

Gender and the two-tiered system of collegiate esports

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Abstract

This paper reports on a funded study, undertaken in early 2019, intended to update our understandings of gender and collegiate esports. Drawing from 21 interviews with leaders of both esports clubs and varsity programs in North America, this paper describes a two-tiered system of collegiate esports governance in which opportunities for cultivating greater gender diversity are found primarily amongst esports clubs. Varsity programs, by contrast, remain overwhelmingly male-dominated, a disparity held in place by efforts within these programs to recruit—rather than develop—highly-skilled players.

Introduction

In the Fall of 2016, AnyKey.org—an initiative funded by ESL and Intel in the wake of the gamergate hate campaign to address issues of inclusivity and diversity in esports, led by esports pioneers Morgan Romine and TL Taylor—released a white paper specifically focusing on the emerging collegiate scene. The report expressed cautious optimism that the institutional and cultural conditions of North American universities might encourage greater gender diversity in what has otherwise been a heavily masculinized and male-dominated domain. Specifically, the authors wrote that “Title IX, as well as broader campus commitments to equity, inclusion, and diversity, can provide new initiatives insights and tools to build positive value-driven programs from the ground up” (Anykey.org, 2016, p. 1).

Three years later, the North American collegiate esports industry continues to grow. Publishers such as Riot and Blizzard, and organizations such as Tespa and the National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE), are further developing infrastructures for intercollegiate leagues and tournaments. Dozens of postsecondary institutions have responded by establishing varsity esports programs: resource-intensive, these programs most often involve dedicated training and competition spaces, dozens of high-end computers and peripherals, partial or full scholarships for top players, full-time administrators and coaches, and frequently, paid support positions such as team nutritionists, psychiatrists, tutors, and physical trainers. These exist alongside (and often, on top of) more longstanding esports communities on college campuses: formal and informal student clubs that organize viewing parties, meetings, and tournaments for aficionados of various competitive games.

As co-authors, we have different but complementary interests in exploring and promoting gender inclusivity in collegiate esports; Bryce, a first-year graduate student, helped launch an esports club at his former school (University of Iowa) with the specific goal of promoting a safe and inclusive space for esports participation, and is now carrying out a feminist ethnography of the

local *Smash* scene. Nick serves as faculty advisor for a *League of Legends* (League) club that was established with similar principles in mind, and has conducted multiple studies of the gender dynamics of various competitive gaming contexts and communities. With ReFiG support, we carried out an exploratory qualitative study in early 2019 that sought to update the Anykey.org white paper on diversity and inclusion in collegiate esports, by interviewing leaders of clubs and programs in North American universities (21 participants in total). In reporting on this study, we are guided by a fairly straightforward question: what are the current conditions for promoting gender inclusivity in an amateur esports scene undergoing rapid expansion and investment?

Background

We've known for some time that the esports player base, especially in its upper echelons, is overwhelmingly male-dominated, and that the cultures that support many of the more popular and long-standing esports such as CS:GO, Dota2, and League are heavily masculinized (Ratan et al, 2015; Voorhees & Orlando, 2018; Witwoski, 2017). At the same time, recent research on and activism within esports have yielded two crucial insights. The first is that women *are* participating in this scene and have been, for some time: while some of this has certainly taken the peripheral and constrained forms (mothers and promotional models) documented a decade ago (Taylor, Jenson & de Castell, 2009), women are also event and community organizers, broadcast personalities, team managers, and so on (AnyKey 2015; 2016; Witkowski, et al, 2018). Crucial here has been the work undertaken by AnyKey to both organize these networks of female-identified participants and to make them more visible. As one of the few activist organizations¹ operating within organized esports, their efforts strike a critical balance between encouraging more female-identified players to take part in esports and highlighting the existing, and often invisible, work aside from gameplay that women have undertaken, and continue to undertake, in esports communities, organizations, and cultures. As applies to the collegiate scene in particular, AnyKey.org encourages colleges and universities to “support a range of ways to participate” for gender minorities, while also actively recruiting, cultivating and retaining female talent (AnyKey, 2016, p. 2).

The second crucial insight informing our work here is that mid-level (amateur) esports *may* offer more favorable conditions for meaningful gender diversity than professional scenes. This is in part due to the greater range of skill levels and degrees of commitment characterizing amateur esports. One of the key factors contributing to the sedimentation of male domination in professional esports is that it requires multiple overlapping privileges, typically more available to male-identified players: the ability to play without fear of harassment or violence (Consalvo 2012; Gray, 2012; Taylor, 2018), greater access to leisure time, play technologies, and contexts (Nakamura, 2012; Jenson & de Castell, 2018), the longstanding material-discursive connections

¹ Aside from AnyKey.org, there are a handful of organizations supporting women in esports, often operating in particular regions and/or around particular games. See AnyKey.org's affiliates page (<https://www.anykey.org/affiliates/>).

between gaming and masculinity (de Castell & Bryson, 1998), and the even longer-standing ones between computation and masculinity (Lie, 1995). For the emerging domain of US-based collegiate esports in particular, there is an expectation that Title IX, with its provisions for gender equality of resources and opportunity in *all* aspects of university life, can serve as a key mechanism for promoting greater gender diversity in esports. Nonetheless, it remains to be seen whether these conditions are leading to greater diversity within a college esports terrain which -- in North America at least -- is going through a phase of intensive organization and professionalization. And as studies of other grassroots esports communities indicate (Taylor, 2009), professionalization often precisely means a narrowing of who gets to play, and how.

Description of study

In this paper, we gesture at some of the main insights from twenty-one semi-structured interviews with collegiate esports leaders, in regards to how they understand ‘diversity’ and whether and how they see it enacted in their own institutional esports setting. Interviews were conducted over Skype or via telephone between January and June 2019. Each interviewee was involved in a leadership position of an esports club or program at a particular university; thirteen were undergraduate students, three were in faculty positions, and six were in salaried, non-faculty positions (one of these was also an undergraduate at the time of the interview; hence the mismatched total). Interviews were solicited via social media posts, professional networks, and snowball sampling. With the exception of the first interview, involving a member of the NCSU League team and carried out by both Nick and Bryce, Bryce conducted all the interviews.

The college esports terrain: Two-tiered system

While by no means comprehensive, our interviews with eight leaders of esports varsity programs and thirteen esports club leaders point to a fairly fundamental and consistent set of differences between these two forms of collegiate esports governance: a two-tiered system of institutionalized esports in postsecondary contexts, that seems to have profound implications for gender inclusivity. To put it glibly, clubs came first, but varsity programs are where the money’s going. Perhaps not surprisingly, we found greater support for gender inclusivity among clubs where the stakes for instant success are not as high. In what follows, we compare these two tiers in terms of their leadership structures and access to resources, including space and technology; these seem to be the most prominent structural issues influencing the conditions for gender inclusivity amongst these two types of esports organization. Following this broad characterization, we delve into specific mechanisms governing efforts at promoting (or dismissing) greater gender inclusivity, as reported on by our participants.

The varsity scene

As alluded to above, the esports varsity programs whose leaders we interviewed feature dedicated training facilities, scholarship opportunities (either full or partial), and full-time administrative support. These varsity programs vary in size from 22 players to 50 (typically far

less than in esports clubs, which often exceed 100 members), and usually field one to two teams in multiple games: the most common being League and *Overwatch*. Following a broader trend in esports varsity programs, the universities represented in our study are mostly small, US-based, and IT and/or STEM-focused; two of the programs operate as the only varsity athletics program at their respective schools. As many of the origin stories recounted by participants illustrate, administrators at their schools view esports as a compelling way to showcase their school's profile as a STEM-focused and technology-intensive postsecondary institution. RCE2, for instance, recounts how easy it was to get his university's leadership on board: "to have our only varsity sport be esports actually coincides with a STEM school, it's a very easy sell. In a marketing sense and in a combination sense. Instead of them [university leadership] balking at it, it was actually received very well." Esports and STEM are seen as going hand-in-hand; it is seen as a 'natural' fit, specifically for smaller universities and colleges aiming for more brand recognition, and, as we explore below, one with definite implications for gender inclusivity (or lack thereof).

The varsity program leaders we spoke to collectively held a wide number of responsibilities, usually shared among a small team of paid staff: these include liaising with university leadership and sponsors, managing training space, recruiting players, coaching teams, organizing scrimmages and tournament travel, addressing and resolving interpersonal issues between players, and so on. RCE2, who directs the varsity program at a private, STEM-focused U.S. school, characterized this position as the "20 billion hats when you work in esports". Many of these participants have backgrounds in the semi-pro or pro scenes of particular games; RCE6, for instance, played *StarCraft II* semi-professionally in South Korea, and RCE1 was a professional League player and on his way to a head coaching position for a team in Europe before being recruited by the university at which he now coaches. Most of these participants are full-time and/or salaried employees, often with direct and routine access to university leadership. One participant, RCE4, is a tenured professor. While their ages vary, all but one are male, and all but one are white. All of the varsity programs these participants described boast exclusive training facilities ('esports arenas'), including high-end computers, peripherals, and gaming chairs. Typically, space and scholarships are provided by the university, while equipment and travel might either be provided by the university and/or through sponsorship arrangements with tech companies such as iBUYPOWER. Some universities, such as RCE1's and RCE4's, feature additional esports infrastructure such as broadcasting booths and screening rooms. In some instances, such as at RCE14's school (a small Canadian school for applied arts and technology), the varsity program and its infrastructural resources are integrated with an esports management curriculum.

While we did not interview any current *players* involved in varsity esports (as the specific focus of this study is on leadership positions), the participants we talked to, who help direct these

programs, expect fairly intensive time commitments of their players. Numerous participants describe schedules involving 15 to 20 hours of practice time a week, in addition to mandatory meetings with physical trainers, team psychiatrists, and team nutritionists; one program mandates a weekly yoga class for players. And this is just scheduled “contact time”; RCE4 (the tenured professor), for instance, said that an unwritten expectation of varsity program students was for them to put in many more hours, individually, working on their skills, much like a traditional college athlete “going in and shooting free throws on your own”. Such is the burden on these programs to produce competitive teams—to see a return on investment—that some participants, notably RCE1 and RCE6, described shifting their recruitment strategies away from high school graduates and towards professional players who may be tiring of the high turnover and burnout rate characteristic of the more high profile esports pro scenes (specifically, but not exclusively, League). Given just how male-dominated these pro scenes are, a shift in recruitment in which varsity rosters would be filled with ex-pros—a strategy led, notably, by RCE1 and RCE6, two former professional players—will likely mean that varsity programs follow down the same road of intensified gender disparity as professional esports.

The club scene

If varsity programs are characterized by material and discursive connections to both varsity athletics (dedicated training facilities, scholarships for top players, comprehensive support mechanisms) and professional esports (a traffic in players to and from the pro scenes, an emphasis on many of the same high profile games), esports clubs share more in common with other extracurricular collegiate pursuits, and are frequently framed by the 13 club leaders we spoke with as places to meet other esports aficionados, socialize, and play ‘friendlies’ face-to-face. These participants represented a much more heterogeneous range of post-secondary educations than their counterparts running varsity programs; everything from large, public research schools, to private liberal arts colleges, to schools at which esports clubs exist alongside (and in the shadow of) esports varsity programs. Likewise, participants described (and help oversee) involvement in a much more heterogeneous range of games; certainly League and *Overwatch*, but also *Smash*, *Heroes of the Storm* (which has been largely dropped by Blizzard), and many other games that have never had a particularly strong or visible professional scene.

While many of the varsity programs we heard about began as clubs, the experiences of the club leaders and officers we spoke to clearly show that having a large and vibrant campus esports community is not, in itself, sufficient grounds for a varsity program. Many if not most of the clubs we learned about have obtained official student group status with their respective universities, entitling them to a small amount of funding and, in some cases, allowing them to register with some of the intercollegiate esports organizations like Tespa and Collegiate League of Legends (CLoL), which require teams to have official student group status. Nonetheless, *all* of the club leaders and officers we spoke to carry out their organizational work for free, and do so often with only intermittent support from their designated faculty advisor (where such a position

exists). This means they are often left to navigate the convoluted bureaucracies and hierarchies of their schools on their own time, and with little institutional knowledge or agency, unlike the varsity program leaders we spoke with who frequently enjoy the direct support of university leadership. For the majority of club leaders and officers in our study, this institutional liminality manifests most directly in an inability to find consistent space to hold club meetings and events. Indeed, one club leader, an adjunct professor at a private liberal arts college in the US, spoke of her frustrations with administrators at her previous school, a large, public university with a massive sports program, for refusing to provide basic access to campus meeting and event space for the school's large esports club.

For some, lack of consistent space means that they make use of whatever rooms become available on a week to week or month to month basis, which means club events are often housed in the 'home' departments of officers, leaders, and/or faculty supervisors: most frequently, Computer Science or Engineering, though also Communication. For us, an interesting follow-up is to explore whether and where this has the effect of *physically* situating esports in places and departments not traditionally associated with gender inclusivity (Blair, Miller, Ong, & Zastavker, 2017). The emphasis among clubs is often more on sharing a passion, networking, and learning, rather than fielding competitive teams. In the following sections, we unpack how these structural and institutional conditions inform the perspectives and day-to-day experiences of the participants we spoke to, in the ways they talk about and (in some cases) work towards gender diversity in their respective organizations.

Gender inclusivity: You're (not) doing it

Before delving into how participants spoke of gender diversity in their organizations, we think it important to note that the 'diversity' portion of our interviews were characterized by different affects when talking with male-identified and female-identified participants, in addition to yielding different perspectives. Navigating questions of diversity with male participants was a challenge throughout this study, whereas for female participants, the same questions were answered enthusiastically. In response to the reticence Bryce experienced in successive interviews with male participants, we re-ordered questions in the interview schedule multiple times in an attempt to transition to the topic more organically (see Appendix 2), but this had little effect. These questions were central to why this research is important, but answers sometimes proved to be short and perfunctory, regardless of when and how they were asked, and particularly with regards to questions about whether there have been any incidents of harassment in the club or program. Simply reading the transcripts, one might take this to mean that diversity is not an issue, but Bryce (who conducted the interviews) routinely sensed unease and discomfort from male participants when discussing these questions, whether talking with program or club leaders. Respective questions, "Has there ever been any kind of problematic incident stemming from racial/gender/sexual identity?" may be met with one word, "No" (RCE14), and possibly even a follow-up like, "That's what you're looking for, right?" (RCE3).

We bring up this sense of reticence because it permeates the responses we received from male-identified participants in response to whether and how their programs and clubs are engaging questions of inclusivity. From their transcribed answers, this affect is difficult to detect, but the fact that Bryce encountered it from male participants, regardless of which of the two tiers they're from and regardless of our experiments with reframing the questions and repositioning them in the interview schedule, is noteworthy. Some level of support for this feeling-based assertion comes in the differing way female participants answered the questions, even when the answer was no. While it is still a "no" response, RCE17 clearly works to qualify her answer to whether there had been issues stemming from gender identity in a way that contrasts men's brief responses, "So I personally haven't seen anything and I think that having our leadership team be primarily female has helped with that."

While there may be only a few reported incidents related to issues of race, sexuality, gender, and so on, that does not mean programs are without conflict. Interpersonal conflicts arising from various aspects of in-game play were reported. This may manifest as rare instances of frustration that others are doing well, such as a problem RCE10 had to resolve in his club: "we had this issue, where someone said, 'If you play Jigglypuff [a *Smash* character], you should honestly just kill yourself.' So we had to establish for some reason that that's not an acceptable thing to say." More often, conflict arises amongst teammates, but RCE5, who is the head coach and general manager for a varsity esports team at an IT-focused public school in the US, clarified that the quarrels did not turn "personal", and that he does step in to mediate conflicts before they escalate. RCE6 (head coach for a varsity team at a private Christian university) shared similar stories, with game-based conflicts being the only issues the team had experienced. Indeed, we had to initially reschedule our interview because he was in the midst of dealing with a player who was struggling to navigate being part of a team simultaneously with the other aspects of his new college life.

The relative absence of interpersonal conflict among both varsity teams and clubs is important to note, and perhaps speaks to the mollifying pressures that co-presence exerts on what are otherwise characterized as toxic online game cultures (Taylor & Hammond, 2018). At the same time, the lack of interpersonal conflict, particularly among varsity teams, might also stem from the relative cultural and gender *homogeneity* of these teams; as our participants working in varsity programs told us, almost all varsity players are men. Because of this, all have likely benefited from the "patriarchal dividend" (Connell 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Voorhees & Orlando, 2018), associated with digital gaming: never having their intensive participation in gaming culture questioned or threatened (at least not by fellow players), never having their skill or motives undermined on account of their gender. At least, this was the compelling theory offered to us by RCE20, who said "one of the reasons why you may not have a lot of issues is so many teams don't have women or don't have marginalized players on them."

In the next section, we further investigate where and how participants discuss how they articulate and work towards inclusivity.

Racial inclusivity

Based on the participants' responses, the demographic makeup of collegiate esports athletes is fairly diverse in terms of race. In particular, representatives of schools in urban centers in Canada and the US (RCE15, RCE8 and RCE5), spoke of the racial diversity among both group membership and leadership. In other instances, the school setting itself is helping to make an otherwise culturally homogeneous group of varsity players more racially sensitive; RCE2, who works for a varsity program in a private US college, mentioned how the university's surrounding neighborhood is more racially and socio-economically diverse than the neighborhoods many (White) players came from and, as a result of studying and playing alongside members of these neighborhoods through outreach and recruitment efforts, several team members have come to a deeper understanding of racial privilege. In other instances, we heard about efforts explicitly aimed at generating more racial diversity, particularly in varsity programs. RCE14 represents a Canadian school with a large international student population from India. He reported that, due to many Indian households not owning home computers, traditionally popular esports titles do not have much of a following. With this in mind, the team organized a *PUBG Mobile* tournament, since a lot of the Indian students were interested in the game thanks to its mobile platform which they used regularly. Similarly, when asked if his team did anything to actively promote inclusivity, RCE6 responded, "Actually yeah, one of our athletes is in the multicultural student union, and we're setting up an NBA2K event with them to kind of reach to marginalized youth." Out of context this may seem awkward, but RCE6 thinks highly of the future of collegiate and professional NBA2K, and it is one of the games with a team in their varsity program.

In general, varsity teams pointed to player skill as the end-all determinant of recruits' potential validity, but community outreach of some form was usually required of team members in varsity programs. As seen in the preceding examples, this sometimes comes in the form of hosting events for player communities normally left at the margins of esports, which is interesting when contrasted with the narrative that clubs tend to be more inclusive simply because they do not recruit based on skill. We can see this tension play out when RCE14, whose organization held the *PUBG Mobile* tournament as a way of including Indian students, responds to whether they do anything to specifically *recruit* players from marginalized backgrounds to their varsity rosters. He replies:

No, it's more so we're obviously like welcome to anyone playing with trying out, but we're obviously all about getting the best people who try out. So if someone's just not good, they're not good. Right? Like there's only so much we can do to include them. If we had like out of nowhere, like five LGBTQ insane *CS:Go* players come out, like they

would just take over the team. It's just the way it is. Like it's all we're all about like skill level I would say. And any opportunity we can include people we try, which is why we have like events where people can play casually or whatever. But that's as far as that goes.

This illustrates a conscious acknowledgment of the two-tiered system in collegiate esports: efforts at inclusivity can effectively be outsourced to clubs and/or to more casual gaming events hosted as community outreach efforts by varsity programs. Interestingly, where these efforts towards increasing racial diversity were framed as positive steps towards growing and maturing collegiate esports (and its players), many participants—again, particularly those working in varsity programs—seemed to balk at the prospect of taking similar steps to increase gender diversity, whether in terms of recruitment and outreach or implementing and enforcing policies.

Gender-focused policies and practices

Gender diversity was largely lacking among player populations across both the teams and clubs represented in this study. Following something Nick documented in earlier research with esports clubs at his university (Taylor & Hammond, 2018), when women are present in clubs, it is often in positions of club organizing and leadership, including many of our participants (RCE11, RCE12, RCE13, RCE17, and RCE20). RCE21, who works for a varsity program at a private US university, is the sole female-identified interview participant associated with a varsity program. She does not actually play any of the games, despite having extensive knowledge about them and being solely in charge of the recruitment process.

The “don’t be a crappy person” policy

The AnyKey white paper on collegiate esports notes that “at a basic level, your organization should have a Code of Conduct and strategies in place for how to enforce it” (2016, p. 2); we would add that policies around safe spaces and strategies for enforcing them are important as well. Several participants we talked to, whether affiliated with a club or a varsity program, made note that their school had some form of boilerplate charter in existence, with language provided by the university that requires groups to “accept” individuals regardless of background. Such documents are often mandated in order for groups to get official club status with the university (in addition to obtaining the approval of a faculty supervisor, and designating a president, treasurer, and so on); official student club status is, in turn, a requirement for participating in the higher profile intercollegiate esports organizations such as Tespa and CLoL. But while they may be an administrative necessity, we saw a range of responses towards how the charter and similar forms of documentation, if existent (Codes of Conduct and Safe Space policies, for example) were actually used in practice.

One frequent response, perhaps the most widespread, is to regard inclusivity policies—where present—as primarily bureaucratic. As RCE14 puts it, “We have a player contract players must

sign and in there it'll state a bunch of different rules and obviously included in it is respect the players, respect to people around you, stuff like that. I don't know exactly what's in it, but I know that that type of language is in there.” RCE2, also with a varsity program, nodded to their inclusivity policies in vague terms, saying “generally I'd say it goes by the rule of don't be a crappy person to start. That covers a lot of just video game stuff in general. Whether it's anything about gender, race, equality anything across the board.” Similarly, when asked about explicit rules governing acceptable language, RCE7 said, “We very well might because I know you have to write up a constitution in order to have a club. But I'm unfamiliar with what I might be. We've never really had to look into that because we haven't had an incident yet.” RCE16 echoes this sentiment by saying the club has a charter that was drafted while applying to be a club, formally, with the school, which, “did cover that they were accepting of diverse groups and individuals, as well as a considered a welcoming environment to any background.” Often accompanying this approach are vague expressions of what sorts of behavior is (dis)allowed, boiling down to “don't be a crappy person” but very rarely making explicit any references to categories of oppression. In contrast to this ‘we have rules but I don't know what's in them / don't be a jerk’ approach, some participants have outright avoided such policies. RCE15, for instance, argued “the need to label your club as a safe space in and of itself is too much. I think it's overbearing and I think that people should be able to enter the space as a club and feel safe without being explicitly told so.”

Whether through treating inclusivity policies as bureaucratic necessities or avoiding them altogether, the end result is the same: most of the programs and clubs we heard about have little in the way of *actionable, explicit* Safe Space policies and Codes of Conduct. This makes instances in which they are visible all the more compelling. One such approach is articulated by RCE2 and RCE9, both of whom work for varsity programs that prominently display code of conduct and safe space guidelines on the walls of their esports arenas. In this way, players and staff can physically reference these posters when encountering (or preventing) toxicity and harassment. Likewise, RCE11 and RCE17, both female-identified club leaders, mentioned that their club's policies (which, in the case of RCE11's group, have additional rules on top of the language required by the university), are presented to members upon accessing the group's Discord server, instead of being buried amongst other bureaucratic documentation (for instance, on a university website).

Gender-(non)inclusive practices

As with attempts to foreground inclusivity policies, and/or adapt them to the needs of the group beyond boilerplate documentation provided by their schools, we encountered few attempts at proactively engaging participants of diverse (ie., non-male-identified) gender backgrounds. The most obvious mechanism for doing so is through recruitment. It is important to note the stark contrast between what recruitment means for varsity programs versus esports clubs. For a club, recruiting entails talking to classmates and peers, inviting friends, setting up a table at the school's student organization fair, and having a continuously updated online presence. The target

population is students who already attend the school. Utilizing similar recruiting strategies, newer, fledgling clubs such as RCE7's and REC17's share an attitude that growth is vital for their clubs at the moment and anyone who is remotely interested is more than welcome in their group, regardless of skill level, what games they play, or how important gaming is to them. An emphasis on competition and mastery is tempered by a desire to grow the club; as RCE9 expressed, "I think the group's goal is to create a positive community where people can play not against each other, but with each other, and try to make sure that the entire group can enjoy themselves and improve." In this way, the "toxic meritocracy" (Paul, 2018), associated with male-dominated (and online) competitive gaming communities brushes up against a desire for belonging within what is often a socially and emotionally challenging post-secondary experience. Indeed, the informal nature of many clubs we heard about bend them towards a more gender-inclusive atmosphere than among varsity programs, even when no explicit efforts at inclusivity are in place among club leadership; one example here is RCE16, who manages a club at a private US liberal arts school. He says he "stayed out of the politics" of promoting inclusivity, but nonetheless noted that "female players advertised their female teams" (thus letting his female peers do the work of "politics").

Regardless, for these reasons, it is not surprising to hear that clubs have a greater degree of gender diversity than varsity programs, even in the absence of explicit recruitment goals or policies. In her efforts promoting gender inclusivity via many of the same strategies outlined by the AnyKey white paper on collegiate esports, RCE20 is an outlier in this study. Specifically, she wants to squash the notion that you must have a certain amount of knowledge or skill to even be in the room at an esports event. This effort was sadly born from anecdotes of her asking other women she had seen hovering outside or around esports events why they were not playing, one of whom told her verbatim that she, "didn't think she was allowed to." It is necessary to note that RCE20's school features both a varsity program as well as thriving club side, and these strategies are planned to be used specifically by the club, not the more competitive, varsity team: again, inclusivity is seen as a matter for clubs, so as not to interfere with the 'objectively' meritocratic pursuit of skill among varsity programs. In an increasingly crowded and competitive collegiate esports scene, skill trumps all other considerations for varsity programs. The perspectives of RCE2, who coordinates a program at a small private school in the US, are insightful here:

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

He is “very open” to female players, but very few apply, and none are good enough to make the cut; it’s out of his hands. This notion of a meritocracy based on and regulated by ‘objective’ criteria is, of course, very familiar territory for those studying the lack of female participation in esports more broadly, or for that matter, women in almost all games industries and cultures (Jenson, de Castell, Taylor 2009).²

A variation on this was provided by RCE4, a tenured professor and director of a varsity program at a public US university, who described a situation in which 30 different players tried out for his *Overwatch* team, “and we go, wow, “there’s really some great young women or some great folks of color in this group. But they don’t have the SR [skill rating; *Overwatch*’s statistical ranking system] as these six do. We made the decision, well then, we need more than one squad”. His point, in other words, is to make room for female players and/or players of color, even if their SR isn’t quite as high as other players. At the same time, little mention is made of articulating or actively addressing the systemic issues at work in why there are only a small handful of women out of the “30” or “550” players that show up for a spot on a varsity roster. What is more, RCE4 made it clear to Bryce that he believes “tokenism” is as problematic as a lack of diversity—as if tokenism is the only realistic alternative to gender homogeneity. We should point out that throughout our discussions of inclusivity, male-identified participants occasionally pointed to women in positions of leadership in their organization and/or as players; one participant mentioned the presence of a “lady gamer” on one of his varsity program’s teams. Perhaps, in the kind of climate that produces “gamer dresses” for its female-identified players (Vossen, 2019) and sees a “lady gamer” as a sign of progress, avoiding “tokenism” does come across as a sign of a progressive and inclusive approach. But in sports parlance, that’s a pretty low bar.

In total, across the 21 combined clubs and programs, we heard of only one recruitment effort intentionally geared towards women. RCE9’s varsity program at a large public university is proactive in their efforts to make women feel welcome, appropriate, and valid in the landscape of esports, in a way that makes them exceptional within the context of this study. They host co-ed camps focused on specific games like *Overwatch* and League, dealing with player roles as well as management and analyst positions. They also offer a female-only camp focused more exclusively on non-player roles in the esports industry. This is the most proactive effort being made to include women, yet still arguably plays into the trope that the most natural roles for

² For us, as communication scholars and as people thinking about issues of inclusivity and representation in post-secondary contexts, there’s an interesting parallel here to be made between the alleged lack of top female-identified talent for varsity esports rosters and the recent crisis centered around the National Communication Association, which responded to critiques of its lack of racial diversity among its Distinguished Scholars by invoking the ‘meritocratic’ principles of the honor; there’s just no suitable candidates of color, apparently, and hence, #CommunicationSoWhite. In both instances, there’s a lack of attention on the part of leadership to the structural and systemic conditions that prevent deserving prospects—whether female esports players or non-white communication scholars—from being deemed ‘suitable’ (Flaherty 2019; see also Chakravarthy et al., 2018).

women in esports are ancillary. Nonetheless, despite clubs being more inclusive in terms of gender, within our study, this was the only varsity program actively working towards gender diversity.

Discussion

We believe that this study, while small in scope, updates our understandings of how the conditions for gender inclusivity in collegiate esports have transformed since the landmark white paper put out by AnyKey. For starters, it is worth pointing out that one initial hope for this study was to put together a sense of what sorts of efforts were being undertaken to improve conditions for the recruitment, training and retention of women in collegiate esports. What we got, instead, was a picture indicating that such efforts are few and far between. Invaluable work is being done at the club level, particularly by female-identified leaders who are operating in precarious institutional conditions, to enact real steps towards gender diversity in their organizations. This comes, not surprisingly, through paying care and attention to Codes of Conduct and other inclusivity policies, and through making deliberate outreach efforts to other student groups: truly operationalizing the institutional and cultural structures of postsecondary education to make esports a more welcoming culture. At the varsity level, the efforts underway in RCE9's program to establish female-only camps seem like a crucial step towards providing women with a greater foothold in varsity programs, albeit in non-player roles. Nonetheless, the challenges for meaningful gender diversity seem more pronounced than in 2016. We explore some of these, by way of conclusion.

Reflecting on the demographics of the people involved in the organizations we spoke to, both with respect to the leaders we spoke to and their group's members: perhaps the call for pushing gender inclusivity should be louder and more explicit. It is clear the landscape of collegiate esports in 2019 is more colorful than it was a decade ago in the MLG era dominated by *Halo* and *Call of Duty*, but women are still strikingly underrepresented. Effort is being made, at least in some cases, to push racial diversity in programs, and in others the group is naturally relatively diverse based on the school's region. This is a good thing, and there should not be a hierarchy of levels of oppression, or a need to be "marginalized enough" to warrant attention, but actively working to promote only racial diversity may be beginning to border on treating a non-issue.

Title IX

Surprisingly, only one participant mentioned Title IX, the American law that mandates equal resources and equal opportunities on gender grounds for all university activities. Despite it being the most obvious and (ostensibly) powerful mechanism for gender inclusivity, it was only mentioned by RCE4, in passing, who noted that other high profile varsity esports programs "had to answer that really tough Title IX question which is so, where are all your women?". He did not go into further detail regarding this situation, but simply used it to demonstrate that *his* program valued diversity (while at the same time, pointing out the pitfalls of "tokenism").

Perhaps this is because invoking Title IX, or attracting the attention of its offices, might prove too much of a headache for the majority of varsity programs, who--at least among our participants--do not currently seem well-positioned to address their gender imbalances. At the same time, based on the outsourcing of inclusivity towards community outreach events and clubs, we might expect that if and when Title IX officers *do* take up collegiate esports in a concerted way, the response of varsity programs might be to simply point out that gender inclusivity is happening through more casual and less formal channels. This is a complex issue, and might require, for example, situating the current relationship between esports programs and clubs alongside instances of universities ‘technically’ meeting Title IX criteria in ways that do little to offer meaningful opportunities to female athletes (see, for example, Mitchell, 2017). But a glib expectation regarding the relationship between Title IX and collegiate esports might go something like this: scholarships for the boys, clubs for everyone else.

The gendered political economies of skill

At this point, it may be that only something like the widespread enforcement of Title IX³—which, crucially, governs *all* programs and activities in educational institutions, not just athletics—can mitigate against the seemingly intractable pressures we see at work in the current monetization of collegiate esports (what one participant described as a “gold rush”). With higher stakes, in the form of sponsorships, media attention, and direct interest from university leadership (operating on the discursive connection between esports and STEM), varsity programs are eager to field winning teams. In these conditions, getting top-ranked players wins out over the more risky project of actively cultivating (more diverse) talent. This is most clearly demonstrated in the plans of some varsity program coaches and directors we spoke with to recruit more actively from the ranks of professionals. Here, the neoliberal values of contemporary university administration seem to be winning out over postsecondary education’s historical commitments to cultivating growth and positive social change: the value of esports is precisely in its capacity to improve the university’s brand in a crowded postsecondary marketplace. In this arrangement, universities have little interest in changing the status quo of the “esports pipeline”, however unsustainable it might be in the long term (Partin, 2019) -- and as we know, this pipeline, like others in adjacent games industries (Johnson, 2018), intensifies rather than ameliorates the longstanding disenfranchisement of women.

³ We are aware that Title IX is a US law, but we might expect that Canadian schools might follow suit with their American counterparts, as collegiate esports is (despite the consistent success of Canadian schools) largely dominated by American universities.

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Appendix 1: Participants

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Race	Leadership role	University	Organization Type
RCE1	24	M		Assistant Coach of varsity and JV LoL	Public US university	Program
RCE2	27	M	White	Director of Esports	Private US STEM school	Program
RCE3	Mid 20s	M	White	Head Coach	Private US Liberal Arts University	Program
RCE4	48	M	White (Northern European)	Director and Head Coach of Esports	Public US University	Program
RCE5	24	M	Hispanic	General Manager / faculty advisor	Public IT-focused US university	Program
RCE6	32	M	White	Head Coach	Private US Christian College	Program
RCE7	19	M	White	Head of Overwatch division	Public US University	Club
RCE8	22	M	Asian	Co-President	Public US University	Club
RCE9	20	M	$\frac{3}{4}$ White, $\frac{1}{4}$ Dominican	President and founder	Public US Research University	Club
RCE10	22	M	White	President	Public US Research University	Club
RCE11	20	F	White	President	Public US Research	Club

					University	
RCE12	18?	F	White	President	Public US Research University	Club
RCE13	19	F	White	President	Public US Research University	Club
RCE14	24	M	White	Varsity Esports Director and Adjunct Professor of Esports	Canadian Applied Arts/Tech College	Program
RCE15	22	M	Canadian born Chinese	President	Public Canadian Research University	Club
RCE16	Early 20s	M	White	Former Esports Club President	Private US Liberal Arts University	Club
RCE17	21	F	Japanese American	President and Co-Founder	Private US University	Club
RCE18	24	M	½ Chinese, ½ White	Former President and Co-Founder	Private US Research University	Club
RCE19	21	M	White	President	Private US Research University	Club
RCE20	31	F	White	Faculty Advisor?	Private US College	Club
RCE21	24	F	White	Esports Director	Private US University	Program

Appendix 2: Interview Questions

Participation in traditional sports & other (competitive) leisure activities

Did you ever play organized traditional sports?

Do you watch/follow traditional sports?

If so, which?

If not, why?

Are you now, or were you ever involved in non-sport competitive activities? (i.e. Debate, Chess, Card Games, Music, etc.)

Participation in gaming/general gaming

Do you currently play any competitive video games?

If so, which one(s)?

What other games do you play currently?

How many hours / week?

When you play multiplayer games, do you play primarily online or in person with others?

Do you specialize in one game/genre of games?

What is your earliest memory of playing games with others?

What's your most vivid competitive gaming memory? (Can be pre-eSports)

Participation in esports

How do you define esports?

What specifics are important to your own definition of eSports?

(Minimized randomness, skill being a determinant factor, whatever)

Do you currently participate in esports as a player, at any capacity?

If so, which one(s)?

What got you interested in the game you play (or played)?

Have you made new friends through playing games?

Have you ever attended a face to face tournament?

Did you attend your first eSports event alone or with friend(s)?

Are you a member of any social networking groups for the game(s) you are interested in?
(Discord, FB)

Do you think collegiate e-sSports will continue growing or slow down/stop? Why?

Experiences with esports program

How many esports teams are there at your school, and how many of them are you involved with?

Does the team have scheduled practices or other obligations?
Where at?

What kind of time commitment is required to be a part of the team?

Does your program focus only on team based games or does it also feature games played between individuals?

What are your personal goals for joining this group?
Do you know what the goals of the group itself are?

Does the program offer any sort of community outreach/development programs for non-team members?

How is the team treated in comparison to traditional sports teams on campus?

Does your program participate in any community outreach programming, either locally or within the esports community?

Does any of this programming specifically target underrepresented groups in esports (women, people of color)? If so, what is the focus of this programming?

Team Governance [different depending on club or varsity program]

Does your program have any affiliation with widespread collegiate esports organizations such as Tespa, Collegiate Star League, or the NACE?

Maybe ask League teams about CLOL since it's apparently exclusive?

How is the group structured or organized?
Is leadership based on skill level, organizational skills, etc?

Is the group more focused on being as competitive as possible or being open to all players?
(What did you base your answer on?/what makes you think this)

Do players get any sort of scholarship for being team members?

Does your organization provide opportunities for players to travel to overnight tournament/events?

Where does the team's funding come from? (School vs Outside funding)

What other forms of support does your organization receive from the university? (Space, etc.)

Is the team also considered to be a club on campus?

If the organization has a faculty advisor, how involved are they?

Where on your campus does your organization meet? Can you describe what it's like?
(what TYPE of building also: Memorial union? Student center? A class building?)

How does the group recruit?
Are you involved in that process?

In your understanding, how was the program originally formed?

What was the state of esports at your school before the program came into being?

What kinds of personnel, aside from the players, are involved? Are those paid or unpaid positions?

Does your team have explicit rules governing what language is acceptable?

Inclusivity Questions

Do any members of your leadership come from historically marginalized backgrounds, whether in terms of race, disability, ethnicity, gender, and/or sexuality?

Is there any representation of people with historically marginalized racial backgrounds in your organization?

Are there any female-identifying members on the team or in the organization? If so, how many?

Is there any LGBT representation on the team or in the organization?

Has your organization ever received disciplinary action in any way, for any reason, that you know of? (Why?)

Have you ever heard any type of comment made by one member that has offended another member?

(Did you intervene? Why/not?)

Was it game based or personal?

(These 4 can all be internal or external, they don't have to be member on member)

Has your team ever had a problematic incident stemming from issues of racial identity?

Has your team ever had a problematic incident stemming from issues of gender identity?

Has your team ever had a problematic incident stemming from issues of sexual identity?

Have you ever had a team member involved in an incident of physical violence?

Do you have any formal documents or policies for 'safe spaces' related to your organization?

- If no, why not?
- If yes, why do you think these are important?

What other strategies (if any) do you and your organization use to promote inclusivity and/or a safe atmosphere?

Do you have any formal documents or policies for *recruiting* gender / racial / sexual minorities?

- If no, why not?
- If yes, why do you think these are important?

Wrap Up

Are there any questions we should have asked about your club that we didn't? Or, is there anything you feel is noteworthy about your club that we didn't touch on?

Background Questions

- How old are you?
- Where do you live now (region and/or city)?
- Do you live with your parent(s)/guardian(s), or on your own/with partner/with friends/other?
- Do you go to school? What level / studying what?
- Are you employed? Doing what?
- How would you describe your ethnic background?

For conclusion question:

THANKS THANKS THANKS

And

Can you recommend people either at your institution or other universities' esports clubs that we should talk to? If so, can you either introduce us over email or share their email address?