

RIOT GAMES VALORANT:  
TRYING TO CHANGE THE GAME

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A Major Research Paper

Submitted to the Department of Communication Studies and Media Arts

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree

Master of Arts

In Communication and New Media

McMaster University

"Chaos demands to be recognized and experienced before letting  
itself be converted into a new order." – Herman Hesse<sup>1</sup>

On August 7, 2018, *Kotaku*, an online gaming magazine, published the article "Inside The Culture Of Sexism At Riot Games" by Cecilia D'Anastasio, throwing the prominent online PC gaming company, Riot Games, into chaos.<sup>2</sup> D'Anastasio interviewed both former and current female Riot Games employees and unveiled the discrimination and harassment that women in the company faced constantly. From sexual innuendos to being passed over for promotions in favour of their less qualified male counterparts, women at Riot Games were in the company but not part of the company. In many ways, the exposé grew out of two recent movements: #MeToo and GamerGate. In 2014, GamerGate was a disorganized online harassment movement that attempted to stop women from participating in the gaming sphere through acts of doxing, threatening sexual assault, and death threats against women gamers.<sup>3</sup> It made visible the disputes about women's participation in gaming culture. The #MeToo movement was founded by Tarana Burke in 2006 but went viral in 2017, highlighting the sexual assault and harassment that women faced in multiple industries—including gaming—and demanded change.<sup>4</sup> The 2017 movement, combined with D'Anastasio's exposé about Riot Games and its toxic, male-dominated culture, caused necessary action to occur within the company.

The video gaming industry is large, with a global estimated value of \$56 billion USD in 2021 that is projected to grow to be worth \$132 billion USD by 2030.<sup>5</sup> Riot Games has around

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<sup>1</sup> Hermann Hesse. AZQuotes.com, Wind and Fly LTD, 2023. <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/1424409>, accessed July 15, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Cecilia D'Anastasio, "Inside the Culture of Sexism at Riot Games," *Kotaku*, August 7, 2018, <https://kotaku.com/inside-the-culture-of-sexism-at-riot-games-1828165483>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> "Get To Know Us | History & Inception."

<sup>5</sup> Consulting, "Online Gaming Market Size to Achieve USD 132 Billion by 2030 Growing at 10.2% CAGR Fueled by Massive Investments in the Gaming Industry - Exclusive Report by Acumen Research and Consulting."

2,500 employees and a market capitalization value of around \$3.52 billion USD.<sup>6</sup> Although Riot Games produces free-to-play games, there is paid content, and this content has generated much of Riot Games' estimated annual revenue of \$1.8 billion USD.<sup>7</sup> One of Riot Games' most popular and oldest game, League of Legends, generated \$1.63 billion USD alone in 2021.<sup>8</sup> The newest game by Riot Games, VALORANT, launched in June of 2020 and has already begun to see a return on investment, with a single in-game paid product generating over \$32 million USD in 2022.<sup>9</sup> However, of that \$32 million USD, Riot Games only pocketed \$16 million USD: the other half went to Riot Games' VALORANT E-Sports Champions League.<sup>10</sup>

E-Sports is a major part of online PC gaming culture. In 2022, Riot Games' League of Legends E-Sports championship had an initial prize pool of \$2.25 million USD, and the World Tournament had 1.1 million viewers on the opening day.<sup>11</sup> Since its 2020 release, there have been over 753 VALORANT E-Sports tournaments, which have accumulated nearly \$14 million USD.<sup>12</sup> The official VALORANT E-Sports league is known as VALORANT Champions League (VCT), and its Champions tournament had a peak viewership of 1.5 million viewers in 2022.<sup>13</sup> Game Changers, the female and marginalized genders VALORANT E-Sports league, has also had success with its first championship in 2022, peaking at 239,334 viewers.<sup>14</sup> Riot Games has mostly met success with its games. However, its newest game, VALORANT, has had an unusual amount of pressure to be a success. VALORANT was Riot Games' first major launch after the

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<sup>6</sup> Gaming·, “How Much Is Riot Games Worth?”

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Gaming·, “How Much Is Riot Games Worth?”

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> “VCT 2022 Game Changers Championship - Valorant - Viewership, Overview, Prize Pool | Esports Charts.”

*Kotaku* expose, and it came out while Riot Games was dealing with a class-action lawsuit brought forward by women who suffered in the company.

Settled in 2021, the gender-based discrimination lawsuit had a payout of \$100 million USD (Riot Games' 2019 proposal of \$10 million USD had been rejected by California's Department of Fair Employment and Housing [DFEH]).<sup>15</sup> The settlement included three years of mandatory monitoring by a third-party company, which was to evaluate Riot Game's policy and workplace reforms.<sup>16</sup> The lawsuit demanded that Riot Games make its workplace environment safer, but it did not include specific guidelines for Riot Games' E-Sports. It was Riot Games that announced it also planned to make its gaming space more inclusive, especially for women. Soon after the lawsuit was settled, Riot Games announced a new league for women and marginalized genders only: VCT Game Changers. The league would welcome women into the professional E-Sports sphere and give them a chance at LAN competition.

The executive producer of VALORANT, Anna Donlon, stated upon VALORANT's release: "The team looks forward to starting our decades-long commitment to servicing the global VALORANT community."<sup>17</sup> Her statement inspired the questions that have driven this research project: who is part of the global VALORANT community, and do these commitments also apply to E-Sports? In response, this major research project draws upon revolutionary feminism theory and the idea that feminism must be inclusive on multiple levels that go beyond that of sex and gender to account for race, nationality, income, and much more. It is a revolution

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<sup>15</sup> Shannon Liao, "Riot Games Agrees to Pay \$100 Million in Settlement of Class-Action Gender Discrimination Lawsuit," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, December 27, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/videogames/2021/12/27/riot-discrimination-100-million-settlement/>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> "Valorant to Launch on June 2, Beta to Conclude next Week."

in global politics that fights back against "dynamics of domination" by including and not excluding.<sup>18</sup> This theory has influenced the three research questions this project seeks to address.

**RQ 1: How do Riot Games' diversity reports describe and demonstrate the company's commitment to structural change and address systemic inequality within an international company?** The Riot Games EDI reports from 2019 to 2023 will be reviewed to address this question. I will use a content analysis approach to identify what Riot Games is trying to highlight and obscure in its reports. I will also look for content related to Riot Games' E-Sports leagues. These E-Sports leagues are owned by Riot Games, but they are not part of the work environment being monitored as part of the lawsuit settlement. However, they are part of the gaming culture that Riot Games states it wants to make more inclusive.

**RQ 2: How has Riot Games attempted to address EDI concerns in their First Person Shooter (FPS) E-Sports community by making changes to the VALORANT E-Sports structure?** To answer this question, I will explore the current VALORANT E-Sports context, examining how Riot Games supports the main E-Sports organizations and players. This will help clarify whether there are significant differences in how Riot Games resources Game Changers.

**RQ3: Is Game Changers just an elaborate performance of EDI, or does it represent a real commitment to change?** This final question is heavily influenced by the work of Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012), which examines the issues that arise at institutions whose EDI efforts are mostly performative and focused on just making reports. Out-of-game content like music videos and game drops, which are meant to

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<sup>18</sup> Hazel Biana, "Extending bell hooks' Feminist Theory," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 21, no. 1 (February 24, 2020): 17.

attract audiences to Riot Games events, will be used to compare the regular VALORANT league marketing investments to Games Changers.

This study of Riot Games and its EDI efforts comes while the third-party monitoring required by the settlement is coming to an end. The initial reports by Riot Games were an excellent start, but without more progression or future follow-up, it is possible that Riot Games's EDI will become performative rather than producing change. This particularly applies to the case of Game Changers. The league is still in its infancy: if Game Changers really is changing the game and the E-Sports sphere, then this league may become the model for how other E-Sports leagues can develop their own spaces for women and marginalized genders. However, if Game Changers' simple existence is what constitutes Riot Games' EDI commitments in E-Sports, then this study simply becomes an interesting EDI performance culture case and gives insight into how low the bar truly is for supporting women in professional E-Sports.

## **Literature Review**

This literature review provides important context and frameworks for my analysis of Riot Games' EDI Reports and the significance of Game Changers. The first section investigates EDI research and the challenges of implementing EDI in different industries. Next, this literature review will look at women and marginalized genders in E-Sports and the identifiable inequalities that currently exist in that sphere, as well as gender inequality in traditional sports. Finally, it examines game studies research, including questions of in-game representation.

### **Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion**

EDI has developed within the last few decades to become a customary practice in organizations and institutions in North America. In the USA, there was a major push in the late

1960s to establish equal pay acts and prohibit discrimination. In the 1980s, sexual harassment in the workplace was prohibited, and in the 1990s, people with disabilities were also protected by law.<sup>19</sup> Ideally, EDI reporting would be a way in which an institution or corporation would reflect on the environment and culture that they create internally and externally for their stakeholders. It would go beyond a summary report and consider future steps to be taken to achieve the organization's EDI goals and even create new ones.

EDI in different industries can be presented in highly unique ways. Corporate EDI is handled like a procedural practice. For organizations that like doing things by the book, the work of scholars William J. Rothwell, Philip L. Easley, and Jamie Campbell, authors of the book *Rethinking Organizational Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, A Step-by-Step Guide for Facilitating Effective Change* (2022) offer exactly that, a guide. Although a step-by-step guide may appear helpful to an EDI team on the surface, a broad and general EDI plan may prove to be harmful and lean towards being performative in the long run.<sup>20</sup> An organization should consider the transparency it has around its EDI team not only to build trust but also for internal reflection on perspectives the team may not be immediately accounted for.

EDI can take different forms when used by international organizations. In an exploration of Diverse Management (DM) in Finland, there was confusion from the DM team in their application of what diversity definition they were applying to their institution. Susan Merilainen, Jane Tienari, Saija Katila, and Yvonne Benschop examined a Finnish case where gender equality and DM were used as interchangeable terms and found that due to existing power structures, they

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<sup>19</sup> "History of Diversity and Inclusion Policies in the Workplace."

<sup>20</sup> Ahmed, Sara. *On Being Included Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham :: Duke University Press, 2012.

organization was diversified from a male-dominated field to include more women.<sup>21</sup> With the hiring of women, they believed that diversity was achieved; however, they failed to consider ethnic or racial diversity.

In the institutional sphere, Sara Ahmed, a scholar who comes from a feminist theory and postmodernism studies background, wrote *On Being Included, Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012). Ahmed asserts that some institutions only create EDI teams or participate in EDI practices as a part of performance culture, which is not an effective commitment to EDI. Performance culture can result in exclusion and can lead to unorganized or ineffective EDI practices that could have harmful impacts on the groups that are supposedly trying to benefit.

When examining EDI reports from different parts of the world, another consideration that needs to be highlighted is the context for which EDI is achievable using different definitions. The hiring of women equalled DM in the Finland case; it may be the case that ethnic and racial diversity was not achievable to the extent it may have been in another context, like North America. For Riot Games, which is USA-based but has offices internationally, some of the limitations in the EDI efforts may stem from their inability to enforce EDI practices the same way they can in the USA. However, because Riot Games does exist internationally, they have a responsibility to ensure their workplaces are safe for all people from marginalized groups.

### **E-Sports Inequalities**

Inequalities between men, women and marginalized genders in sports exist across multiple planes, from the salaries players earn to news and television coverage of their events to the

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<sup>21</sup> Susan Merilainen, Jane Tienari, Saija Katila, and Yvonne Benschop, "Diversity Management Versus Gender Equality: The Finnish Case," *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences* 26 (July 2009): 239.



treatment they receive both in and out of their games. Inequalities in traditional sports are often justified with reference to biological differences between men and women, which could harm the integrity of a game. This has resulted in instances like the World Athletics March 2023 vote to exclude transgender women athletes from competing in female competitions.<sup>22</sup> However, in E-Sports, there does not appear to be any substantial evidence that men, women, and marginalized genders are not able to compete on an even level in E-Sports due to biological differences. Nonetheless, E-Sports co-ed team competition is rare, not due to a lack of female E-Sports players but because they are not being signed at all.

There are significant differences in how men and women are supported in sport. For example, in the International Federation of American Football (IFAF), funding for women is so poor that, in 2020, Team Canada had to ask their players to pay around \$3,500 CAD each to be able to go to a competition.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, female E-Sports players only made 0.05% percent of what their male player counterparts earned.<sup>24</sup> This massive gap cannot be attributed to a lack of women who engage with video games: *Forbes* stated that female gamers account for between 41% and 48% of all video game players.<sup>25</sup> Yet, they are not seen participating in E-Sports, and when they do, they are not paid wages equivalent to men.<sup>26</sup>

In his chapter, "Balancing the game: Five perspectives on the challenges women face in e-sports," Paul Chaloner writes broadly about E-Sports and competitive gaming. (Competitive games do not necessarily mean E-Sports but can refer to games which are competitive in nature.) He has female informants who come from a variety of gaming communities, like the console

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<sup>22</sup> Reuters ·, "World Athletics Votes to Exclude Transgender Women Athletes | CBC Sports."

<sup>23</sup> Russ Crawford, "Women's American Football," University of Nebraska Press (2022): 273

<sup>24</sup> V-Gagné-LeBel, "The 'Femme Effect'- Implementing Coed Teams & Tournaments in the Esports Industry."

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

player community, rather than PC gaming.<sup>27</sup> An element to consider when studying the E-Sports sphere is who is running the tournaments and leagues and who has an affiliation. Some gaming companies are heavily involved in the competitive scene, like Riot Games, and some are removed from the scene altogether. Chaloner notes that women face scrutiny over their physical appearance and attire when they are competing despite its irrelevance to their gaming abilities.<sup>28</sup>

Women face these critiques from their audience when they are gaming; however, attire comments are often the least of their worries. Issues like Gamergate highlight the ongoing and real threats that female and marginalized gender gamers face, predominately from men.<sup>29</sup> Rob Cover highlights the connection between gaming and hypermasculinity.<sup>30</sup> The toxicity of gaming not only impacts women but can also harm men. As male gamers attempt to establish their place in the community and relate to one another, some players attempt to prove their masculinity by uttering threats of violence to women while gaming.<sup>31</sup> It was these actions that harmed many women during the GamerGate events; this negative experience exists across multiple game spheres, including competitive games and casual games.<sup>32</sup>

## Exploring Game Content

Many games objectify women and even build it into their mechanics, encouraging sexist behaviour. As Riot Games has attempted to craft VALORANT into being an inclusive community, their content and representation need to be considered. Going beyond the game to

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<sup>27</sup> Paul Chaloner, *This Is Esports (and How to Spell It) - LONGLISTED for the WILLIAM HILL SPORTS BOOK AWARD 2020 : An Insider's Guide to the World of Pro Gaming.* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2020): 6.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>29</sup> Kishonna L. Gray, David J. Leonard, and Rob Cover, "The Corporeal Ethics of Gaming," essay, in *Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Injustice* (University of Washington Press, 2018), 28.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

examine surrounding content, especially that of Game Changers, may indicate how Riot Games wants Game Changers to be perceived. A game studies lens can be used to explore game content, accompanied by content analysis and revolutionary feminist theory.

Different studies on gaming have found that there are racial and sexist stereotype 'imbalances' onscreen that contribute to stereotyping and inequality outside of the screen.<sup>33</sup> Exposure to misrepresentations within a game can promote less favourable views or maintain negative beliefs regarding minorities.<sup>34</sup> Multiple studies show the negative impact games can have on players and the way in which in-game actions can enter the real world. Maresa Bertolo, Ilaria Mariani, and Eleonora Alberello Conti wrote a chapter within *Woke Gaming* (2018) that focused on using gaming as a vehicle for social change.<sup>35</sup> They acknowledge the problem of misrepresentation in games and argue that changing players' behaviours must begin with the design of a game.<sup>36</sup> Although players may be aware that their in-game actions are racist or sexist, they are able to engage in such behaviours because the game design allows them to do so. To reduce negative impacts, the game should be designed in a way that affects "both attitudes and even behaviours once the games are long over."<sup>37</sup>

Due to the connections between in-game misrepresentation and everyday life, questions of game production need to be considered. David B. Nieborg and Joke Hermes realized the need to examine the production side of a game, including both physical and intellectual labour.<sup>38</sup> They

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<sup>33</sup> Dmitri Williams, Nichole Martins, Mia Consalvo, and James D. Ivory, "The virtual census: representations of gender, race and age in video games." *New media & society* 11, no. 5, (2009): 819.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz and David Ta, "Cultivating Virtual Stereotypes?: The Impact of Video Game Play on Racial/ Ethnic Stereotypes," *The Howard Journal of Communications* 25 (2014): 12

<sup>35</sup> Kishonna L. Gray et al., "DiscrimiNation," essay, in *Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Injustice* (University of Washington Press, 2018), 171.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> David B. Nieborg, Joke Hermes, "What is games studies anyway?" *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (2008): 134.

recognize that game studies are a "force of innovation in cultural studies itself."<sup>39</sup> Cultural studies offer a wide lens for looking at a game and gaming as a practice, while game studies look at games and their production to inform the wider lens of cultural studies.<sup>40</sup>

## Riot's History

Although Riot Games has seen mass amounts of success in their E-Sports endeavours, the 2018 Kotaku scandal has not been entirely forgotten through Riot Games' recent growth. To understand the complex roots that Riot Games has with their equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) agendas and why EDI reporting was included in the lawsuit settlement Riot Games faced, it is important to understand the history of the company. Covered within this section are a brief overview of Riot Games company history and a discussion of the sexism exposed by the Kotaku report.

Riot Games was founded in 2006 by Brandon Beck and March Merrill.<sup>41</sup> It took roughly four years for Riot Games to launch their first game, League of Legends [LOL], in 2009.<sup>42</sup> Over the next few years, they released four online games: Teamfight Tactics (2019), Legends of Runeterra (2020), League of Legends: Wildrift (2020), and VALORANT (2020).<sup>43</sup> VALORANT is their newest game that has no connection to LOL; it was beta-tested in 2019 and immediately grew a base of both recreational and professional players. Riot Games grew from its small business model to now reportedly having 4,500 plus Rioters (employees) in 20 plus offices

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<sup>39</sup> David B. Nieborg, Joke Hermes, "What is games studies anyway?" *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (2008): 134.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>41</sup> Riot Games. "Who We Are." Accessed May 9, 2023. <https://www.riotgames.com/en/who-we-are>.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

worldwide, all currently led by the CEO Nicolo Laurent.<sup>44</sup> The company has its headquarters in Los Angeles, California.<sup>45</sup> The space not only houses its business offices but also has an E-Sports arena that hosts their title matches.

As with other workplaces with ingrained misogyny and sexism, some of Riot Games 'playful' and 'innocent hazing' culture was accepted to be the norm for the company. Riot Games had a 'bro culture' company atmosphere from the late 2000s to the 2010s, one of a 'bros before hoes' mindset.<sup>46</sup> The mindset has highly negative connotations towards women but was popularized in the 2000s in shows like *The Office* and *How I Met Your Mother*, which released a book called *The Bro Code* that one of the characters consistently references.<sup>47</sup> Riot's hiring practices at the time also centred around hiring "core gamers" or, as their hiring page prior to June 2018 stated, "We want passionate gamers who are talented professionals."<sup>48</sup> This resulted in the hiring process not just including consideration of work-related experience but also looking at candidates' LOL stats before they were brought in for an interview.<sup>49</sup> Although the company claimed that it did not evaluate skill level, the "core gamers" they were looking for needed to have the commitment to gain in-game competitive skill points, which are related to skill level in the game.<sup>50</sup>

The impact these practices were having on women working at Riot Games was exposed on August 7, 2018, when D'Anastasio published "Inside The Culture Of Sexism at Riot

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<sup>44</sup> Riot Games. "Who We Are." Accessed May 9, 2023. <https://www.riotgames.com/en/who-we-are>.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> D'Anastasio, "Inside The Culture Of Sexism At Riot Games."

<sup>47</sup> Stinson, *The Bro Code*.

<sup>48</sup> D'Anastasio, "Inside The Culture Of Sexism At Riot Games."

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> D'Anastasio, "Inside The Culture Of Sexism At Riot Games."

Games."<sup>51</sup> D'Anastasio provided a much-needed perspective on the sexist practices that were being encouraged through the 'bro culture' Riot Games had instilled and perpetuated.



D'Anastasio, "Inside The Culture Of Sexism At Riot Games."

## Kotaku Report

D'Anastasio's sexism exposé was released on the website Kotaku.com and did not spare any details on the struggles that women and marginalized genders were facing at Riot Games. D'Anastasio spoke with 28 current and former Riot employees, who shared stories about their unfair treatment and how the company specifically put female employees at a disadvantage in the workplace.<sup>52</sup> Those who recounted these experiences to D'Anastasio did so anonymously for fear that their honesty would impact their future ability to work within the gaming sphere. Meanwhile, some current employees disagreed with these accounts, and top female employees shared on the record that they had not personally experienced discrimination due to their gender.<sup>53</sup> Although both anonymous and recorded accounts may hold validity, it does need to be recognized that there is an imbalance of stakes in disclosure methods. Furthermore, current employees and their accounts may have been impacted due to their employment status and

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<sup>51</sup> D'Anastasio, "Inside The Culture Of Sexism At Riot Games."

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

possible repercussions they might have faced. As D'Anastasio was putting together their article on the company, they had reached out to Riot Games for comment.<sup>54</sup> It is not a stretch to state that Riot Games was actively addressing the issues that D'Anastasio raised in their article. Indeed, Riot Games claims they were working on the creation of a "diversity and inclusion" page prior to D'Anastasio's inquiries into the company; however, the page only went live after the inquiries were made.<sup>55</sup>

The Kotaku article highlights how ingrained gaming and sexism were at Riot. Riot's core gamer aesthetic meant that the company dismissed games of certain genres or play styles. D'Anastasio interviewed a female former employee who explained that, during their interview, they did list all the games they played.<sup>56</sup> Although the position they were applying for had nothing to do with game development, the interviewer kept asking and rephrasing their question about the games the interviewee played until outright asking if they played "real games like *Call of Duty*."<sup>57</sup> This gaming hierarchy was also presented in a Riot producer's 2016 statements about the "PC Master Race."<sup>58</sup> The implication is that PC gamers are somehow better than other platform gamers, and the term "Master Race" has numerous negative associations, especially with Nazi ideas about the Aryan race and the notion that racial categories can be used to discriminate and create divisions.<sup>59</sup>

Another gaming reference used by Riot was related to employees who were let go due to their inability to match the company. Riot Games called their correcting of new hire errors

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<sup>54</sup> D'Anastasio, "Inside The Culture Of Sexism At Riot Games."

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Nazi Racism."

"queue dodge", which is a common gaming practice for avoiding undesired games, in which a player queues for a game, purposely does not do the correct steps to start the game in order to dodge the queue and try again at queuing for the desired game.<sup>60</sup> This practice of treating business like a game may be a reason people became comfortable acting and speaking as if they had their online anonymity.

The culture at Riot Games was compared to that of a fraternity that specifically targeted women to create a boys' club atmosphere.<sup>61</sup> Similar to a fraternity hazing practice, Riot Games employees were forced to wear green hats during their "Riot Denewbification" or "Denewb" process.<sup>62</sup> These practices that made up the Riot culture were pushed back against and pointed out as being problematic; however, initially, there was little change. Rather than listen to their employees as their feedback culture supposedly demands, women were accused of being too emotional or would have their personalities evaluated rather than their work.<sup>63</sup> One person stated, "The company dismisses feedback when it comes to gender."<sup>64</sup>

After the publication of D'Anastasio's article, a gender-based discrimination class-action lawsuit was brought against Riot Games in November 2018.<sup>65</sup> This suit was filed with California state agencies and represented "All current and former California employees and contractors who identify as women and worked at Riot Games between November 2014 and present day qualify for a payout."<sup>66</sup> The suit was settled in 2021 for \$100 million, with \$80 million going to the members of the lawsuit and \$20 million going to the plaintiffs' legal fees.<sup>67</sup> Crucially, the

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<sup>60</sup> D'Anastasio, "Inside The Culture Of Sexism At Riot Games."

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Liao, "Riot Games Agrees to Pay \$100 Million in Settlement of Class-Action Gender Discrimination Lawsuit."

<sup>66</sup> Liao, "Riot Games Agrees to Pay \$100 Million in Settlement of Class-Action Gender Discrimination Lawsuit."

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.



settlement also required Riot Games to undergo three years of EDI monitoring by a third-party company.

## **Riot & EDI**

Riot Games' annual Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) report was a direct response to the lawsuit. The reports began in 2019, and the 2019 D&I report could be viewed as an attempt at crisis management. It was brief, had overly broad data sets that grouped multiple groups to demonstrate diversity, and even mentioned the settlement proposal they were hoping would resolve the lawsuit, which it did not. It was not until 2020 that the reports finally became substantial and specific, with mentions that they used expert third-party oversight for external verification.

From 2019 to 2021, Riot Games developed two reports: the D&I report and a Social Impact report. In 2022, the D&I and Social Impact reports were combined. I have broken my analysis of EDI, mainly regarding the D&I reports from 2019 to 2022, into the following categories: Women working at Riot, Marginalized People at Riot, E-Sports, and VALORANT content.

My interest is in how the reports frame improvements in EDI at Riot Games in terms of employee diversity, representation, company culture, and gaming culture. I examine what Riot Games chose to highlight, how they communicated their efforts, and who they included in their efforts. Revolutionary feminism offers important insights to my analysis; as Hazel Biana explains, revolutionary feminism focuses on inclusion, "It does not exclude women of colour or of different classes or even men for that matter. Vision, not exclusion, is vital for a revolution".<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Biana, Hazel T. (2020) "Extending bell hooks' Feminist Theory," Journal of International Women's Studies: Vol. 21: Iss. 1, Article 3., 17.

This is especially important because Riot Games is an international company. How do the reports engage with the international side of the business, who is being included in the reformation of Riot Games, and where are gaps forming based on geo-location inclusion criteria? As Ahmed reminds us, the risk is that EDI reports are more performative than actual revolutionary change.

Overall, the reports represent Riot Games' attempt to demonstrate accountability and transparency to external stakeholders, including consumers and players. The reports avoid unnecessary jargon, have straight-to-the-point summaries, and use simple graphics. The company is trying to prove to as many people as possible that they have changed, so they have created reports that could be digested by almost anyone. However, in doing so, they have omitted important details and context.

### Women Working at Riot

2019 was the "foundational year" for Riot Games D&I reporting, as noted in its first report.<sup>69</sup> Riot Games claimed to have had a D&I committee prior to 2019 but expanded it in that year as the company re-evaluated its hiring criteria, moving from gaming skills to actual job-related competencies and values.<sup>70</sup>

Notably, the section in the report focused on hiring was only about the USA.<sup>71</sup> The note of the "USA Only" accompanied hiring statistics for underrepresented minorities for all reports from 2019 to 2022. There are several factors that may contribute to this distinction. First, the USA is where third-party reviews were required by the gender discrimination lawsuit. Second,

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<sup>69</sup> "Diversity and Inclusion Progress Report."

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

employment law differs by country. Company census surveys may not be permitted in some of the countries where Riot Games is based. The definition of who qualifies as being an underrepresented minority can also differ by country. Finally, there may be issues of safety for some ethnic, racial, or sexual identity minorities.

The Riot Games D&I reports from 2020 to 2022 claimed that there are "no statistically significant differences in pay or promotion outcomes for women or underrepresented minorities."<sup>72</sup> Although this appears to be an important step forward and an achievement that should be celebrated, it is not clear who is included in the statistics and who is excluded. Although the number of women at Riot Games appeared to not change year to year, the maintaining of equality among employment distribution is not to be understated. Given the size of the workforce, it stands to reason that there is a constant stream of people joining and leaving the workplace, yet Riot Games has been able to maintain a balance. Do these gains include freelancers, and E-Sports organizations and players? The question of how much responsibility Riot Games has for equity in E-Sports remains unaddressed.

### Marginalized Peoples

Riot Games initially began its outreach to marginalized groups by funding pre-existing foundations and organizations; as they grew, they started their own initiatives. The question of what groups are classified as marginalized depends on different legal and company frameworks. Riot Games' 2019 D&I report used the wording Underrepresented Minorities (URM) to refer to "Hispanic, LatinX, or Spanish Origin, Black or African American, Native American or Alaskan Native."<sup>73</sup> The 2021 report added "Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and Two or More

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<sup>72</sup> "Diversity and Inclusion Progress Report."

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

Races in the US" to the list.<sup>74</sup> This partly reflected the U.S. Census Bureau requiring the 5 categories at the minimum, " White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander) for race. "<sup>75</sup> This definition was specifically used regarding the employee makeup of Riot Games US and was regarding all Riot employees, not just within the context of women employees. The section does provide the specific breakdown for each category, including ones that are at 0%.<sup>76</sup>

Riot Games also included LGBTQ+ people in their D&I reports. The D&I reports start to mention in-game Pride events in 2020.<sup>77</sup> One of the most notable aspects of the VALORANT related in-game drops for Pride Month was the VALORANT in-game Pride banners that were made available to all players for free.<sup>78</sup> As of 2023, the Pride banners in VALORANT continue to be available for free during Pride month.

The 2020 D&I report also mentioned that sexual identities were part of the in-game representation planning process.<sup>79</sup> It did not mention specific characters, but on December 11, 2022, Riot Games posted to their official VALORANT Twitter account that two VALORANT agents, Raze and Killjoy, were sitting on a bench kissing.<sup>80</sup> There was no caption attached to the image or comment made by Riot Games regarding the agents.

The media team responded to comments under the image to confirm that the image was official and engaged with positive responses. The VALORANT team did not make a spectacle of

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<sup>74</sup> "Riot-Diversity-Inclusion-Report-2021.Pdf."

<sup>75</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. Race. Accessed August 8, 2023.  
<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/note/US/RHI625222>.

<sup>76</sup> "Riot-Diversity-Inclusion-Report-2021.Pdf."

<sup>77</sup> "Diversity and Inclusion Progress Report."

<sup>78</sup> "Celebrating Pride With You."

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> VALORANT [@PlayVALORANT], "https://t.co/RWVPw4CzPI."

the release, treating this addition to the lore simply as an expansion of the agents' stories. The release of the imaged communicated those members of the LGBTQ+ community deserved to be represented and not sensationalized. From the initial 2019 reporting, where no mentions of the LGBTQ+ community were made, to 2021, introducing the representation of the LGBTQ+ existing not just through company donations to programs but also within games.

## VALORANT

In 2019, VALORANT was still in the beta testing process, so it is not surprising that the D&I report does not mention the game. The 2020 D&I report did discuss VALORANT, mentioning the Game Changers initiative and in-game representation.<sup>81</sup> The sixteen-page report gave one page to Game Changers and highlighted its role in making the "VALORANT competitive ecosystem... to truly be an inclusive sport".<sup>82</sup> In the 2021 D&I report, Game Changes was once again given one page; however, this time, the page included a lot more information.<sup>83</sup> It describes Game Changes and its training program, which aims to empower women and an explanation of how the Game Changers competitive season and competition circuit was constructed.<sup>84</sup>

The reports also addressed representation in VALORANT. This is important because Riot Games highlights that VALORANT's diverse 'agents,' the title given to the games' characters, are meant to be "rooted in the real world."<sup>85</sup> They are not meant to be inspired by cultures; instead, "they represent them."<sup>86</sup> The agent-creation process was first mentioned in the

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<sup>81</sup> "Riot-Diversity-Inclusion-Report-2021.Pdf."

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> "Riotgames-Annual-Diversity-Inclusion-Progress-Report-2021-En.Pdf."

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

2020 report, which explained that to create the Raze VALORANT agent from Brazil, the creative team reached out to include Brazilians in the conversation.<sup>87</sup> The 2022 report also described the lengths that the creative teams were actually going to.<sup>88</sup> In the creation of the Turkish agent Fade, the creative team worked directly with Turkish Rioters and a localization team to ensure they avoided stereotypes.<sup>89</sup> In the creation of the Indian agent Harbor, Indian Rioters were consulted along with academics because Riot wished to delve into some of India's myths and have them included in Harbor's lore.<sup>90</sup> The Filipina agent Neon was co-designed by a Filipino Rioter, who worked with a team based in Singapore.<sup>91</sup> When Neon debuted, she was voiced by a Filipina voice actor and her debut music was composed by Ylona Garcia, a Filipina musician.<sup>92</sup>

Although Riot Games has made some progress regarding sexual orientation diversity, there have been little to no mentions of gender representation beyond that of cis-gendered characters. It is plausible that time is being taken to properly construct identities that do not misrepresent communities. However, the constant release of agents for VALORANT, in consultation with people from the nationalities the agents are representing, indicates that further informed representation of other groups is possible. A major shortcoming in the EDI reports is future planning that includes few specific goals beyond broad statements of hoping to be more committed to EDI. Instead of discussing future plans, Riot Games relies heavily on keywords like "diversity" and "inclusion" in their statements. Ahmed expresses concerns that putting terms into circulation within an organization gives rise to issues of seeking to maintain an environment

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<sup>87</sup> "Riotgames-Annual-Diversity-Inclusion-Progress-Report-2021-En.Pdf."

<sup>88</sup> "Riot-Impactreport-2022.Pdf."

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

rather than "transforming existing organizational values."<sup>93</sup> Jill Blackmoore and Judyth Sachs propose that performance relies on "being seen to perform," and part of the performance is using the right words.<sup>94</sup>

Although these are annual reports meant to recap the past year, there is little accountability to their stakeholders. Riot Games is setting its own goals, and the community that plays its games has little knowledge of whether they are meeting goals or shifting the goalposts to meet them. The Riot Games initiative with the most future promises made about it is the Game Changer E-Sports league. Game Changers has been publicly celebrated, and promises about its future have been made by multiple heads of VALORANT. These promises all circle around the idea of bringing women and marginalized genders into the VALORANT E-Sports sphere and giving them a chance at being included in the pro-circuit. However, these promises are made in the form of statements unaccompanied by any long-term plan, goals, or dates that Riot Games intends to have accomplished. By analyzing the reports and then reviewing the regular VALORANT E-Sports league, the future growth of Game Changers is revealed as being unclear.

## **VALORANT E-Sports**

The E-Sports First Person Shooter (FPS) industry has been male-dominated since the beginning. As women have emerged onto the scene, little room is made for them. Arguments about biological differences between men and women, which are often used to keep the sexes separate in traditional sports, do not hold much validity in the E-Sports sphere. Rather, in E-

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<sup>93</sup> Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham;: Duke University Press, 2012, p. 57.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

Sports, arguments to keep women out of the regular, male-dominated league tend to claim that women are not as good at gaming as men. This argument stems from sexist and misogynistic views of women and from a stance of toxic masculinity where men are expected to be better at video games.

Although the 2018 Kotaku report exposed the toxic and unsafe working environment at the company, it did not address Riot Games E-Sports. However, many issues in the company extend into E-Sports, especially the underrepresentation of women and harassment of women and marginalized genders in the professional E-Sports sphere. Riot Games has claimed that they are changing the gaming culture to make it more inclusive and diverse, creating a space for women in gaming. This section will examine the leaders at VALORANT E-Sports and the basic organization of the VALORANT E-Sports system.

## **E-Sports Leaders**

The Riot Games leadership is divided into two categories: company leadership and game leads.<sup>95</sup> In the company leadership department, men hold seven positions, and women hold four.<sup>96</sup> Within the game leads section, eight of the nine positions are held by men.<sup>97</sup> The sole woman leader in the game section is Anna Donlon, who holds the position of Senior Vice President and Executive Producer and has the responsibility of "Leading the vision and development of VALORANT."<sup>98</sup> Donlon has around 20 years of game development experience and joined Riot Games in 2015, before the Kotaku report.<sup>99</sup> On her company page, Donlon states

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<sup>95</sup> "Riot Games' Leadership."

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> "Riot Games' Leadership."

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.



that she is a "strong champion of women and marginalized genders."<sup>100</sup> Donlon has done substantial work to advance the inclusion of women and marginalized genders in VALORANT.<sup>101</sup> In 2021, she oversaw the creation of the VCT Game Changers Program, which is the first E-Sports section at Riot Games with the aim of being a league where people may "compete without fear of identity or gender-based criticism."<sup>102</sup>

Donlon's superior is Leo Faria, who is the VALORANT Global Head (E-Sports).<sup>103</sup> On the webpage, Faria states, "Together with our new team partners, we plan to deliver new experiences, bigger matches, and more high-stakes competition in every corner of the world."<sup>104</sup> This appears to be only relevant to the main VALORANT league, as on his personal Twitter account, Faria is more ambivalent about Game Changers. Faria comments that it was never going to grow because the hope was that women would join the regular league. The statement contributes to a lack of clarity about the relation of Game Changers to the regular VALORANT league.

### **Regular VALORANT League**

The regular VALORANT league, although not highlighted in the D&I reports, has made some serious steps in the E-Sports sphere to address inequalities found between different geographical regions. The overall climate of the regular VALORANT league is broken down into three elements: first, the link of VALORANT as a game into the E-Sports sphere; second, the professional franchising system; and third, the funding efforts that go into the regular league.

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<sup>100</sup> "Anna Donlon."

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Faria, "A FEW WORDS TO CLOSE OUT THE 2022 VCT SEASON."

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

VALORANT can be played both recreationally and competitively. Within the game, VALORANT has several game modes; the two most prominent are unranked and ranked. Unranked is a recreational play mode that is the exact same as ranked but lacks the ranking system, so a game win or loss has no impact on a player's in-game standing. The in-game competitive mode, which features player rankings, is 'ranked' and must be played by pro E-Sports players because they must be of a certain rank to compete in the VALORANT E-Sports league.<sup>105</sup> This helps to guarantee the quality of the players.<sup>106</sup> On top of having to hold a certain rank, a player also needs to be signed to an E-Sports organization; players cannot enter the E-Sports league on their own.

The VALORANT regular league is entirely overseen by Riot Games, from the location of tournaments, the qualifying system, and the teams allowed to compete in the highest VALORANT tier. The "ecosystem" that Riot Games has developed for VALORANT E-Sports began with the creation of the top two tiers, the VALORANT CHAMPIONS TOUR (VCT), consisting of partnered teams only.<sup>107</sup> The partnered teams were chosen for three reasons: "1. Organizations who share our values of always putting fans first, celebrate our diverse community, and are committed to supporting pros 2. Organizations that have created a strong connection with fans through engaging content, a compelling brand, and an exciting roster 3. Organizations who build for the long-term, with a focus on sustainability."<sup>108</sup> These partnered teams start their season by competing in an international-based tournament, which is split into the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Africa (EMEA), and Pacific regions, for a chance to qualify for the global Champions event. Due to restrictions, the Chinese teams have a unique

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<sup>105</sup> "VALORANT Esports - Game Changers."

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> "VALORANT Esports."

<sup>108</sup> "2023 VALORANT TEAMS REVEAL."

system to qualify for international and global events that are exclusive to them as of June 2023.<sup>109</sup> There are 30 partnered teams, with 10 teams in each region. Not all partnered teams are guaranteed a spot at the global events, but they are guaranteed spots within their regions.

The unique franchising system that Riot Games has produced has had a financial impact which other E-Sports leagues have not experienced. Within the ecosystem designed by Riot Games, there were two important statements made by the company. The first statement was the omittance of participation and franchising fees; rather, financial stipends were provided to the partnered teams as a "return for their investment in growing the ecosystem."<sup>110</sup> The stipends offered to organizations are for operating costs of the organization, travel, and living costs.<sup>111</sup> Stipend minimums start at around \$600,000 USD, and some teams are eligible for a further \$400,000 USD by Riot Games.<sup>112</sup> E-Sports and the gaming industry is a booming business, and these stipends offered by Riot Games on top of Riot Games sharing with their partnered team's revenue from in-game drops, skins, and intellectual property revenue. With these major changes and initiatives, one might consider why these moves are not being brought up in the D&I reports.

Riot Games claims they wish to celebrate diverse communities, which is reminiscent of the Finish diversity management case, where gender equality and diverse management were interchanged with one another.<sup>113</sup> In that case, racial and ethnic minorities were not included in the report, suggesting that having hired more women was enough to meet the company's

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<sup>109</sup> FERRARO, ANTON. "VALORANT Esports," February 23, 2023. <https://valorantesports.com/news/masters-tokyo-will-feature-the-return-of-teams-from-china/en-us>.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Geddes, "What Is VALORANT Franchising?"

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Susan Merilainen, Jane Tienari, Saija Katila, and Yvonne Benschop, "Diversity Management Versus Gender Equality: The Finnish Case," *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences* 26 (July 2009): 239.

diversity criteria.<sup>114</sup> In the case of VALORANT E-Sports, the teams are ethnically and racially diverse; however, there is a serious lack of women and marginalized genders.

This gap seems to be addressed by Game Changers, which is VALORANT's professional E-Sports league that is exclusive to women and marginalized genders. Although this appears to be a positive and inclusive league, its isolated circuit creates a divide between the players from the main competitive circuit, with different prize pools, different player treatment, and different event standards. Riot Games' annual reports do not address their E-Sports sphere in any significant capacity, except when they discuss Game Changers. The question remains open about whether Game Changers is an example of performance EDI or responsive or revolutionary EDI stance.

## Game Changers

On the surface, the competitive circuit that revolves around women and marginalized genders appears to be an excellent creation that supports Riot Games EDI plans because it is a place in which women and marginalized genders can compete with one another at a professional level that did not exist before. Although this exclusive competitive circuit does exist, it does not necessarily embody the EDI stances that Riot Games takes pride in highlighting within its reports. Unlike the regular VCT circuit, which has ways of climbing the ranks to make it to Champions, the Game Changers circuit has no affiliation and offers the women's teams no chance at trying to qualify for any of the regular league VCT events. They are isolated within their own circuit.

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<sup>114</sup> Susan Merilainen, Jane Tienari, Saija Katila, and Yvonne Benschop, "Diversity Management Versus Gender Equality: The Finnish Case," *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences* 26 (July 2009): 239.

The first iteration of Game Changers was in September of 2020 with the VALORANT Ignition series, with a funded prize pool for an event called the FTW Summer Showdown.<sup>115</sup> The qualifier tournament for this event was hosted by GALorants, which is a women's VALORANT Discord community focused on bringing women into the E-Sports sphere.<sup>116</sup> The initial prize pool was \$1,000 USD, and the Showdown prize pool grew to \$50,000 USD.<sup>117</sup> In 2021, Game Changers was announced as the VALORANT CHAMPIONS TOUR Game Changers. Riot Games stated, "VCT Game Changers is our way of building a more representative VALORANT Champions Tour."<sup>118</sup> The 2021 tournament launched and was kept as a regional tournament that was contained to a month-long event with a \$50,000 USD prize pool.<sup>119</sup> Since 2020, the prize pool of Game Changers has not been raised despite the league's growth.

In 2022, VCT Game Changers saw its first real growth, with the league being something akin to the VCT circuit. For 2022 VCT Game Changers, there was a year of regional competitions that took place for teams to qualify for the first international LAN championship.<sup>120</sup> It featured 2 teams from North America, 1 from Brazil, 2 from EMEA, 1 from APAC, 1 from LATAM, and 1 from East Asia.<sup>121</sup> This event took place in November of 2022 and was celebrated with the first official Game Changers event song, official VALORANT in-game drops, and global competition in Berlin, Germany.<sup>122</sup> Although this was a major step forward for VCT Game Changers, the quality of the content put toward the first-ever VCT Game Changers Championship is questionable.

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<sup>115</sup> "VALORANT Ignition Series."

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> "VALORANT Champions Tour Game Changers."

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Neale, "VALORANT Esports - GC 22."

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

This may have been the first for this circuit, but Riot Games by 2022 had already hosted numerous E-Sports competitions of greater size through their LOL competitive circuit and had held two VALORANT VCT Championships. Riot Games, having been in the competitive gaming sphere for years, has produced high-quality productions in anticipation of an event and the hosting of the event. As with traditional sporting events, creating hype before a game is important to engage viewers and get them invested both in viewer engagement and purchasing merchandise. Riot Games has a history of creating short, animated trailers, animated music videos, doing team introductions and event-specific merchandise that fans can purchase. The effort and choices surrounding the content for the 2022 Game Changers tournament require further dissection because most of the content produced falls short of standard expectations of a Riot Games production. Game Changers received no full animated music video, lacked significant game drops, and was not provided with a guarantee of a primetime slot. Furthermore, Riot Games, at the beginning of a competitive season, will produce videos explaining how the competitive season will play out, dates on when tournaments will take place, where they will be taking place, and how fans can watch the games. However, the Game Changers season structure was hard to follow because Riot Games did not produce an explanation of how the Game Changers teams would be able to try and qualify for the end-of-year VCT Game Changers tournament.

## **Music Videos**

It is not uncommon for video game companies to release trailers and animated shorts of their games for releases, events, and advertisements. For years, Riot Games has had a tradition of releasing fully animated music videos, often featuring original music, for their major game releases and before major E-Sports events. There are high expectations of these productions, and

Riot Games has even created its own animated girl group called K/DA and has a dedicated Riot Games Music channel.<sup>123</sup> It is standard practice for Riot Games to produce a music video prior to a major competitive event.

This standard practice has existed in the VCT league from the beginning. VCT Champions 2021 had the song "Die For You" featuring Grabbitz, which was released on November 22, 2021.<sup>124</sup> The official music video was released to the VALORANT YouTube channel and has a run time of 3:38, with the animation of the video done by Riot Games and The Line Animation.<sup>125</sup> Much of the video is moving animation with no repetition of animated scenes. The story within the music video surrounded the gamers and their interactions with their teammates and selected agents, and the continuous reinstatement that they needed to work with one another because working alone would result in a loss. This is depicted through the lyrics reiterating the phrase, "This could be the day I die for you," and imagery of a player and agent constantly reaching out for one another.<sup>126</sup>

For the 2022 VCT Championship, the VALORANT YouTube channel released "Fire Again," featuring Ashnikko on August 22, 2022.<sup>127</sup> This music video, like the previous one, featured original animation. The animation team behind this music video was Riot Games and WIZZ.<sup>128</sup> This music video once again blended agents and players; however, this time, the players were based on VALORANT pro players who had been playing that season. The players were not just the VCT players: women from the Game Changers leagues were also featured. The

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<sup>123</sup> "K/DA Official Fan Club - League of Legends."

<sup>124</sup> VALORANT, *Die For You Ft. Grabbitz // Official Music Video // VALORANT Champions 2021*.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> VALORANT, *Fire Again Ft. Ashnikko // Official Music Video // VALORANT Champions 2022*.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

song "Fire Again" told the story of the agents and players becoming intertwined with one another, switching back and forth as they went through their personal journeys. They all fought with themselves to reach out to the Champions symbol, as they all entered the "Fire Again," or the VCT again. This music video has a run time of 3:38, and although it does not feature as straightforward as the narrative of the previous, the inclusion of the players appears to reflect the ecosystem solidification VALORANT E-Sports has been trying to foster. Recognizable faces and teams within the VCT games.

The VCT Game Changers 2022 did not release an official music video; rather, a visualizer titled "All Eyes On Me" featuring Jean Deaux & Whipped Cream was released on November 8, 2022.<sup>129</sup> This animation of All Eyes On Me was done by Riot Games and Scholar and had significantly less original moving animation than other VCT animation. The run time of the video is 3 minutes, but after the first minute, it is a loop. Die For You and Fire Again were both over three minutes with full original animation. This may be justified as the production was a visualizer, not a music video; however, this then raises the question, why did Riot Games not produce the standard music video for this major event? Furthermore, many of the scenes are stills with little movement beyond flashing lights or floating objects. This visualizer also lacks any in-depth narrative or interactions with VALORANT or agents. To emphasize the female players' presence, the game almost entirely disappears and only exists as a platform with little context.

### **Game Drops**

Riot Games incentivizes VALORANT players to watch E-Sports through game drops, which are a marketing tool used by companies to engage and build audiences. Riot Games

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<sup>129</sup> VALORANT Champions Tour, *All Eyes On Me Ft Jean Deaux & Whipped Cream // Visualizer | 2022 VCT Game Changers Championship*.



creates game drops that can only be earned by watching their E-Sports. For VALORANT, game drops can be earned by watching the official VALORANT channel or official VALORANT streamer partner.

Within VALORANT, game drops can have a financial impact on leagues and gain more attention and viewers. Drops have certain requirements to be earned. These requirements include linking VALORANT accounts to a Twitch account and then having to watch a certain number of minutes or hours of an event. The drop will then appear in a player's VALORANT account inventory.<sup>130</sup> These in-game bonuses have no impact on VALORANT gameplay, but they are viewable by other players and represent one of the few modes of customization available to VALORANT players. The agents in VALORANT are not customizable and cannot be altered. (This may be because the agents are carefully created representations of different cultures.) The customizable features in VALORANT include player cards, player card banners, in-game sprays, gun skins, and 'buddies' (keychains) on the guns.

For the VALORANT Tour Championships 2022, Riot Games released three drops and one gun skin collection. This included a player card, a card banner, and an in-game spray, all of which were free if a certain number of minutes on VCT were watched.<sup>131</sup> All of these drops did not have an immediate monetary gain for Riot Games as they were free for viewers, and watching the games was also free. However, having more viewers would most likely have impacted advertising and sponsor revenues.

Also, for the 2022 VCT event, a limited-edition gun skin collection was released featuring a phantom (gun) skin, a butterfly knife, a player card, a gun buddy, and a spray.<sup>132</sup> The

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<sup>130</sup> "VALORANT Esports."

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Nasteviski, "Valorant Champions 2022 Skin Bundle."

skin bundle cost 6,265 VALORANT points, which is about \$97.98 CAD. Riot Games gave a 50% revenue cut to all qualifying 16 VALORANT E-Sports partnered teams that were competing in the VCT 2022 event.<sup>133</sup> On September 17, 2022, with several days remaining of the bundle being sold, VALORANT Champions Tour tweeted that so far, they had raised over \$16 million USD for the teams.<sup>134</sup> This meant each team took about \$1 million USD in additional tournament revenue from the VCT event.<sup>135</sup>

For VCT Game Changers 2022, there were only two drops and no skin bundle. The Game Changers drops included a player card and card banner.<sup>136</sup> Although the VCT Game Changers 2022 event was much shorter than the VCT 2022 event, it was similar in being the largest and most impactful event for the players of those leagues for their E-Sports season. Given that the VCT 2022 event spray was only available for 2 days, a spray could have been added to the VCT Game Changers 2022 drop line, not only giving both events equal drops but possibly incentivizing further player engagement with the Game Changers league. Additionally, the Game Changers 2022 Championship qualifying teams did not receive any additional revenue from a skin bundle like the VCT 2022 qualifying teams, as there was no skin bundle released to celebrate Game Changers. The Game Changer drops, similarly to the official visualizer, do not meet the standard set by Riot Games for their other major competitions.

## Priority Views

Women in traditional sports have struggled to gain viewer numbers that are on par with those of the men's leagues. Fédération Internationale de Football Association is just one example of massive differences in viewership numbers between men's and women's events. In 2019, the

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<sup>133</sup> Nastevski, “Valorant Champions 2022 Skin Bundle.”

<sup>134</sup> VALORANT Champions Tour [@ValorantEsports], “Through Your Support.”

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Neale, “VALORANT Esports - GC 22.”

men's final event had close to 1.5 billion people, whereas the women's event had about 263.62 million people watch.<sup>137</sup> This difference in viewership also occurs within E-Sports and in VALORANT: although VCT and Game Changers VCT use the same streaming platforms, the actual event coverage and post-game coverage have significant differences.

The VCT league includes both A tier and S tier, depending on the event and who is there, if it is international with all partnered teams or international with the region splits. Game Changers is also within the top tiers because they have their own international championship between regions; however, there is no indication they get a time preference for their matches or when they stream. VALORANT has its primetime based around the Pacific time zone, where Riot Games HQ is located. The VCT league rarely has schedules that conflict with one another internationally and never has conflicts within a region. A major reveal for VCT Challengers, which is a B-tier league, promised that "the biggest Challenger leagues will receive dedicated broadcast windows that will be scheduled to avoid conflicts with international league matches."<sup>138</sup> No announcement has ever been made for VCT Game Changers regarding a promise to not schedule conflicts.

VCT Game Changers' largest dedicated production was a documentary, *Changing the Game: A VCT Documentary*, about its 2022 season.<sup>139</sup> It was a celebration of the accomplishments of the players and for Riot Games to take this step forward, as well as the excitement of the players to compete again in 2023. The documentary highlighted the fact that the VCT Game Changers final was "THE MOST WATCHED WOMEN'S ESPORTS

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<sup>137</sup> Mullin, "What Are the Differences between Women's and Men's FIFA World Cups?"

<sup>138</sup> Rozelle, "VALORANT Esports."

<sup>139</sup> VALORANT Champions Tour, *Changing The Game*.

TOURNAMENT EVER."<sup>140</sup> The Game Changers finals viewership had 114,914 viewers (average), peaking at 239,334 viewers (this applies to viewers on official streams, not in attendance, and not in watch parties).<sup>141</sup> Given how new VALORANT Game Changers is to the pro scene, it is both encouraging that they were able to get a large viewership but also disappointing that this size is smaller than the VTC regular season. In comparison to the 2022 Champions viewer count, the VCT 22 Championship had 520,000 viewers (average) and peaked at 1.5 million viewers (this applies to viewers on official streams, not in attendance, and in watch parties).<sup>142</sup>

Although the documentary was well done and praised the Game Changers league, it raises questions about the intentions of Riot Games having the league. Given that Riot Games is a corporation, it is not unreasonable to believe that it is looking to engage more players and increase revenue. Unfortunately, changes in the 2023 season that would have helped make Game Changers more than a PR endeavour did not occur, and there was a lack of specificity about Riot Games' goals for Game Changers.

## 2023 Season

After the continued success of the VCT regular league and the demonstrated success of the VCT Game Changers, the 2023 season for both leagues was announced with some changes to the past structure. However, the changes and announcements pertained only to the VCT regular

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<sup>140</sup> VALORANT Champions Tour, *Changing The Game*.

<sup>141</sup> "VCT 2022 Game Changers Championship - Valorant - Viewership, Overview, Prize Pool | Esports Charts."

<sup>142</sup> "VALORANT Champions 2022 - Valorant - Viewership, Overview, Prize Pool | Esports Charts."

league, such as new partnered team systems, alleviation of franchising fees, additional stipends, and how teams would qualify for that year's VCT Global events.

VCT Game Changers was not included in any of those announcements, and many aspects of the season were left unclear. Riot Games has yet to announce the qualifying processes for Game Changers as of March 2023. The only official announcement was regarding the location of Game Changers Champions.<sup>143</sup> The Game Changers series is also unclear about prize pools because each region appears to organize its own prize pool allocation and tour set-up.

Within the announcement of the VCT Game Changers 2023 Championship location reveal was the statement, "We want Game Changers to become the stepping stone that pushes more women to compete within the International and Challenger Leagues."<sup>144</sup> Raising the level of competition may be one of the reasons that Riot Games changed the qualifications to compete in Game Changers from being Platinum (level 5 out of 9) to having to be Ascendant (level 7 out of 9).<sup>145</sup> Despite statements made by Riot Games and VALORANT E-Sports about Game Changers being this stepping stone for women and marginalized genders, there is little effort to support them financially, as is being done with the VCT teams.

Riot Games claims to be making room and providing opportunities for Game Changers; however, the E-Sports organizations have no motivation to have women on their rosters. As mentioned above, some of the partnered or large organizations, rather than include women on their regular league teams, have opted to make Game Changers teams that compete only within that league. Hypothetically, it is possible for E-Sports organizations to win both VCT Champions events with their two teams. As of now, Game Changers feels less like a stepping stone and more

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<sup>143</sup> "VALORANT Esports."

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

like a hurdle for women and marginalized genders trying to prove that they can compete at the VCT level. The Champions title they win in Game Changers appears to be held in lower regard to the VCT Champions, and no winners of the first VCT Game Changers were signed to the regular league in 2023.

As my analysis shows, Game Changers does not provide an adequate place in E-Sports for women and marginalized genders, especially if the goal is for Game Changer players to enter the regular league. The bridge from one league to another needs to be clarified and incentives are needed for E-Sports organizations to include Game Changer players on all rosters. The question Riot Games needs to address is why should an E-Sports organization blend Game Changers player into their regular league when they have the money to have two separate teams? Riot Games needs to seriously consider the future of Game Changers, both in the immediate and in the long term.

## Further Considerations

The lack of clarity about the future of Game Changers is a serious problem. Unfortunately, the VALORANT leadership has not been helpful. Leo Faria, the head of VALORANT global E-Sports, has made concerning Tweets about Game Changers lacking a future. Faria is promoting a narrative that limiting the growth of Game Changers is the best way to create a path of integration between Game Changers and the VCT league.

Particularly of note is the response to Faria's tweets in the podcast *Plat Chat Valorant*, which features pro players and is hosted by official VALORANT casters.<sup>146</sup> The podcast

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<sup>146</sup> Plat Chat VALORANT, *SENTINELS ARE \*\*\*\*ED* — *Plat Chat VALORANT Ep. 130*.

specifically addressed Faria's tweet regarding the location announcement of Game Changers 2023 and the responses to comments on his tweet that he made. It specifically addressed the question of what was stopping Game Changers players from competing in co-ed?<sup>147</sup> This question was answered by MEL, a female pro-VALORANT player. MEL pointed out that Riot Games could do more to help female and marginalized gender gamers join the main league, possibly by altering the E-Sports Organization guidelines.<sup>148</sup> MEL shared that she was not able to switch E-Sports organizations because the organization that held her contract made an unreasonable buyout price without her say.<sup>149</sup>

The lack of players' control over which organization they could join, together with statements from Faria that they are not growing Game Changers, leaves female and marginalized gender players with limited options. Consistency and clarity on these topics might help mitigate the resentment some players are feeling towards Riot Games.

The issues caused by Faria's tweets also could make a great case study for crisis management or public relations. It is through these tweets that Riot Games' intentions about the future of Game Changers may have been made clear. But they also gave Riot Games a taste of the possible response should they try to discontinue Game Changers.

Game Changers, as its own separate branch, provides no solutions to the lack of representation within competitive circuits. Partnered teams are currently making separate teams for Game Changers and VCT so that they can compete for two different titles. With the existence of Game Changers and the chance at multiple wins, what incentive is there for an E-Sports

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<sup>147</sup> Plat Chat VALORANT, *SENTINELS ARE \*\*\*\*ED* — *Plat Chat VALORANT Ep. 130*.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

organization to change their VCT rosters? Riot Games, perhaps without meaning to, has established two leagues. Although they continue to refer to Game Changers as a stepping stone, it is already growing beyond that.

If the two leagues were invested in further to grow and be their own entities, then what would the leagues' co-existence look like? What levels of resistance would occur if the Top 3 teams from Game Changers got to compete in VCT or just the winner of the Game Changers VCT finals? The immediate response would be pushback from partnered organizations that did not have a Game Changers team, and there could be a scenario in which an organization would be competing with itself in the finals. However, with the stipends from Riot Games, having two teams may be feasible. Also, when it comes to the business side of an E-Sports organization, more wins increase the possibility of sponsorships, which helps finance the teams.

The stepping stone approach is already failing; Game Changers as its own distinct league is becoming solidified. Should Riot Games ever wish to remove it or downsize it, then it would appear as a step back in their EDI progress. Slowly, Riot Games is driving itself into a corner and needs to either announce its current plans for Game Changers or make plans to have this league take on a life of its own. Game Changers could truly be a game-changing sphere for women and marginalized genders in E-Sports. However, with a current ceiling being placed on the league and a lack of assistance for bridging both league's professional players, the future outcome does not appear to be in Game Changers' favour.

## **Conclusion**

This major research project grew out of my own personal investment in building a more inclusive environment for women in the recreational VALORANT sphere. Prior to this major research project and then again during the research process, I played the game recreationally.



Through playing VALORANT, I experienced the toxic gaming culture firsthand. I was targeted, harassed, and threatened when I would disclose to the team I was on that I was a woman. By having experienced how toxic VALORANT was, I was shocked and intrigued when I learned that VALORANT was one of the few FPS games to have a responsive reporting system and zero-tolerance systems.<sup>150</sup> I became interested in other positive steps that VALORANT and Riot Games were taking to improve the gaming environment. My research began with rose-tinted lenses, but I now have a more pessimistic perspective about Riot Games and their treatment of women in E-Sports. I am skeptical about whether Riot Games will continue its EDI journey after it no longer has mandated third-party reviewing.

Riot Games initially started out as a small gaming company that produced a single game back in 2006. The work culture they fostered was toxic for women, and it was only after being exposed through Cecilia D'Anastasio's article, "Inside The Culture Of Sexism at Riot Games" in 2018, that Riot Games was forced to re-evaluate their company culture and produce change.<sup>151</sup> After the superficial reports produced in 2019, Riot Games prepared more in-depth EDI reports annually.

From 2019 to 2022, the Diversity & Inclusion reports demonstrated that actual change was taking place within the company culture and demographics. However, the in-game representation and inclusive practices that were promised were adopted more slowly. By far, the greatest misrepresentation in the reports is of change being made in VALORANT E-Sports. These reports paint a picture of real diversity and inclusion created through the introduction of Game Changers. However, there are many inequalities in how Game Changers is supported.

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<sup>150</sup> "Riot Games Is Testing a Zero-Tolerance Valorant Report System | ONE Esports."

<sup>151</sup> D'Anastasio, "Inside The Culture Of Sexism At Riot Games."

Game Changers did not receive the standard Riot Games music video, lacked as many drops as the regular league, did not receive a promise of a primetime slot like the regular league, and had an unclear and disorganized proposed 2023 season. Although steps have been taken to foster a better work culture at Riot Games, these do not extend to Riot Games E-Sports.

Riot Games clearly has more work to do regarding their E-Sports sphere, especially with the ceiling they have placed upon Game Changers. If they never aim to help Game Changers reach the heights of the regular league, then it will perpetuate the narrative that women will always be second in VALORANT E-Sports. Also, without a clear plan to integrate women and marginalized genders into the regular league, there is little chance that E-Sports organizations will take the initiative to do so. In the immediate future, a lingering question is what will happen to both Riot Games' EDI initiatives and third-party reviewing when the three-year term expires. When Riot Games is no longer obligated to be under review, and the scandal becomes a distant memory, the decisions they make will reveal how dedicated Riot Games was to changing their company and the gaming sphere. Either they continue to forge ahead and find ways to create diverse and inclusive spaces in the company and gaming sphere, or they will allow their past dedication to dwindle.

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