

Esports: Women, Harassment, and Paving the Way for Equity

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Introduction²

It all began with a patent. In 1947, Cathode Ray Tube Amusement Device, the first video game,³ featured oscilloscope graphics similar to World War II radar screens.⁴ As targets appeared on the screen, players maneuvered light beams in an attempt to destroy them.⁵ Or . . . maybe it's not. Whether or not Cathode Ray Tube Amusement Device is actually the first video game to be invented depends on your school of thought. Technically, Cathode Ray Tube Amusement Device is mechanical and does not rely on programming.⁶ It does have the distinction of being the first electronic game to be issued a patent and did use a monitor.⁷ However, none of the game graphics are computer generated and no memory devices are required.⁸ Did the esports origin story spring from this humble beginning? The debate continues . . .

Significant Events in the Development of Esports

The computer version of Noughts and Crosses, also known as Tic Tac Toe, successfully integrated artificial intelligence into its gameplay a mere five years later.⁹ The graphics for Noughts and Crosses also featured a cathode ray tube or oscilloscope display.¹⁰ Noughts and Crosses is also considered a contender for the designation of first video game.¹¹

When William Higinbotham developed Tennis for Two, in 1958, it was the first publicly displayed computer game.¹² Using an oscilloscope display, the game featured a side-view of a tennis court.¹³ On display as part of the Brookhaven National Laboratory's annual

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² The overwhelming majority of sources for this white paper are electronic. Links to the electronic sources have been provided in lieu of traditional footnote citations.

³ Popular Mechanics, <https://www.popularmechanics.com/culture/gaming/a20129/the-very-first-video-game/>, last accessed 2024/06/23 and MoneyWeek, <https://moneyweek.com/423616/25-january-1947-the-worlds-first-video-game-is-patented>, last accessed 2024/06/23

⁴ Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/cathode-ray-tube-amusement-device-729579>, last accessed 2024/06/23 and MoneyWeek, <https://moneyweek.com/423616/25-january-1947-the-worlds-first-video-game-is-patented>, last accessed 2024/06/23

⁵ Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/cathode-ray-tube-amusement-device-729579>, last accessed 2024/06/23 and Popular Mechanics, <https://www.popularmechanics.com/culture/gaming/a20129/the-very-first-video-game/>, last accessed 2024/06/23

⁶ Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/cathode-ray-tube-amusement-device-729579>, last accessed 2024/06/23

⁷ Id.

⁸ Id.

⁹ Id. Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/oxo-aka-noughts-and-crosses-729624>, last accessed 2024/06/23

¹⁰ Computer History Museum, <https://www.computerhistory.org/timeline/1952/>, last accessed 2024/06/23; Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/cathode-ray-tube-amusement-device-729579>, last accessed 2024/06/23; and Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/science/cathode-ray>, last accessed 2024/06/23

¹¹ Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/cathode-ray-tube-amusement-device-729579>, last accessed 2024/06/23

¹² Id.

¹³ APS125, <https://www.aps.org/apsnews/2008/09/first-video-game>, last accessed 2024/06/23

exhibition, Tennis for Two was extremely popular and for the duration of the three-day exhibit, hundreds of people lined up to for a chance to play.¹⁴ After some upgrades to the game the following year, the game was dismantled and became a distant memory until the 1970s.¹⁵ Many consider Tennis for Two to be the first video game.¹⁶

The next major development in video gaming happened in Stanford University's Artificial Intelligence Laboratory in 1972. Perhaps for the first time, more than two players, twenty or so, were able to compete against each other (in the Intergalactic Spacewar Olympics) playing Spacewar!¹⁷ The winning prize? A subscription to Rolling Stone Magazine.¹⁸ Esports tournament play became more commonplace during the 1980s with organized competitions becoming a mainstay of the 1990s.¹⁹

The Influence of Women on Esports

Carol Shaw shattered the glass ceiling in 1978 when she developed, designed, and released 3-D Tic Tac Toe.²⁰ Shaw was considered to be “. . . the first professional female video game designer” and worked for Atari and Activision.²¹ Just 6 months in the making, Shaw's version of 3-D Tic Tac Toe showcased innovation in video games and hinted at what future gameplay could become. The game, instead of using a flat oscilloscope graphic utilized four grids suspended atop each other.²² Shaw's best known games include Video Checkers (Atari, 1980), Super Breakout (Atari, 1982), River Raid (Activision, 1982), Happy Trails (Activision 1983), and River Raid II (Activision, 2010).²³ Shaw paved the way for other women in a male dominated industry.²⁴ Around the same time 3-D Tic Tac Toe was released, another influential

¹⁴ Brookhaven National Laboratory, <https://www.bnl.gov/about/history/firstvideo.php>, last accessed 2024/06/23 and HC (History-Computer), <https://history-computer.com/tennis-for-two-complete-history/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁵ APS125, <https://www.aps.org/publications/apsnews/200810/physics/history.cfm>, last accessed 2024/06/23 and HC (History-Computer), <https://history-computer.com/tennis-for-two-complete-history/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁶ APS125, <https://www.aps.org/publications/apsnews/200810/physics/history.cfm>, last accessed 2024/06/23 and Brookhaven National Laboratory, <https://www.bnl.gov/about/history/firstvideo.php>, last accessed 2024/06/23

¹⁷ PCGAMER, <https://www.pcgamer.com/the-story-of-the-first-esports-champion-undefeated-since-1972/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁸ Li, R., Good luck have fun: The rise of esports, Skyhorse Publishing, New York, NY (2016). See also, Techradar, <https://www.techradar.com/news/esports-everything-you-need-to-know>, last accessed 2024/06/23

¹⁹ ISPO, <https://www.ispo.com/en/sports-business/esports-history-how-it-all-began>, last accessed 2024/06/23 and Esports.Net, <https://www.esports.net/wiki/esports-history/>, last accessed 2024/06/23

²⁰ Inverse, <https://www.inverse.com/gaming/river-raid-40th-anniversary-carol-shaw>, last accessed 2024/06/23

²¹ Centre for Computing History, <https://www.computinghistory.org.uk/det/47370/Carol-Shaw/>, last accessed 2024/06/23; Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/women-in-history-of-video-games-729746>, last accessed 2024/06/23; and National Museum of Play, <https://www.museumofplay.org/blog/preserving-carol-shaws-trailblazing-video-game-career/>, last accessed 2024/06/23

²² Centre for Computing History, <https://www.computinghistory.org.uk/det/47370/Carol-Shaw/>, last accessed 2024/06/23; YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AeTiYW9yiUw>, last accessed 2024/06/23; and AVG Signal Blog, <https://www.avg.com/en/signal/women-in-tech-carol-shaw>, last accessed 2024/06/23

²³ National Museum of Play, <https://www.museumofplay.org/blog/preserving-carol-shaws-trailblazing-video-game-career/>, last accessed 2024/06/23 and Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/women-in-history-of-video-games-729746>, last accessed 2024/06/23

²⁴ Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/women-in-history-of-video-games-729746>, last accessed 2024/06/25 and Centre for Computing History, <https://www.computinghistory.org.uk/det/47370/Carol-Shaw/>, last accessed 2024/06/23

game developer, Roberta Williams, created a design for “. . . an interactive game combining text with graphics.”²⁵

Competing for high scores, watching friends play arcade video games, the emergence of new video game tournaments, the standardization of game modes, and the formation of video game teams were a few of the hallmarks of the 1980s.²⁶ Dona Bailey, the only female game designer at Atari in 1980, co-created the smash hit video arcade game, *Centipede*.²⁷ As technological advances allowed for multi-player competitive play, tournaments became a natural evolution.

Atari’s Space Invaders Championship is now considered to be “. . . the first true video game tournament. . . .”²⁸ There was no shortage of interest from fans. Foreshadowing the massive interest in video game competition, over 10,000 spectators turned out.²⁹ The 1980s also saw the birth of the internet,³⁰ which facilitated Netrek, a game with the capacity to host up to 16 players competing on the internet.³¹ During this time, Anne Westfall, another female programmer and developer, was busy “. . . create[ing] the first microcomputer-based program to structure subdivisions.”³²

While Brenda Laurel continued her pioneering work in virtual reality,³³ the expansion of the internet in the 1990s helped lay the foundation for what we now call esports.³⁴ Games like Super Mario 64, Donkey Kong Country, and Sonic Adventure received increased visibility and game consoles became popular.³⁵ Computer games like Star Craft and Age of Empires began to crop up.³⁶ Laurel continued her revolutionary efforts by co-founding Purple Moon, a software company devoted to creating video games for girls.³⁷

The 1990s are credited with the birth of esports because of improved internet accessibility and the transition from focusing on high scores to face-to-face gameplay.³⁸ A

²⁵ Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/women-in-history-of-video-games-729746>, last accessed 2024/06/23

²⁶ Newretro, <https://newretro.net/blogs/main/exploring-80s-video-game-culture>, last accessed 2024/06/23 and ISPO, <https://www.ispo.com/en/sports-business/esports-history-how-it-all-began>, last accessed 2024/06/23

²⁷ Centipede happens to be the author’s favorite video game. Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/women-in-history-of-video-games-729746>, last accessed 2024/06/23

²⁸ techradar, <https://www.techradar.com/news/esports-everything-you-need-to-know>, last accessed 2024/06/23 and ISPO, <https://www.ispo.com/en/sports-business/esports-history-how-it-all-began>, last accessed 2024/06/23

²⁹ techradar, <https://www.techradar.com/news/esports-everything-you-need-to-know>, last accessed 2024/06/25

³⁰ 8 Bit Pickle, <https://8bitpickle.com/pop-culture/was-there-the-internet-in-the-80s/#:~:text=The%20internet%20as%20we%20know%20it%20today%20did,and%20reality%2C%20was%20laid%20down%20in%20the%2080s>, last accessed 2024/06/23

³¹ Wired, <https://www.wired.com/1993/06/netrek/>, last accessed 2024/06/23 and Netrek Continuum, <http://w3.netrek.org/>, last accessed 2024/06/23

³² Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/women-in-history-of-video-games-729746>, last accessed 2024/06/23

³³ Versions, <https://killscreen.com/versions/conversation-brenda-laurel-proto-vr-pioneer/>, last accessed 2024/06/23

³⁴ Esports.net, <https://www.esports.net/wiki/esports-history/>, last accessed 2024/06/23 and techradar, <https://www.techradar.com/news/esports-everything-you-need-to-know>, last accessed 2024/06/23

³⁵ The Gamer, <https://www.thegamer.com/best-90s-gaming-consoles-atari-game-boy/>, last accessed 2024/06/23

³⁶ IGN, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2018/12/03/20-years-of-starcraft-an-ign-retrospective>, last accessed 2024/06/23 and Moby Games, <https://www.mobygames.com/game/384/age-of-empires/>, last accessed 2024/06/23

³⁷ Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/women-in-history-of-video-games-729746>, last accessed 2024/06/23

³⁸ History of Computers, <https://historyofcomputers.eu/history-of-games/the-world-of-esports-a-comprehensive-history/#the-era-of-pc-and-online-gaming-1990-s>, last accessed 2024/06/23

record 2,000 entrants competed in Quake's Red Annihilation online tournament in 1997.³⁹ The prize? Quaker's lead developer's Ferrari.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Laurel continued her research into the benefits of human and computer interaction.⁴¹

The Transition from Video Gaming to Esports

The early 2000s saw the intersection of television and esports with South Korea, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States televising esports events.⁴² Twitch.tv (Twitch) created a social platform for gamers and started broadcasting esports in June 2011.⁴³ Twitch was an immediate success teeming with more than 20 million monthly visitors just over a year later in October of 2012.⁴⁴ Twitch provided necessary exposure and visibility for both individual players and large tournaments growing to a pinnacle of 9.89 million active monthly streamers in January 2021.⁴⁵ During April 2024, Twitch supported more than 7 million active streamers,⁴⁶ who watched approximately 1.68 billion minutes, with about 2.3 million concurrent streamers on the platform.⁴⁷

From their earliest days esports tournaments have been wildly popular.⁴⁸ The first million-dollar prize pools began to appear in the early 2000s with DotA 2 International offering \$1.6 million during Gamescon 2011.⁴⁹ In 2013, the League of Legends World Championship sold out the Staples Center in Los Angeles in one hour, but thanks to the internet, streaming and the global demand, more than 32 million people were able to watch online.⁵⁰

For context, that is more viewers than the Major League Baseball World Series (9.11 million, 2023),⁵¹ NCAA Basketball Final Four (14 million, 2024),⁵² National Basketball Association Finals Game 7 (12.2 million, 2024),⁵³ and National Hockey League Stanley Cup

³⁹ Id.

⁴⁰ Id. techradar, <https://www.techradar.com/news/esports-everything-you-need-to-know>, last accessed 2024/06/23

⁴¹ Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/women-in-history-of-video-games-729746>, last accessed 2024/06/23 and Hotspawn, <https://www.hotspawn.com/other/guides/the-history-of-esports>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁴² Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Twitch-service>, last accessed 2024/06/23 and CDW, <https://www.cdw.com/content/cdw/en/articles/hardware/history-of-esports.html>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁴³ TheVerge, <https://www.theverge.com/2013/9/30/4719766/twitch-raises-20-million-esports-market-booming>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁴⁴ Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/746173/monthly-active-streamers-on-twitch/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁴⁵ Id.

⁴⁶ TwitchTracker, <https://twitchtracker.com/statistics>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁴⁷ For example, The Intergalactic Spacewar Olympics, Atari's Space Invaders Championship, and Quake's Red Annihilation mentioned earlier in the article.

⁴⁸ Game Haus, <https://thegamehaus.com/dota/dota-2-the-international-prize-pool/2023/03/19/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁴⁹ Los Angeles Times, <https://www.latimes.com/sports/story/2019-10-16/top-moments-in-staples-center-20-year-history-anniversary>, last accessed 2024/06/26

⁵⁰ Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/235678/world-series-tv-viewership-in-the-united-states/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁵¹ Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1264872/march-madness-final-four-viewers/#:~:text=During%20the%20semi-finals%20of%20the%202024%20edition%20of,over%2014%20million%20viewers%20in%20the%20United%20States>, last accessed 2024/06/26

⁵² MSN, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/sports/nba/tv-ratings-how-many-people-watched-the-celtics-mavericks-2024-nba-finals/ar-BB1osi8b#:~:text=The%202024%20NBA%20Finals%20eventually%20closed%20out%20with,3%25%20vs%20last%20year%20E2%80%99s%20Miami%20Heat-Denver%20Nuggets%20series>, last accessed 2024/06/24

Finals, (4.6 million, 2024). But not the NFL’s Super Bowl Championship Series which saw record viewership in 2024 (123.4 million).”⁵⁴

As of 2023, esports has reached 640 million people worldwide.⁵⁵ As competitive video gameplay continues to integrate into our culture, esports viewership, investment and revenue in esports will only increase.⁵⁶ Worldwide esports viewership for 2025 is estimated at 665 million.⁵⁷ Esports streamers in the U.S. are expected to climb to 362 million in 2025.⁵⁸ The popularity of esports is further leveraged by the fact that competitions are not limited by the constraints of a brick-and-mortar facility. An added benefit for fans is that there is no need to be physically present. Streaming seems to be the preferred way, or at least the most convenient way, to watch a tournament or a favorite team compete from anywhere in the world.

It is doubtful that William Higinbotham, or anyone else for that matter, could have imagined his public display of Tennis for Two almost 70 years ago could lead to an industry, video games or gaming, boasting a worldwide value of more than \$1.72 billion.⁵⁹ The global esports market is projected to grow to \$5.7 billion by 2028.⁶⁰ Despite growing valuations, it seems that for some, at least, profits are hard to come by.⁶¹

The Esports Ecosystem: Do Women Fit In?

What in past decades has been thought of as simply playing video games, we now colloquially call esports. Not all video gameplay is considered to be esports and not all players – or gamers are considered to be engaged in esports when they participate in video gameplay. Esports, or electronic sports, is a category of video gaming and more properly describes professional competitive video gaming whether competing as an athlete or watching as a fan or spectator.⁶² Similar to traditional sporting events, crowds gather to watch the competitions.

There are many types of gamers and GAMEDESIGNING.org, has categorized six types of esports players:⁶³

- The Hardcore Gamer
Hardcore gamers are described as the “ultimate gamer” constantly striving to improve and beat personal bests. Professional esports players can be classified as hardcore gamers because they have a training schedule, actively compete against other gamers, work on strategy, and invest a significant amount of time and energy

⁵⁴ CNN, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/12/media/super-bowl-lviii-ratings/index.html>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁵⁵ demandsage, <https://www.demandsage.com/esports-statistics/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁵⁶ Medium, <https://medium.com/codex/the-growing-trend-of-esports-why-2023-is-going-to-be-a-massive-year-for-esports-e17fe39ac58a>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁵⁷ SportsLens, <https://sportslens.com/news/esports-viewership-to-reach-665-million-people-by-2025/#:~:text=The%20country%20had%20more%20than%20189%20million%20eSports,in%202025%2C%20up%20from%2030.5%20million%20this%20year.>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁵⁸ Id.

⁵⁹ Fortune Business Insights, <https://www.fortunebusinessinsights.com/esports-market-106820>, last accessed 2024/06/26

⁶⁰ Statista, <https://www.statista.com/outlook/amo/esports/worldwide>, last accessed 2024/06/26

⁶¹ The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/20/technology/e-sports-revenue-video-gaming.html>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁶² gamesradar, <https://www.gamesradar.com/what-is-esports/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁶³ GAMEDESIGNING, <https://www.gamedesigning.org/gaming/gamer-types/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

into their chosen game.⁶⁴

- **The Casual Gamer**
These gamers generally play for fun. As casual and hyper-casual gameplay has gained significant visibility,⁶⁵ the number of platforms, as well as gamers, in this category has significantly increased. Casual gamers play more for the experience than for the competition.⁶⁶
- **The Mobile Gamer**
Mobile gamers access the platforms that host their favorite games through devices like tablets and smartphones. Difficulty levels vary as does the seriousness of the play.⁶⁷ This type of game interaction is rising across the globe and is expected to continue to do so for the foreseeable future.⁶⁸
- **The Online Gamer**
Online gamers enjoy the sociality of teaming up to defeat others through combined effort. They appreciate the graphics and sophistication of computer-based gameplay. Online gamers also play individually.⁶⁹
- **The Observer**
The observer is exactly that, someone who enjoys watching others play video games. Twitch and YouTube provide plenty of content for observers to engage in.⁷⁰ Esports can provide a sense of belonging, improve social connections and interactions, and lead to a shared sense of community.⁷¹
- **The Armchair General**
Armchair Generals are strategists at heart but do not necessarily compete in classic strategy games. These players are the trail blazers. They are flexible thinkers that employ cunning, intelligence, and even guile.⁷²

⁶⁴ Id.

⁶⁵ 33 Square, <https://www.33rdsquare.com/what-is-hypercasual-vs-casual-games/#:~:text=Hypercasual%20games%20feature%20extremely%20simple%20mechanics%20that%20allow,game%20play%20but%20a%20bit%20more%20depth%20and%20complexity>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁶⁶ Game Designing, <https://www.gamedesigning.org/gaming/gamer-types/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁶⁷ Id.

⁶⁸ Statista, <https://www.statista.com/topics/8199/mobile-esports/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁶⁹ Game Designing, <https://www.gamedesigning.org/gaming/gamer-types/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁷⁰ TwitchTracker, <https://twitchtracker.com/statistics>, last accessed 2024/06/24; Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/746173/monthly-active-streamers-on-twitch/>, last accessed 2024/06/24; and Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/453461/leading-youtube-gaming-channels-subscribers/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁷¹ GAME DESIGNING, <https://www.gamedesigning.org/gaming/gamer-types/>, last accessed 2024/06/26 and MetroWest Daily News, <https://www.metrowestdailynews.com/story/news/education/2021/02/22/massbay-students-turn-esports-make-new-friends-during-remote-semester/6798070002/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁷² GAMEDESIGNING, <https://www.gamedesigning.org/gaming/gamer-types/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

It seems that professional competitive players could be characterized as hardcore gamers, online gamers, armchair generals, or any combination of the three.

A common misunderstanding is that video games and esports are just for men. Most teens, male and female, play video games. As early as 2008, “97% of teens between the ages of 12-17 played some form of video game, with more than half reporting that they played “yesterday”.⁷³ Though not everyone in this demographic is considered an esports player or goes on to play esports professionally, or even in college, it seems as if this demographic identifies with esports both culturally and socially. This connection, fostered by video game play and esports, mirrors the connection some young people have with traditional sports.⁷⁴

Nevertheless, as people age, esports continues to be driven by men, making the majority of esports players “. . . males who work full-time and are between the ages of 21 and 35.”⁷⁵ Stereotypical notions that men are somehow better at esports than women are not only inaccurate but may be the very device used to reinforce gender inequities in esports.⁷⁶ Despite esports being a male-dominated space for now, “[a]dult women represent 31% of the video game-playing population” and comprise nearly 30% of esports fans.⁷⁷ It is interesting to note that for those under 18, women make up a greater percentage of esports players and a greater percentage of the fan base than males.⁷⁸ Women are just as capable as men in competitive esports, earning professional spots on teams and competing at the same level as men.⁷⁹ Compared to the millions in prize money available in esports, one public data website revealed that only 499 women have won prize money in esports tournaments, with the top female winning a mere \$471,250.07.⁸⁰

If more women under 18 are participating in and making up the esports fan base than men what accounts for the steep drop off –50% to 30% – in their participation at age 18 and as they move forward in their lives? Perhaps gender discrimination, harassment, and overtly bad behavior by males has something to do with it.

Gender Discrimination

In 2021, nearly half of all women in gaming experienced some form of gender discrimination –three times more than men.⁸¹ Gender discrimination in esports has been so

⁷³ Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2008/09/16/teens-video-games-and-civics/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁷⁴ The Word Street, <https://wordstreetjournal.com/esports-phenomenon-the-rise-of-competitive-online-gaming/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁷⁵ Investopedia, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/e/esports.asp>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁷⁶ Wiley Online Library, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jcc4.12159>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁷⁷ VentureBeat, <https://venturebeat.com/esports/esports-must-deal-with-harassment-and-sexism/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁷⁸ Id.

⁷⁹ MSN, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/lifestyle/lifestyle-buzz/women-can-compete-at-the-same-level-as-men-the-push-for-women-in-esports/ar-BB1niXWg>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁸⁰ Esports Earnings, <https://www.esportsearnings.com/players/female-players>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁸¹ Forbes, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mattgardner1/2021/03/19/the-ugly-hatred-faced-by-women-in-esports-and-how-we-fight-back/?sh=289da2ec37d8>, last accessed 2024/06/24

pervasive “. . . that many female gamers disguise their identities, change profiles and characters to appear neutral or masculine, and daren’t use their microphones.”⁸²

The National Integrity of Sport Unit in Australia defines integrity in competitions as,

“The manifestation of the ethics and values which promote community confidence in sports, including fair and honest performances and outcomes, unaffected by illegitimate enhancements or external interests; and positive conduct by athletes, administrators, officials, supporters and other stakeholders, on and off the sporting arena, which enhances the reputation and standing of the sporting contest and of sport overall.”⁸³

Fortnight athlete and Team Liquid member, Alixxa was outraged when the integrity of eFuse Women of the Erena Fortnite Tournament was questioned “. . . simply because it was all-female.”⁸⁴ Using her status in esports, she called for action to be taken against those expressing hate and sexism. She elaborated, “The number of times I’ve seen women getting harassed by teammates, simply because they’re a girl, is horrifying”⁸⁵ Identifying fear as the issue, Alixxa opined, “. . . so many [women] are scared to put themselves out there because they know the type of reaction they’ll receive.”⁸⁶ Her solution? “The only way to fix this issue is to hold people accountable, encouraging and supporting women who want to play at an esports level.”⁸⁷

Tired of men making excuses for her success, professional Hearthstone gamer and member of Team Liquid Slyssa declared “. . . I’ve been accused of cheating numerous times; pro players on the scene have even claimed I’ve co-opped with male gamers.”⁸⁸ Her advice for parents: “. . . please don’t tell your daughters that video games are for boys. I can’t tell you how many girls I know feel left out because we were taught that girls don’t do that. I think future generations will have insanely talented women in esports when their parents don’t stereotype gaming by gender.”⁸⁹ As the esports and video gaming world moves toward a more diverse ecosystem hopefully gamer culture can evolve to “. . . ‘you’re a good player’... not ‘you’re good for a girl.’”⁹⁰

Women continue to be underrepresented as both professional esports players and game developers.⁹¹ Critics claim the esports industry has been a “boys’ club” for decades.⁹² Heavily

⁸² Id.

⁸³ Play by the Rules, <https://www.playbytherules.net.au/got-an-issue/integrity-in-sport/what-is-it>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁸⁴ Forbes, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mattgardner1/2021/03/19/the-ugly-hatred-faced-by-women-in-esports-and-how-we-fight-back/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁸⁵ Id.

⁸⁶ Id.

⁸⁷ Id.

⁸⁸ Id.

⁸⁹ Id.

⁹⁰ Id.

⁹¹ The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/feb/17/i-was-always-told-i-was-unusual-why-so-few-women-design-video-games>, last accessed 2024/06/24 and BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/technology-58466374>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁹² B2 The Business of Business, <https://www.businessofbusiness.com/articles/activision-blizzard-gaming-industry-harrasment/>, last accessed 2024/06/24 and Input, <https://www.inverse.com/input/features/data-shows-the-gaming-industry-still-has-a-pressing-diversity-problem>, last accessed 2024/06/24

male dominated, “. . . women make up only 16% of Executive Teams . . .”, with the executive teams of five of the top esports companies comprised of men only.⁹³ Across the industry, women represent a measly 24% of the workforce.⁹⁴

Accusations have also been made that “. . . [t]he majority of esports companies are only interested in marketing to males.”⁹⁵ The hypersexualized and misogynistic representations of women in video games are dehumanizing. Some have argued the portrayal of women in video games as sex symbols and damsels in distress influences and leads players to adopt the same attitudes.⁹⁶

In spite of the negative portrayal of women in video games, Entertainment Software Association’s Essential Facts report from 2022 demonstrates that video-game players are 48% female with an average age of thirty-three.⁹⁷ It’s no secret that the prime demographic for video game publishers is 18-34.⁹⁸

Armed with the knowledge that women gamers make up almost half of the market, it is surprising that attempts to diversify game genres are met with resistance. It seems that innovative game developers with groundbreaking content are often forced to leave behind their artistic and creative freedom in favor of a larger game publisher’s vision.⁹⁹ Independent game developers often work a full-time job, find a side-hustle, or do their best to sweat it out lacking the very resources that are needed for success.¹⁰⁰

Harassment of Women: Online and Off

The sexual harassment culture that has been so pervasive in the video and esports industry continues to be perpetuated.¹⁰¹ In August 2018, it was revealed that several senior level staff members at Riot Games engaged in harassing behaviors, “[f]rom telling jokes about rape, to

⁹³ Forbes, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/avivahwittenbergcox/2020/08/28/gaming-industry-please-waitgender-balance-loading/?sh=36288565d304>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁹⁴ Id.

⁹⁵ VentureBeat, <https://venturebeat.com/esports/esports-must-deal-with-harassment-and-sexism/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁹⁶ ScienceDaily, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/03/170328105908.htm>, last accessed 2024/06/24 and Polygon, <https://www.polygon.com/features/2014/10/24/6242329/character-design-sarkeesian>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁹⁷ GamesIndustry.biz, <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/esa-48-percent-of-video-game-players-are-female-and-29-percent-identify-as-people-of-color>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁹⁸ Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/189582/age-of-us-video-game-players/>, last accessed 2024/06/24; Liquid Web, https://www.liquidweb.com/insights/video-game-statistics/?irgwc=1&clickid=wCtUT8wpPxyPWcSVq9wwnz6PUkFyFiTUeR6EWI0&iradid=735602&irpid=2003851&sharedid=EdgeBingFlow&ir=1&utm_medium=affiliate, last accessed 2024/06/24; and DataProt, <https://dataprot.net/statistics/gamer-demographics/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

⁹⁹ Medium, https://medium.com/@OVI_E-SPORTS/the-rise-of-indie-game-developers-changing-the-game-in-the-industry-08a46cec2ea0, last accessed 2024/06/24

¹⁰⁰ The Verge, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/10/9/20903139/indie-game-developers-creators-money-funding>, last accessed 2024/06/24

¹⁰¹ NFHS, <https://www.nfhs.org/articles/the-perfect-storm-addressing-sexual-harassment-in-esports/>, last accessed 2024/06/24 and SCI AM, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/universities-need-to-address-sexual-harassment-in-the-gaming-they-sponsor/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

sending photographs of their genitalia to female co-workers”¹⁰² Reminiscent of the #metoo revelations in the entertainment industry, more than 70 people from every corner of the esports ecosystem spoke up about the harassment they have been subjected to from sexual harassment, to sexism, to allegations of abuse.¹⁰³

As women and non-binary game developers and video game players achieve greater notoriety and visibility there seems to be corresponding increases in harassment and intimidation directed toward them.¹⁰⁴ While it is difficult to point to a specific cause, perhaps it is because their games are perceived as a threat to traditional gaming culture.¹⁰⁵ Such was the case for Zoë Quinn.¹⁰⁶

After receiving favorable reviews from mental health professionals and gaming media outlets for their game *Depression Quest*,¹⁰⁷ an unconventional video game designed to simulate the day-to-day challenges of depression through a series of fictional scenarios based on Quinn’s own life experience, their former boyfriend suggested through a blog post that the positive review was a quid pro quo for sex.¹⁰⁸ The allegations of such an exchange have not been proven.¹⁰⁹

The accusations made by Quinn’s former boyfriend became a flashpoint providing the kindling for backlash from the gamer community.¹¹⁰ Gamers, it seems, disliked the game because of its narrative-based format and limited player choices – a departure from more typical formats emphasizing violence and skill. Focusing on the challenges associated with depression,

¹⁰² Esports.net, <https://www.esports.net/news/industry/esports-sexual-harassment-problem/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

¹⁰³ The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/23/style/women-gaming-streaming-harassment-sexism-twitch.html>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁰⁴ IGN, <https://www.ign.com/articles/igda-statement-game-developers-harassment>, last accessed 2024/06/24 and PCGAMER, <https://www.pcgamer.com/91-of-game-developer-survey-respondents-say-abuse-from-players-is-a-problem/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

¹⁰⁵ MotherJones, <https://www.motherjones.com/media/2014/05/pop-culture-anita-sarkeesian-video-games-sexism-tropes-online-harassment-feminist/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

¹⁰⁶ Quinn uses they/them pronouns.

¹⁰⁷ DBpedia, https://dbpedia.org/page/Depression_Quest, last accessed 2024/06/24; The New Yorker, <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/zoe-quinn-depression-quest>, last accessed 2024/06/24; DEADSPIN, <https://deadspin.com/the-future-of-the-culture-wars-is-here-and-its-gamergate-1646145844/>, last accessed 2024/06/24; and Depression Quest, <http://www.depressionquest.com/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

¹⁰⁸ DEADSPIN, <https://deadspin.com/the-future-of-the-culture-wars-is-here-and-its-gamergate-1646145844/>, last accessed 2024/06/24; Vox, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/9/19/16301682/gamergate-alt-right-zoe-quinn-crash-override-interview>, last accessed 2024/06/24; The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/15/opinion/what-is-gamergate.html>, last accessed 2024/06/24; and International Business Times, <https://www.ibtimes.com/what-gamergate-scandal-female-game-developer-flees-home-amid-online-threats-1704046>, last accessed 2024/06/24

¹⁰⁹ Vox, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/9/19/16301682/gamergate-alt-right-zoe-quinn-crash-override-interview>, last accessed 2024/06/24; daily dot, <https://www.dailydot.com/parsec/zoe-quinn-sexual-assault-alec-holowka/>, last accessed 2024/06/24; and International Business Times, <https://www.ibtimes.com/what-gamergate-scandal-female-game-developer-flees-home-amid-online-threats-1704046>, last accessed 2024/06/24

¹¹⁰ International Business Times, <https://www.ibtimes.com/what-gamergate-scandal-female-game-developer-flees-home-amid-online-threats-1704046>, last accessed 2024/06/24 and ars TECHNIA, <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2015/03/that-life-is-over-zoe-quinn-looks-beyond-gamergate/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

Quinn's game was not fun because it was not meant to be.¹¹¹ That backlash took the form of attacks against Quinn including doxing,¹¹² hacking into personal accounts,¹¹³ and threats of rape and death.¹¹⁴

What initially began as a personal attack against Quinn, gained momentum and ignited a movement that has come to be known as Gamergate.¹¹⁵ Like a fire raging out of control, other outspoken women in the video game community were swept up in its destructive wake becoming casualties of what has come to be described as part of a long-running culture war against efforts to diversify the traditionally male video gaming community.¹¹⁶

Anita Sarkeesian and Brianna Wu were also targets of Gamergate.¹¹⁷ Sarkeesian is a feminist media critic, who was subjected to online harassment, for her contributions to a YouTube video series.¹¹⁸ The series, *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* (2012), analyzed portrayals of women in video games.¹¹⁹ Brianna Wu, a video game developer who sought to fill a void in the gaming market by designing video games for women at her all female game development studio was also consumed by the backlash.¹²⁰ Like Quinn, Sarkeesian and Wu were harassed, subjected to doxing, and inundated with rape and death threats.¹²¹

¹¹¹ DBpedia, https://dbpedia.org/page/Depression_Quest#, last accessed 2024/06/24; ars TECHNIA, <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2015/03/that-life-is-over-zoe-quinn-looks-beyond-gamergate/>, last accessed 2024/06/24; and DEADSPIN, <https://deadspin.com/the-future-of-the-culture-wars-is-here-and-its-gamerga-1646145844/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

¹¹² Doxing is the dissemination of personally identifiable information in the public sphere, usually via the internet. International Business Times, <https://www.ibtimes.com/what-gamergate-scandal-female-game-developer-flees-home-amid-online-threats-1704046>, last accessed 2024/06/24

¹¹³ Time, <https://time.com/4927076/zoe-quinn-gamergate-doxing-crash-override-excerpt/>, last accessed 2024/06/24 and International Business Times, <https://www.ibtimes.com/what-gamergate-scandal-female-game-developer-flees-home-amid-online-threats-1704046>, last accessed 2024/06/24

¹¹⁴ Id.

¹¹⁵ NBC News, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/how-zoe-quinn-took-online-trolls-trying-destroy-her-nca813401>, last accessed 2024/06/24; DEADSPIN, <https://deadspin.com/the-future-of-the-culture-wars-is-here-and-its-gamerga-1646145844/>, last accessed 2024/06/24; International Business Times, <https://www.ibtimes.com/what-gamergate-scandal-female-game-developer-flees-home-amid-online-threats-1704046>, last accessed 2024/06/24; and Vox, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/9/19/16301682/gamergate-alt-right-zoe-quinn-crash-override-interview>, last accessed 2024/06/24

¹¹⁶ The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/15/opinion/what-is-gamergate.html?mtrref=undefined&gwh=618FC385AD7155A30D7D1DD42C8A4008&gwt=pay&assetType=PAYWALL>, last accessed 2024/06/24

¹¹⁷ The Verge, <https://www.theverge.com/2017/1/27/14412594/fbi-gamergate-harassment-threat-investigation-records-release>, last accessed 2024/06/24; International Business Times, <https://www.ibtimes.com/what-gamergate-scandal-female-game-developer-flees-home-amid-online-threats-1704046>, last accessed 2024/06/24; and The Mary Sue, <https://www.themarysue.com/will-prosecutors-act-on-gamergate-death-threat/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

¹¹⁸ MotherJones, <https://www.motherjones.com/media/2014/05/pop-culture-anita-sarkeesian-video-games-sexism-tropes-online-harassment-feminist/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

¹¹⁹ IGN, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2013/05/31/tropes-vs-women-in-video-games-why-it-matters>, last accessed 2024/06/26

¹²⁰ silicon republic, <https://www.siliconrepublic.com/innovation/inspirefest-speaker-brianna-wu-gaming-its-a-girl-thing>, last accessed 2024/06/24 and Huff Post, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-brianna-wu-went-from-gamergate-victim-to-congressional-candidate_n_58b5b430e4b060480e0c402c, last accessed 2024/06/26

¹²¹ DEADSPIN, <https://deadspin.com/the-future-of-the-culture-wars-is-here-and-its-gamerga-1646145844/>, last accessed 2024/06/24; The Guilfordian, <https://www.guilfordian.com/opinion/2023/11/10/why-doxing-is-wrong-obviously/>, last accessed 2024/06/24; International Business Times, <https://www.ibtimes.com/what-gamergate->

Overtly Bad Behavior from Professional Esports Players

Hafu Chan is another target of gamer harassment. One of the best Hearthstone players in the world and a former professional World of Warcraft competitor, Chan has been the target of blatant sexual harassment by professional esports players and teams.¹²² After qualifying for the World of Warcraft regional tournament in 2008, then 17 year-old, Chan had to endure an incredibly public display of sexual harassment when a team called "Gonna Rape Hafu At Regionals" qualified for, was allowed to enter, and then competed at the tournament.¹²³ When she lodged a complaint against the team name, Chan was told the name was a just a joke.¹²⁴ Her experiences left her considering whether to leave esports.¹²⁵

Sexual harassment in esports is not just directed at women. Samuel ‘Sammyboy’ Anderson was sexually harassed by Team Vendetta DotA 2 Coach Chase ‘Loomdun’ Stearns who was then fired.¹²⁶ Other incidents involving sexual harassment include harassment being hurled at journalists and fans. Timo “Taimou” Kettunen was banned in 2012 by the European Team Fortress 2 League for engaging in “. . . a wide range of insults towards various nationalities, and . . . reports in 2018 that [he] had used anti-gay slurs in his Twitch stream”¹²⁷ The Finnish Overwatch star doubled down and directed his offensive and harassing behavior toward at least one woman conducting interviews of esports players by making lewd comments about her body.¹²⁸

Two promising Overwatch gamers, Lee ‘Leetaejun’ Tae-jun and Geum ‘Dean’ Dong-geun, derailed their esports careers in early 2017 by developing numerous online relationships with female fans.¹²⁹ Allegations of dating female fans, including a minor surfaced.¹³⁰ Dong-geun’s fans set up a Twitter account, [@DunggeonVictims](#) where proof of Dong-geun’s troubling

[scandal-female-game-developer-flees-home-amid-online-threats-1704046](#), last accessed 2024/06/24; BuzzFeedNews, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/alisonvingiano/a-female-game-developer-had-to-flee-after-her-address-was-po>, last accessed 2024/06/24; The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/15/opinion/what-is-gamergate.html>, last accessed 2024/06/24; The Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/10/20/rape-and-death-threats-are-terrorizing-female-gamers-why-havent-men-in-tech-spoken-out/>, last accessed 2024/06/24; and The Verge, <https://www.theverge.com/2017/1/27/14412594/fbi-gamergate-harassment-threat-investigation-records-release>, last accessed 2024/06/24

¹²² PCGAMER, <https://www.pcgamer.com/hearthstone-pro-hafu-speaks-out-about-sexist-trolling-on-twitch/>, last accessed 2024/06/24 and <https://www.sportskeeda.com/esports/gonna-r-pe-hafu-regionals-pokimane-quarterjade-others-react-bizzare-incident-blizzcon-2008>, last accessed 2024/06/24

¹²³ sportskeeda, <https://www.sportskeeda.com/esports/gonna-r-pe-hafu-regionals-pokimane-quarterjade-others-react-bizzare-incident-blizzcon-2008>, last accessed 2024/06/24; Ginx.tv, <https://www.ginx.tv/en/twitch/hafu-retells-horrific-story-of-a-professional-esports-team-harassing-her-while-competing>, last accessed 2024/09/24; and VoxBliss, <https://www.voxbliss.com/everything-about-hafu/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

¹²⁴ sportskeeda, <https://www.sportskeeda.com/esports/gonna-r-pe-hafu-regionals-pokimane-quarterjade-others-react-bizzare-incident-blizzcon-2008>, last accessed 2024/06/24

¹²⁵ Id. PCGAMER, <https://www.pcgamer.com/hearthstone-pro-hafu-speaks-out-about-sexist-trolling-on-twitch/>, last accessed 2024/06/24

¹²⁶ Esports.net, <https://www.esports.net/news/industry/esports-sexual-harassment-problem/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹²⁷ Id.

¹²⁸ Id.

¹²⁹ Dot Esports, <https://dotesports.com/general/news/lunatic-hai-players-suspended-4600>, last accessed 2024/06/24

¹³⁰ Yahoo! News, <https://news.yahoo.com/south-korean-overwatch-pros-suspended-183227252.html>, last accessed 2024/06/25

behavior could be posted.¹³¹ Pressure from fans led to their departure from Lunatic-Hai and Overwatch.¹³²

While the sexual harassment of anyone is horrendous and should not be tolerated, it is interesting to note that when the victim is male there seems to be a heightened sense of accountability and the undertaking of actionable consequences. Publicly disclosed incontrovertible proof coupled with significant fan engagement appear to be another situation in which perpetrators are called to account for unacceptable behavior. Absent that, there appears to be a glaring lack of accountability.

Integrity and Regulation

The esports regulatory structure is largely non-existent. There is no overarching or centralized body that provides general guidance, possibly because of the breadth of activities that esports encompasses. Even for professional esports, no regulatory body has been established and collectively been given the authority to create rules, regulations, policies, and oversee tournaments. However, a handful of self-regulatory organizations have been established in an attempt to address particular concerns or manage a segment within the industry. The entities discussed in this section are not an exhaustive list, rather they are examples of the types of bodies that have developed to positively promote esports and perhaps to address various concerns in the professional esports ecosystem.

A robust year for esports association formation, 2016 saw the creation of World Esports Association (WESA), British Esports Association (British Esports)¹³³ and Professional Esports Association (PEA) in North America.¹³⁴ According to its website, WESA is a collaboration between esports tournament organizer, ESL and 12 other esports organizations.¹³⁵ It is engaged in creating the infrastructure necessary to “. . . support and amplify sustainable growth of esports, based on the shared values of fairness, transparency, and integrity and sharing that growth between the players, teams and leagues.”¹³⁶ WSEA holds itself out as “. . . an open and inclusive organization. . . .” seeking to “standardize regulations” and “bring all stakeholders to the discussion table.”¹³⁷ Its leadership is 100% male.¹³⁸

WESA has established “A Code of Conduct and Compliance For Teams and Players”.¹³⁹ Finalized in December 2017, the code of conduct includes non-discrimination (Regulation 17)

¹³¹ Id.

¹³² ESPN, https://www.espn.com/esports/story/_/id/19151605/from-uncrowned-kings-new-idols-lunatic-hai, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹³³ British Esports Federation, <https://britishesports.org/the-hub/press-releases/formation-of-the-british-esports-association-a-new-not-for-profit-organisation-to-represent-competitive-video-gaming-at-all-levels/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹³⁴ Polygon, <https://www.polygon.com/2016/5/13/11668182/what-is-wesa>, last accessed 2024/06/25; GamesBeat, <https://venturebeat.com/games/the-united-kingdom-forms-the-british-esports-association/>, last accessed 2024/06/25; and Complexity, <https://complexity.gg/professional-esports-association-pea-launches/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹³⁵ WESA, <https://wesa.gg/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹³⁶ Id.

¹³⁷ Id.

¹³⁸ WESA, <https://wesa.gg/board/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹³⁹ WESA, <https://wesa.gg/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/WESA-Code-of-Conduct-Teams-and-Players-Final-03052019-1.pdf>, last accessed 2024/06/25

and anti-harassment regulations prohibiting general harassment (Regulation 18.2) and sexual harassment (Regulation 18.3). Unfortunately, the Code of Conduct and Compliance is unclear as to what would happen should a violation occur because specific sanctions and penalties are not mentioned. Regulation 21 establishes a permissive standard (may) by which players or teams who fail to comply with governance decisions by WSEA or other esports bodies could be sanctioned.

British Esports, a national non-profit formed by the British government, is not a governing body and its efforts focus on the community at large.¹⁴⁰ Created to “. . . promote and nurture future esports talent, British Esports has played a pivotal role in shaping the landscape of amateur competitive gaming throughout the UK and Internationally.”¹⁴¹ Its current efforts are “[f]ocused on developing grassroots esports, cutting edge curriculum and career pathways, British Esports self-proclaims that it has successfully advanced the perception of esports nationwide.”¹⁴² Predominately male, with men holding 11 of 16 positions within the organization, no regulations or gameplay guidelines can be found among its educational materials. Its efforts continue.

PEA, a collective of team organizations, incorporated a shared vision to work as equals to advance the esports industry.¹⁴³ Claims of communication failures and a decision to prevent PEA players from competing in the ESL Pro League prompted an open letter of complaint from PEA’s players representative Scott Smith.¹⁴⁴ PEA responded with a letter of its own reaffirming its ability to determine the events in which players could compete.¹⁴⁵ No regulations or guidelines for esports players seem to have been developed and none are posted on its archived website. It appears that nine associations were affiliated with PEA¹⁴⁶ and all meaningful efforts ceased in 2017. No information about its leadership is available.

Professional esports organizations might look to the governance structures of U.S. collegiate athletic associations for insights into how to best oversee esports. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is a member-led athletic regulatory organization “. . . dedicated to the well-being and lifelong success of [traditional sport] college athletes.”¹⁴⁷ Its substantial infrastructure governs more than 500,00 athletes.¹⁴⁸ The NCAA’s members are comprised of 1,098 colleges and universities and 102 athletic conferences.¹⁴⁹ It has vast

¹⁴⁰ britishesports.org, <https://britishesports.org/about-us/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁴¹ Id.

¹⁴² Id.

¹⁴³ Professional Esports Association, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190703034908/http://www.proesports.org/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁴⁴ Medium, <https://medium.com/@sirscootscs/an-open-letter-to-the-professional-esports-association-its-member-teams-and-the-counter-strike-db2fb8b55f75>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁴⁵ Wikiwand, https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Professional_Esports_Association#History, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁴⁶ Professional Esports Association, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190703034908/http://www.proesports.org/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁴⁷ NCAA, <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2021/2/10/about-resources-media-center-ncaa-101-what-ncaa.aspx>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁴⁸ NCAA, <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2021/2/16/overview.aspx>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁴⁹ NCAA, <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2021/2/10/about-resources-media-center-ncaa-101-what-ncaa.aspx>, last accessed 2024/06/25

experience regulating an enormous stakeholder group and variety of traditional sports. Its range of athletic competitions in numerous sports is not unlike the diverse game titles in esports. It is a member-led rulemaking body that has the power to enforce its rules, regulations, and policies.¹⁵⁰ It has created an office of inclusion and is required to comply with U.S. federal and state laws regarding gender equity.¹⁵¹ Many thought the NCAA could bring needed oversight and guidance to esports,¹⁵² perhaps paving the way for better governance at the professional level. When it declined to govern collegiate esports, the NCAA board articulated two reasons: “. . . video games are predominantly played by males (which creates possible Title IX complications) and the violent nature of some games is not in line with the NCAA’s image.”¹⁵³

Now, instead of a single body providing oversight for collegiate esports programs there are three. The Eastern Collegiate Athletic Conference¹⁵⁴ and the National Junior College Athletic Association¹⁵⁵ “. . . two of the longest-standing governing bodies in collegiate athletics” both stepped up to offer a governance structure for college esports programs, organize schedules and tournaments, and hold national championships.¹⁵⁶ The National Association of Collegiate Esports, a relative newcomer, promotes the positive development of esports programs and advocates for a strong institutional commitment to esports.¹⁵⁷ Though none of these organizations have posted rules, regulations, or policies to their websites, all three are subject to U.S. federal and state law requirements and must comply with non-discrimination, anti-harassment, including sexual harassment, and gender equity laws.

Professional esports could also look to U.S. state gambling regulators as they seek to establish a more unified oversight approach. Gambling regulators have broad authority to regulate gaming licensees. Gaming licensees are subject to discipline from their jurisdictional regulator for failure to comply with laws, rules, and regulations.¹⁵⁸ Gaming licenses are privileged, are not a property right, and can be limited, conditioned, suspended, or revoked.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁰ NCAA, <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2021/2/9/governance.aspx>, last accessed 2024/06/25 and NCAA, https://ncaaorg.s3.amazonaws.com/champion-magazine/HowNCAAWorks/AW_HowNCAAWorks.pdf, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁵¹ NCAA, <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2016/3/2/gender-equity-and-title-ix.aspx>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁵² VentureBeat, <https://venturebeat.com/pc-gaming/the-ncaa-needs-to-help-college-esports-grow/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁵³ The Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/esports/2020/08/06/ncaa-whiffed-esports-its-paying-price-can-still-learn-lesson/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁵⁴ The Eastern Collegiate Athletic Conference governs at the four-year institution level.

¹⁵⁵ The National Junior College Athletic Association governs at the two-year institution level.

¹⁵⁶ ADU, <https://athleticdirector.com/articles/the-rise-of-collegiate-esports-programs/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁵⁷ NACESPORTS, <https://www.nacesports.org/about/>, last accessed 2024/06/25 and <https://nacesports.org/#:~:text=NACE%20is%20a%20member%20driven%20organization%20that%20focuses,and%20a%20strong%20institutional%20commitment%20to%20the%20sport>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁵⁸ Harris Becky and Alikhan, Husna, Part II: Nevada Over 60 Years of Regulating Gambling – A Jurisdictional Overview, 10 Gaming Law Review 2019, p. 5 & 7.

¹⁵⁹ Harris Becky and Alikhan, Husna, Part II: Nevada Over 60 Years of Regulating Gambling – A Jurisdictional Overview, 10 Gaming Law Review 2019, p. 7.

Where legal to place wagers on esports, gambling regulations provide guidance on how esports events should be conducted. Two U.S. jurisdictions, Nevada and Ohio are good examples of how esports can be regulated and illustrate the broad authority gaming regulators have.

In 2018, the Nevada Gaming Commission adopted the first integrity-oriented regulation applicable to esports competitions, Regulation 22.1201, Other Events. The designation of other events is a catch-all for proposed gaming activities that were not specifically regulated. For a sportsbook to accept wagers on esports events, specific defined integrity requirements must be met:

2. A request for approval to accept wagers on an other event shall be made by a book at least 30 days prior to such event on such forms approved by the Chair, and shall include:
 - (a) A full description of the event and the manner in which wagers would be placed and winning wagers would be determined.
 - (b) A full description of any technology which is necessary to determine the outcome of the event.
 - (c) Such other information or documentation which demonstrates that:
 - (1) The event could be effectively supervised;
 - (2) There are integrity safeguards in place;
 - (3) The outcome of the event would be verifiable;
 - (4) The outcome of the event would be generated by a reliable and independent process;
 - (5) The outcome of the event would be unlikely to be affected by any wager placed;
 - (6) The event could be conducted in compliance with any applicable laws; and
 - (7) The granting of the request for approval would be consistent with the public policy of the state.¹⁶⁰

In 2023, The Nevada Gaming Commission adopted Regulation, 22.1202 specifically defining esports, articulating that esports are considered other events, and listing requirements Nevada books must comply with to offer wagers. Those requirements mirror section 2 of Regulation 22.1201 with additional requirements requiring information about game publishers.

Esports tournament organizers and self-regulated organizations could look to Regulation 22.1201 subsections (c)(1), (c)(2), (c)(6), and (c)(7) for guidance on how to incorporate player protections into their rules, regulations, and tournaments as a component of integrity. Subsections (c)(6) and (c)(7) of Regulation 22.1201 are particularly important as they could be

¹⁶⁰ Nevada Gaming Comm'n Regulation 22.1201.

utilized to enhance player protection by ensuring non-discrimination, anti-harassment including sexual harassment, and gender equity laws are observed.

In response to threats made against collegiate athletes in January 2023, the Ohio Casino Control Commission (OCCC) considered how it might use its regulatory authority to protect athletes. Recognizing that the regulatory authority cannot control behavior, the Executive Director pointed out that the Commission can control access to venues.¹⁶¹ The law of Ohio gives the “casino control commission broad authority to impose a lifetime ban on ‘any person whose presence in a sports gaming facility or whose participation in the play or operation of sports gaming in [Ohio] is determined by the commission to pose a threat to the interests of the state.’”¹⁶² Lifetime bans are generally reserved for issues that “affect the integrity of the gambling system.”¹⁶³ By July 2023, the Ohio Legislature passed a law explicitly stating “[t]hose who make threats ‘against persons who are involved in sporting events, where the threat is related to sports gaming’ are to be added to the OCCC’s list of individuals whose behavior excludes them from the right to participate in sports betting in the state in any form. The names of such individuals are to be shared with sportsbook operators in the state, who would be expected to deny acceptance of any wagers from them.”¹⁶⁴

Solutions

If things are to improve, it will take a collaborative effort. Esports stakeholders should work to reinforce each other’s efforts in the space. Recognizing the challenges women face in the esports ecosystem is a critical first step. As of 2022, of the 3.2 billion people that comprise the world’s global gaming community, almost half, or 46%, are women¹⁶⁵ Having open discussions about difficult topics such as bullying and sexual harassment can help the industry move toward the establishment of prevention policies.¹⁶⁶ Developing policies is just the beginning. The real work comes in supporting and promoting anti-bullying and sexual harassment prevention campaigns. Systemic long-term solutions are essential but never easy to implement. Having the fortitude to persist will be the catalyst for lasting change.

¹⁶¹ News 5 Cleveland, <https://www.news5cleveland.com/news/local-news/ohio-gaming-regulators-discuss-cracking-down-on-sports-bettors-who-attack-college-athletes-over-losses>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁶² Cleveland.com, <https://www.cleveland.com/news/2023/01/ohio-regulator-threatens-lifetime-ban-if-gamblers-threaten-athletes-following-complaint-from-university-of-dayton-basketball-coach.html#:~:text=Ohio%20gambling%20law%20gives%20the%20casino%20control%20commission,a%20threat%20to%20the%20interests%20of%20the%20state.%E2%80%9D>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁶³ Cleveland.com, <https://www.cleveland.com/news/2023/01/ohio-regulator-threatens-lifetime-ban-if-gamblers-threaten-athletes-following-complaint-from-university-of-dayton-basketball-coach.html#:~:text=Ohio%20gambling%20law%20gives%20the%20casino%20control%20commission,a%20threat%20to%20the%20interests%20of%20the%20state.%E2%80%9D>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁶⁴ SPORTSHANDLE, <https://sportshandle.com/ohio-first-ban-bettors-threaten-athletes/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁶⁵ PLAYTODAY.CO, <https://playtoday.co/blog/stats/how-many-women-are-esports-gamers/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁶⁶ VentureBeat, <https://venturebeat.com/esports/esports-must-deal-with-harassment-and-sexism/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

Productive Pipelines

One of the challenges esports faces is that no significant pipelines for players to transition from amateurs to professionals exist.¹⁶⁷ Developing a pipeline that identifies, supports, and trains players would help more amateurs find the pathway to professional competitions. Excelling at esports requires the development of skills. In esports the focus is often on “. . . being better than someone else . . .”, rather than on skill building.¹⁶⁸ Skill building can be especially challenging because it takes time to develop skills and the career arch of esports players is radically different from any other activity. By the time esports players reach their mid-20s, most have already reached their peak and are headed to retirement.¹⁶⁹

Because a lot of esports professionals retire at around the same time they would be entering college, there is no linear natural progression for development of amateurs. Though some of the pipeline infrastructure is beginning to be put into place through community and high school esports programs, there are no significant structured player development programs though for those who can afford it, skills coaching though esports bootcamps are available.¹⁷⁰ Thus, finding amateurs ready to play at a professional level can be difficult. Finding substantial numbers of female amateurs who are ready to become professional esports players – and take on the additional gender-based challenges is near impossible.¹⁷¹ Thoughtful investment in the creation of sustainable pipelines that can identify, support, and train diverse amateur esports players, particularly women would help equalize the playing field.¹⁷²

Recruit with Diversity in Mind

Esports is unique in that men and women can play and compete together on the same team. Research reinforces that mixed gender teams perform better than single gender teams.¹⁷³ However, research from a 2019 study found that of the professional esports players, only 5% are women.¹⁷⁴ A 2021 sample of 196 college programs showed men are the clear winners - they receive nearly 90% of esports scholarships.¹⁷⁵ While some college programs are more intentional

¹⁶⁷ Polygon, <https://www.polygon.com/features/2019/7/11/18632716/esports-amateur-pro-players-teams-talent-process>, last accessed 06/25/24

¹⁶⁸ Id.

¹⁶⁹ Nikkei Asia, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Business-trends/Life-after-esports-What-happens-when-pro-gamers-hang-up-the-joystick>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁷⁰ CONCORDE GAMES. <https://concordeeducation.com/games/blog/esports-bootcamps-the-role-of-intensive-training-in-player-development/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁷¹ BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/reel/playlist/female-innovators?vpid=p09v5xk8>, last accessed 2024/06/25; Variety, <https://variety.com/2018/gaming/features/women-in-esports-1203016379/>, last accessed 2024/06/25; and THE CONVERSATION, <https://theconversation.com/at-colleges-nationwide-esports-teams-dominated-by-men-154793>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁷² Variety, <https://variety.com/2018/gaming/features/women-in-esports-1203016379/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁷³ The Sport Journal, <https://thesportjournal.org/article/the-mission-value-of-collegiate-esports/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁷⁴ PLAYTODAY.CO, <https://playtoday.co/blog/stats/how-many-women-are-esports-gamers/#:~:text=A%202019%20study%20on%20Gender%20and%20Gaming%20stated,of%20that%20population%20are%20considered%20professional%20esports%20athletes>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁷⁵ AP News, <https://apnews.com/article/esports-gender-inequality-scholarships-men-1823321276db40fea37dc8d9e5410643>, last accessed 2024/06/25

about inclusion, only 8.2% of collegiate esports players are women.¹⁷⁶ College level and other esports programs with a potential to develop a pipeline to professional esports must be intentional about diverse recruitment and work to create and fortify inclusive pathways that funnel women to professional esports opportunities.

Another way to diversify the esports industry is to hire qualified women in esports organizations.¹⁷⁷ Increasing the number of women in any establishment can open doors, bring invaluable insight, help reach marginalized communities, and offer unique perspectives.¹⁷⁸ Women also tend to bring the additional benefits of mentorship and advocacy.¹⁷⁹

Focus on Player Well-Being

The benefits of competitive esports play are undeniable – critical thinking skills, communication, strategic thinking, leadership development, social connection, and teamwork.¹⁸⁰ Some research has also credited esports with the development of mental toughness, improved cognition, and problem-solving skills.¹⁸¹ However, when the entire esports landscape is taken into account, more needs to be done regarding player well-being.

Professional esports players are being recruited earlier and earlier. Lil Poison, dubbed the youngest esports player, turned pro at the tender of 6 years old.¹⁸² It is unclear if appropriate player protections have been established for professional players who are minors, particularly in light of the lack of protections for women in esports.

It is incumbent upon the esports industry to develop, establish, and implement measures to facilitate a safer environment for all esports players. In “Linking Esports to health risks and benefits: Current knowledge and future research needs” researchers have identified areas of player well-being that should be explored.¹⁸³ Some of their recommendations include further study to determine:

¹⁷⁶ The Conversation, <https://theconversation.com/at-colleges-nationwide-esports-teams-dominated-by-men-154793>, last accessed, 2024/06/25

¹⁷⁷ VentureBeat, <https://venturebeat.com/esports/esports-must-deal-with-harassment-and-sexism/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁷⁸ Forbes, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2023/02/07/why-everyone-wins-with-more-women-in-leadership/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁷⁹ Forbes, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2020/02/10/the-power-of-female-mentors-why-we-need-more-women-leading-todays-workforce/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁸⁰ EDUCAUSE, <https://www.educause.edu/ecar/research-publications/2021/expanding-esports-in-higher-ed-benefits-and-guidance-for-new-esports-programs/esports-and-student-success>, last accessed 2024/06/25 and EdTech, <https://edtechmagazine.com/k12/article/2022/07/how-esports-helping-students-improve-their-grades-and-build-leadership-skills>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁸¹ ScienceDaily, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/06/200611104801.htm>, last accessed 2024/06/25; and Technology, Mind, and Behavior, <https://tmb.apaopen.org/pub/qj0c4ij2/release/3>, last accessed 2024/06/25; and Gaming Concepts, <https://www.gamingconcepts.gg/post/10-essential-skills-students-gain-from-esports-participation#:~:text=Their%20findings%20articulate%20the%20profound%20impact%20of%20esports,mental%20agility%20is%20as%20crucial%20as%20physical%20skill>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁸² watchmojo, <https://www.watchmojo.com/articles/the-10-youngest-players-in-esports-history>, last accessed 2024/06/25

¹⁸³ NIH National Library of Medicine, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7749245/>, last accessed 2024/06/25

- Health issues related to participation in competitive action-based Esports video gaming in more advanced virtual and augmented reality Esports environments.
- Long-term impact of physical inactivity or prolonged sitting during digital game play.
- Mental health issues resulting from competitive video gaming, including gaming addiction, burnout, cyber bullying, intimidation, discrimination, and addiction.
- The psychosocial and cognitive effects of esports competition.
- Potential gender gaps and differences regarding Esports training and competition.¹⁸⁴

Additional areas for examination include:

- Identification of any potential health risks resulting from esports training, gameplay, and competition.
- The potential for long-term health consequences from playing video games.
- The effect of varying levels of physical fitness and stress on esports players.
- Classification of overuse injuries and how to avoid them.
- Creation of minimum age requirements for professional esports players.

Conclusion

Since the first mechanical game captured our imaginations over 75 years ago, video games have transformed from single function, single player input and limited graphics to massive multiplayer, multi-level involved story lines, with extensive player options and immersive graphics. Though a male dominated industry, the video game and esports ecosystem owe a lot of its groundbreaking game development and programming as well as advances in technology to women.

Almost one-third of those who play video games are women. The women of the rising generation make up a greater percentage of those engaging in video game play as well as the esports fan base than males. Yet women find themselves in an inhospitable environment and are subject to maltreatment, abuse, and harassment which only increases as they find success. While those who have paved the way have endured much, the road ahead, though improved by trail blazers, still appears to be rocky.

Collaboration throughout the esports industry on core priorities that include policies guaranteeing equal treatment and protection for all esports players, building pipelines that develop critical skills, intentionally recruiting women throughout the industry, and investing in player well-being are critical next steps for the esports industry. Afterall, it doesn't really matter when the first video game was created or when the first esports tournament was held. What does matter is that a maturing video game and esports industry create an environment of inclusiveness, acceptance, belonging, parity, and safety.

Key Take Aways

- What started out as an experiment, whether it be a cathode ray tube amusement device or few lines of computer code, has transformed into a multi-billion-dollar industry featuring diverse game offerings, hundreds of esports teams, highly competitive tournaments,

¹⁸⁴ Id.

substantial prize pools, and streaming channels.

- Women are credited with technology innovations, cutting edge game development, and programming innovations.
- Women are critical to the esports ecosystem. Almost one-third of those who play video games are women. Women game developers and programmers spark innovation and are crucial to the development of video games and the esports industry.
- The esports ecosystem has engaged in the systemic harassment and abuse of women. While there are whispers that attempts are being made to change the esports culture, it will take significant resources and effort to create a safer and more equitable environment.
- Tournament organizers, trade associations, regulatory bodies, and lawmakers should establish rules, regulations, and policies that promote integrity standards and include player protections.
- Esports tournament organizers and self-regulatory bodies can look to other governing organizations and state gambling regulators for guidance.
- Solutions include engaging in collaborative efforts, developing productive pipelines, establishing diversity focused recruiting standards, and emphasizing player well-being,