

Chapter 6

eSports Gender, Race and Culture

ABSTRACT

Gaming culture has often courted controversy, whether for its association with sloth, its violent content, or sexist depictions of female characters. In the narrower context of eSports, instances of misogyny, racism, and homophobia remain an ongoing concern. Despite the fact that women and racialized groups make up a significant proportion of the gaming public, eSports viewership among those groups is proportionally much lower. Moreover, analyses in this chapter show that women and people of color comprise a fraction of the top streamers on Twitch, as well as the broadcast face of eSports media coverage, the casters. Despite efforts to educate users and regulate the conduct of players and streamers, the eSports community continually runs into controversy. While the industry grapples with its image related to social justice and equity, the clear lack of diversity in eSports excludes a large and important demographic, and thus limits its economic growth. Reforms have been slow to come, and some argue have had impact.

INTRODUCTION

A recent study on eSports and gaming by researchers at the University of Oxford concluded, as have many previous analyses, that gaming is in no way connected to violence in society (University of Oxford, 2019). What it does observe, however, is a toxic culture of “anti-social behavior”

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-1538-9.ch006

including trolling and “trash-talking.” Gaming might not be a direct catalyst for violence, however other reports have highlighted an ominous connection between gaming sites and the alt-right as emerged in the aftermath of the mass shooting at a Mosque in New Zealand in March, 2019 (Duff, 2019). Women and people from racialized groups make up a significant portion of the gamers in North America and many parts of the world, but eSports viewership among those groups is proportionally much lower. Incidents of racist and sexist behavior are documented with remarkable frequency in eSports media, despite industry efforts to boost inclusion and punish those who step out of line. Diversity advocates argue the perceptions of a hostile culture itself prevents broader participation in eSports by marginalized groups. Moreover, eSports teams, leagues, game publishers and media cannot take full advantage of the market when major demographics do not engage. More importantly, the individuals and groups targeted by toxic rhetoric continually suffer from marginalization and abuse in the absences of any broad, measured reforms. This chapter documents the ongoing issues related to equity and social justice faced by eSports and underscores the lack of diversity. It also examines the efforts to target harassment and provide a more inclusive culture.

BACKGROUND

The Masculine, White World of Twitch

The global gaming community is huge, as indicated in previous chapters, and almost half the population of the world plays video games. In North America this means high rates of participation for both men and women, as well as racialized groups. On the gender front there seems to be fairly consistent data estimating female gaming at about 45 per cent of the total in the United States (Entertainment Software Association, 2018). In Canada, the most recent analyses suggest an even split (50%) between male and female gamers (Entertainment Software Association of Canada, 2018). Statistics on the racial breakdown of the gaming demographic are much harder to come by. One report cites data from a 2017 ESPN Fan Survey in which African-Americans make up 22% of total “who identify as avid fans (African-Americans are 13% of the U.S. population overall)” (parenthesis in the original, Peterson, 2018). Hispanics in the United States

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