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Gender and the two-tiered system of collegiate esports

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ABSTRACT

Collegiate esports in the U.S. and Canada have grown tremendously over the past decade, through intensive investments by both universities and esports publishers. Although post-secondary institutions are believed to offer more hospitable conditions for gender-inclusive esports than professional scenes, the institutionalization of collegiate esports might be transforming these conditions. Drawing from 21 interviews with leaders of both esports clubs and varsity programs in North America, this article describes a two-tiered system of collegiate esports in which opportunities for cultivating greater gender diversity are found primarily among esports clubs, student-run and often precarious. Well-funded varsity programs, by contrast, remain overwhelmingly male-dominated, a disparity held in place by efforts within these programs to recruit—rather than develop—highly skilled players.

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Esports gets schooled

In the Fall of 2016, AnyKey, an organization dedicated to advocating for greater inclusivity and diversity in esports, released a white paper specifically focusing on the emerging collegiate scene. Funded by ESL and Intel in the wake of the gamergate hate campaign to address issues of inclusivity and diversity in esports, AnyKey is led by esports pioneers Morgan Romine and TL Taylor. It works with activists, academics, and esports organizations to devise strategies for making esports and its related practices (such as livestreaming and content moderation) safer and more hospitable. As one of several white papers on specific challenges and opportunities for greater equity in esports, its 2016 report on collegiate competitive gaming expressed cautious optimism that the institutional and cultural conditions of North American universities might encourage greater gender diversity in what has otherwise been a heavily masculinized and male-dominated domain. Specifically, the authors wrote that “broader campus commitments to equity, inclusion, and diversity, can provide new initiatives insights and tools to build positive value-driven programs from the ground up” (Anykey, 2016, p. 1).

In the years since this piece, the North American collegiate esports industry continues to grow, and not without controversy and concern. For instance, a 2018 piece from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reports on the efforts by the University of Akron to establish an esports program on campus, even as it rolled back support for 80 degree programs.

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The headline (“U. of Akron Will Phase Out 80 Degree Programs and Open New Esports Facilities”) clearly implies that the esports program is being purchased *at the cost* of degree programs (Pettit, 2018). Regardless of the specific economic transactions involved here, the story is indicative of how esports are increasingly being positioned by university administrators as attractive tools for recruiting and retaining students—particularly in STEM fields. Within this emerging environment, dozens of American and Canadian post-secondary institutions have established formal esports programs, often involving dedicated facilities, dozens of high-end gaming setups, scholarships for top players, salaried full-time administrators and coaches, and frequently, paid support positions. Such programs are aligned with the varsity system of intercollegiate sporting competition in North America, in which universities offer a range of support in the form of full or partial university scholarships, dedicated training staff and resources, and academic tutoring to student athletes, who then represent their universities in intercollegiate leagues and tournaments. In the United States, the National College Athletics Association (NCAA) is the largest governing body for varsity athletics and is a powerful economic and cultural presence, though as of summer 2020 it has not yet made efforts to include esports within its purview. Varsity esports programs were relatively new when we carried out this study in early 2019, though they exist alongside more long-standing esports communities on college campuses: formal and informal student clubs that organize viewing parties, meetings, and tournaments for aficionados of various competitive games. These efforts at institutionalizing esports on college campuses mark a rich payoff (often in the form of public funding for postsecondary education) for esports publishers such as Riot and Blizzard, and organizations such as Tespa and the National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE), which have been developing infrastructures for intercollegiate play for the last decade. As noted in a more recent white paper by AnyKey, this heightened interest and investment has attracted “predatory third party organizations” (paid recruiting services and data analyses) and seems to be unfolding according to the commercial logics of professional esports, while not necessarily broadening avenues for participation for women and gender minorities (AnyKey, 2019).

Our own study parallels and extends this invaluable work carried out by AnyKey, seeking to uncover in more depth the structural conditions that have developed in the intervening years between AnyKey’s two reports of inclusivity in North American college esports. We carried out an exploratory study in early 2019 in which we interviewed leaders of clubs and programs in North American universities (21 participants in total). In reporting on this study, we are guided by a fairly straightforward question: from the time of this study to our preparation of this manuscript (early 2020), what were the conditions for promoting gender inclusivity in an amateur esports scene undergoing rapid expansion and investment? Our investigation of this question, partial and provisional as it is, suggests that esports are being incorporated into the neoliberal university in its intensified investments in amenities and student services, even as public investment in postsecondary education continues to diminish under conditions of austerity—conditions that are likely to intensify following the COVID-19 pandemic, which began shortly after we finished the first draft of this article. Furthermore, our research suggests that the implications for gender inclusivity regarding esports’ growing institutionalization in post-secondary contexts are grim, as varsity esports programs often deliberately replicate the logics, tactics, and organizational structures of professional esports’ masculinized domains.

Esports, privilege, and toxic meritocracy

We've known for some time that the esports player base, especially in its upper echelons, is overwhelmingly male-dominated, and that the cultures that support many of the more popular and long-standing esports such as *Counterstrike: GO* (CS:GO), *Dota2*, and *League of Legends* (*League*) are heavily masculinized (Ratan et al., 2015; Voorhees & Orlando, 2018; Witkowski, 2016). At the same time, recent research on and activism within esports have yielded two crucial insights. First, female-identified folks *are* participating in this scene and have been, for some time: while some of this has certainly taken the peripheral and constrained forms documented a decade ago (i.e. mothers who chaperone their sons to tournaments, and promotional models and support staff; see Taylor et al., 2009), women are also, and with increasing frequency, event and community organizers, broadcast personalities, team managers, and so on (AnyKey, 2015). After all, playing is only one of the ways in which it is possible to carry out esports-related work (Taylor, 2012; Witkowski et al., 2018). Along these lines, and as applied to the collegiate scene in particular, AnyKey encourages colleges and universities to “support a range of ways to participate” for gender minorities, while also actively recruiting, cultivating and retaining female talent (AnyKey, 2016, p. 2).

The second crucial insight informing our work here is that mid-level (amateur) esports *may* offer more favorable conditions for meaningful gender diversity than professional scenes. This is in part due to the greater range of skill levels and degrees of commitment characterizing amateur esports. One of the key factors contributing to the sedimentation of male domination in professional esports is that it requires multiple overlapping privileges, typically more available to male-identified players: the ability to play without fear of harassment or violence (Consalvo, 2012; Gray, 2012), greater access to leisure time, play technologies, and contexts (Jenson & de Castell, 2018; Nakamura, 2012), the long-standing material-discursive connections between gaming and masculinity (de Castell & Bryson, 1998), and the even longer-standing ones between computation and masculinity (Hacker, 1989; Lie, 1995). These intersecting dimensions of privilege coalesce into what Chris Paul (2018) productively dubs the “toxic meritocracy” of male-dominated gaming cultures, of which esports continues to be a key incubator and contributor. Indeed, as has been documented by critical and feminist research on esports over the years, the lack of participation by female-identified players among the ranks of professional competitive gamers is frequently (mis)understood by esports players and boosters as proof of the “natural” superiority of (cis)males in the conjoined domains of technics and athletics—effectively erasing the very economic, social, and technological conditions around sustained involvement in competitive games that tend to favor men and boys. It thus remains to be seen whether the ostensibly more inclusive atmosphere and policy directives of North American universities are leading to greater diversity within a college esports terrain which—in North America at least—is going through a phase of intensive organization and professionalization. And as studies of other grassroots esports communities indicate (Taylor et al., 2009), professionalization often precisely means a narrowing, along predictably hegemonic lines, of who gets to play, and how.

Description of study

In this paper, we gesture at some of the main insights from 21 semi-structured interviews with collegiate esports leaders from post-secondary institutions across the United States

and Canada. Participation was solicited via social media posts, professional networks, and snowball sampling, and interviews (30–60 min in length) were conducted over Skype or via telephone between January and June 2019. Each interviewee was involved in a leadership position of an esports club or program at a particular university; 13 were undergraduate students, three were in faculty positions, and six were in salaried, non-faculty positions (one of these was also an undergraduate at the time of the interview; hence the mismatched total). The interview included questions about the organizational structure and history of esports on the participant's campus, their own involvement, how participants understand “diversity,” and whether and how they see it enacted in their own institutional esports setting. Interviews varied in length between 30 and 60 min; recordings were transcribed and the transcriptions were anonymized. We did not follow a strict coding procedure for analyzing interview transcripts, but collaboratively developed the following analytical framework through re-reading transcripts, discussing what we understood as their key themes, and consulting existing literature on esports, professionalization, and gender.

The college esports terrain: a two-tiered system

While not comprehensive, our interviews with eight leaders of esports varsity programs and 13 esports club leaders point to a consistent set of differences between these two forms of collegiate esports governance: a two-tiered system of esports organization in post-secondary contexts that seems to have profound implications for gender inclusivity. To put it glibly, clubs continue to carry out the work of forming esports communities, and are still where we are most likely to find the most diversity (in terms of both skill and background), but varsity programs are where the money's going. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we found greater support for gender inclusivity among clubs, where the stakes for instant success are not as high. In what follows, we compare these two tiers in terms of their leadership structures and access to resources, including space and technology. Following this broad characterization, we delve into specific mechanisms governing efforts toward promoting (or dismissing) greater gender inclusivity, as reported by our participants.

Varsity programs: institutionalizing esports culture

The varsity esports programs whose leaders we interviewed feature dedicated training facilities, scholarship opportunities (either full or partial), and full-time administrative support. These varsity programs vary in size from 22 players to 50 (typically far less than in esports clubs, which often exceed 100 members), and usually field teams in multiple games: the most common being League and *Overwatch*. Following a broader trend in esports varsity programs, the universities represented in our study are mostly small, U.S.-based, and IT and/or STEM-focused; two of the programs operate as the only varsity athletics program at their respective schools, both of which are small, private, STEM colleges. Administrators view esports as a compelling way to showcase their school's purposeful branding efforts as a STEM-focused and technology-intensive postsecondary institution. RCE2, for instance, considers varsity esports at his STEM school “a very easy sell” and one that “was actually received very well” when it was pitched to the president of his university by local third party organization wishing to partner up and build an esports

program. His school has since announced a Bachelor's degree in "esports management." In this regard, STEM and esports are seen as a "natural" fit, with varsity programs often preceding and paving the way for degree programs in esports management. This is especially (though by no means exclusively) the case among the smaller STEM-focused universities and colleges discussed in our study, which, as we explore below, has definite implications for gender inclusivity (or lack thereof).

The varsity program leaders we spoke to collectively held a wide number of responsibilities, usually shared among a small team of paid staff—what one participant called the "20 billion hats when you work in esports." These include liaising with university leadership and sponsors, managing training space, recruiting players, coaching teams, organizing scrimmages and tournament travel, and resolving interpersonal issues between players. Many of these participants have backgrounds in the semi-pro or pro scenes of particular games; RCE6, for instance, played *StarCraft II* semi-professionally in South Korea, and RCE1 was a professional *League* player, on his way to a head coaching position before being recruited by the university at which he now coaches. Most of these participants are full-time and/or salaried employees, often with regular access to university leadership. While their ages vary, all but one are male, and all but one are white. All of the varsity programs these participants described boast exclusive training facilities ("esports arenas"), including high-end computers, peripherals, and gaming chairs. Typically, space and scholarships are provided by university administration, while equipment and travel might either be provided by the university and/or through sponsorship arrangements with tech companies such as iBUYPOWER. Some universities feature additional esports infrastructure such as broadcasting booths and screening rooms. In some instances, the varsity program and its resources are later integrated into an esports management curriculum. Indeed, in what seems a consistent pattern, the schools offering degrees in esports—almost all of which are esports management—began with varsity programs before introducing esports-related academic offerings. The institutional positioning and staffing of these programs is certainly a ripe area for further critical consideration.

With great resources come great expectations. With no broader guidelines or policies to regulate students' involvement in varsity esports, program leaders expect fairly intensive time commitments of their players, describing schedules involving 15–20 hours of practice time a week, in addition to mandatory meetings with physical trainers, team psychiatrists, and team nutritionists; one program mandates a weekly yoga class for players. And this is just scheduled "contact time"; one participant described an unwritten expectation for players to put in many more hours, individually, working on their skills, much like a traditional college athlete's "going in and shooting free throws on your own." Such is the burden on these programs to produce competitive teams—to see a return on investment—that some participants, notably RCE1 and RCE6, described shifting recruitment strategies away from high school graduates and toward professional players who may be tiring of the high turnover and burnout rate characteristic of the more high-profile esports pro scenes (specifically, but not exclusively, *League*). Given just how male-dominated these pro scenes are, a shift in recruitment in which varsity rosters get filled with ex-pros—a strategy championed, notably, by two former professional players—would further produce the same intensified gender disparity as professional esports.

Esports clubs: diversity and liminality

If varsity programs are characterized by connections to both university athletics (training facilities, scholarships, support staff) and professional esports (a traffic in players to and from the professional scenes, an emphasis on many of the same high-profile games), esports clubs share more in common with other extracurricular collegiate pursuits. They are frequently framed by the 13 club leaders we spoke with as places to meet other esports enthusiasts, and play face-to-face “friendlies” (emphasizing camaraderie and stakes-free learning) with fellow students. These participants represented a much more heterogeneous range of post-secondary institutions; everything from large, public research schools to private liberal arts colleges. Likewise, club leaders help oversee involvement in a much more heterogeneous range of games, as they are not bounded by publisher support or by trends in the professional scene the way varsity programs are. Certainly *League* and *Overwatch* were popular among clubs, but also *Smash*, *Heroes of the Storm*, and many other games that have never had a particularly strong professional scene. Student clubs play a vital role in North American collegiate life, providing students with community and belonging around shared interests and identities; in the stories we heard from participants, and in our own experiences (both authors are supervisors of esports clubs), this is very much the role that esports clubs can, and often do play on university campuses.

Following the conventions of the North American student club system more generally, which subsists almost entirely through volunteer labor, all of the club leaders we spoke to carry out their organizational work for free. Club leaders are responsible for (among other things) maintaining communications with members, faculty supervisors, and other clubs; planning activities and events; and organizing fundraising, often leaving little time to play games (Taylor & Hammond, 2018). They carry out this work often with only intermittent support from their designated faculty advisor (where such a position exists). This means they are often left to navigate the convoluted bureaucracies and hierarchies of their schools on their own time, and with little institutional knowledge or agency. For the majority of club leaders in our study, this institutional liminality manifests most directly in an inability to find consistent space to hold club meetings and events. Indeed, one club leader noted with frustration a situation in which esports leaders of a well-supported varsity program at a public university refused to provide space for the school’s large esports club.

In the following sections, we unpack how these differing institutional conditions between programs and clubs intersect with the ways participants talk about and (in some cases) work toward gender diversity in their respective organizations.

Attempts at inclusivity

Before delving into how participants spoke of gender diversity in their organizations, we think it important to note that these discussions were characterized by different affects when talking with male-identified and female-identified participants, in addition to yielding different perspectives. Navigating questions of diversity with male participants was a challenge throughout the interview process; answers sometimes proved to be short and perfunctory, regardless of when and how they were asked, and particularly with regards to questions about whether there have been any incidents of harassment in the club or

program. Simply reading the transcripts, one might take this to mean that diversity is not an issue, but we routinely sensed unease and discomfort from male participants when discussing questions related to diversity and inclusivity in esports, whether talking with program or club leaders. For instance, even as both male and female-identified participants answered “no” to whether they had seen problematic incidents stemming from racial/gender/sexual identity, male participants’ responses were terse and defensive, whereas our few female participants offered expansive commentary as to how such incidents had been avoided.

In what follows, we take up the substantive insights from our discussions around inclusivity, organized around racial inclusivity; formal policies and the management of interpersonal conflict; and other explicit attempts (or the lack thereof) to address gender disparities.

Racial inclusivity, sort of

Based on participants’ responses, there is a fair degree of racial diversity among collegiate esports athletes in their programs, particularly as reported by participants from schools in urban centers. In some instances, participants told us about outreach efforts explicitly oriented around race and ethnicity, particularly in varsity programs. RCE14, from a Canadian school with a large Indian population, had his team organize a *PUBG Mobile* tournament, since many Indian students who are not otherwise interested in PC-based esports were drawn to the game for its mobile platform. Similarly, RCE6 reported that his program set up an *NBA2K* event in partnership with the multicultural student union, “to kind of reach to marginalized youth.”

While varsity teams cement player skill as the most important criteria for recruitment, many programs engaged in some kind of competitive gaming-related community outreach. As seen in the preceding examples, this sometimes comes in the form of hosting events for player communities normally left at the margins of esports, and such events are framed as opportunities for public relations, rather than recruitment. Returning to RCE14, he characterized such attempts as his program’s *PUBG Mobile* tournament as follows:

We’re obviously like welcome to anyone playing with trying out, but we’re obviously all about getting the best people who try out. So if someone’s just not good, they’re not good. Right? Like there’s only so much we can do to include them. If we had like out of nowhere, like five LGBTQ insane *CS:GO* players come out, like they would just take over the team. It’s just the way it is. Like it’s all we’re all about like skill level I would say. And any opportunity we can include people we try, which is why we have like events where people can play casually or whatever. But that’s as far as that goes.

At work here is a conscious acknowledgment that pre-existing competencies in established esports trump all other considerations when populating varsity teams—operationalizing the “toxic meritocracy” that deems such learned competencies as natural properties of male bodies rather than the result of entrenched cultural, economic, and technological privileges (Paul, 2018). In such conditions, efforts at inclusivity are positioned as the work of clubs and/or to more casual gaming events hosted as community outreach efforts by varsity programs. Notably, we heard far more about race-based efforts of outreach than about gender-based attempts; even to the extent that such events function less to diversify

varsity programs themselves and more to increase the profile of the program, gender takes a back seat.

The “don’t be a crappy person” policy

Formal mechanisms such as a Code of Conduct and a Safe Space policy can be instrumental in mitigating against these gender disparities (AnyKey, 2016, 2019). Several participants we talked to, whether affiliated with a club or a varsity program, made note that their school had some form of boilerplate charter in existence, with language provided by the university that requires groups to “accept” individuals regardless of background. Such documents are often mandated in order for groups to get official club status with the university; official student club status is, in turn, a requirement for participating in the higher-profile intercollegiate esports organizations such as Tespa and CLoL. But while declarations of inclusivity may be an administrative necessity, we saw a range of responses indicating how Codes of Conduct, Safe Spaces policies, and similar documents were actually used by varsity programs in practice—reflecting Sarah Ahmed’s trenchant critique of inclusivity and diversity policies in post-secondary contexts more generally (Ahmed, 2012).

One frequent response, perhaps the most widespread, is to regard inclusivity policies—where present—as a bureaucratic necessity, both for clubs and programs. As RCE14 puts it,

We have a player contract players must sign and in there it’ll state a bunch of different rules and obviously included in it is respect the players, respect to people around you, stuff like that. I don’t know exactly what’s in it, but I know that that type of language is in there.

RCE2, also with a varsity program, nodded to their inclusivity policies in vague terms, saying “generally I’d say it goes by the rule of don’t be a crappy person to start. That covers a lot of just video game stuff in general.” Similarly, when asked about explicit rules governing acceptable language, RCE7 said,

We very well might because I know you have to write up a constitution in order to have a club. But I’m unfamiliar with what it might be. We’ve never really had to look into that because we haven’t had an incident yet.

RCE16 echoes this sentiment by saying their club has a charter that was drafted while applying to be a club, formally, with the school, which, “did cover that they were accepting of diverse groups and individuals, as well as considered a welcoming environment to any background.” Often accompanying this approach are vague expressions of what sorts of behavior is (dis)allowed, boiling down to “don’t be a crappy person” but very rarely making explicit any references to categories of oppression. In contrast to this “we have rules but I don’t know what’s in them / don’t be a jerk” approach, some participants have outright avoided such policies. RCE15, for instance, argued

the need to label your club as a safe space in and of itself is too much. I think it’s overbearing and I think that people should be able to enter the space as a club and feel safe without being explicitly told so.

Almost all participants reported that they had not seen incidences of interpersonal conflict, particularly stemming from differences in race / gender / sexual identity.

Rather than see this as evidence that bureaucratically necessitated Codes of Conduct are doing their job uniformly across clubs and programs, the relative absence of interpersonal conflict might instead speak to the mollifying pressures that shared physical space exerts on what are otherwise characterized as toxic online game cultures (Taylor & Hammond, 2018). It is just as likely that the lack of interpersonal conflict, particularly among varsity teams, might also stem from the relative gender *homogeneity* within these programs. Perhaps there are no interpersonal conflicts relating to gender difference because there *are* few such differences; as our participants working in varsity programs told us, almost all players in their programs are cis-men. Because of this, all have likely benefited from the “patriarchal dividend” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Voorhees & Orlando, 2018), associated with digital gaming. They have probably never had their intensive participation in gaming culture questioned or threatened (at least not by fellow players), nor had their skill or motives undermined on account of their gender identity. At least, this was the compelling theory offered to us by one participant, who said “one of the reasons why you may not have a lot of issues is so many teams don’t have women or don’t have marginalized players on them.”

Whether through treating inclusivity policies as bureaucratic necessities or avoiding them altogether, the end result is the same: most of the programs and clubs we heard about have little in the way of *actionable, explicit* Safe Space policies and/or Codes of Conduct, even while feminist games activists and scholars emphasize the necessity, and effectiveness, of making such policies explicit in the long shadow of the gamergate hate campaign (and numerous other incidences of bigotry, marginalization, and harassment in contexts of game production and play; see Clark-Parsons, 2017; Lo, 2018; Massannari, 2015). This makes instances in which they are visible all the more compelling. One such approach is articulated by RCE2 and RCE9, both of whom work for varsity programs that prominently display Code of Conduct and Safe Space guidelines on the walls of their esports arenas. In this way, players and staff can physically reference these posters when encountering (or preventing) toxicity and harassment. Likewise, RCE11 and RCE17, both female-identified club leaders, mentioned that their club’s policies are presented to members upon accessing the group’s Discord server, instead of being buried among other bureaucratic documentation (for instance, on a university website).

Gender-(non)inclusive practices

As with the scarcity of attempts to foreground inclusivity policies, we heard of few attempts at proactively engaging participants of gender diverse (i.e. non-male-identified) backgrounds. The most obvious mechanism for doing so is through recruitment. Here, it is important to note the stark contrast between what “recruitment” means for varsity programs versus esports clubs. For a club, recruitment entails talking to classmates and peers, inviting friends, setting up a table at the school’s student organization fair, and having a continuously updated online presence. The target population is students who already attend the school. Newer, fledgling clubs such as RCE7’s and REC17’s share an attitude that growth is vital for their clubs; anyone who is remotely interested is more than welcome in their group, regardless of skill level, what games they play, or how invested they are in esports. An emphasis on competition and mastery is tempered by a desire to grow the club; as RCE9 expressed, “I think the group’s goal is to create a positive

community where people can play not against each other, but with each other, and try to make sure that the entire group can enjoy themselves and improve.” In this way, the toxicity often associated with masculinized competitive gaming cultures is offset by a desire for belonging within what is often a socially and emotionally challenging post-secondary experience. Indeed, the informal nature of many clubs we heard about bend them toward a more gender-inclusive atmosphere than among varsity programs, even when no explicit efforts at inclusivity are in place among club leadership. One example here was provided by RCE16, who manages an esports club at a private U.S. liberal arts school. He says he “stayed out of the politics” of promoting inclusivity, but nonetheless noted that inclusivity happened without his intervention, as “female players advertised their female teams” (thus, it should be noted, letting his female peers shoulder the work of “politics”).

Not surprisingly, then, clubs have a greater degree of gender diversity than varsity programs, even in the absence of explicit recruitment goals or policies. In an increasingly crowded and competitive varsity scene, skill trumps all other considerations. The perspectives of RCE2, who coordinates a program at a small private school in the U.S., are insightful here:

We don't have any women on our team and I've gotten a lot of flack about that and one of the reasons is ... we had 550 recruits our first time doing it, and out of that only 10 were women ... So when you are recruiting three or four people out of 550 and only 10 of them are women the chances of a woman making it are actually pretty low, just like anybody else. So I'm very open to having them or very open to having underrepresented groups, but they also do need to make the guidelines that everybody else does too.

He is “very open” to female players, but very few apply, and none are good enough to make the cut; it's out of his hands. This notion of a meritocracy based on and regulated by “objective” criteria such as the quantifiable skill ranking generated by most contemporary esports is, of course, very familiar territory for those studying the lack of female participation in esports more broadly, or for that matter, women in almost all games industries and cultures.¹ Moreover, participants made it clear that they regard “tokenism” to be as problematic as a lack of diversity—as if tokenism were the only realistic alternative to systematic gender exclusion. We should point out that throughout our discussions of inclusivity, male-identified participants occasionally pointed to women in positions of leadership in their organization and/or as players; one participant mentioned the presence of a “lady gamer” on one of his varsity program's teams. In the kind of climate that sees a “lady gamer” as a sign of progress, avoiding “tokenism” does come across as a sign of a progressive and inclusive approach. But in sports parlance, that's a pretty low bar.

In total, across the 21 combined clubs and programs, we heard of only one recruitment effort intentionally geared toward women. RCE9's varsity program at a public university in the U.S. is proactive in their efforts to make women feel welcome, safe and included in the landscape of esports, in a way that makes them exceptional within the context of this study. This participant's program hosts co-ed camps focused on specific games like *Overwatch* and *League*, dealing with player roles as well as management and analyst positions. They also offer a female-only camp focused more exclusively on non-player roles in the esports industry. This is the most intensive and deliberate effort being made to include women, even as it plays into the expectation (not entirely unfounded given the current landscape of gendered esports labor) that the most appropriate roles for women in

esports are ancillary and organizational. Nonetheless, despite clubs being more inclusive in terms of gender, within our study, this was the only varsity program actively working toward gender diversity, and in a way that refuses the dichotomy we encountered elsewhere among varsity esports leaders between “tokenism” and the male-dominated status quo.

Implications of our study

We believe that this study, while small in scope, updates our understandings of how the conditions for gender inclusivity in collegiate esports have transformed since AnyKey drew attention to these concerns in 2016. It is worth pointing out that an initial hope for our study was to assemble into one document the efforts being made to improve conditions for the recruitment, training and retention of women in collegiate esports. What we got, instead, was a picture indicating that such efforts are few and far between. Invaluable work is being done at the club level, particularly by female-identified leaders who are operating in precarious institutional conditions, to enact real steps toward gender diversity in their organizations: the work of “politics” is being carried out by the most precarious. This comes, not surprisingly, through paying care and attention to Codes of Conduct and other inclusivity policies, and through making deliberate outreach efforts to other student groups and to marginalized populations. Such efforts earnestly operationalize the institutional and cultural structures of postsecondary education to make esports more welcoming. At the varsity level, the efforts underway in RCE9’s program to establish female-only camps seem like a crucial step toward providing women with a greater foothold in varsity programs, albeit in primarily non-player roles. Nonetheless, the challenges for meaningful gender diversity seem more pronounced than in 2016. Effort is being made, at least in some cases, to establish broader racial diversity, and in other cases, team’s ethnic and racial diversity reflects the demographic of the school’s population. These are positive signs, but it does suggest that “diversity” is being understood in one-dimensional terms.

Title IX

Title IX is the American law that mandates gender-equal resources and opportunities for all university activities. Despite it being the most obvious and (ostensibly) powerful mechanism for gender inclusivity, participants did not raise it in our interviews (with one exception, and that was to talk about the perils of “tokenism”). This may be because invoking Title IX might prove too much of a headache for the majority of varsity programs, who—at least among our participants—do not currently seem well-positioned to address their stark gender imbalances (this is to say nothing of the Trump administration’s efforts to undermine the law). Based on the outsourcing of inclusivity toward community outreach events and clubs, we might expect that if and when Title IX officers *do* take up collegiate esports in a concerted way, the response of varsity programs might be to simply point out that gender inclusivity is indeed happening, albeit through other (more precarious, less lucrative) channels such as the student club ecosystem. Given these conditions, we might expect something similar to the ways many universities currently “game” Title IX to continue to favor male sports (Mitchell, 2018): scholarships, arenas, nutritionists, and yoga classes for the boys, undersupported and underfunded clubs for everyone else.

Gender, STEMification, and the collegiate esports “gold rush”

These gender disparities are being fueled by the drive to professionalize collegiate esports through intensive investment; what one participant described as a collegiate esports “gold rush.” With higher stakes, in the form of sponsorships, media attention, and direct interest from university leadership (operating through collegiate esports’ association with STEM fields), varsity programs are eager to field winning teams. Getting top-ranked players wins out over the more risky project of actively cultivating (more diverse) talent; professionalizing collegiate esports involves reifying professional esports’ stark gender divisions. This is most clearly demonstrated in the plans of some varsity program coaches and directors we spoke with to recruit more actively from the ranks of professionals. Here, the neoliberal values of contemporary university administration seem to be winning out over postsecondary education’s historical commitments to cultivating growth and positive social change: the value of esports is precisely in its capacity to improve the university’s brand in a crowded postsecondary marketplace. In this arrangement, universities have little interest in changing the status quo of the “esports pipeline,” however unsustainable it might be in the long-term (Partin, 2019)—and as we know, this pipeline, like others in adjacent games industries (Johnson, 2018), intensifies rather than ameliorates the long-standing disenfranchisement of women and other gender minorities from gaming-related industries and opportunities.

We end this article by situating this push toward a particular kind of esports institutionalization within the broader political economies of contemporary post-secondary education in North America. Esports has long sought to manufacture, emphasize, and capitalize on its connections to professional sports, in what has been called the “sportification” of competitive gaming (Heere, 2018). The gendered politics of these attempts are obvious enough and have been well-documented. Moreover, given the exploitative relations and conditions that abound in North American collegiate sports, the “sportification” of collegiate competitive gaming might arguably play into the same logics. That said, we would suggest that “sportification” has, thus far, not been a particularly successful technique for selling universities on esports, particularly given the ambivalence of the NCAA toward competitive gaming (Hayward, 2019). At work in the picture painted to us by our participants is a slightly different logic of adoption and adaptation, as universities increasingly invest in esports programs and facilities (effectively providing the esports industry—which has long striven for profitability, despite raking in \$1 billion in 2019—with a welcome source of relatively stable and often publicly funded investment). Instead of sportification, the winning formula for selling esports to schools is “STEMification,” in which esports are positioned as a vital new strategy in the efforts of university administrators to recruit STEM talent—and by extension, flush STEM donors and grants. This STEMification is not without some empirical basis: even in our limited data set, the majority of varsity programs we learned about were either housed within or institutionally positioned alongside Computer Science (CS) departments (with their own long-standing history of gender-based exclusions; see Master et al., 2016), and CS majors are often seen as the obvious source for recruiting talent. But equally agential to this STEMification is the larger technocultural imaginary in which esports thrives: representative of how sport itself is changing to adapt to our increasingly hybridized, digitized realities (Hutchins, 2008), and held up as emblems of a country’s technological and economic superiority (Szablewicz, 2016).

Given this technological imaginary, and under extreme pressure to retain funding in an era of entrenched economic austerity for post-secondary education, investing in esports makes a certain sense, so long as we buy into the notion that esports are (or could be) to STEM fields in the twenty-first century what basketball and football have been to American universities for the last century. Esport, the thinking goes, is the “killer app” for universities hoping to offset the strangulation of public funding for postsecondary education by pivoting to STEM (like the University of Akron and its reinvention as a “polytechnic” school, as signaled by its controversial esports facilities). Investment in esports is thus part and parcel of the neoliberal university’s shift in funding priorities toward amenities and services (see, for instance, Bousquet, 2008), with the added luster of its discursive, though not always material association with STEM fields.

Disregarded here are the equally obvious and arguably more compelling, but perhaps less immediately lucrative, connections between collegiate esports and communication departments. Despite its apparent and partial STEMiness—its association with computational cultures, with the fact that it centrally involves young (male) adults who are really good at computer games—esports are, fundamentally, media productions. Competition between hyper-skilled components on a virtual terrain may be the main draw, but the apparatuses and competencies involved in producing esports as a broadcast commodity are, historically, the domain of media arts, as are numerous other vital parts of the esports industry such as journalism, event organization, and technical communication. That these fields happen to be more inclusive and more diverse (though by no means, equitable) than Computer Science underscores the need for media scholars to rethink where and how esports belongs on college campuses.

Note

1. For communication scholars concerned about issues of inclusivity in post-secondary contexts, there’s an interesting parallel here to be made between the alleged lack of top female-identified collegiate esports talent the response given by the National Communication Association, to critiques of its lack of racial diversity among its Distinguished Scholars by invoking the “meritocratic” principles of the honor; there’s just no suitable candidates of color, apparently, and hence, #CommunicationSoWhite. Both instances are characterized by a lack of attention on the part of leadership to the structural and systemic conditions that prevent deserving prospects from being deemed worthy of recognition (Chakravartty et al., 2018).

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