

Making Bodies Possible: Exploring Transformative Justice in Esports

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INTRODUCTION

In our presentation we discuss two case studies that bring together bodies, esports, gaming and transformative justice. It is widely recognized that esports, while becoming an established cultural practice and growing into an impactful multi billion business (Ahn et. al. 2020), continues to struggle with questions of diversity, equity and inclusivity (Friman et al. 2024). As we argue elsewhere (Legierse & Ruotsalainen 2024), in order to fully grasp the discriminatory structures and practices present in esports and gaming, we need a better understanding of the way bodies are part of esports. We have argued that this happens at least in four ways:

“1) the obscuring of the playing body and establishment of an idealized and normative masculine, athletic body; 2) the 'visibility' of women's bodies as deviant from the norm ; 3) the invisibility (and impossibility) of disabled bodies through design (embodied nature of design of both games and gameplay); and 4) the embodied nature of infrastructural issues that cannot be reduced to materiality” (Legierse & Ruotsalainen 2024: 7)

We furthermore note that it is not enough to look for corrective measures (such as women's league in esports). A more thorough deconstruction of esports, both as practice and representation, is required. Additionally, it is important to take into account that even when corrective measures have been implemented, this does not in itself suffice. The way matters like unequal access live on the body have to be taken into account: injustices leave long and lasting trails. Thus, we find that addressing the violence that has already happened is crucial. In order to facilitate thinking about justice and access in esports otherwise and differently, we turn

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towards transformative justice, as suggested by Samantha Close (2024). According to Close, transformative justice “emphasizes the humanity of both aggressors and victims even as it requires aggressors to be accountable to their victims.” (918) As such, accountability functions as its corrective mechanism, instead of punishment. Transformative justice approaches furthermore stress the importance of recognizing and and changing the conditions in which the injustice has happened (Close 2024).

We apply the framework of transformative justice to two cases: examining the physical places of esports play and community in Berlin and examining the discursive practices around commercial esports for marginalized groups.

The first case, conducted by author one, builds on ethnographic fieldwork in various competitive gaming settings in Berlin in which amateur and (semi-)professional competitions get organized. The data from this fieldwork includes data from participant observations and interviews, collected between August and September 2024, and February and May 2025. Included in this case study are a space for (semi-professional) competitive gaming with a variety of games played; a competitive community focused on a single game; and a queer community that organizes for-fun amateur tournaments. Through data from participant observations, author one highlights how bodies become relevant and understood in current competitive practices. Interviews will put these current practices in relation to previous experiences in gaming and interrelated contexts in interlocutors’ day-to-day.

The second case, conducted by author two, examines the discursive practices around commercial esports for marginalized players and asks how these discursive practices make bodies possible. Focusing on two esports leagues, Game Changers for *Valorant* (Riot Games 2020) and ESL Impact League for Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (Valve, 2012) and *Counter-Strike 2* (Valve, 2023), the author two traces how marginalized bodies are portrayed, positioned and framed in different media materials (websites, game broadcasts, interviews) produced in 2022-2024 and how different practices and infrastructures (the prize money sums, the broadcasting times, the player salaries) contribute in the construction of possible bodies.

The transformative justice framework will be applied in order to analyse the ways in which these spaces and communities establish access and participation - or in other words which bodies are made possible and which bodies might be impossible - and how this gets negotiated by participants. Doing so will highlight both the (infra)structural conditions for participation, as well as the lived experience and contextual negotiation of these (infra)structural conditions. This allows for an understanding of current practices through the transformative justice framework that addresses best practices and ongoing issues simultaneously.

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