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Dons, Bjørn

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One major part of the *League of Legends* ecosystem is the spectacle of the streamer. A streamer will submit a play to the hazardous, volatile nature of the Internet, welcoming judgment and offering to let us share in his or her triumphs and defeat. Glancing at a list, one Danish man stands out as consistent: streaming is his full-time job, and despite efforts to the contrary, he seems to be staying that way.

To his left is Pengu, a large stuffed penguin. He often wears a Teemo hat. His playlist, which shifts from alt-rock to metal to the odd TV theme song, is regarded as one of the best on Twitch.tv. His real name is Bjørn Dons, but most of the *League of Legends* community know him as Guardsman Bob.

At the time of writing, Dons is 27 years old and has played *League of Legends* since its beta period. He is most known for being an informative, even-tempered streamer and playing in the Noxus vs. Ionia showmatch. During a unique situation where the game's lore would be influenced by the winner, Dons' Udyr proved formidable, and he his exemplary play rewarded him with a new audience.

However, before this all happened, Dons was highly involved in another MMORPG called *Guild Wars*. His guild, Rebel Rising, participated in a number of tournaments that *Guild Wars'* developer, ArenaNet, held.

"For two and a half years we took about fifty percent of those," Dons muses, thinking back. It was also around this time that Dons would begin an association with Joshua "Jatt" Leesman, who played *League of Legends* for Team Dignitas and currently works for Riot Games as a Game Analyst and color commentator. He would also come to know Ryan "Morello" Scott, Riot Games' Lead Designer, who was doing quality assurance and design for ArenaNet.

It was Leesman and other *Guild Wars* friends that would encourage Dons to play *League of Legends*, and they would form his initial group of players, as well.

"Jatt went away for about a couple of weeks and when he came back I had been playing *League of Legends* nonstop," Dons explains. "Pretty much all of *Guild Wars* turned into *League of Legends*."

Playing with familiar faces also allowed him to try new strategies without the pressure to perform. Having a solid support group to bounce ideas off of (or to just mess around with) was something Dons enjoyed highly. Especially in the early stages playing a new game, this type of network can be invaluable.

“If you’re into online gaming, and looking to long-term becoming a pro player or anything, or be a good online gamer, your first game is the worst one,” Dons said. “Jumping games with friends is always the best way to go about it. Infinitely more fun.”

Despite this group leading him to League, he also explained that he would have eventually found his way there, regardless of Leesman’s introduction. *Guild Wars* had been out for four years by 2009, and the MOBA genre represented something new and exciting.

As Dons explained it, “*League of Legends* felt like an evolution of *Guild Wars*.”

In the months leading up to the Noxus vs. Ionia showmatch, Dons would start streaming mainly as a way to gain recognition among the people he was playing with. Like many other streamers of the day, viewer counts were relatively low, and when they rose by the dozens, Dons enjoyed the popularity. Up until Own3d.tv’s recent implosion, Dons was a fixture on that network; he currently streams on Twitch.tv daily.

The real expansion of his audience happened after the showmatch, as his play with Udyr propelled him to hundreds of regular viewers. It was at this point that he seriously considered streaming as something that could serve as an inroad in the industry.

“I think at that time my mindset was ‘If I make it big in the *League of Legends* streaming community, something will fall off,’” Dons said. “Maybe a team will pick me up, maybe I’ll start making it as a caster, or maybe Riot will offer me some position.”

However, the hope to work for the *League of Legends* developer seems to not be in the cards for Dons. There is frustration in his voice as he explains the road he’s taken in attempts at employment, including many positive starts to the process, only to have it fall off in later interviews with the company.

“Over the last year and a half I applied to Riot three times and had five interviews. I’ve been turned down every time, the latest being for champion designer and the live balance design. They also turned me down for player support – they won’t even let me type the e-mails.”

Dons’ annoyance is apparent, and an unfortunate side-effect of his situation. Because he is not a professional player, he does not receive high amounts of exposure to the *League of Legends* community at large; players like James “PhantomL0rd” Varga and Vincent “VMan7” Fevola are in a similar place, relying on their streams and their cult fan bases to provide them with income.

However, Dons’ quest for something more has a certain tinge of sadness to it, especially when hearing him vent. While he is highly regarded by the *League* community, his stream does not find the numbers that many professional players do. He also doesn’t regard himself as good enough to qualify for a professional team, at least at the level of success he wants to achieve.

Dons has considered turning his knowledge and passion for the game to commentary, but his lack of a native-English vocabulary and other factors impede his progress.

“The thing that I’ve always had a weird relationship with is maybe, fake emotion. People getting excited on command. Not that you’re personally excited for what’s happening, but because the situation calls for it.”

“The Holy Grail there is genuine enthusiasm, and I think I’m struggling finding that.”

The demeanor of streamers and commentators is a volatile subject in the *League of Legends* community, as the flair for the dramatic may net personalities a larger following and resulting revenue than being educational, stoic and otherwise “chill.”

“I think a lot of times when I watch streamers who show that type of emotion I sit back and I go like ‘They’re just doing it to show off,’” Dons said. “They’re not doing it because that’s truly how they feel deep inside. They know that streaming and being completely ridiculous is going to make viewers love them, so they’re just doing it for that.”

Dons’ story seems to be something that is coming up with increasing frequency as *League of Legends* grows in popularity. There is a limited amount of “spots” that people can occupy, and even though the game has a vast amount of potential eyeballs, it can be very hard for a new streamer, broadcaster or player to make themselves visible to them.

Especially as Riot throws its efforts into producing a quality League Championship Series every week, teams and broadcasters that aren’t working within that system are cut off from a large amount of exposure. For every story that continues positively, like the Brunch Club/compLexity, Team MRN and DragonBorns, there are dozens more that come to a harsher conclusion.

As we saw, many teams that failed to qualify for LCS broke up as soon as they were eliminated, with the road back into the spotlight being a very difficult one. The doors may be closing, with fame and a career in gaming on the other side.

“I feel like I’m between everywhere. I’m not quite good enough to have 10,000 viewers watching my stream, and I’m not quite good enough to be a pro player, I’m not quite good enough to be a caster, and I’m not quite good enough for Riot to hire me. I feel like I’m 90 percent there, everywhere.”

Due to that 90 percent, Dons hesitates to put down roots in his native Denmark. Already on the older side of many figures of the *League of Legends* community at 27 years old, he worries that there is going to be a time where he will have to give up what has essentially been his calling for the past few years. While streaming provides him with income, he says that it was only supposed to be a holdover until a career – one as a professional player, broadcaster or developer – manifested itself.

“I don’t know if I’m just wasting my life hanging onto a dream that’s never going to happen, or I’m just climbing an exceptionally large mountain and I’ll get to the top eventually,” Dons said.

“Definitely, at some point, I’m realizing... I’m wasting my twenties... not doing anything but computer games. I have to think about the possibilities that my life isn’t going to

be *League of Legends* or Riot Games. And I have to balance that with fact that I'm trying full time to [do that]."

Watching his stream, that frustration bubbles to the top occasionally; it's there, and it's noticeable. With streaming accounting for his income, Dons doesn't know if the time it would take to try to go pro or become a broadcaster would be worth it. This problem intensifies as he gets older.

"What I'm learning doing this is only useful in this very specific scene. The moment I go outside this world, I've essentially done nothing. What I'm realizing is if I want success with something, I have to put my time into it, as well, and if I don't start putting my time into it... if I don't put time into it for another two years? Three years? Then I'm thirty-something before I start putting my time into something else."

"That's a hard place to start from."