the anyone else as actually homosexual but for that person to deny the possibility of being homosexual, thus staking their normative masculinity. The members seem to follow what Cameron has observed. Even the homosexual members of the Discord insult others with homosexual slurs. Perhaps the lack of heat and intention behind those slurs let the members dissociate the actual act of homosexuality from using homosexuality as an insult in their toxicity. Because communities on the internet seem to house exaggerated aspects of social

norms and social fantasies, the performance of masculinity seems to be exaggerated as well. The anonymous nature of the online community allows everything to be “fair game,” such as accusations of pedophilia and the mocking of transgenderism.

Hoodwink and Yoobum’s comments, however, bring up an important aspect of toxicity: supposed humor. As long as “someone laughs” these insults and griefs are seen as normal by the community. However, there is pressure from their peers for League of Legends players to treat most toxicity thrown their way as a joke. There is a certain type of “street cred” tied with being able to dish and receive toxic insults. Yoobum states how annoyed he is with “kids” that take toxicity too seriously and “fan the flames of scandal and drama.” Those that can’t operate within the toxic culture are often infantilized by being referred to as kids or babies.

Gabriel-Mello: tbh I’ve been toxic to most girls lately

Onder PePutin: LOL. A++ Gabe always has girls following him

Yelim: Toxic?

Gabriel-Mello: Yeah, Idk, suddenly I don’t like egirls.

*Onder PePutin: Suddenly**

Gabriel-Mello: Not girls, egirls. I think I was on discord too long.

Yelim: What did you do/say?

Iridis: I always liked bois better too @gabriel-mello

OnderPePutin: He likes eboys now.

Gabriel-Mello: I’m not that popular anymore because I’m Toxic.

Don’t talk to me thx. Lol. Not u Yelim

Yelim: What do you say that people are calling u toxic?

Gabriel-Mello: <3 well. I say don’t talk to me.

And the first thing that comes into my mind. Which is like a knife.

I call them thots too. Fucking egirls.

Kale: *Don't talk to me ur an egirl XD*

Iridis: *Gabe, you're beautiful don't let anyone tell you otherwise.*

Kale: *Gabe that's what I do. That's why people don't like me.*

Gabriel-Mello: *I just trigger people, idk. Not because I'm cringe like Kale.*

but more like my words.

Iridis: *Gabe you the best. If they get triggered, then they're babies.*

Here, Gabriel-Mello recounts how he's been intentionally toxic to girls recently. He jokes that he's not popular anymore due to his toxicity, but the people of the server know that's a lie: many girls in the server message him daily asking to date or sext. He was part of the administration team before he left due to "real life issues." Even as he complained to us, several girls admitted to me that they were trying to figure out how best to seduce him. With how well received his admission of toxicity was, it seems that being toxic is the norm in the community. People found little faults with the insults that he lobbed, and, rather, they found it undesirable if the recipient didn't find it as amusing as they did. As Iridis says, "Gabe you the best. If they get triggered, then they're babies." Thus, the ability to navigate the toxic environment becomes social capital, analogous to one's "street cred" in the real life. Social capital, as described by Pierre Bourdieu, is a certain quality or substance that serves as an indicator of one's social might. Toxicity here serves as gatekeeping for the "right" to participate in the community. As John Carty and Yasmine Musharbash says in "You've *Got* to be Joking: Asserting the Analytical Value of Humour and Laughter in Contemporary Anthropology"

“Laughter is a boundary thrown up around those laughing, those sharing the joke. Its role in demarcating difference, of collectively identifying against an Other, is as bound to processes of social exclusion as to inclusion.” a

Being able to identify the humor in toxicity is what separates those that are considered members of the community from those that fail to find a way into the fold.

The kind of transgressive humor that is invoked by toxic behavior is similar to the humor sought after by trolls, self-identified denizens of the internet that revel in the suffering of others and the memetic responses their victims have to their pranks. Lulz, as Whitney Phillips writes in *This is why we can't have nice things*, is the trolls' word for humor that is both “immediately recognizable for those familiar with the trolling vernacular but often inscrutable, often unrecognizable, to outsiders” and highly performative (28). While the average layman might not understand why trolls message and harass a grieving family's social media, “we do it for the lulz” is a phrase that is immediately recognizable and loaded statement for those that participate in troll culture. Though the members of the forum do not explicitly define this term, often I feel that the members seek a similar form of transgressive humor. In goading their teammates or purposely being belligerent in chat, the members find humor in the agitation that it instills in their targets. For them, “lulz operates as a nexus of social cohesion” (28). While for trolls the humor itself may constitute a social connection, for the players of League of Legends, humor itself might not be the direct factor. Lulz's other social function is more similar to how toxic behavior functions in the league community. Here, Phillips argues that the recognition lulz operates as a social vehicle for the community to expand and grow. “A set of shared experiences and expectations emerges,” the lulz, “and the resulting content feeds into and sustains an interconnected nest of constitutive

content which simultaneously contextualizes and reconfigures the explicit meanings of additional content...to recognize and in-joke is to participate in community formation. (30)” Being able to create lulz depends on the ability of others to receive and recognize lulz. Additionally the social network that recognition of the lulz creates lays down the additive foundation for other members of the community to create more of their specific humor. In order to participate in the troll community, being able to recognize lulz is a necessity.

Those cannot understand and get angry at the trolls are barred entry into their social sphere.

Gabriella Coleman in *Phreakers, Hackers and Trolls* details how trolls view the effects of “lulz” gatekeeping as a necessity in the recent internet popularity and a show of one’s emotional strength. She says that trolls and hackers populated the internet during a time where the mindset that only those that are geeks, social outcasts for their internet savvy and inability to fit in with what is considered “appropriate social behavior” in their culture, spend time in online communities. Thus, the geek vs normie (those that exhibit “appropriate social behavior” and are accepted by their offline peers) divide spills over into the linguistic habits of trolls and gamers, both viewed perhaps less favorably by the public eye. A common insult in the league of legend Discord is “Reeeee Normies.” Reeeee (with additional e’s according to how upset a member may be) is an onomatopoeia of frustration. Normies indicates anyone that cannot “roll with the punches” and, for example, fuss about politically correct behavior in the general chat. Coleman interviewed one prominent troll who said, “If someone called me a chink or gook online, I really wouldn’t care at all. In real life though, depending on who says it, if someone called me a chink or gook I would want to beat the hell out of them...Reason for this is because online they have no clue what race I am and so they are obviously trying to troll me which I find funny” (111). If someone takes offense at an insult, trolls believe that they do not have the mettle to join internet

communities. Finding offense at a troll's comment is liable to generate more fun at the offended's expense. When players of League of Legends aren't able to receive toxicity coolly, as Gabriel-Mello's female correspondents couldn't, other members of the community judge their mettle and view them as weak, unworthy members— "babies."

There are, however, several key differences between the social function of toxicity and trolling, and thus the type relationships that these two behaviors foster develop in different ways. The troll that Coleman interviewed highlighted a distinction between his online and offline self. In "real life" he would beat anyone who tried to troll him. Online, however, the rule is "to never take anything seriously" (111). According to Coleman, there is a fundamental disconnect between a troll's biological and virtual self. "Not only is this twain never to meet, according to the trolls I interviewed, it isn't designed to meet. It's something they work hard to make sure it isn't able to meet" (112). Trolls work hard to keep their anonymous nature and trolling does not necessarily indicate intimacy. Phillips remarked that specific events of humor unites the trolls and those that participate in trolling often go their own way rather than create long-lasting connections. "Never take anything seriously." This is in stark contrast to the intimate relationships made in the League of Legends community. This community more similar, in terms of intimacy, to Boelstorff's Second Life virtual world. Close friendships and even romantic relationships are likely and encouraged. The divide between the online and offline persona is not so pronounced and the lines are often blurred. Several players have confided that their personality does not change between the "real" and "virtual" and the only difference is the confidence with which they interact with friends and strangers online. While the members may seek this "lulz" from strangers, they are not simply seeking a momentary response from other

members of the community when they are being toxic. Toxicity becomes a device to both build and destroy relationships depending on how the members choose to employ it.

Thus far, most of the analysis has been about male to male interaction in League of Legends. However, Toxic language and toxicity in the community is very gendered. Olivia Rose Marcus and Merrill Singer explains in their essay “Loving Ebola Chan” that “the internet extends our metaphoric conceptions of social reality while also creating new venues for new metaphors to emerge.” Often the social preconceptions of concepts like gender that already may exist in the member’s society are recreated in the new medium and extended through further interactions made possible by the internet. If toxicity becomes an avenue to perform masculinity, then toxicity also becomes an avenue to highlight women as an “other,” and anomaly, in the community. The bravado of Insults as social capital does not seem to apply for both genders. While men in the community are expected to participate in the toxic exchange culture, women seem to be exempt from need to provide toxicity (though they are still expected to receive toxicity gracefully). A female member of the server, khadame, confided that she was misidentified as a male until she had to prove her gender on voice communication. “It’s because I greeted people with ‘hey fags’ instead of hello :3 like most egirls,” she said. On the flip side, she could not believe that one member was actual male instead of female because of their demeanor:

***Khadame:** I thought meoinks on our server was a girl too until he told us otherwise*

***Yelim:** Just by how he acted?*

***Khadame:** Yeah. i just assumed he was a girl. it came as a shock to me and lutocris*

***Yelim:** How did he act?*

Khadame: we had to listen to depressing music for hours, well, i cant really describe it.
he was just so normal kinda

Yelim: Just so normal?

Khadame: Yeah, a bit soft. no insults or anything...and i just assumed some others did too,
so i wasnt really the only one

Yelim: I guess it's also like they expect guys to act a certain way

Khadame: someone even crushed on meoinks because he thought he was a girl
it was pretty jarring for him

It stands to reason, then, that the toxicity inherent in male to male interaction is fundamentally different in both performance and meaning from male to female or female to female interactions. Aliefendioglu and Arslan studied how women were portrayed in the media in the article Don't take it personally, it's just a joke: The masculine media discourse of jokes and cartoons on the Cyprus Issue. They describe how the media portrays women such that their domestic role is glorified. It spreads a widespread image of “the role of women as mothers, dutiful wives, or their imagined sexuality” Though perhaps none of the women on the forum are viewed as homemakers, their domesticity is glorified in other ways: in the issues of the heart. Women have often been viewed as the “softer” and “gentler” sex throughout the ages. They are seen as carriers of a nurturing (though that definition has departed from being the caretaker of children but instead the caretaker of the hearts of men in the forum) nature. Thus forum perception of how women are supposed to speak or act and the casually toxic nature of interaction amongst forum members seem to be at conflict. Khadame couldn't be recognized initially as a woman by her generally callous tone and her decision to engage in toxic behavior alongside the rest of the male members. Conversely, Meoinks, who was male, did not engage in

toxic behavior and was thought of as female. As the forum takes place in a solely online world where one's identity is anonymous, toxicity becomes a marker to gauge one's gender as well.

Because Toxicity becomes a gauge for one's masculinity, being heterosexual-cis male, the jokes seem to be made at the expense of another's supposedly abnormality (homosexuality) or one's femininity. Faggot and Pussy are common insults. Many members joke about how the women in the community are "egirls," the stereotypical online girl that cares only about money, status, and attention from lonely online boys, and are only interacting with them in order to gain monetary favor, either through gifts or cash in exchange for being a romantic or friendly companion. Arslan says that, similarly, the cyprus media is

"likely to depict women as inferior beings, intrinsically shallow and demanding people, or sexual commodities. Furthermore, women are themselves expected to find these jokes amusing, and if they do not, they might be accused of either not having a sense of humor, or not being intelligent enough to understand these jokes."

Although women are not expected to reproduce the toxic ritual, they are expected to receive toxicity gracefully—without being offended. Just as how Gabe insulted the egirls above by calling them "thots," internet slang for whore. He expected for them to receive his toxicity negatively, and used that as further ammo to say that there was no place in that community for those "egirls." Amused or not, opposition to the insults result in a negative social view of the member. For example, Khadame, who had just been recently made an administrator of the forum, was heavily criticized by some male members due to her strict adherence rules and keeping the chat "family-friendly."

Kupo: Worst admin. Nazi admin.

Yelim: Who?

666: Khadome lol.

Yelim: But she's so nice!"

666: She's Nazi! She kicked off all the cool people, my boyz.

Kupo: It's mod abuse! Kupo for admin 2017.

Khadame had banned those that she believed were being “too toxic” and “ruining the environment.” The members that she banned were those that she frequently clashed with. The cavalier attitude they had towards women on the internet and their, in her words, “entitlement” for the forum’s attention had soured her opinion of these members. After several arguments, she eventually banned two members, one for taking an insult “too far” and another for using the word “nigger.” Although I asked her what insult was too extreme that she had to ban the member, she refused to tell me on grounds of privacy.

As a result, however, this intolerance to the toxicity of certain members has caused others to look upon her unfavorably. Her strict methods caused her to be called “Nazi.” It is likely that such opinions may have formed because of her status as the sole female administrator. All the other administrators are male. Some forum members mocked her ability to understand humor by saying that she “kicked off all the cool people.” In essence, being unable to endure the toxicity in silence had lost her some social capital and her standing in an imaginary online clique of “cool people.” Toxicity as gatekeeping is not limited to the League of Legends community.

For example, Bonnie Nardi, in *My Life as a Night Elf Priest*, said that the chat logs in World of Warcraft (another massive online multiplayer game) bore resemblance to conversations taking place within male locker rooms. The male members that she played with shared rape jokes with

each other and belittled those that seemed uncomfortable with them, asking if they were “9 year olds.” Many players, usually women, that were uncomfortable with the behavior stayed silent. Those that spoke up had sometimes gotten harassed. Women, in the face of this toxic masculinity, become silenced or reject their femininity to order to participate in the discourse

It’s quite hard to describe exactly why toxic language is funny to the members of the community. It’s especially hard to convey that humorous quality to an audience especially when I still cannot laugh at Tyler1’s, the streamer’s, raging antics. I don’t participate in toxicity within the community, but that is still accepted as part of my feminine nature. **Carty and**

Musharbash says that “A joke plucked out of the nuanced social context of its emergence often seems crude, nonsensical or, worse, just plain unfunny.” Indeed, many new members to the

community, or even those that have spent 10 minutes in YouTube video’s comment section are horrified at what they’ve found. Initially, I also thought harshly about casual slurs repackaged into jokes. However, just looking at the immediate context of the joke is unhelpful.

Understanding history of the situation and how toxicity has integrated itself into the community is perhaps needed to understand this type of behavior. Toxic language within League of Legends holds history from the time in which the internet was mostly used by those that considered themselves social outcasts, or geeks, uninvaded by the so-called “normies” and women. Vestiges of this can be seen in how those in the community were unsure of how to deal with womens’ presence and their “imagined sexuality.” The members both put up women on pedestals and “other” them with their toxic discourse. As a result, the women in the League of Legends community have carved out a niche for themselves and perform femininity in analogous ways to how the men perform their masculinity.

The Female Spectacle: Femininity as Both Weapon and Shackle

When I first arrived on the server, I was first astounded by the easy camaraderie between strangers. Second, I realized that I had become a spectacle. Despite the rising population of girls (and women) on the internet, the moment a girl entered the chat, there would be invariably one or more members excitedly shouting at her presence. “GRILL???” someone typed at me. At first, I was offended. To be called Grill by a stranger seemed so condescending. And, perhaps, that is what the member wanted—he may have been testing my patience for the toxicity that followed. “Grill” is how the members of the server ironically called girls. Purposely misspelling the word, “girl” has become an ironic, memetic joke that signals a person’s identity as part of the online gaming community. It is particularly salient that women as a whole become the target of a joke within this community, cementing the fact that the online gaming community is, indeed, a man’s world. “It’s not just league,” Hy, a young high-schooler in Australia, said. “Overwatch, DOTA, everyone makes a big fuss and shout GRILL when a girl goes into voice chat.” My profile picture was a picture of myself and I did not hide my gender. People sent me private messages asking me for more information about myself. There were some who wanted to chat with me simply because I was a woman, and that was inherently interesting and titillating. While I was chatting with friends, a new member to the server once typed “THERE’S A GRILL :O” into the general chat. Since my gender wasn’t a revelation to the other members online at the time, the message was a call for my attention. Pointing out my gender became akin to a rather rude greeting or a catcall. I soon came to realize that unless I were to expressly hide my gender, other members would constantly remind me that I am female—different. My gender became something so inherent to my identity in the server, that it couldn’t be ignored.

The online League of Legends community has a complicated relationship with the women in their community. Women are joking called “egirls,” or online girls, and are viewed as different from women offline. The term itself is confusing: egirl could simply mean any woman online, but it could also mean women that view online boys as a free ATM, cheating male members out of money and affection in return for their emotional labor. Thus, the two meanings often coalesce into each other. At times, being a woman is a detestable invasion into a boy’s treehouse. Women are viewed as manipulative schemers.

Hon: I never disliked her bc I remember hearing from the guys that they didn’t originally like me. When they found out I was a girl. Bc. You know how egirls usually are.

Yelim: Are you serious? But you’re such a sweetie

Hon: Yeah

Yelim: I didn’t expect that. They like Cait...even tho she’s a girl?

Hon: She’s been there since the beginning LOL. She’s hella cool too. But yeah, if an egirl comes in people are usually on guard. Bc egirl usually mean drama. Once they found out how chill I was, they were hella cool with me.

The conversation above took place during a controversial event within the community. A trans female member was “outed” and subsequently chased off by a few members. Hon, a girl in her sophomore year of college, felt conflicted as those who chased Libra off were her friends. She reported that she was met with suspicion because she identified herself as female. Hon had to prove her character, her worth to participate with the community just like “the guys.” At the same time, those same women are put upon a pedestal by the community for their femininity. They are tasked to perform emotional labor for the male members of the community

and men lavish desperate shows of attention in order to attain the singular adoration of a girl on the internet.

Jeanist: Looking to carry my sweet princess to diamond. Are you that princess? Let's get on the climb together. I'm not a stingy daddy, I'll give skins every time we go up a division.

Public posts searching for a female partner, like above, are common in certain servers. Men of that community espouse their skill in the game and thus their worth as a dating partner. To sweeten the deal, he offers monetary incentives for any girl who wishes to “edate” him. Since the ratio of women looking for partners online appear to be far less than the men, personal ads promise greater gifts and incentives to stand out from the others.

Seen as both desirable and repulsive, women in the community hold large social power over their male counterparts in some ways but are also ironically powerless in other situations. Unlike the male members of the community whose social capital derives from their rank in the game and their ability to navigate the social toxic dialogue, women's social capital seems to be detached from the game mechanics themselves. Their capital seems to be derived from how the community values their inherent gender. That is, women are powerful according to the value the men of the server place upon their emotional labor and companionship. In order to take advantage of this capital, some women—as well as men—adopt a linguistic pattern that highlights their femininity in the context of this society. As Deborah Cameron states in *Language and Sexuality*, “To be a woman as opposed to a female takes more than just being born with the correct reproductive organs. It is a cultural achievement which has to be learned, and exactly what has to be learned is different in different times and places” (2003, p3). For example, Cameron explains how Western Women must learn to sit with her legs crossed in the public

while her male counterparts are free to spread their legs. These norms are not instinctual and must be socialized into the “woman,” through pressure from societal norms and social mentors. The server is the same way--women on the server are not immediately recognized as a woman (in fact the women that deviate from supposed feminine behavior are treated like “one of the men”) without the specific verbal and non-verbal actions that signify to the rest of the community her identity. The women of the server, to be acknowledged as a woman, must maintain feminine linguistic practices that permeate through their daily conversations on the Discord channel and even how they play with other members in the game. Actions that maintain a sense of cheerfulness and cooperativity, acceptance but not reproducing toxicity, all work to form the online “woman,” the preferred “woman” for online men. The role that women fulfill in a team even to the emotional labor that they provide are all cultural patterns that they must wield as part of their social power. In addition, it seems as if the women of the server are forced into this site wide cultural archetype, willingly or unwillingly, to maintain their feminine identity.

In League of Legends, a player fulfills one of 5 roles: Top, Jungle, Middle, ADC (Attack Damage Carry), And Support. Four of these roles: Top, Jungle, Middle, and AD Carry, have the chance to become what is called a “carry.” “Carries,” are players that make significant impact on the game by killing the enemy and fulfilling important objectives or goals in the game. Support, however, is an interesting role that exists not to directly impact play by killing the enemy but to “support” the other players by keeping them alive through healing and shields. A support character who kills the enemy is often accused of stealing from their carries. There is a common stereotype in League of Legends that women mainly play supporting roles in game, due to their lack of skill or perhaps their lack of will to play high impact positions. Although many women

detest this stereotype, anecdotally many of the women I interviewed play support. 4 out of the 5 female informants that I got close to in the main server were support players.

Shy: Yeah, it's a stereotype...but it's not unfounded. You know?

Yelim: So you agree most girls are in support?

Shy: It sounds so bad but then I play support. You play support. 90% of girls I know play support.

Yelim: You're right. Lmao, I do play support.

Shy: Unless you're making a conscious effort to not play support, I think girls play support.

Gabe: It's not that girls are consciously pushed into support. It's that honestly girls start playing because of their boyfriend or their male friends. They usually put her in support because it's the easiest to learn.

One of these women, Pix, is a 17 year old who enjoys the support role in League of Legends. Paynes is a 22 year old man who prefers the jungle role. The two began fighting in the general chatroom one day over the importance of one role in League of Legends over another.

Pix: Paynes you absolute retard you're not listening to me

Paynes: I don't want to talk to a silver scrub that thinks the support LOL is the most important.

Pix: BUT IT IS

Dmk: can confirm supports are shitty adcs that can't cs. (the amount of minions the players have killed through the course of the game, cs, is a common indicator of their skill level.)

Source: I'm a support main

Pix: You can make plays

Pix: And save people and have greater map influence as a support

Paynes: That's Jungle! And Supports get carried to higher elo anyway.

Paynes: Shitty Janna mains in diamond that deserve to be bronze smh.

Paynes: Their boyfriends boost their elo.

Paynes, above, insulted Pix by calling her a “silver scrub,” someone that has no knowledge of the game and has a low rank. Even worse, he insinuates that support players get carried to “higher elo” by association with the more skilled players on their team in other roles. Elo, in this case, is slang for one’s rank in League of Legends. For example, Pix’s Elo is silver. Dmk agrees with Paynes by saying that supports are in that role because they can’t “cs,” a core skill in the game that people often use to indicate one’s relative ability. Pix retaliates by arguing that the support role is important for more than one’s mechanical skill in playing the game. She argues that the support fills a role, like glue, that tidies the team and keeps them alive. Paynes gets in one last retort by insinuating that those that play the support champion Janna, including pix, are all only in their relative rank because their boyfriends “carried” them to the rank. Not only is such act illegal, but it is an immense insult for many women in high ranks that deal with the constant skepticism from their peers who cannot believe that a woman was able to reach diamond rank or above with her own two hands.

After the fight below, Pix left the server and didn't return. Paynes was quick to reassure us, the rest of the server, after Pix had left that he knew that not all support mains have had their "elo," their ranking in the game, boosted by their hypothetical boyfriends. He went on to assure to me that the support role is the second most important in the game after Jungle. Gabriel-Mello and Paynes' words highlight the ongoing mindset of a woman's inferiority of skill in the game compared to their male counterparts. "Stand by Your Man: An Examination of Gender Disparity in League of Legends," published in the Journal Game and Culture in Media and Communication studies, states that female gamers "have to negotiate gender stereotypes that, on one hand, portray female game characters in hypersexualized ways, and on the other hand, position females as 'naturally' inferior users of computer technology," (Ratan et al, 2015)

Yelim: I'm so bad at League you guys

Paynes: It's okay, just play Janna and get carried by people. It's what all egirls do.

Above, Paynes attempted a lighthearted joke in order to comfort me. Because relative skill is so important in the game, I wished to improve my playing ability. These interactions highlight, however, two important aspects about the way the player base interacts with the game and each other. First, Paynes derides Pix for being a "silver scrub." As mentioned before, League of Legends operates on a highly visible hierarchy that's accessible to the public on the player's profile. Players often make fun of lower ranks than their current rank (and sometimes even their current rank): "Bronze Trash," "Gold Normie," and "Silver Scrub" are amongst the most common insults that are flung around on the server. Second, women seem to be released from the responsibility of being a good gamer that is tied to the other male members of the server. They are encouraged to fight behind their male compatriots and support their skill instead. There

seems to be a notion that women who play support latch onto men with more skill in order to drag themselves into higher ranks. Paynes' remarks perpetuate the idea that for women, rather than personal skill at the game, their ability to attract skilled men is a valuable resource. The idea is compounded by the type of characters that were created in League of Legends in the past. As Ratan et al notes, gender stereotypes are perpetuated by the female characters contained within the game. For the first five years of the game, many of the support champions (in fact all but three) were women with attention given to their curvy, "sexy" body and their skimpy (sometimes no) clothes. Of the remaining three champions, one was male intended to parody the flaming homosexual stereotype, and the others were non-human creatures. The gender disparity seems to convey the implication that women are supposed to play the support role rather than their heterosexual male compatriots. Of course, League of Legends has since realized the gender disparity within their own champion ranks and have since sought to fix the issue—female champions with diverse body shapes as well as male support characters have since been released in the past two years. But the stereotype remains.

However, not all women, or men, view the support role as an easy ticket to a higher rank. In an interview with Khadame, another female support player, she mentions that she *"plays as support because [she] likes helping [her] team. Simple as that. [She loves] team playing a lot."* For Khadame, the support role allows for her to gain fulfillment by making sure her team doesn't die. "Carries would be nowhere without us," she said, "Without us shielding or healing them, they'd die 1 vs 5 in enemy front lines." However, she does acknowledge that certain members of the team takes that love for team playing for granted. Support players often get accused of being subpar players, like DMK says, that "can't cs,"

The Support and ADC roles must constantly be near each other as the Support protects the ADC's life and the ADC in turn tries to kill as many people as he can. Above, Gabe mentioned that many women play the support role as a result of a desire to play with and help their boyfriend. However, many men also view the intimate nature between Support and ADC as a way to get an online girlfriend. The Healsluts Discord has many "craigslist personal ad" type posts where a man is trying to find a perfect support girlfriend:

Skayio(): Male. Europe west, League of Legends, looking for a long term (preferably) duo partner. I play carries most of the time (Jungle, ADC) and you play support. I used to be platinum but stopped playing for a year and am now getting out of silver, on a winstreak. I don't enjoy being carried, but I promise I'll carry you.

Little W/Catititude :D : Female. Looking for someone to join me for games, preferable east coast North America. Always looking for more league friends so send me messages if you wanna carry me ^^; Please DM, direct message, me instead of posting on this server.

Here, Skayio() and Little play to the same norms in which a skilled man "carries" his female partner. The dominance of the man and the passiveness of the woman also carries into the style of speech as well. Skayio() is domineering, "You play support. I'll carry you." Little W/Catititude politely asks "Please DM me." Even in her personal ad, Little is setting up a servile attitude for her "carry."

Often, the offer to "carry" to a higher rank isn't enough for some women. For Jeanist, above, and many other male members in the League community, they offer "skins," small aesthetic changes to a champion that the player inhabits, to sweeten the deal. Often these skins are simply costume changes, but that small difference in appearance matters to the player base.

League is a free to play online game, so the company makes most of its profits off of these “skins.” The skins’ price ranges anywhere from 5 dollars to 25, and some players, such as Coastal, have confessed that they sunk “thousands of dollars” into these cosmetic changes. Many men are willing to buy women skins simply upon suspicion of her gender to entice her into playing more games with him. Some might even view the act of buying skins for women as buying a woman a drink at a bar. For some, the prospect of receiving skins is motivation enough to conform to stereotypes.

Cait: E-girls are the worst.

Yelim: The worst?

Homu: They’re thots.

Yelim: Thots???

Cait: Thots = hoes. Miss me with that shit. You can usually find them orbiting challengers ‘Taco you’re so sexy. :3’ ‘Look at me, I ‘accidentally’ took a selfie!’ ‘Carry me taco!’

Homu: Dani was the biggest egirl and Taco’s dickrider. Be gone thot.

Although egirl could mean a woman on the internet, egirl has a secondary definition: a woman who plays men’s affections for attention or money. Tiffany, one self-proclaimed egirl, has told me that since plenty of men in the community are desperate for some sort of affection from women, simply talking to them or sending a private picture is enough for men to drop 30 to 40 dollars as a gift. The ease of which women could wield their social power over men wasn’t apparent until I joined the Healsluts community.

Yelim: So, Female to male trans people don’t necessarily “exist” in Healsluts?

Coastal: No. Why would they?

Yelim: ?

Coastal: I mean, this is going to sound bad

Yelim: No, plz, go on.

Coastal: Yeah, but Girls literally get everything. I mean, part of the reason why trans girls probably want to be on Healsluts is to get that attention that they can't get irl. But Egirls online have to a.) exist. And b.) be a female to get boys to get them gifts and skins. Why would girls want to be a boy online?

I had observed many male to female transgender members, but strangely I haven't seen the opposite. When I asked Coastal for the reason behind this phenomenon, he was extremely confused. To him, the answer was obvious, there was no benefit for women to pretend to be a man on the server because, according to him, "girls literally get everything." This ability to economically exploit men, as described by Coastal is tempting enough for women to engage within the confines of the egirl role. They are content to play support for their economic benefactors.

Tiffany, for example, played top lane in her free time in normal games, games that don't matter in the ranking system but are instead played for pure entertainment, but when playing with her "boys," in their ranked games Tiffany played support champions. I asked what she did in her own solo ranked games, but Tiffany responded that she refused to play ranked without a partner. She refused to expand on the reason, but others have chimed in with their own opinions.

"Isn't it obvious?" Crag said. We were playing a game together and were swiftly losing. We had lost all interest in the game, and our topic turned to my research. His incredulous voice seemed almost palpable. "Tiffany obvious wants to win and she's not good enough to play top solo." Crag's opinion of Tiffany and other so called egirls was low, so his words may have had a

kernel of bias. He was previously in a partnership with a girl in the past that left him for a better player. The prevalence of this type of affection for economic partnership in the community has soured many players opinions of other women in the server. Hon, above, mentioned that she was shunned because of a perception that she was just “another egirl.”

Another side effect of the rise of “egirl economy” is the tendency for many male players to view this sort of economic partnership as something ordinary. They expect for the female players of the server to receive their gifts and respond positively in return. While playing League of Legends, I had mentioned that I was a girl in a game. After the team had won, I received a gift (a kimono costume in game for one of my champions) from a teammate with a message, “*let’s play another together!*” In another instance, I stopped an informant from committing suicide. That informant was someone I had only spoken to, once or twice, but he must have felt that we had an intimate connection. I was worried for his health and spent four long hours talking about various events within his life that led to this drastic measure, as he refused to speak to a suicide hotline. The next day, I woke up to 30 dollars’ worth of ingame cosmetic costume gifts in my inventory. I felt extremely uncomfortable, as I neither wanted this gift nor was I able to return this gift back to him. Perhaps he was only showing his appreciation for my emotional labor, and these types of gifts were ingrained in to his social habits. I tried to protest the gift but he refused. “*You’re not like the other egirls,*” he said. “*you deserve this more than them.*”

Though I have proven my worth as “not like the other egirls,” it is still undeniable that the informant still engaged within the same social ritual that guided the partnerships between egirls and their male admirers. Though this hold over male desire could become profitable, for many women the role or the supposed role of an egirl shackled them to certain patterns of

interactions within the community. These gifts and declarations of affection can turn into unwanted advances as they had for me and many other women that I have come to know. Coastal above asked “why would a girl want to be a boy online,” as if he couldn’t imagine any benefits in being seen as a man in the community. His mindset, which is similar to that of many other men in both Healsluts and the main Discord league server, highlight two very important paradigms in the league community. First, birth gender is wholly important to the members of the community. Being transsexual is regarded as either pretend gender play or a different gender altogether. Second, the members of the community assume that women want these advances and gifts. For a woman to pretend to be a man seems outlandish, but a man pretending to be a woman is an understandable, though despicable, desire.

Catfishing as a term was popularized in 2010 by the American documentary *Catfish* directed by Ariel Schulman and Henry Joost (depicting the main character, Ned, in a romantic relationship with a man that pretends to be a woman) but has been present for far longer than that. In the context of the League of Legends Discord server, a catfisher is any person, usually a man, that dons another identity in order to deceive other men for gifts and money. With the excess of men that are eager to provide for a female member, catfishing is rampant within the community. For example, Jeffie, a 19 year old member of the main Discord server, acted as a young girl in the heal sluts community (a community advertising as a hangout for gamer women and men to find their gaming and life partner) in order to receive gifts. He conned two men into becoming his “sugar daddies,” each providing 70 dollars a week in exchange for a few games per week. Jeffie completed his “transformation” into an egirl by equipping a profile picture of a cat and a meek attitude.

Jeffie: I just said I was really nervous and they lapped it up.

Yelim: That's really wild. They didn't suspect anything?

Jeffie: Yeah, and if you act a little shy when they ask for nudes, they get super into it.

Even if it's kinda creepy.

Jeffie isn't the only catfisher that changes his linguistic patterns when in their role. In the exchange below, the people of the server are discussing a recent member, Cody, that seem to have hit on every female seeming member of the server. Thus, as a response, a group of people were encouraging and teaching a male member, Durand, to pretend to be a girl to garner Cody's attention. Both male and female members of the server gave advice as to how they believe women acted and talked in the server.

Kupo: Just make ur name steffie

Durand: idk man sid is pretty sexy

Kupo: and a cute anime girl avatar.

Gabriel: lets put this to a test

Player7: change the last d to an a. Durana. And go anime girl. And you're good to go.

Gabriel: and only talk in girl emotes: ^^;

Player7: use a lot of smileys. ^^

Gabriel: haha catfishing that'll show him for trying to get girls.

Cat: Use girl emotes

Durand (who now changed his name to Durana): What are girl emotes?

ellinia: OuO or c: [emoticons, text pictures, that are meant to resemble a smiling face]

Cat: Lol that's a pretty cute picture [in reference to Durand's current avatar]

Durand: first result for anime girl

Cat: now hit me with a “wow, you’re so cool ^-^”

Durand: That’s pretty good. Would perfect grammar turn him on?

Cat: nono, you have to add a lot of Os

In teaching Durand how to act and talk like a girl, the people of the forum pinpoint the gender distinctions of language online on the server: how people expect girls to talk and act. First and Foremost, Player 7, Cat, and Gabriel advise him to use emoticons in his speech. Certain “smiley faces” seem to associated with women far more than men, and usually these are the emoticons that invoke the feeling of “cute.” Most of the emoticons denote positive feelings, but also served another function. Eli Dresner and Susan Herring in “Functions of the Non-Verbal in CMC: Emoticons and Illocutionary Force” in the 2010 journal *Communication Theory* states that emoticons are “construed as indicators of affective states, the purpose of which is to convey nonlinguistic information that in face-to-face communication is conveyed through facial expression and other bodily indicators.” Though perhaps an obvious statement, being able to show emotion in a conversation is important, for many reasons.

First, Professors of communication studies Eli Dresner and Susan Herring, in studying the use of emoticons in many forms of online communication such as emails and instant messaging write that there is a “belief that women express affect more than men do.” They cite two studies of asynchronous public discussion forums—psychologists Witmer and Katzman (1997) in *Does Gender make a difference* and Wolf (2000) in *Cyberspace and behavior*, psychologists that specialize in social psychology in the online world—that found that women used emoticons more often than men did. Continuing, they write that psychologist Naomi Baron in *See you online. Gender issues in college student use of Instant Messaging* (2004) “observed

that the overwhelming majority of emoticons in her corpus of synchronous private instant messaging were produced by women,” (Dresner and Herring, 2010). It is almost expected, then, for women on the server to be emotive when talking to the members of the server. There are many reasons for women to be expressive, many pertaining to previous norms laid by modern society offline, but if women are expected by others to use emoticons frequently, then online women must use emoticons frequently to be acknowledged as a woman.

Dresner states, an emoticon’s “usage neither expresses emotion nor does it mimic a physical wink; its sole function seems to indicate the utterance’s intended illocutionary force.” An emoticon isn’t necessarily a direct indicator of the user’s emotions. For example, a “wink emoji” can be used literally, to indicate a user’s expression of interest in a woman, but it can also indicate a user’s sarcastic ironic use of the wink to tease another member of the server. In both cases, the wink emoji was never intended to emulate the flirtatious emotions of the user, but rather the intentions behind the emotions. Similarly, egirls on the server use emoticons, rather than as a direct mirror to their emotional state, as vehicles for social rituals to mitigate their threat to the community and appeal to other members.

Emoticons can emulate a physical interaction that women may engage in offline—such as a pat on the shoulder after a sad event emulated by a frowny face emoticon given after a member of the server complains of a recent string of unlucky games—or intend a meaning created in a virtual space with no parallel meaning in the offline world—such as the kitty face emoticon (:3) that invokes an indication of feeling “cute” in the individual. Thus, these emoticons fulfill a sort of emotional labor that the women fill in the server—in addition to the emotional labor that the women produce within the game.

Cat instructs Durand to say “Wow, you’re so cool,” to reinforce whatever the man may say, jokingly, satirizing the way the egirls speak in the server. As said by Deborah Tanner (2013) in “You just don’t understand,” women apparently speak more cooperatively and strive to make their peers feel positive emotions. Though the book is highly problematic in the way that it generalizes the experiences of everyone under the single banner of gender, Tannen does highlight common stereotypes for the way women and men are supposed to act. As a woman on the server, especially in order to gain male attention, Durand must attempt to be encouraging, no matter how empty the platitudes may sound as women are expected to be “nicer” than their male counterparts. Though Cat is teaching Durand an extreme example of Tannen’s stereotype, the satire has roots in truth.

Another common stereotype, acting bubbly and “cute” on the server, is another preconceived disposition that becomes a beacon of light for the men looking for companionship. The cute actions of the “egirls” are reminiscent of the “kawaii” culture in Japan or the “feizhuliu” culture in China. Feizhuliu is an aesthetic derived from Japanese and Korean fashion and makeup styles. “The most common representations of feizhuliu are girlish pictures capturing the subjects’ baby-like cuteness,” says Qiu Zitong, professor of media studies in Zhejiang university, in “Cuteness as a subtle strategy.” In his article, he describes the strategies that young women online use to induce that feeling of “jiao” or cuteness in their audience. From enlarging their eyes in photographs to using cat-like verbal tics at the end of sentences, many of these online Chinese women employ the same strategies as egirls in the Discord server. As the members of the server are highly interested in Asian culture and Asian media, it isn’t uncommon to believe that the women of the server imitate Asian fashion and aesthetics. Additionally Asian women are often fetishized by the Discord men:

ZJ: God, Asian girls are the best. So fucking sexy

Gabriel Mello: I know, JAV (Japanese adult videos) suck but amateur Asian porn is amazing

Chromo: I'm not racist lmao. I just think Asian look better than any other girl. I want a sexy Asian Gf

Qiu Zitong continues, “To be jiao,” to be cute, “is to be delicate, dependant, and vulnerable...As a communication style, saijiao is a highly feminine style of speaking characterized by high pitch. Catherine Farris defines it as the adorable petulance of spoiled children or young women who seek benefit from an unwilling listener. She sees saijiao style as indicating an indirect and informal power in Chinese society, even while it remains trapped within and helps to maintain dominant gender power structures.” There are many parallels to be made between the saijiao style of young Chinese women and the cutesy “egirl” style of the women online. Physically, many women post selfies of themselves to emphasize the innocence and femininity of their body and face. Many women use snapchat filters that enhance the size of the eyes, apply cat whiskers or flower crowns. “I do it because I don’t like my chin,” says Cat on why she chooses to use snapchat filters, “but also because I think it makes me look cute.” Furthermore, the bright bubbly speech style invokes a sense of “cuteness” in the user. If Chinese women who invoke saijiao in their speech choose to utilize a high pitch voice, then egirls choose to invoke cuteness in their speech through their generally friendly atmosphere and the excessive use of emoticons.

And, while garnering indirect and informal power in the online community, the cutesy speech pattern also maintains traditional gender power structures. Egirls speech is never direct

and inflammatory towards the men that may harass the girl. Little w/ Catitude, above, invokes cute in her speech while asking for a game partner while simultaneously maintaining the idea that the man, her partner, is the true power in the relationship. By being cute, Little gains momentary power over men as she is free to pick and choose, but ultimately denotes that she will give her power over to traditional gender roles once she has picked said partner.

This cuteness “can be understood as gender performativity in Judith Butler’s sense—the coherence and stability of femininity is configured through the repetitious performances dictated by certain ‘regulatory practices’,” (Qiu 2010). As many egirls adopt this cute speech pattern, it becomes a base line for how women are expected to act and what feminine speech looks like. As with teaching Durand how to act like a woman above, feminine speech is broken down into a regular pattern that is almost universally considered on the server as how women should speak. This pattern is maintained by both the woman’s participation and the man’s expectation of the speech style. Furthermore, trans women adopt this speech pattern in order to be identified as a woman on the server, with varying degrees of success as expanded in the next chapter.

I am curious as to whether the women began talking in such a bubbly and reassuring manner in the matter and the men reacted favorably to the disposition first, or whether men looked for their fantasy female disposition and women matched their way of speech to this ideal. As Cameron states in her *Performing Gender* essay, Gender as an idea is constructed by those that engage in gender performance. Each bubbly girl and foul-mouthed man contributes to the overall idea of how each gender should act.

Catfishing, however, is interesting in the fact that men alongside women codified the linguistic pattern for women. Alongside advising Durand, I have seen many other men in the

community describing how women should talk to other would-be catfishers. In fact, some egirls of the community employ the same tactics and imitate the catfisher's linguistic patterns (excessive emoticons and a meek, cooperative, and bubbly personality), hiding how they would normally speak, to further attract their male partners.

Hon: I didn't trust Libra bc I originally thought she was one of those egirls you know?

Yelim: What did she do that tipped you off?

Hon: Well, she was always so fucking cheerful. Had <3's all the time.

Yelim: I use <3's a lot?

Hon: Yea, but you got close to us and we trust you right? She was just to friendly right off the bat. And always had so many :3 or ☺ emojis. It was suspect.

According to Hon, Libra, a trans woman, used many of the same linguistic patterns as that of a typical egirl or catfisher. Her overly friendly nature incited suspicion. As catfishers and egirls usually employ such friendliness for some ulterior gain, Hon believed that her nature was fake. Through the efforts of catfishers, egirls, and the common perceptions of the league community, it seems as if a woman's speech pattern has been solidified. There are some women, however, that eschew such norms. Khadame, I had mentioned in the previous chapter, preferred to speak brashly and engaged in toxic language. Pix was another woman that preferred to insult freely, quite opposite from the friendly meek egirl. Those two were often mis-gendered as fellow men by the members of the server. The price from deviating from the pre-conceived notions of female speech patterns is to discard one's femininity in the eyes of the society. Those that do, however, wish to be seen as female are set within a rigid guideline and must juggle between being seen as a kind, demure woman online and being seen as a manipulative but alluring egirl.

“He thinks I’m just another egirl,” Says Tiffany, a young 18 year old girl taking a gap year between college and high school. She and I were talking casually in voice chat room at 3 in the morning. Tiffany had been making romantic gestures at another boy in the server and she had just been rejected, soundly. *“I just asked to ‘marry’ him but he says that he doesn’t trust me.”* The server has a function in which two members can choose to get ‘married’ and the server would remember them as a couple. Of course, this is all cosmetic and the ‘marriage’ ultimately means very little legally or for the game--for example, close friends marry in the server, jokingly. However, this server marriage feature has been used by couples on the server to announce their ongoing interest for another user.

“Why doesn’t he trust you?”

“It’s stupid.” Tiffany sighed, *“He doesn’t trust me because I got a skin (a cosmetic change to a player’s champion, for example a new costume, that players can buy with real money. The “skin” are purely aesthetic and change nothing drastic within the game) from Chaser [a 19 year old male on the server]. It was my birthday. Plus it’s not like I forced Chaser to give it to me.”*

I find myself sympathizing with Tiffany, whose natural friendliness causes others to mistake her cheer for feigned interest, Pix, whose grouchy nature became a source of jokes for male users that exclaimed that dating her would be like dating a man, and for the other women in the server trapped in shackles of offline world while trying to escape in the virtual reality. Perhaps it was naive to imagine the online community of League of Legends as a blank slate in which the physical body no longer matters. Even if anonymity should in theory enable more range of freedom to play with social norms, roles, and identities, it seems as if the community

reproduces and maintains these rigid gender norms. For Tiffany, pix, me, and the other girls in the community, momentarily forgetting our gender without discarding the female identity was not an option.

Hidden and Mistaken identity: Social Drama Online

Though I have provided snapshots into the daily lives of the members of the League of Legends Discord, the community is still changing and volatile. What I may observe today may not be true in three years. Since I have arrived, I've seen many people come and go. Some come online for a month or two and leave without a trace. Others realize that they have more pressing priorities outside of a Discord server and take breaks for months on end. After Bounce, one of the most prolific posters on the server, left to focus on his college courses, I could not deny feeling as if I had lost a good friend. "The old guard is leaving," confessed Myta—he had been in the server since its creation. "I honestly identify and fit in with the old people more. And they're leaving."

For Myta, the server had started out as something of a chat group between him and a few close online friends. As those friends invited other friends, the server grew larger and larger. There was a need for an administrative system and moderators, people to police a user's language and subsequent intent within the server. In the span of a year, the server became mostly open to the public. Though an existing member still had to extend an invite to someone, the people no longer needed to "fit in" with the majority of the members. Small groups formed around distinct interests and personalities. In a sense, the small, intimate safe space became a large and bustling community.

I had arrived right at the cusp of that change. I arrived early enough into the infancy of the server to be able to connect and interact with most of the older members of the server. And yet, I arrived late enough to be considered new and to be compared with the slew of members arriving

every day. The community and its values were changing with the influx of a new demographic, both into the Discord community but into the online reality as a whole. Inevitably, these differing values crashed into conflict. Myta's melancholic perspective was poignant and relatable, but both he and I understood that the community was changing and there was little he could do slow it down. The server was rapidly redefining interactions in the community, reevaluating what constitutes as acceptable actions or identities.

I took a break from the server to write about it. Three weeks had passed, from January to February, and I decided to check back in. I logged on to see five different private messages and a fractured community.

Naga: Hey I know you're not on much, but if you're interested I have my own server here [link]

Yelim: Naga what happened?

Naga: Oh shit ur here. Well, Dmk is being a blowhard, so a bunch of us have our own server now.

Above, naga explains that the members have created "servers," private chat groups much like the one in which I am doing my research. Each server is contained within the parent website, Discord's, domain. The servers can be either public or private and require an invitation to join. In creating his own server, Naga aimed to create a chat forum in which he, as the owner, can create his own rules for the community.

Ossify: Hey. Dunno if you know, but Jeffie is banned. So is Naga.

Ossify and Naga quickly told me that after a few monumental events the day before,

Jeffie and Naga were banned and the server's administrator, Dmk, removed all the mods from their duty. Jeffie and Naga left to create their own Discord server and asked a few select people that they were close to, mostly those that Myta called the "old guard," to join. Muse, Ossify, and Libra, those that felt that they have been slighted by Naga's group, had created another server to commiserate and comfort each other. Dmk, in the meanwhile, was in the midst of reforming his server to the praises of some and the chagrin of others. These changes confused those that didn't notice to broiling tension over the changing values in the server.

Cait: I'm gonna cry.

Yelim: Aww, bb, no!

Cait: I'm serious. This is so sad. I've had other servers, but this is my first one that I'm super active in. I'm on it all day, all night.

Yelm: In class lmao.

Cait: Ye, I wake up and sleep in discord 😊 Yelim...

Yelim: Yes?

Cait: If this server falls apart I'm going to kill myself.

Some, like Cait in the conversation above, were impacted heavily by the fracture. Cait, and some other members of the community, have confessed to me that Discord is their primary social interaction in life. For them, their world was breaking apart. However, this Discord is not necessarily spell the end of a community. The previous chapters have all focused on how the members of the community created and adhered to social norms. At a glance, the previous chapters give very little agency to the members. They become actors caught within a script rather than the social actors that anthropology now know the individual to be. Certainly there are

dissenting opinions regarding what is acceptable and what isn't within the community, and, within these conflicts, the community continues to redefine itself.

With everyone chiming in their individual opinions and choosing which side of values they prefer, several people carried my favor and attempted to sway my opinion over to their side. While I did have a few private feelings, I was caught in the middle. I couldn't voice my honest opinion without alienating many members of the community. If I sided with one side of the argument, I am no longer privy to the other side and their opinions. Without the ability to confer with all the members of the community, my research would become biased. Though I felt like I was deceiving some of the members, I decided to remain neutral in the conflict, often passively giving a noncommittal agreement to one member and giving the same to the next on two differing views. In the end, I had joined three different private servers created by the new and old members of the demographic on the server in order to garner as much information as I could.

“Social dramas are volatile episodes of social action that erupt forth from the otherwise smooth surface of routine social life,” (Turner, 1968). “They are potential turning points in social situations where the social order gets deconstructed, debated, and reformed,” (Daniel A. McFarland 2004). The conflicts in the society mark instances in the users usually actively talk about the peculiarities of their norms and carefully scrutinize reactions or interactions taken for granted.

Linguistic anthropologist Nancy Ries, in *Russian Talk*, expands on why social drama, and the language surrounding social drama, is so important to study in *Russian Talk*. She states “Cultural or ideological oppositions, such as those inherent in constructions of gender, power, status, and value, are both resisted via acts of speaking and reconstituted through them. Any type of talk can be viewed as accomplishing several tasks at once with reference to the overall system

of speech genres: first, it asserts and constructs itself and defines its own position in the structures of genres; second, it subverts the value of other positions or resists the claims of other positions; and, third, it reasserts the structure of the system as a whole.” As she examines male and female gendered speech, she analyzed how each both undermined each other while simultaneously bringing forth what is most important and key to the conflict. Social dramas are useful to study because they bring to attention debates about the structure of the community that would otherwise be ignored. The language that surrounds the conflict, thus, succinctly grasps at the key tenets or norms of the society, to either reassert their authority or to aim to break it down. In each of the examples below, I highlight instances of social drama that caused the server to pause and take a second look at terms taken for granted. Through debate, though perhaps results are not immediately seen, we can see that the members are questioning and rejecting perhaps some of the most defining characteristics of the community: for example, its toxicity.

A Second Glance at Toxicity

“He’s a giant fucking baby” Kennuy ranted.

“I’m 15, when I was 13 I got plenty of shit on the internet.” Naga added. The two were talking via voice channels to a small audience of teenagers, all 15 to 19 years of age. They all needed to release their frustrations regarding the current social politics of the server. Kennuy, Naga, and Sol who was their audience, were all part of the “old guard” who, as myta had mentioned, felt that their values were being pushed away and made invisible to cater to the

new members of the server. I sat, silent, in their conversation as they became more and more heated about the server administrator, dmK, and the “baby,” Muse.

Naga: It kinda split down the middle over what is bullying and what isn't

Yelim: uh wait. Recap for me what happened tonight.

Naga: tldr (too long didn't read), kennuy was tilted and upset and muse made a comment. Kennuy flamed back and muse left the server. Basically, muse can joke and make fun of people but if you make fun of muse, it hurts his feelings. They asked us to stop bullying muse and it started an argument over what's bullying and such...resulting in pie leaving and other shit happening. Tldr muse has a double standard and we are in an argument about how we shouldn't be forced to be nice.

Yelim: Uh, okay. I feel like this argument could happen a lot. Why is this one so explosive?

Naga: Bc we are aggressive, and an old person from r/lol got insta banned etc. DmK wants us to put on fake happy attitudes and always be happy and never disagree but that's impossible. We both have completely different views on how discord should be compared to dmK. We like to banter and don't we don't really get offended/emotional over banter. But slowly banter is being called “bullying”

Both Kennuy and Naga are high ranked, diamond rank, players. In turn, Muse is in the least skilled division, bronze. As such, a subject of their daily toxicity relates to rank. Both Naga and Kennuy as well as several other people in the server, make fun of his bronze status almost constantly. If Muse were to say anything about the game, whether his private opinion or his own analysis, inevitably someone would chime in with “it's because you're a bronzie.” They imply

that his opinions do not matter as those that are as young as he is—he is the youngest in the server—and people that are in bronze simply do not know enough of the game to participate in the conversation. Dmk, the administrator of the server and someone who makes the ultimate decisions in the rules of the server, disagreed and stated that rank does not allow members to antagonize others.

“*They’re fucking assholes.*” Muse wrote to me, privately. “*They just want an easy target to rage at.*” As said in chapter 2, those that cannot navigate social toxicity, are often infantilized. For Muse, his youth exacerbates his inability to exert social power over the others in the server. His biological age predisposes others to infantilize him. As naga said, “when I was 13, I got plenty of shit on the internet.” He seems to imply this sort of discrimination based on age is quite natural, a widespread practice in online communities. The server’s administrator, Dmk, joined Muse’s opinion on the issue. For him, Naga and Kennuy overstepped their bounds as members of the community and committed a social transgression. He wasn’t the only member to think this way: Josephine (Josie) and Ossify also believed that that teasing veered too far off friendly toxicity into hostility. Though dmk is part of the older crew, both Josie and Ossify joined the community quite recently--within the last 6 months. Whereas the older members endorsed friendly toxicity, new comers were less likely to be receptive to it. Nightshade, a member that joined for only a week before leaving, was shocked at the “*degeneracy*” in the community and called the other members “*toxic scum.*”

The relationships amongst the old members were built on a camaraderie around their skill in the game and easy, toxic banter, as myta said. The members who viewed toxicity as a mainstay in the community, called Dmk’s attempt to moderate the conversation an unwelcome censorship

into a previously “no-holds barred” society. As naga said above, he believed that the results of such policing would only end in “fake happy attitudes” rather than true relationships and intimate friendships. Ultimately, the server was split between those that viewed toxicity as either prosocial or anti-social behavior. Toxicity becomes torn between the “definitional claims actors successfully impose on the evolving social situation during social drama” (Turner 2002, p 247) In this conflict, Muse is trying to redefine toxicity: what exactly is considered malicious or friendly. Naga and Kennuy are trying to resist his impositions.

Tolerance to toxicity was not the only difference between the newer and older demographic on the server. The population of LGBT and other nonbinary members rose in the last year, according to administrator of the server. He noted, *“There used to be like one bi person? Now there’s bi people, gay people, trans people. The community has kinda changed.”*

Professor of communication studies, Avi Marciano cites in “Living the VirtuReal: Negotiating Transgender Identity in Cyberspace” many different reasons for why nonbinary, homosexual, or other such members may find themselves migrating to online communities. “First, on the personal-materialistic level, the Internet is an unprecedented source of information, support and consultation; it allows transgender users to maintain social interactions, take part in the local and global transgender communities” (2014). Certainly, trans members of the community have found solace in each other. Libra, one such male to female trans member, connected with Hraes, a bisexual member of the community, through their mutual experiences of discrimination and bad luck with love in their offline lives. Though it may be unsafe to search for companions, either platonic or romantic, the internet provides an almost consequence-free arena for the marginalized to express their identity and pursue relationships. Thus, it is no surprise that there are such a

large volume of marginalized users in the community. However, not everyone welcomes the rise of LGBT individuals in the community.

Transgender in the Community

Hon: I don't know how to say this nicely

Yelim: Just say it.

Hon: Bc I don't want people to think badly of them. But they're my friends. It's just that, some of them are pretty vocal about the not straight people lately

Yelim: Non straight? Like homo?

Hon: Like nonbinary/trans too. Just, you know, not straight. There's a lot of them lately. Some people just don't really like them.

Predictably, the influx of this new demographic cause friction between the members. Previously “free” topics to joke about and insults to fling around became taboo and unsavory in the eyes of some members. “Tranny,” for example, which was commonly used to mock a member’s high pitched voice, offended transgender members that just joined the community. “Faggot,” another common insult, began to develop another meaning in the community separate but not inseparable from its original use: a less skilled player. With the addition of literally homosexual or transgender members, figurative meanings of words ceased to become just a vessel for intimacy or social gatekeeping: they became true, offensive insults. As the older members felt that their old social rituals were becoming constrained, they began to feel resentment for the new demographic.

Naga: *tldr* (too long didn't read) *psycho nonbinary person joins server, and fall madly in love with Jeffie with 2 days.*

Naga, above, describes a new member of the server, Libra, as a psycho nonbinary. Though nonbinary on its own could simply be a description of a new member, it is clear that Naga did not intend for such a light-hearted definition. Here, he adds the descriptor “psycho,” to emphasize that he intends for “nonbinary” to be an insult. “You’re gay” between two straight members of a server might highlight the close and intimate relationship between two friends, but “You’re gay” from a straight member of the server to the new homosexual member of the server becomes a means to alienate the new member.

I arrived at the server one slow Sunday afternoon hoping to talk to a new person that entered the server, Libra. Libra was a vibrant and friendly person. Like many others, I had just assumed that Libra was a woman through her language. When I approached Libra with the purpose of interviewing her about female experiences in League of Legends, her cheerful demeanor faltered for a moment. “*Actually, I’m trans...is that okay?*” Her normally cheerful demeanor became cautious, as if she was expecting me to deny her. It was only after I enthusiastically reassured her that her being trans was helpful as it provided another viewpoint that Libra relaxed enough to have a proper conversation.

I did not view her initial hesitation as something particularly important, though it should have highlighted Libra’s past experiences on the internet. She had expected for me to deny her experiences due to her birth gender—for me to deny her femininity. Emboldened by my acceptance, she began to tell me why she left the server I was researching.

Libra had begun to “date” another member of the server, Jeffie, as soon as she met him. After one day, I was surprised to note how friendly the two were with each other, proclaiming their love in the general chat. Two days afterwards, Jeffie was loudly proclaiming that he was deceived—Libra harassed him and made him feel uncomfortable with her advances.

Jeffie: Ugh don't ask me about it >.< I want to forget it.

Yelim: Okay

Jeffie: Libra's a dude. I'm not gay. Ugh this fucking sucks.

Libra had told him the night before that she was born a man. As the two had been flirting and, “getting serious,” Libra felt that Jeffie should know the truth. In return, Jeffie had shut off all communication. The fact that Libra was biologically born a man, no matter if Libra considered herself a woman, was a betrayal.

Libra: I never deceived anyone. Jeffie deceived me

Yelim: I believe you.

Ossify: Jeffie's a piece of shit.

Libra: He just was “questioning” and used that to get closer to me. We fell fast, and yeah, that's true. But I trusted him and loved him so much.

Yelim : Aww Libra...

Libra: And then I told him my birth gender. He decided afterwards he wasn't really into me after that.

Libra continued to tell me, afterwards, how she felt that after her birth gender was revealed to the server, she no longer felt comfortable there. In part, she was constantly reminded of Jeffie's betrayal. However, she also felt that she could no longer be free to show the best image

of herself to the other members. To them, she would always be a trans woman—a fake woman. A man pretending to be a woman online. For them, a transgender person could never fully become a woman, even if the virtual world could not directly interact with her physical body.

Libra followed Boelstorff's ideal in *Coming of age in Second Life*. She could recreate herself as who she believes she is inside and shed her physical body in an online community. While presenting as a woman may be difficult for Libra in her offline community, the internet cannot see a user's physical body unless the user decides release personal photographs. Xieroh, another trans member of the community, said: "Unless you say otherwise, it's really easy to make people think you're a cis girl. I practiced how to pitch my voice higher, so now people don't know even on voice chat." The idea that trans people can re-imagine themselves online is widespread. Avi Marciano, communications professor in Brunel University of London, even goes so far as to state that "The transgender self is experienced through the virtual one, partially because living in cyberspace may infuse a sense of realness into the experience of something that is, at least according to strict social dictates, based on artifice and deception." In essence it is easy, somewhat natural, for transgender individuals to integrate into online communities as they maintain a sort of a "virtual identity" in the offline world in order to be socially accepted. Furthermore, they may actually feel as if the online person is more "real," due to their ability to express their identity freely on online communities compared to offline communities. However, as both Xieroh and Libra states, Avi Marciano has an optimistic view of online communities. Xieroh, Libra, and countless other transgender individuals reports having to hide their identity online, from fellow discriminatory members. Many reported either hiding their gender or omitting the fact that they are transgender, hiding behind the anonymity of the text

communication. Instead of re-imagining their identity, trans people are often forced into the same patterns of hiding as they would in the offline world.

Boellstorff writes how he observed the “predominance of text having a distancing effect, keeping the actual world and Second Life distinct—so that, for instance, men could participate as women or one could not prejudge the actual-world age of a resident. Text could act as *techne*, its mere use separating the virtual from the actual,” (150). Indeed, it would be difficult to know if one cannot see or hear the person that they are talking to. Text speech had kept the anonymity of the online world alive. However Discord, as a chatting service, advertises itself as both a chat and voice speaking forum. Members of the server expect others to participate in voice channels, especially during a game of League of Legends. Voice chat, then, becomes an agent to bring together the ambiguity of the online world the physicality of the offline world. Anonymity still exists, and often users do not know what their team or server members look like, but the voice gives an approximation of basic details about their life. Gender, age, and even personality can be assumed from voice the voice channel.

Catfishing and Identity

Cat: Sis :D :D :D

Yelim : Cat! Omg you're on!

Cat: Yeah, only for a little bit, before dad gets home.

Cat is a young 18 year old girl who, at first, never joined anyone on a voice call. Ever since I met Cat in the Discord server, she latched onto me. Soon afterwards, we were calling each other

“sisters” and fostered a sibling-like relationship on the community. I gave her advice about colleges and fashion, and in turn she regaled me with anecdotes about league and updates on her everyday life. Two months into this online friendship, she requested to talk to me in voice chat, privately. I never asked what pushed Cat to make such an intimate move in this relationship, but I was happy to oblige.

Her voice was not what I had expected. It was soft, and clear but low-pitched. Cat revealed to me, that day, that she was trans, male to female. Her avatar usually contained a cute picture of a young woman or a small animal. She chatted in a way that clearly codified her in the community as a woman. For someone who was mis-gendered as a man throughout her life in school and in her home environment, she could escape and present herself as female in a virtual environment. If Cat had not shown me through voice communication, I would have never known her birth gender. I was humbled by the trust she placed within me.

Some others on the server did not take this revelation kindly. Gabriel-Mello, who had previously been close to Cat, had learned about her birth gender on the grapevine.

***Gabriel-Mello:** I can't believe Cat didn't tell me. I can't believe I found through someone else.*

***Yelim:** This is about Cat being trans?*

***Gabriel-Mello:** I draw her doodles etc of her and maru to cheer her up. When I left sunset I gave her my clan name bc she's a friend. I find out she's trans from RANDOM sunset people. listened to her when she needed it. She used me, Yelim. Used me.*

Yelim: Maybe she was going to tell you later?

Gabriel-Mello: Nah, I asked her about it, and she just brushed me off. What a fake. She acts all nice in the chat, but that's just it. It's all fake.

In the conversation above, Gabriel-Mello confessed to me that he had an angry altercation with Cat. He believed that Cat leaked his private messages to other people and was angry that Cat didn't reveal her birth gender to him. Here, Gabriel-Mello implies that the supposed intimacy between their online selves was all fabricated.

Coastal: I don't have anything against trans people, okay? It sounds bad, but there's a lot of trans people looking for relationships online. Transgirls. Probably because they don't get much boys irl.

Yelim: So it's easier online?

Coastal: Not even! Transgirls don't even get that many DMs. Listen, if a cis-girl asked for a boyfriend online, she'd get flooded with messages. Didn't you get DMs?

Yelim: I got a fair bit.

Coastal: See! And, listen, I don't have anything against them okay? But if they [transgirls] don't say that they're trans in their catalog... then they're catfishing. They're pretending to be cis-girls.

Coastal is 18 years old and a member of “healsluts,” a Discord server for League of Legends players to find possible romantic or sexual relationships in a BDSM context. The members on that server post advertisements of themselves, similar to Craigslist personal ads, to find a partner—either for life or for the next few games. He

identifies himself as a dominant and desires to find a submissive *female* partner. To him, the partner must be born as a woman and identify as a woman, in other words a cis-female. Someone who is trans, then, isn't a proper woman to him.

Sienna, another member of "healsluts" confessed that she has also been battered with insults by men that feel that they were "betrayed" by her feminine exterior.

Sienna: I'm not trying to deceive anyone.

Yelim: I believe that!

Sienna: Yeah. You do. But sometimes other people don't. They call me catfisher.

Or gay.

Yelim: But you're not gay, well romantically, or a catfisher.

Sienna: But it's gay for them`. It's like, they don't want to get with a dude.

Yelim: That's awful.

Sienna: Sometimes it's just easier to not tell them anything. But then they get angrier when they find out.

Sienna has identified as a woman for three years, long before she ever began to play League of Legends. She joined Healsluts to find a kinky gamer boyfriend but was disappointed by her experiences. Many of the men that were proclaiming their love for her personality backpedaled as soon as they learned she was trans. Soon, the administrators of the servers asked her to edit her personal advertisement with her trans status—like marking her body with a scarlet letter. Some of the men that approached her knowing her birth gender asked her to be their

“ladyboy.” They were, she said, into forced feminization: the act of feminizing a male submissive partner. In indulging some of their fetishes, Sienna felt as if her gender was disregarded. Those men viewed her not as a woman, but as a trans girl—some strange third gender. Sienna mentioned, in particular, that many men approached her with requests for her penis size, deeming a small penis important for such “ladyboys.” Others wanted to deny her transgender identity by asking her to pretend to be a woman online (disregarding the fact that Sienna identifies as a woman). Some asked if she sounded feminine--high pitched voice--so that they could conveniently forget that she was transgender. One of the women interviewed in Marciano’s article stated “All I want is to be accepted as a real biological woman, or as a transsexual.” says one of the interviewed women. “Many transgender women, as the analysis reveals, dream about getting rid of the transsexual tag, which they know will accompany them for the rest of their lives, despite any physical changes.” Even if Sienna considered herself a woman, it was clear that many of her contemporaries did not. She became a pseudo-girl--a pale copy.

Catfishing is not exclusive to the boundary lines between gender. Catfishing has now encompassed the expanded definition of “pretending to be someone else.” If someone were to lie about their job and education, the community defines that act as catfishing. In a way it is ironic that on the internet, users are mostly anonymous and most often do not meet their peers. It is difficult to prove any offline facts about a member’s life without the member providing the evidence. Yet, in this murky amorphous state, the members ask utmost truth from each other. The community relies on the trust that although a person may act a bit more forward online, the basic tenet of their personality and their life was honestly given.

Dmk: I think I act pretty much the same online

Sol: Lmao yeah.

Bounce: I think of it as you put the best face you could have online. It's like a you that you can achieve irl (in real life) but often get hindered by anxiety.

Yelim: That's a really nice way to put it.

Bounce: Yeah, it's not as if I completely change my personality when I'm online.

Sol: Yeah, it's just that I'm more outgoing.

After I had asked the server members how they were like offline, Dmk, Sol, and Bounce above all agreed that their offline and online selves were similar. Rather than putting on a mask when online, many members likened the online personality to taking off a mask, their burdens and their social anxiety. Even when I entered the server, no one questioned the legitimacy of my project, they only questioned whether it was useful. They believed wholeheartedly that I was a Wellesley student living in Boston. And, strangely enough, I wanted to be truthful.

The residents of Second Life, in *Coming of Age*, also shared the sentiment that members show their “true selves” online, “I think you can get a good judgement on people just by talking to them. If you are boring in real life, then chances are you are in second life too,” (160, Boellstorff). However there is one important distinction between these two similar perspectives. Boellstorff uses these testimonies to argue why the residents of second life do not feel as if the biological self behind the keyboard is important. The mental, the mind that inhabits the avatar online, is what truly matters to them. Thus, if the core personalities are the same, then the residents of Second Life do not mind if a user is a male masquerading as a female or if they are transgender. Conversely, League of Legends players use the argument that people are generally the same offline or online to argue the importance of the biological gender. For them, the trust in

one's online identity is both stalwart and fragile. Many members must take the leap of faith, and do so quite frequently, and trust the information that another user provides. However, the members are also quite quick in homing in on inconsistencies in another's testimony. One white lie could call the whole of a user's identity into question. And, for the Discord community, biological gender, age, and sexuality is so integral to the identity that it is taboo to fabricate those details.

However, ability to re-create one's identity is tempting; there are inevitably many people that do choose to don a mask. Jeffie was one of older members of the server; he was a member of the community for close to two years. He shared details of his college life and posted pictures of "himself" at parties. He connected with another member, Cait, through their supposed mutual depression and their struggle to truly connect and care about another human being. Cait, who said that she was finding it harder and harder to pretend to feel emotions towards her offline peers, cared deeply for Jeffie who she felt was similar in spirit.

His carefully structured identity crumbled when someone found proof that his photos were pictures of him and were, instead, pictures of another person. Another member found out that Jeffie's pictures were stock images online, easily ripped from Google. Jeffie, it had turned out, was not a shy but sensitive college jock who played football on the weekends and partied with his friend every Friday night. The fallout was immense. Jeffie was immediately banned from 3 different servers. People were quick to acknowledge their grievances with him.

Ossify: MY INTUITION WAS RIGHT. I FUCKING KNEW HE WAS AN A+ SCUMBAG. HE LIED ABOUT A FAMILY MEMBER DYING.

Yelim: Wait, when did this happen?

Ossify: After like. He got caught as a liar and a catfish on many servers. He wrote here that his family member died. He was tryin to get the heat off of him.

Ossify, above, was convinced that Jeffie was unsavory after Jeffie admitted that he catfished people in another server to obtain money. Jeffie would ask lonely men online to wire money to his bank account and, in exchange, he would be their sugar baby and their companion during games online. “Only scumbags would do that” Ossify said to me, “He’s fucking lying. Who’s to say he’s not lying to us.” Not everyone was so gleeful that their suspicions were confirmed. Cait, who had been close to Jeffie, was devastated.

Cait: I tried to confront him you know.

Yelim: What happened

Cait: NOTHING. He just brushed me off. He gave me some bullshit about “coming out” to Myta.

Yelim: Like confessing to him?

Cait: Hell if I know. Why even myta tho? Why not anyone else???

Yelim: Aww, cait. I’m sorry.

Cait: It’s. not. Okay. It’s hard. It’s like...I don’t even know him anymore. The Jeffie I knew was fake.

Arguably, a person could call almost every interaction online “fake.” The online boyfriends and girlfriends who may never meet might be called a “fake” relationship.

Friendships that exist through the veil of anonymity might be called “fake.” A member will never be truly sure that someone is who they say they are online. As such, I believe the people of online communities have an increased preoccupation with the authenticity of the person or

interaction. It would be a lie to say that friendship made online does not matter to the members of the community. Cait was utterly devastated to lose the friend she had in Jeffie. In fact, I became very close to many members of the community throughout this project. For some, the online community becomes their only method of social interaction in the world. Thus, many members chase that scrap of “realness” in a conversation or identity.

To know a member’s face or a member’s location is a symbol of intimacy. Gabriel-mello once showed how close he was, and how much he was loved by, several women by showing me the various selfies he received from them. Cat showed her trust in me and our relationship by letting me hear her voice for the first time. Knowing more about a member’s “real” or offline life becomes a way for the community to gauge their intimacy with each other. As such, the community trusts that whatever information a member gives willingly is the truth.

Boellstorff had also observed instances of catfishing in Second Life. In one anecdote, he describes how David had lied about who he was to his online girlfriend, Emma. “I led her to believe I was a whole other person for a year and a half... not personality wise, but a different picture and occupation and everything...I guess at first a part of me thought of it as a game.” David goes on to express his ultimate regret at deceiving his girlfriend. The two eventually broke up their relationship, and “the sense of loss could be as intense as with an actual-world relationship,” (p170, 2015). David’s words are ironic. The two were in a game:

Second Life. And yet, David and Emma’s relationship showcases how games have impact beyond being a mere game. For many members of the community, in Second Life or League of Legends, the world can become something more than an escape, and friendships made become

just as important as those in the offline world. Trust and honesty, even about the anonymous physical body, are demanded from fellow users.

This is quite possibly the reason why transgender members such as Libra and Cat have such a challenging time acclimating to the community. Their goals and the values of the other members are dissonant. Whereas Libra's identity online may be the "true self," unfettered by societies' notions of gender, the other members believe that the "true self" lies in the offline world and the online community is simply a way for members to connect, akin to a telephone line or a long-distance window. Few times, I had wondered why this strict interpretation of an online persona was accepted in the community. Especially for a server that centered around video games, a form of escape from reality and identity play, why was the physical self so important for these gamers? It seemed strange that the urge to build a new identity was not encouraged but instead demonized.

Though these norms may seem to be entrenched deeply within the daily interactions of the members, the current social drama is proof that the community is changing. As newer members join the server, the older members are becoming outnumbered. More and more members are decrying toxic behavior, and administration is handing down harsher punishments onto members that may cross that imaginary and arbitrary line. Though "weeb," an insulting word meaning a western man that loves Japanese culture, seemed quite harmless to me in the beginning, server moderators have in the recent months banned the use of that word as it could "offend others."

The change is gradual. The server may take one step towards a more politically correct viewpoint before stepping backwards twice towards its old mindset. Even if the majority of the server becomes more amenable to the plights of trans women like Libra, nothing truly binding

may happen in the server for the administration needs to decide if certain acts or words are a banable offense.

Libra: It's nothing that can really be moderated. Just people showing their sociopathic tendencies.

Jessica: Yes

Libra: Toxicity etc. This all, it's just showing that people don't care.

Jessica: Pretty much this

Libra: and that's sad.

Here Libra and Jessica discuss how Cait was toying with a 16-year-old girl in another server. The young girl was romantically interested in Cait, and Cait faked her reciprocal interest. Cait posted the resulting conversation as a source of amusement in the main Discord server, laughing at the young girl for trusting her. Several members besides Libra and Jessica also voiced their discontent with her behavior. Ossify, in particular, was vocal in disapproval. He wanted Cait to apologize to the girl, but she responded that “she didn’t care about it, it’s online and the girl should know better.” Though Dmk, an admin, also expressed distaste for her actions, he didn’t believe that being malicious in another server was enough to ban Cait.

Instead, all the members could do was apply peer pressure and derisive remarks on the individual. In a sense, the communal disapproval even from a minority is important for causing change within the community. McFarland in his analysis of social drama states that “Resistance can arise in at least two forms: Passive and active. Passive resistance is a tacit, indirect subversion of the normative codes of schooling and is at most an expression of malcontent and critique...Many acts of passive resistance manifest as jokes,” (2004). Kennuy and Naga joking

about Muse, libra, and other marginalized members of the community is an example of resistance against the changing demographics that encroach upon their safe space. Libra's critiques and complaints are examples of resistance against the prevailing norm that necessitates her to constantly hide her identity. Only time will tell how the community will change, but it is certain that once these complaints have been voiced, the community needed to address these issues. Once Muse voiced his grievances about toxicity aimed towards him and his youth, the community must think critically about the nature of toxicity to debate its legitimacy within the community. Even if the members were to decide that his complaints are unfounded, the nature of toxicity will be redefined and adjusted

Anthropologist Sally Moore, as cited in Victor Turner's *Anthropology of performance*, states "Processes of situational adjustment involve both the exploitation of indeterminacies in sociocultural situations and the actual generation of such indeterminacies... a model of social reality as basically fluid and indeterminate, though transformable for a time into something more fixed through regularizing processes." (p10, 1987) Small pockets of resistance keeps the community in flow, changing. Perhaps because the internet is so new compared to societies in the offline world, the changes seem to happen more rapidly.

Marciano says "For transgender individuals, the alternative world is parallel to the offline world. What distinguishes between these worlds is neither the temporariness nor the tentativeness of the activity" (2014). However, this applies to more than just transgender individuals. The online world is a parallel world for many of its users, no less important than its offline counterpart. In this world, the users must maintain a constant identity, a network of support and relationships, just as they might in other social settings in school or work. One

cannot trivialize this game community no matter how short a time the users spend on the game itself, no matter how “unimportant” contemporary society may deem the hobby.

In Conclusion

In conducting this research, I must regretfully acknowledge some shortcomings. I am aware that the ratio of men to women amongst my informants is quite disparate. The ratio is similar to the player base found in League of Legends, as 90% to 85% of the players are men, according to the game company RIOT. Despite my intentions to talk to more women, the women that joined the server were either not very active or left rather quickly. With that in mind, the active women on the server may be a skewed demographic and does not represent other female gamers in League of Legends. Similarly the population is skewed towards young people, ages 15 to 25, but that is not too uncommon for a game community. Perhaps older games may have an older or more varied demographic, but League of Legends has existed for a scant 8 years.

Though I have analyzed at length the interactions between trans women members and the rest of the server members, I have been leaving the counterpart mostly ignored. I mentioned in the second chapter that several members of the server believed that there are no trans men in the server as it provides them with "no benefit" to pretend to be a man. Obviously the viewpoint is quite biased and members that are truly trans can explain that they aren't "pretending" to be a man and rather truly feel that they are a man, disregarding biological gender. However, I do wonder if the member was in some parts correct in saying that trans men number little to none in the server.

Cat and Libra have had to announce their trans status out of necessity: Libra for honesty in a romantic relationship and Cat in order to reject romantic suitors. Josie, another prominent trans

member, was special in that they transitioned from being referred to by male pronouns as a default to asking members to use feminine pronouns throughout the course of their stay online. However, for Cat and Libra, it seemed inevitable that the truth of their biological gender would become public knowledge; the suitors that were told often treated their biological gender as a dirty secret. In a way, the trans women are also encouraged to pre-emptively announce their transgender status in order to dissuade any "straight" men from courting them. A common thread between their circumstances seem to be that as a woman, they were being pursued. They couldn't conceal their trans status without feeling morally obligated to inform their potential partner. As the men of the server are usually the ones aggressively pursuing the female members, unless the trans men members of the server initiate the courting process, the trans men are less likely to find themselves in an online relationship. Thus, those members are less pressured to release their birth gender.

Of course, this isn't proof that no trans men exist on the server. However, I have not had the ability to speak to any, first hand, due to the relative ease in which they blend into the community. If no trans men confess their birth gender to me, then I would not know whether or not that member was born a man or a woman. The fact that I could not interview trans men is a bit of a tragedy--I wanted to know if they, like the trans women of the servers, consciously used linguistic speech patterns to fit their preferred gender. Do trans men act more "toxic" in order to erase any suspicions of femininity that members may have about them? Would server members view the truth of a trans man's birth gender with as much inherent betrayal as trans women without the overture of romantic drama? I almost think that since the stigma of catfishing, pretending to be a woman to garner economic benefit, is not as closely associated to trans men,

knowledge of a trans man's existence would be received more gracefully and without too much blame and shame piled upon the person.

In a similar vein, I've expounded upon Catfishers, men pretending to be women, but I have not talked at length about women that pretend to be men. My chapter on feminine discourse may make women seem like a passive participant in the social norms of the community, but there must be women that go against the norm. As I've explained in Chapter Two, another member's constant and aggressive romantic messages are not always well received. In fact, these messages are a source of discomfort for many women, and plenty of creepy "DMs," direct messages, have been compiled as an advisory list for what men should not write online. Of course, a woman that pretends to be a man in this community would be free from the daily harassment that plagues the publicly known women in the server. Additionally, they may be afforded greater respect from the male players. Whether a woman plays well or badly, her skill level may take a backseat to her gender.

"You played well for a girl," or "It's okay if you did bad. Just let your boyfriend carry you." Are common comments flung around. It must be frustrating for a player to practice her skill in the game only for her gender to invalidate her efforts. When I first entered the server, I assumed that plenty of women would hide their gender online.

However, it seemed that my intuition was wrong. Most of the women in the server seemed to feel that it was important to be recognized as a woman on the server. Several reasons were given: too much work to pretend to be another gender, wanting to be seen by their identity and not as someone else, enjoying the attention online. However, this isn't proof that there aren't women pretending to be men. Once again, as with transgender men, I wouldn't know of their existence

without one of the informants telling me so. To my knowledge, none of my regular informants ever catfished as a man—they've sent me many pictures of their supposed selves.

Women could also push back against these cultural norms without donning the mask of another gender. So far, I have written how men and women on the server fall into these stereotypes without much deviation. However, there have been some women that purposely go against the feminine linguistic patterns or the pattern of being placed into support conscientiously. Tiff, a young 19 year old girl on the server, reported that she refused to play support for her online friends.

“I dislike being support. It’s boring, number 1 ...but also I feel like I’m feeding in to a stereotype.” Despite many women on the server choosing to become support, Tiff loudly stated that she refused to “bend to the norm.” In fact, Tiff felt that women acquiescing and accepting their support role added to the problem of how women were viewed on the internet.

***Tiff:** I play Top for that reason.*

***Yelim:** Because it’s somehow manly?*

***Tiff:** Because it’s something that they expect an egirl to avoid. All these girls going support, sorry cuz u play support too, give girls a bad rep of being carried.*

Tiff believed that for women to gain the respect of the male players on the server, they have to become comfortable in a role that was independent. Top lane, for example, is nicknamed the “island” as a player is largely on their own in that role. In the process of advocating for “women’s rights” on the server however, Tiff belittled the women of the server who were comfortable in their role as an egirl or who did not feel the need to particularly differentiate

themselves from the typical egirl. Her radical view also garnered much controversy from her peers, both women and men. “*She’s insecure.*” Gabe said. He was certain that Tiff was compensating for the lack of attention she received compared to other (more attractive, he noted) women. One girl noted, “*It’s like she’s acting better than us. I don’t know what right she has to act that way.*”

If I had more time, I think I would have liked to explore the topic of social justice and gender on the server. I partially believe that the lack of social awareness is a large obstruction to this topic of research. However, as demographics are changing, and more women seem to be joining the server, as well as more women joining the League of Legends game overall, the attitude on what is acceptable or expected from a woman seems to be changing. Far fewer women and men are accepting of how women are treated and harassed in game. There have been several topics on the Reddit (The forum the Discord originates from) calling to attention how women become either the unwanted center of attention or are ignored into submission in voice chats. Given enough analysis, the topic may have been a good point of discussion for Chapter Three and how the server is changing through conflict and drama.

Another topic that I would have liked to explore further is intimacy between the queer members of the server. Over the course of the paper, I have focused on mostly heteronormative actions and ideals—partially due to the fact that heterosexual men dictate the ruling mindset in the server. However, queer members, both men and women, do exist in the server. Though I cannot say that there was a large sample of queer members, the few that I did know were quite vocal about their sexuality. Joe, for example, constantly flaunted how attracted he was to certain men (either members of the servers or celebrities) and posted unabashedly his nudes in the “Not

safe for work” channel. He seemed almost fueled by the heterosexual members’ exasperation and reveled in inserting coy pictures of himself amongst numerous pictures of attractive female porn stars.

Other members, such as Hraas and Cat, considered themselves gay and lesbian respectively but did not loudly announce that status. Both have been pursued by men and women and have had their fair share of romantic trysts online. Given more time, I would have liked to compare how homosexual relationships compare to heterosexual relationships, given the almost strict 50’s gender role aspect of heterosexual relationships. In a relationship without the masculine “carry,” how does the aspect of skill in League of Legends intertwine in their interactions? Is there still a sense of hierarchy in which a skilled player “carries” their less-skilled more feminine partner? What does the economy of skins and the meaning of “gifting” a cosmetic skin to the significant other mean? Is there still relationships that have been founded on one person economically benefiting from their partner? In comparison to offline relationships, I cannot help but wonder if the stereotypical Butch vs Femme roles exist in queer relationships on the League of Legends servers. Would being more butch or being more femme affect a member’s linguistic pattern?

I have a certain affinity to this particular subject matter, as I too have played video games, perhaps not League of Legends specifically, for a long time. I have made friends both long-lasting and fleeting online and in “real life,” through the mutual joy of exploring a new and unfamiliar, fantastical world together. In some way, I feel a certain kinship with those of my field site—I feel as if we have walked a similar path of societal judgement. In some way, I feel a certain kind of responsibility as an anthropologist to make this strange and vibrant cybernetic world familiar to the larger public audience. Video games and video gamers have received such a

bad reputation of being violent or encouraging anti-social or avoidant behavior; I want to give a chance for these unheard voices to speak amidst the negative media.

“Yelim-ah” My Mom called out to me, “Playing Video games all day...you know they call those people ‘otaku.’ Fanatics. Video games will get you nowhere, no job, no love.” Otaku, primarily a Japanese word in origin, describing a demographic of youth obsessed (with anything but primarily) the virtual world. These youths supposedly leech upon their parents money and contribute nothing of use to society. And yet, I see professional gamers on screen making millions of dollars. I’ve talked to young high schoolers and despondent college-dropouts that have dreamed to play games for a living. Young men and women have found and lost love on the intricate webs of circuitry, the lush landscape of the League of Legends field that we may spend up to 10 hours a day on.

“Yelim-ah,” My Mom says over the phone. “Are you sure you don’t want to do Biology? Anthropology seems so...unpredictable.”

I sit down and power up the computer. The light of the screen illuminates the dark room. It’s 2am and so many people are online. Some are winding down from a day of work or school. Others are just getting up and starting their day. Still others have no other professional obligation and play league all the time.

Yelim: Hello!

Hy: Hello!!! BEST GIRL!!!

Yelim: Lol Hy, hello to you too.

I smile and listen to the conversation on the voice channel. Loud and vibrant, filled with jargon of the online age that I do not yet fully understand. Hy’s Australian accent is hesitant at

first but grows louder the longer he debates with Saku over the importance of “buying” a specific item in the game.

I am transported back to a time familiar yet different, not League of Legends but something similar, where I too feverishly looked up advice on a game in the dark of the night while parents were asleep.

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