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TOM LEGIERSE AND MARIA RUOTSALAINEN

Abstract

Branding competitive gaming as esports, part of a process known as sportification, has contributed greatly to the wider acceptance of competitive gaming as legitimate leisure and professional activity. However, the social effects of sportification remain largely overlooked in current research. In this paper we argue that in order to understand the normative and formative social effects of sportification of competitive gaming, we need to forefront the bodies in esports. Building on scholarship that highlights inequities in (competitive) gaming and esports, we identify four ways in which bodies are made relevant in esports: 1) the obscuring of the playing body and establishment of an idealized and normative masculine athletic body; 2) the 'visibility' of women's bodies as deviant from the norm; 3) the invisibility (and impossibility) of disabled bodies through design (embodied nature of design of both games and gameplay); and 4) the embodied nature of infrastructural issues that cannot be reduced to materiality. We argue for a deconstruction of esports as a social practice that forefronts bodies. Understanding exactly how bodies become relevant will allow us to deconstruct the structural conditions of participation that dictate which bodies are possible or not in esports and move towards more equitable esports practices.

Keywords

Esports; competitive gaming; bodies; equity

In this essay, we will call for a more critical engagement with framing competitive gaming as 'esports' and draw attention to how bodies are situated within this framing. To make this call, we will discuss what it means for competitive gaming to be understood as a sport, engaging with the scholarly debate on the sportification of competitive gaming. We will highlight how the sportification of esports is shaping and hiding the structural conditions for participation. In order to do this, we will pay

particular attention to bodies. We argue that by deconstructing esports as social practice (Pfohl, 1985), by scrutinizing the ways esports normalise certain bodies over others, these structural conditions can be unveiled. We trace the ways bodies are depicted, recognized, and situated within esports. We continue by arguing that the ways in which different kinds of bodies are rendered visible or invisible in esports is central to these structural conditions. Furthermore, we identify that current research in esports lacks a sufficient understanding of exactly how bodies become (and are made) relevant. In this light, we call for research on esports to centre on bodies in order to deconstruct the structural conditions of participation (see also Taylor, 2021). Before we make this argument, we will first turn toward exclusion in games more broadly and the sportification of competitive gaming in the following section.

Exclusion in games

Playing videogames has become a popular past-time and mainstream activity. This has not, however, solved the social issues gaming is ripe with. These issues of inequity in gaming are well documented by gaming scholars. Especially since the events of #Gamergate in 2014, increasingly more academic work has highlighted the normative construction of the gamer identity. Young, white, middle-class men are generally regarded as the default gamer (Witkowski, 2018), and while some other groups—such as young Asian men—are partially acknowledged as rightful participants, they are continuously othered, feminised, and fetishized (Zhu, 2018). Indeed, studies have shown how groups of men make an effort to defend ‘their’ space from unwanted ‘outsiders’ (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). #Gamergate can be regarded as the most notorious example of this. What started as a harassment campaign quickly developed into a battleground over gamer identity and who gets to consider themselves part of game cultures (Mortensen, 2018). However, even ten years after these events, game cultures continue to be troubled with issues of sexism, racism and other forms of harassment and exclusion (Cote, 2020; Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022; Gray, 2012).

These issues have always been tied to bodies. It is certain *kinds* of bodies that struggle to belong in gaming spaces, whilst other kinds of bodies are privileged. Amanda Cote (2020) shows how narrow definitions of stereotypical gamer identity categories are deeply ingrained in the social fabric of gaming spaces. Players are aware of what makes a ‘real’ gamer, and these normative ideals inform how they position themselves within gaming spaces (Cote, 2017; Cote, 2020; Gray, 2020; Kivijärvi & Katila, 2022). In a similar vein, Kishonna Gray has highlighted “the inescapable chains constantly binding marginalized populations to stereotypical frames and limited narratives” (2020, p. 36). The ‘real gamer’ is not only a particular kind of man, but also plays a particular type of games, in a particular kind of way (Kirkpatrick, 2017). This is compellingly illustrated by Nakamura (2009a; 2009b), who shows that not only the avatar of a player, but also the *imagined* body of the player based on their way of

playing matters for how others interact with them in-game. Additionally, Young (2014) observes that the LAN-parties he attended drew in mostly white men, and 'others' are often stigmatized, othered or even literally excluded from participation. Beyond social exclusion, LAN-party aesthetics are traditionally dark rooms, making these spaces potentially even more unsafe for minorities. Other ways in which the 'real gamer' is established include upholding a dichotomy between 'hardcore' and 'casual'. In this dichotomy, hardcore gaming is associated with men and casual gaming with women, regardless of evidence that complicates these stereotypical notions (Zaremba, 2012). Casual gaming is disregarded as unskilful, low intensity, and uncommitted (Blamey, 2022). This dichotomy is most often applied to sideline women, who are by default not recognized as legitimate participants based on their assumed mode of gameplay and their supposed lack of skills (Ratan et al. 2015; Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018). As a result, women often deal with discriminatory and exclusionary behaviour directed toward them, ranging from insults to sexual harassment, and aimed at discouraging their (critical) participation (Butt & Apperley, 2018).

Esports are not an exception to this, and many of the issues we see present in gaming are likewise present in esports (Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022; Schelfhout et al., 2021; Taylor & Stout, 2020; Wilson et al., 2024), even though esports is sometimes considered as the "antidote" to the toxic gaming cultures, especially in public discussion (Cumming, 2021; Ruotsalainen & Välisalo, 2020). However, as we argue, issues in esports should not be seen as mere extensions of issues that are present in videogames, nor should a move from competitive gaming toward esports be seen as the solution to all problems persisting in gaming. Rather, structuring and branding competitive gaming as esports—a process known as sportification—brings with it and transforms a number of issues deriving from both videogames and sports. This becomes especially relevant when we look at the relevance of bodies, which we will come back to later in this article. As such, we should zoom in on how the branding of esports as separate from *and* similar to gaming and sports in some ways affects its social organisation.

The sportification of competitive gaming

Even though games have been played competitively since the first iterations, it has only been since the early 2000s that the term esports has become synonymous with (professional) competitive gaming. One of the earliest known uses of the term esports dates back to 1999, to the press release on the launch of OGA, Online Gamers Association (Wagner, 2006). During this period, competitive gaming grew from merely a (looked down upon) leisure activity into an industry in which its participants *could* earn a living. Drawing parallels between sports and competitive gaming has become a key strategy through which esports has attempted to become a mainstream (sporting) activity. Emblematic of this approach is Riot Games' promotional video *Our Game* (League of Legends, 2017). In this video, the argument is made that *League of Legends'* professional competitive players should be considered esports

athletes, ending with the following text: “not just a sport, our sport”. Local and national governments are also increasingly expanding their legislation for sports and athletes to include competitive gamers, recognizing esports as an official sport. This for example provides professional competitive gamers with the opportunity to apply for athlete visas and allows esports organizations access to funding earmarked for sports.¹ The recently announced Olympic Esports Games, to be hosted in Saudi-Arabia from 2025 onwards, further underscores esports events moving toward becoming mainstream ‘sporting events’.

By adopting the term esports, competitive gaming is drawn out of the sphere of regular gaming through a process typified as sportification. Pargman and Svensson argue that esports are following a trajectory toward becoming a legitimate sport compared to many sports, which includes “standardization, specialization, rationalization, regimentation, professionalization and other criteria” (2020, p. 32), following Guttman’s (1978; cited in Pargman & Svensson, 2020) framework for the sportification of leisure activities. Esports have adopted and mimicked competitive formats, rules, and regulations from sports (Reitman et al., 2020; Summerley, 2020; Steinkuehler, 2020). Also, the production and broadcasting of esports events closely follows that of sports (Turtiainen et al, 2020) and esports is also a branding tool for competitive gaming. What is missing from Pargman and Svensson’s (2020) analysis of esports’ sportification, but hypothesized by Summerley (2020), is that through adopting and mimicking the organizational structures of sports, esports might also have to adopt the power structures that are fundamentally built on inequalities. Taylor (2021) takes this argument one step further, arguing that “esports do not have a gender problem, it is a gender problem”, meaning that esports cannot be seen as separate from gendered issues because they are an epitome of these issues.

The sportification of esports functions to reproduce two problematic facets that are emblematic to sports: masculine, even misogynistic culture, and banal nationalism, which itself is deeply embedded in the construction of modern hegemonic masculinity (Ruotsalainen, 2022). Thus, far from solving the issues of exclusion, sexism, and racism that are part of game cultures, sportification of competitive gaming brings with it its own bag of issues, and at worst runs the risk of hiding or legitimising the existing issues.

Although sportification has contributed greatly to the wider acceptance of competitive gaming as legitimate leisure and professional activity (Ruotsalainen & Välisalo, 2020), social issues continue to threaten the sustainability of the industry (Nyström et al., 2022). Beyond some notable expectations (Taylor, 2021; Ruotsalainen, 2022;

¹ For instance, the Finnish Esports Association was accepted as part of Finnish Olympic Committee in 2016, making it eligible for some of the funding earmarked for sports (see Finnish eSports Federation, 2016). Similarly, Germany officially recognizes esports as a ground to issue visas for professional players, as can be read on p. 522 of the *visumhandbuch: visumhandbuch-data.pdf* (auswaertiges-amt.de).

Witkowski & Harkin, 2024), the social effects of branding competitive videogaming as sport through sportification seem to be largely overlooked in current research on esports. What is meant when we apply the term esports is seldomly defined, and if it is, the definition rarely touches upon its social sides. Similarly, the ways in which sportification does not solve issues of inequity present in game cultures, but in many ways compounds them, continues to not be adequately addressed. We will come back to what this means for our understanding of bodies in esports later in this paper.

The myths of inclusive potential and meritocracy

Scholars have been optimistic about esports' potential to be a vehicle for social change and to become potentially more inclusive than sports spaces (Hayday & Collison, 2022; Nyström et al., 2022; Reitman et al., 2020; Summerley, 2020; Steinkuehler, 2020). This seems largely influenced by views on gaming as spaces in which out-of-game identities are less relevant or irrelevant, as well as a lesser emphasis on physical athleticism. However, we still see that esports and gaming spaces are predominantly occupied by (white, young) men, with misogyny and exclusionary practices being part of the daily, 'ordinary' experiences of its participants. We argue that a focus on esports' inclusive potential distracts us from both the critical examination of the undercurrents that enable inequalities to take shape and persist as well as the way branding competitive gaming as sports normalises these inequalities. Assuming a potential for esports to be inclusive is to assume that there is inherently something about games that makes them inclusive, but as many scholars have shown, game design is not neutral and often contributes to the reproduction and reinforcement of offline social structures (Kirkpatrick, 2017; Paul, 2018). It also carries the assumption that all that should really matter is how good you are at the game. Arguably this should be the case, but we cannot let our desires misguide our analysis. To assume that esports have potential is to assume that the conditions for this potential to be fulfilled are there. The empirical evidence to make this assumption is lacking.

Additionally, the notion of this inclusive potential allows for an understanding of the current absence of marginalized competitors as a lack of skill development. Following this logic, issues of exclusion in esports can simply be solved by providing marginalized competitors with the right opportunities. As if once marginalized competitors become (even) better players, the current issues that cause their exclusion disappear. This logic seems to be deeply embedded in how the current commercial women's and gender minority leagues are constructed: rather than addressing the structural issues deeply entwined with the construction of current esports, separated, but structurally similar, competitive space are created for those targeted with harassment and exclusion in esports, with the rhetoric of their aim becoming eventually obsolete (Ruotsalainen et al., 2022). However, we should be cautious not to present women and gender minority leagues and tournaments as the solution to fix

it all. In a study of the sportification of skateboarding and its effect on female skateboarders, Dax D'Orazio (2021) shows how sportifying and mainstreaming skateboarding has opened up opportunities to female skateboarders who have been marginalised in the community, which has had a strong, subcultural ethos. However, even with new opportunities, women continue having extensively smaller price pools than men and struggle to get sponsorships. This underscores that more opportunities do not necessarily translate to equality, by any means.

Furthermore, given the binary logic of gender in which most institutionalised sports operates, structurally separating marginalized competitive gamers under a logic of development runs the risk of eventually becoming a justification for segregation rather than inclusion, essentializing the difference rather than situating them as outcomes of structures. As organizations like AnyKey argue, women and gender minority initiatives are productive only if these initiatives are paired with structural efforts to improve equity (AnyKey, 2017). Otherwise, creating a separate space for marginalized gamers to compete with a fraction of the resources (monetary, material, and support) will only further perpetuate existing inequalities. As Ahmed (2017) argues, different types of institutions do violence also via the practices of inclusion, as support is given to some marginalized groups rather than all (p. 264). In this vein, also those who receive support in the name of inclusion end up providing labour to these structures. We should therefore be wary that at worst, women and marginalized gender leagues can end up further legitimizing exclusionary practices. Additionally, Ruotsalainen and Friman (2018) argue it is not enough to address a lack of women's participation in esports at the professional level, as the problems women face start considerably earlier and are deeply embedded to everyday play practices and player communities. Presenting the structural inequalities in esports as a matter of deficiencies does not allow for a critical reflection on the strategic exclusionary efforts, and instead puts the responsibility for change with those who are most disadvantaged in the current system.

The issues described above offer emblematic examples of what Nakamura (2017), inspired by Berlant (2011), calls gaming's cruel optimism. As noted by Taylor (2021), it presents success in esports as something that can ultimately be earned if one works hard enough, even though the reality for many marginalised gamers is that they are evaluated not just based on their merits, but rather on their identities. Paul (2018) discusses the concept of 'toxic meritocracy' to describe similar observations: the false assumption prevalent in gaming that everyone has the same opportunities and success is merely dependent on hard work. These assumptions, however, hide and obscure the different challenges non-normative bodies and marginalised players face. Similar dynamics have been observed in sports. Sports carry the inherent illusion that the best will always be on top and that it is through a mix of sheer willpower and talent that one achieves greatness. Messner (1988; 2007) argues that the dominant position of men in sports is far from self-evident, but rather carefully constructed, reinforced, and protected. We see similar dynamics in gaming spaces and esports, as discussed earlier in this paper. With the adoption of sports as a frame

for competitive gaming, we risk turning a blind eye to the inequalities that are currently allowed to fester within the industry. The sports paradigm supports the normalisation and naturalisation of perceived differences within competitive gaming, allowing biological and natural notions of superiority to gain legitimacy and prominence (Taylor, 2021). The narrative of meritocracy obscures the unequal foundation of competition in competitive gaming by making it seem like the result of some sort of natural selection. In doing so, it becomes a function of its own logic; instead of an ideology of equal opportunity and chances, meritocracy becomes a source of gratification for those with merit that ultimately serves to justify their position as somehow more elite than others (Liu, 2011). In this light, efforts to diversify and calls for inclusivity are presented as a threat to meritocratic ideals of fair competition (Seron et al., 2018). It is important to note how this justification of merit through narratives of meritocracy dictates what we consider merit to be, how it is measured, and thereby creates the conditions for how it can be achieved. In this light, we argue it is crucial to critically reflect on the social and material conditions that enable esports participation. In the following section, we will forefront the ways in which bodies are rendered (in)visible and call for a more thorough understanding of how people make sense of bodies in esports spaces.

The (in)visibility of bodies in esports

In this section, we will identify four ways in which bodies are made relevant in esports: 1) the obscuring of the playing body and establishment of an idealized and normative masculine, athletic body; 2) the 'visibility' of women's bodies as deviant from the norm ; 3) the invisibility (and impossibility) of disabled bodies through design (embodied nature of design of both games and gameplay); and 4) the embodied nature of infrastructural issues that cannot be reduced to materiality. It is important to note here that we apply a definition of bodies that exceeds just physicality. Bodies are never just a biological and material entity, but also a social and cultural construct (Mol, 2002), and we should understand it as both simultaneously (Rafanell, 2023). Our application of bodies in this text alludes to the many ways in which different forms of inequity are embodied and enacted.

The establishment of an idealized and normative body

We want to approach this by drawing attention to sporting jerseys that have become commonly used in esports. They are curious items that both obscure and highlight the way esports addresses bodies. In many sports, the sport jersey has a double function: its material is designed for bodies which sweat under the physical strain, and the player numbers offer sportscasters a way to quickly identify players in the field. However, in esports bodies are under less strain, nor do the players move from one place to another while playing—only their in-game characters do so. As such, in esports these sports jerseys lose the double-function they have in many sports and rather become a token of sportification; a way of signalling esports as a real sport

by adopting the sport aesthetics. In this way, they also signal how bodies are positioned in esports and how they are made visible. The sporting jersey, in a similar manner to esports teams' promotional material consisting of videos and pictures of e-athletes lifting weights at the gym, creates a disconnection between the of an esports player and the way esports is played for example with fine motor movements. As Taylor (2021) has pointed out, esports is invested in promoting certain kinds of bodies, in this case athletic and masculine, as 'naturally' better. This obscures the playing body that operates the keyboard, the controller, or the mobile phone.

The studies that discuss the relevance of bodies in esports, do so mostly in the paradigm of sportification and function consciously or unconsciously to further justify esports as a sport (Riatti & Thiel, 2023). For instance, Jenny et al. (2017) argue that esports lack the physicality of sports. However, while it is true that in esports players' bodies are not under similar physical strain compared to many other sports, this does not mean that bodies would be inconsequential in esports—far from it. It is rather that the athletic and masculine body promoted via the paradigm of sportification is not as consequential in esports as increasingly suggested by the sportification aesthetics. This, however, obscures the way the playing body is important, as is the case in sports such as pool or darts or shooting. There is also considerable difference between different esports titles on what kind of bodily engagement they require. It might be that those denouncing the importance of the physicality in esports are denouncing physicality related to a particular kind of hegemonic understanding of both body and esports. This is also present in the ways the body is attempted to be made more relevant or rendered visible in esports through the hegemonic understanding of sports and the body. For example, a *Quartz's* (digital news outlet) video on YouTube, titled "Esports players are training like professional athletes", has the following description: "esports players train like traditional professional athletes with regular gym visits, performance coaching, and a nutritionist-designed diet. CompLexity, an esports franchise, is developing training that borrows straight from the books of professional football players—and there's a reason for that" (Quartz, 2019). The video opens, not so surprisingly, with an esports player lifting weights.

The often-claimed irrelevance of physicality, or the way idealised athletic sporting bodies are highlighted, is problematic in several ways, but we will highlight two here. Firstly, it normalises the narratives of difference in sports as legitimate and based on biological truths, even though practices like sex-segregation have compellingly been shown not to be a natural given (Dworkin & Cooky, 2012; Karkazis et al., 2012; McDonagh & Pappano, 2008; Messner, 1988; Messner, 2007; Schultz, 2018). This is an important issue to consider, and one that applies to the social sciences and humanities more broadly, but falls outside the scope of this paper. Secondly, hiding the ways in which bodies are physically relevant, and making them relevant in a very narrow way, obscures the ways in which bodies become (and are) relevant in esports, which we argue hinders our ability to pinpoint and discuss those issues that are at the core of esports' current foundation.

Reducing bodies to an irrelevant aspect of playing games reproduces and establishes an idea of what a 'normal gamer' is or should be. This not only relates to an expected style of play (i.e., hardcore instead of casual), but also the way in which one is able to play (i.e., the way games and tournaments have been designed). These taken-for-granted expectations dictate who is included in the ideal image of participation, and who is excluded.

The 'visibility' of women's bodies as deviant from the norm

A poignant example of the relevance of the bodies in esports is the way women's bodies are depicted and framed as all pervasive and almost as obscene, especially when they are present in esports spaces that are not reserved for women and gender minorities. In 2018, Se-yeon "Geguri" Kim, a professional *Overwatch* player, was not signed to Overwatch League in its inaugural season, and one of the teams not signing her gave as one of the reasons co-ed player housing (Cullen, 2018). It is the divergence from the normative (masculine) body that makes bodies visible again, showing what bodies are seen as not fitting and not desirable—and showing that there is a desirable body that is legitimised through the project of sportification. Friman and Ruotsalainen's analysis (2022) of the case of "Ellie" in professional *Overwatch* likewise highlights this. Ellie was an *Overwatch* player who rose to top ranks apparently out of nowhere and was signed by a team. From early on, questions about Ellie's gender were raised and echoed throughout social media and it turned out that Ellie was in fact a male, known by the community, pretending to be a woman. According to Friman and Ruotsalainen, "Ellie's skill or rank was never under suspicion, their gender was. When it was revealed that there was indeed a man behind the account, both the media and the community seemed to let out a huge sigh of relief and get back to their lives, considering the case Ellie closed" (2022, p. 150).

The invisibility (and impossibility) of disabled bodies through design

Bodies, and what is considered a normal (and normative) body, also become evident when examining both games played as esports as well as technology used for playing them. As Ahmed (2006) teaches us, objects are made to fit those who are envisioned to use them, as well as made to order who *can* use them (p. 51). This is no less the case for esports. In their study on competitive gamers with disabilities, Ripetta and Silvestri (2024) highlight the ways in which the choice for which games are played, the peripherals available, and how space is organised, all impact the experiences and possibilities that gamers with disabilities have. They argue that certain games value certain skills more than others, which should not be seen as a given but as a (design) choice (Ripetta & Silvestri, 2024). Additionally, the gamers in Ripetta and Silvestri's study who were born with disabilities experience that they often cannot fully identify with the avatars they play with. The movements of these characters are in some ways simply alien to them. To accommodate for their own participation,

gamers with disabilities customise their in-game settings, peripherals (mouse, keyboard, etc.), and furniture. Ripetta & Silvestri (2024) note that these players are burdened with the costs for such customization, even in highly professionalized environments, creating an additional barrier for their participation. In an interview between the British Esports Association and Tucker Griggs, a gamer with a disability, they discuss how tournaments often do not even accept what is called 'adaptive equipment', meaning gamers with disabilities that rely on such equipment are excluded by default (British Esports, 2021).

The embodied nature of infrastructural issues

Financial means as an entry barrier remains largely overlooked in research on esports, but are certainly not exclusive to gamers with disabilities. The example of gamers with disabilities does show, however, that this is not simply a monetary issue. It becomes another mechanism for the exclusion of unwanted or non-normative bodies. Most games that are considered esports are, as mentioned earlier, played on PC, require high-quality, expensive hardware, and depend on equally expensive infrastructure. Not everyone has access to the financial means necessary to afford this hardware. In that light, the industry's preference for technologically high-demanding PC games over more affordable alternatives becomes an issue of (economical) class, which is inextricably tied to other forms of inequity like race and gender. DiSalvo and Bruckman (2010), as well as Richard and Gray (2018), highlight the ways in which financial disparity further hinders the participation of racialized players. These issues cannot be solved merely through solutions that tackle the material inequalities between players. These material inequalities have lasting effects on the affected bodies. This is not just a local issue in the sense that currently most esports industries value PC games over console games, platforms on which economically disadvantaged gamers are more prevalent. The issue is also global, as the prominence of high-demanding esports titles (e.g., *League of Legends*, *Counterstrike* and *Valorant*) favours the economically wealthier Global North over the Global South, where technologically lower-demanding mobile games (e.g., *Mobile Legends: Bang Bang*, *Arena of Valor* and *Free Fire*) are hugely popular. Access to certain popular esports titles is limited in certain geographical areas. For example, Riot Games opened their first server on the African continent in 2023, 14 years after releasing *League of Legends* and three years after releasing *Valorant* (Riot Games, 2023). The server, located in South Africa, is exclusively dedicated to *Valorant*, meaning that African players still have no options to play *League of Legends* on a server located on their own continent. Given the concentration of developers for esports titles in North America and Europe and the power that resides with game developers in enabling and organizing esports events (see: Karhulahti, 2017), this means that what can be considered a 'true' esports, and who gets to compete, is highly dictated by actors in the Global North.

Together, these four ways we have discussed dictate which bodies are possible in esports, and which bodies are not. Furthermore, this shows that what counts as esports is always socially, culturally, and institutionally constructed and legitimises some games and forms of participation over others. Most importantly, it highlights the unwritten and mostly unspoken idealization of certain bodies over others, favouring bodies that are abled, masculine, wealthy, white, and young. This is exactly where we believe the lack of critical engagement with the social effects of sportification, and the application of the term esports, are most violent; in normalising and formalising the conditions for participation and acknowledgement thereof. It is this violence that we turn to in the next section.

Toward more sustainable and equitable practices and language

In taking for granted a definition of esports, we are taking for granted the ways in which esports are currently building on inequalities. There are no inherent qualities to esports that would allow for social change. Rather, if we wish for esports to become a vehicle for social change, we should start with deconstructing what esports currently represents, and more importantly who is represented and representable. Failing to do so will further establish the current state of affairs as if it is the result of some sort of natural order, a meritocracy if you will. However, we have shown in this paper how nothing in esports should be considered neutral. The equipment used, the choice of games (and their design), the way of organizing competition—it all factors into questions of who gets to compete in what ways, and how this participation is valued. The meritocracy is toxic because it is unequal by design, and we have highlighted the relevance of bodies in this design.

Esports set the norm for who can be considered a participant as well as how these participants can be (and in many ways should be) valued. The idealized body is not just the norm, it is also formalized in how esports present themselves to the public, both as competitive gaming and as a sporting activity. In this light, we argue that recognizing what esports *do* is crucial for understanding what esports are. There are many forms of inequity that relate to the idealization of some type of body over other types of bodies which we have not mentioned or dealt with in this paper. Our main aim has not been to tackle all these inequities, but rather call attention to the necessity that future research in esports does. There is violence in obscuring the processes that establish and naturalize the idealized body. It complicates efforts to address issues of exclusion and inequity, and further supports the erasure of those who do not fit the ideals promoted through the idealized body. The playing field is set up in a way that does not properly recognize those whose body is not ideal, and it makes them impossible esports participants in some ways (Butler, 2004, p. 31). As long as we take the idealized body for granted by not clearly defining what esports are and to whom they are supposed to appeal, the idealized body perpetuates itself and marginalized bodies will continue to be excluded.

Our argument is not to move away from the term esports in favour of another term, like professional competitive gaming. Merely changing our terminology will do nothing to change the structural issues of gaming and esports. It could even further obscure the social issues that are part of the very foundation of esports as we currently know them. Instead, the deconstruction of esports that we call for should be understood as a call for a critical engagement with its current foundations. This starts with an acknowledgement that the *terms* we use matter beyond text. Approaching competitive gaming as a sport under the banner of esports is, as we have argued, more than just strategic use of words. Deconstructing then starts with unravelling exactly how bodies become relevant and under which conditions. As such, we argue, we need to deconstruct esports as social practice (Pfohl, 1985). This will allow spaces to rebuild esports in ways that are more equitable and just. Such an engagement should, in our view, aim to contribute to a more thorough understanding of how people in esports make sense of bodies. This relates to questions of how participation is enabled, the ways in which participation is valued, and the broader normalization and formalization of idealized bodies. It is critical to note here that we should also look at our own roles as researchers in enabling, normalizing, and possibly promoting the idealized bodies through our academic work. If we fail to critically interrogate the industries' terminology in our academic work, and if we fail to account for the social work that sportification does, we perpetuate existing inequalities through our research practices.

Beyond the question of how people make sense of bodies in esports, we should furthermore ask how bodies make sense of esports practices. What we mean by this is to not only look at what kind of bodies are invited to take part in esports and how, but also at the everyday practices of bodies engaging with esports and how this is enabled, sometimes in radical ways. Through an exploration of these questions, further research will not only highlight issues of inequity in esports that should be dealt with, but it will also allow us to collectively envision how esports could be different.

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Authors' division of work

The original idea for the article came from author one and was developed further in collaboration. Both authors contributed to the writing of the article with author one leading the process.

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