Gender and Resilience in Esports

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INTRODUCTION

Esports, as an industry and as an interconnected set of communities, has long been characterized as misogynist and exclusionary: a domain in which reactionary notions of gender, particularly in relation to sports and computation, flourish. And yet, women (including both trans and cis-gender) and non-binary folks have been foundational to the growth and legitimacy of esports since its inception. This is particularly the case for the many forms of labour and care that happen offscreen and behind the scenes, but which are as indispensable to esports as they are frequently invisible--event organizing, coaching, media production, and team management, to name a few.

This paper reports on some provisional insights from a project that asks the following question: What are the mechanisms through which women and non-binary esports workers have remained, and found success, in the competitive gaming industry?

BACKGROUND

Scholarship on esports' persistent gender exclusions has helped us better understand the barriers to more equitable participation in professional gaming, and in the competitive gaming communities that constitute the industry's pipeline. These include toxic communication in networked play, a lack of meaningful diversity in esports titles' gender representations, inequitable patterns of access to the technical apparatuses needed for sustained, intensive gaming, and a meritocratic ideology that presumes that anyone can 'git gud' at games given enough determination (Paul 2018; Ruotsalainen & Friman 2018; Taylor 2015). As important as these considerations are in determining why the esports player base remains resolutely male-dominated and masculinized, such approaches tend to center play as the primary (if not exclusive) form of participation in esports. This has the effect, inadvertently, of overlooking the myriad other activities that the esports industry supports (and requires), and the pioneering work carried out in these areas by women and non-binary participants.

Our presentation draws on the first round of semi-structured interviews with women and non-binary esports workers—those whose labour, paid or unpaid, onscreen or off, has helped grow and sustain a particular competitive gaming community or organization. Thus far, our interviews have solicited stories and perspectives from participants about how they persevere in an industry that is difficult, if not hostile, to those who are not men. Their stories shed light not just on mechanisms they draw from

in their current roles in order to give and receive support (Discord channels, family members, mentors) but also on the conditions of access that allowed them to pursue a path in esports in the first place.

DIRECTIONS

While this project is still in its preliminary stages, we expect that it should illuminate patterns in the conditions and mechanisms of support that participants describe, patterns in how they were able to initially cultivate and sustain an interest in competitive gaming, and how they are able to find success in an exclusionary industry and culture. Accordingly, the study should make it possible to articulate forms of intervention that seek to replicate some of the mechanisms of education, and apprenticeship that routinely come up in our interviews, in a way that provides young women and non-binary folks with support structures for their involvement in competitive gaming in schools, youth clubs, and amateur esports organizations.

In theoretical terms, the study aims to disrupt an understanding of resilience that has become prevalent in technology industries (including esports and games production): the notion that resilience is a matter of individual persistence and determination, of 'grit' in the face of hostile conditions (Richard & Hoadley 2015). Resilience, in these terms, is the d innate capacity to absorb harm, often in ways that leave sources of harm intact (Bridges et al. 2021). By contrast, our study mobilizes an understanding of resilience as relational and networked (Ungar 2018). When applied to the task of addressing esports' manifold inequities, this shift moves us from seeking solutions at an individual level – such as helping gender (or racial, or ethnic) minorities develop a 'thicker skin' – to articulating systemic interventions aimed at esports' cultural sustainability.

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