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Abstract

Meant as both a provocation and a prompt, 'who cares about esports?' opens the topic up to critical scrutiny at a time when the esports *industry* is in the midst of a(nother) serious contraction, even as there is a sizeable jump in the breadth and amount of esports *research*. As the introduction to this special section on Sustaining Equitable Competitive Gaming, this article considers the interplay of these two transformations, while also opening up a third, vital line of inquiry: 'who cares *for* competitive gaming?' This question is meant, on the one hand, to underscore the difference—and the relationship—between competitive gaming and esports, while also providing an overview of the kinds of critical and timely care documented by the four articles in this special section.

Keywords

Competitive gaming; esports; platformization; labour; care

The preparation of this special section of *Eludamos* on Sustaining Equitable Competitive Gaming comes at a transitional and uncertain time, with our preparations transpiring against the backdrop of what has been characterized as a widespread "esports winter", a notable and in some cases, drastic reduction in the flows of capital that have fuelled the industry over the past decade. A confluence of higher interest rates, slow revenue growth, and a crash in the cryptocurrency ecosystem (Partin, 2024, p. 184), not to mention bloated salaries at the upper reaches of esports organizations (and talent pools) and the lack of a sustainable revenue model beyond comparatively fickle corporate sponsorships, all contributed to acute industry contraction throughout 2023 (Franco, 2023; Lee, 2023). This past year has seen layoffs, bankruptcies, and a dip in "public hype-cycles" that threaten to put esports on the same footing as Google Glasses and "blockchain gaming": "ostensibly disruptive paradigms with low commercial viability" (Partin, 2024, p. 185).

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One small side-effect of this winter was a re-arrangement in the kinds of collaboration that the scholars assembled for this special section of *Eludamos* had hoped to carry out. This section was initially intended as a publication venue for work that was to have been presented and collaboratively workshopped at an in-person symposium in Toronto, tentatively titled "Sustaining Equitable Esports Communities". Though the grant application to Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) was unsuccessful (providing a possible answer to the question of whether and how the Canadian government 'cares about esports'), it provides a chance for us to highlight the kinds of care that are vital to the sustainability of grassroots communities impacted by the freeze in capitalists' enthusiasm.

What is not often mentioned in the forensic analyses of *this* esports winter is that there have been previous winters, and there will be future ones. That's how seasons work. My own intellectual interest in esports began just prior to, and in the wake of, the last esports winter in 2008-2009, as the US housing market collapsed and was followed by a major recession (N. T. Taylor, 2009). Overnight, several of the mainstays of esports' initial heyday (the World Cyber Games, Major League Gaming), not to mention well-funded upstarts like the Championship Gaming League, either folded outright or were substantially devalued and sold off. What followed *that* esports winter was the foundational reorganization of esports around the logics of "platformization". Under the arrangement that has crystallized over the last decade, an oligopoly of publishers (Activision/Blizzard, Riot, Valve) function as "content intermediaries" for players, spectators, sponsors, streaming platforms, teams, researchers, educational institutions, event organizers, statistics brokers, and so on, outsourcing the risks of investing in esports onto these stakeholders while capitalizing – mightily – on the connections made among them, and the cultural productions that arise (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Partin, 2024).

What will follow *this* esports winter is yet to be determined but will likely be as transformative as its realignment in the early 2010s. There's reason to believe that what might keep esports afloat is massive investment by nation-states and their tentacular educational and civic organizations. This has arguably been the goal of the industry's push into schooling: offering a stable source of investment and labour for transforming amateur competitive gaming on university campuses and high schools into esports products (Cote et al., 2023; N. T. Taylor & Stout, 2020). And this certainly seems to be the underlying logic with Saudi Arabia's much-trumpeted plans to pledge billions towards building an infrastructure for the production of esports content (Wilde, 2022). In what is not a wholly new paradigm so much as an intensifying pattern of state sponsorship (Chee, 2023; Szablewicz, 2020), esports are emerging as one cog of a geopolitical public relations strategy, becoming part of the expansive "sportswashing" portfolio that nation-states wield to ameliorate criticism over human rights abuses and environmental degradation (Ingle, 2023). We may thus come

out of this winter with esports emerging as the "plaything of institutions", as John Durham Peters described 20th century mass media (Peters, 2010, p. 280).

Who cares about esports? A provocation

Set against this tumult, the title of this introduction, "who cares about esports?", is offered as both as a rhetorical provocation and an empirical prompt. The ambivalence of the question—is it academic trolling, or a more earnest inquiry?—is reflective of the current uncertainty regarding the viability of the esports industry. It is also reflective of my own relationship to an academic field that increasingly seems more concerned with supporting the industry than holding it to account.

Approached as a rhetorical provocation, "who cares about esports?" can invoke either a cynical reaction ("what's the point of esports?") or a sense of indignation; "how could you possibly care about esports now, given everything else going on?" These reactions are not without their allure, particularly for those inclined to measure their interests, research or otherwise, against the scales of urgent social, political, or environment crises. As I write this in late 2024, several of the 'tipping points' we have been warned of—whether it's the rise of authoritarianism and ethno-nationalism and its genocidal outcomes, the concentration of more and more wealth into fewer and fewer hands and the conversion of our basic needs into esoteric financial products, or the various climatological thresholds we are blowing past in our dogged attachment to the fantasy of endless growth—seem like foregone conclusions.

Set against such existential threats, it seems a stretch to insist that esports *matters.* But then, the same is true for any of the other innumerable media practices in which we find joy or meaning—that certainly don't matter much 'in the grand scheme of things' and that likely, in some way or another, perpetrate some form of harm, whether social injustice, economic exploitation, and/or environmental destruction. Maybe it's playing or watching esports; maybe it's building LEGO; maybe it's binge-watching reality TV, or speedrunning, or sharing dance moves through Tik Tok, or asking ChatGPT for a dinner recipe. The point is, mediated leisure doesn't simply stop *mattering* under the looming and cascading threats we face. Indeed, one task of critically engaged research on media (including, certainly, on esports) is to connect our quotidian media practices to broader transformations: to ask what relations of power, and what economic, social, technical, and ideological arrangements, are served and/or subverted in even the smallest communicative act. It is the kind of connection-making that is succinctly captured (though by no means exhausted) through insights like "every time you post to Instagram, you're turning a light bulb on forever" (Michel, 2024).

As Will Partin and Matt Howard observe, such critical approaches characterized the bulk of early research on esports (mine included), with a particular focus on gender-based inequities (Partin & Howard, 2021). This initial scholarly attention also saw the

framing of competitive gaming as “esports” unfold in real time, and through fits and starts. We understood the ‘sportiness’ of esports as neither inherent nor easily dismissible, but rather as a *problematic*: a historically situated attempt on the part of boosters to frame the nascent industry as a continuation and transformation of sports under new sociotechnical conditions (Hutchins, 2008; T. L. Taylor, 2015; Witkowski, 2012). For critical scholars, esports matters because it was (and continues to be) a terrain of experimentation for emergent formations of labour, leisure, and cultural expression. Such approaches help us undercut (or at least temper) the sense of meaninglessness or outrage prompted by the rhetorical “who cares about esports?” *We* care about esports because it can tell us something about platformization (Partin, 2024; N. T. Taylor, 2024); the nature of affective work in the gig economy (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021); contemporary mutations of nationalism and Orientalism (Chee, 2023; Fickle, 2021), not to mention race and gender (Fletcher, 2020; Witkowski, 2018); and how we understand value (Boluk & LeMieux, 2021).

Who cares about esports? A prompt

Asked more earnestly, “who cares about esports?” can also serve as an invitation for empirical consideration rather than provocation, inviting us to gauge the spread of interest in organized, spectatorial competitive gaming. The platformization of esports over the last decade, part and parcel of the platformization of cultural production more generally, means that ‘caring about’ anything that reaches us through a content intermediary— from a professional *CS:GO* match to the antics of an ornery baby hippo—can be measured through likes, subscribes, impressions, downloads, and so on. Pursuing ‘who cares about esports?’ along these lines, we are quickly met with an array of claims about the growth of esports, expressed through quantified metrics and, for the most part, seemingly unfazed by the latest esports winter. Hours of content watched; peak number of viewers; industry revenue, broken down by year, quarter, region, and game genre; total market value; player accounts; Twitch subscriptions; and so on.

Esports research itself is both preoccupied with and reflective of this concern with measuring growth, as fields including sport management, business and marketing, psychology, and educational science have leaned heavily into esports research initiatives (not to mention, undergraduate degrees and certification programs) over the past decade, leading to an explosion in publications and citations. This spike in scholarly activity roughly coincides with, and is in fact intertwined with, the realignment of the esports industry around oligopolist content intermediaries. The impressively hefty *Routledge Handbook of Esports*, organized by the Esports Research Network, represents a landmark for the field, and is indicative of this direction. The *Handbook* is written as much for practitioners as for researchers, with a broad range of topics representing an array of academic and applied perspectives, from player psychology to recommendations for technical specifications and equipment (Jenny et al., 2024). The impression generated by this volume is that a lot of people, organizations, and

institutions *care about* esports, perhaps more now than ever before—and that it is the job of researchers in this field to respond to, interpret, and help channel this 'caring about' in a way that ultimately best supports the industry.

Esports vs competitive gaming

For all that I find commendable about the *Routledge Handbook of Esports*, from its broad scope of topics, to its inclusion of critical perspectives, to its deliberate engagement of both academic and non-academic audiences, I wonder about the central definition of esports that the editors put forward: "organized and codified competition between human players using video games" (Nothelfer et al., 2024, p. 10). This definition elides the technocultural *work,* both historical and ongoing, to *transform* competitive gaming into esports; work that a number of early esports scholars (myself included) documented as it began to unfold over a crucial period from the mid to late 2000's.[1] Is it pro gaming? Or powergaming? Is it eSports? Or e-sports? Alongside this question of what to name it and how to spell it, esports did not truly solidify into the shape we understand it today until there was a stable, relatively cheap infrastructure for broadcasting competitive gaming, not to mention a set of technologies—screen recording software, Twitch subscriptions, shoutcasters, statistical and graphical overlays—for *producing* esports, and monitoring (and monetizing) the distribution of said products (T. L. Taylor, 2018). Seen in this light, esports is decidedly not synonymous *with* organized competitive gaming, so much as it is a "cultural technique" grafted *onto* competitive gaming (Siegert, 2015): a concretization of infrastructures, technologies, ideas, and bodies into a more or less stable arrangement aimed at transforming competitive gaming into a media product.

Seen in this light, it can be quite generative to locate historical precursors to esports, particularly insofar as such work highlights early attempts to harness an interest in watching people play video games competitively (see, for example, Boluk & LeMieux, 2017). But it is anachronistic to refer to these precursors *as* esports. From a media theoretical perspective, referring to early competitive gaming spectacles as 'esports' would be like referring to the camera obscura as photography: some of the elements of the cultural technique are there, but they have not been formalized and incorporated into the arrangement that came to later be called photography (Kittler, 2010). For esports, one key piece of its definitive arrangement—what is produced

[1] As it happens, none of the scholars featured in a (virtual) roundtable discussion about the early, critical focus of esports research, featured in *ROMchip*'s special issue on the history of esports (Partin & Howard, 2021) contributed to the Routledge volume. This is less of a deliberate omission and more of a respectful self-selection, though it is nonetheless indicative of the field's recent transformations.

through the cultural technique of esports—is the esports spectator. This is the subject that, when properly engaged and measured, makes it possible for the esports industry (and analysts, whether those employed by universities, publishers, or esports organizations) to deliver a ready and demographically intelligible answer to the question 'who cares about esports?'

Media historian and theorist Jack Bratich provides a framework for better understanding this process. He offers the distinction between the "constituent" energies at play in our media practices, and the techniques of capture and representation (likes, subscribes, logins, and so on) through which these energies are "constituted" as resources from which value can be extracted (Bratich, 2005, p. 246). This is the transformation through which competitive gaming enthusiasts become "audienced" as esports spectators (Partin, 2019; N. T. Taylor, 2016, p. 296; T. L. Taylor, 2018).

I make this distinction between esports and competitive gaming to insist on what I see as their underlying relationship: not as more or less formalized versions of the same thing, but as that of a parasite to its host, albeit the kind in which the parasite is so deeply entwined in the body of the host as to not only seem inseparable but to exert control over the host's behaviour. Definitions that collapse this relationship, for instance by eliding the historical and ongoing techniques through which competitive gaming communities are professionalized for the sake of esports content creation, risk naturalizing this parasitism. Esports scholarship that plays into this naturalization—that sees esports as synonymous with, rather than parasitic to, competitive gaming—undermines its ability to fully grasp the following:

- the forms of labour – some consensual, some exploitative, many both – through which competitive gaming itself is sustained, and the processes through which it becomes esports; and
- the "constitutive" practices, energies, affects, and identities that are *sidelined* through these processes – namely, the perspectives and practices of people who love competitive gaming but who, for any number of reasons, are neither welcome in nor feel drawn to esports.

I do not list these out of any desire to put forward an alternative research agenda for competitive gaming, but to flag what kinds of considerations are left out of even the heftiest handbooks of esports. These are precisely the kinds of concerns that we have gathered for this special section, and they open up one last prompt: who cares for competitive gaming?

Who cares for competitive gaming?

Note the slight but substantial shift in wording: not just from esports to competitive gaming, but from "caring about" to "caring for". As far as I can tell, this distinction was first deployed as a conceptual concern by anti-racist educators (Gay, 2010), and

is meant to signal the distinction between being *interested* in someone or something, and being *materially committed* to their well-being. It is the difference between being sad that something has gone, versus devoting time, labour, and energy toward its preservation. While communication research often positions these along a continuum—for instance, at what point does interest in a cause translate to social action? When, if ever, does "hashtag activism" become direct action (Tufekci, 2017)? —they can also remain mutually exclusive. As an example, and for my own part, I have never cared that much *about* esports; outside of a couple of memorable events (such as attending Dreamhack with friends and colleagues who are far better esports scholars than I), the onscreen displays of skill and offscreen drama of teams have rarely set my pulse racing. But I have been in positions of responsibility towards communities of competitive gamers, even when the care on offer was as straightforward as making sure that university *League of Legends* clubs had a safe and accessible place on campus to watch tournaments and talk shop (N. T. Taylor & Hammond, 2018).

The articles assembled for this special section both highlight and enact forms of care that go much further than this. Collectively, they report on the efforts and perspectives of people who strive to make competitive gaming liveable and sustainable for their communities; who find in competitive gaming a source of identity formation and belonging, and who toil on their behalf, in ways that are not so easily registered by the esports industry's metrics. These articles also, collectively, represent the work of emerging scholars, and centre the perspectives and voices of those at the margins of the North American and western European-centric purview of English-language esports (including, crucially, English-language esports research).

Tom Legierse and Maria Ruotsalainen open the section by insisting on the embodied dimensions of competitive gaming and their attendant politics; who is left out of the industry's construction of the esports subject as able-bodied, cis-het, white, and masculine? Synthesizing and extending feminist critiques of the boundaries through which esports are built, the authors offer a theoretical intervention that prompts us to acknowledge and remain grounded in a concern for the acceptance—and visibility—of all manner of bodies.

Carina de Assunção, Michael Scott, and Rory Summerley's work explores precisely the kinds of barriers that efforts to implement more equitable conditions for esports participation face, under the broader banner of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity (DEI) initiatives. Focusing on the under-attended Portuguese esports community, they illuminate the kinds of discursive strategies leveraged by members of the *Overwatch* Portugal Discord community to undermine DEI-driven interventions, such as tournaments for gender-minority players. The authors' careful account demonstrates how top-down, corporate-driven DEI initiatives can so easily backfire when imposed rather than cultivated and championed at a grassroots level.

Beatriz Blanco offers something of a companion piece to Assunção et al., examining how a thriving esports industry in Brazil appropriates grassroots initiatives that find initial success in supporting non-normative competitive gamers. In a compelling case story of the broader mechanisms through which the precarious work of feminist advocacy becomes, under platform capital, 'cause-driven marketing', Blanco analyses how key feminist gaming collectives in Brazil were first sponsored and then undermined by for-profit esports organizations, so that those organizations might better perform DEI.

Fredrik Rusk, Matilda Ståhl, and Isac Nyman provide another nuanced look at the work required to sustain grassroots competitive gaming communities but are nonetheless entangled with the logics of dominant esports platforms. Examining a gaming-focused youth group that has, since the pandemic, operated entirely on Discord, the authors document the kinds of labour that become 'infrastructural'—invisible, feminized, and entirely indispensable—to the communicative practices of the group. Like Blanco, they explore what caring *for* competitive gaming can look like, in terms of situated practice, particularly when this care is in the service of cultural belonging rather than corporate gain.

In the midst of an esports winter, there is real warmth to be found in these four articles, both in terms of what they accomplish and the perspectives they document. They remind us what it can mean, as researchers, to care *for* competitive gaming, and for those community organizers whose precarious and often invisible work helps sustain competitive gaming communities. These forms of care are particularly worth holding onto as the caprices of platform capitalism—which, by design, does not care *for* much of anything, beyond the extraction of value—leave esports, once again, in peril.

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