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Balancing Gender Identity and Gamer Identity: Gender Issues Faced by Wang 'BaiZe' Xinyu at the 2017 *Hearthstone* Summer Championship

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Abstract

This article examines a terrain in which gender inclusion remains a challenge: competitive esports. In the male-dominated sphere of esports, the underrepresentation of women and nonbinary people often leaves these marginalized groups invisible, with a significant lack of women and nonbinary people competing in top-tier tournaments. We highlight the experience of Wang 'BaiZe' Xinyu, a Chinese *Hearthstone* player who became the first woman to compete in a *Hearthstone* Championship Tour event in the game's 3-year history. The narrative surrounding BaiZe's participation largely focused on her gender and ignored the achievements that led her to qualify for the event. We argue that BaiZe's entrance to

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the championship scene was received negatively by both competitors and spectators, reinforcing barriers that exclude women and nonbinary people from entering this male-dominated space. The discrimination faced by these esports competitors reinforces sexism inherent not only in *Hearthstone* but also in esports in general.

Keywords
gender, competitive gaming, *Hearthstone*, gender in games, esports

Wang 'BaiZe' Xinyu, a Chinese *Hearthstone* player, commentator, and streamer, was the first woman to compete in a *Hearthstone* Championship Tour (HCT) event in the game's 3-year history at the 2017 HCT Summer Championship in Los Angeles, CA. The narrative surrounding BaiZe's participation largely focused on her gender, ignoring the achievements that led her to one of 16 coveted positions at the event. Many competitors and spectators reacted negatively to BaiZe's entrance to the championship scene, which reinforced barriers that excluded women and nonbinary people from entering this male-dominated space.

Esports take the form of organized, multiplayer video game competitions, particularly between professional players. The activity has achieved wild popularity over the past decade due to advances in broadband Internet and gaming. As Jin (2010) points out, understanding esports is complex because of the relative novelty of the industry as well as the "convergence of culture, technology, sport, and business" (p. 61). Esports have been covered extensively in academic literature from its rise as a major form of entertainment to its fit within the defining characteristics of "sport" (Jenny, Manning, Kelper, & Olrich, 2017; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; T. L. Taylor, 2012). *Hearthstone* has received little scholarly attention, most of which has focused on statistical modeling and artificial intelligence (García-Sánchez, Tonda, Mora, Squillero, & Merelo, 2018; Goes et al., 2017; Stiegler, Dahal, Maucher, & Livingstone, 2018) but has not been the focus of any academic articles focusing on community and esports spaces since its launch in early 2014. Its uniqueness as an emerging esport and its rising global popularity demand further analysis. This article seeks to herald the successes, failures, issues, and opportunities that may arise from the game as its popularity continues to skyrocket.

Issues surrounding gender discrimination are not uncommon in the sphere of esports, as women and nonbinary people are prime targets of judgment in a male-dominated space. Gender, feminism, and sexism are not new topics in game studies; in fact, academics have been writing, presenting, and arguing about masculinity in the video game industry for well over a decade (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Jenson & de Castell, 2008). At the heart of this article lies an important question: Does gender discrimination permeate *Hearthstone* as it does other games in esports despite its de-emphasis of hypercompetitive play, or does it continue to exist since it belongs in a male-dominated space? The present article describes BaiZe's experience at the 2017 HCT Summer Championship and how power relations played out with the inclusion

of subordinated groups. As the first woman to compete at an HCT event, BaiZe's experience was unique, and the tournament's commentators and participants highlighted her gender as a central focus throughout.

This article is framed strictly from an Americanized media standpoint, which means that reactions and interpretations of the tournament experience are taken from players, casters (esports commentators), and members of the *Hearthstone* community who interpreted the experiences of BaiZe and other players from an American cultural perspective. This approach begins with Foucault's (2012) premise that the social discourses are socially constructed according to dominant power structures. In addition to the personal communication between the authors and BaiZe, secondary sources offer insight for the discourse analysis. Hall (1997, p. 4) argues that discourse "governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about," which means that discourse also limits other ways of describing a situation. The article examines the actions of players that competed against BaiZe at the 2017 *Hearthstone* Summer Championship and the discourse surrounding her participation of the event's organizer and developer, Blizzard Entertainment. The discrimination faced by female and nonbinary esports competitors exacerbates the sexism inherent not only in *Hearthstone* but also in esports in general.

Esports as a "Male Space"

While girls and women have been and still are less visible as gamers, that does not mean they are not playing, and the case of BaiZe at the 2017 HCT Summer Championship is certainly not the first time the relationship between female gamers and video games has been discussed (Bryce & Rutter, 2003; Chess, 2017; Jenson & de Castell, 2005, 2010, 2011; Kafai, Heeter, Denner, & Sun, 2008). Scholars such as Bryce and Rutter (2005, p. 2) "challenge the myth of gaming as a male-only activity" and argue that female gamers do exist but are discouraged from playing video games and, if they do participate, are "often rendered 'invisible' by male-dominated gaming communities." If these women do become visible in the male-dominated games industry, they are typically seen as "oddballs," "anomalies," or "intruders" rather than inhabitants of gaming culture (Hjorth, Na, & Huhh, 2009, pp. 254–255).

The difference between boys and girls in terms of their preference of leisure activities has also been explored thoroughly in academic literature. Britton's (2000) article raises a pivotal point in the broad concept of gendered organizations, positing the idea that if organizations are inherently gendered, it "implies that they have been defined, conceptualized, and structured in terms of a distinction between masculinity and femininity … and will thus inevitably reproduce gendered differences" (p. 419). Women's involvement in computer and video games has been chronicled as an activity met with low interest. As Hartmann and Klimmt (2006, p. 910) detail in their article, many studies conducted in social science, such as psychology, "report that girls and young women display less interest in digital games, have less game-related knowledge, and play less frequently and for shorter durations

than do boys and young men." This may explain why we see fewer women and nonbinary people in esports but does not justify their absence from this space.

As Shen, Ratan, Cai, and Leavitt (2016, p. 315) further show:

> The gendered behavioral patterns contribute to a self-fulfilling cycle: The less women are attracted or committed to competitive gaming, the less experienced or worse-performing they become compared to men ... The gender performance gap then reinforces the "men are better at games" stereotype, which leads to decreased competence, beliefs, motivation, and performance of women.

Consalvo and Harper (2009) find that perceived gender-based performance disparities resulted from factors that are confounded with gender, such as the time spent playing video games, and not player gender itself. The stereotype of female and nonbinary players as inferior is not only false but also a potential cause for unequal participation in digital gaming. With a growing number of women in the game playing market (Casti, 2014), this perception of inferiority may lead to dissipation of accessibility issues for women gamers.

Studies have also focused on female and nonbinary participation in competitive contexts and the barriers, both psychological and institutional, that they face while engaged in competitive formats (Bryce & Rutter, 2003). While "computer gaming may be perceived as a masculine activity, its complexity regularly offers sites for female participation and resistance to societal gender roles and conceptions of masculinity and femininity" (Bryce & Rutter, 2005, p. 4). As Yee (2008) notes, women are more likely to cite the game culture rather than the nature of the game as a deterrent to participation. The notion that women are just inherently not going to ever be as good at computer games as men is "all too common," as T. L. Taylor (2012, p. 117) notes that conversations in competitive environments can "certainly be smattered with misogynistic or, at the least, retrograde notions about women." For gaming environments, this means that additional measures must be taken to make gaming environments safer for women and nonbinary people. Sports and video games can each be sites where women, through asserting themselves and seeking inclusion, challenge gender stereotypes in varied and even contradictory ways and potentially gain power in and make changes to a highly masculinized space (Kissane & Winslow, 2016). Considering the structural barriers and social isolation women players often face in public, competitive spaces, women are one of the most dedicated player demographics around, given increasingly high participation rates (T. L. Taylor, 2008).

Numerous anecdotal and research accounts (Fox & Tang, 2014; Fullerton, Fron, Pearce, & Morie, 2008; Gray, Buyukozturk, & Hill, 2017; Ivory, Fox, Waddell, & Ivory, 2014; Shen, Ratan, Cai, & Leavitt, 2016) claim that gaming communities and the game industry are often hostile to women and nonbinary people, fraught with gender stereotypes, sexism, and harassment. Researchers have cautioned that the unlevel playing field around gender in online gaming spaces and that, while harassment directed at female and nonbinary players in gaming spaces has been widely known among gamers,

it has only recently become part of larger public discourse. As scholars have highlighted, a major focusing event that facilitated this issue's entrance into the larger discourse is GamerGate, a 2014 online movement concerned with ethics in game journalism and with protecting the "gamer" identity (Gray et al., 2017; Mortensen, 2018; Salter, 2018). This event particularly focuses on the patriarchal undercurrent guided by "systemic sexism [that] structures the industry and gaming culture as a whole to the extent that the very idea of integrating elements of feminism into video games was read as actual evidence of a conspiracy" (Chess & Shaw, 2015, pp. 208–209).

Issues remain for girls struggling to find acceptance in public gaming environments. The conflict between male identity, hegemonic masculinity, and gamer identity, as we discuss in the following section, has been alleviated in recent years as male gamers can adopt one of several neoliberal masculinities to embrace without fear of exclusion from gaming communities. Voorhees and Orlando (2018) explain how neoliberal masculinity is performed in the context of team-based games, illustrating a compelling example of how each member of Cloud9's *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* team performs a different style of masculinity. Girls and women, however, can only embrace either a gamer identity or a gender identity in this sphere, which may lead to misrepresentation of the identity that they want to embrace (Paaßen, Morgenroth, & Stratemeyer, 2017). Men perceive a stronger overlap between their gendered identity and their gamer identity, facilitating social identification and self-stereotyping. For women, the opposite is likely to happen, argues T. L. Taylor (2012): Because their gendered identity conflicts with the gamer identity, they may be less likely to describe themselves in terms of the gamer stereotype.

Hegemonic Masculinity in Male Gaming Spaces

Video games have been perceived as a stereotypically masculine space. Because of gender differences in aggressive tendencies and behaviors, events that focus on dominance, extreme competitiveness, aggression, violence, or war are prevalent in many competitive esports. In traditional sports, men and women are segregated on basic biological differences: Higher testosterone levels make it easier to build muscle, strength, and power. The same ornamental and secondary roles of women that are well-established in the domain of professional sports, such as the roles of cheerleaders and swimsuit models in *Sports Illustrated*, are being replicated in the esports industry (N. Taylor, Jenson, & de Castell, 2009, p. 240). Sport faces challenges in escaping gendered social order and, therefore, remains a site to support hegemonic masculinity. Scholars such as Kane (1996) have pushed against this notion and have cited the power that the media has in changing the perception of women athletes, noting that "... [w]e have begun to see examples in which the media appear to be responding to criticism by portraying women as athletes rather than as caricatures" (p. 125). This reinforcement of gendered social order in sport perpetuates women's disempowerment, where "negative

evaluations of women's capacities are implicit in the masculine hegemony in which sport is embedded" (Farrell, Fink, & Fields, 2011, p. 191).

According to Connell (1995), hegemonic masculinity is defined as the "configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (p. 77). What is powerful about the formulation is that hegemonic masculinity, T. L. Taylor (2012, p. 113) notes, is that "it exists in relation to not only femininity but in relation to varying forms of masculinity that are contextually and historically situated, stratified, and often in contest." To put this into context, hegemonic masculinity derives from notions such as "the ideal male form, physical domination, and strength, technological mastery" (p. 113).

The construction of a masculinized culture has also helped reinforce masculine behavior between male members of the community in which they participate. Interactions with other male players in networked video games provide opportunities to create bonding experiences that may "reinforce masculine norms in the video game setting, and in the promotion of the ingroup (males) may continue to demean or isolate the outgroup (females)" (Fox & Tang, 2014, p. 315). Sport sociologist Richard Giulianotti (1999) coins the term "stopper" as factors, such as age, gender, and ethnicity, that prevent social actors "from gaining full or even partial access to the economic and social resources within a society" (p. 171). Witkowski's (2012) experience in researching location-based (LAT) players highlights the presence of "stoppers" at seasonal nationwide gaming circuits that restricts access for a variety of LAT players. In addition, online gaming environments feature the opportunity for anonymous participation through streaming services, such as Twitch.tv and YouTube, and social media websites geared toward male gamers, such as Reddit and 4Chan.

Fox and Tang (2014, p. 317) note that "participants who endorse masculine norms are more likely to report sexist attitudes about women's participation in video games." These spaces not only discourage women and nonbinary people from participating in discussions and gaining experiences related to games but are also where they are harassed and subjected to sexist attitudes. The "mechanics of the male gamer stereotype lead to the marginalization of women in video game culture," which could "lead to negative psychological outcomes for women such as feeling unwelcome, isolated, or like a misfit in a hobby that is otherwise appealing" (Paaßen et al., 2017, p. 429). Ironically, an imbalanced playing field where women are typically excluded "penalizes men's masculinity when bested by a woman, but also punishes women for being in an arena where they are assumed not to belong" (Richard, 2016, p. 73). This concept is directly related to BaiZe's experience where she, as the first female to participate in an HCT championship, was thrust into a lose-lose situation, where failure was interpreted as a setback for female gamers, and success received with harassment from competitors saddled with defeat.

Hearthstone

Developed and published by Blizzard Entertainment, *Hearthstone* is a free-to-play, digital-only collectible card game (CCG) that was released worldwide on March 11, 2014. CCGs are those in which a basic set of cards is supplemented over time with expansions containing new cards and strategies. The game is a turn-based card game between two opponents, each of whom uses constructed decks of 30 cards along with a selected hero with a unique power, with the goal of reducing the opponent's health to zero. According to codeveloper Eric Dodds (as cited in Wawro, 2014, para. 5), the game's inception was inspired by the desire for the company to "develop something more experimental with a smaller team in contrast to their larger projects, and [by] the shared love of collectible card games throughout the company."

Hearthstone's slogan is "Deceptively Simple, Insanely Fun." The game appeals to hard-core and casual gamers alike; the game provides a fun, easy, and simple playing experience that allows more complexity as players collect more cards. The game's name is meant to imply "a close gathering of friends by a hearth," a goal of what the game's developers want players to feel (Stanton, 2013). This is a step away from Blizzard Entertainment's aggregation of "hard-core" games such as those included in the *Warcraft*, *Diablo*, and *StarCraft* franchises. The relaxed approach incorporated in the development of *Hearthstone* was prioritized due to the arrival of digital download platforms such as Xbox Live and the Apple App Store, which included thousands of start-up projects that could appeal to much larger audiences, including those who were not familiar with video games. *Hearthstone* is adapted to play on mobile devices and is available for free on the Apple App Store and Google Play, resulting in an influx of "casual" gamers to the game. This is evident in many of the game's features including its emphasis on casual play, its low-stakes Tavern Brawl game mode, and "Fireside Gatherings," which are real-world gatherings that encourage players to meet and play face-to-face in public settings.

Many of *Hearthstone*'s players are considered "casual" gamers and the difference in commitment between downloading a free-to-play app and investing in other CCGs, such as buying packs in *Magic: The Gathering*, for example, is significant. Casual games stand in opposition to what are considered "hard-core games"—while "hard-core" games "tend to be expensive, difficult to learn and master, and time consuming, a 'casual' game is cheap, easy to learn, and can be played for variable amounts of time" (Chess, 2017, p. 13). As Anable (2013, para. 1) points out, casual games constitute a broad genre but share basic similarities, such as "having simple graphics and mechanics, usually being based on browsers or apps, and that are free or cost very little to play." Popular examples of "casual" games available on mobile devices are *Bejeweled* and *Candy Crush*. That these games can be played in two ways puts pressure on the developers to cater to several different audiences at the same time, which constitutes an issue that *Hearthstone* has struggled with particularly as the game continues to evolve.

Hearthstone also differs from mainstream hypercompetitive esports such as *League of Legends* and *Dota 2*. Developers of *Hearthstone* have noted that its esports

division appeals to a relatively small group of people, and its popularity as an esport on live streaming platforms such as Twitch.tv is smaller than other games' but rapidly increasing in global viewership. In October 2017, *Hearthstone* was the second most watched game on Twitch.tv with 33.1 million total hours of content. In all 6.4 million hours of this time were "esports hours," which equates to 19.3%, with the remaining share of time devoted to casual and noncompetitive play. This share is miniscule compared to the other games that make up the most watched games over that month long span: *League of Legends*' 94.3 million total hours consisted of 39.6% esports hours, *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*'s 28.3 million total hours consisted of 54.8% esports hours, and *Dota 2*'s 31.6 million hours consisted of 46.2% esports hours. This difference could be attributed to several reasons, but as Minotti (2017) notes, 86% of digital card game players watch online videos of other people playing digital card games, and many watch to learn new strategies.

As noted in this article's introduction, the saturation of casual gamers in *Hearthstone* presents an interesting case in how its in-game community differs from more esports-centric games. When judging the player base of *Hearthstone* by its participants in official esports events, one would assume the game is exclusively played by 18- to 35-year-old males in North America, Europe, and Asia. Due to the lack of official demographic statistics published by Blizzard, it is unknown what sorts of player segments are represented in and are attracted to the game. In the following sections, we introduce the emergence of esports as a major spectator sport, the reinforcement of the domain as a "male" arena, the concept of masculinity regularly exercised by male players and spectators of the game, and the challenges facing the inclusion of female and nonbinary competitors to *Hearthstone*. The following section will review typical competitive gaming environments in order to provide a reference for comparison for the case of BaiZe's participation in the 2017 HCT Summer Championship.

Balancing Gender and Skill: BaiZe's Appearance at the 2017 HCT Summer Championship

Wang 'BaiZe' Xinyu is a former professional *Hearthstone* player from China. Her road to the 2017 HCT Summer Championship in Los Angeles culminated in the 2017 Summer Gold Series in Shanghai, a final roadblock in the qualification process. Thirty-two players competed for the chance to become one of four Chinese qualifiers for the HCT Summer Championship, a grueling slate that involved countless hours of competitive gameplay for up to 2 weeks. BaiZe narrowly qualified for the second group stage with a 4-3 record in Swiss play, becoming one of the final eight competitors. Her luck would run short in this second round, however, as she narrowly finished outside of the top four in fifth/sixth place, meaning that her dreams of competing in Los Angeles would have ended. Following this unfortunate setback, she unexpectedly qualified for the competition as an alternate after fellow Chinese player, popularly known as "jiajia," was denied a U.S. visa.[1] The entry into the tournament meant that she would be the first woman to compete in an HCT world event in the game's short 3-year history.

BaiZe's involvement in games started early in her life, citing her experience playing *Dota* as her "esports enlightenment" long before she picked up *Hearthstone*. In an interview with the authors, she noted that she spent most of the spare time in her life on games. Like jiajia, BaiZe was relatively unknown outside China's *Hearthstone* scene before the 2017 HCT Summer Championship, having only qualified for the Wild Open in July 2017, where she advanced to the quarterfinals. At the time of her qualification, she was a member of Star Horn Royal Club, a Chinese gaming organization best known for its *League of Legends* team that reached the game's World Championship final twice in 2013 and 2014. Her defining feature in the HCT Summer Championship was her use of unorthodox decks, using cards that were not used by any of the 15 other competitors at the event.

The game's infamous lack of female and nonbinary competitors was magnified in the days leading up to the beginning of the tournament, with significant media attention surrounding BaiZe's participation as the game's first female gamer in a world championship event. Detractors pointed to the unimpressive history of women in professional gaming as a sign that women were inferior players; according to Li (2017, p. 133), they "scoff that only two female pro players have made more than $100,000 in prize money . . . . Over three hundred men and boys have surpassed that mark."[2] In a prerecorded interview, Pavel Beltukov, *Hearthstone*'s 2016 world champion and BaiZe's first-round opponent in the 2017 HCT Summer Championship, opened his thoughts of his opponent, stating that "[t]he only thing I know is that she's a girl . . . and that's it" (PlayHearthstone, 2017a, 4:33:20). Beltukov's interpretation was not novel: Scholars claim that perceived player skill is influenced by opponent gender and trait competitiveness (Vermeulen, Núñez Castellar, & Van Looy, 2014, p. 307). In addition, he discredited BaiZe's motivation for playing in the tournament itself, suggesting that "I think that she's thinking about what places she should visit in Los Angeles" (PlayHearthstone, 2017a, 4:33:30). Although Beltukov attributed the lack of BaiZe's biographical information to a difference in media platforms between his native country, Russia, and Baize's native home of China, it is interesting that he noted her gender as her primary trait heading into a major competition due to the bias against female gamers in digital competitions.

Beltukov perpetuated the notion of competitive gaming to be a "male" space and that female gamers would rather be spending their time outside this space. This selection of expectations reflects a central tenet of gender role theory, through which Kidder (2002, p. 630) suggests that "individuals internalize cultural expectations about their gender because social pressures external to the individual favor behavior consistent with their prescribed gender role." Women are "encouraged to be social and caring, and to maintain relationships, but also to avoid activities construed as masculine" (Williams, Consalvo, Caplan, and Yee, 2009, pp. 703–704). From what we know of massively multiplayer online games and video games, as Williams et al. (2009) point out, these spaces remain heavily focused on achievement and competition. BaiZe's personal experiences reaffirm this notion, as she recalls situations where, "[m]y opponents joked that they lost to me because they were giving me an

easy pass, because I was a woman. Or [they would complain] losing to me (a woman) was too humiliating" (Personal communication, April 23, 2019). She believes her male opponents would do this in search of excuses for their defeat, blatantly displaying a lack of acknowledgment and respect for the skills BaiZe put forth in defeating them.

This practice of highlighting gender over skill is not uncommon in an esports setting, and gender was a point of emphasis for casters commentating on BaiZe's progress throughout the tournament. The media strategy to play up her gender throughout the broadcast was recognized immediately by fans and required a repudiation of intent to novelize BaiZe's inclusion in the tournament. Dan "Frodan" Chou, a well-known caster in the *Hearthstone* community and a commentator for this first-round match, opened the match with the following disclaimer:

> . . . now I know what you're thinking: are we playing up the fact that BaiZe is only different because she's female and it's not true at all. If you look at her decklist and lineup, she's also got some unusual choices. (PlayHearthstone, 2017a, 4:34:20)

Despite this disassociation from the fact that gender was a topic throughout the broadcast, BaiZe would receive different treatment from that of her male opponents.

The first of two prerecorded interviews with BaiZe that were broadcast during the match largely focused on her experience competing in *Hearthstone* as a woman. BaiZe noted that this angle was not new, as interviews during domestic tournaments also largely focused on her gender instead of her preparation and strategies. She explains, "They were always asking what I thought [of the situation] as a female contestant . . . they asked these kinds of questions for more than 2 years. Every single time, my answers changed very little" (Personal communication, April 23, 2019). When asked about her personal experience in competing as a woman at the 2017 HCT Summer Championship, she answered:

> I get asked about this a lot, and I don't think competing in *Hearthstone* has anything to do with gender. There definitely are some players who underestimate me, but it doesn't matter. When we're playing, the outcome is decided by the match itself. There are actually a lot of female *Hearthstone* players in China. If you go to the offline tournaments, there's a lot of women there. Maybe they need an example of someone to follow. (PlayHearthstone, 2017a, 4:47:00)

BaiZe's participation seeks to improve access for female gamers in a game that differs from other esports in two ways. First, *Hearthstone* as a digital CCG does not carry the stigma of being violent and aggressive and emulates a setting of "a close gathering of friends by a hearth," as discussed earlier. Second, the game's broad appeal to casual gamers creates a more accepting space for women and nonbinary people in a more competitive atmosphere, while separating the game itself from the hypercompetitive esports events that produce communities that are defined by

Table 1. Questions Asked in Prerecorded Interviews Broadcast During Elimination Match Between BaiZe and Cocosasa.

Cocosasa	BaiZe
Why do you think you perform well in *Hearthstone*?	What is your favorite thing about *Hearthstone*?
What do you enjoy about *Hearthstone*?	What are your other hobbies?
What is your overall tournament strategy?	Who is your favorite *Hearthstone* player?
What is the difference in strategy between your playoff appearance and the HCT Summer Championship?	In a movie about your life, who would play the leading role?

hegemonic or "geek" masculinity. Scholars (Ratan, Taylor, Hogan, Kennedy, & Williams, 2015; Shen et al., 2016) have found that women outnumber men as players of "casual" games, though it is rare to see these casual gamers occupy a space dedicated to competitive esports.

BaiZe's second prerecorded interview, aired in her elimination match versus Chang-Hyun "cocosasa" Kim, a male player from South Korea, highlighted the discrepancy between the questions that Blizzard geared toward male and female players. Table 1 shows the questions presented to BaiZe and cocosasa in separate interviews (PlayHearthstone, 2017b). In assessing the disparate coverage, first, the questions presented to cocosasa were employed to give viewers deeper insights to his skills as a player, whereas those presented to BaiZe shifted attention away from her skill by, in one example, asking what other activities she enjoyed outside *Hearthstone*. In addition, the third question "Who is your favorite *Hearthstone* player?" focused on players other than herself, deflecting attention away from her own skill and to her male peers. The casters of this series, T. J. Sanders and Nathan "Admirable" Zamora, responded sarcastic responses to the questions offered to BaiZe, with Sanders ridiculing the interview, "I feel like we learned a lot there," and Admirable cynically agreeing, "Yup" (PlayHearthstone, 2017b, 6:29:10).

One incident that transpired during BaiZe and cocosasa's second round game raised eyebrows and spurred controversy within the *Hearthstone* community. In the opening match of the best-of-five series, the evenly contested bout featured BaiZe's unique Shaman deck and cocosasa's Priest deck, with neither player taking a decisive advantage in the first nine turns. Following the acquisition of the card "Thrall, Deathseer," cocosasa acquired the Hero Power "Transmute Spirit," which could transform a friendly minion into a random minion costing one more mana. With this ability in hand, he used it to evolve one of his minions on his next turn. The minion he summoned, Prophet Velen, provided a potential game-changing swing in momentum. Pleased with the result, he lifted his hand and waved. Sanders immediately responded with surprise, exclaiming, "Did he just wave bye? He just waved goodbye to BaiZe in this game" (PlayHearthstone, 2017b, 5:57:00). There was no

initial reaction from BaiZe and no further gestures of exultation from cocosasa, and the players resumed the match as if nothing occurred. Reaction from the *Hearthstone* community, however, ranged from outrage toward his act to defending the wave. Some fans viewed his behavior as unsportsmanlike, with some referring to him as "BM," an acronym for "bad-mannered," popularly used by Korean gamers (Calixto, 2017). BaiZe herself notes that she did not even notice the gesture during the match, citing her full concentration on the game itself. However, she condemned the action by saying that players should not make movements irrelevant to the game itself to affect opponents. She says, "I did not like his behavior, but I would not elevate [the gesture] to the level of ill-mannered. It is simply something that I would not appreciate" (Personal communication, April 23, 2019).

Others thought it might discourage women like BaiZe from competing in future competitive *Hearthstone* tournaments. *Hearthstone* caster Cora "Songbird" Georgiou noted the difficulties associated with being a woman in the male-dominated *Hearthstone* tournament scene but argued that the disrespect she received was not a surprise. Georgiou says,

> [s]he was put in the difficult position of not just being a player in the HCT Championship, however. Whether she liked it or not, she was the first woman to qualify for a Championship and she had to carry the weight of expectations and community perception on her shoulders. (Personal communication, January 11, 2019)

Streamer "Mackenseize" affirms this notion, regarding her participation as nonconsequential. "I don't think BaiZe should go into a tournament with the fact she's a woman in the forefront in her mind. She should go in thinking about her decks, matchups, bans, etc. Anything else but that" (Personal communication, November 18, 2018). Participating in high-profile tournaments proves to be an uncharted territory for women, but the increasing prominence of women in these tournaments encourages more women to aspire to compete at the professional level of the game.

This does not fully explain cocosasa's behavior during his match against BaiZe since the tournament pitted competitors of similar skills levels against one another; the stalemate leading up to the wave might provide stronger context for such emotions to come to light. Cocosasa apologized for his behavior, attempting to explain it by saying that his reactions while playing Hearthstone are "naturally very expressive, and that his prior poker-face behavior in the game versus BaiZe was a strategic attempt to send out false signals about his current hand" (as cited in Calixto, 2017). In a strategic card game like *Hearthstone*, players tend to find ways within the confines of sportsmanship to psychologically alter their opponents' decision-making, and cocosasa's action was an attempt to make her misplay on her next turn. Regarding the hand wave, he explained that the gesture was not intended as a "goodbye" to BaiZe but as a "hello" to the Prophet Velen card he summoned.

Prominent American *Hearthstone* streamers sided with cocosasa. Brian Kibler, perhaps one of the game's best known casters, tweeted one day following the incident,

"[t]he community response to Cocosasa's expressiveness is crazy. We should not discourage playfulness and personality and assume the worst" (bmkibler, 2017). The incident was interpreted as a "nonevent" and taken with humor instead of maliciously, as fellow caster Simon Welch tweeted, "[i]f you guys think cocosasa has a malicious bone in his body you've got it twisted. Come on guys it was harmless fun" (coL_-Sottle, 2017). The difference in responses between the casters and the fans delineated an interesting contrast in defining appropriate conduct during matches.

What is significant about this experience within the scope of this article is that the reaction from fans regarding the hand wave made progress toward establishing a standard by which the *Hearthstone* community wished to see its players and casters behave. Whereas a gesture like a hand wave may be shrugged off in other hypercompetitive spaces, the reaction from the community spawned debate on whether cocosasa's actions were right or wrong, with viewers informally judging what behavior is tolerated in a competitive setting. As *Hearthstone* continues to define itself as an esport, the development of its community will also be highlighted and scrutinized through every instance that provokes discussion on how it should behave.

Conclusion

BaiZe's appearance at the 2017 HCT Summer Championship was short-lived; after taking a 2-1 lead in a best-of-five series against Pavel Beltukov, she dropped the final two matches with her Rogue deck to move to the consolation ladder in Group D. In the elimination match against cocosasa, she dropped her first two matches before defeating his Rogue deck to force a fourth match, where cocosasa dispatched her Shaman deck, sending her home with the lowest payout grade of the competition, $7,500. BaiZe positively reflects on the experience, stating

> I felt pretty good about 2017 HCT Championships. Although I did not advance to the later stage, I was in a pretty good form to play cards and barely made any mistakes—I could say that I did my best . . . Those championships were a very unforgettable, beautiful experience of my life. (Personal communication, April 23, 2019)

Despite her untimely exit, BaiZe hopes she can be a positive influence on other female gamers who wish to get involved in the competitive *Hearthstone* scene. Obstinate in her belief that hobbies such as *Hearthstone* should not be filtered as "male" or "female" activities, BaiZe hopes that "all women could be able to choose what they truly like, and do not have to hesitate because this or that very thing is not feminine enough," adding that "[i]f I could thus encourage anybody to muster the courage to do what they are passionate for, I would feel very honored" (Personal communication, April 23, 2019). Other female *Hearthstone* players, such as competitive player and streamer "Slysssa," are aware of the duality of wanting to be recognized as a legitimate player regardless

of gender while also positively representing women as minority gamers. She notes that

> [w]e as women can [and] do play at the same level as the men, so we wanted to be treated as such. At the same time, there are way less women in the field, so being a positive role model is important in getting more women into esports. (Personal communication, November 8, 2018)

Mackenseize sums up this sentiment by saying,

> [w]e are all players who love the same game. And I truly believe people treat you the way you let them . . . Anyone who lets sex separate one player from another is distracted and will ultimately fail in the long run. Those who keep players' priorities in check will flourish. (Personal communication, November 18, 2018)

This sentiment is mirrored in the greater realm of video games and competitive esports. Cassell and Jenkins (1998, pp. 34–35), when examining girls and video games, found that one problem is that "both sides, ultimately, start from the assumption that computer games are boys' own games, and thus both scenarios can result in the disparaging of girls' interests." By continuing to demystify this stigma and encouraging more girls and women to become involved in esports, the esport community can make progress not only to dissolve the popular perception of competitive gaming sphere as a "male" space but also to reduce harassment and sexism in gaming.

There are limitations with this study that future research should redress when analyzing *Hearthstone*'s unique space in the esports industry and seeking to reconcile gender and gamer identities. Making demographic data available for *Hearthstone* could illustrate which groups are active in the game's casual and competitive arenas and provide evidence that could buttress the assumptions put forth in this article. In addition, a discourse analysis could be conducted to gauge the opinions of fans of *Hearthstone* on social media, particularly on platforms such as Reddit, Twitter, and Twitch.tv. This method was not employed due to space constraints in the present article but would otherwise provide opinions that represent the overall community. Finally, framing BaiZe's experience through the lens of race and ethnicity could enrich the study in a field where scholarly work surrounding issues of race in esports is relatively scant. This research opts not to peruse this element not only due to space constraints but also because it became difficult to develop an argument due to the dearth of evidence we could identify.

Video game culture is dynamic. Games and gamers change rapidly, and video game culture changes in response. In the case of *Hearthstone*, the development of a gamer community is still considered in its embryonic stages. Georgiou observes that

> [g]o to any Twitch chat when a woman is playing during Dreamhack or an HCT tour stop and you'll see a similar situation. I don't believe the *Hearthstone* community is

> different from other esports in any way when it comes to sexism, but in general women in *Hearthstone* have to try much harder to be perceived well. (Personal communication, January 11, 2019)

Women today are more visible in the gaming culture, and the number of female gamers is increasing, but this does not mean we should stop talking about gender and games; mounting evidence proves that digital gaming can be greatly rewarding for many players, not only as a pleasurable and sociable leisure activity but also as a pathway toward positive interpersonal, vocational, and educational outcomes. The potential benefits of providing a more inclusive space for men, women, and nonbinary people appear to be a worthy goal.

However, some advocates believe that we should be cautious of how female and nonbinary gamers are channeled into these hypermasculine, male-dominated arenas. A few gaming organizations have taken initiatives to tackle abuse and create more accepting spaces for women and nonbinary people, such as Twitch.tv, which has established Inclusivity City, an area for diversity organizations at its annual convention, TwitchCon. The company has also partnered with an organization called Misscliks, which promotes female role models in the gaming world. According to Misscliks founder Anna Prosser Robinson, the goal of Misscliks is to "provide support and resources to encourage those women to create a network on Twitch and stay in esports" ("100 Women 2016," 2016). In addition, organizations such as AnyKey have established guidelines to promote inclusive gaming communities through partnerships with streamers and competitive gamers.

Georgiou sums up female participation in *Hearthstone* by concluding,

> [i]t's important to note when a woman . . . performs well, but then to not make that the focal point. Acknowledge it, and then move on the focus on their performance as a player, host, or caster. Eventually maybe we won't even have to acknowledge it at all. (Personal communication, January 11, 2019)

BaiZe has memories of a positive experience competing in Los Angeles at the 2017 HCT Summer Championship, voicing her hopes for the future that

> [i]n an ideal world, everyone competes on merits and skills, and enjoys the pleasure brought by games. I hope I can be the trailblazer for the future female players and see to it that they encounter fewer unpleasant incidents. [I hope that] the trees I have planted can provide shade for the newcomers. (Personal communication, April 23, 2019)

Introduced for the 2019 competitive season, *Hearthstone* Grandmasters invited 48 players to compete in a league-based format based on "criteria including lifetime earnings, points earned during HCT 2018, seasonal points' leaders, contributions to the Hearthstone community, and more" (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019). Notably, only one of the 48 invitees (Pathra Cadness) is a woman. Although it has

encountered bumps along the way, *Hearthstone* appears to be constructing a community that provides an encouraging experience for women and nonbinary people, and players such as BaiZe have expressed optimism that the game has the potential to steer away from the stereotypical hypermasculine environment that pervades other esports.

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Notes

1. BaiZe was able to attend the tournament since she attended *Hearthstone*'s 2017 Wild Open, held in July 2017 in Burbank, CA, meaning her visa was still valid for entry into the United States.
2. According to a recent article ("100 Women 2016," 2016), the earnings for the top male player in esports amounts to over $2,500,000 while the top female earnings are less than $200,000. Ultimately, there is less money to be made from female teams, leading to fewer sponsors, and reduced coverage.

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