

12 Shout-Outed: Pronoun Hazards in Live Streamed Esports Events (A Conversation with Sasha “Magi” Sullivan)

Matt Knutson

Introduction

This interview with Sasha “Magi” Sullivan was conducted in the fall of 2019 over email. Magi is known as a competitor in *Super Smash Bros. Melee*, a Nintendo GameCube game from 2001 that is still played as an esports today. Until 2020, *Melee* tournaments were predominantly played in person, and those tournaments that attract national and international competition (known as “majors” and “supermajors”) could bring in viewing audiences in excess of 100,000 through Twitch. (In-person tournaments were discontinued during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and they have resumed only recently; the two years of online-only tournaments did not surpass previous events in viewership.) At its peak, the competitive *Melee* scene supported perhaps two dozen full-time professionals and at least as many semiprofessionals, largely through live streaming content creation on Twitch—as well as contracts with esports teams, sponsorships, and tournament winnings. A biannual ranking system conducted by the community rates the top 100 competitors worldwide; making the top 100 is a remarkable milestone in a *Melee* career, and discursive practices in the community regularly site this ranking system (“So-and-so, a top 20 player . . .”).

At the time of this interview, Magi had risen to prominence in *Melee* for recently breaking into the top 100 and for her strong performance at Genesis 6 (a supermajor tournament with world-class competition). There, she defeated longtime professional and top 5 player Mang0 on stream; this stunning upset gained her a new level of recognition across the community. At this time, she was known to be transgender in her local *Melee* scene, and yet she was presenting as male at live streamed tournaments. Because

of the high visibility of live streamed competitions, and because her personal safety depended on the stability of her living situation at her parents' house, Magi did not deem it safe to present as female or be gendered as female by commentators ("shoutcasters" in esports) during live streamed tournament play. Through social media, Magi had been public about her preference to be referred to at tournaments as simply "Magi" or by male or gender-neutral pronouns. However, any shoutcaster who knew her to be trans but had missed her stated preferences not to be gendered as female in commentary could unintentionally jeopardize her personal safety with a simple "she." The precarity of her situation was only exacerbated by her strong performance in 2019; as her prominence in *Smash* grew, so did her personal risks during tournament play.

Magi's case reminds us that the conditions of visibility in live streaming remain fraught. Moreover, a little knowledge of another's gender identity can be a dangerous thing: if one insists on using the ostensibly "correct" pronoun(s) when failing to do the due diligence of finding out their preferences, the person in question may be outed in personally damaging ways. The interview illuminates details of her personal story, as well as the scope of the issue: Magi has been in contact with other trans players seeking her advice about managing pronoun use and coming out within a community that live streams its tournaments. Journalists, tournament organizers, and scholars would be well advised to listen to Magi's account and reflect carefully on the stakes of inadvertently outing someone on stream when key communication of preference has not first taken place off stream.

By the end of 2019, Magi had risen from number 97 to number 43 on the *Melee* rankings and moved out of her parents' house. In the summer of 2020, she came out to her parents. She actively competed in the online *Melee* scene amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and currently, she continues to stream and compete in the game.¹

Interview

*How long have you been playing Melee competitively, and at what point did you land on Falco?*²

I started playing competitively in early 2014. I didn't start with *Melee* and actually started with *Project M*, and picked up *Melee* in August of the same year. Because I played Link in *Project M*, I started off by playing Link/

Ganondorf in *Melee* for a couple of months, but eventually landed on Falco whenever I decided that I wanted to play a technical, aggressive character that wasn't as fast as Fox.

What are your current Melee aspirations?

I think right now I'm just trying to make up for inexperience. I spent a majority of my competitive career in Louisiana, so I was sheltered from a lot of different characters and styles that exist in the greater *Melee* scene. By the end of the year I would like to cement my spot in the Top 50, and depending on how these next two or so months go I will hopefully feel like I can push for a top 20 spot. In the end, I just want to be the best player that I can possibly be.

Can I ask what you're studying and what your career aspirations are?

I was originally a sociology major, but now I am a general studies major (which basically just means three minors). The three minors are sociology, business administration, and economics. I honestly have no real interest in careers, and I'm only really getting a degree so I have something to fall back on if my aspirations in esports fall through.

At this point, the match you played that got the most attention/recognition from the community was against Mang0 at Genesis 6 (February 2019). What was that match like for you? Were there any unexpected consequences of upsetting a fan favorite player early (especially at Genesis, where Mang0 has so much history)?

It was certainly a life-changing moment for me. Throughout the weekend, I joked with my friends about my bracket at Genesis, and how I would really like to beat Mang0 because that would let me avoid all the floaty players I had in loser's, and be left with only Foxes and Marths. I remember when the first game started how I kinda had a small moment where I was like, "Oh god, I'm actually playing against Mang0." Thankfully, I've sort of trained myself to not let things like that affect my play, and from that moment on, it was just focusing on the set itself and things that I can do to beat him. One funny consequence was that people think I play red Falco because that's the color I chose during that set, but I've always been a neutral color Falco, I couldn't take it away from Mang0 though.

At what point did you start to promote the title of "prettiest Falco" for yourself?

I heard a fighting game player refer to themselves as a very "pretty" player because of how their play looked aesthetically, and once I saw their

gameplay, it made a lot of sense to me in relation to my gameplay. It also just so happened to be that I was figuring out my gender identity around the same time, so it kinda ended up being a double meaning.

At what age did you discover you might be more comfortable identifying as female? Can you describe your experiences transitioning?

I found out what the word really meant in October 2016. It took a lot of overcoming internalized transphobia and other shitty things that I was taught growing up, but one day it clicked and it's been like that ever since. It's been a positive experience overall, I recently started "socially" transitioning in my friend groups and the internet. It's still going to be a while until I'm fully comfortable being able to transition full time at school/in public in general, but hopefully that time will come soon. For now, I'll at least get to exist as who I want to be on my streams and at tournaments.

Living in the Deep South has, I would imagine, its own obstacles for queer people coming out. Moreover, Gamergate appeared not long after you started playing competitively. Did your location and/or social activities have an influence on the timing of your coming out?

Living in the Deep South definitely influenced me a bit. It also didn't help that my brother already came out as gay to my parents, and they weren't accepting of him at all. Although the state is pretty awful toward LGBTQ+ members, there are at least a lot of resources and a growing community in Louisiana that is making existing a little bit easier. Coming out to the *Smash* community was pretty easy honestly, I knew my scene was particularly liberal, and I was only worried about maybe someone deciding to be transphobic and others following suit, but my scene has been amazing and honestly at this point, is my family. The internet/online community in particular never really fazed me either, I just know the spaces to avoid, and I'm generally happy, aside from the random people that decide to go out of their way to tell me I'll never be a "real woman" or whatever.

What you say about friends becoming family—I know that's often remarked on as common to a lot of LGBTQ+ people's experiences. Beyond the Smash scene, have you gotten active in Gay-Straight Alliance or other queer advocacy groups/organizations?

Not really, I am a part of a local trans Facebook group for Louisiana, but outside of that I haven't really gotten that involved with any groups outside of *Smash*.

Can you say a bit more about what your transition meant before the “social” phase and what this has entailed? Your previous Twitlonger post advising commentators about pronoun usage testifies to your experiences with transitioning in different personal spheres at different rates. I’m curious to hear more about this.

My transition when I lived at my parents’ place was extremely awkward. Basically, I came out to a small group of my friends before I came out to my parents, and I wanted to keep it that way for a while. Eventually they did of course end up finding out, and reacted pretty much exactly as I would expect them to. After that I completely came out to my state’s *Smash* scene, and then I ended up making a Twitlonger explaining why I still would prefer people to use he/him or they/them pronouns when referring to me, since my parents were already watching my live sets when I sent them the link (plus I used to get very uncomfortable when people used my preferred pronouns while I was still presenting male).

This created the super awkward dynamic of transitioning in different spaces with limited resources. I usually just told people to use they/them pronouns, but if necessary to use he/him pronouns, especially if they were visiting my parents’ house with me. My friends that I hung out with all the time understood my situation completely, but some of the acquaintances and nonactive members were really confused or just completely uninformed, so there were a lot of people that I just didn’t really bother explaining it to and just let them use whatever they were used to. And then of course, there were the random occasions where I actually got to present as female and just be who I wanted to be, but those were pretty rare, considering how difficult it was to get ready and then go back to looking “normal” again before going back to my parents’ place. AND IF IT WASN’T AWKWARD ENOUGH, it just so happened that I started performing really well out of state. Slowly my popularity really starts to rise, and now I’m relatively well known in the community for being a hidden boss that happens to be trans. THEN I get ranked and make the waves around that I’m the first female top 100 player, THEN I beat Mang0, and NOW I have hundreds of people supporting me and helping me move out of my parents’ place, all while my parents are completely oblivious to everything and I just pretend that I’m the manly man that they wanted me to always be. Looking back on it, it certainly is one of the strangest circumstances to exist in, but it was my life, and it was normal for me.

Were there any times when you were concerned that a commentator or someone else would out you in a way that your parents would notice? Or did tournament organizers (TOs) keep their commentators well informed enough to avoid this circumstance?

I was worried, and it actually ended up happening, but thankfully my parents didn't really make too much of a fuss about it and kinda just let it slide. Honestly I don't really know if it was a conscious decision to ignore it or if they just didn't connect the dots somehow. Either way, it has always been a concern for sure.

If there had been repeated references to you as a "she," do you believe your parents would have pressed you on this and raised more of a fuss? Would they have kicked you out/cut you off financially?

They would have certainly caused a fuss, and it's hard for me to say whether or not they would have cut me off 100 percent. It would've been a mess no matter what, but my parents may have been merciful and compromised some deal with me so I wouldn't get kicked out. This is a question I've asked myself many times, and it's pretty hard for me to say what would've happened in reality, but for my safety I assumed that they would have kicked me out 100 percent.

Do you know of others who are currently or were previously in circumstances like yours? I know that your situation is and was unique, but I imagine other folks are in a state of transition (I just saw an announcement from SonicFox coming out as genderqueer) in which they may not be ready to out themselves beyond their close friends yet.

I actually have a pretty large group of trans people that are in similar situations. A lot of the people who follow me are in very similar situations, and I get a lot of messages from people who are in similar spots who ask for some advice or just offer words of encouragement for our struggles.

What advice do you tend to give them? Or does it vary greatly case by case?

It usually does vary case by case, but I try my best to always pass the message that, "If I can do it, so can you, I am not a special person that was born with the ability to cope with my situation; this is a skill you can learn." My main goal is to reassure them that they can do it, and if they need any specific advice, then I could certainly pass on any knowledge I have to them.

What can TOs and competitors take from your experiences to best communicate pronoun preferences, especially in times of transition?

What I usually tried to do is contact the TOs or the stream team and asked them to read my pronoun twitlonger. I think most people can just make a quick blurb about their situation, but generally I've had a positive experience with TOs/stream teams listening to my instructions. I'm sure as long as trans players try to inform the TOs about their situation, then they should be safe from any mishaps, and I hope TOs continue to listen!

Melee is now old enough to vote—it's ancient in the world of esports. Do you see the competitive community sustaining this game from eighteen to, say, twenty-five years old?

It depends on what you mean by sustain. I believe that people will play this game for at least another fifty years, but I'm not sure if majors will exist for the entire time. The community is die-hard; almost all of the players will talk about how we can't find any game that satisfies us as much as *Melee* does, so I find it hard to believe that people will ever STOP playing the game. I just don't know if tournaments will be able to justify us because it's hard to say how the popularity of the game will last, or if Nintendo decides to cut off streams for us once and for all or something like that.

Closing Note

Magi's comment about being the first trans player and the first woman in the top 100 for *Melee* should remind us of systemic issues in gaming, and in esports in particular, which prevent representative gender participation in such spaces. It is critical that in responding to the successes of competitors such as Magi we (as academics, journalists, community members, etc.) are not overeager to promote their visibility without first diligently ascertaining their preferences. The work of moving esports toward more equitable participation and visibility remains vital; this interview serves as a reminder that, like any well-intentioned efforts, such work can be fraught whenever visibility becomes perilous to the visible. Magi's comments on others who are in similar spots to hers should emphasize the pervasiveness of this issue. Closetedness often persuades a cisgender/heterosexual public that the absence of evidence is the evidence of absence. As such, testimony from folks like Magi, whom live streaming makes newly public, should

correct common misunderstandings about who is playing, how much of a good thing visibility is, and what someone else's best interests are with respect to pronoun usage.

Notes

1. I would like to offer a special thank-you to Magi for her time in sharing her experiences with me and for her support of this scholarship.
2. This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity and readability.

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Live Streaming Culture

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