Crime and Deviance in Esports: A Routine Activities Theory Approach

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ABSTRACT

Esports popularity exploded in the last decade. The safety of its participants, many of them children, is under threat crime and deviance. This article examines crime and deviance in the esports playground from the lens of Routine Activities Theory, a criminological theory that recognizes the importance of guardianship in reducing crime, where weak guardianship results in higher likelihood of crime and in spaces where there simultaneously exist motivated offenders and attractive targets. This article contributes to a better understanding of the digital playground of esports by applying a theoretical framework from criminology to games and play phenomena. Examining the esports playground from this perspective reveals that the incidents of crime and deviance occurring can be explained by weak guardianship. This criminal justice perspective applied to play phenomena is almost nonexistent, and as such this article establishes a necessary foundation for future research and exploration in multiple disciplines.

Keywords

Esports, routine activities theory, crime, deviance, playgrounds, guardianship

INTRODUCTION

The "play space" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004) encapsulates all spaces where play occurs, such as playgrounds or sport fields. Sports are a special type of play. Suits (1973) describes the features necessary for a type of play to be considered sport: skill, physicality, wide following, and a stable following. For the purposes of discussion, traditional sports include those sports played in physical spaces throughout history, such as football, tennis, and soccer. The traditional sport playgrounds contrast from the modern phenomenon of esports playgrounds. In esports, the shift from physical to online spaces alters the design and location of the playground itself. Esports playgrounds involve players, or gamers, competing on digital platforms. Play research considers these "game spaces" where videogames occur in great detail (Nitsche 2008). Nitsche (2019) explains how modern games intertwine digital spaces with physical spaces, such as location-based games *Ingress* (Niantic 2012) and *Pokémon GO* (Niantic 2016). The popularity of this form of play is remarkable. Participants in esports playgrounds include men, women, and children from all over the world and from likely every conceivable racial and ethnic background (Hedlund 2023; Souza 2015). Activate (a tech consulting firm) estimates more than 318 million eSports

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enthusiasts worldwide (Seager 2019). The International Olympic Committee (IOC) organized the first-ever Olympic Esports Week in Singapore, as well as the European Esports Championship in Katowice. The appearance of esports in the Olympics, arguably the most revered playground of all, appears inevitable.

The playgrounds of esports and sports differ in obvious ways, but they share similar design priorities. All playgrounds incorporate safety to some degree. The typical modern Western playground places safety in design as a key priority, which often involves softer surfaces made of wood chips or rubber, elimination of exposed obstacles such as rocks or tree stumps, and in an open space under the watchful eyes of parents and passersby's (Richmond et al. 2018). Traditional sports are one of very few games that is a public spectacle, where organized competitions and practices always involve parents, coaches, referees, fans, and/or medical staff. Even if sport occurs in an unorganized manner, such as recreational basketball at a local park, the play typically occurs in a public location where help, if needed, is nearby. Despite this emphasis on safe playground design, recent studies have argued that some level of risk in playgrounds is beneficial to development (Brunelle et al. 2016). Sports are games that often inherently include serious risk. Combat sports, football, and soccer are examples of games that encourage combative, yet controlled, violence amongst the participants. This risk of harm may provide a special type of value. Dangerous sports challenge our preconceived limitations and allow for self-affirmation (Russell 2005), and evidence from extreme sports shows that risk-taking is related to the morally and psychologically valuable development of humility and courage (Brymer and Oades 2009). Too much danger and risk may be problematic, with Martínková and Perry (2018) differentiating "safe danger" from other risky sport activities where the harms outweigh potential benefits of the risk. This is a critical distinction, because danger can still exist without unnecessarily compromising the safety of the participants. The design of sport spaces constantly juggle this balance between providing enough beneficial risk while maintaining participant safety. However, one of the dangers faced by participants sports and esports playgrounds is victimization from acts of crime and deviance. Such a risk seems unlikely to be defended for its moral and psychological development by scholars such as Russell, Brymer, or Oades.

Some safety risks of videogames receives considerable attention. Violence in the games and addiction issues led to the American Psychiatric Association specifying Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) as a diagnosis in the DSM-5 (Association 2013), and the World Health Organization listed Gaming Disorder (GD) in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) 11th Revision. Debates in the literature focus primarily on these risks of psychological harms (Palanichamy et al. 2020; Rodríguez et al. 2022), which are particularly problematic for esports given those playground spaces consist of primarily children and young adults. The average age of professional esports players is between 16-18, with most retiring during their early 20s (Smithies et al. 2020). The safety of this vulnerable population from crime and deviance remains understudied and uncertain. Incidents of esports match-fixing, corruption, and doping, the infamous plagues of traditional sport, are increasingly evident (Abarbanel and Johnson 2019; Holden et al. 2017). Harassment, discrimination, and sexism committed through online chat mechanisms are similarly evident (Adinolf and Turkay 2018). Esports research lacks robust consideration of this risk of criminal exploitation, although Ruskin (2014) acknowledged digital game spaces are attractive to organized crime, who have used videogame chat lobbies for recruiting, operations, and even ordering hits.

This article improves upon previous considerations of esports safety by considering crime and deviance in digital spaces through rigorous theoretical consideration through the lens of Cohen and Felson's (1979) Routine Activities Theory (RAT). Such application of RAT to any esports criminal or deviant act is almost completely absent from academic study, apart from Zohn and Bleakley (2023) who argue that anonymity of illegal betting in esports contributes to match-fixing risk according to RAT. This paper begins by identifying the various forms of crime and deviance that threaten the esports playgrounds. The second section outlines the elements of RAT, and the third applies those elements to esports, showing that a high likelihood of crime and deviance in esports exists because of motivated offenders, suitable targets, and a lack of guardianship. This article places particular emphasis on the lack of guardianship in esports and provides a brief conclusion that identifies guardianship as a focal point for policy efforts in order to reduce crime and deviance in esports.

CRIME AND DEVIANCE IN ESPORTS

The problematic content, themes, and actions in videogames resulted in a moral panic where concerns were expressed regarding the dangers of "dark play" (Linderoth and Mortensen 2015), where war, apocalypse, violence and many other controversial topics are represented in digital games. The game design itself can also reward morally problematic behavior, such as deceit and betrayal. Dark play itself could be considered a form of deviance, although Meades (2015) argues that some forms dark play, such as cheating, are often considered acceptable innovations by those within the gaming community. Questions linger regarding the connection of dark play to deviant behavior in videogames. However, in traditional sports literature there is considerable efforts made to understand deviant and criminal behavior and its connection to sport (Fincoeur et al. 2015; Groombridge; 2016; Huggins 2020; Russell 2005; Van Der Hoeven et al. 2019), largely because of scandalous incidents involving such behavior in traditional sports. These scandals, which have led to the abandonment of leagues (Hill 2010) and declines in player participation (Mountjoy et al. 2022), generate interest from the general public and scholars alike.

This section attempts to expand on previous dark play literature by noting the criminal and deviant issues in esports. Esports playgrounds are experiencing similar scandals to traditional sports involving various forms of cheating and the violation of gamer rights. Cheating results in undeserved rewards for corrupt participants, who take advantage of others attempting to compete fairly. The violations of player rights threaten physical health, mental health, and overall well-being. These incidents result in similar consequences to those in traditional sports. The *StarCraft* (Blizzard, 1998) Proleague in South Korea shut down due to match-fixing (Ashcraft 2016), and scholars have found corruption and cheating lead to sponsors shying away from the industry (Freitas et al. 2021; Lokhman et al. 2018). Beyond the impact on the industry itself, these actions victimize individuals in the playgrounds by treating them as means to an end, rather than as ends in themselves, which is morally problematic (Kretchmar 2019). Participants are obstructed from harnessing the intrinsic value of the mutual quest for excellence provided by fair competition, thereby preventing opportunities for acquiring various virtues.

Cheating

Cheating behavior in esports shares similarities with traditional sports, including match-fixing. Match-fixing involves the distortion of the entire outcome, or a specific

aspect of the outcome, of a contest through withdrawing effort in performance (Van Der Hoeven et al. 2019). These incidents are motivated by financial reward and/or securing competitive sporting advantage. Match-fixing is a criminal problem because it violates criminal codes relating to fraud, sport fraud, bribery, money laundering, and corruption (Preston and Szymanski 2003), and often fixes are organized by criminal networks who earn profit and launder money through match-fixing (Anderson 2018; Costa 2018; Spapens 2021). Successful prosecution of these crimes in match-fixing are rare given legal regulations are usually insufficient at capturing the complex nature of the phenomena (Holden and Ehrlich 2017; Lu 2022). The previous decade witnessed match-fixing in popular esport titles (Abarbanel and Johnson 2019; Holden 2021). A *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (*CS:GO*) (Valve 2012) incident culminated in police arresting six offenders, and The FBI continues to investigate manipulation related to another CS:GO incident in North America (Holden 2021). (Carrillo Vera and Aguado Terrón 2019). Referees are common target in traditional sports, but in esports referees are not responsible for judging or influencing the outcome of competition in the same way. As such, gamers are the principal actors exploited in esports cases. Manipulations in esports can be accomplished in ways that differ from traditional sports. Gamers can manipulate software to improve or disrupt performance. (Irwin and Naweed 2020; Tseng 2019) For example, "aimbots" can automatically target opponents, "wallhacks" allow players to see behind walls or create invisible walls, and "extra sensory perception" can obtain information about opponents location or locate items.

Esports also suffers from doping, which aims to illegitimately improve performance through performance enhancing substances. Doping cases in traditional sports are ever-present, with scandals across many sports. In esports, the substances used are specific to improving attention and focus. In 2022, Vyvanse, a stimulant normally prescribed for ADHD, was used by a Brazilian PUBG team during official tournaments (Tweedie et al. 2022). Adderall has similarly been used in a variety of different game types. WADA in 2023 included esport as one of the sports on their doping monitored list, and esport organizations have followed this action with adopting anti-doping polices in compliance with WADA's code. Doping is connected to organized crime. Organized crime act as suppliers for performance enhancing substances, and they exploit players by using them as distributors (Fincoeur et al. 2015).

Violations of Player Rights

Deviant behavior in competitive settings in esports takes many forms, where players will victimize each other Toxicity, the quality of being harmful or unpleasant, is synonymous with esports (Adinolf and Turkay 2018). Competitors make insidious, hurtful, and discriminatory comments as they bully and harass each other through online chat mechanisms. A recent survey found that 75% of all *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009) players experience online harassment, with 53% of those being harassed due to their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation (Weinreb 2021). Gamers go to great lengths to sabotage performance of competitors. Streamers have been targeted by their viewers when the streamer's home address is discovered, such as in the case of the particularly dangerous "SWAT Prank" (Tseng 2019). This prank involves viewers calling in an emergency to the streamer's address, upon which a police unit breaks into the house and disrupts the streamer. One such incident resulted in the death of an individual not even associated with the match (Tseng 2019).

Players as professional workers are also victimized by various industry stakeholders, which are in some cases criminal and deviant violations. Professional players are pressured by their teams, coaches, or administrators to stream gameplay as much as possible in order to increase ad revenue, of which the players receive a small fraction (Madden and Harteveld 2021). This pressure leads to health problems from sitting on the computer for extended periods of time, with professional players retiring due to chronic shoulder, wrist, and lower back issues. In other cases, mental illnesses manifest as a result of the stress imposed upon players. Players develop depression, anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, often leading to early retirements (Palanichamy et al. 2020; Rodríguez et al. 2022). On top of this, players criticize the working conditions they endure, including the lack of benefits, health services, and consistent pay. In the last few years salary pay has become more common, but most gamers rely on tournament prizes or online content creation to make a living (Weinreb 2021). Player protection as employees in the industry is similarly criticized. Tournament organizers or game publishers can bar entry, ban, or disqualify players for any reason. The bargaining power of gamers in these cases is minimal, and player associations that could protect their employee rights are not common (Holden and Baker 2019).

ROUTINE ACTIVITIES THEORY

Inspiration for finding a theory to explain esports crime and deviance may come from Groombridge (2016) or Silva and Kennedy (2022) in their books overviewing the various criminology perspectives in sport. Control theories (Hirschi 1969) were examined by Stanfield (2015) who found that more involvement in sport increased social bonds; however, increased involvement in sport, in contradiction to control theories, was associated with delinquency. Sub-culture theories (Cohen 1955) were applied to sport by Yar (2014) who focused on the hyper-masculinity subculture in sport that is associated with acts of deviance. Atkinson and Young (2008) took a Durkheimian perspective when considering deviance in sports, specifically related to the deviance that is desired by fans and administrates during sporting spectacle such as violence on the field of play. Differential association (Sutherland 1939) was applied to the example of cyclists where doping is a learned behavior through interactions with other cyclists. Routine Activities Theory (RAT) is a mainstream theory absent from these criminological examinations of sport (Groombridge 2016; Silva and Kennedy 2020); nevertheless, it deserves examination in this context given its applicability to the esports context.

Cohen and Felson (1979) developed RAT, which was expanded by Clarke and Felson (1993). This theory considers the risk and perspective of the victim, or target, in addition to the motivations and perspective of the offender (Felson and Eckert 2016). RAT shifts the focus of criminology from the offender towards understanding the situations in which criminal events will occur. The "routines" of daily lives places individuals in situations that make them more likely to be victims of crime, and offenders take advantage of specific situational opportunities to make quick judgements on committing the crime. There are three elements integral to RAT: An attractive target pursued by a motivated offender, in the absence of guardianship. Crime occurs when this "crime triangle" converges at a specific time and space.

The concept of motivated offender follows the rational model of crime (Felson 2001). Offenders are hedonistic, seeking to avoid pain and pursue pleasure (Cohen and Felson 1979; Felson and Eckert 2016). Offenders assess a situation and then

determine whether the conditions are appropriate to use illegal methods to obtain immediate rewards such as money, vengeance, or the protection of self-image. These rewards are the targets of offenders in RAT (Felson 2001). The acronym VIVA has been used to describe appropriately suitable targets, which stands for value, inertia, visibility, and access (Cohen and Felson 1979; Miró 2014). To warrant the risk to the motivated offender the target must 1) have value to the offender, 2) the physical aspects of the object must be suitable in terms of size, weight and shape, 3) be a visible mark to the offender and 4) be easily and safely accessed. Guardianship refers to a capable guardian that can deter criminal behavior. This guardian could be an agent of formal control, such as law enforcement, but the guardian can be an agent of informal control, such as family and friends (Felson 2001). The surveillance hypothesis (Felson and Eckert 2016) applies to the guardian element of RAT, where increasing security should lower the overall crime rate because of increased guardianship. Tillyer and Eck (2011) importantly extended the discussion in the literature to include handlers, a subdivision of guardians. Handlers have their basis in social bond theory (Hirschi 1969), which according to RAT are those social bonds that allow informal control to occur. Handlers have a relationship to the potential offender that influences the extent to which the motivated offender adheres to the rules of society.

The advent of the digital age saw many of the same crimes common in physical spaces occurring instead in virtual spaces, with these crimes labelled generally as "cybercrimes" (Capeller 2001). There exist key differences between traditional crimes and cybercrimes given the characteristics of the space in which they occur. Mitchell (1995) described virtual space as lacking distance between any two points, which reduces boundaries between people and groups. Interactions between individuals are easier than ever before, and the digital space offers more opportunities for hiding interactions (Grabosky 2001). Digital drift (Goldsmith and Brewer 2015) explains the criminogenic impact of these characteristics, whereby the digital space allows potential offenders to "drift" from bad behavior in the real world to bad behavior in the digital world. Worryingly, even those that lacking skills and motivation to offend in physical spaces may possess those key attributes when online.

RAT can help explain these online behaviors and thereby direct attempts at controlling cybercrime (Choo 2011; Pease 2001). Studies supporting RAT's application in cybercrime exist for malware infection (Bossler and Holt 2009), phishing (Hutchings and Hayes 2009; Leukfeldt,2014), consumer fraud (Pratt et al. 2010; Van Wilsem 2011), and online harassment (Bossler and Holt 2009; Marcum et al. 2010). Choi (2008) showed that victimization can be increased by participating in certain online activities, which is supported by Marcum and colleagues (2010) as well as Val Wilsem (2011). These studies found that increasing the exposure to motivated offenders through online shopping and online forum participation, combined with a lack of digital guardianship, increased the likelihood of victimization of cybercrimes. Williams (2016) showed that guardians in cyberspace include network administrators and forum moderators, other users in the cyberspace, as well as security systems such as encryptions and firewalls that limit access to specific spaces of the digital environment. The motivated offenders in cybercrime could be hackers, stalkers, and other fraudsters (Yar 2005), while the offenders target identification data, bank information, or cryptocurrencies (Yar 2005). Leukfeldt and Yar (2016) added to the conversation in the literature by showing certain elements of RAT are more applicable than others to the various cybercrimes. The visibility, or time spent online on various routine activities, showed strong correlation with various cybercrimes. One such

"routine activity" increasing in popularity in the digital space is esports and videogames more generally.

ESPORTS AND ROUTINE ACTIVITIES THEORY

According to the crime triangle of RAT, there must be a convergence of motivated offenders and attractive targets (Cohen and Felson 1979). In esports, there occurs such a convergence. Athletes in traditional sports are motivated towards cheating, accepting bribes, and match-fixing due to low pay and unstable careers (Boeri and Severgnini 2013; Costa 2018; Liu et al. 2019). Esports players are motivated to commit similar behaviors for the same reasons. Very few esports players earn a living through esports due to unfair inequity in distribution of resources in the industry (McLeod et al. 2022). High income, or even steady income, through legitimate esports activity remains a reality only for athletes at the highest level in the most popular esports. Similarly, transnational criminal networks are motivated to exploit esports and profit from illicit activity in the industry, as seen in the recent scandals of criminal networks bribing poorly paid players to fix matches (Holden et al. 2017). These motivated offenders seek attractive targets such as favorable competition outcomes that allows for illicit gain through the betting market.

The inherent anonymity of digital spaces makes identification and capture of offenders by guardians less likely (Armstrong and Forde 2003), which lowers the costs of offending for motivated offenders. Liboriussen (2019) uses the concept of Bratton's "Stack" (2015) as it applies to various videogames and considers this complex question of where the player "is" in digital spaces. Esports can be played on personal computers or gaming consoles, where players detach from their physical selves through competing online (Seo and Jung 2014). While certain measures exist to address anonymity for serious crimes, the subjective *perception* of motivated offenders matters more than objective reality for RAT. Bray (2016) found that offenders highly value perceived anonymity of online spaces for committing cybercrimes, which suggests that those inside esports may similarly value anonymity that they *believe* is offered by the digital space, regardless of whether that space is as anonymous as they believe. Improved guardianship impacts the perception of anonymity for potential offenders. A player considering acts of crime and deviance might hesitate to do so if they believe that guardians can effectively discover them to then punish swiftly, severely, and certainly with fines and prison sentences. Effective guardianship is therefore of primary concern to dissuade motivated offenders from seeking attractive targets.

The complexity of esports guardianship merits further consideration. Even though esports can be characterized as a singular routine activity, esports are not a monolith. Games are varied in terms of their design and game play. Gamers can play at varying levels, with Hedlund (2023) identifying a scale of esports players based on their competitive ability including Competitive, Casual, Casual-Social, Casual-Fun, and Casual-Competitive. Gamers can compete in schools, universities, and through a variety of professional organizations at national and international levels. The guardians responsible for supervising these spaces differ, with teachers and school administrators more relevant in school teams while esports federations and game publishers are more relevant for professional organizations. Determining who is responsible for these varied esports spaces can be differentiated into broad groups consisting of external guardians and internal guardians.

External Guardians

External guardians include the vast array of institutions, organizations, and individuals outside of the industry that are in some part responsible for regulating esports. These guardians include formal agents of control such as esports governance bodies and law enforcement officials, as well as informal agents of control such as parents, school officials, and community members. All of these external guardians face significant challenges.

Unlike traditional sports, there is no single global body governing esport. As many as eight international federations in esports claim governance over esports worldwide, the most prominent among them being the International Esports Federation (IeSF) and the Global E-Sports Federation (GEF) (Nyström et al. 2022). The esports scene is vast, disjointed, and receives limited oversight related to governance of crime and deviance. Data collected from an esports symposium in Sweden, utilizing a workshop research methodology that included a variety of stakeholders of the sport as participants (members of academia, players, coaches, and industry representative), revealed a strong acknowledgment of the need for a centralized governing body at international and local levels for esports (Nyström et al. 2022). The participants of this symposium argued for stable and reliable legal framework, but they acknowledged doing so is difficult and unlikely. The esport games are so varied that trying to govern all of them through these external governing bodies appears unrealistic. National regulatory oversight proves difficult if the players of the country in question are competing on servers based in another country. For example, there would arise difficulties in resolving a dispute where the minimum age for competing in one esport competition is 16 for country Y, but 21 in country X, and a participant from country Y wanted to compete in country X.

Law enforcement authorities are essential guardians for RAT because they possess capabilities that other guardians lack in terms of discovering, investigating, and ultimately punishing offenses (Cohen and Felson 1979) Traditional sport federations cooperate with law enforcement because their own methods of internal investigations are often insufficient for serious crimes (Hessert 2020). However, whether law enforcement officials are motivated to address crimes in esports remains a lingering question. Traditional sports encounters significant issues when convincing law enforcement to address crimes in their domain due to lack of priority (Boeri and Severgnini 2013). In esports exists the added challenge that the crimes occur in a digital space. Police may believe issues in esports are the responsibility of esport governing bodies, while esport governing bodies may simultaneously believe that law enforcement is responsible for any crime occurring regardless of the context in which it occurs. Both are correct. Serious crimes will require efforts from law enforcement yet sport governing bodies must also take responsibility for the actions under their jurisdiction. This conclusion explains why strengthening cooperation between sport governing bodies and is a key feature in policies such as the Macolin Convention that aims to address match-fixing (Henzelin et al. 2018).

RAT importantly assumes anyone can prevent crime (Felson 2001), not just law enforcement and governing bodies. The list of potential guardians for RAT includes handlers such as parents, school officials, and community officials (Tillyer and Eck 2011). These guardians differ from other formal agents of control due to their proximity to the gamers, who are both offenders and victims of crime and deviance. Parents for example can monitor the online activity of their children playing esports.

Esports teams are also becoming more common in high schools and universities, which means school officials can take a more active role in monitoring the actions of students who compete. Any youth program that includes esports will similarly have community officials responsible for supervising the programs, and these officials can act as handlers of that space to control crime and deviance. These handers lack the investigative tools and sanctioning powers of formal agents of control; however, their proximity to the players may allow them to influence player behavior with more swiftness and certainty compared to formal agents of control. Cooperation between the two seems essential for improving guardianship of the space.

Internal Guardians

Inside of the esports industry are a variety of stakeholders that could also be considered guardians of the esports playground. These stakeholders, who also experience challenges to their guardianship, include esports administrators, tournament organizers, and game publishers.

Esports administrators are those that supervise the competition itself, which can include referees and coaches. Referees are rare outside of the elite level (Carrillo Vera and Aguado Terrón 2019), but they have a significant amount of control over the outcome of esport events. Referees record the outcomes, inspect for bug exploits, and check hardware. Corruption of these administrators through bribing or extortion is a possibility, and some esports agencies have prohibited such actions in their codes of conduct. Unfortunately, the lack of a central governing body or referees association makes it difficult to discover and punish any corruption that might be occurring. Another target for corruption may be the coaches. With the improved esports professionalization the coaching infrastructure is developing in positive directions with many professional esports organizations employing coaches (McNulty et al. 2023). However, players developing in the lower levels primarily compete alone. Even those coaches common at the elite level are not trained according to a uniform and approved licensing system (Watson et al. 2022). Esports insiders are frustrated by a low standard of coaching in some esports titles, noting its negative impact player development and cultivation of talent (Abbott et al. 2022). As a result, players prefer seeking advice and training from other professional players rather than their coaching staff. Traditional sports in contrast almost always include coaches and referees from grassroots level to the elite level, and coaching and refereeing licenses must be obtained through standardized and rigorous processes.

Tournament organizers are responsible for creating and hosting esports competitions, which means they dictate compliance for their events. The most elite tournaments have high scrutiny in terms of how they treat the players, the prizes they offer, and their standards for maintain the fairness of competition. However, those competition organizers that are not of the same standard can easily control the outcome of matches or facilitate cheating by the participants through negligence. Oversight of these competition organizers is minimal (Peng et al. 2020). Rules vary, the restrictions to entry are subjective, and new competitions are organized each year by multitudes of organizations. The possibility for crime and deviance is high given the lack of oversight and the ability for competition organizers to establish the rules of their competition, at least to a degree. For example, players banned from one competition for deviant behavior may be able to find another competition to ply their trade depending on the rules of entry.

Arguably the important of all the guardians in the esports ecosystem are the game publishers. They can be divided into the developers that organize the professional scene in their games, such as Riot Games, Activision Blizzard, or Valve (active developers), versus those that publish games but do not engage with the professional esport scene of those games, such as Nintendo (passive developers) (Peng et al. 2020). The active developers are the sole proprietors of intellectual property rights of the esport games, which means these private corporations are the only ones that can organize the professional competitions and leagues. This results in a private profit-driven corporation being able to determine who has access to the game, how that access is granted, the quality of the game, rule changes, and can deny access to a game based on their own judgements. Their primary responsibility as a company is not esports; rather, their priority is the success of the video game industry as a whole. As such, it is possible that esport game publishers will make decision that will be beneficial for them as a company and the video game industry, but disastrous for esports. For example, publishers can remove esports titles from the market, as they did with *Fractured Space* (Edge Case Games, 2014) in 2018 due to low popularity (Dominteanu et al. 2023). The survival of any esports title becomes dependent upon the simple calculation of monetary gains and losses. The public and other stakeholders are suspicious that the publishers will not pursue effective guardianship without being influenced by these commercial priorities. Even if guardianship by these game publishers is lacking, they have such a monopoly of power that it becomes difficult to hold them accountable they allow crime and deviance to run rampant through and on their games.

CONCLUSION

This article explored the safety of the esports playground spaces. The discussion identified various threat to the playground spaces of esports and thereby raised awareness about esports playground risk of crime and deviance. Participants in esports playground spaces are engaging in play behavior in spaces that are weakly guarded, with motivated offenders and attractive targets of exploitation. Importantly, esports offers challenges for guardianship of the playground spaces that differ from traditional sports. Esport players, esports federations, administrators, game publishers, tournament organizers, and law enforcement are arguably all responsible for protecting esports playgrounds from crime and deviance. This article highlighted the particular importance of various guardians, according to RAT, and their role in protecting the players who are the victims, and sometimes perpetrators, of offending. The esports playground, which includes a broad scope of esports titles played at a variety of levels in different cultural contests, is a difficult space for guardians to protect potential victims. The heterogeneity of esports playground spaces alone complicates guardianship. For example, if some esports titles recognized as Olympic sports by the International Olympic Committee, those esports titles may experience better guardianship compared to others that are not under the IOC umbrella of governance.

Nevertheless, exploring the supervision of esports spaces and its relation to crime and deviance impacting player's lives as a general theme was an important outcome of this paper. How games are related to governance of player's lives was identified by Kłosiński (2024) as one of the key areas of biopolitical inquiry in ludic studies. Players are controlled in terms of actual engagement in the games themselves (Lassila 2022), pushed towards government ideologies (Kłosiński 2024), and serve to encourage certain moral behaviors such as good citizenship (Davisson and Gehm 2014). How

games might influence crime and deviance, or place players at risk of crime and deviance, is a necessary expansion on biopolitics research in ludic studies. Further ludic studies could build off these findings to consider a possible criminogenic effect of esports. Esports clearly places players at risk of criminal exploitation because of the lack of suitable guardianship. Whether the design and gameplay itself of esports pushes gamers towards criminal offending remains a valuable area of research to be explored.

Applying criminological theory to understand criminal and deviant behavior in the esports playgrounds is an important contribution to criminal justice literature. Understanding why these crimes occur, which in part is likely because of weak guardianship, informs initiatives to reduce criminal and deviant behavior in esports. Such initiatives lie outside of the scope of this paper, but a few key points can be drawn from the discussion of this paper. Digital spaces are not necessarily a space devoid entirely of guardianship or the potential for effective guardianship. External guardians such as law enforcement use tools for internet supervision in cybercrimes include statistical methods, machine learning, neural networks, and deep learning (Al-Khater et al. 2020). Applying these tools to esports could improve guardianship and reduce offending in esports playgrounds. Internal guardians such as game publishers could take the initiative to reduce the threats that exist in esports playgrounds, making more of an effort to discover and punish integrity violations. Cooperation between internal and external stakeholders additionally requires further consideration because of its impact on improving guardianship in traditional sports (Hessert 2020).

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