

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

Becky Harris

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Author: Becky Harris¹

Introduction

It all began with a patent. In 1947. Cathode Ray Tube Amusement Device, the first video game, featured oscilloscope graphics similar to World War II radar screens. As targets appeared on the screen, players maneuvered light beams in an attempt to destroy them.² Or maybe 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. It is the first electronic game to be issued a patent and did use a monitor.³ However, none of the game graphics are computer generated and no memory devices are required.⁴ Did the esports origin story spring from this humble beginning? The debate continues

Significant Events in the Development of Esports

The computer game Noughts and Crosses, also known as Tic Tac Toe, successfully integrated artificial intelligence into its gameplay a mere five years later. The graphics for Noughts and Crosses also featured an oscilloscope display. Noughts and Crosses is also considered a contender for the designation of the first video game.⁵

When William Higinbotham created what is widely thought to be the first video game, Tennis for Two, in 1958,⁶ it was the first publicly displayed computer game.⁷ Using an oscilloscope display, the game featured a side-view of a tennis court. On display as part of the Brookhaven National Laboratory's annual exhibition, Tennis for Two was extremely popular and for the duration of the three-day exhibit, hundreds of people lined up to play.⁸ After some

¹ Becky Harris is the Distinguished Fellow in Gaming & Leadership at the International Gaming Institute at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). She collaborates with regulators, academicians, and other stakeholders on a host of gaming and leadership related issues and projects. Harris is also an adjunct law professor at the Boyd School of Law at UNLV, where she teaches Gaming Law and Policy. A former Nevada state senator, she had the privilege of being named the first female chair of the Nevada Gaming Control Board.

² MoneyWeek, <https://moneyweek.com/423616/25-january-1947-the-worlds-first-video-game-is-patented>, last accessed 2023/09/08

³ Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/cathode-ray-tube-amusement-device-729579>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁴ Id.

⁵ Id.

⁶ APS, <https://www.aps.org/publications/apsnews/200810/physicshistory.cfm>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁷ Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/cathode-ray-tube-amusement-device-729579>, last accessed 2023/09/06

⁸ Brookhaven National Laboratory, <https://www.bnl.gov/about/history/firstvideo.php>, last accessed 2023/09/08; HC (History-Computer), <https://history-computer.com/tennis-for-two-complete-history/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

upgrades to the game the following year, Tennis for Two was dismantled and became a distant memory until the 1970s.⁹

The next major development in video gaming happened in Stanford University's Artificial Intelligence Laboratory in 1972. For the first time, twenty-four students competed in the Intergalactic Spacewar Olympics playing Spacewar!¹⁰ The winning prize, a subscription to Rolling Stone Magazine.¹¹ Esports tournament play became more commonplace during the late 1970s with Atari hosting the first international esports tournament for its video game version of football.¹²

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. During her career, Shaw, the first female professional video game developer, worked for Atari and Activision.¹³ 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 by moving beyond a flat oscilloscope graphic to a tiered multi-layer grid for gameplay.¹⁴ 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). Shaw paved the way for other women in a male dominated industry.¹⁵ Around the same time 3-D Tic Tac Toe was released, another influential game developer, Roberta Williams created a design for an interactive video game combining text and graphics.¹⁶

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.¹⁷ Dona Bailey, the only woman game designer at Atari in 1980, co-created the smash hit video arcade game, *Centipede*.¹⁸ With the rise of video game tournaments, during this decade The Space Invaders Championship has

⁹ APS, <https://www.aps.org/publications/apsnews/200810/physicshistory.cfm>, last accessed 2023/09/08; HC (History-Computer), <https://history-computer.com/tennis-for-two-complete-history/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

¹⁰ University of New Haven, <https://onlinedegrees.newhaven.edu/resources/infographic/history-of-esports/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

¹¹ Li, R.: Good luck have fun: The rise of esports, Skyhorse Publishing, New York, NY (2016); Techradar, <https://www.techradar.com/news/esports-everything-you-need-to-know>, last accessed 2023/09/08

¹² Esports.Net, <https://www.esports.net/wiki/esports-history/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

¹³ Centre for Computing History, <https://www.computinghistory.org.uk/det/47370/Carol-Shaw/>, last accessed 2023/09/08; Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/women-in-history-of-video-games-729746>, last accessed 2023/09/08

¹⁴ Centre for Computing History, <https://www.computinghistory.org.uk/det/47370/Carol-Shaw/>, last accessed 2023/09/08; YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AeTiYW9yiUw>, last accessed 2023/09/06

¹⁵ Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/women-in-history-of-video-games-729746>, last accessed 2023/09/08; Centre for Computing History, <https://www.computinghistory.org.uk/det/47370/Carol-Shaw/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

¹⁶ Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/women-in-history-of-video-games-729746>, last accessed 2023/09/08

¹⁷ Esports.Net, <https://www.esports.net/wiki/esports-history/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

¹⁸ Centipede happens to be the author's favorite video game. Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/women-in-history-of-video-games-729746>, last accessed 2023/09/08

gained recognition as being the first true videogame tournament. It also has the distinction of being the first videogame tournament to have significant fan engagement with 10,000 spectators in attendance.¹⁹ The 1980s also saw the birth of the internet which facilitated Netrek, a game with the capacity to host up to 16 players competing on the internet.²⁰ Anne Westfall, another female programmer and developer, created the first microcomputer-based program to structure subdivisions.²¹

While Brenda Laurel continued her pioneering work in virtual reality,²² the expansion of the internet in the 1990s helped lay the foundation for what we now call esports.²³ Games like Super Mario Bros, Tetris, and Sonic received increased visibility and game consoles became popular. Computer games like Star Craft and Age of Empires also made their appearance.²⁴ Laurel continued her revolutionary efforts by co-founding Purple Moon, one of the initial software companies devoted to creating video games for girls.²⁵ 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.²⁶ A record 2,000 entrants competed in Quake's Red Annihilation online tournament in 1997.²⁷ The prize? Quaker's lead developer's Ferrari.²⁸ Meanwhile, Laurel continued exploration into how humans interact with computers and the benefits that can be derived from that relationship.²⁹

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.³⁰ Twitch.tv created a social platform for gamers and started broadcasting esports in June 2011.³¹ Twitch was an immediate success boasting 20 million monthly visitors during its first year of operation.³² Twitch provided necessary exposure and visibility for both individual players and

¹⁹ Techradar, <https://www.techradar.com/news/esports-everything-you-need-to-know>, last accessed 2023/09/08

²⁰ 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%20own%20in%20the%2080s>, last accessed 2023/009/06; Esports.net, <https://www.esports.net/wiki/esports-history/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

²¹ Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/women-in-history-of-video-games-729746>, last accessed 2023/09/08

²² Id.

²³ Esports.net, <https://www.esports.net/wiki/esports-history/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

²⁴ Id.

²⁵ Id. and Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/women-in-history-of-video-games-729746>, last accessed 2023/09/08

²⁶ Esports.net, <https://www.esports.net/wiki/esports-history/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

²⁷ University of New Haven, <https://onlinedegrees.newhaven.edu/resources/infographic/history-of-esports/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

²⁸ Techradar, <https://www.techradar.com/news/esports-everything-you-need-to-know>, last accessed 2023/09/08

²⁹ Lifewire, <https://www.lifewire.com/women-in-history-of-video-games-729746>, last accessed 2023/09/08

³⁰ University of New Haven, <https://onlinedegrees.newhaven.edu/resources/infographic/history-of-esports/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

³¹ The Sport Journal, <https://thesportjournal.org/article/recognizing-esports-as-a-sport/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

³² University of New Haven, <https://onlinedegrees.newhaven.edu/resources/infographic/history-of-esports/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

large tournaments growing to 45 million streamers.³³ Today, Twitch has “9.7 million active users, who watch an average of 106 minutes a day, with over 2 million people streaming.”³⁴ 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.³⁵ For context, that is more viewers than the Major League Baseball World Series (14.9 million), NCAA Basketball Final Four (15.7 million), National Basketball Association Finals Game 7 (26.3 million) and the Bowl Championship Series (26.4 million).³⁶ The first million-dollar prize pools began to appear with DotA 2 International offering the largest prize pool at that time, \$33,330,09.³⁷ Computer versions of older game titles also began to be released.³⁸ The first formal collegiate esports program was offered at Robert Morris University in 2014.³⁹

As of 2022, the esports audience has reached 532 million people worldwide with more viewers expected to engage. As competitive video gameplay continues to integrate into our culture, esports viewership will only increase. The pop-culturalization and social component of live streaming and gaming has helped fuel investment and revenue in esports.⁴⁰ Total esports viewership for 2023 is estimated at 646 million with the number of monthly gamers growing to 276 million.⁴¹ Esports viewers in the U.S. are expected to climb to 34.8 million in 2026.⁴² For perspective, esports has a bigger audience than some traditional sports leagues.⁴³ The popularity of esports is further leveraged by the fact that competitions are not limited by the constraints of a brick-and-mortar facility. It is possible to watch a team compete from anywhere in the world with an internet connection.

³³ Esports.net, <https://www.esports.net/wiki/esports-history/>, last accessed 2023/09/08; The Sport Journal, <https://thesportjournal.org/article/recognizing-esports-as-a-sport/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

³⁴ The Sport Journal, <https://thesportjournal.org/article/recognizing-esports-as-a-sport/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

³⁵ My Esports Globe, <https://myesportsglobe.com/games/leagueoflegends/league-of-legends-world-championship-2013#:~:text=The%20World%20Championship%20final%20was%20watched%20on%20Twitch,watch%20their%20favorite%20teams%20win%20the%20prestigious%20championship>, last accessed 2023/09/08

³⁶ The Sport Journal, <https://thesportjournal.org/article/recognizing-esports-as-a-sport/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

³⁷ Esports.net, <https://www.esports.net/wiki/esports-history/>, last accessed 2023/09/08; University of New Haven, <https://onlinedegrees.newhaven.edu/resources/infographic/history-of-esports/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

³⁸ Esports.net, <https://www.esports.net/wiki/esports-history/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

³⁹ ADU, <https://athleticdirector.uconn.edu/articles/the-rise-of-collegiate-esports-programs/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁴⁰ Insider Intelligence, <https://www.insiderintelligence.com/insights/esports-ecosystem-market-report/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁴¹ Maryville University, <https://online.maryville.edu/blog/evolution-of-esports-industry/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁴² Insider Intelligence, <https://www.insiderintelligence.com/insights/esports-ecosystem-market-report/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁴³ Major League Baseball and Major League Soccer. Maryville University, <https://online.maryville.edu/blog/evolution-of-esports-industry/>, last accessed 2023/09/08; Insider Intelligence, <https://www.insiderintelligence.com/insights/esports-ecosystem-market-report/>, last accessed 2023/09/08; Forbes, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jamesayles/2019/12/03/global-esports-revenue-reaches-more-than-1-billion-audience-figures-exceed-433-million/?sh=68b18d681329>, last accessed, 2023/09/08

No one could have imagined that almost 70 years later, as an industry, video games or gaming, would boast a worldwide value of more than \$300 billion.⁴⁴ The global esports market is projected to grow from \$1.72 billion in 2023 to \$6.75 billion by 2030.⁴⁵ According to Forbes magazine, “Esports is fast on its way to becoming the most financially lucrative market on the planet”⁴⁶

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. Esports, or electronic sports, is a subcategory of video gaming and more properly describes professional competitive video gaming both as an activity and as a spectator activity. Similar to traditional sporting events, the crowd gathers to watch the competition.

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 their video game of choice. There are many types of gamers and GameDesigning.org, has identified six categories of esports players.⁴⁷ Professional competitive players fit the hardcore gamer category. In addition to the hardcore gamer designation, they can be online or armchair general gamers as well:

- The Hardcore Gamer

Hardcore gamers are described as the “ultimate gamer” constantly striving to improve and beat a personal best. Professional esports players tend to be 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 into their chosen game.⁴⁸

- The Casual Gamer

These gamers generally play for fun. As casual and hyper-casual gameplay has gained significant visibility,⁴⁹ the number of platforms, as well as gamers, in this

⁴⁴ Earthweb, <https://earthweb.com/how-much-is-the-gaming-industry-worth/#:~:text=Key%20Video%20Game%20Industry%20Statistics%202023%201%20The,to%20invest%20%247.2%20million%20in%20Singapore.%20More%20items>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁴⁵ Fortune Business Insights, <https://www.fortunebusinessinsights.com/esports-market-106820>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁴⁶ Forbes, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jamesayles/2019/12/03/global-esports-revenue-reaches-more-than-1-billion-as-audience-figures-exceed-433-million/?sh=68b18d681329>, last accessed, 2023/09/08

⁴⁷ Game Designing, <https://www.gamedesigning.org/gaming/gamer-types/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁴⁸ Id.

⁴⁹ Investopedia, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/e/esports.asp>, last accessed 2023/09/06

category has significantly increased. Casual gamers play more for the experience than for the competition.

- **The Mobile Gamer**
Mobile gamers engage with games that can be played on mobile devices like tablets and smartphones. This type of game interaction is rising across the globe and is expected to continue to do so for the foreseeable future.⁵⁰ Many casual gamers utilize mobile devices to access the platforms that host their favorite games.
- **The Online Gamer**
Online gamers enjoy the sociality of teaming up to defeat others through combined play. They appreciate the graphics and sophistication of computer-based gameplay. Online gamers also play individually.
- **The Observer**
The observer is exactly that, someone who enjoys watching esports. Twitch and YouTube provide plenty of content for observers to engage with.⁵¹ Esports can provide a sense of belonging, improve social connections and interactions, and lead to a shared sense of community.⁵²
- **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.⁵³

A common misunderstanding is that video games and esports are just for men. Most teens, meaning male and female, play video games. As early as 2008, 97% of teens between the ages of 13-17 played some form of video game, with more than half reporting that they played ‘yesterday’.⁵⁴ Though not everyone in this demographic is considered an esports player or goes on to play esports professionally, or in college, they identify with esports both culturally and socially. This connection, fostered by esports, mirrors the relationships other young people have with traditional sports.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Statista, <https://www.statista.com/topics/8199/mobile-esports/>, last accessed 2023/09/06

⁵¹ GAME DESIGNING, <https://www.gamedesigning.org/gaming/gamer-types/>, last accessed 2023/09/06

⁵² 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 2023/09/08

⁵³ Game Designing, <https://www.gamedesigning.org/gaming/gamer-types/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁵⁴ Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2008/09/16/teens-video-games-and-civics/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁵⁵ Id.

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 35.⁵⁶ Stereotypical notions that men are somehow better at esports than women are not only inaccurate but may be the very weapons used to reinforce gender inequities in esports.⁵⁷ Despite esports being a male-dominated space for now, adult women represent 31% of the video game-playing population and comprise nearly 30% of esports fans.⁵⁸ It is interesting to note that for those under 18, women make up a greater percentage of esports players and fan base than males.⁵⁹ Women are just as capable as men in competitive esports, earning professional spots on teams and competing at the same level as men.⁶⁰ 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 \$452,666.57.⁶¹

If more women under 18 are participating in and making up the esports fan base than men what accounts for the steep drop off – from 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.⁶² Gender discrimination in esports is so pervasive that some women gamers refuse to use microphones, attempt to disguise their identities, and change profiles and/or characters so as to appear neutral or masculine.⁶³

Integrity in competition goes beyond merely complying with the rules of play, “. . . True athletic integrity requires athletes to remain competitive without seeking methods of advancement that lack morals and ethics.”⁶⁴ *Fortnite* 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.”⁶⁵ 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

⁵⁶ Investopedia, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/e/esports.asp>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁵⁷ Wiley Online Library, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jcc4.12159>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁵⁸ VentureBeat, <https://venturebeat.com/esports/esports-must-deal-with-harassment-and-sexism/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁵⁹ Id.

⁶⁰ Id.

⁶¹ Esports Earnings, <https://www.esportsearnings.com/players/female-players>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁶² 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 2023/09/08

⁶³ Id.

⁶⁴ Harris, B., Holden, J., Reshaping College Athlete Sports Betting Education 47(2), 398- 450 (2021)

⁶⁵ Id.

horrifying.”⁶⁶ Identifying fear as the issue, Alixxa opined, “[women] . . . are scared to put themselves out there because they know the type of reaction they’ll receive.” Adding, “The only way to fix this issue is to hold people accountable, encouraging and supporting women who want to play at an esports level.”⁶⁷

Tired of men making excuses for her success, Team Liquid streamer Slyssa—a professional Hearthstone player declared “I’ve been accused of cheating numerous times; pro players on the scene have even claimed I’ve co-opped with male gamers.”⁶⁸ 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.”⁶⁹ 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.’”⁷⁰

Women continue to be underrepresented as both professional esports players and game developers.⁷¹ Critics claim the esports industry has been “a ‘boys’ club’ for over 30 years.”⁷² Heavily male dominated, only 16% of executive teams are women, with the executive teams of five of the top esports companies comprised of men only.⁷³ Across the industry women represent a measly 24% of the workforce.⁷⁴

Accusations have also been made that the majority of esports companies are only interested in marketing to males.⁷⁵ 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.⁷⁶

⁶⁶ Id.

⁶⁷ Id.

⁶⁸ Id.

⁶⁹ Id.

⁷⁰ Id.

⁷¹ 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 2023/09/08; BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/technology-58466374>, last accessed 2023/09/08 and FIG Strategy & Consulting, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/technology-58466374>, last accessed 2023/09/06

⁷² B2 The Business of Business, <https://www.businessofbusiness.com/articles/activision-blizzard-gaming-industry-harrasment/>, last accessed 2023/09/08 and Input, <https://www.inverse.com/input/features/data-shows-the-gaming-industry-still-has-a-pressing-diversity-problem>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁷³ Forbes, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/avivahwittenbergcox/2020/08/28/gaming-industry-please-waitgender-balance-loading/?sh=36288565d304>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁷⁴ Id.

⁷⁵ VentureBeat, <https://venturebeat.com/esports/esports-must-deal-with-harassment-and-sexism/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁷⁶ ScienceDaily, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/03/170328105908.htm>, last accessed 2023/09/08

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.⁷⁷ It's no secret that the prime demographic for video game publishers is 18-34.⁷⁸

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 often have to choose between sacrificing their artistic integrity by working for a large studio subrogating their ideas and vision to a corporation's formula for success or sweating it out as an independent game developer often lacking the very resources that are needed for success.⁷⁹

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. In August 2018, it was revealed that several senior level staff members at Riot Games engaged in harassing behaviors, including sharing jokes about rape, and sending photographs of their genitalia to female co-workers.⁸⁰ 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 rape jokes and sexist comments to pay disparities (between men and women) and limited advancement opportunities for women.⁸¹

As women and non-binary game developers and video game players achieve greater notoriety and visibility there seem to be corresponding increases in harassment and intimidation directed at them. 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. Such was the case for Zoë Quinn.⁸²

After receiving favorable reviews from mental health professionals and gaming media outlets for their game *Depression Quest*,⁸³ an unconventional video game designed to simulate

⁷⁷ 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 2023/09/08

⁷⁸ Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/189582/age-of-us-video-game-players/>, last accessed 2023/09/08; Liquid Web, https://www.liquidweb.com/insights/video-game-statistics/?irgwc=1&clickid=wCtUT8wpPxyPWcSVq9wvwnz6PUkFyFiTUeR6EWI0&iradid=735602&irpid=2003851&sharedid=EdgeBingFlow&ir=1&utm_medium=affiliate, last accessed 2023/09/08; DataProt, <https://dataprot.net/statistics/gamer-demographics/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁷⁹ The Verge, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/10/9/20903139/indie-game-developers-creators-money-funding>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁸⁰ Esports.net, <https://www.esports.net/news/industry/esports-sexual-harassment-problem/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁸¹ The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/23/style/women-gaming-streaming-harassment-sexism-twitch.html>, last accessed 2023/09/07

⁸² Quinn uses they/them pronouns.

⁸³ Daily Dot, <https://www.dailydot.com/irl/zoe-quinn-sexual-assault-alec-holowka/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

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.⁸⁴ The allegations of such and exchange have not been proven.⁸⁵

The accusations made by Quinn's former boyfriend became a flashpoint providing the kindling for backlash from the gamer community.⁸⁶ 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, Quinn's game was not fun because it was not meant to be.⁸⁷ That backlash took the form of attacks against Quinn including doxing⁸⁸ hacking into personal accounts,⁸⁹ and threats of rape and death.⁹⁰

What initially began as a personal attack against Quinn, gained momentum and ignited a movement that has come to be known as Gamergate.⁹¹ 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.⁹²

Both Anita Sarkeesian and Brianna Wu were targets of Gamergate.⁹³ Sarkeesian is a feminist media critic, who sadly, is no stranger to online harassment, having been targeted in 2012, for her contribution to a YouTube video series. The YouTube series *Tropes vs. Women in*

⁸⁴ Deadspin, <https://deadspin.com/the-future-of-the-culture-wars-is-here-and-its-gamergate-1646145844>, last accessed 2023/09/08; Vox, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/9/19/16301682/gamergate-alt-right-zoe-quinn-crash-override-interview>, last accessed 2023/09/08; ARS Technica, <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2015/03/that-life-is-over-zoe-quinn-looks-beyond-gamergate/>, last accessed 2023/09/08; International Business Times, <https://www.ibtimes.com/what-gamergate-scandal-female-game-developer-flees-home-amid-online-threats-1704046>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁸⁵ Vox, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/9/19/16301682/gamergate-alt-right-zoe-quinn-crash-override-interview>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁸⁶ International Business Times, <https://www.ibtimes.com/what-gamergate-scandal-female-game-developer-flees-home-amid-online-threats-1704046>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁸⁷ ARS Technica, <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2015/03/that-life-is-over-zoe-quinn-looks-beyond-gamergate/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁸⁸ 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 2023/09/08

⁸⁹ Time, <https://time.com/4927076/zoe-quinn-gamergate-doxing-crash-override-excerpt/>, last accessed 2023/09/07

⁹⁰ Id.

⁹¹ NBC News, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/how-zoe-quinn-took-online-trolls-trying-destroy-her-ncna813401>, last accessed 2023/09/07

⁹² 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 2023/09/07

⁹³ The Verge, <https://www.theverge.com/2017/1/27/14412594/fbi-gamergate-harassment-threat-investigation-records-release>, last accessed 2023/09/08; International Business Times, <https://www.ibtimes.com/what-gamergate-scandal-female-game-developer-flees-home-amid-online-threats-1704046>, last accessed 2023/09/08; and The Mary Sue, <https://www.themarysue.com/will-prosecutors-act-on-gamergate-death-threat/>, last accessed 2023/09/07

Video Games analyzed sexist portrayals of women.⁹⁴ Brianna Wu, a video game developer who sought to fill a void in the gaming market by designing video games for women at her female dominated company was also consumed by the backlash.⁹⁵ Like Quinn, Sarkeesian and Wu were harassed, subjected to doxing, and inundated with rape and death threats.

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.⁹⁶ After qualifying for the World of Warcraft regional tournament in 2008, a 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.⁹⁷ When she lodged a complaint against the team name, Chan was told the name was a just a joke.⁹⁸ Her experiences have left her considering whether to leave esports.⁹⁹

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.¹⁰⁰

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 offensive speech aimed at various nationalities, including accusations of employing anti-gay slurs on Twitch in 2018. The Finnish Overwatch star doubled down and directed his offensive and harassing behavior toward at least

⁹⁴ Mother Jones, <https://www.motherjones.com/media/2014/05/pop-culture-anita-sarkeesian-video-games-sexism-tropes-online-harassment-feminist/>, last accessed 2023/09/07

⁹⁵ The Huff Post, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-brianna-wu-went-from-gamergate-victim-to-congressional-candidate_n_58b5b430e4b060480e0c402c, last accessed 2023/09/07

⁹⁶ PC Gamer, <https://www.pcgamer.com/hearthstone-pro-hafu-speaks-out-about-sexist-trolling-on-twitch/>, last accessed 2023/09/07

⁹⁷ Sportskeeda, <https://www.sportskeeda.com/esports/gonna-r-pe-hafu-regionals-pokimane-quarterjade-others-react-bizzare-incident-blizzcon-2008>, last accessed 2023/09/07; Ginx.tv, <https://www.ginx.tv/en/twitch/hafu-retells-horrific-story-of-a-professional-esports-team-harassing-her-while-competing>, last accessed 2023/09/07; VoxBliss, <https://www.voxbliss.com/everything-about-hafu/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

⁹⁸ X, https://twitter.com/itshafu/status/1420472254496837632?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwrm%5E1420511789150658560%7Ctwgr%5E98226b511aacb5e14ca30689c5cf9afd7efdca9d%7Ctwcon%5Es2_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.sportskeeda.com%2Fesports%2Fgonna-r-pe-hafu-regionals-pokimane-quarterjade-others-react-bizzare-incident-blizzcon-2008, last accessed 2023/09/07; Sportskeeda, <https://www.sportskeeda.com/esports/gonna-r-pe-hafu-regionals-pokimane-quarterjade-others-react-bizzare-incident-blizzcon-2008>, last accessed 2023/09/07

⁹⁹ PC Gamer, <https://www.pcgamer.com/hearthstone-pro-hafu-speaks-out-about-sexist-trolling-on-twitch/>, last accessed 2023/09/07

¹⁰⁰ Esports.net, <https://www.esports.net/news/industry/esports-sexual-harassment-problem/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

one woman conducting interviews of esports players by making lewd comments about her body.¹⁰¹

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.¹⁰² Allegations of dating and requesting “sexual favors” from female fans, including a minor surfaced.¹⁰³ Dong-geun’s fans set up a Twitter account, [@DunggeonVictims](#) where proof of Dong-geun’s troubling behavior could be posted.¹⁰⁴ Pressure from fans led to their departure from Lunatic-Hai and Overwatch.¹⁰⁵

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 with actionable consequences being undertaken. Publicly disclosed incontrovertible proof and 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 given the authority to create rules, regulations, and policies and oversee tournaments. However, a handful of self-regulatory organizations have been established in an attempt to address particular concerns or manage some 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 in response to 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 (BEA) and Professional Esports Association (PEA) in North America. WESA is a collaboration between esports tournament organizer, ESL and 10 other esports organizations. It is engaged in creating the infrastructure necessary to sustain and magnify growth in esports through “shared values of fairness, transparency, and integrity and sharing that growth between the players, teams and leagues.”¹⁰⁶ Its stated purpose is

¹⁰¹ Id.

¹⁰² Dot Esports, <https://dotesports.com/general/news/lunatic-hai-players-suspended-4600>, last accessed 2023/09/08

¹⁰³ Yahoo! News, <https://news.yahoo.com/south-korean-overwatch-pros-suspended-183227252.html>, last accessed 2023/09/08

¹⁰⁴ Id.

¹⁰⁵ ESPN, https://www.espn.com/esports/story/_/id/19151605/from-uncrowned-kings-new-idols-lunatic-hai, last accessed 2023/09/07

¹⁰⁶ WESA, <https://wesa.gg/>, last accessed 2023/09/07

to create industry-wide standards and inclusivity. The association's goal is to be more inclusive and work more closely with game publishers. Its leadership is 100% male.¹⁰⁷

WESA has established rules and regulations concerning a code of conduct for players and teams participating in its events. Finalized in December 2017, the code of conduct includes non-discrimination (Regulation 17) and anti-harassment regulations prohibiting general harassment (Regulation 18.2) and sexual harassment (Regulation 18.3). Though it is unclear as to what would happen should a violation occur because specific sanctions and penalties are not mentioned. Regulation 21 establishes permissive standard (may) by which players or teams who fail to comply with governance decisions by WSEA or other esports bodies could be sanctioned.¹⁰⁸

BEA is a national non-profit formed to increase awareness, improve standards, promote esports, and inspire future talent in the United Kingdom. Predominately male – men hold 11 of 16 positions within the organization¹⁰⁹ – British esports is not a governing body and its efforts focus on the community at large. One of its major commissions is to provide education about esports to parents, teachers, policymakers, and the media.¹¹⁰ No regulations or gameplay guidelines can be found among its educational materials. Its efforts continue.

PEA, a collective of team organizations, was also formed in 2016. Its shared vision was to work as equals to advance the esports industry.¹¹¹ 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. PEA responded with a letter of its own reaffirming its ability to determine the events in which players could compete.¹¹² No regulations or guidelines for esports players seem to have been developed and none are posted on its website. It appears that all meaningful efforts ceased in 2017 and no information about its leadership is available.¹¹³ As of summer 2018, nine associations were affiliated with PEA.

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 an athletic regulatory organization committed to the

¹⁰⁷ WESA, <https://wesa.gg/board/>, last accessed 2023/09/07

¹⁰⁸ WESA, <https://wesa.gg/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/WESA-Code-of-Conduct-Teams-and-Players-Final-03052019-1.pdf>, last accessed 2023/09/07

¹⁰⁹ British Esports, <https://britishesports.org/meet-the-team/>, last accessed 2023/09/07

¹¹⁰ British Esports, <https://britishesports.org/about-us/>, last accessed 2023/09/07

¹¹¹ Professional Esports Association, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190703034908/http://www.proesports.org/>, last accessed 2023/09/07

¹¹² Wikiwand, https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Professional_Esports_Association#History, last accessed 2023/09/07

¹¹³ Id. and Professional Esports Association, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190703034908/http://www.proesports.org/>, last accessed 2023/09/07

well-being and success of amateur traditional sports athletes.¹¹⁴ Its substantial infrastructure governs more than 500,00 athletes.¹¹⁵ The NCAA's members are comprised of 1,098 colleges and universities and 102 athletic conferences.¹¹⁶ It has vast 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.¹¹⁷ It has created an office of inclusion and is required to comply with U.S. federal and state laws regarding gender equity. The NCAA works to establish a training and competitive environment free of gender bias.¹¹⁸ Many thought the NCAA could bring needed oversight and guidance to esports,¹¹⁹ perhaps paving the way for better governance at the professional level. When it declined to govern collegiate esports, the NCAA board articulated two reasons: first, "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."¹²⁰

Now, instead of a single body providing oversight for collegiate esports programs there are three. The Eastern Collegiate Athletic Conference¹²¹ and the National Junior College Athletic Association¹²² two of the longest-standing governing bodies both stepped up to offer a governance structure for college esports programs, organize schedules and tournaments, and hold national championships.¹²³ The National Association of Collegiate Esports, a relative newcomer, promotes the positive development of esports programs, education, the development of students through esports, and advocates for a strong institutional commitment to esports.¹²⁴ 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.

¹¹⁴ NCAA, <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2021/2/10/about-resources-media-center-ncaa-101-what-ncaa.aspx>, last accessed 2023/09/07

¹¹⁵ NCAA, <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2021/2/16/overview.aspx>, last accessed 2023/09/07

¹¹⁶ NCAA, <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2021/2/10/about-resources-media-center-ncaa-101-what-ncaa.aspx>, last accessed 2023/09/07

¹¹⁷ NCAA, <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2021/2/9/governance.aspx>, last accessed 2023/09/07 and NCAA, https://ncaaorg.s3.amazonaws.com/champion-magazine/HowNCAAWorks/AW_HowNCAAWorks.pdf, last accessed 2023/09/07

¹¹⁸ NCAA, <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2016/3/2/gender-equity-and-title-ix.aspx>, last accessed 2023/09/07

¹¹⁹ VentureBeat, <https://venturebeat.com/pc-gaming/the-ncaa-needs-to-help-college-esports-grow/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

¹²⁰ 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 2023/09/08

¹²¹ The Eastern Collegiate Athletic Conference governs at the four-year institution level.

¹²² The National Junior College Athletic Association governs at the two-year institution level.

¹²³ ADU, <https://athleticdirector.com/articles/the-rise-of-collegiate-esports-programs/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

¹²⁴ NAC Esports, <https://nacesports.org/#:~:text=NACE%20is%20a%20member%20driven%20organization%20that%20focuses,and%20a%20strong%20institutional%20commitment%20to%20the%20sport>, last accessed 2023/09/08

Professional esports could also look to 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. Gaming licenses are privileged, are not a property right, and can be limited, conditioned, suspended, or revoked.

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 their authority gaming regulators have.

In 2018, the Nevada Gaming Commission adopted the first integrity-oriented regulations for esports competitions, Regulation 22.1201, Other Events. For a sportsbook to accept a wager on an esports event, 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.¹²⁵

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

¹²⁵ Nevada Gaming Comm'n Regulation 22.1201.

protections into their rules, regulations, and tournaments as a component of integrity. Subsections (c)(6) and (c)(7) are particularly important as they could be 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 the Ohio Casino Control Commission (Commission) is considering 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.¹²⁶ Ohio law gives the Commission the authority to impose prohibitions, up to a ban on “any person whose presence in a sports gaming facility or whose participation in the play or operation of sports gaming in this state is determined by the commission to pose a threat to the interests of the state.”¹²⁷ Lifetime bans are generally reserved for issues that affect the integrity of the gambling system.¹²⁸ Though it has not yet been established if the impact of threats on athletes is considered an integrity issue, the Commission seems ready to make that determination.

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 industry is a critical first step. Currently, about a quarter of the world’s women are involved in esports.¹²⁹ Having open discussions about difficult topics such as bullying and sexual harassment can help the industry move toward the establishment of prevention policies. 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.¹³⁰ Having the fortitude to persist will be the catalyst for lasting change.

Productive Pipelines

One of the challenges esports faces is that no significant pipelines for players to transition from amateurs to professionals exist. 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

¹²⁶ 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 2023/09/07

¹²⁷ 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 2023/09/07

¹²⁸ Id.

¹²⁹ Much Needed.com, <https://muchneeded.com/esports-statistics/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

¹³⁰ VentureBeat, <https://venturebeat.com/esports/esports-must-deal-with-harassment-and-sexism/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

someone else, rather than on skill building.¹³¹ 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.¹³²

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. 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. 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.

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.¹³³ However, research from a 2019 study found that of the professional esports players, only 5% are women.¹³⁴ A 2021 sample of 196 college programs showed that men are the clear winners in esports with nearly 90% of esports scholarships going to men.¹³⁵ While some college programs are more intentional about inclusion, only 8.2% of esports players are women.¹³⁶ 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 lead to professional esports opportunities.

Another way to diversify the esports industry is to hire qualified women in esports organizations. Increasing the number of women in any establishment can open doors, bring

¹³¹ Polygon, <https://www.polygon.com/features/2019/7/11/18632716/esports-amateur-pro-players-teams-talent-process>, last accessed 2023/09/07

¹³² Nikkei Asia, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Business-trends/Life-after-esports-What-happens-when-pro-gamers-hang-up-the-joystick>, last accessed 2023/09/07

¹³³ The Conversation, <https://theconversation.com/at-colleges-nationwide-esports-teams-dominated-by-men-154793>, last accessed 2023/09/08

¹³⁴ PlayToday, <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 2023/09/08

¹³⁵ AP News, <https://apnews.com/article/esports-gender-inequality-scholarships-men-1823321276db40fea37dc8d9e5410643>, last accessed 2023/09/07

¹³⁶ The Conversation, <https://theconversation.com/at-colleges-nationwide-esports-teams-dominated-by-men-154793>, last accessed, 2023/09/08

invaluable insight, help reach marginalized communities, and offer unique perspectives for content creation. As cultures change and more women are included, they will bring the added benefits of mentorship and advocacy.

Focus on Player Well-Being

The benefits of competitive esports play are undeniable – critical thinking skills, leadership development, and experience working as a team.¹³⁷ Some research has also credited esports with providing opportunities for leadership, mental acuity, improved cognition, and problem-solving skills.¹³⁸ However, when the entire esports landscape is taken into account more needs to be done regarding player well-being.

Esports professional players are being recruited earlier and earlier. Currently the youngest esports professional player is just 7 years old.¹³⁹ It is unclear if appropriate player protections have been established for minor professional players, 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. Some areas of player well-being that should be explored include:

- Identification of any potential health risks resulting from esports training, gameplay, and competition.
- The effect of varying levels of physical fitness and stress on esports players.
- Classification of overuse injuries and how to avoid them.
- How graphics, virtual, and augmented reality environments affect esports players.
- The long-term impact of physical inactivity or prolonged sitting required by esports training and competition.
- Whether there are long-term health consequences from playing video games.

¹³⁷ Educause, <https://library.educause.edu/resources/2021/8/expanding-esports-in-higher-ed-benefits-and-guidance-for-new-esports-programs>, last accessed 2023/09/08

¹³⁸ Wilson Center, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/esports-health-and-safety-collegiate-level>, last accessed 2023/09/08 and Connected, <https://community.connection.com/how-esports-help-students-cultivate-soft-skills/>, last accessed 2023/09/08

¹³⁹ Screenrant, <https://screenrant.com/fortnite-youngest-professional-player-8-years-old/>, last accessed 2023/09/07

- Mental health issues resulting from competitive video gaming, including burnout, cyber bullying, intimidation, discrimination, and addiction.
- The psychosocial and cognitive effects of esports competition.
- Creation of minimum age requirements for professional esports players.
- Gender gaps and differences regarding esports recruitment, training, and competition.¹⁴⁰

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 owes a lot of its groundbreaking game development and programming as well as advances in technology to women.

Women currently comprise almost half of all video game players and are the dominate gender playing video games. The women of the rising generation make up a greater percentage of esports players and fan base than males. Yet, women are mistreated, abused, and harassed – even more so if they find success. While the women who have paved the way have suffered much, the road ahead still appears to be filled with hazards.

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 is the next critical step 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 after more than 75 years the video game and esports industry create an environment of inclusiveness, acceptance, belonging, parity, and safety.

¹⁴⁰ Some, but not all, of the suggestions for promoting and assessing a safer esports player environment were taken from NIH National Library of Medicine, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7749245/>, last accessed 2023/09/07

Key Take Aways

- What started out as an experiment whether a cathode ray tube amusement device or few lines of computer code has transformed into a multi-billion-dollar industry featuring highly competitive tournaments, diverse game offerings, hundreds of esports teams, 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. They represent almost 50% of consumers. 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 gaming regulators for guidance.
- Solutions include engaging in collaborative efforts, developing productive pipelines, establishing diversity focused recruiting standards, and emphasizing player well-being,