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## Professional gaming and work: Challenges, trajectories, and labour market impacts amongst professional gamers

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Sociology

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## Abstract

Over the last decade the popularity of video games has risen tremendously. A new industry around professional gaming has emerged alongside this growth in the popularity of video games. In professional gaming, individuals play video games competitively while their matches and games are streamed online to a global audience. As a result of the growth in the sector, compensation for some individuals has reached well into six and seven figures. Knowledge of these salaries has resulted in an influx of individuals interested in working in professional gaming. This study investigates not only those individuals who play video games professionally, but also those who work in the periphery and infrastructure of the gaming industry.

This dissertation critically investigates work in the professional gaming industry drawing on qualitative interview data. Two primary questions are asked: What is the nature of work in professional gaming? What are the experiences of individuals who pursue careers and work in this industry? This exploratory research utilizes thirty-four semi-structured interviews with individuals involved in the professional gaming industry.

The participants describe a range of challenges, difficulties, and issues they experience both transitioning into and working in this industry. The results suggest that work in professional gaming is rife with exploitation, precarity, and non-standard work arrangements. Pursuing a career in this industry is difficult, and participants often lack social support during their transition from playing video games as leisure to being employed in professional gaming. This lack of social support is not determinative and the participants often accessed their social capital in other ways in order to succeed. Financial difficulties, geographic challenges,

and issues with discrimination and sexism were faced by the participants working in this industry. The present study provides important recommendations for future research. Overall, the study sheds new light on the nature of work in this industry – work that many dismiss as simply leisure – revealing tensions, contradictions, and inequalities within it.

## Keywords

Sociology of work; video games; gaming; esports; streaming; Twitch; professional gaming.

## Summary for Lay Audience

Over the last decade the popularity of video games has risen tremendously. An entirely new industry around professional gaming has emerged alongside this growth in the popularity of video games. In professional gaming, individuals play video games competitively while their matches and games are streamed online to a global audience. As a result of the growth in professional gaming, compensation for some individuals has reached well into six and seven figures. Knowledge of these salaries has resulted in an influx of individuals interested in work in this sector. This study investigates not only those individuals who play video games professionally, but also those who work other jobs in professional gaming.

The participants describe a range of challenges, difficulties, and issues they experience as they transition into and work in this industry. The results suggest that work in professional gaming is rife with exploitation, precarity, and non-standard work arrangements. Pursuing a career in this industry is difficult, and participants often lack social support during their transition from playing video games as leisure to being employed in professional gaming. This lack of social support resulted in participants accessing their social networks in different ways. Financial difficulties, geographic challenges, and issues with discrimination and sexism were faced by the participants working in this industry. The present study provides important recommendations for future research. Overall, the study sheds new light on the nature of work in this industry – work that many dismiss as simply leisure – revealing tensions, contradictions, and inequalities within it.

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## Chapter 1

### 1 Introduction

Over the last thirty years, video games became increasingly prominent in the everyday lives of people from all strata of society (Freeman & Wohn, 2017a; Johnson & Woodcock, 2017; Taylor, 2012, 2018). During the early 2000s, a transformation of the role occupied by video games began, shifting video games from something that was strictly a hobby towards a serious and competitive activity. Rather than individuals simply playing video games for fun, people began competing against one another and in some cases, competing for compensation. While the professional gaming industry has roots dating back thirty years, there has been a considerable change from the early days of competitive gaming. The last decade in particular has led to a remarkable rise of *professional* gaming and individuals playing video games for work (Griffiths, 2017; Johnson & Woodcock, 2017; Reitman, Anderson-Coto, Wu, Lee, & Steinkuehler, 2019).

The development of this new form of labour, playing video games for compensation, was also accompanied by the development of an extensive support infrastructure and industry (Kempe-Cook, Sher, & Su, 2019). The rapid growth of periphery jobs as part of the support infrastructure has yet to receive significant attention from researchers. When asked to imagine a type of professional sport or work, most people would not think of video games. In spite of this, professional gaming has emerged as a multi-billion-dollar industry, one that allows individuals employed in a wide variety of jobs to earn a living (Merwin et al., 2018; Taylor, 2018). Professional gaming, esports, and streaming hold an

uneasy position straddling leisure, work, and sport, creating challenges for researchers attempting to understand the experiences of those involved in this industry.

The emergence and integration of digital technologies, and the integration of professional gaming into our economies and everyday life necessitates further investigation. The limited literature in this space suggests that existing inequalities are being reproduced in this new and emerging industry (Reinessa, 2019; Reitman et al., 2019; Rudolf et al., 2020; Yun, 2019). This dissertation addresses this gap in the literature. As digital, and often remote work, professional gaming represents one possible future of work. Remote, virtual workplaces have, during the 2020 pandemic, become commonplace and increasingly relied upon by employers (Arntz, Yahmed, & Berlingieri, 2020; Brynjolfsson et al., 2020; Dubey & Tripathi, 2020; Kramer & Kramer, 2020).

Understanding the nature of work in the professional gaming industry can give insight into phenomena that have relevance for many other types of work in Western society more broadly.

Research on professional gaming from a sociological perspective not only produces academic insight, it may also provide credibility to the industry as a legitimate form of work. Research can shift perceptions, gain a new understanding, and improve the conditions and experiences of those in the industry by legitimizing professional gaming as a valid area to work in. To explore professional gaming and esports, it is essential to first provide appropriate context and background on the development and history of this industry. Next, I will define what professional gaming is and provide a brief overview of its history.

## 1.1 Contextualizing Professional Gaming and Esports

### 1.1.1 What is Professional Gaming?

Professional gaming, streaming, and esports are terms that present a particularly difficult conceptual conundrum.<sup>1</sup> The distinction between them is not necessarily straightforward, and has yet to be fully developed in the literature. Broadly, professional gaming includes persons whose participation in the video game industry serves as a primary source of their income. Individuals involved in esports are not only professional gamers, but are also involved in direct competition with others. Esports involve competitive matches between players or teams within a particular video game (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Competitions take place over a multitude of devices including consoles, mobile devices, and personal computers (PCs). Despite this range of equipment used where esports events take place, the primary medium are PCs. As such, this dissertation focuses primarily on PC gaming. Streaming involves the broadcasting of individuals playing video games on Twitch.tv or another streaming platform (Burroughs & Rama, 2015; Cook, 2014; Taylor, 2018). The terminology for the professional gaming industry that will be used going forward will be *professional gaming*. For chapters two and three, I use professional gaming as a blanket catch-all term. Within these chapters I may make reference to specific areas of the industry, for example, streaming and esports; however, a full discussion of the nuances, differences, and definitions of professional gaming, esports, and streaming will be presented in chapter four. Here, I clarify how professional gaming,

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<sup>1</sup> For a full, detailed overview of the specific jobs, occupations, and areas of labour within professional gaming see T.L. Taylor (2012). The development of the industry over the past decade has resulted in considerable change in this sector. The general descriptions and occupations remain similar.

streaming, and esports are defined and how the terms are used in the remainder of this thesis.

Understanding professional gaming from a historical perspective is important, as it can provide context for the industry and explain certain practices and circumstances that may at first glance be difficult to understand (Bogost, 2008). The late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed the beginnings of competitive multiplayer video games. A 1997 'Quake' tournament is "widely regarded as the world's first esports event" (Bountie Gaming, 2018). For the next decade, professional gaming underwent an incredibly slow growth, and struggled to expand to new audiences. It was not until 2007, with the launch of Justin.tv, that the industry began to experience rapid growth. This website revolutionized how video games were broadcast online, with live streaming and interactive real-time discussions with the individual broadcasting (Andronico, 2016). Following the success of Justin.tv, in 2011 Twitch.tv was created as a spin-off, providing a dedicated streaming platform for video gaming content (Cook, 2014). Over the last five to seven years, Twitch has increased in popularity, legitimacy, and reach, to the point where its audiences rival those of professional sports and the entertainment industry (Keiper, Manning, Jenny, Olrich, & Croft, 2017; Tassi, 2012; Taylor, 2012). Twitch is certainly not the only live-streaming platform used by those involved in professional gaming. Facebook and YouTube, along with several tournament organizer specific platforms exist. Nevertheless, Twitch remains the clear leader in live streaming (Keiper et al., 2017; Taylor, 2018).

While the beginnings of professional gaming were characterized by amateurism and disorganization, over the last five years considerable professionalization and organization



has emerged. Today, esports are generally structured similarly to traditional sports (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2017). Esports teams have organizations, team managers, support staff, and annual salaries (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). For example, an article in *The Verge* described the compensation of the players on Team Liquid: “[Team Liquid] covers the expenses of its five Dota<sup>2</sup> players and provides them with training facilities, all the PC hardware they could ever want, and support services like a mental coach. Continuing, an annual salary that ranges between \$100,000 and \$200,000” (Savov, 2017). As of 2018, Team Liquid is a top organization across a wide range of esports games with extensive resources and well- developed infrastructure and support systems (Savov, 2017; Young Gu, 2016). Esports resembles traditional sports in other ways as well. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the organizers of the Asian Games, the Olympic Council of Asia, who announced the inclusion of an ‘electronic sports’ medal event for the 2022 Asian Games. According to the press release, the inclusion of esports at the games reflects, “the rapid development and popularity of this new form of sports participation among the youth” (Olympic Council of Asia, 2017). The National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE) is another esports organization that has emerged to legitimize this industry.

NACE’s purpose is to:

promote the education and development of students through intercollegiate esports participation. Member institutions, although varied and diverse, share a common commitment to high standards and to the principle that participation in organized esports competition

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<sup>2</sup> Dota 2 or Dota as it is sometimes simply referred to, is a video games that has become one of the biggest esports titles. In this game, two teams with five players each compete against each other attempting to defeat the other and ultimately win the game. This game has four of the five highest prize pools in esports history, with Fortnite having the second highest single tournament prize pool and Dota occupying the first, third, fourth, and fifth highest dollar figures. The 2019 International held in August 2019 in Shanghai holds the record, with a prize pool in excess of \$33 million dollars (Nordmark & Heath, 2019).

serves as an integral part of the total educational process. (National Association of Collegiate Esports, 2016, p. 1)

NACE's membership includes over 130 colleges in the United States, in excess of 3000 student athletes and scholarships in the tens of millions of dollars across a wide variety of esports titles and platforms (National Association of Collegiate Esports, 2016). The meteoric rise in scholarships for professional gamers has also impacted the decision making of young people (Koetsier, 2018; Schaeperkoetter et al., 2017). According to NACE, the number of scholarships offered for esports rose 480% from 2017 to 2018 (Koetsier, 2018). Both the inclusion of esports by an Olympic committee as well as the rapid spread of college esports competitions further demonstrates the growth, organization, and improving structure of the professional gaming industry.

The rapid expansion and legitimization of professional gaming has not come without its difficulties and challenges. The industry has consistently struggled with exploitation of players, support staff, and individuals involved in the production of events (Kempe-Cook et al., 2019). This includes several tournament organizers and team owners failing to pay players, play-by-play announcers, and production staff, prize pools and payment for work performed (Ramadani, 2017; Reinessa, 2019). Over the last five years in Dota 2, there have been numerous public discussions about the lack of promised compensation. The November 2016 Northern Arena championship in Dota 2 is one such example, as "complexity Gaming, Alliance, Team NP, as well as the organizers and talent lineup had yet to be paid for their involvement four months after the event concluded" (Ramadani,

2017). Payments for this event were ultimately distributed over six months after the conclusion of the championship (Reinessa, 2019; Rosen, 2017).<sup>3</sup>

### 1.1.2 Financial and Spectatorship Expansion

Coupled with the rapid rise in popularity of professional gaming is considerable financial growth. The average prize pool of esports tournaments has rocketed up from just \$6,400 in 2011 to over \$47,000 in 2018 (e-Sports Earnings, 2018). The increase in average prize pool has been fueled by the top prize pools; the highest fifteen dollar amounts ever awarded have occurred since 2014 (e-Sports Earnings, 2018). This financial growth is not limited to prize pools but includes increases in viewership and broadcasting as well.

At the same time, the professional gaming industry as a whole has experienced significant growth in viewership and broadcasting. According to a 2018 report by Goldman Sachs, viewership for esports is growing tremendously with a 167 million global monthly audience that surpasses both the National Hockey League (NHL) and Major League Baseball (MLB) (Merwin et al., 2018). Based on the projections by Goldman Sachs, if current spectating trajectories continue, this global monthly audience, “will reach 276 [million], similar in size to the NFL (National Football League) today” (Merwin et al., 2018, p. 3). At the end of 2017, Twitch and Overwatch League signed a 2-year broadcasting agreement that sees Twitch pay Overwatch League \$45 million per

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<sup>3</sup> I personally worked this event as tournament administrator and was paid by a third party who had difficulty receiving payment to cover my expenses from the primary tournament organizer. This will be described in more detail in the following section of this chapter.

year for broadcasting rights to their games.<sup>4</sup> For comparison's sake, the National Hockey League's (NHL) deal with NBC pays the NHL \$200 million a year until 2021 (Hughes, 2011). During the 2017-2018 NHL season, NBC averaged 417,000 viewers across all platforms (Paulsen, 2018). Towards the end of the last Overwatch season, Twitch viewership rose to over 350,000 concurrent viewers (GameCentral, 2018). Indeed, the productions that take place surrounding esports events rivals that of traditional sports. This includes some cases of companies using multiple production trucks to put on their esports events, a practice not unlike what currently takes place in traditional sports (Taylor, 2018). This number is dwarfed by the nearly 700,000 concurrent viewers that tuned in to watch popular streamer Ninja play Fortnite, a competitive multiplayer first person shooter game, along with rappers Drake and Travis Scott in late 2018 (GameCentral, 2018).<sup>5</sup> Ninja, arguably the most popular video game streamer, regularly had viewer counts that extended into hundreds of thousands of people on Twitch (TwitchTracker, 2019). The significant growth in viewership of both esports and streamers demonstrates the increasing relevance of this industry.

These financial, spectatorship, and professionalization trends reflect that professional gaming, and esports in particular, is a growing industry. Work within this industry may no longer simply be part-time and casual employment (Hollist, 2015; Li, 2017). While gaming has been historically viewed as a leisure activity or hobby, participation in professional gaming provides income for those playing games, as well as those in the

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<sup>4</sup> Overwatch is a popular first-person shooter game that has an extensive league setup similar to traditional sports.

<sup>5</sup> Ninja is a professional gamer who has both competed in competitions as well as successfully streamed in front of hundreds of thousands of viewers. He is one of, if not the most, recognizable streamers in 2020 (Lewis, 2018).

periphery supporting the industry. That is, for an increasing number of people, professional gaming is work. The relative lack of research on this industry, and the dearth of literature on work in professional gaming calls for further inquiry. Where there has been research on the professional gaming industry, it tended to focus on players and ignored those individuals working in the periphery of the industry. Those people occupy important roles in the infrastructure of professional gaming, and to date their experiences in this burgeoning industry have yet to be appropriately examined.

## 1.2 Researcher Background

I was first drawn to video games in late 1997 at the age of eight. I can remember sitting in my friend's basement while his father played a new game "Age of Empires" (AOE). For the next two weeks, I spent nearly every night after school at his house playing AOE until my mom came to pick me up. The impression this game left on me has been enduring. I was amazed by the different tactics and difficulty in mastering that strategy. I was able to purchase my own copy of the game and it became the first video game I played online against other players. I became quite good, eventually winning an event with a \$20 prize pool in the early 2000's. This was my first experience playing competitive online video games and they have since become a significant part of my life. I have played many other games online competitively: Age of Empires 2, Warcraft 2, Warcraft 3, Starcraft, Call of Duty, Battlefield, Counter Strike, Overwatch, PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG), and Defense of the Ancients 2 (Dota 2). The last game, Dota 2, is ultimately the catalyst behind this research. Dota 2 is a Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) that began as a custom game modification (MOD) in Warcraft 3. In the late 2000's Valve Corporation hired the creator of this MOD to develop a standalone game, Dota 2, which was released

to the public in 2011 (Valve Corporation, 2011). I began playing Dota 2 in 2011 and since then I have made several lifelong friends from playing this game. I have spent the majority of the leisure time in my adult life playing competitive online multiplayer games like Dota 2 with friends.

The scope of my involvement in professional gaming and esports includes serving as tournament administrator, tournament official, and tournament referee for several esports competitions. These events ranged from small online tournaments of \$2,000-\$5,000, to large online events with prize pools worth upwards of \$50,000. In 2013, I began assisting a Canadian-based esports organization, Dota 2 Canada Cup, with events and acting as an administrator for games. My role included enforcing rules and ensuring that the tournament and the games within it occurred fairly and as scheduled. This position was generally not paid, and when I did receive compensation it was typically in the form of free items or gaming equipment.<sup>6</sup> It was sporadic and uncommon, but on three occasions I received financial compensation. In November 2016, I attended the local area network (LAN) Northern Arena Esports Championship in Montreal to act as an on-stage administrator.<sup>7</sup> This tournament had a prize pool of US\$100,000 and was held at the Bell Centre in Montreal. In the aftermath of this event, I unfortunately personally experienced the exploitation and non-payment by tournament organizers that will be discussed in chapter four. Ultimately, my background, experiences, and reflections all contribute to

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<sup>6</sup> While it was generally not paid, this has changed more recently, as the industry has become more developed.

<sup>7</sup> Local Area Network or LAN in the context of gaming refers to competitions that are held at physical locations via local computer/internet networks. These types of competitions are typically considered 'fairer' and more equitable as they reduce inequities between the players relating to internet or computer quality.

the approach of the research, the collection and interpretation of the data, as well as the dissemination of the findings. My involvement in the gaming industry can be best categorized as brief. While I was compensated on a number of occasions for my work in this space, I did not attempt to pursue a career or full-time employment in this industry. My experiences do, however, uniquely position me to approach and investigate the intersection of work and professional gaming. In addition to my experiences, the contacts and connections I have within the industry provide another unique quality for the study.

### 1.3 Overview of the Dissertation

This dissertation uses a monograph approach to understanding work in the professional gaming industry. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals employed in this industry between January 2019 and June 2019. This includes persons playing video games for compensation either as streamers or within esports. This research also addresses gaps in the literature to consider the experiences of those working in professional gaming but not playing video games themselves. In addition, an individual's decision-making process around their transition into and out of the industry will be discussed. The difficulties and challenges they experience once working in professional gaming will also be addressed. This research is largely exploratory, as scant literature exists on this topic.

The remainder of the dissertation is organized into the following chapters: Chapter two provides a detailed review of the literature on the intersection of professional gaming and work. The methodology for this research is described in chapter three. The first of four results chapters, chapter four, outlines the current state of professional gaming, including the maturation of the industry, how to delineate different subsections of the industry, and

the working conditions, exploitation, and challenges experienced by those that work in this industry. Chapter five investigates the role of social support, gaming capital, and social capital in the transition into and success of those working in professional gaming. The findings on the intersection of leisure, work, and professional gaming are discussed in chapter six. Chapter seven presents a discussion of the difficulties and challenges experienced by those working this industry. This includes issues relating to discrimination and sexism, socioeconomic inequalities, and hardships that arise as a result of where people live. The discussion, limitations, and future research recommendations are presented in the conclusion, chapter eight.



## Chapter 2

### 2 Literature Review

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a review of the literature on professional gaming. This literature is still developing. Beyond this overview, I will delve deeper into specific areas of research to inform the various focal points of the current study. First, I discuss the current literature on work and the theoretical underpinnings that form the foundation of the dissertation. I then discuss the professional gaming industry and situate it within the sociology of work literature. Next, the intersection of work, identity, and leisure is reviewed. I then present existing research on social support followed by a review of the literature on different forms of capital, alongside their importance to professional gaming. Subsequently, I present the literature on various inequalities and differences that impact individual's participation in the professional gaming industry. These include the economic challenges of professional gaming, gendered experiences in gaming, and the physical and mental health implications of being involved in the industry. I conclude the chapter by discussing how the current study contributes to the research on professional gaming, and how this dissertation helps to address the gaps in the literature. Lastly, the research themes and research questions that are the basis for the current study are presented.

## 2.2 Work

Tilly (1998) considered work to be “any human effort that produces transferable use value” (p. 103). This is a broad definition that applies to a variety of different types of work. Paid work typically takes place within a job or occupation, which can be defined as a “bundle of work contracts” with a set of rights, obligations, and expectations accompanying it (Tilly, 1998, p. 103). Is gaming work? To the extent that it produces use value – for an audience or employer for example -- it is. When gaming takes place professionally, for someone else, it can be a job according to Tilly’s definition.

Scholars have argued that the distinction between work and play is essential to understanding gaming and work from a Marxian lens (Fuchs, 2014; Kristensen & Wilhelmsson, 2017). When someone games for their own enjoyment, it is not clear that use value is created. At this level, then, gaming may be ‘play’. Yet, it can also be the case that gamers produce use value, but lack the contracts, obligations, and expectations accompanying an occupation or job. There is a continuum between leisure, work, and occupation, and along this continuum exists rampant opportunities for exploitation (Aguiar, Bils, Charles, & Hurst, 2017).

The vulnerability of amateur gamers is highlighted by Kostakis (2009) who comments that from a Marxist perspective, “in the production of the amateurs, there is no wage dependency and therefore almost no marginal cost when exploiting an additional amateur” (p. 459). People can profit from the gaming work of others who lack contracts. Amateurs are at risk in these environments as others benefit from their exploited labour. In *Capital*, Marx (1867) extensively outlined the exploitation experienced by those working within a capitalist system. For Marx, the essential issue for workers is that their

compensation is only approximately tied to the output of their labour (Fuchs, 2014; Graham, Hjorth, & Lehdonvirta, 2017; Marx, 1867). That leaves the opportunity for third parties or outsiders to excise the surplus value, a value that is not returned back to the individual who created it. The alienation may be especially problematic when the lines between work and play are blurred. Here, the worker finds themselves in a circumstance where the “digital labour is the play labour that hides the reality of exploitation” (Fuchs & Seignani, 2013, p. 288).

In today’s economy workers experience new forms of risk that leave them vulnerable to exploitation, including the rise of non-standard employment (Kalleberg, Reskin, & Hudson, 2000). Non-standard work is work which lacks some characteristic of a standard employment relationship (Adams & Welsh, 2008). The definition of a standard work arrangement is one in which “workers have a full-time, year-round job with one employer... The work is located at the employer’s premises and is under the supervision of the employer.... Workers [also] have a reasonable expectation that employment will continue infinitely” (Adams & Welsh, 2008, p. 271; Kalleberg et al., 2000). This non-standard work typically includes jobs that are part-time, semi-permanent, and precarious (Adams & Welsh, 2008; Hardy, Lovei, & Patterson, 2018; Lewchuk et al., 2015). As of 2018, nearly 14% of the adult population in Canada worked in temporary employment and the “growth in temporary work has outpaced permanent employment since 1998/1999” (Hardy et al., 2018). Some scholars have argued these figures are even higher and that upwards of 30% of Canadians work in employment relationships that are precarious in nature (Lewchuk et al., 2015). Much work in the gaming industry is non-standard, enhancing the vulnerability of gamers and others in the industry. Those working

in this industry are often faced with questionable working conditions, unpaid labour, and precarious employment terms (Ridgeway, 2014; Yun, 2019; Zulinski, 2016). Work has, according to Gina Neff (Neff, 2012), materially changed in the twenty first century. For her, “the new industrial relations of uncertainty are emerging” and have increasingly raised the level of risk and precarity of employment (Neff, 2012, p. 8). As individuals seek to navigate the changing employment landscape, they do so while simultaneously experiencing the impacts of the precarious labour market personally (Neff, 2012).

Professional gaming has overwhelmingly relied on labour primarily provided by youth (Taylor, 2012). The last fifty years have witnessed other labour market changes, and these have disproportionately impacted work opportunities for youth (Autor, 2010; Morissette, 2016). Young people, specifically young adult men, have considerably higher rates of unemployment when compared to the rest of the population. In 2014, excluding full-time students, under 60% of Canadian men aged 17-24 were employed full time, compared to 74.1% of young men with full time employment in 1989 (Morissette, 2016). This shift in employment has led to more part-time and temporary work, in addition to changes in how young adults approach work and the labour market (Adams & Welsh, 2008; Morestin, 2012; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010). Decades ago, youth were able to graduate high school and find decent paying jobs. Today, even university graduates struggle to find work that pays a living wage (Weikle, 2019). This is especially true in urban areas considering the high cost of living in many Canadian cities (Evans, 2019). These changes have left many young people disillusioned with the labour market, and has implications for professional gaming, including exploitation and difficulty finding properly compensated employment.

## 2.3 Professional Gaming and Work

The development of the gaming industry over the last decade has been well documented (Connolly, Boyle, MacArthur, Hainey, & Boyle, 2012; Mora-Cantalops & Sicilia, 2018; Reitman et al., 2019; Seo, 2016; Seo & Jung, 2016; Taylor, 2012, 2018). In addition to the development of the industry, understanding how other researchers have conceptualized and defined professional gaming is important. Any understanding of the nature of work in this industry is predicated on an appropriate conceptualization and framing of the industry itself. A review of the literature finds that researchers have generally described esports and streaming as the two most prominent areas of professional gaming.

The distinctions between professional gaming, esports, and streaming may at first glance seem arbitrary. However, appropriate considerations ought to be made to distinguish between these areas of the industry: a task which has yet to be appropriately and thoroughly articulated (Freeman & Wohn, 2017a; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Reitman et al., 2019). The defining of professional gaming “is a nontrivial debate that underlies scholars’ framing of their research” (Reitman et al., 2019, p. 9). Not only has a proper framing of this industry as an emerging place of work not taken place, researchers often use these terms and concepts interchangeably. The lack of consensus in the literature surrounding professional gaming, streaming, and esports necessitates a proper conceptualization, a process that will be a research focus of the current study.

How do these forms of work fit within a sociology of work framework? Individuals who work primarily in streaming certainly have a materially different relationship to the means of production and the capitalist system more broadly than those working in other

areas of professional gaming. More specifically many streamers are self-employed, and earn money through sponsorships and subscriptions. Those in esports work within a complex array of contractual agreements and arrangements, but are more likely to be employees or contract workers. Complicating matters, many individuals working in the esports industry work in jobs that are not unlike jobs found outside of this industry (for example, managers, coaches, and play by play announcers).

The challenges and difficulties faced by those employed in this industry may be a reflection of societal wide trends towards increasingly precarious employment (Hardy et al., 2018). This is representative of the gaming industry as, it is “characterized both by its reliance on networked computer technologies and its youthful and precarious workforce” (Sotamaa & Karppi, 2010, pp. 10-11). The prevalence of non-standard employment within professional gaming is certainly greater than full-time permanent work (Kücklich, 2005). The industry has overwhelmingly relied on precarious labour relationships. As such, it may suffer from the same issues and challenges as other forms of non-standard employment struggle with. The lack of meaningful work and precarity characteristic of the opportunities available to youth in society generally, may encourage participation in professional gaming. While gaming is no more secure than work in more traditional fields, it is regarded as more meaningful to those involved. Some researchers have suggested that video games themselves may be leading to lower levels of work amongst young men (Aguilar et al., 2017; Bui, 2017). While this is not indicative of the literature as a whole, it is important to consider the impact that the gaming industry is having on employment itself.

Work in the professional gaming industry has undergone changes over the past decade (Spiezia, 2017; Valenduc & Vendramin, 2016). More specifically, the working conditions and employment practices in this industry have improved (Merwin et al., 2018; Taylor, 2012). In spite of this development and progression there have been continued calls for increased professionalization and regulation (Blum, 2016; Valenduc & Vendramin, 2016). As the proliferation of esports continues, the sophistication of the events surrounding them has also increased. This growth is often accompanied by “institutionalized governance of esports, reflected in a greater number of professionalized leagues and organizations” (Seo & Jung, 2016, p. 636). This formal organization and structure are often limited to esports, whereas streaming continues to operate outside of the purview of institutional or organizational structure (Merwin et al., 2018; Taylor, 2018; Yun, 2019). Understanding the role of organizations and the relationship they have with the workers in this industry is important to learning more about the experiences of individuals employed in professional gaming.

## 2.4 Work and Leisure

Games, and video games specifically, have traditionally been considered strictly leisure or hobby activities (Griffiths, 2017; Y.-H. Lee & Lin, 2011). The public generally views individuals playing video games as doing so for hobby or leisure (Batchelor, 2017; Hattenstone, 2017). More recently some scholars have argued for a refined perspective on leisure and video games, arguing that not all play is equal (Gillespie, Leffler, & Lerner, 2002; Stebbins, 2004; Taylor, 2012, 2018; N. Taylor, Bergstrom, Jenson, & de Castell, 2015). Aguiar and colleagues (2017) proposed that an increase in leisure time,

specifically time dedicated to playing video games, may be contributing to this lower average hours worked per week by young men.

Serious leisure, “activities in which significant time, money, resources, and overall identity investment occur”, is also indicative of this trend within professional gaming (Taylor, 2018, p. 154). More recently however, the gaming industry has challenged the separation between leisure and work. The professional gaming industry, streaming, and esports have challenged the boundaries between work and play. Lee and Lin (2011) found that amongst those involved in the gaming industry “ambiguity of work and play is a significant characteristic”, one that “requires further exploration” (p. 463). As such, for those heavily involved in video games, their pursuit shifts from a focus on leisure and hobby to one of developing connections and skills for succeeding in the industry. This process has been identified as some scholars as a commercialization of leisure (Fuchs, 2014; Kücklich, 2005). There is also evidence to suggest that satisfaction with leisure activity is tied to self-perceived quality of life, providing further explanation for increased participation in leisure activities (London, Crandall, & Seals, 1977).

Various terms have been coined to characterize this trend including playbour (Kücklich, 2005) and leisure capital (Aguilar et al., 2017). Playbour addresses the intersection of play and labour that is reflective of the gaming industry. The precarity of work and the prevalence of uncompensated labour “is veiled by the perception of [gaming] as a leisure activity, or simply as an extension of play” (Kücklich, 2005). The exploitation and commodification of leisure is not necessarily new, but the way in which an industry exploits the leisure of its consumers and users is novel (Fuchs, 2014; Goggin, 2011; Kücklich, 2005). Grimes and Feenberg (2009) argue:



some cases a game played by an unpaid community of players might become the recruiting ground for a paid community of professionals performing for an audience of spectators. In others, the products of gameplay may acquire real-world exchange values. In each case, however, the mass commodification of a game will be preceded by its standardization and rationalization. (p. 108)

In these instances, the blurring of the lines between leisure and work can create vulnerabilities for workers, and ambiguity for researchers, as discussed above.

### 2.4.1 Identity

The connection between identity, leisure, and work is documented amongst musicians (Beech, Gilmore, Hibbert, & Ybema, 2016), healthcare workers (R. Williams et al., 2019), and sports athletes (Tasiemski, Kennedy, Gardner, & Blaikley, 2004). Amongst gamers, their identity can also be intrinsically tied to their gaming (Y.-H. Lee & Lin, 2011). Understanding the interplay between identity, leisure, and work, may be essential to developing adequate insight into the implications of precarious work (Seo, 2016). It may also shed light on the relationship between leisure and work, and the potential implications that result from identity challenges (Törhönen, Hassan, Sjöblom, & Hamari, 2019). Underpinning this conception of identity is social identity theory (SIT) (Kaye, 2019; McLeod, 2008). SIT is the extent “to which an individual’s self-concept is defined by the belonging to certain social groups” (Kaye, 2019). An application of SIT, self-categorization theory has been used in the literature to understand the connection between leisure gaming and identity (Vermeulen, Van Bauwel, & Van Looy, 2017). Individuals’ self-identity can be highly impacted by the extent to which they categorize themselves (Hornsey, 2008).

Individuals' identity can, and often is, impacted by the ways in which they categorize themselves as belonging to or fitting within a particular group (Y.-H. Lee & Lin, 2011). This is true amongst gamers, and especially relevant for those who face difficulties as a result of competing identities (A. Shaw, 2012; Vermeulen et al., 2017). Specific characteristics and categorizations of individuals may create internal conflict and strain. Women in particular have been found to struggle with the management of their identity both as women and as gamers (A. Shaw, 2012; S. M. Shaw, Kleiber, & Caldwell, 1995; Stone, 2019).

Understanding the self-conceptualization and categorization of individuals involved in the professional gaming industry may shed light on the impact of the convergence of leisure and work (Seo, 2016; A. Shaw, 2012; Vermeulen et al., 2017). For this research, identity will be framed as the self-conception or identification of an individual's identity, consistent with the literature (Kaye, 2019; Y.-H. Lee & Lin, 2011).

## 2.5 Social Support

Throughout an individual's major life events, including the transition into new work, social support can have both positive and negative consequences (Freeman & Wohn, 2017b; House, 1983; Wellman & Wortley, 1990). The transition into and success within professional gaming is influenced by the social support an individual has. It is not uncommon for "the player who wants to continue on to a professional level, often they find themselves having to educate, and indeed convince, those around them (especially parents and family members) that this path is a viable option" (Taylor, 2012, p. 107). The positive support and encouragement of individuals support systems can be essential in their decision-making process and success in professional gaming (Freeman & Wohn,

2017b). Consequently, investigating the role and impact that individuals' support systems have on their decision making is a crucial component in developing the understanding of the professional gaming industry.

Researchers have conceptualized social support in many different ways. The intricacies and nuances associated with this term require a more specific definition. Researchers have used a plethora of conceptualizations to understand social support. House (1983) characterized social support as interactions between individuals that contain one of the four identified types of support: 1) emotional concern, 2) instrumental support, 3) informational, and 4) appraisal. For the purposes of this paper, emotional concern is the primary avenue through which persons are considered to have social support, a measure consistent with the literature (Freeman & Wohn, 2017b). One manifestation of the emotional concern towards the participants from their networks is the approval of their involvement in professional gaming. This use of emotional concern as one provision of social support is consistent with the literature (Freeman & Wohn, 2017b; House, 1983; Wellman & Wortley, 1990). Another component identified by House (1983), instrumental support, will be addressed further in chapter seven, within the discussion on financial support provided to the participants. The importance of instrumental support specifically in the context of competitive gaming environments has already garnered some research (Freeman & Wohn, 2017b). This research however focused on the social support and relationships that emerged through the course of playing rather than the role of people within an individuals' network. The current study aims to address the role that other relationships have in the social support of those working in professional gaming.

## 2.6 Social, Cultural, and Gaming Capital

In addition to the social support received from individuals in a person's network being important, social, cultural, and gaming capital are essential components to success in the professional gaming industry (Dalisay, Kushin, Yamamoto, Liu, & Skalski, 2014; Freeman & Wohn, 2017a; Molyneux, Vasudevan, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2015; Stein & Scholz, 2016; Taylor, 2012). Therefore, it is important to evaluate how these forms of capital develop throughout an individuals' involvement in video games. To properly understand the experiences individuals working in this industry requires an understanding of the role of capital in their work.

Social capital has generally been defined as, the social network, community, and participatory capital of an individual, group, organization, or nation (Putnam, 2001; Wellman & Frank, 2001; Wellman, Quan-Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001). Portes (2000) argues that the origins of social capital focus "on the benefits accruing to individuals or families by virtue of their ties with others" (p. 2). In the current study the focus will be on individuals' social capital. The prevalence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has presented interesting challenges for the study of social capital. Quan-Haase and Wellman (2004) question the traditional ways of measuring social capital and see social capital as:

contributing to new forms of interaction and community that cannot be measured using standard indicators of social capital. The fact that people are not interacting in visible public spaces does not mean that they are isolated...The Internet makes it necessary to redefine our understanding of what social capital is. (p. 126)

Taking into consideration how social capital could manifest in different ways in a digital society is essential in order to properly understand social connectivity in the twenty-first

century. These conceptualizations of social capital in digital environments have since been adapted, and in some cases with forms of capital specific to gaming (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Molyneux et al., 2015).

Expanding the concept of social capital, researchers have developed the term gaming social capital (Molyneux et al., 2015). Gaming social capital represents “the social ties among gamers [that] act as a mediating step between multiplayer gaming and offline social capital” (Molyneux et al., 2015, p. 384). The application of Putnam’s (2001) work on bridging capital to this conceptualization of gaming social capital can broaden our understanding of the role of networks and social capital as they relate to the gaming industry. The role of bridging capital within the definition of gaming social capital provides for a better explanation of how individuals from diverse and unique backgrounds “form connections with one another” (Perry et al., 2018, p. 7) . This adaptation of social capital results in a better understanding as to how those involved in this industry navigate and develop bridges between the online and offline networks of individuals. Gaming social capital is often specific to particular communities and specific video games and may not necessarily transfer between groups of individuals who play different games (Molyneux et al., 2015). This social capital is specific to their gaming communities.

Research by Molyneux, Vasudevan, and Gil de Zúñiga (2015) presents evidence for a positive association between involvement in multiplayer online video games and forming associations with individuals within those gaming communities. Furthermore, they also found a “spillover effect from gaming social capital to social capital in the real world. In other words, gamers learn and develop social and civic attitudes and behaviours while

interacting with other gamers, some of which are applied to their real-world communities” (Molyneux et al., 2015, p. 393). Support for similar offline social capital being generated through online interactions within different networks amongst those specifically involved in esports has been found (Trepte, Reinecke, & Juechems, 2012). Individuals in competitive video games were also able to leverage the social capital accrued through their involvement in professional gaming for benefits that transcended the industry (Trepte et al., 2012). This gaming social capital can have a considerable impact on the social support received by participants from within the gaming community. The importance of social capital on social support is documented in the literature (Lu & Hampton, 2017).

### 2.6.1 Cultural and gaming capital

Cultural capital can be defined as the community or societally important knowledge and social assets that an individual possesses (Bourdieu, 1986; Portes, 2000). Bourdieu (1986) deconstructs cultural capital into three distinct forms, two of which are particularly relevant to the professional gaming industry: *embodied cultural capital*- “long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body” - and *objectified cultural capital*- “in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.)” (p. 47). Having the requisite cultural competencies can be essential in enabling participation in a society or culture in a meaningful way. Building on this concept of cultural capital, various scholars have proposed refined versions specifically for a digital environment. Ignatow and Robinson (2017) posit that digital capital can be defined “as a secondary form of capital distinct from primary forms of capital such as economic and cultural” (p. 952). Digital capital can therefore be composed of an individual’s “reach, scale, and

sophistication of his or her online behavior” (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017, p. 952).

Individuals investing the time and effort towards the development of their technological competencies accrue digital capital (Seale, Georgeson, Mamas, & Swain, 2015; Selwyn, 2004). Expanding on this concept of digital capital, Consalvo (2007) presented gaming capital as a means of framing cultural capital within the gaming industry. For Consalvo (2007), gaming capital represents a unique perspective in understanding “how individuals interact with games, information about games and the game industry, and other game players.... a currency that is by necessity dynamic— changing over time, and across types of players or games” (p. 4). This application of gaming capital need not be limited to professional gamers, but can also be expanded to include those working at the periphery of the industry (Consalvo, 2007). Moving beyond an application of considering gaming capital strictly amongst those playing the game will improve the understanding of the professional gaming industry as a whole.

Limited research on those individuals employed in occupations that support gamers within this industry exists (Consalvo, 2007; Walsh & Apperley, 2009). The role of those working in the infrastructure is essential to investigate further, as “specific segments of the game support industry have shaped important elements of gaming capital over the past several decades” (Consalvo, 2007, p. 4). Speaking to the role of gaming capital in the transition into the industry for players, Taylor (2012) explains that they “learn everything from how to communicate to other players during and after games to strategies and tactics” (p. 107). In this case, individuals leverage their gaming social capital in order to more effectively develop their cultural or gaming capital.

For the remainder of the dissertation the following conceptualizations for gaming capital and gaming social capital, will primarily be use. Gaming capital will refer to the knowledge and understanding of the gaming industry that contributes to and impacts how individuals interact with, and navigate, professional gaming. While gaming social capital will refer to the social ties and relationships amongst gamers that mediates and facilitates social capital, both within and outside of gaming.

## 2.7 Inequality and Differences in Online Gaming

A look at the professional gaming industry would be incomplete without an examination of the social differences and inequalities that structure the field of gaming and shape the experiences of those working in it. It is essential to consider how access to and usage of technology is not universal across society and various groups continue to have differential experiences online. This includes individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, those living in rural areas, and the experiences of individuals online continue to be gendered (Alfrey & Twine, 2017; Haight, Quan-Haase, & Corbett, 2014; Kaye, Pennington, & McCann, 2018; Robinson et al., 2015).

The shift towards a highly digital economy disproportionately impacts those with lower socio-economic status and lower education levels (Haight et al., 2014; Purcell, 2014). There continues to be a significant portion of the population who have yet to fully participate in the digital economy (Haight et al., 2014). Lack of access to the internet can have significant implications, impacting employability, access to the public sphere, and the ability to connect with family and friends (DiMaggio & Bonikowski, 2008; DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001; Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal,



2008; Purcell, 2014; Sylvester & McGlynn, 2010). These factors create not only new hardships, but they also reinforce existing inequalities in society.

Even amongst those in poverty, research reveals differential computer and internet use based on locality (Tine, 2019). For the United States, a clear difference exists between those living in poverty in urban areas when compared to rural areas (Carlson & Gross, 2016; Tine, 2019). Expanding on this concern, there may be mental and physical health implications arising from these urban and rural differences in gaming participation (Shi, Boak, Mann, & Turner, 2018). The lack of access or adequate access to the internet and computers experienced by those living in rural areas may have a mediating impact on the health outcomes of gamers when compared to those living in urban areas (Shi et al., 2018). The rural player may not have been able to “play as frequently, could not play as long, and would experience in-game lag time while playing” (Shi et al., 2018, p. 7). The inability to play video games at an acceptable internet latency may ultimately result in individuals with lower quality internet playing video games less. These health implications will be discussed in further detail in the following section of this chapter. The inability to effectively participate in online competition in the same way that individuals with stable and appropriate access to the internet can prove detrimental when trying to pursue a career or job in this industry.

More recently, research focus has shifted from primarily examining digital inequality through access to technology towards digital inclusion (Amazan-Hall et al., 2018; Ekbia, 2016; Johnson, 2019; Rhinesmith, 2016b; Robinson et al., 2015). This new approach represents a more thorough analysis of not only whether or not individuals use technology, but also the effectiveness with which they are able to use technology

(Rhinesmith, 2016a). In his research on digital inclusion, Rhinesmith (2016b) identifies four essential components of digital inclusion efforts: 1) Providing low-cost broadband, 2) Connecting digital literacy training with relevant content and services, 3) Making low-cost computers available, 4) Operating public access computing centers. Here, the question shifts from simply a question of access to the internet, towards a wholesome and inclusive consideration of two things— Do individuals have access to the technology necessary *and* do they have the skills and knowledge required to appropriately utilize access to those technologies.

The differential access to and usage of technology across socioeconomic statuses may be mimicked in the use of computers for playing online games. Indeed some researchers have found evidence that youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds are significantly less likely to use computers for non-academic purposes compared to other youth (Keegan Eamon, 2004; Shi et al., 2018). There is also evidence to suggest that achievement in professional gaming is related to socioeconomic status. Parshakov and Zavertiaeva (2015) found no evidence of differences in prize money earned based on country GDP. They did however report that “the level of health and education are positively significant indicators” within countries (p. 23). This finding suggests that the socioeconomic status of individuals relative to others within their own country can impact their success in esports (Conroy, Sandel, & Zuckerman, 2010). Those individuals from higher socioeconomic strata would be expected to be more likely to succeed at a job in professional gaming when compared to those from a lower stratum.

### 2.7.1 Gender differences online

The early literature on computer and internet use has focused on the significant gender differences in the use of both these technologies (Bimber, 2000; Fletcher-Flinn & Suddendorf, 1996; Reinen & Plomp, 1997). More recent research has shifted this paradigm and suggests that the traditional gender gap in internet use identified by Bimber (2000) has largely disappeared (Haight et al., 2014; Ono & Zavodny, 2003, 2007; PEW, 2014; Wasserman & Richmond-Abbott, 2005). As of 2019 approximately 90% of both men and women using the internet according to PEW (PEW, 2019). More recently however, the narrative has shifted from a question of differences in access towards an investigation of the gendered experience online.

There is evidence that the experiences of individuals involved in the professional gaming industry remain gendered (Gray, 2012; Ratan, Taylor, Hogan, Kennedy, & Williams, 2015). These gendered experiences not only impact those within the industry but also impact who works in professional gaming. Overall engagement in video games is skewed towards young men, with gender discrimination and harassment remaining a meaningful impediment towards equal engagement in gaming (Cote, 2017; Lenhart et al., 2008).

This discrimination often exists not only at a personal level, between individuals in a particular game or gaming community, but also within organizations and companies. In their 2017 report on video game developers, Weststar and colleagues (2017) described how women “consistently reported experiencing inequity at much higher rates than males” (p. 33). Past literature on organizations has revealed that perceived organizational tolerance and acceptance of sexual harassment and sexism does ultimately result in greater consequences for women (Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997;

Stamarski, Hing, & Leanne, 2015). The organizational role that companies within professional gaming occupy in this gender divide has not been extensively researched.

One explanation for the inequality experienced by women in this industry is the depiction of women in video games (Kennedy, 2002; D. Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009). The concerns emerging from the gendered differences in the portrayal of men and women in video games extends beyond the scope of any particular game, and may impact the gaming industry as a whole. Stermer and Burkley (2015) found that “men who played video games high in perceived sexism were higher in benevolent sexism than men who played games low in perceived sexism” (p. 6). This finding was isolated to men. Their work sheds light on potential industry-wide challenges with sexism, at least in part brought on by the pervasiveness of objectification and sexism within video games. There is yet to be any meaningful movement on the gendered portrayal of characters and storylines within video games (Consalvo, 2012; Fox & Tang, 2014; Todd, 2015).

This sexism is not limited to the in-game experiences of women gamers, but it extends through the entire industry, impacting women in all areas of professional gaming and esports (Devia-Allen, 2017; Ruvalcaba, Shulze, Kim, Berzenski, & Otten, 2018; Stermer & Burkley, 2015). The negative experiences of women gamers might ultimately reduce the number of women and their desire to become involved in professional gaming and esports (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). Research on a specific game, League of Legends (LOL) discovered that “the abilities of men and women did not differ” and the primary factor impacting “gender equality is the participation of women in video gaming. The stereotype that women are inferior to men is further widening the divide, inhibiting women from unreservedly joining the already male-dominated market” (S. J. Kim, 2017,

p. 66). Ultimately, it appears that gaming is a gendered institution, and assumptions and stereotypes are deeply embedded within institutional logics and practices (Acker, 1990). Nevertheless, research is lacking on the gendering of professional gaming, and the experiences of women *working* within this industry.

## 2.8 Health Impacts of Professional Gaming

The inequalities that impact work and engagement in professional gaming may also contribute to health implications for those working in this sector. The health outcomes associated with working in professional gaming are important to understand the occupational considerations individuals must make in this industry. The media narrative surrounding the impact of playing video games on individuals' health has nearly unanimously focused on negative outcomes of this activity (Loria, 2018; Schiesel, 2018). Until recently, research on the health implications of gaming has also overwhelmingly focused on the negative consequences of video games (Kleinman, 2015; Krischer Goodman, 2019; Loria, 2018).

The mental health impacts of professional gaming have been documented by a variety of scholars and organizations. In September 2018, the World Health Organization (WHO) included gaming disorder in the eleventh revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11). The ICD-11 defines gaming disorder as: characterized by a pattern of persistent or recurrent gaming behavior...manifested by:

1. Impaired control over gaming (e.g., onset, frequency, intensity, duration, termination, context).
2. Increasing priority given to gaming to the extent that gaming takes precedence over other life interests and daily activities.
3. Continuation or escalation of gaming despite the occurrence of negative consequences. The behaviour pattern is of sufficient severity

to result in significant impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning. (World Health Organization, 2019)

Research on the relationship between mental health and gaming focuses on video game addiction (VGA). Using a variety of indicators such as screen time, habits and patterns, as well as social life limitations, researchers have presented video game addiction as problematic amongst the population who plays video games (Sepehr & Head, 2013, 2018; Tavormina & Tavormina, 2017; Turel, Romashkin, & Morrison, 2016). In addition to VGA, researchers have also identified other mental health impacts from involvement in gaming, including “personal hygiene issues, social anxiety, and sleep disturbances” (DiFrancisco-Donoghue, Balentine, Schmidt, & Zwibel, 2019, p. 3). Shi and colleagues (2018) found evidence that “adolescents who were males or who had worse mental health status were significantly more likely to be problem gamers” (p. 7). This outcome difference based on gender is important to consider, particularly when compared to non-gaming rates of mental health challenges found in the general population (Shi et al., 2018).

The consequences of this addiction can also include physical health consequences. Macgregor (2000) identified repetitive strain injury (RSI) in children for the first time in video games. He found what he believes “may be the first reported case of computer induced RSI in a child and suggest that children and their parents should be made aware of the possible short and long term effects of this condition” (p. 1). This initial diagnosis has become increasingly common in esports, as the injuries “are similar to conditions seen in sedentary desk jobs with the incorporation of intense dexterous actions” (DiFrancisco-Donoghue et al., 2019, p. 3). The incidences of RSI are rising across all

workplaces in Canada, with the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety reporting that 15% of Canadians are impacted by this condition (Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, 2017).

Other researchers have argued that little to no direct correlation exists between duration playing video games and addiction to them (Skoric, Teo, & Neo, 2009). There is evidence to suggest that the often cited addiction to online games may simply be a choice (B. Ng & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005). In addition to findings that indicate either no relationship or a negative relationship between gaming and health outcomes, some researchers have also suggested that there may actually be a positive impact on health outcomes from involvement in gaming. Ng, Chan, Balwicki, Huxley, and Chiu (2019) found evidence that gaming and health outcomes are positively associated. A number of possible explanations are put forward. One is that gaming itself is a catalyst for improved physical and mental health. Another possibility presented is that “gamers operate in a professional job context more frequently...providing them with some routine and stability” (pp. 1665-1666). Understanding the impact that working in this industry may have on health outcomes is important.

## 2.9 Research Objectives

This study builds on the literature on health, work, social, cultural, and gaming capital, to explore the experiences of individuals working within professional gaming. This research seeks to expand on the literature, focusing on the nature of work within professional gaming and worker’s experiences working in this industry. Two exploratory research questions guide this research:

- 1) What is the nature of work in professional gaming?
- 2) What are the experiences of those pursuing careers and working in this industry?

To answer these broad research questions, I focus on five themes that have not only been highlighted in the literature, but also emerged as significant during the course of the interviews. The following five themes will be considered:

1. The growth, development and landscape of professional gaming.
2. The employment experiences of those working in an emerging industry such as professional gaming.
3. The role of social support, and other forms of capital during work in professional gaming.
4. The intersection of leisure, work, and identity in professional gaming
5. The challenges and difficulties experienced by individuals working in professional gaming.

Research theme one and two will be addressed in Chapter Four. Chapter five will address research theme three. Chapter six will examine research theme four. Chapter seven will investigate research theme five.



## Chapter 3

### 3 Methods

#### 3.1 Overview

In order to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of individuals working in this sector and considering the relative lack of research on professional gaming, this research uses an exploratory qualitative approach. Exploratory research is an approach that aims to “generate new ideas and weave them together” (Stebbins, 2001, p. 9). This methodology is appropriate when the experiences of individuals or “a group, process, activity, or situation has received little or no systematic empirical scrutiny” (Stebbins, 2001, p. 9). The data gathered for this dissertation are drawn from qualitative interviews conducted with individuals in the professional gaming industry.

Interviews were chosen as the method for data collection for this research. More specifically, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from individuals involved in the professional gaming industry. The use of semi-structured interviews allows for greater latitude in questionnaire design as well as the ability to refine the interview guide throughout the course of data collection (Horton, Macve, & Struyven, 2004; Saldaña, 2015). Additionally, the flexibility offered by semi-structured interviews allows the participants a certain degree of freedom to explain their responses and elaborate on areas of particular interest or expertise (Birmingham & Wilkinson, 2003; Horton et al., 2004). The ability to elaborate and provide context to their responses is essential to ensuring that the research themes are properly explored. Being exploratory research on an emerging industry, this study has limited existing literature to rely on and

as such it is necessary to use the responses of the participants to guide the research program within the interviews. The use of semi-structured interviews is the best method for developing a deeper understanding of the professional gaming industry. While the interpretation and analysis of semi-structured interviews may be more resource intensive, this is mitigated by the use of transcribing software described in the data analysis section below (Birmingham & Wilkinson, 2003). As such, while there are challenges and limitations associated with interpreting semi-structured interviews, the flexibility and ability to probe the participants' responses outweighed these concerns.

The goal of the research was to include individuals from different areas and occupations of professional gaming. As a result of the relatively small body of research on professional gaming, I recruited a range of individuals involved in the industry to participate in the research. This range encompasses individuals involved in the organization/management of teams, games, and tournaments, those involved in the production, broadcasting, and support of professional games, as well as those playing the games. This approach provides an understanding of the industry from a multitude of perspectives and provided the greatest opportunity to understand the experiences of those working in professional gaming.

## 3.2 Research Ethics

The initial submission for ethics approval for the current study was submitted to the Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) in November 2018. In December 2018 a list of modifications and recommendations were suggested by the NMREB. These suggestions were addressed and outlined in a resubmission in late

December 2018. Ethics approval for the study by the Western NMREB was received in early January 2019 (Appendix A- Protocol number: 112922).

### 3.3 Participant Recruitment

Other than the respondents' involvement in professional gaming and that they speak English, the only other inclusionary criterion was that they consider their participation in this industry as a form of labour or work. Individuals who previously participated in the industry but no longer work in professional gaming were also included. The inclusionary criteria for the latter participants remained the same, but the interview focused on the time period that they worked in the industry. There was one individual who was scheduled to be interviewed for the project, who after receiving the letter of information communicated that they did not feel as though they considered themselves to have worked in the professional gaming industry. As such, the interview for this potential participant did not move forward. In total, thirty-four individuals participated in the research.

The recruitment of the participants for the study began in January 2019 and ended in June 2019. There were four primary avenues for the recruitment of participants for this study: personal contact, industry contacts, publicly available information, and snowball referral by other participants. The initial contact with study participants depended on which of the four avenues communication was initiated. Regardless of method of recruitment, for all individuals with whom contact was made, a 'two non-response' policy as per the ethics approval was maintained. That is, if any individual did not respond or reply after two messages or emails, they were no longer considered a potential participant in the

research. No additional contact took place. The four methods of participant recruitment are detailed next.

The first, personal contacts, involved contacting individuals I had met in the professional gaming industry and inviting them to participate in the research. The interaction with these participants took place over email and Discord. Discord is a Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) service, similar to Skype, that allows for communication between individuals. The potential participants were provided with a copy of the digital recruitment poster and asked to contact me if they had any questions, issues, or interest in participating in the research (Appendix B).

The second method involved leveraging my contacts in the industry to introduce and share the digital recruitment poster (Appendix B). These industry contacts were asked to forward the digital recruitment poster to potential participants and provide them with my contact information. If the individuals were interested in speaking with me, they typically contacted me over email. In addition to email, conversations about the project, including the coordination of the interview time and further information about the study took place over Discord.

The third recruitment strategy involved communication with individuals via their publicly available contact information. This included their public Discord and their email. This avenue proceeded similarly to the first, whereby I would email or message potential participants about their interest in participating in the study. The digital poster would be attached and they would be invited to respond to me if they were either interested in speaking with me further about the project, or participating in it.

The last method for recruitment was the referral of participants by those who have participated in the project. At the conclusion of each interview, the interviewees were asked if they had any suggestions for who may be interested in participating in the research. For some of these suggestions, the individuals had a personal connection with their recommendation and as such they were told they could distribute the digital recruitment poster and contact information they had received. In the cases where they did not have a connection, I noted their suggestion and attempted to find publicly available contact information and contact the potential participant. In no cases was private information of individuals given to the researcher by participants. Any suggestions made by the participants regarding who may be valuable to speak to for purposes of the research were either contacted by the participants and provided the digital poster and contact information, or they were contacted by me via publicly available contact information. There were a number of cases where participants recommended speaking with individuals they may or may not have known personally, but for whom I could not find public contact information. In all of these cases, these potential leads were no longer pursued.

All participants who emailed me without solicitation, reported how they received information about the study. This allowed me to easily identify whether or not the participants were recruited through industry contacts or referral. For some contacts, they were contacted via multiple methods, including referrals and direct contact. These participants were categorized as referral because they commented that they had seen my email but did not respond until they had received the digital poster from a personal contact of theirs, and ultimately decided to send an email. The catalyst for their response

was receiving the information from a personal contact who participated in the research. If the participant was contacted because of a suggestion by a participant through publicly available information, the participant was categorized as being recruited through publicly available information. A key point of distinction between the second recruitment method, industry contacts, and the fourth, referral, is the temporal order of events. For industry contacts, my personal contacts in the industry were provided the digital poster at the outset of the research, while those recruited through referrals were contacted at various times by individuals who had received the digital poster, instead of an industry contact or myself. Overall, to recruit the eighteen contacts reached through publicly available information, over three hundred messages were sent out. The remainder of the participants include eight industry contacts, four referrals, and four personal contacts. The breakdown of the responses is presented in Table 1 below.

<b>Table 1. Description of recruitment method of the participants (N =34).</b>				
<b>Recruitment type</b>	<b>All participants</b>	<b>Current player or streamer</b>	<b>Infrastructure</b>	<b>Ownership/management</b>
<b>Public information contact</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Industry contact</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Referral</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Personal contact</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>

The majority of the participants in infrastructure were recruited through publicly available information, with all five current players or streamers being recruited through this method. The recruitment method for ownership or management was fairly evenly

spread between all recruitment categories, with one public information contact, three industry contacts, and two participants from both referrals as well as personal contacts. This distribution of participants by recruitment method suggests a well-rounded approach, with the arguably least biased method, public information contact, representing the most common participant recruitment.

Multiple methods of participant recruitment were necessary, as the number of people involved in this industry is still rather limited and they are a relatively difficult population to access. In these circumstances, especially where the researcher has a number of ‘seeds’ or contacts to start, snowball sampling is an effective method for recruiting respondents (Goodman, 1961; Handcock & Gile, 2011). In this research, a combination of convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling was used. Purposive sampling is particularly useful in cases where a researcher is able to identify participants who may provide “information-rich cases for the most proper utilization of available resources” (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016, p. 2). By identifying participants who are proficient and knowledgeable about the gaming industry and recruiting them, I was able to concentrate specifically on the individuals who are directly relevant to the research (Etikan et al., 2016; Patton, 1990). While there is debate as to the optimal sampling method for hard-to-reach communities, the literature focuses on both snowball sampling and purposive sampling as most effective (Magnani, Sabin, Saidel, & Heckathorn, 2005; Staniford, Breckon, Copeland, & Hutchison, 2011; Valerio et al., 2016). The reliance on readily available participants and those willing to take part in the research may certainly have a biasing effect; however, due to the exploratory nature of the research,

representativeness and generalizability are not the primary foci. The use of these non-probability sampling techniques is then appropriate.

### 3.4 Data Collection

The interviews occurred exclusively over Discord, through a private call between me and the participant. Discord was chosen as the platform through which the interviews took place due to its popularity amongst gamers (Neumann, 2018). Following the scheduling of the interview, the participants would be asked for their Discord name. I then proceeded to reintroduce myself on Discord following adding them.

These exploratory semi-structured interviews with individual participants had an intended length of approximately thirty minutes. The actual interviews ranged between twenty-two and eighty-five minutes, with an average interview length of forty-nine minutes. The interviews began by reviewing the letter of information with the participants (Appendix Three). The participant was sent the document as an attachment over Discord and provided time to read through it. I then went through the document with the participant, explaining the sections and giving them an opportunity to ask for clarification or further information. The participant was then asked to go to the last page of the document and verbally consent to the two statements. With the consent of the participant, the interview was recorded through Discord. No participant objected to the recording of the interview. Quite a few participants also recorded the interviews to use the audio for their own content creation. These participants were told that they could use their own responses; however, the questions and my audio were not to be used. Neither of the two participants who made this request objected to this stipulation and the interview moved forward.



### 3.5 Interviews

The interview guide (Appendix Four) served as the foundation of the semi-structured interviews for this study. Using a semi-structured interview guide, developed based on Patton (1990), allowed for the inclusion of major questions that form the core of the interview, while simultaneously providing for the flexibility to ask follow-up or probing questions. Included in the guide are a range of demographic questions aimed at developing a profile of the participants in the project. Participants were asked their age, gender, their highest level of education, and whether or not they were currently a student. They were also asked if their highest level of education was completed or not. Their living situation as well as a range of questions regarding income were also discussed. Finally, the participants were asked about any work outside of the gaming industry.

Beyond the demographic questions, the remaining questions contained in the interview guide were based on the work of a number of scholars. The interview guide adapted questions from the work of Walsh and Apperley (2009), specifically the questions relating to gaming capital. Expanding on their conceptualization of gaming capital, derived from a combination of the forms of capital discussed by Bourdieu, the questions on the role of knowledge and technical ability helped develop an understanding of individuals' gaming capital in a professional gaming context. Questions surrounding the role of friends, family and significant others, as well as the impact of fans and spectators were related to gaming social capital, a concept developed by Molyneux and colleagues (2015). The questions aimed at developing a better understanding of the intersection between work, digital labour, and professional gaming were drawn from a range of research (Castronova, 2008; Taylor, 2018; N. Taylor et al., 2015; Törhönen et al., 2019;

Yee, 2006). In particular, Taylor (2018) and her discussion of leisure, serious leisure, and the gaming industry, informed section three of the interview guide. The questions related to individuals' leisure and hobby time, as well as how these activities intersect with work in the industry are based on the research of Taylor (2012, 2018), as well as Lee and Lin (2011).

Throughout the course of the interviews, adjustments were made to the interview process, both in the ordering of questions, and which ones were asked. Most notably, after interview six, participants were no longer asked to state their household income. This decision was made based on several factors, the most important was a general aversion to disclosing this type of personal information. Instead, participants were asked to compare their non-gaming related income to gaming related income as a ratio or percentage. This approach ultimately made direct comparisons between participants and categories difficult. After the second interview an explicit question on the progress, changes, and evolution of the professional gaming industry was asked of the participants. This topic was discussed at length during the first two interviews, and for all subsequent interviews this question was posited. The participants were plainly asked, "How in your opinion has the professional gaming industry changed over the last number of years? Has this change been positive? Negative? In what ways have you seen the industry shift?" This question provided the participants with significant latitude and freedom in their responses, but it also served as a gateway into important discussions on a number of topics that were central to the research.

Another change to the progress of the interviews concerned the completion of the demographic questions. While initially asked at the beginning of the interview a change

was made to this approach following interview three. Beginning with participant four, the demographic information of the participants was gleaned throughout the interview based on their comments and was not explicitly discussed until the conclusion of each interview. Throughout the interview, an excel file was filled in with the relevant demographic information from that section, as the participant mentioned it. The remaining demographic questions that had not yet been answered by the participants were asked at the end of the interview. This approach was used as it became clear that participants often answered nearly every demographic question throughout their responses.

### 3.6 Data Analysis

The data analysis started with transcribing, cleaning, and organizing of the interviews. Following the conclusion of the interview, the interview file was copied onto an external hard drive and deleted from my computer. The interview files were then uploaded via this hard drive to an account with LiGRE Software. LiGRE offers automatic transcription services that were utilized to provide the initial transcription of the interviews. With the exception of this transfer of the files to LiGRE, the hard drive was kept in a locked secure cabinet. Once transcribed via LiGRE, the transcripts were crosschecked and cleaned to ensure accuracy. While the transcription quality was over ninety percent, there were issues with the program delineating which speaker was talking, particularly in cases where there were no clear and distinct breaks in the dialogue. Addressing this limitation in the software required multiple passes through each interview to ensure accurate transcription of the participants' statements. This problem was especially evident for

participants who were soft-spoken or whose microphones captured the audio at lower levels.

Following the transcription of the interviews on LiGRE, the data for this study were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2018). This approach allows for an understanding of this relatively new industry and area of research within academia. The data collection and data analysis were not linear but consisted of a reflexive process, as the insight and refinement it affords researchers may not be readily apparent or exist in the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2018; Patton, 1990). The use of thematic analysis allows for deep engagement with the experiences of those involved in the professional gaming industry and according to Braun et al. (2018), the "flexibility central to qualitative research practice" (p. 7). It is especially appropriate given the recentness of this industry and the lack of extensive research and examination, academic or otherwise.

The six-phase thematic analysis framework presented by Braun and Clarke (2006), serves as the foundation for the data analysis in this research. The six phases are: familiarizing yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Familiarization with the data was achieved through cleaning of the interviews transcribed by LiGRE. To accomplish this, the transcription was re-read until a satisfactory level of accuracy was obtained. For this study, a satisfactory level of accuracy was defined as having no errors that would impact whether or not, "the transcript validly represents what is said in the recording" (Mero-Jaffe, 2011, p. 232). Denaturalized transcription is the approach taken towards the interviews in this study. With this method of transcription the, "accuracy concerns the

substance of the interview, that is, the meanings and perceptions created and shared during a conversation” (Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005). The transcription focuses on the intention and meaning of the words spoken by the participants rather than the idiosyncratic aspects of their speech (Davidson, 2009; Oliver et al., 2005).

The first three steps of the analysis for this research were carried out subsequent to each interview. One of the benefits of transcribing and analyzing the interviews as they are conducted are the adjustments and amendments that can be made to the interview guide to improve the efficacy of the research. This is especially important when unforeseen themes or topics emerge from the initial interviews— findings that otherwise may not be fully investigated without simultaneous interviewing and transcription. Consistent with their explanation of this analysis technique, the progress through the various stages of thematic analysis for this project was recursive and not linear (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2015). The initial codes for the study were generated while proofing the interviews and the process of collating the data in accordance with the developing codes began immediately afterward. The coding was completed within LiGRE. This allowed for an integration of transcripts and coding within one infrastructure and software. To ensure the consistency of the coding, a colleague was asked to review and confirm the coding of a number of interviews throughout the research process. After coding the interviews and searching for initial themes as per steps two and three of Braun and Clarke’s 2006 guide, focus then shifted to reviewing the themes that emerged.

Consistent with the approach used in this study, the development of themes was cyclical and recursive. Following the transcription and cleaning of the eighth interview, the process of evaluating the codes and considering how they may combine began.

Throughout the course of the interviews, a collection of potential main and sub-themes was identified. The final assessment of the themes generated throughout the research process took place towards the end of data collection, after the majority of the interviews were completed. The evaluation of these themes and the internal and external consistency of them, similar to the codes were confirmed by a colleague.

Both steps four and five informed the point at which the project reached saturation. The objective as per the ethics protocol was to aim for thirty to forty interviews and reevaluate the richness of new conversations as this goal drew closer. Three factors were used to determine the extent to which saturation had been reached (Morse, 2015). The first is whether the number of participants was adequate. This was determined by having replication occur in the interviews. The second was the appropriateness of the sample. That is, the extent to which those interviewees were, “experts in the phenomenon of interest” (Morse, 2015, p. 588). The evaluation to satisfy this criterion was the most difficult. One challenge that emerged throughout the project was finding participants. Many of the ‘high profile’ gamers are eighteen to twenty-five-year-olds, playing video games and making six figure incomes, with little incentive to participate in research. While there were several participants from this group, acquiring individuals who fall within this categorization was challenging. As such, the majority of the participants in this study who are players or former players would be considered tier two or three. These tier two or three players compared to the professional esports players or streamers would be akin to minor league baseball players compared to MLB or the American Hockey League (AHL) compared to the NHL in hockey. Thus, these individuals may be especially well aligned to speak to many of the foci of this research, specifically the

difficulties, challenges, and decision-making processes associated with being involved in professional gaming. When considering whether these players were, “experts in the phenomenon of interest” (Morse, 2015), it is important to evaluate the ability of these individuals to provide insight. Additionally, when expanding the scope of this evaluation of appropriateness to include all individuals involved in professional gaming, not just players, it becomes clear that this criterion is appropriately satisfied. Many of the individuals interviewed in supporting areas of the industry are at the pinnacle of their area of expertise.

Lastly, and most importantly, the continuation of interviews ceased when the richness of interviews was diminishing due to overlapping themes. That is, subsequent to the transcription of each interview, particularly those that took place after interview twenty, an evaluation was made as to the new insight gained through that interview. If the discussions replicated prior interviews, no new themes emerged, and the insight gained from the transcription and coding was minimal, the decision would be made that saturation had occurred. Ultimately the decision was made that after interview thirty-two, these three criteria were appropriately satisfied. Subsequent to this decision two additional interviews were conducted that were included in the research findings. These interviews reaffirmed the earlier analysis that the conversations with participants were primarily replicating findings and no new themes were emerging.

The sixth and final phase of Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis is the final analysis and writing of the results. They highlight the need to utilize vivid extracts to, “capture the essence of the point you are demonstrating, without unnecessary complexity” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93). Quotations are included throughout the remaining chapters to

provide context, evidence, and examples for the themes and findings that emerged from the discussions with the participants. Direct quotations can, for some themes, represent an effective tool in conveying meaning (Alhojailan, 2012; Patton, 1990). The use of quotations as an instrument in reporting the findings of thematic analysis is consistent with the methodology of this approach in the literature (Alhojailan, 2012; Gibbs, 2002; Joffe & Yardley, 2004). The participants were asked to consent to the use of unidentifiable quotations in the dissemination of the research, a consent required as per ethics approval and one that is consistent with the literature (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006; Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). One challenge to consider when disseminating the results of this research is that many of the participants have previously partaken in public interviews or are otherwise public figures. It is essential to protect the confidentiality of the participants when using direct quotations.

To address this concern, while verbatim quotations will be used extensively, alterations are made to specific quotes so as to ensure anonymity, while maintaining the integrity and overall intention of the statement by the participants. For example, if a participant says my brother or sister, it has been changed to *my family member* or *relative*. Wherever necessary, these amendments will be included in the quotation. These changes strengthen the anonymity of the participants while also allowing for recounting of participants' experiences through quotations (Orb et al., 2001). To identify these amendments to the participants' statements, the following changes will be presented within the quotes. All deleted content is identified by XXXX. Four X's are used regardless of the length of the deleted segment. If the content was reworded, italics will be used to represent this



adjustment<sup>8</sup>. Where necessary, a footnote is included to further explain the redaction or rewording of the quotation. All rewording of quotations was reviewed for consistency and to ensure the intention of the statement maintained its integrity, while anonymizing the speaker.

### 3.7 Sample

A total of thirty-four in-depth, semi-structured interviews took place with people from various areas of the professional gaming industry. To protect participant confidentiality, the decision was made to create general categories broadly reflecting the realm within professional gaming that an individual was primarily involved in. The categories are as follows: former player, current player, infrastructure, and management or ownership. Individuals considered current players are those people who at the present time, earn a portion of their household income from playing video games. Infrastructure includes those participants who are involved in the professional gaming industry but their compensation and work are not tied to their playing of games. For these individuals, their occupations and labour are directly related to and in support of the professional gaming industry. Examples include: Information technology (IT), broadcasting, journalism/media, legal, graphic design, commentating, and content creation. Individuals categorized as ownership and management includes those persons whose involvement includes managing an organization or team, as well as owning an organization or company involved in professional gaming. Many individuals have held a multitude of positions and jobs throughout the industry. As a result, these categorizations are for

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<sup>8</sup> Italics in the text outside of quotes will be used for emphasis purposes.

current positions held, or in the case of individuals no longer in the industry, the position they primarily/last held. While the positions of the participants were self-reported, I made a concerted effort to verify their comments regarding their position, particularly in the case of ownership and management. Additionally, participants with ambiguous positions or jobs which may straddle different categories were asked to comment on which best fit with their definition of their job. This happened with less than five individuals and for the majority of the participants their position clearly fit into one particular category.

Throughout the course of the interviews, participants were also asked to comment on this structure as a means of best representing individuals' roles in the industry while maintaining anonymity. The general consensus of the participants was that given the requirements for participants to remain anonymous, this was a broad and general, but fair, representation.

### 3.7.1 Description of research participants and results

Table two provides an overview of the participants recruited in the research. The three major categories of participants are presented along with the following demographic information: age, gender, living situation, level of education, area of the industry, employment status, and whether the participant is a former player/coach.

The average age of the participants was 28.3 years old for all participants. Current players and streamers were the youngest category on average at 25.2 years of age although the youngest participant was a nineteen-year-old former player, now working in the infrastructure of the industry. This contrasts with the oldest participant at forty-two years of age, and the oldest average age at 29.9 years old for those working in ownership or management. For gender, the participants were asked an open-ended question, what is

your gender? No individual gave an answer other than man or woman, and no participant refused to answer. Six of the thirty-four participants identified as women, with the remaining twenty-eight identifying as men. This percentage of women participants, 18%, is consistent with the literature and the percentage of women involved in the gaming industry (Neus, Nimmermann, Wagner, & Schramm-Klein, 2019).

<b>Variables</b>	<b>All participants</b>	<b>Current player or streamer</b>	<b>Infrastructure</b>	<b>Ownership/management</b>
<b>Number of participants</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Number of former players</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Number of former coaches</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Category of the industry</b>				
<b>Streaming</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Esports</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Both</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Highest level of education</b>				
<b>Less than high school</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>High school graduate</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>College or university dropout</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>College or university graduate</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Post-graduate degree</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Current student</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Gender</b>				
<b>Women</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Men</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Work status</b>				
<b>Working full-time in gaming</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Working part-time in gaming</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Not working in gaming</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Living situation</b>				
<b>With parents</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>With roommates</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>With partner</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Alone</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Age</b>				
<b>Average age</b>	<b>28.3</b>	<b>25.2</b>	<b>28.4</b>	<b>29.9</b>

The sampling frame was composed of individuals involved in all areas of professional gaming, including individuals involved in streaming and esports as well as individuals

working different or unique occupations within this industry. For industry category, the responses of the participants were used to categorize whether individuals worked in esports, streaming, or both. Only those individuals who had that area of the industry at least in part contribute to their income were considered. For example, one individual working in the infrastructure commented that he streamed a few times a year and he never had more than one viewer, the one viewer typically being a family member. He was not categorized as both esports and streaming. Four of the five players or streamers considered their work both esports and streaming, with only one interviewee commenting that he does not at all stream. For the infrastructure of the industry this area is more ambiguous and difficult to discern. A more detailed discussion of the breakdown of the industry occurs in chapter four. Thirteen of the twenty-one participants working in the infrastructure of the industry exclusively work in esports. The eight individuals whose work can be considered both streaming and esports, are categorized as such for a number of different reasons. For one participant, while her occupation and primary source of income comes from her involvement in the infrastructure of the industry, she also streams and has a community on Twitch. Several other participants worked in the legal field in this industry, serving both individuals streaming as well as those working in esports. In these cases, the participants were categorized as working in both. In management and ownership, six of the eight individuals worked exclusively in esports, with the remaining two having their companies working in both areas.

Former players included all participants who at one point in time played video games for compensation. Coaches included those individuals who were employed directly by teams to assist the players in their given games. Many former players and coaches remain

employed in the industry. There were no participants currently coaching a team. Two of the five current players and streamers have served as a coach previously. Of the participants working in the infrastructure of the industry, three were both former players *and* former coaches, with one additional participant being only a former player and another being only a former coach. In ownership and management, two of the eight participants were former players or coaches, with one individual being both a player and a coach. The work status of the participants was categorized based on their response of whether they felt as though their work in the industry was full-time or part-time. It is important to note that there remained differences between working full-time hours and being employed in a full-time position, a nuance that will be discussed in further detail in chapter four. Those participants who were no longer working in professional gaming were categorized as such. All five players and streamers considered it their full-time work. Twelve of the eighteen participants still working in the infrastructure of the industry were working full time, while the remaining three participants were no longer employed in professional gaming. In ownership and management, five of the eight participants were employed full-time. Two of the eight participants held full-time positions in an unrelated occupation while the third part-time participant is transition towards full-time employment in professional gaming. Overall, of those still currently employed in the industry, just over seventy percent were employed in and working full-time hours with three participants not currently working. Of those three participants, only one would consider returning to the industry for paid employment.

The level of education of the participants was highly skewed towards post-secondary education. One participant had less than high school education and every other

participant completed high school and at minimum attended university or college. Nine of the thirty-four participants obtained a post graduate degree, including one Masters and two PhDs.<sup>9</sup> Thirteen participants graduated college or university and a further nine had dropped out of college or university. There were two participants who were currently students. The living situation of the participants is presented as what has been their primary living situation throughout their work in the industry, or in the case of those individuals who are no longer in the industry who did they primarily reside with during their time in the industry. In the case of individuals who frequently changed living situations, their current living situation was used. Overall, fifteen of the thirty-four participants lived with their partners. The proportion was slightly higher amongst those working in the infrastructure, with ten of twenty-one, or nearly fifty percent of the participants living with their partner. Unsurprisingly, given the older average age of those individuals in the ownership or management category, zero participants still lived with their parents compared to four and two in infrastructure and current player or streamer, respectively.

### 3.8 Challenges with Data Collection

Consistent with the research on email participant recruitment, the current study found numerous challenges and difficulties (Meho, 2006; Meho & Tibbo, 2003).

Communication over email amongst individuals who generally rely on social media and other ICT's proved problematic. For instance, one participant responded in an email six

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<sup>9</sup> The sample may have higher levels of education for a number of reasons. The sector itself may have higher levels of education more generally, or there may be a selection effect whereby the more educated individuals in professional gaming were more likely to see merit in and participating in this kind of research.

weeks after my initial contact: “Sorry for taking so long to reply...I was literally shocked when I saw I had email... I never check this thing only ever receive memes from fans”. This is one explanation for the poor response rate relative to the number of emails and messages sent to potential participants. Another participant, a current player was contacted at the beginning of March 2019 and did not respond until June 2019 and was ultimately one of the final interviews. An important development that improved participant recruitment occurred at the beginning stages of data collection. During an early interview, the participant inquired how the project was going and in particular asked how recruitment was progressing. When I mentioned that it was proving to be a challenge, they suggested that the subject line of the contact emails was potentially to blame. As a result of this comment and upon further reflection and discussion with colleagues, I made a decision to change the subject line of contact emails from ‘interview request’ to ‘conversation request’. Subsequent to this adjustment, the proportion of responses relative to solicitations noticeably improved, although it remained low. For example, prior to this change, approximately eighty emails were sent out with only four responses. Subsequent to this change nearly two-hundred contacts with potential participants were made with nearly thirty responses. Not all of the responses ultimately resulted in an interview, with some participants being away at events or competitions, and others deciding not to participate.

This low response to email contact introduces potential complications with selection bias of participants. Absent drastically oversampling individuals in the upper echelon of professional gaming, having an incentive for participation, or systematically employing gatekeepers to those communities, this bias is difficult to properly address. While efforts

were made to contact these gatekeepers, many did not have publicly available contact information. When they did have public contact information, usually a spokesperson or agency would handle requests on the individuals' behalf. When this was the case, the interview request was sent to the provided contact information. There was zero participation through this contact avenue, with one response. The one response was from an agency that represents individuals in the industry, "Sorry, we get a lot of similar enquiries [for interviews] and do not have the capacity to give bespoke help."

In addition to the challenges in communicating with participants, there was also significant difficulty in scheduling and executing the interviews. With the average age of participants being 28.3 years of age, this was expected, yet nevertheless complicated the research process (Abrams, 2010; Sivo, Saunders, Chang, & Jiang, 2006). For many of the participants, particularly the youngest participants, the scheduling of interviews was problematic. With individuals in this industry frequently travelling to events, streaming, and having irregular schedules, upwards of three to four weeks elapsed from first contact until interview for some participants. This included one individual for whom eleven weeks elapsed between first contact and the interview due to their travel to events and a difficult schedule. The rescheduling and cancellation of interviews was also an obstacle, with one participant cancelling the interview six times before a successful conversation took place. These difficulties with participant recruitment may reflect a convergence of challenges, from lack of incentive to participate, the age of the participants, to the number of interview requests received by the target population. Chapter eight will further discuss this issue and potential approaches to addressing it in future research.



Beyond the difficulty with the recruitment of participants and issues with the scheduling of interviews, the data collection also included some challenges. While I had tested Discord thoroughly prior to conducting the interviews, the quality of the connection was at times problematic.<sup>10</sup> This was especially true as participants physical distance from London, Ontario, Canada grew. Interviews with two participants from Asia, one from Eastern Europe, and one from China were impacted by latency, stuttering, and generally poor connections.<sup>11</sup> This made both the interview process and the analysis of the data more complicated. Expanding on the analysis of the data, it became clear that the software program used to transcribe the interviews did incredibly well with clear audio from a native English speaker, however, it performed poorly when the audio quality was subpar or the interviewee was not a native English speaker.

The substantive findings from the interviews are disseminated below in chapters four through seven. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for an in-depth evaluation of the two research questions: 1) What is the nature of work in professional gaming? 2) What are the experiences of those pursuing careers and working in this industry? The five research themes that emerged from the literature and interviews are discussed in the following chapters.

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<sup>10</sup> A colleague participated in a number of “mock” interviews where couple minute conversations were recorded using different settings. They were then transcribed using LiGRE. Discord and the recording software were then adjusted based on what settings performed best.

<sup>11</sup> The participant was not from China but rather travelling in China for an event in esports at the time that the interview was conducted.

## Chapter 4

### 4 Work in the Professional Gaming Industry

#### 4.1 Introduction

Over the last decade professional gaming has emerged as a burgeoning industry. Throughout this time the maturation of the professional gaming industry has been ongoing. Taylor (2012) found that discussions within the industry were not “simply about informal norms and ways of acting, but also about emerging modes of institutionalization and the formalization of those practices” (p. 248). Research has only begun to explore the implications for workers employed in this industry. Non-traditional and exploitive employment practices are common for those working in professional gaming (Blum, 2016; Hattenstone, 2017; Sandle, 2018; Zulinski, 2016). As this industry continues to grow and evolve, those working in professional gaming are affected. Understanding the impact that the development of the industry has on those working in it is essential. The maturation of this industry has brought with it a number of challenges for researchers. In particular, the application of the term professional gaming has expanded considerably in recent years, and now often encompasses significantly divergent areas of work. As such, it is important to improve our understanding of the hardship and challenges faced by workers in a variety of roles across this diverse sector.

Research questions one and two are addressed in this chapter. 1) What is the nature of work in professional gaming? 2) What are the experiences of those pursuing careers and working in this industry? Two themes that emerged during the interviews address these questions: the growth, development and landscape of professional gaming (research

theme one), as well as the experiences with employment and for those working in this industry (research theme two). Both are addressed in this chapter.

These two themes contribute to a better understanding of professional gaming. Exploring the growth, development, and landscape of professional gaming assists in the understanding of the nature of work in this industry. This chapter aims to address the considerable confusion and variation surrounding participation in professional gaming. Additionally, this chapter provides an overview of the development and maturation of the industry over the last number of years. Additionally, within research theme two, the employment practices and experiences of individuals working in this industry are considered.

## 4.2 The Areas of Professional Gaming

As I began this research, I was keenly aware of the tension that exists within the professional gaming space surrounding the definitions and delineations in this industry, and in particular, between esports and streaming. What I did not foresee was the extensive and strong opinions that the first few participants had on this issue. As a result of the continued discussions surrounding esports and streaming, a question was integrated into the interview guide, in order to better understand and explain the participants perspectives on this issue. Participants were asked how they categorize or conceptualize the professional gaming industry as well as what forms of labour are found within it. This question was open-ended and the participants often spoke passionately for an extended period of time on this topic. The interviews yielded new insights, expanding the conceptualization of the industry presented in chapter 3, and shedding light on how those working in professional gaming categorize different jobs in this field.

Participants explained that the professional gaming industry has grown and expanded both within a particular game, category, or genre, as well as outwards to new games, genres, and categories. Simply discussing professional gaming may not properly capture the nuances and differences that exist between different areas of this industry. For the participants, streaming and esports exist as the two primary areas in professional gaming. The umbrella term, professional gaming, encapsulates all occupations and labour that directly or indirectly exist as a result of playing video games. This includes the individuals playing the games for compensation, and those working in supporting occupations, management, and ownership.

The Venn diagram below, depicts esports and streaming, with a middle ‘hybrid’ area. In this middle area, workers operate both within esports as well as streaming. The easiest and most straightforward examples of people occupying the middle ground are players. Four of the five players who participated in the research both played esports, either on teams or individually, and streamed on either Twitch.tv or YouTube. Assigning these individuals to this middle area is straightforward.



Table three below presents the breakdown of the category of the industry the participants work within. Eighty percent of the current players operate in both areas of the industry, eighty percent of those working in management work exclusively in esports. In the infrastructure of the industry, thirteen of the twenty-one participants only worked in esports, with the remaining eight working in both areas of the industry. Examples of those individuals working only in esports include casters and play-by-play analysts, production, and journalists<sup>12</sup>. Those participants whose work spanned both major areas of the industry included individuals who were lawyers, graphic design artists, and on-camera personalities.

<b>Variables</b>	<b>All participants</b>	<b>Current player or streamer</b>	<b>Infrastructure</b>	<b>Ownership/management</b>
<b>Number of participants</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Category of the industry</b>				
<b>Streaming</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Esports</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Both</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>

Using a Venn diagram to present the findings is not only the most appropriate graphical tool, but it was also specifically used by a number of the participants. Participant twenty-four, a man who previously worked in the infrastructure of the industry, suggested the use of a Venn diagram to describe the areas of the industry: “I would say like there are three categories. Venn diagram is that the circles where they overlap right? It’s more like a Venn diagram with everything I would say than exclusive categories.” Participant three,

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<sup>12</sup> Production includes those people who assist with the production/running of an esports event. Examples are audio/visual specialists, consultants, and tournament administrators/referees.

a man and current player and streamer, also evoked a Venn diagram when explaining the areas of professional gaming: “You have like esports and streamers, I would say it’s more like, it is kind of like a Venn diagram, you can be one or the other or both, right? With like lots of overlaps here or there.” For him, fluid movement between these categories was key. For other participants, while there is a middle ground, esports and streaming remain fairly distinct groupings. Participant thirty-one, a male working in the infrastructure of the industry commented:

When you are looking at esports vs streaming. I think most people are esports or streamer. I think the crossover is pretty small...I think it’s mostly people on the fringe. It is pretty easy to distinguish between esports and streaming, generally, other than on a case-by-case basis a few outliers that are stuck in the middle.

Even amongst the dissenting voices, the general consensus was that a middle ground does exist. Participant four, a man, player, and streamer, reflected on this middle ground: “Maybe I am an example. I started with streaming and had some exposure to competitive esports, I played in some XXXX. I would have been more committed to that had those games not flopped, not really being esports. I, like, I have done both.” It is clear from the conversations with the participants that these categorizations, with streaming and esports beneath the umbrella of professional gaming appropriately captured the professional gaming industry. With that in mind, the question then shifts to how to best understand the difference between these terms, esports and streaming. What determines whether individuals are streamers, involved in esports, or both? Identifying the division between the two is not an easy endeavor. Participant twenty-one, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, addressed this difficulty:

There is a lot of complementarity back and forth... There is a lot of within gaming crossovers between competitive players having an opportunity to show their personality and not just their skill *when they*

*stream...* But there is a hell of a lot of complementarity. There is a reason that those two get confounded so often.

The controversy surrounding Ninja and an ESPN article about his role as the face of gaming and esports was a point of contention and discussion in many of the conversations (Lewis, 2018; Teng, 2018).<sup>13</sup> This debate ignited discussions within the interviews about the differences between the various corners of professional gaming and whether or not treating all areas of the industry the same is appropriate. Many of the participants approached the conversation about various areas of the industry by using examples of well-known streamers or esports competitors. Ninja and the controversy surrounding him being labelled the face of esports was frequently cited, absent solicitation or prompting. It was used as an example of where the participants felt as though the lines between different areas of professional gaming were drawn. The participants typically made distinctions between streaming and esports, identifying the two as different. Participant twenty-five, a man working in the infrastructure commented that esports is:

Players, playing a competitive game in front of crowds for money, that's what it is. Then you've got someone like Lirik or Ninja<sup>14</sup> who okay, they may occasionally participate in Twitch Rivals or go to some charity pro-am, but that's not the bulk of what they do. The bulk of what they do is that they are a streamer, they are an entertainer, they are a content creator, but it's not esports related.

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<sup>13</sup> The article titled "*Ninja Might Very Well Be The Face of Gaming But He Is Not The Face Of Esports*" by Richard Lewis, an influential figure in the professional gaming industry was in response to an ESPN article which labelled Ninja as the 'face of esports'. The discussion in his article centered around the homogenous use of the terms esports and gaming. This article generated heated debates in the industry and many of the participants referenced the article by Richard Lewis in the interviews without prompting.

<sup>14</sup> Lirik, like Ninja, is one of the biggest streamers on Twitch, with consistent viewership in the tens of thousands per stream.

For him, the focus of streaming is entertainment and not competitive games. The focus within esports is on the competitive play between individuals or teams. Video games are simply the common vehicle through which both occur.

The notion that streaming represents a unique form of entertainment as opposed to a sport or competition was common among those interviewed. For participant seven, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, the content creation of streamers and the entertainment value that is generated from that content is the primary focus of their work:

Ninja has nothing to do with esports... He is by all intents and purposes a content creator, what it does is simply produce content on Twitch for entertainment. You can call him a professional gamer but I still think that is a subset of what he actually is, which is a content creator.

Participant fifteen, a man working in management, addressed the Ninja ESPN article controversy specifically, commenting that: “Ninja comes from the world of esports... Now he is not that, he is a streamer. He is more of a youtuber or comedian than he is a pro sports player.”

Making an analogy to professional sports and entertainers was also common among the interviewees. Participant twenty-one, a man working in the infrastructure referenced American football when explaining these differences:

A big part of the sort of distinction is that when you are watching competitive play, yes, the persona and the fame of the individual players is part of the draw. But it's a part of the draw in a way that your favourite player on a baseball field or football field would be. Yeah, we all know Tom Brady is really famous but at the end of the day it is him out there throwing the football and there are a lot of other guys and the focus is on the game. Whereas with the streaming aspect, it's a lot more of a talk radio or a live service, where the streamers' primary purpose is not necessarily to show off gameplay but to entertain. He is entertaining with the way that he interacts with the game and the viewers. That is the distinction to me.



For this participant, the skill and ability of Tom Brady as a football player represents the primary motivation for viewing his football games much the same way that people watch esports competitions, to see the skill of the best players in the world. Participant eighteen, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, also discussed the controversy surrounding Ninja and the importance of skills:

Yeah, it's a gap. *Esports and streaming* are two different things. This is something that came up when Ninja made *Time's* hundred most influential people and *someone* said that 'Ninja has just legitimized esports'... They are not the same thing. You have to look at what skills you need right? If you are going to be a streamer, your skillset involves being entertaining. It is getting people to want to spend time with you, it's organizing things such that people can tune in and interact. Being a social person that will interact with a chat... That is where the time is going in. It is creating something that is entertaining and resonates with people... You are constantly having to retain that audience. That is entirely different than a professional esports player. Your job is to be really good at the game that you have been hired to play. Your number one responsibility is playing that game as much as you can.

Beyond Ninja, other participants evoked different streamers when explaining the distinctions between esports and streaming. References were made to another prominent streamer, Dr. Disrespect, an individual who has amassed over four million followers on his Twitch.tv channel as of May 2020. Participant twenty-one, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, used Dr. Disrespect to provide an example of another streamer who is not involved in esports:

He is really good at the games that he plays, but he is a guy that has carefully crafted a persona for himself. He has created an experience for his viewers that is highly complementary with that persona and has a hell of a product as a media experience that has nothing to do with his association with any *esport*.

For him, and many of the participants, the focus within streaming was entertainment. Twenty-six of the thirty-four participants primarily mentioned entertainment when describing streaming. Participant thirty-three, a man and owner of an organization in

gaming, suggested that the intention is what is important: “What’s the intent? Is the main goal to win? Or is just to entertain?” For him, the intention of those involved is a central factor. This was echoed by participant thirty-one, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry who commented that “The difference is streamers vs esports. Streamers stream; they entertain. Are people playing competitive games for money? Esports.” To end this section, I want to present the two most impactful quotes on the different areas within the professional gaming that emerged from data collection. The first is from participant twenty-nine, a woman working in the infrastructure of the industry, who provided an interesting analogy to explain the differences between esports and streaming using traditional sports:

I think a great example is to look at the Harlem Globetrotters. You have NBA, professional basketball. Then you have Harlem Globetrotters, trick basketball, entertainment basketball. They are professional basketball players that are being paid to play basketball. But they are not being paid to compete. I think that is an important distinction to be made is that esports are people who are competing at the highest level of skill. And then there are entertainers who are professional video game players, but their purpose is entertainment. They are still very skilled. I mean the Harlem Globetrotters; those guys are amazing. It’s not like calling someone a professional streamer or a video game entertainment brand is an insult. It’s not saying you are bad at the game. There are obviously people that cross over with both.

Using a slightly different example, participant four, a man and current player and streamer, provided an analogy for the different areas of the professional gaming industry:

I view it like, kind of like an ocean. Umm, like if gaming is an ocean, the different professions you can make in it are you know. You can be a sailor, you can be a swimmer, you can be a fisher. There’s not really any reason to categorize them all as the same thing, when they are just very different things...It’s like lumping in fisherman, sailors, and swimmers, they are just different ways of using the same medium.

Both participants echoed the same sentiment; that it was a similar medium yet different job. The emphasis on entertainment and content as central elements of streaming and

competition and compensation tied to performance was indicative of esports. The nature of work in these two areas of professional gaming are different and distinct and as such it should be framed and researched accordingly.

#### 4.2.1 Importance of differentiating these terms

There are both practical and research explanations for properly defining these terms, and understanding where the distinctions between them are. Participant twenty-one, addressed the importance of properly framing the nuances of the industry:

Esports adds a lot of value to *professional gaming*. At the same time, I do think it is important to have distinct terminology and to recognize that you know, Shroud<sup>15</sup> was a competitive player, he was an esports player. Now when he is streaming Apex Legends on his stream at night to his Twitch viewers, he is not an *esports player*. He is a part of the player, he is providing an incredibly valuable entertainment service, but I do think there is a distinction between the livestreamed content that you see and truly competitive events between the best teams in the world. I do think that this does matter.

Speaking of professional gaming as a heterogeneous industry does not accurately and appropriately present this emerging area of work. This necessity extends beyond simply an esports or streaming distinction. Participant eighteen, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry argued for the importance of making distinctions not only between esports and streaming but also within esports:

When we group up and we have articles about ‘esports viewership is better than the Superbowl’. It’s like no, League of Legends maybe, but every esports is different. When we treat all esports as if they are just esports in a bubble rather than individual scenes... They are structurally different and it does a disservice to people [to refer to them as being the same].

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<sup>15</sup> Shroud is a former esports player who no longer plays competitively. He has since ‘retired’ from esports and competitive play to stream on Twitch, and as of July 2019 has nearly seven million followers on Twitch and over three-hundred million views.

This sentiment was echoed by participant twenty-one, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry:

The biggest error that people make when they look at esports is making statements along the extent of ‘esports something’, some description, ok? Esports is not a homogeneous environment, each title is extremely heterogeneous, the communities are very different... You have to kind of take that as a given.

Even within streaming or esports there may be differences between specific games or communities which make them unique from both a social and research perspective. This is also true when discussing the financial growth and reach of the industry. Participant fifteen, a man working in management spoke directly to this point:

I think it is a little disingenuous to include the entire gaming category as esports. That is one of my big problems. People say ‘the gaming space is worth X gazillion dollars’ and yeah that’s true but esports is only worth a part of that, whatever the amount is. I don’t consider them in the same category. That doesn’t even account for the fact that each esports is different, like, considering fighting games and Overwatch the same just doesn’t make sense at all. People still do it.

For this participant, the financial discussion ought to be more specific and be limited to particular games or genres within esports or streaming. When asked about the consequences of not properly understanding the differences between the different jobs within professional gaming participant eighteen, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, commented:

They are two different job descriptions. Conflating the two is to do an injustice to either...But they aren’t esports skills, they are entertainment skills...We do need to keep those things separate. It’s too easy to just say ‘it’s that gaming stuff’. When we do that, we ignore what makes each part of the industry great and different.

This focus on skills highlights the research importance of understanding the intricacies and differences between the areas of the industry. The tacit and gaming skills that individuals hold can have a considerable impact on their ability to succeed in particular

areas of the industry (Brock & Fraser, 2018). The development of this knowledge and skills can impact whether or not individuals successfully transition into the industry (Seo & Jung, 2016; Wagner, 2007; Witkowski, 2012).

In addition to the skills of persons working in this industry, whether the individuals work primarily in esports, streaming, or both can have a meaningful impact on their experiences at work. The nature of work within these areas of the professional gaming industry is different. These include variances in the interaction with fans and spectators that will be discussed in chapter five, and their mental and physical health which will be addressed in chapter six. At minimum, researchers ought to consider how individuals' labour fits within the industry. Effort should be made to move towards recognizing that where a person works within professional gaming, can and does profoundly change how we as researchers investigate and understand their experiences.

### 4.3 Professionalization and Maturation of the Industry

The literature on professional gaming has recognized the necessity for growth, maturation, and professionalization within the industry (Bayliss, 2016; Blum, 2016; Brock, 2017; Vera, Agustín, & Aguado Terrón, 2019; Zulinski, 2016). The “regulation and integration of the industry, its actors and activities in the functioning of society will contribute to the good health, transparency, normality and professionalization” (Vera et al., 2019, p. 16). Often-cited elements of this growth include regulation, the development of standards and best practices, and more appropriate labour practices (Bayliss, 2016; Hollist, 2015). Throughout conversations with the participants, regardless of the substance of the discussion, was commentary — both underlying and sometimes forward — on growth and change in the professional gaming industry. Many of the participants

described various aspects of the professional gaming industry that over the last two, five, and ten years have undergone considerable change, including changes in the treatment of workers (discussed later in this chapter), shifts in social support and approval (chapter five), and trends in the difficulties and challenges experienced by those working in professional gaming (chapter seven). The general sentiment of the participants was that additional change was necessary if the industry was to continue to progress.

When describing the growth of professional gaming, the participants used a multitude of words: corporatization, mainstreaming, legitimization, and professionalization were used almost interchangeably. When asked what they meant by these terms, participants argued that professional gaming has experienced more organization, more oversight and rules, higher standards, greater equality, and improved treatment of workers. In this chapter and for the remainder of this research, I use the term professionalization to represent the development and formalization within the industry, consistent with the manner with which the participants used it. This quote from participant ten, a woman working in the infrastructure of the industry demonstrates the interchangeability of these terms:

I would hope in the next five years, more opportunities and companies come to XXXX<sup>16</sup>. I hope it becomes a bit more professional, like it is going in that direction but I would like it to happen faster... This is dependent on a lot of things so I can't put my eggs all in one basket. I just think that it needs to be more legitimate, umm, organized, I guess.

For her the organization and influx of companies into the space was important. The primary point of discussion amongst participants when speaking about the professionalization and maturation of professional gaming was the increasing number of

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<sup>16</sup> The game that the participant is involved in is redacted.

corporate interests and companies involved in this industry. There was widespread agreement that the industry was better off with the introduction of legitimate corporate sponsors and the entrance of established companies into positions of ownership and organization. As the profile of the gaming industry has increased so has the scrutiny around the actions and behaviour of individuals online. Participant twenty-nine, a woman working in the infrastructure commented on this development: “As these online interactions have been drawn more and more into the public and involve older and older people, have in general a better sense of how bigotry and sexism not only are actively harmful, but how they show up.” This shift has resulted in improvement, with the greater inclusion and acceptance of minorities, women, and individuals historically excluded, but more remains to be done (Amazan-Hall et al., 2018; Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018).

Participant thirty-four, a current streamer commented on this increase of inclusion: “It has gotten significantly more gender equal. As we have gotten more legit, we have gotten more accepting I would say. Not totally but I’d say it went from like 99 to 1 male-female to now it’s maybe like 75 to 25.” This newfound inclusion of individuals from diverse backgrounds has created situations where persons who have been working in this industry for some time must adjust and adapt. Speaking to the impact that this shift towards inclusivity has had on players, streamers, and on-screen talent in professional gaming, participant twenty-one, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry reflected: “It requires a great more diversity in your appeal and approach and your personality to sustain viewers in a game.” This development and increased inclusivity were generally considered positive amongst the participants. The participants discussed this transformation as being brought on by societal wide social change, the maturation of

professional gaming, and the influx of established companies and organizations into the industry.

Nevertheless, throughout the conversations with the participants, there was concern about the impact of these newfound ‘corporate overlords’, as one participant phrased it. Many of the participants expressed contradictory opinions related to freedom of speech and discrimination. The acceptance and encouragement of further corporate involvement in this industry was consistent amongst the participants. This was, however, often followed by a hesitation, qualification, or reluctance. Corporate involvement fostered inclusion, but did limit participants’ ability to “say what you want” as participant one, a man working in management in the industry lamented.

Within many of the conversations, individuals lamented newfound censorship and expectations around speech, behaviour, and attitudes. Participant thirty-one, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, provided an example of this tension when discussing his work in the industry. Speaking about a public figure within the game they work in, he commented:

He would make sexist jokes, he’s not a sexist person I wouldn’t say. He would be a bit racist and a bit sexist but in a very tongue in cheek, non-offensive way, just make jokes on those matters. Umm, the moment you start to get sponsors involved, that stuff just goes right out the window. There is absolutely now, a hypersensitivity which was never really there when I first started to get *into the industry*. I have still seen it continually tightening up and tightening up, just trying to get a much less boys-club vibe to things. To move towards this kind of hyper professional sports TV broadcast which I believe doesn’t fit XXXX<sup>17</sup> at all... I think it is actually the wrong way to go, unfortunately, to get the

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<sup>17</sup> The name of the game that this individual is employed in is redacted.



sponsors in at this kind of early stage that esports is in, it's better to tread on the safe side.

For him, the progression in the direction of more professionalism has brought with it a 'hypersensitivity' towards behaviours, comments, and negativity within the industry. This negative attitude towards this newfound 'hypersensitivity' was also acknowledged by participant four, a man and current player and streamer: "I just think the whole thing is moving towards this hypersensitivity. As for the future, I think that will change. I think we are going to start to regress to more lax rules or that sort of thing. I am not the biggest fan of *this hypersensitivity* but I do understand it. Money is very important."

Participant fifteen, a man who is involved in the management of a major esports organization, acknowledged this hypersensitivity as well.<sup>18</sup> As a result of the corporatization and mainstreaming of professional gaming there are more restrictions on players and those working in this industry. He explained how his organization deals with this heightened awareness of insensitive comments: "There is a limit you know? Our players can't call people faggots, they can't call people gay. They can't use racial slurs, they can't be homophobic. Beyond that they can swear. Its part our brand." Participant nine, a man and current player was especially passionate about this topic:

It has positive and negative effects. With every change there is always good and bad but it is a general gigantic net positive. You will have the person who will tell you 'we don't like this because we are losing our heart and soul', but that's a lot of bull crap. What people are simply saying, speaking from the XXXX<sup>19</sup> side of gaming, it's so dumb, like they say 'we can't say certain words on commentary anymore because we have sponsors who wouldn't like it.' It's like no shit like that's very

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<sup>18</sup> This individual's organization is owned by an 'outside' entity that is new to the professional gaming industry, an established company.

<sup>19</sup> The game that the participant plays is redacted.

obvious. They are trying to enforce some level of professionalism. That doesn't mean you can't cuss, I mean there is always a good time to drop a good f bomb or something like that. But the heart and soul has always been and always will be the game and as long as that remains unchanged by any outside entity, I think there should be no issue of it. I will say that the general gaming opinion of it may be bad, but the professional gamer opinion of it is 'good lord we needed this so badly can we get more professionalism.'

For him, while some individuals in the industry alongside consumers may be unhappy with the progression of professional gaming, the changes have been necessary and beneficial for this industry as a whole.

Overall, there was tension around corporatization. Participant happiness with greater pay, standards, and legitimacy, was coupled with a simultaneous dislike for some of the accompanying restrictions, standards, and higher expectations respecting conduct and behaviour. These concerns were expressed most strongly for those whom the restrictions and standards most affected- players, streamers, and on-camera personalities. Similarly, the participants who were more positive about these developments were women and individuals working in infrastructure and management.

Improvements, progress, and corporatization all emerged as themes throughout the conversations with participants regarding the development of the industry. This trend was first articulated by T.L. Taylor (2012) in her book *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*. Taylor observed that "like other sections of the e-sports scene, the professionalization of the gaming journalists covering these athletes is still very much in the making" (p. 197). This process, according to the participants, continues to be a work in progress.

Participant six, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry commented on the progress within professional gaming: “The professionalization of the industry is still, the industry is moving more towards professionalization but it’s not quite there yet. That has been an impediment *to progress on work and labour in the industry.*” Another participant who has an understanding of the labour situation in the industry addressed this need for professionalization: “I’m not sure when it’s going to improve. I think people are starting to recognize some of the labour practices of the past just aren’t acceptable anymore. As, like, as we like get more organized and gaming matures even a bit more, I think it’s going to be better, a more professional industry to work in.”<sup>20</sup> Part of this maturation may be in part attributable to new companies entering professional gaming. Participant thirty-three, a man and owner of a gaming organization commented on the effect that the entrance of companies from outside of the gaming industry into the space has had on the maturation of the industry: “It’s becoming more mainstream. I say mainstream, like, you get involvement from a lot of big, you know, professional sports teams have been buying, like the Cowboy’s<sup>21</sup> with Complexity Gaming and all these different teams. Which I think it’s good, that’s great.... I don’t know if anyone knows how to do it right.” This introduction of companies and corporations that operate in more established industries has introduced certain standards and best practices that ultimately improve the situation within professional gaming.

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<sup>20</sup> Participant information is redacted to protect anonymity

<sup>21</sup> This participant referenced the 2017 purchase of gaming organization complexity Gaming by Jerry Jones, the owner of the Dallas Cowboys in the NFL.

The corporatization of the professional gaming industry has, according to the participants, brought with it both positive and less desirable outcomes for those working in this space. Following up on a conversation regarding professionalization, participant twenty-one, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, expressed confidence that professional gaming is moving towards a mainstream and professional structure. He commented on the importance of corporate interests in this shift: “We are going to get there sooner rather than later, if only because the financial incentives to getting there are starting to become really extreme.” Participant thirty, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry addressed the influx of money and corporate sponsorships into the industry:

There is a lot more money in the industry, which is good and bad. More money means there are more people looking to take advantage of folks in the scene to make a quick buck. But it also means that for people who know to get a lawyer to check their contracts and understand a little of how a business works there is more of an opportunity to create a career and not just be a passion project or a hobby.

Career opportunities, thus, appear to be expanding with corporatization, but the risk of exploitation appears high. Participant seven, a man working in the infrastructure of professional gaming explained:

People still don't get lawyers enough. There isn't a reason not to really, the contracts can be shady and that's even if they actually can hold up. It didn't always used to be this way but it's not like the money isn't there now, when you are making good money you should protect yourself.

Participant eighteen, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry echoed this sentiment:

It sure would be nice if those people who are working really hard and putting their all into it could be paid what they deserve to be paid for all the hard work and effort that they are putting in. I think that aspect of

the professionalization is something that we should all be rooting for. That only helps everyone succeed.

Experienced people in the industry, may be better equipped and able to protect themselves. Participant six, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry argued:

The professionalization of the industry itself is going to be met with more resistance by those that have been for a long time and you know, know the way that it works. The gaming community for better or worse is all about authenticity and you can smell it a mile away, some guy come in and is trying to make a quick buck off of the esports hype.

The implication is that people newer to the industry may get taken advantage of.

Newcomers to the industry may not be able to easily discern legitimate from illegitimate work opportunities in the same way that more entrenched workers are able to. However, some of the long-time participants in the industry may also be vulnerable. The conversation with participant six included a discussion of ‘legacy’ workers. The development and growth within the industry has begun to leave some people behind, impacting those persons who may have been involved in professional gaming the longest.

Participant twenty-one, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry addressed this issue:

As the industry grows there are some people who are really smart, and do have ideas, and have even contributed a lot to the growth of the industry who end up getting left by the wayside because they can’t adapt to what eventually needs to become a professional environment... People you know, they look at Major League Baseball for example and they see a well-oiled machine... They say ‘well why don’t we do business like that’. They miss the fact that it took years to get there. Baseball owners didn’t give the players rights because they wanted to. Baseball owners gave players rights because of organization and strikes.

Unionization was mentioned by less than five participants, and there are currently no active unions in professional gaming (Hollist, 2015; Korpimies, 2017). Not only are there no unions in this industry but the road towards such organization is difficult and may not

be promising (Chao, 2017; Hollist, 2015). Overall, participants suggested that some workers in professional gaming were negatively affected through corporatization: some long-standing participants faced declining opportunities, while some new to the sector could get taken advantage by companies offering dubious contracts. These concerns informed participants' eagerness for more professionalization and growth in the industry.

The participants also explained how these trends were not uniform across professional gaming. Rather, variations were evident across contexts and sub-areas. Participant eight, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry elaborated: "There is no single answer about *the professionalization of the industry*. Fighting games for instance are very grass roots and I think if they moved away from that, you would lose what makes the fighting game community so positive and inclusive. Comparatively, Overwatch League right now, they have franchising which is very divisive. You have people who are very passionate for it and those that aren't." Other participants were also adamant that there were important variations across sub-areas in the field with some having progressed and changed more than others. The explanations by the participants relating to specific games and communities within esports as being unique and different represent a kind of field. For the participants a segmented field exists within the gaming industry between various games and genres. As such, the different forms of capital that exist within each of these fields are valued differently (Bourdieu, 1993).

Ultimately a significant majority of the participants recognized that change and progress has happened within the professional gaming industry. These shifts continue to improve the experiences of people working in this space. While growth has resulted in positive change and advancement for the industry, there remains vulnerability for some

individuals working in this sector. Employment precarity and dubious contracts continue to be an issue for some individuals working in professional gaming.

#### 4.4 Professional Gaming and Work

Employment in the professional gaming industry can often be challenging and difficult (Bayliss, 2016; Y.-H. Lee & Lin, 2011; Taylor, 2012, 2018). The lack of regulation, rules, and best practices within this area of work has created considerable hardships for those making a living in this industry (Brock, 2017; Hollist, 2015). This struggle extends to those not physically playing video games and includes individuals employed in other supporting areas of professional gaming. The exploitation of workers in this space is rampant with a reliance on non-standard employment relationships as well as free or poorly compensated labour.

One of the difficulties associated with employment in professional gaming is the overwhelming reliance on non-standard employment practices. An important consideration is not just the nature of the employment but whether or not this type of employment arrangement is voluntary or involuntary (Green & Livanos, 2017). In the case of the participants, their employment relationships were often undesirable and precarious. This includes severe discrepancies between individuals involved in the same company. Companies can “pick and choose what esports to support and completely *fire an entire division/game* because they may not think that sport is going to be viable for their bottom line” explained participant ten, a woman working in the infrastructure of the industry. For her, because most companies’ employees are not unionized and often operate on revolving contracts, there exists constant stress and fear of ‘could I be the next one?’ Recent high-profile examples of this include Rockstar Games, creators of the

Grand Theft Auto series. In October 2018 contract workers commented on the precarious employment practices used by the company with an anonymous source stating that “A large amount of staff are on rolling temporary contracts and live in the hope that they will be extended and able to pay rent as the end of their contract approaches” (Totilo, 2019). This commentary on the financial difficulties that come as a result of the exploitative employment practices was frequently discussed by the participants.

Concern surrounding non-standard contracts emerged during conversations with individuals from all sub-areas of professional gaming. Players often experience situations with problematic contracts signed when they are a very young age. Participant ten, a woman working in the infrastructure of the industry addressed this: “There are huge discrepancies between the individuals’ pay... There are a lot of players that are young kids, they get in and sign the contracts for the minimum or just above the minimum. But their co-players are making two or three times more than them. That happens in sports too but in sports people have agents and stuff. There are people to help young kids manage or migrate that system. That has me concerned.” The lack of representation and outright exploitation through dubious contracts was commonly discussed. The reliance on labour that often goes uncompensated within professional gaming has historically been problematic (Agha, 2015; Ridgeway, 2014). Participant seventeen, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry commented on how the professionalization of the gaming industry has in some ways improved the employment situation: “It has done a really good job of pushing away from this sort of unpaid labour, to help make things run better. This legitimization has gotten rid of some bad eggs and gotten rid of some people who are just here to exploit young people. People that are in their late teens and early



twenties and just trying to make as much money as they can and bugger off without paying them.” While he felt as though the industry had progressed largely as a result of professionalization and development, he acknowledged that questionable contracts within both esports and streaming remain common.

For some participants, exploitation can be traced to the reliance within the industry on freelance workers. Participant eighteen, a male working in the infrastructure of the industry commented on the issues with this employment relationship: “Freelance, it’s very hard to balance it. If you aren’t making enough from freelance to pay your rent on your own, which I don’t think a lot of people can do because the freelance rates just aren’t nearly that high. You gotta be doing something else and then that something else takes away from hours that you could be doing freelance things.” For him, employers’ insistence on hiring workers on complete or partial freelance contracts ultimately results in precarious employment arrangements. Many of the participants, particularly those not formally employed in organizations, made it clear that this employment relationship was not desirable and contributed to the stress and mental health challenges they experienced (discussed in greater detail in chapter six). Participant nine, a man and current player, compared the working arrangements in esports to professional sports, commenting:

*Professional gaming hasn’t been established the way regular sports have. Where you have salaried contracts that are good, not garbage. Good contracts that you can live off, then the stress of competing is only the personal gain of a satisfying win, winning something. Whereas in a number of games, the stress is both about winning and making a living for yourself.<sup>22</sup> It makes it hard to focus and play you know?*

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<sup>22</sup> This participant went into considerable detail about the financial challenges of two of the games they are considerably involved in. This was edited to protect anonymity. The initialized sentence reflects this change.

Speaking of his experiences as a former player, the precarity in employment and subsequent stress may directly impact an individual's performance, play, and ability to succeed while playing games.<sup>23</sup> These findings are consistent with the literature that finds that while non-standard employment can have benefits, this work arrangement must not be involuntary (Green & Livanos, 2017; Zaleska & de Menezes, 2007). These employment practices are common in this industry as individuals are “‘pushed’ to accept less preferred non-standard employment conditions in order to avoid unemployment, giving rise to ‘precarious employment’” (Green & Livanos, 2017, p. 5). Temporary and sub-contracting of work have become common and the norm within professional gaming, particularly amongst those working in the infrastructure of the industry.

Those working in the infrastructure of professional gaming often work for start-up organizations and companies. Missed pay cheques, mass layoffs, lack of healthcare, retirement, and life planning, as well as general job precarity are endemic in organizations at this stage (Ozimek, 2019; Thörnquist, 2015). Participant five, a woman involved in management, commented on this difficulty:

I am very fortunate, in that my company does have those plans in place for their employees. We have like a *pension contribution plan* and all that long-term planning stuff. Consistency with being paid. So, I am very fortunate. A lot of other people are a lot less fortunate.

She further explained that her experiences working for certain organizations when she first became involved in the industry have made her appreciate her current employment that much more. There are numerous recent examples of players and talent commenting

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<sup>23</sup> The participant currently plays a particular video game competitively as an esports and is categorized as a current player. In this quote he was referencing a number of years ago when he competed in a completely different unrelated game.

on the difficulty in making ends meet or finding success in the industry (Blomdin, 2019; Bueno, 2018; Wu, 2018). A former player and infrastructure worker in esports, Ben ‘Merlini’ Wu, spoke to the difficulties associated with working in professional gaming and meeting your obligations and responsibilities. He wrote in a February 13<sup>th</sup> (2018) post on Reddit that: “As you age older and older, priorities start to shift. Dreams start to fade, realizations start to set in, and responsibilities mount.”

One research subject, participant twenty-four, a man who formerly worked in the infrastructure of the industry, commented on the hardship he faced trying to transition into professional gaming, and ultimately his decision to leave the industry. He commented that: “I quickly realized that unless you are on the top-end of it, there is no financial viability.” Participant eleven, a man and former player now working in the infrastructure of the industry, echoed this difficulty in working in professional gaming as a long-term goal: “I would do it if it is sustainable... Most of the people that I did it with, *we don’t do it anymore*. It’s just not something you can do, unless you are SumaiL.”<sup>24</sup> This reference to SumaiL highlights the inequitable distribution of money in the industry, as evidenced by the incredibly top-heavy arrangements whereby only those individuals at the pinnacle of the industry are in a financially sustainable situation. Participant thirty-three, a man and owner of an organization in gaming, addressed this inequity in compensation and lack of financial viability:

A lot of these players really had these goals to go professional. You know, supporting themselves, they were living at home with their parents with varying degrees of support there. Income in general, a lot

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<sup>24</sup> SumaiL is generally recognized as one of, if not the best Dota 2 players in the world and is currently playing for European esports organization OG (Erzberger, 2017).

of people, I remember them talking like ‘I have no money.’ Unless you are at the literal top it is impossible to make a go of it.

Although the participants did not generally discuss one area of the industry being higher prestige or status, there were differences discussed specifically relating to players working in esports. There was some discussion surrounding a layering of esports players specifically into different tiers or strata based largely on the financial compensation and viability of their work. Participant twenty-two, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry addressed these different levels of esports players: “Having worked a lot with these sorts of like tier two or three players who don’t make enough money from XXXX to support themselves... They didn’t get it... They didn’t make it.” He went on to explain that the industry is incredibly “top heavy” which results in players who are semi-professional having more difficulty making ends meet. This challenge becomes more difficult the further from the top tier of competition a player gets.

In addition to the often-irregular working relationships, expectations surrounding compensation and worker pay in this industry are also problematic. The expectation that workers will provide free, or ostensibly free, labour is rampant in professional gaming. The manifestation of this attitude on the part of organizations and employers exists primarily two ways. The first and more nefarious situation occurs when organizations change employment agreements or delay payments or compensation after an individual has performed work. The second occurs when companies are openly and transparently advertising, encouraging, or accepting free labour. Both of these situations were described during the conversations with the participants.

A number of participants experienced issues with organizations renegeing on promised payments or verbal agreements at various stages of their employment. Some had yet to begin working, while others were not compensated to various degrees for work already performed. One participant<sup>25</sup>, a man working in the infrastructure, explained his experiences with this issue:

Things can get dicey pretty quick. One of the things that is unfortunate about being in a growing industry is that you have a lot of people who can take advantage of the kind of loopholes *because rules* aren't really in place yet...that's the worst-case scenario in esports, when you are that kind of semi-professional team and you hitch yourself to this *organization* because you think that certain things are in order. But there just isn't a good level of oversight.... It is changing, but there was that 'wild west' time and you kind of have to acknowledge that when you talk about the growth of any young industry.

This participant was employed for some time by an organization that ultimately paid him less than half his salary that was due and also failed to pay many other individuals in the organization. He ended up using some of the salary he received to ensure that other members of the organization who were affected by this were able to survive financially and make rent payments.

This situation was not uncommon, with participants often describing having to "chase" companies for money. Participant seventeen, a man working in the infrastructure of professional gaming addressed this challenge: "I wasn't being paid and then I finally convinced them to actually pay me." This participant moved across the country for employment and ultimately had to haggle and threaten to leave his employer before they ultimately paid him. The financial viability and difficulties experienced by individuals

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<sup>25</sup> Participant number has been redacted due to concerns about anonymity based on the explanation of the quote.

working in the infrastructure of the industry have historically been problematic as well, with participant thirty, a man working in this area of professional gaming commenting that: “I didn’t even get paid for half of it, maybe more. I spent a lot of time and effort and just nothing, it’s hard. I have to pay bills, expenses, live.” Individuals attempting to shift their primary source of income to professional gaming are impacted as well. Participant ten, a woman who works part-time in professional gaming but would like to transition to full-time, explained one challenge: “Finding the right clients is a challenge at the moment for me. You have to find people that can actually pay you.” Ultimately however, the landscape is improving as participant twenty-eight, a man and owner of an esports organization explained: “Historically speaking, the treatment of staff *in esports* is getting a lot better. A big part of esports is getting the production and talent on board, they had to put in a lot of hours to put on a show. Before, they would just do this voluntarily without any/much compensation. People are starting to become compensated more fairly for the services that they perform.” The difficulty and uncertainty surrounding being compensated for performing labour is absolutely an impediment and hardship for those working in this space.

In addition to companies and organizations failing to compensate for work that is performed, the participants also expressed concern surrounding wages, compensation, and free immaterial labour. Immaterial labour, “where labour produces immaterial goods such as a service, cultural product, knowledge or communication,” represents the majority of the work in professional gaming (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 292). The reliance on immaterial labour, often suppresses wages and creates undesirable working conditions for workers (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hesmondhalgh, 2010). Some people do work in the field

for very little (or no) compensation. Participant ten, a woman working in the infrastructure of the industry, commented on this challenge: “It’s a part-time side thing I do. If I could go full-time, man I would do it. But, right now the industry is so competitive and there is a lot of people that will work for basically free so it’s hard to get in right now.” For her, her employment outside of professional gaming provided compensation that was highly disproportionate to what she was generally offered and paid for her work within the industry. During a follow-up conversation about her work, she provided specific examples. Numerous times she quoted organizations and companies paying “a few thousand dollars” for her services, an amount she explained was below her typical rate outside of gaming. Ultimately these organizations were willing to pay her “a couple hundred dollars,” numbers that according to her “are just not workable, I can’t do it.” This tension and expectation of significantly depressed wages was especially true for those individuals who maintained employment both within professional gaming as well as outside of it.

Participant thirty-three, a man who owns an organization in esports while also maintaining outside employment, described this suppression of wages and compensation: “Like I am a software engineer, and that market right now is going crazy. And I have looked at jobs, software, in the gaming industry as well and there is just no way, the pay isn’t even close. There is just so many people that want to be in gaming so much that they are willing to take a lower pay. They are like ‘oh it pays a lot less but at least I get to be in gaming’. As a result, it lowers the salary for everyone *in the industry*... I barely work forty hours right now. I have heard that in the gaming industry you are easily working tons of hours.” He continued, explaining why this happens: “I just feel like people are

going to take, let's say that, overall salaries, wages, are going to be lower than other software places right? Because people are so passionate, there's almost like a flood of people interested in doing it, which I think is awesome but it ends up lowering the wages for everyone." Even while explaining his frustration with this labour situation, this participant described that he himself would most likely make a similar decision to take less money: "I have a family to support and gaming is more of a hobby for me but... Yeah I would probably take a pay cut. *I would probably take a 15% pay cut*<sup>26</sup>." The participant then proceeded to laugh for a few seconds before stating that: "That's funny, I guess I kind of am the same as them, I would take a pay cut. Probably not as drastic as some people but I would do the same."

This willingness to work for lower pay was also described by participant twenty-two, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry: "Yes, yes, I actively did that. *I probably now make sixty percent of what I did before.*" For him, he made the decision to move from an unrelated career in media and advertising to one in professional gaming for ostensibly a forty percent pay cut. This is in addition to the fact that he acknowledged the lack of security and precarity that comes with working in professional gaming compared to his former employment.

This desperation to work in the industry was addressed by a significant number of the participants. Participant twenty-one, a man who works in the infrastructure, commented:

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<sup>26</sup> To address issues with participants not wanting to speak about their income, I used units of money. For this participant he commented that if what he was currently making now was 100 units, he would be willing to take 85 units of money or a 15% pay cut in order to work in gaming. This has been edited for clarity sake within the body of the document.



“You do get young people that are desperate to break into the industry that are coming along and saying I am willing to work for a quarter of the rate that I think this other guy is charging because I am desperate for that first big break.” This sentiment was echoed by numerous participants who lamented the simultaneous growth in revenue and money in the industry, with the propensity of large organizations to accept and often times encourage free labour. Participant twenty-six, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, spoke to this concerted effort by companies within professional gaming:

“Wages are kinda not at par. They are suppressed. You have a lot of younger individuals who may not know their worth, and there is a lot of owners who will hire anyone that will work for really low wages or basically for free.” The rush of workers to enter this industry and secure employment has resulted in a considerable lack of power and control over their work for those in professional gaming.

Recent literature has focused on the development of the precariat, a social class identified as having precarious labour and employment (De Peuter, 2014; Dyer-Witthoford & De Peuter, 2009; Wright, 2016). The results from this research demonstrate that many in the gaming industry are precarious workers. Employers are able to leverage these individuals to control and drive wages downward (De Peuter, 2014; Ekbia, 2016). Many of the participants described a period effect, where the industry is emerging in conjunction with a cohort of young people who may not have worked before. This makes exploitation and being taken advantage of potentially easier. Employers can set unrealistic standards for work and pay that are difficult to resist for this cohort yet are not commiserate with typical standards for work and pay for individuals outside of this group. These young workers lack a reference point for expectations and fair practices. They also typically lack

access and use of a knowledgeable support system such as agents, lawyers, and mentors to guide them.

Participant ten, a woman working in the infrastructure of the industry, commented on this reserve army of the unemployed:

People are like *coming out of university and are like* ‘man I want to work in the esports industry.’ It’s like, you are paid very minimal or you aren’t paid at all, but you are like ‘yeah I am doing it.’ So like, if there is always a pool of those people it’s going to replace people who are qualified and this is their job.

This consistent source of cheap labour is similar to Marx’s concept of the reserve army of labour. In this industry, many companies structure their organizations and business models around this reserve army. The presence of a reserve army of labour in gaming can be illustrated through an example cited by a number of participants concerning the Epicenter Major in Dota 2. This event occurred in June 2019 and is a Valve sanctioned Dota Pro Circuit (DPC) event.<sup>27</sup> For the last two DPC seasons, Epicenter has hosted a Major. Both events included a ‘Caster Contest’ in which “everyone has a chance to win the opportunity to comment on the games of The Epicenter Major group stage” (Epicenter, 2019b). The idea behind this competition was to allow spectators and fans to watch individuals commentate and cast qualifier games for this event, have them vote for their favourites based on the performances, and ultimately those who ‘won’ would be selected to attend the event. While it initially seemed like an excellent opportunity, three participants discussed numerous issues with the work arrangement. Participant thirty-one,

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<sup>27</sup> Valve is the company that runs Dota 2. It has an annual circuit of sanctioned events that culminate in an event in August of each year. The events are split into Minors and Majors, with prize pools of \$300,000 and \$1,000,000 respectively. Valve partners with third party tournament organizers and companies to run these events and contributes to the prize pool. The teams are awarded points based on their standings that ultimately decide whether or not they attend ‘The International’ in August.

a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, explained that the motivations on the part of the organization were not great. He commented that:

People were definitely trying to use the new talent to make the budget better for their bosses. *The amount given to newer talent was very very low amount for two weeks in Moscow.*<sup>28</sup> *The amount that the new talent received was not considered reasonable by any kind of established talent, but because they are new talent they are able to do that.* Conversations did take place between existing talents and the newcomers *and it was made clear that this acceptance of a low wage would be making life rough by undercutting them.* At the same time, the established talent *recognized* the newcomers came in through a legitimate option, they ran this competition and it is their decision.

This quote highlights the tension that exists within this relationship, where existing and established talent are faced with newcomers who work for wages and compensation that is unsustainably low. For example, in reference to Epicenter, another participant suggested that the new talent was offered around \$1,000 and all expenses paid for two weeks of work, a rate of pay significantly higher was paid to more established individuals. After an interview with a different participant, they spoke at length about this event and the knowledge they had about it because of their connections in the industry. They commented that the existing talent was paid in excess of \$2,500 for the event plus all expenses for the two weeks of work.<sup>29</sup>

While this ‘caster contest’ is lauded as developing the talent in the industry, there is also an important cost and labour control mechanism at play. This is in part evidenced by the

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<sup>28</sup> In Dota 2 talent is typically referred to as individuals who work in production/broadcasting who have some degree of importance to the conveying of information to the audience. This generally includes play by play announcers or casters, analysts, interviewers, observers, and desk hosts.

<sup>29</sup> This participant agreed to speak “off the record” but did give consent to use their statement within the dissertation so long as no reference at all to them was used. This stipulation was specific to this particular topic because they knew sensitive information, and the participant’s quotes and information are used otherwise the same as the other participants in the remainder of the dissertation.

fact that three of the contest winners for the 2018 Epicenter XL Major, Nomad, MoFarahDota, and Bkop, were also contest winners for the 2019 iteration of the Epicenter Major (Epicenter, 2019a; Koch, 2018). This tension was specifically discussed by participant 25, a man involved in the infrastructure who commented:

*People go for exposure bucks basically, because they did need the exposure at that point, so that people did know who they are. That's how people get these opportunities to do more and more things. But at a certain point, like you can't work for free anymore. Because not only is it not viable for yourself, it sets a bad precedent for bad behaviour for those that might be up and coming in the scene.*

In addition to these difficulties with labour and employment, the participants often struggled balancing their commitments to work within professional gaming and their education.

## 4.5 Credentialism and the Importance of Education

A number of the participants spoke to the importance of education in the gaming industry. During discussions of the professionalization and maturation of professional gaming, the importance of education emerged. Generally speaking, the participants agreed that historically, education was marginally important for employment. Much more relevant to job opportunities was experience and the willingness to work long hours for little compensation. There was also agreement that with the growth, corporatization, and introduction of established non-gaming companies into this industry, expectations surrounding education and employment are changing. Speaking to this point, participant twenty-one, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, explained what is happening to people who have been working in professional gaming for an extended period of time but do not have formal training or education: “There are people, it's just a harsh truth, but as the industry grows there are some people who are really smart and do

have ideas and have even contributed a lot to the growth of industry, who end up getting left on the wayside because they can't adapt to what eventually has to become a professional environment." This perspective was shared amongst a number of the interviewees, with participant twenty-eight, a man and owner of an esports organization commenting that:

On the VC side they are strictly interested in the ROI, they are interested in someone to propel them in that direction.<sup>30</sup> Where someone fresh out of high school that has been in the scene for like four years or something. They haven't gone to college or graduated but they have been grinding in the scene. They are not exactly business savvy to propel a company to have a positive ROI. They may be very experienced and they may understand the scene but there is a certain business sense the VC's might want them to have. It's hard to find someone that encompasses those two roles, having a good formal education and being involved and having a long span in gaming.

This individual went on to explain that he has personally experienced the manifestation of this credentialism. Once venture capital (VC) companies purchase established organizations, at times there is a disconnect between their traditional expectations for education and employment history and those of the existing employees. This finding was limited to participants in the infrastructure and management areas of the industry, as formal training of players has yet to become mainstream, especially in North America and Europe (Liu, 2017). While it is outside of the practical and geographical scope of this study, there is a shift in Asian countries towards esports and gaming training academies for players.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> VC refers to Venture Capital, investment firms that are moving into professional gaming and buying established organizations and companies. ROI refers to return on investment.

<sup>31</sup> See the Asia Pacific University of Technology and Innovation's Esports Malaysia Academy. Here players can learn teamwork, leadership, and train technical skills relevant to success in esports competitions.

Six of the participants have had their companies that they currently work for taken over by companies from outside of the gaming industry. Four of those participants had the companies or organizations that they work for taken over by VC firms<sup>32</sup>. Each of these participants told nearly identical stories surrounding this insistence on education and credentials and the tension that this created within these companies. One of those participants gave an excellent description of this situation:

There are going to be a lot of those that do let go in favour of people with more traditional credentials. There are going to be a lot of them that do and go get MBA's and reenter the industry a couple of years later with the added credentials knowing how to speak the language of the hedge fund investors that are coming to the table now. People are like well 'I am a marketing director for this esports firm.' And it's like yeah, but when it started it was you and five other people, and now it is a company of appreciable size and you are a marketing director that has no formal degree in economics, marketing or business. You know? You are some English major that got hired back when this company was six people and you were the only one willing to work for the salary that they could pay. Why are you here and why should you expect to keep your position?

Here, individuals in the infrastructure or management of the industry who lack the formal credentials to be director of marketing, Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Chief Operating Officer (COO), but who have years of experience in these roles may eventually be pushed out of the industry. Another interviewee, participant ten, a woman working in the infrastructure of the industry, while not belonging to one of these organizations that had been taken over, commented on this necessity for education that is now permeating the industry: "I think of a lot of employers in esports are going to need or require a degree. You are going to have large teams and you need people who can communicate... having *an education* would be useful." This insistence on having formal education may

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<sup>32</sup> All participant information is redacted to protect anonymity.

ultimately result in the exiting of the industry by those lacking the requisite credentials. At minimum, some individuals with years of experience in professional gaming may be forced to return to school to formalize their skills and obtain a degree relevant to their work experience.

#### 4.5.1 Going back to school

The participants were asked questions surrounding their education, and for those not currently in school, whether or not they would ever return was asked. The responses to the latter question were varied and influenced by whether or not the participant felt as though further education was necessary, as well as what area of the industry the participant worked in.

An interesting dynamic emerged whereby some participants acknowledged the shift in the importance of school described previously, while others seemed to suggest that further education is pointless given requisite experience. This inconsistency is demonstrated in the explanations below. Participant one, a man working in management, commented on the importance of experience versus formal education: “TBD. There is a world where I could get an MBA. But, it’s probably not worth it. Shit’s too expensive. Returns aren’t really worth it. Experience is worth more than the paper at this point, I think. I don’t know, it’s a possibility, I thought about it more than once.” This suggestion that education was less relevant than his experience in the industry was echoed by participant nineteen, a woman working in the infrastructure of the industry:

At this point for me school is not really a smart option. Because it would take up a lot of my time and what I do now is what I studied. So, I figure, why go to school and finish the rest of my degree when I am already working in the *job* that I was studying. So really it would be

counterproductive in a way. The only way I would consider it is if I had to, like was forced to.

The last sentence of her quote highlights the common sentiment among the participants. She felt as though her experience was more important than finishing her education. This was followed by an acknowledgment that she may ultimately be required to return to school depending on the direction of the industry.

This was a reoccurring theme throughout the interviews. The participants recognized the credential creep taking place within the industry (Bollag, 2007).

Credential or degree creep- happens when jobs and occupations that previously required little or no formal training or education now require it (Bollag, 2007; Garvin, 2012).

Many of the participants were pragmatic regarding furthering their education. Participant seventeen, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, addressed his thought process surrounding his education and his work in professional gaming: “If I ever felt like my like career was being held back, if there was a barrier for growth in my current career path. Like if I needed to go back and get a degree I would consider it.” For participant five, a woman working in management, while she personally felt as though returning to school may not be worthwhile, she also recognized the benefit it may have for others depending on the area of the industry they work in:

Probably not, just because in my particular field I don't see a specific need for it. Umm, but I could definitely see it being a thing for other departments in my company but for XXXX maybe not. Because it's so busy, that like if I were to go to school and then come back from it, I am not sure if I would like have so much hands-on experience going to school that it would be beneficial for my area of the industry.

Beyond this, she continued to explain how a few of the people she knows who work for her organization have started to go back to school to “upgrade” so they remain



competitive in the industry. This explanation by the participant represents an effort by her contacts to almost ‘future proof’ their employment in professional gaming. Because the industry is fairly new and the norms, practices, and educational expectations are continually evolving, these efforts may be an attempt to stave off future difficulties with working in this sector. Participant thirty-one, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, again focused on this requirement: “It’s not something I have discounted. A solid maybe, I guess, it kind of depends on how this goes. Do I need it?” For participant eighteen, a man working in the infrastructure of professional gaming, already having a graduate degree made it unnecessary for him to immediately upgrade:

It’s not something I would do for quite a while, at least if I am going to be in esports. Like I said I already have a Masters in XXXX from XXXX.<sup>33</sup> Maybe as I got older I would do it... I like to be in academic environments...It’s not something I see as an immediate priority; I feel like I am pretty happy with the education I have and how it has enabled me to do what I am doing today.

Those participants with a post-graduate degree shared similar perspectives regarding their education. For them it was having the post-graduate certificate, masters, or PhD that was important, regardless of whether or not it was specifically relevant to what they were doing in the industry. They felt that although different areas of professional gaming are moving towards requiring more education, their advanced degrees were sufficient even if the skillset associated with this education was not directly complementary to their positions. This degree creep was directly addressed by participant two, a man working in the infrastructure of professional gaming, who described degree creep that is imminent in the industry:

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<sup>33</sup> Participant described his field of his Master’s degree as well as the school that he attended. They have both been redacted.

The idea has crossed my mind to go back to school for XXXX.<sup>34</sup> I am basically riding things out right now, because right now I am getting the gigs, getting the work experience. If that didn't happen, I would probably go back to school for XXXX so I would have that background. Its looking like, I am predicting that once it gets big enough they are going to stop hiring self-taught people. The only situation I would go back to school is if I didn't have the experience, I need by then to just get hired for gigs.

## 4.6 Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to explore the professional gaming industry. Developing proper terminology, understanding the professionalization and maturation of professional gaming as well as the intersection between school and work in this industry is essential in laying the foundation for the topics discussed throughout the remainder of the dissertation. In particular, understanding how to properly frame the professional gaming industry is important. Developing and understanding the different jobs, areas of occupation, and intricacies of this industry provides both the current study and future research the opportunity to appropriately investigate these issues.

Professional gaming, and esports in particular, struggle with issues surrounding employment and work. Many of the participants described their experiences with questionable labour practices and the precarity of work as a challenge in this industry (Bayliss, 2016; Chao, 2017; Hollist, 2015). The results from this research demonstrate that people employment in professional gaming often belong to the precariat class, identified as having precarious labour arrangements. These challenges can have a meaningful social and psychological impact on individuals working in this industry (Brock, 2017). These precarious working conditions can also translate into considerable

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<sup>34</sup> The participants specific job in the industry is revealing and is redacted.

difficulties surrounding social support and familial relations (this will be discussed in greater detail in chapter five).

The professionalization and corporatization of the industry also presents challenges for those working in professional gaming. The alienation and growing exploitation described by the participants is consistent with what has previously been reported (Ridgeway, 2014; Taylor, 2012; Yun, 2019; Zulinski, 2016). The exploitation of individuals working in professional gaming is akin to the idea posted by Kostakis (2009) “in the production of the amateurs, there is no wage dependency and therefore almost no marginal cost when exploiting an additional amateur” (p. 459). The Epicenter Major in Dota 2 described by a number of the participants represents an example of this. The major producers of esports events can and continue to rely on ‘amateurs’ trying to make it into the scene. The increasing reliance on this cheap, and below-market labour results in a considerable financial windfall for the companies and prolonged, stagnant, and flat wages for those working and entrenched in the industry. Credential creep and the introduction of education requirements from industry outsiders presents challenges and obstacles for those working in this industry (Gong & Piller, 2018; McCarthy, 2019). This is especially true for individuals who may have worked in professional gaming for some time and did not obtain an education. The participants also commented on the influence of social support, social and gaming capital, and viewers and spectators on their transition into this industry.

## Chapter 5

### 5 Social Impact and Transitions in Professional Gaming

#### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to understand the factors that contribute to individuals' career success within this volatile industry. Interviews highlighted the influence of social support, social capital, gaming capital, and the impact of feedback from consumers on an individual's pursuit of a career in professional gaming.

The literature on social support and video games focuses almost exclusively on the social support gained or acquired through participation in, or consumption of games (Lieberman, 1997; Trepte et al., 2012). While research exists on parental involvement in children's decision-making processes respecting careers, no research has specifically investigated parent-child relationships within professional gaming (Cheong, Hill, Leong, Zhang, & Zhang, 2018; P. C. Lee, Lee, & Dopson, 2019; J. Taylor, Harris, & Taylor, 2004). The literature is also largely silent on the role of social support generally in the career choices of those in professional gaming. This chapter addresses this gap in the literature by examining the role of social support in shaping whether or not individuals pursue professional gaming, and how individuals rely on support mechanisms during transition periods. Attention is paid to both gamers and those in industrial support roles, who have received little attention in the literature (Taylor, 2012). Transition periods are fraught with uncertainty, and social and gaming capital may be crucial to launching a successful career – although they remain under-explored in the context of professional gaming (Molyneux et al., 2015; Trepte et al., 2012; Walsh & Apperley, 2008, 2009).

Financial support will be addressed at length in chapter seven when discussing economic inequality and the impact of familial socioeconomic status on participation in professional gaming.

Even for those successfully employed in professional gaming, substantial tension and negativity can develop from the spectators, fans, and consumers of their work. Social support can help them deal with such tensions (Johnson, 2019; Johnson & Woodcock, 2019; Panneton, 2019; Ratan et al., 2015; Taylor, 2012, 2018). The role and impact that interactions with fans, spectators, and consumers have during the course of an individuals' work in this industry is also explored. Ultimately, this chapter explores individuals' work and careers in this emerging industry and the factors that contribute to success, failure, and continued pursuit of work in professional gaming.

## 5.2 Forms of Capital

An integral component of an individual's involvement in professional gaming is the capital that individuals leverage for participation in this industry. Being able to successfully transition into this industry is not a necessarily straightforward process. Beyond the social support and approval from a person's network, considerable understanding of the professional gaming industry, as well as connections within this space contribute to an individual's ability to succeed. Two main forms of capital are integral to the discussion in this chapter: gaming capital and gaming social capital (Molyneux et al., 2015; Walsh & Apperley, 2009). Gaming capital, represents a "dynamic and highly contextual form of capital" (Walsh & Apperley, 2009, p. 4). Gaming capital includes the skills and knowledge that individuals acquire and is linked to Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital. Understanding how gaming capital facilitates

participation of individuals involved in professional gaming, and how their knowledge and experiences are leveraged in this industry is essential. Having a well-developed comprehension of the professional gaming industry may help participants in navigating their transition into and success in this area of work. In addition to knowledge of the gaming industry gaming social capital is a context specific form of social capital linked to Bourdieu's social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Molyneux et al., 2015). This also explains the difficulty and potential barriers for entry into the industry that exist for non-traditional participants. Both gaming capital, knowledge and understanding about the industry, as well as gaming social capital, and the connections within the industry persons can utilize, are important factors in developing a comprehensive picture of work in this field. In particular, how do these forms of capital impact an individual's involvement in professional gaming?

### 5.2.1 Gaming Capital

The development of gaming capital and knowledge of professional gaming is integral in assisting participants' navigation of this emerging industry. As discussed in chapter two, gaming capital represents a form of cultural. Gaming capital includes support from persons within the gaming industry, and contributes to the development of knowledge and understanding of professional gaming. Ultimately this gaming capital assists in the transition into professional gaming as work (Molyneux et al., 2015; Walsh & Apperley, 2009).

Those working as commentators or play-by-play casters often get criticized for lacking knowledge or understanding of the game. Participant twenty-nine, a woman working in the infrastructure of the industry, shared her understanding of such criticisms:

People get upset about *knowledge*... XXXX is very very good at getting pro players to get on the mic with him.... In XXXX *the game rating is everything, so if you aren't knowledgeable and have a high rating in the game* people scream at you if you try and judge a professional player play without having *a high rating in the game*.<sup>35</sup>

These pressures to have gaming capital and knowledge do not necessarily fall equally on everyone working in this industry. She expanded on her statement regarding the importance of gaming capital by explaining it may be different depending on if it is a man or woman: “it does feel like women need to prove their knowledge a lot more aggressively than guys do, or they will get called out for it.” The gendered experiences of women working in this industry will be addressed extensively in chapter seven.

There was also a discussion about the sacrifice that individuals made in order to further develop their gaming capital. Participant four, a man and current player and streamer, lamented the impact that his time in the industry had on his existing friendships: “Over the course of the first eight to twelve months *of being involved in the industry* the amount of work I had to put into it ended up hurting my friendships and relationships at the time.” This statement was followed by an assertion, that while it was not an entirely conscious decision, he understood the impact of what he was doing:

I knew that if I wanted to do this, if I wanted a career and to be a streamer this was what I had to do. I was so focused on working on my stream and getting on a team that my relationships suffered. I had to grind. I like, I had met so many people in gaming so quickly. I felt at the time that I, umm, I didn't think about it until later and I could reflect that I had lost a lot of my friends, and kind of replaced them with people in gaming.

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<sup>35</sup> The name of the game and individual who commentates are redacted. The italics represent a particular ranking in a game, a term that if used would reveal the game in which this participant is involved.

His commitment to the industry and ensuring that he was fully immersed in professional gaming resulted in him losing contacts and relationships held previously. He lamented these lost relationships; however, for him, his commitment and sacrifices were ultimately necessary for his success in professional gaming.

Some participants discussed leveraging their gaming social capital in order to develop their gaming capital or understanding of the nuances of the industry. Participant eight, a man working in the infrastructure of professional gaming commented: “I kind of leaned on *the individuals that I worked with* as people that were really helpful to me in making that full-time transition.” This participant relied on individuals within their network to assist in the participants successful entry into the industry and provide information that may bridge a knowledge divide. Here, individuals accessed their gaming social capital as a means of improving their understanding of the industry and how to proceed with transitioning into full-time work in professional gaming (Molyneux et al., 2015; Treppe et al., 2012).

### 5.2.2 Gaming Social Capital

For those persons who work precariously in this industry, their social capital and connections could be essential in securing work. For participants, their contacts within professional gaming were able to influence both in-game interactions, as well as impact work and career opportunities for those transitioning into the industry. Participant twenty-four, a man who previously but no longer works in the infrastructure of the industry highlighted the importance of contacts within the industry: “One thing that was a problem, getting people to let me commentate their games, even for free. Tournament organizers and stuff like that, trying to get ahold of them. There was a bunch of other



small-time folks doing the same thing as me. That was probably the hardest part of it was getting ahold of and in touch with people.” Within esports specifically, it can be incredibly difficult to gain a foothold without these connections and gaming social capital.

Participant twenty-three, a man who is a former player and streamer and now works in the infrastructure of the industry commented on the importance of gaming social capital:

One of the only ways to actually get somewhere in the esports scene is connection based because it is so young. You essentially have to know people to get on a team or get somewhere in content. Like that’s how I got my XXXX job, I just knew someone like within the company that I had teamed with previously. I think what more people should do is reach out to people and offer them value, help them with something as a way of making a connection... They should really try and reach out to bigger names and making connections.

This difficulty necessitated the participants developing their networks and leveraging these connections for employment opportunities and work. Participant eight, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry stated that: “I started networking with a lot of people... I started utilizing Twitter and social media for the first time, to start looking for future endeavors within esports full-time.”

The participants’ clear endorsement of the importance of gaming social capital links to the discussion of exploitation and unpaid labour discussed in chapter four. Participant twenty-two, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry addressed the intersection of these two ideas:

Basically, I worked for free for these other companies. XXXX took me to *an event* to help cover the event.... I worked the event and wrote a couple of articles and got experience working as an onsite esports journalist and made some connections as well. I then worked for XXXX based on the *connections I had made working for XXXX*.

A tension exists between the leveraging of social capital for employment opportunities, and the continued exploitation of workers in this industry. As discussed in chapter four, this can undermine wages in this sector and can lead to continued expectation of free labour based on social relationships. Others recognized that gaming social capital is afforded to various groups of people differently. For participant thirty, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, women not only faced sexism and discrimination, but their opportunities to develop their gaming social capital were also unequal to their peers:

*I have been involved in an organization that assists women who don't have a lot of experience, or have experience but don't have the connections as a result of the bias. Some of it is the inherent bias and some of it is the hostility of the community towards female players relative to male players. Just helping them get the coaching and the resources they need to be successful in tournaments.*

This effort to ensure that women were afforded equal opportunities both to succeed in the industry as well as develop further connections was not unique in this research.

Participant nineteen, a woman involved in the infrastructure of the industry was also involved in an organization whose goal was to network and improve the experiences of women within professional gaming.<sup>36</sup>

The impact of having gaming social capital was recognized by the participants with a number of them discussing how they accessed their networks. Participant twenty-three expanded on his previous acknowledgement of the role of gaming social capital by specifically commenting on the exchange of capital: “People just complain too much. They put their issues on me when I could provide them a ton of value, I could give them

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<sup>36</sup> The participant's organization is not stated to help protect anonymity. Her statement about her involvement in this organization is not included as it would be identifying and not possible to redact while maintaining the efficacy of the quote.

connections if they did enough for me. Not did enough, I don't want to make it sound conceited. If they offered me value, I could give them a lot back. Instead people just tunnel vision." Participant eleven, a man and former player, recalled his playing career and the importance of gaming social capital: "I would play whatever was there, whatever I could, to meet people... It's literally all networking which I am not very good at, but I met people." The focus for participant eleven as a player was to network and develop connections that could be leveraged into opportunities to play on teams and compete in tournaments and qualifiers. Those in the infrastructure of the industry accessed their gaming social capital to develop their career in the industry. Participant fifteen, a man working in management of an esports organization commented on accessing his network:

Equipment was a challenge when I really got *into the industry*. Having a good computer, good microphone, a good camera. At the time what I did was reach out to like everyone I knew to get a sponsorship. I got PC sponsorships twice, the first time I got a PC just for me, the next time I got three for like the whole company, staff and everything.... As soon as I had a need I tried to do everything I could to find somebody to help us directly or indirectly.

His entry into the industry began with working in the infrastructure of esports which required equipment and computers to effectively broadcast and cover events.

Reaffirmation and acknowledgement from individuals within the industry was important to the participants. Being recognized by individuals working in the space provided a push and motivation to continue to pursue working in professional gaming. A man, participant twenty-three, who is a former player and currently working in the infrastructure of the industry specifically discussed this: "Especially bigger names, I think when I get any sort of reaffirmation from bigger names, for instance I got a retweet from XXXX. That is awesome. That really helps me feel like okay people within the scene who have a name

and are known to be good people and do good things that is the type of reaffirmation that really helps me continue going.” This recognition may also contribute to greater gaming capital through an improved sense of belonging to the industry.

For the participants in this research, their gaming capital or knowledge of the industry impacted their pursuit of work in professional gaming. For individuals who understood the industry, navigating working in this space was more straightforward and direct.

Conversely, those who lacked knowledge or skills in order to succeed struggled.

Leveraging their gaming social capital as a means of providing support for their effort to work in professional gaming proved effective. Participants described ranging benefits for the leveraging of their contacts and capital for obtaining work.

### 5.3 Social Support

Understanding the role of social support on individual’s participation in this industry is important for two reasons. First, support or lack thereof may be linked to the boundary between work and leisure that will be discussed in chapter six. Second, the discussion in chapter four surrounding the intrinsic value and meaning of work can also interplay with the social support individuals receive. This may be mediated by the nature of the relationship through which a person is receiving social support. In order to investigate the role that social support has on individuals’ success in this industry, participants were asked the following: “What impact, if any, did your family, friends, or significant others have on this process?” (See Appendix D). The ‘process’ referred to their transition into and involvement in the professional gaming industry. When asked about the support they received, participants spoke mainly of three social ties: partners or significant others, friends, and family members. The social support they received varied widely within their

own support system. Some participants simultaneously had both highly supportive and non-supportive people around them. In conversations with the participants, three main themes around the nature of support emerged: (1) not supportive and against their involvement in the industry, (2) hesitant or cautious support or indifference, and (3) fully supportive.

As discussed in chapter two, social support is known to be multidimensional. This study considers one type of social support. For purposes of this chapter support will be narrowed to emotional support and concern (Barrera Jr, 1986; House, 1983). If the participants' networks approved of and were positive regarding their involvement in professional gaming, they were categorized as emotionally supportive. Conversely, those individuals who actively lobbied against and were not approving of the participant's involvement in this industry were considered to be non-supportive, since they did not demonstrate positive emotional support. The nature of the support was not entrenched, especially when considering that, according to the participants, support from individuals often changed over time. This progression in support from their networks will be addressed later in this chapter.

### 5.3.1 Nature of support

#### 5.3.1.1 Not Supportive

The participants described family, significant others, and friends, both within and outside of gaming, as being *not* supportive of their involvement in this industry. Some had family and friends actively lobby against their participation, discouraging further work and making it clear they did not agree with the participant's work in professional gaming. The

most common social grouping discussed as being non-supportive was parents. For some participants this was both parents, for others it was just one of their parents.

In the case of participant five, a woman employed in management of an esports organization, her parents were not in agreement with her employment in professional gaming, especially her father: “My father was very disapproving of my choices at first, because when I first started, I wasn’t being paid very much/often. Of course, parents say ‘how much does my kid make?’ That’s all that matters.... *He would say* ‘oh this isn’t a real career, you’re not getting paid very much, and you are wasting your life.’” This sentiment was common amongst the participants, where the lack of support from both parents existed. Participant nineteen, a woman working in the infrastructure of the industry, addressed this: “My parents never saw anything out of gaming. They mostly thought it was a waste of time.... They were not supportive whatsoever.” For her, despite her continued involvement and success in this industry, her parents continued to not approve of and support her decision to work in professional gaming. Participant eleven, a man who is a former player and currently no longer working in the industry felt widespread hostility towards his involvement in gaming, stating: “Everybody have negative opinions, everybody has negative opinions. Even before *it impacted my school* it’s always negative. Everyone thinks negatively about *my involvement* with video games.” These negative opinions and attitudes towards professional gaming may be related to individuals concerns surrounding the legitimacy and career-worthiness of working in this industry.

The lack of approval from parents and family members can also be tied to the tension that developed between an individual’s pursuit of a career in the professional gaming industry

and the subsequent impact on their schooling. Participant thirty-two, a man involved in management, addressed this tension, commenting: “My parents were kind of not about it. The entire time I have been involved in the industry they have kind of said I should go back to school and finish it.” Another participant, research subject twenty-three, a man and former player who now works in the infrastructure of the industry, ultimately made the decision to remain in school and simultaneously pursue working in the industry:

There was very little support. They are very traditional. They wanted me to go to high school and go to college, the typical... It’s basically the only reason I am in college otherwise I would be investing more time into the industry. They put a lot of pressure on me to play less, to focus on my studies. So, it’s actually definitely the complete opposite of encouraging me to move into the industry, it was actually more dissuading.

The experiences of this participant, and in particular his commentary on his parents being “very traditional,” was common amongst the participants. Often, the hesitation and uncomfortableness with the participants’ work in professional gaming by their parents was rooted in the social timing of a persons’ life (Elder, 1994). Working in professional gaming may not necessarily fit with this social timing of lives— “the incidence, duration, and sequence of roles and to relevant expectations and beliefs based on age” (Elder, 1994, p. 6). For the participants with ‘more traditional’ parents, work in this industry may not be compatible with expectations surrounding post-secondary education, cohabitation, marriage, childbearing, and conventional work and occupations. Later in this chapter, I address this idea further and discuss how changing cultural and societal knowledge and acceptance of professional gaming both generally and as a viable occupation may impact these traditional parents’ expectations.

A similar experience with an alternative outcome, was expressed by participant seventeen, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry. In large part because he dropped out of college, the relationship he had with his parents was contentious. When asked about their support for his transition into professional gaming, he stated that: “My parents definitely were not happy. I already did not have a great relationship with them at the time so that was kind of an additional stressor added onto it.” In addition to non-supportive parents, the participants also described that amongst parents who did support their endeavor, that support was hesitant and cautious.

### 5.3.1.2 Reluctant or cautious support

Within this category individuals described either veiled support or a general indifference to their involvement in professional gaming. One key characteristic of this category is that any support, in addition to being reluctant and hesitant, is limited. Family and partners of the participants represent the majority of this group. Participant seven, a man who now owns a company in the industry left a full-time job to pursue a career in professional gaming. The reaction from his parents reflected only reluctant support:

“from *their* perspective, it is difficult for them to understand *that I had a stable* job with essentially my entire career laid out for me. I was leaving that to this entirely brand-new industry with a lot of question marks. At the beginning my parents were kind of supportive but there is that obvious hesitance, like ‘is this the best move right now?’”

This questioning and uncertainty, especially amongst family and significant others was also experienced by participant eight, a man employed in the infrastructure of the industry. He spoke specifically to this cautiousness and hesitation, stating that: “there was a mixture of confusion.... It was definitely a shock, but they realized that I was pursuing



something that I enjoyed. Umm, I don't necessarily feel like they were supportive, but they understood that I was making a move that I felt was best for me at that time."

Another interviewee, participant thirty-one, a man working in the infrastructure of professional gaming directly identified the support of his parents as hesitant when explaining their attitude towards his work:

It started out very much, I would tell them whenever I would get some work and they would be like 'oh that's cool' but it was always very, you felt like they weren't really fully appreciating that this could ever evolve into a career. It was kind of like 'good that you are doing this' but any reference towards it actually becoming a job which I wanted it to be, was very, not negatively, it was always supportive but it was always 'uh huh, oh that's great, good job'. Almost like a hesitant support.

Hesitant support was common amongst parents of the respondents. For some of the parents, they qualified their support. This was explained by participant fifteen, a man working in management of an esports organization, who described the conversation his parents had with him about his pursuit of work in this industry. His parents told him: "We really don't care if you do all this stuff as long as you finish your college degree. As long as you don't drop out of college you can basically do whatever you want. Don't fail, don't drop, you know? You have to finish college because your degree is important." While this participant expressed that he enjoyed school, he too stressed that ultimately his finishing of his education was to appease his parents and in part "to get them off my back so I could do what I want, to work in esports."

In addition to the reluctant or hesitant support, the participants also expressed neutral reactions to their work. Participant seventeen, a man employed in the infrastructure of the industry, spoke to the support from his significant other. He remarked that "my significant other at the time was pretty, umm I guess kind of supportive. She wasn't

happy but she understood why I was doing it.” This middle ground was also expressed by participant fourteen, a man working in the infrastructure of gaming who expanded on this indifference:

My parents were never actively against it or anything, they weren't huge like having a war against video games or anything but they kind of thought they were wasting my time for a long time. There were other life choices that might have been more worrisome or a concern. As long as I was able to support myself, my family were fine with it.

This statement, and in particular, the idea that his parents “weren't huge like having a war against video games” generally represented the sentiment of many participants. Their parents and significant others weren't really supportive; neither were they actively advocating against participation either.

### 5.3.1.3 Supportive

Lastly, some participants had support, including outright encouragement. Individuals described not only their support system wishing them well, or wanting what is best for them, but also encouraging them to become involved. Some participants found that their family and friends deferred to the participant and trusted their judgment. Participant nine, a man and current player, commented that when discussing his transition into industry:

It was surprising what their reaction was. They were very supportive of me...They said ‘you know what you are doing. You know, you know how good you are, your brothers say they know how good you are, so if you think you can do it, we are going to support you.’ They maybe wanted me to go a safer route but I definitely had a lot of support.

Revisiting participant five discussed previously, we can see that while her father was a non-supportive parent and vehemently against it, her other family members were positive about her transition into the industry. She spoke about the rest of her family, remarking

that: “My mom was supportive. She saw that I was happy, so she never discouraged me from doing it. More than that, my brother was also supportive.”

A clear connection emerged between individuals having an understanding and knowledge of the professional gaming industry and supporting the participants. Participant ten, a woman working in the infrastructure of the industry addressed this support from her gaming friends, stating: “My online friends were encouraging for sure; I was lucky I had some people that could help me navigate learning the framework and how to do it.”

There were exceptions to this universal support from those involved in or with knowledge of the industry. Participant twenty-five, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, suggested that explicit support from friends with an understanding of gaming has generally been infrequent and unsubstantial. He explained that “With your, quote unquote gamer friends, that you might have only met once or twice in real life but you talk to every single day. You know they can be kind of, everything is a chance to kind of rip on each other or give yourself a little shit. A little bit of playful taunting and that sort of thing comes from them. It would be nice hear a bit more of ‘I think you are doing a good job’ but that’s just the dynamic.” While his friends were not necessarily dissuasive, he lamented the lack of positive encouragement and approval from his network within the industry.

In addition to the support from persons with familiarity with the industry, there were some who were still supportive, but had little to no knowledge of the gaming industry. This was generally the participants’ ‘non-gaming’ friends, although a few mentioned receiving support from their family members and significant others. Participant twenty-

five commented that “I think friends have been supportive. Not, I don’t know, like it’s hard to be actively supportive of someone but just like you know when we are hanging out they are like ‘tell me about this or tell me about that, or I am really impressed with XYZ’, that’s really good to hear, that little bit of extra validation”. Amongst members of individuals’ support networks that had little or no understanding of professional gaming, non-gaming friends were the most supportive. Participant eighteen, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry commented that “in general my friends were supportive of the passion that I had for it.” While it was not extensively commented on by the participants, this difference in support by individuals not knowledgeable of the industry is likely a result of differences in the nature of the relationship.

### 5.3.2 Factors that mediated support

The interviews revealed additional factors that influenced the support an individual received. The first, as previously mentioned, was the degree to which individuals who associated with the participants understood or were knowledgeable about the professional gaming industry or esports. The second was the nature of the participant’s transition into the industry.

The understanding and knowledge of professional gaming that the contacts within the participants’ support structure had was an important factor that impacted support. Those interviewed as part of this research expressed feeling near unanimous support and encouragement from individuals in their network who have intimate knowledge or understanding of the professional gaming industry. This includes predominantly friends and partners, particularly those who are involved in video games themselves. These same individuals are prominent figures in the participants gaming social capital and as a result

are also often providing social support. The significance of knowledge of the industry was discussed throughout the interviews. One interviewee addressed this divide and specifically commented on the importance of understanding and knowledge for whether or not they were supported. Participant six, a man and owner of an organization operating in the gaming industry, described the distinction between the support of gaming friends and family that many of the other interviewees identified. He commented that: “I would say that most of my friends were more supportive because they are involved in it and know what esports is, and my parents were kind of supportive because they had no idea but they took my word for it.” This was not uncommon and was to be expected. What was interesting, however, was how gaining an understanding or knowledge of the industry shifted an individual’s perceptions and approval of the participant’s involvement in professional gaming.

Those participants with individuals in their support systems who *understood* professional gaming reported them to be more supportive than those who did not. Participant twenty-nine, a woman involved in the infrastructure of the industry, specifically spoke to this support from her friends and significant other who were involved in professional gaming:

Going full-time esports and having it be my job to travel and see them? Very supportive. They were already all in that life.... I had a lot of support from the person that I was dating through that point and that decision. The person that I was dating *when I made the decision to transition full-time into the industry*, I credit him almost entirely for giving me the push I needed. I thank him a lot for the support and the push.

For her, this support from her significant other was essential during the beginning stages of her career, especially in light of the inconsistent support from her family.

There was another clear differentiating factor which impacted parental and partner support more so than friends. The extent to which the individual was all-in, that is, the higher the perceived risk associated with an individual's participation in the professional gaming industry, the more hesitant the support. For those persons whose transition into the industry took place gradually, or through part-time work at first generally expressed either more support or less pushback from their families and significant others.

Participant twenty-four, a man who is no longer working in the gaming industry in any capacity, illustrates this point perfectly with his comments about his parents' support:

“My parents are awesome. They thought it was super cool that I have videos online and getting views and stuff like that. I talked to them about it and basically explained that unless something magically happened, I wouldn't get any traction to go full-time with it. So, they were supportive of my hobby and they're happy for me to do that.” His parents expressing initial support was at least in part predicated on the last sentence of the quote, and in particular the use of the word hobby.

Those family members and significant others of the participants who understood it was something that was either a hobby or a side project were, according to the interviewees, much more supportive. Participant thirty-three, a man and owner of a company in the industry, addressed this point:

They saw it as entrepreneurial; you know? They didn't really see it as like, probably if I was a player, right? I could see how a player could get more flack, because it just looks like they are playing games all day. But for me, I was actually building a business, and they saw it like that. And like it's not like I quit my job to do it, umm so they weren't worried about loss of income so they thought it was a cool side business/hobby or whatever.

A number of participants described how their support networks often viewed their involvement in video games as pointless play, whereas the participants viewed it as building gaming capital that young people see as *leading* to work (Aguilar et al., 2017; Consalvo, 2007). A disconnect exists whereby individuals playing the games view this as an investment in their work and potentially leading to labour market opportunities while others see it as simply play or leisure. As a consequence of this, individuals within the participants network who understand this industry and can value the building of gaming capital, are certainly more likely to support them working in professional gaming.

Another factor that mediated support was an emphasis on gaming as a part-time or side endeavour. The continued insistence that individuals maintain employment outside of the industry and work in gaming as secondary employment was discussed by participant twenty-five who works in the infrastructure of the industry:

Family, I would say they are somewhat supportive. They just want to make sure it doesn't interfere with my full-time work. This new role that I am stepping into shortly which is gaming and esports related, they are like 'oh what about the future of that thing for yourself?' They sort of view it as more of a short-time thing as supposed to something that is going to have long-term sustainability. They are just concerned about my future prospects, I guess.

This was a reoccurring theme amongst those working in the infrastructure and management of the industry, the notion that this was a temporary, and part-time endeavor that would ultimately pass. Participant eighteen, a man working in the infrastructure of professional gaming explained how his parents hoped this was a short-time distraction from whatever he ultimately chose to pursue as a career: "they were happy enough that I was doing something that I really enjoyed. But there was definitely a 'Hopefully this will get it out of your system and you will go onto something that will be more stable in the

long run.' *Their thoughts on this* have changed over time." There exists a palpable arrangement whereby individuals close to the participants either were indifferent, cautiously optimistic, or ignored the participant's work in professional gaming if there was an understanding that this work was not ultimately directed towards going all-in. Participant thirty, a man working part-time in the infrastructure of the industry commented on this unspoken understanding: "I never particularly seriously considered it as a career and I think that was pretty obvious to the other folks in my life."

For other participants, the support was absent not because their family did not approve, but rather they were not fully aware of their work. Participant four, a man and current player and streamer commented: "my family didn't find out till almost a year later, after I became successful. It was somewhat intentional." For him, his family was not generally supportive, so he felt as though there was not really a need to tell them. Another participant, interviewee twenty, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, also did not tell his family:

I actually didn't tell my family until probably four to six months after I got my first paid gig... I didn't want to tell them until much later just because it is sort of a weird thing to talk to them about. I wanted to make it feel like it was real before I told them that this was the path I was going down.

When asked how they reacted to the discussion revealing the new career path, participant twenty's experience mimicked the experiences of those whose families changed their attitudes and support for their loved one's involvement in professional gaming. He remarked that their reaction: "was definitely skeptical at first. It was the type of thing where they were supportive once they realized it was a real thing. So, I think it made sense to not tell them. Now they are incredibly supportive." For a number of participants,



intentional decisions were made to not disclose the nature of their work, often because they did not believe they would receive support. For this participant, he did receive positive support as a result of the legitimization of his work in the industry from his parent's perspective.

### 5.3.3 Change in Support

Many of the participants spoke of a shift over time in the social support and approval of their networks and in particular their families. This change took place for a number of reasons, in most cases linked two key factors. The first and central explanation for this transformation was the participants receiving compensation, work contracts, or full-time employment. Secondly, attending events and travelling also impacted the views of the participants' networks. For many of the participants, these developments served an important function in shifting the approval and support from the individuals within their networks. Both of these changes play a prominent role in the legitimization of the pursuits of individuals for a career in professional gaming.

Several participants spoke to a change in support over their time in the professional gaming industry that coincided with the evolution of their employment in the industry. For some, the issuance of a work contract served to legitimize and formalize their transition into the industry for their parents. For participant twenty-seven, a player and streamer who identifies as a man, his first contract served as the catalyst for the shifting attitudes regarding his pursuit of a career in gaming:

There was a little bit of a surprise initially but very quickly people realized this is actually a legitimate serious thing. Shortly after I got my first contract I started travelling and competing in tournaments. People could see this, you know, as not just some kind of pipe dream that I am pursuing but this is a legitimate thing I am doing.

This ‘first contract’ served as an important milestone in the transformation of an individuals’ gaming activities from hobby or leisure towards a job and career.

The importance of being involved in a formal organization was also discussed by participant seventeen, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry. His parents were not initially supportive, but the formalization of his employment within an organization had a significant role in changing their attitude: “Until XXXX offered to move me to XXXX, no one was really supportive of me wanting to go into esports. To them it was just an excuse play video games and not do what you are supposed to. Until I had a plane ticket in my hand and an employment contract.”<sup>37</sup> He finished his explanation of the transformation of their support:

Now it’s to the point where when I wanted to move out to XXXX, my parents thought it was a fantastic idea and were willing to help in any way to help that dream become a reality.<sup>38</sup> So, it took a while. At the beginning they were definitely not supportive and probably were pretty against it... It has been a pretty nice evolution that they have become so supportive.

For him, the support he ultimately received from his parents was highly dependent on his demonstrating to them that this was viable work. This was common among those whose support networks changed their support. When asked what resulted in his parents finally changing their support for his work in professional gaming, participant twenty-three, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry commented, “I would say money and when there was a sense of balance.” This was not a naturally occurring progression of changing perceptions. The interviews made clear that the onus rests on the children to

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<sup>37</sup> This participant described at length, an offer to work at an organization that covers streamers and esports events in the USA.

<sup>38</sup> City and state the individual moved to is redacted.

demonstrate that this new area of work was legitimate. There was considerable hesitance on the part of parents to embrace work in this new sector when they held traditional conceptualizations of what were legitimate forms of labour.

In addition to contracts and the formalization of their work, the second factor contributing to the change in support was attending events. While the majority of their labour and work in the industry takes place digitally, for the individuals in their network that were not supportive, the significance of working ‘in person’ was essential. Participant thirty-one, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry commented on the legitimization that attending in-person events seems to give those persons in their network that are skeptical. He commented that: “Once I started flying to places, I went to XXXX and XXXX<sup>39</sup> over like two months. That’s when they were like ‘alright if someone is paying you to go out, this is an actual thing’ then they started to actually get interested.”

Participant twenty-nine, a woman employed in the infrastructure of professional gaming, reiterated this importance, stating: “When I came back after working all *of those events in a row* and travelling to like six different places over the course of two months. Their tone changed quite a bit. They were like ‘oh this is actually a job, this is incredible.” For her family, attending the events legitimized her labour in this industry. Attending events in person shifted her work in gaming from something that was simply a leisure or hobby activity in the eyes of her parents to something that *they* viewed as traditional work.

Participant twenty-two, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry is one of the older participants in the study at thirty years old. He commented on the change he has

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<sup>39</sup> The specific events including locations and dates were redacted.

seen throughout his time in the industry as well as the shift in his parents' support of his employment in professional gaming:

I come from the generation that, you know, esports was not necessarily a viable option, not really a career choice you could make. I am thirty now. I grew up right at the beginning of where esports was... but my parents always thought it was a waste of time to play video games.... My parents have come around to some extent because they have seen me go to events. Cover XXXX<sup>40</sup> and be paid to do it. They still think it isn't the healthiest thing to spend all of my time at a computer all day. At the same time, they have come around to the fact that this is what I love to do and I have the ability to make money doing it at this point in my life.

Participant ten, a woman working in the infrastructure of the industry expanded on this point highlighting the evolution in her parent's approval of her work as well as the explanation behind this change: "My parents were apprehensive about how many games I was playing. Doing a lot of production stuff, my parents, they realized after the first event, like this is kind of an emerging scene. They weren't going to question it anymore."

The participants were keenly aware of why there may have been a lack of support. For certain interviewees this absence of support or indifference was actively managed and strategies were developed to help improve their support. This was encapsulated by participant thirty-one, a man, involved in the infrastructure of professional gaming:

Once I started getting actual work and started to travel out to places. I would always be very keen to keep them aware of what I was doing. With my parents I would always make sure they knew how much money I was making... I wanted them to know I was making good money when I was flying out to these places so they didn't have to worry that I was being taken advantage of by being flown out because I am a cheap young adult or whatever. And yeah, then it was all dandy basically. They have been supportive ever since.

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<sup>40</sup> The event the individual covered has been redacted.

For him, effort to assuage and counter the hesitancy of his parents allowed him to ultimately gain their approval. The participants described how they cultivated and actively highlighted their participation and activities within professional gaming as a strategy to generate more positive support from their networks. Participant seventeen, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, spoke to this active approach:

I came back at Christmas time; I came back and sort of started to talk to my parents about like ‘oh yeah here are all the things I am doing. I met with the vice president of this company and all these things.’ I was kind of bragging about the things I was doing. That was the real moment where they kind of realized that this is actually something that you can do and make money at, and is like a real career. They would start asking questions and started to have a real interest in what I was doing.

A number of participants referenced this ‘Christmas legitimization effect’, whereby their returning home for family gatherings at Christmas stoked or contributed to the change in approval and support. Participant twenty-nine, a woman working in the infrastructure of the industry commented on this holiday development: “Every Christmas now I come home with a million new stories and new stamps in my passport and whatever else and they are like ‘yeah this is really cool’ so yeah, now they are supportive.”

A clear trend emerged in the interview data in which even amongst those parents who were initially non-supportive, many eventually began researching, learning, and developing an understanding of the industry. For some parents this included following professional gaming, and in some cases the participant reported a change in their parent’s attitudes towards their work. Participant ten, a woman working in the infrastructure of the industry, spoke to her parent’s evolution that went beyond simply a change in approval: “They actually started following stuff in esports. Cause they know that it’s actually going to be huge. It’s a huge entertainment industry.” For her, although she was not an ‘on-

camera' personality in professional gaming, her parents ultimately ended up following the events, tournaments, and competitions in which she was involved. This newfound interest extends further for some parents, especially for those individuals whose work in the industry is 'visible'. For example, participants who were on screen, streaming, playing, or making content, would comment that their parents would often learn more about the industry and then begin to *follow* their careers, watching their games, videos, and streams, much the same as a fan or spectator would do. Participant twenty-nine, a woman who streams and works in the infrastructure of the industry, expanded on this by explaining her parents' newfound interest in her career:

My mom, ever since 2014 when I went to that tournament, has watched every single one of my streams, checks my Twitter feed, checks my Instagram, reads Reddit, wakes up at 5 or 6am to check the scores when games are being played in China, writes down the brackets of big tournaments and team rosters... She does it all analog on paper.

### 5.3.4 Importance of Support

Participants expressed mixed emotions when describing the importance of their support systems and their impact on the decision-making process. Those individuals who received positive support from their networks highlighted the significance of this approval. Participant six, a man and owner of an organization in the gaming industry, spoke to the importance of the support from his friends and family, stating that: "At least on my end I don't think I would have quit my six-figure job and went this route with a passion if I didn't have all the support from everyone." This is consistent with the literature which has found positive associations between parental support and career decision making (Brown & Lavish, 2006; Stringer & Kerpelman, 2010). The influence of parents for those who experienced support was helpful and encouraging. While it was not necessarily career changing, it was certainly influencing.

For those participants who reported having unsupportive individuals around them, the general importance of support and approval was ranked lower. These participants downplayed the significance of receiving support. Participant five, a woman employed in management of an esports organization, addressed her personal experience with this issue. Her father was non-supportive while her mother was supportive: “He definitely wasn’t approving but honestly I didn’t really care what he thought, I just cared what like my mom thought and my mom was supportive so.” At times, lack of support could be a motivating factor. This was the case for participant one, a man working in management in the professional gaming who explained his transition into the industry:

I did it kind of in spite of them, not really in support of. They didn’t really take it seriously until I started making money. At first, they were like you can do whatever you want with your hobby but if you are calling it your career you got to make some money. They weren’t particularly supportive at the very beginning; they were just concerned about my ability to generate revenue and get work experience and stuff. Now it’s all good, but at the time there was a lot of pressure to make enough money to pay rent and do stuff on my own instead of just living at home.

Participant eleven, a man and former player now working in the infrastructure of the industry addressed the importance of support and the influence of those in their close social network on his participation in professional gaming:

It’s definitely for a lot of people, it’s the people around you not in the game. Immediately when I exited high school, I wasn’t like dead set on XXXX but I also wasn’t super committed to XXXX. Because the people around me framed it as not a thing to do, you should never try to play video games for money... I understand where people are coming from when they say ‘you can’t pursue this, this isn’t realistic, there is no money here, video games are bad’ all that shit. All of that, it takes a toll, it makes you not want to do it because of all of the people telling you it’s bad.

He expanded on this discussion of the importance of his family, explaining that it was not until he moved out from his parents’ home and to a city across the country, that he

ultimately made the decision to pursue a job in professional gaming: “As soon as I exited that environment and I went to school away from home, I wasn’t surrounded by that anymore so I got to make my own choices with that. That was my time to do it I suppose, that is when I decided to do it.”

Ultimately, most pursued this career trajectory because they believed it was best for themselves. The majority of the participants attributed neither their decision to work or not work in professional gaming to the support and approval that they received from their close networks. For many, social support represented an influencing factor. Participant five, a woman working in the infrastructure of the industry, touched on this arrangement: “I had both supportive and negative influences from my family and even significant others. I think that at the end of the day that it made me happy and I knew that the money would follow as I gained in my career and it worked out, so I am happy.” For the participants, social support shaped their experiences and well-being. Those who had considerable support were gratified to have it, and those who had less support went to some lengths to win-over family members through demonstrating their success in the industry. The support was a welcome, albeit not necessary condition of their continued involvement and success in professional gaming. Those lacking support generally expressed disappointment in not having it but endeavored to succeed regardless.

It should be noted that the support that the participants received for their pursuit of a career in professional gaming was not consistent across the different areas of the industry. The players expressed the least support from their families and significant others, while individuals involved in ownership or management generally reported the highest levels of support. This may be due to a multitude of factors. One explanation is that those



individuals working in ownership or management were less ‘all-in’ in nature, a key factor that mediated support. Three of the eight individuals in this category maintained full-time employment outside of the industry. Those working in the infrastructure of professional gaming fell in the middle of this support spectrum. While reporting less overall support than management and ownership, they certainly received less negative support from friends and family than players. For players, their work was deemed not as legitimate as an individual who was a CEO of a gaming company.

#### 5.4 Viewers, Spectators, Consumers, and Fans

The consumers, fans, and spectators of professional gaming were also important to participants’ involvement in this industry. The community and network that emerges, particularly amongst professional streamers, can be key factors when explaining spectatorship and viewership (Burroughs & Rama, 2015; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Weiss & Schiele, 2013). The importance of fans and spectators in this industry results from the fact that they “do not simply consume but are crucial participants in the *production* of cultural products... In the case of e-sports [sic]... [they] often provide important contributions through their participation in various media” (Taylor, 2012, p. 188). Both during the transition into the industry, as well as the decision-making process and experience once working, those consuming professional gaming occupy a prominent position as influencers. This influence extends beyond the apparent connections between players and streamers, individuals who are directly interacting with the viewers. Those persons working in the periphery of the industry, while not consistently interacting with fans and spectators, do see comments and feedback regarding their work. Encouraging interactions with fans and spectators have positive effects on the participants’ happiness

and satisfaction with their jobs and ultimately their desire to continue working in the industry. Conversely, the negative interactions force self-reflexivity, psychological fortitude, and thick skin that facilitate participants moving forward in the industry.

The importance of understanding the interactions between fans and spectators was highlighted by participant thirty-one, a man working in the infrastructure of professional gaming:

It's just very unique with *this industry*. There is no space between the *person* and the feedback. It's not like a movie where you produce it, you send it out there, you sleep a couple of nights and then its released and you read the critic reviews. It's not even like a radio show where you are on the radio, then you get home and there are some people being mean about you in the 'radio times' or whatever. You know? It's nothing like that, I think this is unprecedented. At least, other than maybe live events. But again, at live events people don't shout at you, they don't have a keyboard at live events. So, it is an entirely new thing. I think people are still struggling to adjust to it.

For streamers, players, and individuals directly interacting with consumers, the relationship with spectators can be an important factor in both the success of their stream as well as their desire to work in and continue in the industry. Participant three, a man, current player, and streamer, credits the spectators on his stream as the main reason why he now does this as a successful career: "The community I have was the biggest factor. They would push me to improve the stream and the channel and push me to go further with it." Those participants that streamed often referred to the individuals who spectate their streams as their community. For the participants these discussions surrounding community invokes new conceptualizations of what a community is in the digital age (Feenberg, Feenberg, & Barney, 2004). These communities become a central focus for individuals who stream, often at the expense of the games themselves. This connection reinforces the findings from chapter four on the distinctions between the areas of the

industry. The importance of community was especially prominent amongst those involved in streaming and less pronounced for those working in the periphery of esports.

Participant twenty-nine, a woman who, in addition to working in the infrastructure of the industry also streams, commented on the importance of her spectators: “They have been insanely supportive.... They encouraged me every single step of the way. They were just, they were encouraging and helpful.” The value of fans, spectators, and consumers was not always predicated on personal interaction and communication. Often, individuals working in the infrastructure of the industry were able to see the reaction to their work, whether it be articles, production quality during a broadcast, or graphics, in real time.

Participant ten, a woman working in the infrastructure of the industry was reflective surrounding the type of comments she received. This participant’s work in the industry is based in production and graphic design, so while she was not directly interacting with the fans and spectators, she was often able to see real-time feedback regarding broadcast and/or graphic quality:

What is their feedback? Is it that the fact that they just didn’t like it? So, that kind of feedback, if they hate it for technical reasons or bad design, you can use that information to not make the same mistake again... I find a lot of satisfaction in making something that is used on stream... I still get a kick out of people seeing what I made. You get people’s reactions in the chat and that... I did an animation for XXXX, they were like ‘man, look at that sick graphic’... I was kind of like ‘yeah I made that’ pat on the back.<sup>41</sup>

These positive interactions are consistent with the existing literature that finds “the interactions with audiences, the fact that you share your personal life and/or space, and the ways that you construct a sense of community through your broadcasts can certainly

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<sup>41</sup> This participant described the event and game that she created the graphic for, it has been redacted.

cast a more positive light on things” (Taylor, 2018, p. 135). There are nevertheless negative effects of this area of the industry including fatigue from the daily performances and the weight of constant interaction with fans and spectators.

While spectators, viewers, and consumers, can have positive and constructive effects, there are also consequences that can be difficult to navigate. Participant eleven, a man and former player now working in the infrastructure, addressed the difficulties of interacting with fans or spectators and the resulting impacts. Reflecting on his time playing on a competitive esports team, he addressed negative comments in a stream about his team’s play:

Thirty negative comments on a Twitch stream that don’t know my story or any of my teammates’ story and don’t know how much we have, how that game was like a stepping stone for us. We don’t go into a game expecting to win, we expected to learn.... It depends on how you look at it. *If you are struggling with a mental health issue*, it’s definitely going to take a toll. It definitely took a toll on a lot of people I played with; it took a toll on me.

While he did not personally suffer from mental health issues, he expanded on this point by commenting on some of the mental health adversities that his teammates dealt with as a result of the high stress and the negative relationships with fans and spectators.

These findings are consistent with the literature: the role of spectators, fans, and consumers of esports and streaming content and their interactions with esports competitors and live streamers are well-documented (Musabirov, Bulygin, Okopny, & Konstantinova, 2018; Ruvalcaba et al., 2018; Stahlke, Robb, & Mirza-Babaei, 2018). However, in previous research there is a lack of consideration for the impact that fans and spectators have on individuals working in the infrastructure, management, or ownership

of the industry. Participant thirty-one, a man working in the infrastructure of professional gaming, commented on the effect of consumers on his pursuit of full-time employment:

I got super sad and super upset about a lot of the comments *I received after an event...* I look back at it and I can laugh at it but at the time it destroyed me. I didn't want to escape; I didn't want to stop doing it. I don't think the negative comments stopped me from wanting to do, but the positive comments definitely propelled me forward.

Throughout his time in the industry he has developed coping mechanisms and self-confidence to wade through negative commentary regarding his work. This sentiment was also expressed by participant twelve, a woman working in the infrastructure of the industry:

Years ago it was worse, when I first started every comment counted, every message I took to heart. Now I try and look at the constructive stuff. Whenever I see someone saying that we do something right, I get a smile... I have definitely matured and I try to not take people's weird anger to heart. I know a lot of the talent they read every Reddit comment and that is not good at all.

Some participants remained focused on the positive feedback and encouragement with a clear intention to avoid or ignore negativity. For participant five, a woman working in the infrastructure of the industry, she felt as though the negative comments about the esports company she worked for were in some ways positive:

I don't necessarily dislike the negative fans; I think having both positive and negative fans is just two sides to the same coin. That just says how much your fans care. I would rather have people who are very passionate about the team and the game. The industry only exists because of the fans. If there were no fans and no one watched I wouldn't have a job...

This passion demonstrated by the fans represented validation that her work within her organization was driving people to become invested in the team. Her mindset surrounding this spectator and fan dedication ultimately served as motivation and an

impetus to continuing to work in the industry. While she acknowledges the negativity, for her it comes with employment in her position in professional gaming:

I think I have had a lot of positive experiences with fans. Being in esports, that is a big part of the lifestyle and the life. I do think that has been a motivator for me to stay in the industry. I wouldn't say it has been the main motivator but it has been one... One of my favourite parts of my job is interacting with fans. There have been times where it has been frustrating. I never really thought of giving it up because of the negative interactions. I just know that it's part of the job and I pretty much expect it. There have definitely been times where it has been frustrating, people would personally attack me even if I had nothing to do with the thing that they are upset about.

This frustration was brushed aside by other participants who either ignored or dismissed the negative comments. Participant twenty-three, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry explained: "I don't have an issue with hate. Positivity yeah, I love it when people are positive and leave me good messages... Online people are typically a little more toxic. But within the community that I have been a part of, XXXX, people are very nice." The tone of most of the participants who reported negative interactions with fans was dismissive. This was especially true for those participants who have been working in this industry for an extended period of time.

While the majority of the participants were able handle and deal with the negativity, there were some examples of the toxicity and harshness from consumers having undesirable effects. Negativity and difficult encounters with spectators and fans in some cases resulted in individuals leaving the industry or transitioning to avenues of employment that are less public and visible. For participant eight, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry this included ultimately abandoning a career as an on-camera personality

after his first live event due in large part to the negativity and toxicity regarding his performance: “I worked at XXXX<sup>42</sup>... it was my first opportunity in front of a camera... I think by the time that I finished I realized that I couldn’t do it.” Participant thirty-one, a man working in the infrastructure of professional gaming, commented that he knew others involved in the infrastructure of the industry who ultimately made the decision to leave the industry and work in non-public occupations. This transition out of professional gaming came in large part as a result of the negativity directed towards them from spectators and consumers. He explained: “I know people who have quit because of bad comments. That is a thing that has happened. People get their self-confidence destroyed by bad comments.” This individual works within production and on-screen commentary in a particular title in professional gaming. This game and occupation was highlighted by a number of participants as notoriously negative, toxic, and ultimately confidence breaking.

## 5.5 Conclusion

Many different people can impact individuals’ pursuit of a career in professional gaming. This chapter investigated how individuals working and transitioning into professional gaming were impacted by others. As discussed in chapter four the professional gaming industry is rife with precarity. Consequently, establishing a job and ultimately a career in this emerging industry is not easy. The interviews probed participants on the factors that contributed to their careers and they often pointed to the role of others through social support, gaming social capital, gaming capital, and fans or spectators.

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<sup>42</sup> The event, location, game, and date of the event are redacted.

The social support they received and the feedback from spectators, fans, and consumers all mediated their work in this space. Their experiences were both career enhancing as well as career impacting. Both gaming social capital and gaming capital are important and impact the participation of individuals involved in professional gaming. This is true of the players, to management and ownership, and to those working in the background within the industry. That is, studying these forms of capital in professional gaming ought not be limited exclusively to those playing games, but rather extended to the industry as a whole. This leveraging of the participants in game networks towards offline social capital and gaming capital is similar to the literature on gaming generally (Molyneux et al., 2015; Walsh & Apperley, 2008; Zhong, 2011).

The role of social support, particularly amongst gamers, is complex and varied. The findings suggest that social support may not be essential for pursuing a career in professional gaming but rather a welcome and encouraging presence. This study also highlights the importance of 'legitimacy'. The more divergent professional gaming was from what their support networks considered 'traditional work', the lower levels of support. While video games have been around for decades, the proliferation of professional gaming is a new phenomenon. For older generations, even those who may have grown up with videogames, this activity represents a leisure activity and not work.

As the prevalence of professional gaming has increased over the last few years, the social and cultural acceptance of employment in this industry has also shifted. There is evidence that this increased acceptance of gaming leads to more social and cultural approval of gaming as a career option (Eklund, 2015; Webster & Randle, 2016). The participants highlighted how, as professional gaming gained prominence and societal acceptance, the



support the participants received improved. The importance of this cultural acceptance is highlighted by the Esports Federation of Germany- Esport-bund Deutschland- “The objective of promoting esports is to establish it in the public perception... Esports has become an important social and cultural instrument of the youth and because of that it needs to be recognized by the public, media, and industry” (Esport-Bund Deutschland, 2018). Conversely, the lack of social support, deficient gaming social capital and negative feedback were all career impacting. This effect was not necessarily career ending, however, for many of the participants these negative experiences influenced their career trajectory.<sup>43</sup> Having difficulty finding work, understanding how to proceed, or receiving undesirable feedback, all contributed to this influence on the participants’ career paths. They often had to shift their goals, objectives, or strategy as a result of these negative experiences. However, these negative situations were not career ending, just career altering for the participants.

Social support, gaming capital, gaming social capital, viewership, and spectators all represent important factors for those individuals making the transition into professional gaming for work. These factors when transitioning into working in professional gaming can have a considerable impact on their sense of self and identity development (Ibañez & Lopez, 2018). The connection between identity development and a person’s involvement in this industry will be explored further in chapter six.

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<sup>43</sup> A limitation that will be discussed in chapter eight is that this research may only uncover the resilient.

## Chapter 6

### 6 Leisure, Work, and Identity in Professional Gaming

#### 6.1 Introduction

Gaming as a pastime is pursued by many; however, for some it is more than a hobby. Beginning in the formative years of a person's life, gaming can become a core component of their personality and identity (Y.-H. Lee & Lin, 2011; A. Shaw, 2012; S. M. Shaw et al., 1995; Vermeulen et al., 2017). It is not surprising then that some may seek to turn their hobby into paid employment or seek paid employment in the gaming industry – especially with the expansion of opportunities in streaming and esports. What we consume and how we consume it “have become key identity markers and the boundaries between work and leisure have become blurred by more ambiguous considerations of lifestyle” (Brewis & Linstead, 2000, p. 84). This blurring between work and leisure may be particularly felt by people working in the professional gaming industry. What happens when the leisure activity so core to your identity becomes your job? Interview findings, detailed in this chapter, suggest such blurring can result in difficulties and challenges associated with leisure activities, identity, and mental health.

#### 6.2 Intersection of Leisure and Work

The blurring of leisure and work was described by the participants at nearly every stage of the interview process. While traditional discussions of the intersection of work and leisure focus on place and physical location, the difficulty with the professional gaming industry is the ambiguity of place (Brewis & Linstead, 2000). This challenge was touched on by participant eighteen, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry:

You know, everything is on your computer. Whether you are watching the games, or writing or whatever. It is all taking place on that one device. Which is great that we are all interconnected enough.... The connections you are making are all online... I would have weeks where if it was a really big busy time, *I am doing work almost every waking moment*. I might not talk to people, that are real flesh and blood human beings.... That can be hard, that is something that not a lot of people necessarily factor into the equation, how to balance that time.

The intersection of leisure and work within professional gaming is unique due to place and location (Fuchs, 2014; Goggin, 2011; London et al., 1977). This means individuals being inside at their computers for extended periods of time. This sedentary lifestyle can have tremendous impacts on mental and physical health, which will be addressed at the end of this chapter.

As the lines become blurred between work and play, the participants highlighted the difficulties that follow when attempting to continue playing games as hobbies. Participant thirty-two, a man working in management in the industry, addressed this challenge: “If you make your one escape your job, then it is no longer an escape it is just an obligation that you have.” His initial transition into a career in professional gaming led to considerable strain on his leisure time. For him it felt as though his release was now just another part of his job and he “struggled with it.” This challenge was expressed by participants throughout all areas of the industry, and manifested itself in a number of ways.

For those involved in this industry, the inability to ‘escape’ or remove oneself from work resulted in considerable difficulties. With their work and leisure intrinsically intertwined, enjoying leisure time proved problematic as removing oneself from work becomes nearly impossible. This inability to separate work and leisure becomes especially problematic as

the pressure to succeed weighed on the participants. For participant thirty-two, he felt as though he *had* to continue: “I kind of live online... You are alone with your thoughts, you are at the computer even if you aren’t working, you are watching streams. That was just part of my job. If you demonstrate a lack of knowledge, it’s kind of like a sign of weakness so you have to do it. Just keep doing it.” Participant thirty, a man working in the infrastructure of professional gaming, specifically discussed those working in this area of the industry and the challenge they face balancing leisure and work: “I know a lot of people in *the infrastructure* where hobby and job sort of get blurred. I think for a lot of those folks it becomes difficult to play as a hobby.” This difficulty in continuing to play as a hobby was corroborated by a number of other participants. Participant twelve, a woman working in the infrastructure of the industry, commented that: “Even though I work in video games I rarely play video games. In my free time I would avoid doing that.” Her work in this industry has resulted in her playing video games infrequently. When she played it was primarily to connect with friends online; she rarely actively sought out or desired to play games ever since she began working full-time in the industry. Her experiences were similar to those reported by participant twenty-one, a man working in the infrastructure, who provided the following analogy when asked about the intersection of leisure and work:

I mean it reminds me a lot of you know... my *relative* will still tell you the story of when he was a teenager and in his early college years and he ate, you know, *fast-food-chain food* every weekend and ended up taking a job there over the summer. He ended up taking a job there over the summer and hasn’t touched the stuff since. You know, as well

intentioned as it may be, your love of something does not always survive seeing the sausage get made.<sup>44</sup>

This example highlights the difficulty many of the participants experienced. As they transitioned into a job in the industry it had a considerable impact on their ability to play games as a hobby. This is especially problematic in light of the long-hours commitment that work in the industry often requires. Participant thirty-four, a man and current streamer commented on the issues that this creates:

When I wanted to be a pro player my mindset was literally to play this game from the second you wake up until the second you sleep. If you aren't going to play you are going to watch streams. If you aren't going to watch streams, then you are going to watch replays. My mind was literally time out is missed time. Time is improvement, and that kind of mindset can be problematic.

Participant eighteen, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, explained how this feeling impacts people working in this area of the industry:

I am a XXXX, I am writing as many articles as I can, I am watching as many games as I can... Eventually you realize, umm, it always feels at first that when you aren't writing is a time that someone else might be. This is such a competitive industry and there is so many people that would just love to write about video games full time.<sup>45</sup>

For the participants, their hobbies and leisure activities became commodified. This commodification can lead to alienation and exploitation as discussed in chapter four (Postigo, 2003). The blending of leisure and work led some of the participants to feel as though they were selling themselves short. Companies and organizations in this industry take advantage of the fact that people “would just love to write about video games.”

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<sup>44</sup> The individual described the food and food chain that their family member would eat at. The family member as well as the specific food and store name have been redacted to protect anonymity. Prior to this statement the participant stated how “I have said this before” in reference to other interviews and communications relating to their experiences in the industry.

<sup>45</sup> The specific job that the individual has at their company has been redacted. His work is broadly described as being involved in media or journalism coverage of professional gaming.

This constant feeling of ‘I could be doing more’ was common with the participants. It begins to erode the ability for an individual to enjoy the leisure or hobby time they have. This can impact an individual’s happiness, particularly when the work is all-consuming, and the work-life balance is uneven (Perrons, 2003). Participant eleven, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, commented on this effect: “It didn’t at the start, but by the end like, I didn’t enjoy it. I just couldn’t do it anymore *but I had to do it*. That has an effect on you.” He explained that while he no longer enjoyed the work he was doing in the industry, he had no choice but to do it, and do it all the time. It became all-encompassing for him and ultimately has resulted in him recently leaving the industry.<sup>46</sup>

The blurred boundaries between their gaming, leisure, and work time is evidenced by the difficulty participants had in explaining their hours *worked* per week. This challenge was consistent across all occupational categories as the interviewees struggled to make distinctions between their work and leisure, and subsequently develop a coherent explanation of their work schedule. Participant twenty, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, mentioned the difficulty of measuring workload and time worked: “Hours per week is just not something that really works. The thing is, even if I am just relaxing and playing games with friends that is still work. It’s really all work. It’s all encompassing. It’s a lifestyle. I am always working, always thinking about it.” When asked about the hours per week he worked in the industry, participant thirty-one, a man employed in the infrastructure of professional gaming, replied: “There is definitely a blurred line there... That is extremely difficult to say.” This is analogous to the

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<sup>46</sup> This participant was transitioning out of working in the industry and the last income they had was from working in professional gaming.

difficulties associated with measuring *time spent online* for researchers (Araujo, Wonneberger, Neijens, & de Vreese, 2017). Measuring internet use with one-foot-in and one-foot-out scenarios of checking your phone while in a face to face social encounter are difficult. This example represents similar challenges that exist in trying to measure the hours per week worked of individuals whose leisure and work activities become blended together. This role blurring manifests in part due to the pressures and stress associated with working in this industry. This sentiment was echoed by participant four, a player and streamer:

I would say that you have to stream 160 hours a month at very least. Beyond that, pretty much all your time when you aren't streaming is that you have to handle social media, you have to do sponsorship management. People email you. You have to work on YouTube. You are the brains behind the entire organization, you are the organization. It's everything you do.

Such long hours devoted to gaming are particularly common among players who often operate as entrepreneurs. One participant who is a current player described how this situation was improved after he was hired on by an esports organization as a streamer.<sup>47</sup> He now had access to support with video editing, social media support, and general assistance with his stream, which ultimately allowed him to develop a slightly healthier, albeit still not ideal, schedule. For those individuals without schedules, “‘work creep’ might be more problematic compared to those with a more rigid schedule” (Schieman & Glavin, 2016, p. 24).

This convergence of leisure and work had several negative impacts on the participants. For many of the participants, the strain created by this intersection of leisure and work

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<sup>47</sup> Participant number is redacted and the direct quote is not used to protect anonymity.

ultimately resulted in them reducing their time playing games. Participant twenty, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry explained the effect that working in professional gaming had on his ability to enjoy games during his free time: “I don’t play nearly as much as I used to, that’s for sure. There was a stage where I would play and get very stressed and upset...I try to play less now and purely for enjoyment.” Participant nine, a man and current player, commented that because he played different games competitively the challenges posed by the intersection of leisure and work often experienced by players is at least partially mitigated: “It’s a pretty big factor, *that I have played multiple games competitively*. As much as somebody might not want to admit it, if you aren’t enjoying the game you aren’t going to play it as much. If you do then other parts of you are going to suffer, so that’s a big part of it.” Often, this intersection resulted in considerable tensions, strains, and conflicts.

This pressure to play games to ‘remain competitive’ is especially true for professional players. Participant twenty-six, a man and owner of an esports organization spoke to the challenges faced by professional players specifically:

You see a fantastic player that plays a lot as a hobby, he gets noticed by a pro player. There is no one to really guide this individual into ‘you know this is what being a pro is like’ they are just kind of thrown into it. You know, like with a job you are trained a little bit, you are given a bit of leeway and eased into it. Whereas this player now that is on a pro team is getting shit on by a bunch of Twitch viewers and they are getting a lot of negative attention because they played poorly. That can have an effect on players, you see it. Either they can go get really back into the game or they say ‘you know what I don’t want to play anymore I lost passion’ and move on. That is where it gets tricky... it is a cycle that needs to be addressed I would say.



This intersection of leisure and work is especially problematic for those individuals whose skill level and proficiency in a particular game *is* the reason why they are working in this industry. This melding of work and play is especially problematic in those cases.

For many of the participants, gaming was no longer a hobby, but rather a career. Being able to ‘turn off’ work becomes immensely more difficult, as “no longer are computer games pure play and leisure, but they now form professionalized careers for many players” (Johnson & Woodcock, 2017, p. 27). This pressure felt by the participants is not dissimilar to that felt by individuals in other industries experiencing precarious employment (Campbell & Price, 2016; White, Hill, McGovern, Mills, & Smeaton, 2003). This strain can result in health consequences for those working in this industry not unlike those identified in traditional ‘work from home’ arrangements (Baines & Gelder, 2003). The added dynamic that exists within professional gaming is that not only are these jobs individuals’ livelihoods, but gaming can also be tied to their self-identity. Ambivalent feelings about gaming due to long work hours, and decreased enjoyment in gaming as it ceases to be a hobby, can contribute to identity and mental health challenges, which I discuss in the following sections.

### 6.2.1 Identity

Throughout the interviews, participants reported shifts in their identity as they discussed this transition from hobby to work. The tying of identity and work is well documented in the literature on those live streaming and playing games within this industry (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Johnson & Woodcock, 2019; Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017). In the current research, while it remained an issue amongst players and streamers, it was also relevant to those working in the infrastructure of the industry.

For many of the participants, a core component of their self-identity was gaming. Their work in this industry created tension between their identity and ability to escape their work. For participant two, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, this challenge proved difficult: “I haven’t found anything to replace it.” After he began working in the professional gaming, he struggled to find something to fill that role or gap in his life: “I felt like a part of me was missing, just not there or something.” The experiences described by the participants closely follows Gregg’s (2014) *presence bleed*. This term explains the blending of “contemporary work life, where firm boundaries between personal and professional identities no longer apply... It manifests as the variable degree of willingness workers feel in letting work seep into and coexist alongside other spheres of life activity” (Gregg, 2014, pp. 123-124). This blending of identities may be especially difficult on players. Participant twenty-eight, a man working in ownership, addressed the challenges players face when trying to find a balance: “It is much different than doing a 9-5 job where after 5pm you mentally clock out and you can go and spend your time. Whereas for the players, it is never the case.” The identity of the players become intertwined with their hobby and leisure activity in such a way that makes separating the two nearly impossible.

Participant thirty-two, a man working in management explained the thought process behind individuals going all-in with their work: “By putting more time into it they think it will increase their success or happiness. But doing this they are losing their one thing that allows them to escape from it.” One mitigating factor may be the nature of an individual’s work in this industry. For participant thirty, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, maintaining part-time employment in professional gaming

may ultimately have preserved gaming as a hobby and escape for himself: “Once I got better known, where I had a presence online I thought about moving more into it full time for work but because of *health issues*<sup>48</sup> this wasn’t necessarily an option... In that sense it was very much a hobby, an escape.” The nine participants who were not working full-time in professional gaming reported fewer issues with identity and the intersection of work and leisure. While they still experienced challenges in navigating the convergence of hobby and labour, these were much less prominent than for individuals working full-time in this field.

These difficulties result in individuals having to adjust and adapt who they are and what they do. Participant twenty-four, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, explained how individuals working in professional gaming have to shift and make changes: “It is almost like a need. You need to engage with new hobbies.... I don’t think a normal person, or very few people would be able to play games in their leisure time when they are doing this.” This was further highlighted during a conversation with participant thirty-four, a man and streamer who commented on the change in his self-identity through his involvement in gaming:

I definitely felt like I was far more of a gamer before I started doing this than I am now. I just don’t have the time to pay attention anymore, it’s almost kind of like I don’t want to anymore. I dedicate eight to ten hours a day on average, gaming, talking about gaming, streaming myself gaming... A good example is that my brother constantly asks me to play video games with him because that’s what we used to do. I am just so, that idea is so unappealing to me now, I did it once and it is such an unappealing idea to me. I am just like ‘I am not going to do this again. I was like let’s go to the beach, go for a hike, go swimming, do

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<sup>48</sup> This participant’s health issues were unrelated and predated his work in professional gaming.

something outside' I just want something contrasting [to] what I am doing ten hours a day.

Participant thirty-three, a man and owner of an organization, expressed how having hobbies outside of gaming was beneficial:

I did feel like that but gaming wasn't my only leisure hobby. I do other stuff with my family. I played other leagues, I played softball, I played tennis. I had other things going on outside of it. So I didn't feel like I was like 'oh I have no outlet anymore'. I did notice, that like if that was my only thing, my desire to game went down, I could have seen myself as struggling with that.

The challenges for identity may also be more pronounced, or at least different, for women compared to men working in professional gaming (Vermeulen et al., 2017). This will be examined in greater detail in chapter seven. For those individuals who do struggle with their self-identity and managing the leisure-work balance, there may ultimately be health difficulties and challenges associated with their experiences.

### 6.3 Health Challenges

Not unlike other industries, individuals working in professional gaming experience health difficulties associated with their work (Happonen & Minashkina, 2019; Lieberman, 1997). Similar to previous chapters, the health implications for people in this industry vary depending on which sub-area of professional gaming they work in. These challenges manifest themselves in a number of ways. Overall, participants described the mental and physical toll of working in this industry. Participants used words such as 'difficult', 'all-encompassing', 'stressful' when describing the intersection of leisure and work in professional gaming. In particular, the hardships and difficulties that the participants endured throughout this transition have serious health implications.

Consistent and prolonged stationary computer usage can result in many health issues (Connolly, Stansfield, & Hainey, 2011; Dworak, Schierl, Bruns, & Strüder, 2007; H. Lee, 2004). Participant twelve, a woman working in the infrastructure of the industry, addressed the health implications of her work in professional gaming: “I had to shift about a year ago and I started to play less and less video games. I started to look out for myself and my body, sitting in front of the PC from morning to evening wasn’t so healthy.” The consequences of sitting at a computer for long periods of time were consistently discussed by the participants, and specifically by the players and streamers. Participant thirty-four, a man and streamer highlighted the difficulty with the extended period of time in front of the computer streaming:

It physically and mentally just feels really bad. It’s a hard feeling to even articulate. To just be in front of a computer for 12 or 15 hours a day. It could be your hands, head, back. It could be the stress. It is just physically and mentally really bad for you. You are engaging constantly. It all adds up to an unhealthy space.

Participant nine, a man and current player, highlighted the impacts on health that may not necessarily be associated with prolonged computer usage: “It’s a problem, you have people who aren’t eating well, you have people are not sleeping well, and they all add up to impact health.”

### 6.3.1 Physical Health Challenges

Within professional gaming physical health challenges present considerable issues for the individuals working in this industry (DiFrancisco-Donoghue et al., 2019; Happonen & Minashkina, 2019). These difficulties spanned all areas of professional gaming, although the participants’ descriptions of the types of physical complications they experienced varied. Players often described injuries consistent with constant use of a computer. Four

of the five players described these physical health issues associated with their extended time in front of their computers. Participant twenty-seven, a man and current player and streamer, spoke to his history with this issue:

The biggest thing I have experienced is repetitive stress injuries. Throughout my career I have had to deal with a lot of pain. XXXX is a very demanding game and spending a lot of hours playing a game like that and using your fingers so extensively. And sitting for extended periods of a day has also had an impact on my body... *At one point I was in so much pain* I was close to not being able to do this anymore. *Even though it has gotten better* I still suffer from issues with it. I need to manage it, you know? I need to make sure I have a gaming and life balance to mitigate that.

This resulted in the participant developing coping strategies and adjusting his lifestyle to address these concerns. He explained that this involved developing alternative hobbies and leisure activities that took him away from the computer in his free time. This sentiment was echoed by former esports player Vincent ‘Jellybeans’ Tran, a competitor in World of Warcraft, who spoke to many of these challenges in a July 2019 post on Twitter, stating that: “Started gyming again recently and focusing on eating more again since I lost nearly 20 pounds since last December. Also been spending time away from the house a lot. Been feeling insane. Remember to focus on your health and don’t get too consumed by gaming. Shit’s dangerous” (Vincent, 2019).

Beyond the players, individuals working in the infrastructure of professional gaming also described the health consequences of their involvement in this industry. Participant thirty-one, a man working in the infrastructure, spoke to the toll of attending LAN events: “I can see how people can get caught off guard when they go to events... It is incredibly stressful; I think that can catch people off guard. It is just a boiling pot for very critical situations, lack of sleep, long hours, exhaustion.” His description of the working

conditions at events was consistent with the other participants working in the infrastructure, particularly with regards to the lack of sleep and an irregular schedule. Participant fourteen, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry addressed these concerns: “Because I didn’t have a steady sleep schedule and because I was up all night sometimes and then up forty-eight hours for an event. There were definitely times where I went manic trying to make it in esports.... Switching my sleep schedule three or four times a week, it definitely has an effect.”

The repetitive stress injuries described by participant twenty-seven above, indicative of the physical health issues experienced by players, was also discussed by those working in the infrastructure of the industry. Only five of the twenty-one participants in this area of professional gaming touched on these types of injuries, a significantly lower proportion when compared to players. Participant thirty-two, a man working in management, addressed these types of injuries by non-players in the infrastructure: “It is hard to take care of yourself if you are constantly at your computer. A lot of people are developing arm and back problems. I saw PimpuckL today say that ‘I am having really bad pain in my arm so I had to use a stream controller now.’ Yeah, it’s hard to take care of yourself.”<sup>49</sup> The prevalence of neck and back injuries is common amongst those working in professional gaming (Choi, Hums, & Bum, 2018; Happonen & Minashkina, 2019).

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<sup>49</sup> PimpuckL or JJ is a well-known observer for Dota 2 competitions. An observer is the person who controls the camera for the stream during an esports competition and work alongside the casters and analysts.

### 6.3.2 Mental Health Challenges

In addition to the physical health challenges described by the participants during this research, many discussions took place surrounding the mental health difficulties experienced by those working in professional gaming. These challenges existed for individuals working in all areas of the industry. For some, the precarious nature of the work in this space resulted in mental health issues. Participant one, a man working in management, addressed the impact of employment uneasiness on mental health: “You aren’t 100 percent sure that you’re going to be able to make it and like make this a sustainable thing. You sit through a lot of negativity and self-doubt because you spend a lot of time alone in your office or bedroom or basement, wherever your computer is... [it] slowly wore me down over time.” This finding is not necessarily unique to the professional gaming industry, the negative association between precarious employment and mental health is well documented (Canivet et al., 2017; Canivet et al., 2016; Mai, Jacobs, & Schieman, 2019; Moscone, Tosetti, & Vittadini, 2016).

For players specifically, mental health challenges may be even more problematic. Participant nine, a man and current player, commented on the toll that competing in esports has on a player: “Mental health is definitely an issue.... *If you don’t have good contracts that you can live off of, then the stress of competing is only the personal gain of a satisfying win, winning something. Whereas in a number of games, the stress is both about winning and making a living for yourself.*” For him, the additive stress of competing in esports competitions as well as being worried about making ends meet creates an atmosphere that often results in poor mental health.



Expanding on the conversation in chapter five surrounding the role of spectators and consumers, a number of participants highlighted the impact that interacting with the public can have on mental health. Participant fourteen, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, addressed the impact of this interaction on the mental health of women: “I personally know a number of women that have dealt with depression as a result of the harassment and the sexist side of the industry. That is very exacerbating for mental illness.” The negative interactions with fans, spectators, and consumers not only impacts participation in the industry, as discussed in chapter five, but can also result in mental health difficulties for those who experience harassment and abuse.

This negative atmosphere may be especially difficult to navigate for those individuals who have pre-existing mental health challenges. Participant thirty-one, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, spoke to this issue: “If somebody has mental health problems then that can be a whole rabbit hole of problems for them or triggers. I can see how *it can be a rough industry* for someone with anxiety or depression.” The majority of the participants did not discuss preexisting mental health issues. Four participants did describe having a range of mental health issues from ADHD to bipolar disorder. For all four participants these mental health challenges were heightened and amplified by their work in this industry with three specifically citing the precarity of their employment as a contributing factor.

### 6.3.3 Addiction

Coupled with the discussion of mental health challenges, a number of participants described the addictive nature of professional gaming. Participant twenty-six, a man and owner of an esports organization, commented on dissonance and lack of consistency that

exists surrounding this addiction categorization: “In sports the analogy is ‘I question their work ethic blah blah blah’ whereas in gaming they say there might be an addiction.” For him, within traditional sports, if individuals do not commit one hundred percent effort and dedicate their lives to their crafts, they are considered lazy or unappreciative of the opportunity they have. The inconsistency between the treatment of individuals pursuing sport and those aiming for a career in professional gaming may be in part attributable to the way in which people view professional gaming. The behaviours and habits of individuals “are often framed as problematic, because of the lack of physical activity and its sedentary nature” (Bányai, Griffiths, Király, & Demetrovics, 2019, p. 13).

Some scholars have argued that a ‘gaming addiction’ is akin to being a ‘workaholic’ or being addicted to one’s work (Griffiths, 2017). Many of the same characteristics exhibited by those considered to have addictions to playing video games as a leisure activity are shared by those thought of as workaholics (Griffiths, 2017). With professional gaming, individuals who are ‘all-in’ are typically looked upon as being unhealthy and having an issue or addiction to gaming. This is despite the fact that the relationship an individual has with gaming is similar to those that professional athletes have with their sports. In the interviews, these discussions generally focused on what can best be termed a *necessary* addiction. That is, the participants often argued that in order to succeed individuals almost *need* to be addicted to gaming, with this being particularly true for players. The difficulties with addiction can lead to mental health issues and complicate pre-existing conditions in people working in professional gaming (Bányai et al., 2019; Han, Lyoo, & Renshaw, 2012).

For participant five, a woman working in management, she has not always been able to properly balance her work in gaming: “I have a very addictive personality and nature; I was able to balance it more in college but *at other times* I wasn’t able to find a balance between gaming and my life that well.” Participant thirty-one, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, addressed the addiction in the industry:

I just think it’s bad to be stuck in a cycle of doing the same thing all day every day. As well, I think there is a huge problem with time management. I can’t remember who tweeted it but someone made a really funny tweet saying like ‘people who are addicted to video games aren’t addicted to video games they are terrible at time management’ or something like that.

The discussion surrounding this quote highlighted that many individuals in this space struggle to find a proper balance with gaming, which is a challenge that is often discarded as simply a time management issue and not an addiction issue.

Participant twenty-three, a man and former player now working in the infrastructure of the industry, addressed the prevalence of addiction within esports specifically:

A main issue within esports is that is it very addiction based. Like it’s not because they necessarily are all in on the idea of becoming a pro player. I think a lot of these kids they tell themselves that, that it is all about becoming a pro player but it is mostly just an addiction. I think parents see that and they think it is just an addiction.

The experiences and thoughts on addiction were diverse and varied amongst the participants. For many of the participants, it was clear that there were elements and traits similar to addiction for those working in this industry. This was particularly true for players and those working in skill-based positions. Beyond the general agreement that this issue exists within this industry, participants generally followed this observation with commentary on the necessity of this addiction, or concern surrounding the health implications of working in this industry.

### 6.3.4 Navigating the Health Difficulties

The participants' responses and discussions surrounding mental and physical health challenges led into conversations on how they address and navigate these consequences of working in professional gaming. The participants described various methods, strategies, and coping mechanisms — some more effective than others — that enabled them to continue working in this field.

For players, streamers, and individuals in the infrastructure of the industry, navigating health difficulties is a constant consideration. For some of the participants, their coping approach was proactive and deliberate. Participant twenty-nine, a woman working in the infrastructure of the industry, explained her strategy to stave off health issues: “I am very proactive in trying to avoid these issues. I try and go outside every day, I take vitamin D. I exercise when I can. I do everything I can to avoid the stress, depression, and panic, but not everybody can.” For participant thirty-two, a man working in management, efforts to address his health concerns became a priority after he recently left his position at an esports organization for a new opportunity in the industry: “I have made an effort since I left XXXX to take better care of myself. To make sure I am going out. I have been very lucky to have a friend group where I live... I have been lucky to have them to force me to go out and be social.” However, while these participants were able to effectively manage health issues, this was not indicative of all interviewees.

This concern surrounding the ability to address and deal with health difficulties was also touched on by a number of the participants. As would be expected, those living in the United States expressed the most concern, due in large part to the lack of universal healthcare (Van de Ven & Schut, 2008). Participant eighteen, a man working in the

infrastructure of the industry, commented on the stress, anxiety, and general uneasiness created by the lack of health care when working in precarious employment:

I personally am pretty fortunate; in that I have supportive parents that can help me with health things. I know a lot of people who are working XXXX, you don't have medical benefits from that. So, if you do have mental issues, you're kind of left to figure that out and afford that on your own. We in the States don't have universal health care. So, if you are someone that has, I don't know, a lot of stress because you work a freelance job in which your pay isn't guaranteed. You have to constantly be performing collections with websites that see you as an interchangeable part– that is a lot of stress and anxiety. You're not necessarily going to feel like you have the money to invest in tackling those problems the best. I was fortunate in that way, but I know people who weren't.<sup>50</sup>

Participant fourteen, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, also spoke to the inability to properly address health concerns: “You don't have insurance when you are trying to make it in esports. That plays a role, not being able to get any help or medication of any kind.”

None of the eight individuals working in management or ownership mentioned difficulties in addressing these health concerns. This is likely a result of two factors. First, some of the individuals in ownership held positions outside of gaming that may have afforded them healthcare coverage. Second, at least three of the individuals from this category worked in organizations within gaming that provided healthcare. Participant five, a woman working in management at an esports organization, addressed this in a quote discussed in chapter four: “I am very fortunate in that my company does have those plans in place for their employees...So, I am very fortunate in that, a lot of other people

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<sup>50</sup> The participant described the specific job they have in the infrastructure of the industry.

are a lot less fortunate.” The first portion of her statement was specifically in response to a question about how she addresses health issues.

Developing a new hobby to mitigate both the *loss* of a leisure activity in gaming as well as improve a person’s health was commonly discussed by the participants. Participant nine, a man and current player commented on the importance of physical activity away from the computer as a coping mechanism and a way to address the health challenges from working in this industry:

I always tell people that are in this rut, you need something that tethers you down that you can always turn back to. Obviously for people where that is gaming that is an issue. For people that spend most of their time inside, I always recommend outside activities. Go for walks, go to the gym, you don’t have to do any heavy weights, you don’t have to pump serious iron, just change your environment. That will definitely help clear this thing up. It is definitely 100% a big issue, I have straight up seen people lose their minds. You’re surrounded by the same people doing the same thing day in and day out.

Overwhelmingly, the conversations focused on this new hobby being a physical activity, and in particular the gym. Participant thirty-two, a man working in management stressed the importance of the gym: “I am coming up to a year on my gym membership, I think I just passed a year. That has been a huge thing for me.” Participant thirty-one, a man working in the infrastructure, highlighted his use of the gym as a mechanism through which he could mitigate the mental and physical health consequences of working in professional gaming:

I also started exercising a lot more. Which is weird, it seems pretty backwards. But there was a point where I was like XXXX<sup>51</sup> is my life, I want to cast, I want to play all the time... You get to the stage where you need self-confidence, it helps build self-confidence as well. It stops

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<sup>51</sup> The game that the individual primarily works in is redacted.

it from being everything. If someone says ‘you are shit at casting’ I am like well whatever I hit the *gym a few times a week*... I found it really interesting how I ended up exercising a lot more, it actually helped my casting.

His reflection at the beginning of the quote, “which is weird, it seems pretty backwards”, led to a discussion about how going to the gym was initially not a conscious decision to find an alternative leisure activity to gaming. Participant eighteen, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, explained the difficulty that young people in this industry have at finding this balance:

It can be very hard to learn that sometimes the best thing you can do is take a break and recharge; getting away from the computer and experience all these other things that will both refresh you and give you a different perspective. That also is a lot easier for me to say with hindsight now that I have a job that facilitates me to do so. If you tell that to 23-year-old XXXX, I don’t think he would believe it enough to really take advantage of it.<sup>52</sup>

## 6.4 Conclusion

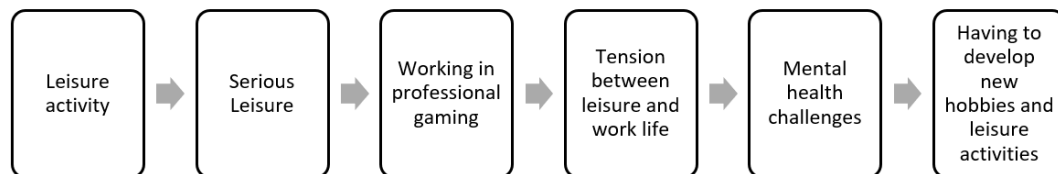
Throughout the course of the interviews, the intersection of identity, leisure, and health when working in professional gaming were discussed by the participants. How individuals navigated their education and work in this industry, how they balanced their leisure and work activities, and how they struggled with and dealt with health issues are important topics covered in this chapter.

Linking these three together is a process that emerged throughout the course of the interviews. When describing their experiences, many participants described the progression from leisure activity to working within professional gaming. The timelines

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<sup>52</sup> The participant was referring to himself and his name is redacted.

were consistent across the various areas of the industry, and while nuances specific to players existed, the general experiences remained similar. The graphic below presents this progression as described by the participants.



First, the participants' gaming was a leisure or hobby activity they did in their free time for pleasure and enjoyment. As they became more immersed in video games, they began to move into box two, serious leisure — “activities in which significant time, money, resources, and overall identity investment occur” (Taylor, 2012, p. 154). Here, their identities and day-to-day lives become intertwined with gaming. This envelopment with gaming ultimately transitioned into working in the industry (box three). They work long hours often coupled with precarious working arrangements and contracts (as discussed in chapter four). While the participants often cited being content with employment within professional gaming, they also recognized the impact that this newfound employment had on them. Participants struggled with the fact that what was once a key component of their self-identity had in some cases “been taken away” and it was no longer “mine” as one participant described now working in the industry. The mental health difficulties that developed were particularly onerous. Both the nature of the industry, combined with the fact that what was previously their leisure or hobby activity is now their job, led to considerable tension and strain (box four). It is during this stage that many participants described beginning to experience health implications, particularly mental health issues



associated with their involvement in gaming (box five). The participants often lamented how what they had historically used as an escape or something to do for fun was now the *only* thing they did.

This loss of an escape, the precarious work in professional gaming, and the subsequent mental health challenges often resulted in participants having to develop new hobbies and leisure activities (box six). Here participants often described going to the gym, getting physical activity, and developing a new hobby, as a means of coping with and addressing the mental health issues associated with the loss of their hobby or leisure activity. It was in many ways a coping mechanism for the participants. As interviews progressed, I began developing this framework to capture participants' descriptions of the changes they experienced in over time in their careers. I presented this framework in interviews with the final eight participants. There was nearly unanimous agreement with the framework, although participants suggested a few minor distinctions. This transition model can help improve the understanding of how individuals move from playing games as leisure activities to working in the industry, and how their identity and health is affected over the course of their transition. Beyond the health challenges in navigating the intersection of leisure and work, individuals also experienced a number of other hardships when attempting to pursue a career in professional gaming.

## Chapter 7

### 7 Challenges and Difficulties in Professional Gaming

#### 7.1 Introduction

Over the last decade the growth of the professional gaming industry has accelerated considerably (Koetsier, 2018). Simultaneous to this growth in professional gaming has been a societal wide shift towards the digital economy (Huws, 2014; Van Ark, 2016). Concerns surrounding the shift towards the digital economy and the potential for this change to either exacerbate or decrease existing inequalities are well documented in the literature (Chen, 2013; Haight et al., 2014; Hoang, Blank, & Quan-Haase, 2020; Witte & Mannon, 2010). However, the impact of inequalities on those in professional gaming has received little attention. The global audience and workforce is expected to increase greatly over the next few years, and understanding the social implications of working in this industry is essential (Merwin et al., 2018; Syracuse Staff, 2019). As this industry expands and the number of players and streamers rises, the number of individuals employed in infrastructure and management positions will also increase. As such, improving the understanding of how these challenges and inequalities manifest themselves, not only for those on the frontline of professional gaming, but also for those in the periphery and supporting roles, is important.

This chapter aims to investigate the challenges and difficulties associated with participating in the emerging industry of professional gaming. The results suggest that individuals working in professional gaming experience considerable hardships, not dissimilar to those experienced in traditional industries and occupations. Challenges are faced both by those attempting to transition into the industry, and those well-established

within it. This chapter sheds light on workers' experiences through research theme five: the challenges and difficulties experienced by those working in professional gaming. In interviews participants described several hardships including experiences of discrimination, sexism, and economic and geographic inequality. In this chapter I identify these hardships, discuss how they manifest, and describe how participants navigated them.

While a broad range of adversities were identified in the interviews, three emerged repeatedly. First, discrimination was widely discussed by the participants and it manifested as sexism and homophobia. Second, economic inequality was apparent; participants discussed several economic difficulties associated with participation in the industry. These included parental socioeconomic status and barriers to entry into the industry. Lastly, participants identified geographic difficulties associated with working in or transitioning into the professional gaming industry. Geographic barriers were broad, encompassing discrimination, challenges linked to access to the internet and digital services, and geographic distance to events, competitions, and major organizations.

## 7.2 Discrimination

There are well-documented examples of discrimination in the gaming industry. These include GamerGate, homophobic remarks, and derogatory statements about individuals' identities and cultures (Good, 2018; Marshall, 2019; Overwatch League, 2018).<sup>53</sup> These

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<sup>53</sup> This incident began through a blog post about an ex-girlfriend and quickly devolved into a "social justice" initiative. While it was "held up as a pseudo-political movement by its adherents, there is substantial evidence that Gamergate is more accurately described as an organized campaign of hate and harassment [towards women]" (Chatzakou et al., 2017, p. 1). This has been identified as a landmark

instances of hateful and discriminatory behavior are vast. Research on discrimination and prejudice in professional gaming has typically focused on public statements and incidents that impact individuals who are underrepresented in this industry, including women, racialized individuals, and members of the LGBTQ community (Aghazadeh et al., 2018; Mortensen, 2018; Taylor, 2018). Discrimination of individuals with public and frontline roles in the industry such as live streaming or on camera talent are well documented, however, the experiences of individuals in supporting occupations are not well researched.

Various forms of personal discrimination and difficulties were described throughout the interviews. In particular, sexism emerged as a prominent and reoccurring issue, as five of the six women interviewed reported challenges related to gender and sexuality. Many of the participants who identified as men spoke to the challenges and difficulties faced by women in professional gaming. Homophobia and racism also emerged as themes, although less prominent. This may be due to several factors, including the distinct lack of ethnic diversity within the gaming industry (Awotwi, 2016). None of the participants interviewed for this research self-identified as a racialized individual.<sup>54</sup>

Of the six research participants who identified as women, four were involved in infrastructure, while two were in management or ownership positions in the gaming

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example of the stress, harassment, and discrimination that women experience online and more specifically within the gaming community.

<sup>54</sup> The lack of racialized individuals in this industry may be a result of implicit or explicit racism. It could also be linked to sampling bias or the biased population that exists in the industry.

industry. One participant was a former player and another owns a company in the gaming industry. The experiences of women in the professional gaming industry can be described as inconsistent. The treatment of women involved in esports differed greatly when compared to those involved in streaming within gaming. Nearly unanimously, participants agreed that the attitudes and behaviours towards women in this industry were derogatory, unacceptable, and an impediment to progress in the industry. As the industry has matured and grown, there was overwhelming consensus that it has improved generally but there remains much work left to do. The experiences of women were highly dependent on context, including a multitude of factors. The specific area within professional gaming is important, as the visibility and types of interactions that take place can vary greatly depending on if an individual is a player, working in the infrastructure, or in management or ownership.

The gaming industry is characterized as a gendered institution, within which women have traditionally not belonged (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). This sense of not fitting in was discussed in the interviews as being pervasive and at times overwhelming. Some participants suggested that men have acted as gatekeepers, deciding and restricting who can become involved in this industry. The *men as gatekeepers* theme emerged during coding and contributed to the notion of a gendered industry in two ways. The first and most obvious is that women are excluded, either intentionally or unintentionally, because they are not in positions of power and thus not doing the hiring. Participant twenty-nine, a woman working within infrastructure, spoke to this exclusionary culture in gaming. She

explained the considerable backlash she would experience for being backstage, commenting:<sup>55</sup>

I would look at them and say every single time, ‘but if you were backstage, no one would think anything of it,’ the moment I am backstage, the moment I am talking to a guy for more than two minutes, everybody’s mind is made up about exactly why I am there. No one thinks I have anything worthy to contribute to the conversation.<sup>56</sup>

She expanded on this thought by suggesting the introduction of outsiders into the industry has had an overall positive effect on changing this culture: “As non-endemics become involved in this space, they are used to the real world. They are used to diversity and equality being important on a broadcast and a team. So, when they step into the industry and they are hiring, I have heard many stories of ‘we want a woman’, because they are sick of eight white dudes in a suit.”<sup>57</sup>

The experiences of participants closely resembled cultural matching—a process whereby employers seek “candidates who [are] not only competent but culturally similar to themselves” (Rivera, 2012, p. 1000). This cultural matching manifests itself within professional gaming among women who are trying to make it as players, within the infrastructure, or in management of organizations. This is consistent with the experiences of Stephanie Harvey, a player on Counter Logic Gaming Red, an esports team competing in Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS: GO). In a 2016 interview with the British

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<sup>55</sup> Backstage in the context of her quote refers to being in restricted players/employee only areas at events that the general public does not have access to.

<sup>56</sup> Speaking to a man who is an acquaintance and a fan of professional gaming but not involved in the industry.

<sup>57</sup> By ‘outsiders’ this participant was referring to individuals and/or companies that have recently moved into the gaming industry.

Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) she commented that “it’s still a ‘boy’s club’ so as a woman you’re automatically judged for being different” (BBC, 2016).

The second manifestation of men as gatekeepers is the necessity of women having to prove themselves worthy, more subtle yet potentially more destructive. There can exist a sense of ownership over a particular occupation or activity by men in the industry. For women to acquire a job they must demonstrate their capability or prove themselves ‘worthy’ often beyond the requirements necessary to be accepted. While this example illustrates the exertion of authority by those in power, women also experience the bottom-up pressure of having to demonstrate capabilities. Spectators, fans, and consumers of professional gaming often exert pressure on women to demonstrate legitimacy and competency in ways not necessarily applied equally to men. This is rife with undertones of sexism and works to inhibit women from participating fully in the professional gaming industry. A sense of illegitimacy and the necessity to prove oneself worthy emerged as a common theme in the interviews with the participants. As participant twenty-nine, a woman employed in the infrastructure stated: “it does feel like women need to prove their knowledge a lot more aggressively than guys do, or they will get called out for it.” A number of the participants who identified as men also touched on this theme, with participant twenty-three, a man involved in an infrastructure position, commenting on the struggle that women go through to break into the industry: “there are so few women in gaming because people still think they can’t do it, not that they actually can’t do it.”

This undertone of illegitimacy manifests itself in a number of ways. Participant five, a woman involved in the management of an esports team commented that: “there is this stereotype about girls not being genuine about their interest in games or gaming, how it is

like maybe girls just want to play video games because guys think it's cool and guys like girls." This experience was echoed by other participants. Throughout the interviews it became clear that women must demonstrate or prove worthiness in ways that extend far beyond the scope of what is expected of men in professional gaming. Participant twenty-nine, a woman, explained her experiences:

I had a lot of 'black marks' against me for being taken seriously. For a long time, I was dating a professional player and I was very private about it, very few people knew. I didn't want people to accuse me of trying to sleep my way to the top. It was very frustrating that I couldn't be open about my relationship because of the judgement I would get.

The general feeling that women have to go to great lengths to prove, demonstrate, and justify themselves was common amongst participants. This acknowledgement extended beyond the interviewees who identified as women, as a man involved in the infrastructure, participant thirty, commented that, "while this has improved, ultimately meaningful change is still necessary. Women continue to need to show it, prove it, in ways that umm, guys just don't get asked to. It is how it is and it's not really fair." This pretext can impact a woman's ability to succeed in the industry, as participant twenty-nine, a woman working within the infrastructure said:

I couldn't believe how impossible it was for me to be taken seriously without bending over backwards and jumping through a million different hoops to prove that I knew what I was talking about... You can talk about being a woman and the harassment you get, all those different things, and all of that is important but for me it was always the respect and being taken seriously. Because I wasn't just here to get easy Twitch donations, and I wasn't just here for the VIP parties and the backstage access. I am here because it is what I love... and proving that to people was, is, and continues to be a challenge.

These difficulties ultimately can result in feelings of exhaustion, discontent, and more generally may make women less willing to participate in the industry.



The interviews also revealed that benevolent sexism may be contributing to the challenges faced by women in professional gaming. Benevolent sexism are “attitudes towards women that are sexist in terms of viewing women stereotypically and in restricted roles, although subjectively positive in feeling tone” (Beuker, 2016, pp. 1-2). However well-intentioned they may be, the reaffirmation of traditional gender norms and expectations weighed on the women participants (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). The notion that women aren’t worthy extended beyond simply you don’t belong to if you belong you should occupy particular roles. Participant sixteen, a woman owner of a gaming company addressed her experiences with this form of sexism:

I would *go to an event* and I would be *wearing a t-shirt from my organization*, I would...like I would hand out *free goodies*, they would be like ‘where did you get this *item?*’ I was like we have them. They were like ‘No, but like are you modeling for them? How do you work for XXXX?’ This assumption that I work for XXXX not that I built or run or own the company.<sup>58</sup>

This focus on the role of men in the professional gaming industry, and focus on women as objects or models can have a debilitating impact; both on those already working in gaming as well as those who aspire to gain employment in this industry. This inequity and sexism is not unlike the experiences of women in other cultural industries (Acker, 1990; Bielby & Bielby, 1996). The work of Acker (1990) on the gendering and hierarchy within organizations is reflected more broadly throughout the entire gaming industry (Heron, Belford, & Goker, 2014).

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<sup>58</sup> The italics in this quote are to protect anonymity by removing the types of giveaway as well as the event that this individual attended. The organization of the individual is redacted.

Participants in different occupations relayed different experiences with discrimination and sexism. Those involved in infrastructure and supporting roles within the gaming industry experience these challenges differently than those involved in positions that have them interacting with the general public and fans. These difficulties are also different for those working in management or ownership. Those who are interacting with the public more often, or in entry level positions in the industry, spoke more of outward sexism and discrimination. The close interaction with spectators and fans lends itself to instances of sexism and prejudice outside of the scope of organizational structure and regulation that others in the industry work under.

Those working in organizations or within a regulatory framework acknowledged that outward instances of sexism were less common; however, they also spoke to the prevalence of benevolent sexism within the professional gaming industry. There was a clear divide in terms of opinion regarding sexism in the industry between those involved in formal organization (3) and those with informal or contract employment (3).

Benevolent and discreet sexism was discussed more amongst those employed in formal organizations. This can be at least in part attributed to organizational pressure to address these issues. On the contrary, those individuals with informal employment arrangements such as production, graphic design, and content creation, interacted with spectators to a greater degree. This close interaction with fans and spectators provides ample opportunities to experience sexism and bigotry. Participant thirty-four, a man who is a streamer, corroborated this distinction by commenting that, "I have seen people not respected by, more so from a fan level than a business level, people not respected and not appreciated because they are women. They are definitely the minority in this space." The

experiences of women in this study, in particular those working in the infrastructure, are not dissimilar from women working in sports broadly. Speaking specifically about women sports journalists, Hardin and Shain (2005) described “discrimination and token status” amongst women working in sports journalism (p. 32). A parallel may exist between sports journalism as an infrastructure job within the sports industry, and women working in the infrastructure of professional gaming (Everbach, 2018).

In addition to the sexism experienced by women in professional gaming, more direct, hostile, and vulgar forms of discrimination were also described. A number of the women reported their gender was treated with hostility. This sentiment was echoed by many of the participants, including men; women were treated with a degree of disdain. Examples of this type of behavior include hateful messages, attitudes, and generally disdainful behaviours. A woman, participant sixteen, who owns a gaming company, explained “there is more aggression towards women, in a threatening sense than there was ten years ago. There seems to be more of a perceived rivalry between men and women, I think some of that is because of what is happening across greater society and we are seeing some of that play out, more so than this being due to the esports industry as a whole.” This treatment of women was also evident in plain sight on livestreams and chats, where fans, spectators, and consumers of the professional gaming industry engaged in sexist and discriminatory behaviour. Much the same as the other examples of sexist behaviour, these instances of aggression and hostility are most often carried out by spectators and consumers. A man and streamer, participant thirty-four, when asked whether the treatment of women has improved at all over the last few years commented: “I would say no for fans and spectators, yes for business organizers, tournament organizers, those kind

of things. As far as fans and spectators, they still objectify women, talk natively [sic] about women, don't respect women. They still do that today, not to any significantly less degree than before." The manifestation of this hostility and anger can also result in the questioning of women's competency and place in the gaming industry. Stephanie Harvey, in the same BBC interview quoted earlier comments on this: "The way I get harassed is about what they would do to my body, about why I don't deserve to be there because I use my sexuality-- it's all extremely graphic" (BBC, 2016).

This theme also emerged through conversations with the participants about the use of slurs within the industry. Homophobic comments in particular were highlighted as an ongoing social problem. Much the same as what has happened with the treatment of women and sexism within professional gaming, the use of homophobic and anti-LGTBQ slurs has changed over-time. Speaking about how the treatment of sexual orientation has shifted as the industry has matured with participant thirty, a man involved in the infrastructure of gaming commented: "There are issues surrounding gender and sexual orientation. There is a lot of homophobia. There is a lot of sexism. So, if you were someone who was not a straight white dude there was a good chance someone was throwing a slur of some type that related to you, and umm, immediately made it a less comfortable place to be on a regular basis." The struggle experienced by racial and sexual minorities in the professional gaming industry can be in part attributed to the lack of integration of these individuals into the mainstream of the industry (DiSalvo et al., 2011; Peterson, 2018). Improving the number of individuals from these groups participating in the industry in a meaningful way can contribute to progress. A woman participant, twenty-nine, specifically highlighted the manifestation of this idea for women when she

commented that: “As more women fight their way into the industry, more people just get used to seeing women there. More conversations get to be had about why certain comments are unacceptable, more context is provided.”

In an emerging industry like professional gaming, the existence of discrimination of workers is not unprecedented. One individual, participant twenty-one, a man who holds a graduate degree, commented that, “it’s not unlike the growing pains that, you compare to Silicon Valley and you compare to the tech industries, and you then compare to the gaming industry as a whole. It is going through these culture shocks.” Much the same as the technology industry and Silicon Valley experienced, and continues to experiences, challenges with gender inequality as an emerging industry, professional gaming is experiencing similar challenges (Alfrey & Twine, 2017). While the origins of the technology industry involved extensive participation by women, more recently, within the tech industry and specifically Silicon Valley, systematic “underrepresentation of women in positions of power [has been] a woman’s primary barrier to success” (Alfrey & Twine, 2017, p. 31). In a similar manner to the technology industry, the culture within the hyper-masculine men dominated culture of professional gaming is simultaneously keeping women out while pushing away those women that have been able to gain a foothold (Hanton, 2015).

### 7.2.1 Navigating these Challenges

The approaches of the participants who identified as women in navigating these challenges within professional gaming industry differed. Two main approaches emerged for women when dealing with the discrimination and inequality they experienced in professional gaming. The first involved the downplaying or non-disclosure of gender as a

means of avoiding difficulties. The second involved being patient and open to women's increased involvement with the belief that more women involved in gaming would ultimately improve the situation. This approach included both passive and active efforts, with some participants taking specific actions to increase the number and visibility of women within the industry, while the more passive approach relied on time and waiting for a greater representation of women and the subsequent visibility of women in the industry to change the discourse and experiences of women.

The first strategy was practiced by individuals without a frontline or 'visible' role in the industry. That is, for those persons who *were able* to hide their gender. Two of the six women participants specifically discussed non-disclosure of their gender, with a third suggesting that she specifically tried to not discuss gender whenever possible. Of the remaining three participants, two occupied positions where non-disclosure of identity was not possible, mainly being involved in on-camera roles, in-person events, and competitions. One of the two women also competed as a player at events, therefore non-disclosure of gender was not an option.

One individual, participant sixteen, a women owner of a gaming organization lamented how she was reluctant to disclose her gender for fear that others would question her legitimacy and worthiness: "I didn't intentionally hide my gender but I definitely didn't want to reveal it. For the first two or three years I played it very low key, didn't want to talk about my gender. And there was this fear, if I was a more visible woman that would lead to my work being all about my gender, which is what I didn't want." This results in women being forced to make a decision as functioning "at the top of male hierarchies requires that women render irrelevant everything that makes them women" (Acker, 1990,

p. 153). The non-disclosure of identity occurred by both the women participants as well as those whose sexual orientation was either bi-sexual or homosexual. One man working in infrastructure discussed non-disclosure of sexual orientation in much the same way that the women involved in the research spoke of not wanting to address their gender. This research subject in particular went through considerable effort to not have their sexual orientation disclosed throughout their work in this industry.<sup>59</sup>

The navigating and managing of identities is common amongst gamers who are not heterosexual men (Kaye et al., 2018; A. Shaw, 2012; Vermeulen et al., 2017). A 2015 report by the PEW Research Center found women were significantly less likely to self-identify as gamers. While 50% of men and 48% of women surveyed played video games, only 6% of women identified as gamers, compared to 15% of the men (Duggan, 2015). This difference is more pronounced when considering younger gamers, as “men ages 18 to 29 are more than three times as likely as their women counterparts to identify as gamers (33% vs. 9%)” (Duggan, 2015). While prior research has suggested that women are hesitant to identify as a gamer because “of the stigma and discrimination they face because of their gender” (Kaye et al., 2018, p. 19). Three of the six women interviewed for this study were less reluctant to identify as a gamer, than as a woman. This may be explained by the fact that all three of the women worked in supporting or infrastructure roles that ostensibly a priori identify them as gamers. This is important because while prior research has focused on gamers and live streamers, these women were not

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<sup>59</sup> Participant number is not given for this quote because the individual commented that their sexual orientation is not public information. This individual also asked that quotes from this portion of our discussion not be used. Other quotes for this participant are used in the dissertation.

necessarily public figures and were therefore able to manage their self-identification differently. Women who were livestreaming and working in visible roles within the gaming industry were seen and observable; they have a public persona.

A woman participant commented on her role as an on-screen personality and the impact of viewers' and spectators' harassment and judgment: "The fact that I was a streamer, that comes with the attention-whore tag. The fact that I was a cosplayer, which really comes with an attention whore-tag. It was these strikes against me for being a bubble-headed idiot who just wanted to be famous, because that's what people perceive."<sup>60</sup> Their ability to manage and make decisions around their gender and identity is more difficult for these individuals than for those persons who are not public figures and whose occupations are primarily supporting roles. While the initial reaction may be to hide their gender, this strategy may ultimately make women involved in professional gaming invisible, and by extension solidify the notion that this is an environment dominated by and for men (Olsson, 2018; Paaßen, Morgenroth, & Stratemeyer, 2017). Participant sixteen, a woman owner of an organization, spoke of her own evolution on this issue and the frustration of feeling invisible and ignored:

It wasn't until maybe three years ago where I was more established and there were more women around that I felt more comfortable being open about my gender or talking about gender issues. For the longest time I didn't even have a Twitter avatar that had a picture. I was very low-key. I liked it that way. I got more confident, I got more established. I also got tired of like, people not believing who I was... It just got annoying over-time.

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<sup>60</sup> Participant number is redacted to help protect anonymity.



The accounts from the women participants, and in particular their approach to navigating their gender in this industry, represent a form of passing. Passing according to Goffman (2008) represents “the management of undisclosed discrediting information about self.” In the descriptions of their experiences with gender in this industry, the participants actively and consciously practiced Goffman’s passing (Goffman, 2008; Kalei Kanuha, 1999). They openly recognized that their revealing of gender represented *discrediting information* for others in the industry. They also evolved on this issue. As they felt that revealing their gender was becoming less discrediting, they made the decision to present their true selves.

The second strategy discussed by participants was the increase in the number and visibility of women over time in the industry. There were generally two avenues through which participants approached this issue: passive and active approaches to the involvement and treatment of women in the industry. The narrative for both approaches is that as the number of women in the industry increases, the treatment of women improves. The passage of time, and the growth in the exposure of women within professional gaming would ultimately improve the experiences for women employed in this space.

Participants recognized this development in the treatment of women, arguing that women’s experiences had improved over time with more women participating.

Participant sixteen, a woman, commented that the behavior towards and objectification of women has gotten considerably better: “It improved so much, like *when I was going to my first esports events*, there were so few women, that every woman was such a novelty. And now, there is so many women that work in esports and it is not their gender, it’s becoming more about their work.” This may be especially true over the last few years as

the number of individuals who do not have gaming or esports backgrounds in the industry has increased tremendously. Participant thirty-four, a man who is currently a streamer, addressed the prevalence of women in professional gaming:

We went from, when I was first getting into this there were no women. Like there may have been women fans, but there were no women on the stage, there were no women analysts, there were no women competitors, there were no women on the camera, like obviously there was probably some percentile of women who were fans, but there were no women you could see. That's obviously significantly changed over the past decade.

While backgrounds in the tech industry or other gendered spaces may not be especially enlightening, there exists value in individuals with outside experience and perspectives entering this space.

Beyond a passive approach to improving the conditions for women in the professional gaming industry, some participants described taking an active approach to addressing this issue. While these individuals acknowledged that greater exposure and integration of women in professional gaming would have a positive impact, they took an active path to ensure that more women participated in, and as a result, had more positive experiences in the professional gaming industry. Two participants, one man and one woman, spoke about the organization, AnyKey. AnyKey is an advocacy group focused on improving and fostering more diversity in esports and professional gaming whose mission statement reads:

To help create fair and inclusive spaces in esports for marginalized members of the gaming community. We pledge to: Provide competitive gamers with resources, support, and opportunities. Highlight positive role-models. Create knowledge and tools to help create more diverse communities and supportive networks. (AnyKey, 2019)

This organization showcases individuals, communities, and esports players and teams that are ‘affiliates’. AnyKey welcomes those “who would like to help represent the cause of healthy, happy, and inclusive spaces in esports... [To facilitate this] we recently launched an affiliates program to help support and amplify positive leaders in the competitive gaming community” (AnyKey, 2019).

In addition to AnyKey, another participant spoke about their involvement in an inclusive gaming organization, similar to AnyKey, that assisted members of the LGBTQ gaming community.<sup>61</sup> This organization assisted those individuals who identify as LGBTQ to participate in the industry and navigate the challenges, difficulties, and harassment that they face on a regular basis. Another research subject spoke of her role in creating an esports organization which aimed to improve the exposure of women in professional gaming. Participant nineteen, a woman working in the infrastructure of gaming, commented on her role in starting this organization:

I realized something when I was watching XXXX, literally there wasn’t one girl on the stage competing. To me that was kind of like a shocker, because there is so many women out there that play the games just as equally as the guys do. I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t believe it was so male dominated... When I got home, I sat down and thought ‘what can I do to change that part of the esports world?’<sup>62</sup>

Ultimately, she described her intention to create an organization to address this inequity: “The goal was to create a place that women wanted to better themselves in the competitive world, not just play the games but be great at what they do. Be able to go

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<sup>61</sup> Participant information is fully redacted to protect identity.

<sup>62</sup> Name of the esports title referred to by this individual.

compete. It wasn't about shutting out guys or anything, we allowed guys to play.... Just trying to propel women into competitive gaming.”

Companies such as AnyKey and this individual's organization can assist in highlighting individuals, communities, and organizations that are effectively promoting diversity and equality. This will allow for the focus to remain on examples of positivity within the professional gaming industry rather than instances of sexism, racism, and other forms of inequality. The importance of these grassroots organizations in drawing attention to issues around sexism and representation of women have also been identified in an analogous industry, video game development. There, the “challenges faced by women in the game industry are receiving growing attention as women game developers speak out at industry events, through the attention of the women developers' associations and grassroots movements” (Weststar & Legault, 2018, p. 118). The role of these organizations and the participation of members of the community in them are essential elements of improving the experiences of women in this industry.

Nevertheless, despite this progress, there remain public instances of prejudiced and discriminatory comments and behavior across all areas of the industry (Good, 2018; Marshall, 2019; Overwatch League, 2018). Both passive and active approaches to increasing the number of women in professional gaming are similar to the literature on racialized role models and the push within education to introduce minority teachers and support staff (Hopson, 2013; Ryan, Pollock, & Antonelli, 2009). Minority teachers and educators are often *filtered* and this filtering “systematically prevents certain elements from passing” (Ryan et al., 2009, p. 607). Thus, introducing more minorities into the system will result in either a less biased and more representative filtering, or an

elimination of the filtering process altogether. Within professional gaming the filtering that occurs happens in all areas of the industry. The experiences of the participants in this study, and in particular the women, suggest that similar principles that seek to improve the experiences of minorities in the education system may be effective in encouraging more women to pursue and ultimately be hired to work in professional gaming.

While equality and opportunity for women within the professional gaming industry continues to be a challenge, progress has been made. The decline in public and direct sexism, particularly within esports, was nearly unanimously discussed by the participants, including women. That is to say, incidences whereby individuals made sexist comments, remarks, gestures, or were otherwise inappropriate towards women have decreased considerably over the last number of years. Participant nineteen, a woman former player and streamer commented, “When I had started to try streaming, I had a lot of people coming into my chat and basically insult my looks a lot. But when I started streaming two years later for real, that stopped. I had huge support. I was really shocked that now I had a lot of women watching my stream”.<sup>63</sup> This acknowledgment of the progress made within the industry was often followed by a qualification that while the experiences of women involved in professional gaming has improved, the challenges faced by women have become more hidden.

Speaking to the treatment and discrimination of women and minorities in the industry, a man, participant thirty, commented: “it’s not displayed in the same way but the

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<sup>63</sup> This participant started streaming five years ago then took a break, at least partly due to the comments and sexism on her stream. She started streaming again part-time two years ago after an extended period of time off.

underlying current is still there.” His suggestion echo’s the sentiment of other individuals who felt as though there had been improvement, nevertheless some of that improvement may be misleading. Participant nineteen, a woman former player who is now involved in the infrastructure, addressed this by commenting:

it used to be much more public, it’s gotten better for sure but umm, part of that better isn’t actually better it’s just not as visible. Don’t get me wrong, women are much better off now than when I got started but I still hear the comments, they just, like they will happen in private chats or whatever, since saying it in public gets more scrutiny and backlash.

This statement highlights the general sentiment that emerged throughout the interviews. Throughout the discussions with the participants, it became evident that there was agreement that discrimination on the basis of gender and sexual orientation remains an issue in the professional gaming industry. A consistent perspective emerged whereby the treatment of various minorities in professional gaming has evolved over time:

1. The harassment and sexism directed towards women has historically been discriminatory and exclusionary in the professional gaming industry.
2. This has generally improved over time, although in some instances and contexts considerably more than others.
3. There remains significant work to be done, particularly now that some of the issues are less public and visible.

While there were varying degrees of opinions on each of these stages it was clear that compared to even two or three years ago, the experiences of different minority groups within the professional gaming industry has improved. While progress has been made on the experiences of women and other minority groups within the professional gaming industry, the treatment of these groups remains problematic, and improvement in how members of these groups are integrated into and dealt with within the industry must continue.

### 7.3 Economic Inequality

In the literature on professional gaming and esports there is a noticeable dearth of research on the significance of financial security and socioeconomic status (Railsback & Caporusso, 2018). While there is evidence to support the role of socioeconomic status as it relates to the participation of individuals in professional gaming, this is a topic which has yet to be fully explored (Parshakov & Zavertiaeva, 2015; Shi et al., 2018). Recent discussions, including those in chapter four, tend to address employment and labour issues within this industry. This chapter will instead focus on economic inequality and how socioeconomic status and social position impact an individual's involvement in this industry. This is distinct from the conversation of worker exploitation and employment practices that was considered in chapter four.

The economic and financial inequality that exists within professional gaming impacts those in the industry in a number of different ways. The first and most consistent theme that emerged was the reliance on family, including parents or partners, as a means of successfully transitioning to and succeeding in the professional gaming industry. It was evident from conversations with the participants that their socioeconomic background and families occupied an important role in their ability to pursue work in professional gaming. Gaming brings many economic challenges and potential hardships for participants. This includes the ability of individuals to afford computer equipment, internet service, and mobility. Twenty-eight of the thirty-four participants referred to the impact that socioeconomic status can have on an individual's experiences in professional gaming. Their perspectives were expressed primarily through three different lenses: their own experiences, that of their friends and contacts, as well as their opinions on the role of

socioeconomic status in the professional gaming industry more generally. The importance of family background and socioeconomic status for a person's ability to pursue a career in professional gaming is clear. This expands to include not only a pursuit of a career in the industry, but also the ability to maintain success in professional gaming. There were however a number of participants who came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds that acknowledged that while a higher socioeconomic status absolutely makes the path clearer, the transition easier, and success more likely, it was not a necessary condition.

Persons coming from higher socioeconomic upbringings and families have a much clearer path to success in this industry. This sentiment was expressed across the industry, from players to coaches, management, and infrastructure. For some, this reliance extended beyond their immediate family to include extended family and individuals within their social network. Participant four, a man, current player, and streamer, attributed some of their success to their ability to leverage their high socioeconomic background from both close family and friends during their initial transition into the professional gaming industry. They commented that: "Throughout *the start of my involvement in professional gaming* I was making almost no money. I had to borrow money. At one time I was borrowing money from like three different people. My *family member*, my mother, and a close friend." This circumstance was not dissimilar to the experiences of many other participants who cited loans, free accommodations, and assistance with paying bills and rent from family members and friends as key reasons for their ability to pursue this area of work. The wording used by the individuals interviewed differed greatly when referencing the role of their families in supporting them. For some,



the assistance was seen as a loan which required repayment. This same participant, participant four, who was receiving a loan simultaneously from three individuals even referenced the arrangement he had in place for this support: “My investors weren’t like formal investors, but I did give them like 5% on their loans. I was like ‘hey can you float me three grand for a few months. I mean part of it is knowing enough people, and yeah, you have people that are able to float you.’” For others, they viewed the assistance from their support system as a form of sponsorship and support that allowed them to pursue working in the industry. Participant thirty-four, a streamer who is a man, commented that: “My mom gave me like basically a free subsidized year; she was supporting me.” There were clear markers in terms of how they viewed the support. Nevertheless, the ultimate effect remained similar. Those that were able to leverage these resources, regardless of how they framed them, seemed much better positioned to succeed.

While the majority of the participants are from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, there were individuals whose families were not financially well-off. Speaking to the challenges that persons from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face in the professional gaming industry, participant thirteen, a man working in the infrastructure, said that being from a low-income background is “a huge problem, we are talking about inequalities in the industry. And I feel like, that’s just something that we don’t bring up. You know? Like I think that’s a thing which needs to be talked about more. It’s truly in our current cultural context, an invisible privilege.” Participant thirty-one, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry, commented on this:

It is a good point to make that the majority of *those involved in gaming* are very privileged people. If you have the money for a good computer to play XXXX on, you have the time to do so as well and you aren’t working throughout your teenaged years. You then get to play more

games and then you have a very privileged point of view, umm which obviously means that you have the financial backing to make it as a *player or a supporting role in the industry*.

The lack of necessity to work throughout teenage years, university, and ultimately through trying to ‘make it’ in the professional gaming industry was specifically discussed by a number of the participants.

Participant eighteen, who works in an infrastructure job addressed the role of socioeconomic status and acknowledged that while it plays an important role, it isn’t necessarily deterministic:

There are exceptions. There was a great VICE documentary about two League of Legends players that kind of went *into the backgrounds* and you know, the childhoods they had and the difficulties they had to overcome to become pro players. The majority of players come from very different backgrounds. They are more advantaged, privileged, whatever word you want to use, so that they could play the video game for as many hours as you need to play it to get that good at it. You know, you can’t work a forty-hour work week and play the ten to twelve hours a day every day that some of the best players in the world are doing.

The participants stressed the benefit and advantage a person trying to transition into professional gaming has when not having to worry about financial or work obligations beyond the industry.

The likelihood of success in professional gaming is also influenced by financial resources. Participant thirteen, a man working in the infrastructure, commented:

In terms of financial accessibility it is a very, ummm, I would say that the gaming industry is very inaccessible to low income people. If you are coming from that low income area you need to do something to kind of make money and a lot of the other people like if you’re competing against the gentry class heavily, you’re competing against people who you know, go to university and college, get a diploma or a degree and then you might even have like financial support for doing these things...it’s very upper economic strata.

This sentiment was echoed by participant thirty-one, a man working in the infrastructure of professional gaming:

It's definitely a factor, there are anomalies, but it's definitely a factor that the vast majority of people who are doing this, and the vast majority of people in this industry do come from privileged backgrounds.... It is very difficult if you aren't from a privileged background to come *into the industry* and have a successful start, unless you've got some kind of flexible job like I had which can work around it, which is very rare.

In order to 'make it' in the professional gaming industry individuals must be satisfied with little or no initial pay. This can have an impact on those persons who may not be able to make ends meet, while not earning much income. Certain roles within the professional gaming industry are then placed behind a barrier, that requires individuals to be able to earn little to no money at the beginning of their time in the industry in order to succeed. This connection was specifically pointed out by participant eighteen, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry. He commented that coming from a higher socioeconomic background and having the financial support of your family does provide significant advantage:

You can work from home rather than having to afford an apartment right away. Which means all that time that you know, I had to spend at the grocery store to make sure that I was paying my rent, well they could have just kept *working within the industry* and making connections. While they are trying to make that a full-time gig and if it doesn't work out right away, you still have cushion that's a huge advantage that some people can take on that others can't, so yes family support matters there.

The role of socioeconomic status is not limited to the ability to allocate time to 'succeed' in the professional gaming industry. Having access to computer equipment and a quality internet connection is a key component in this equation. While access to computers and internet connectivity are becoming more common, inequity in access to the technology

remains (Carlson & Gross, 2016; Chen, 2013; Friemel, 2016; Haight et al., 2014). The difficulties experienced by the participants surrounding access to technology and internet service represents an economic opportunity divide (Mossberger, Tolbert, & Stansbury, 2003). Individuals' participation and ability to succeed in a digital economy is highly dependent on computer skills and access to equipment and services that facilitate the application of these skills (Haight et al., 2014; Mossberger et al., 2003; Ono & Zavodny, 2007).

Participant fourteen, a man employed in the gaming infrastructure commented on access to technology in this industry: "One-hundred percent, One-hundred percent. I see this all the time unfortunately. Like, you do need to be able to afford a laptop and maintain it and probably replace it if something gets broken. That is a heck of a lot easier to do if you have a support system who can help you. Having parents that are supportive of this journey." Participant eighteen, a man, focused on those involved in the infrastructure of the industry, and the importance of technology and equipment for their success:

The more you have to work in order to keep a roof over your head, to keep yourself fed, to keep yourself healthy, to keep all the tech and everything you need running.... I wouldn't feel comfortable breaking into this industry without at least a laptop that you felt would be able to last and help get done what you need to get done....I think, there is something to be said about the kind of person that could afford to be in esports.

The role of socioeconomic status on an individual's ability to both pursue and succeed in professional gaming is considerable. From the flexibility to accept little or no compensation to the capability of purchasing internet and computer equipment, those persons from higher-income families are better positioned to succeed in this industry. These findings are not deterministic, however; just as, kids from lower-socioeconomic

backgrounds can get into expensive private colleges in the United States, there are exceptions (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Harper & Griffin, 2010). Participant eighteen, a man working in the infrastructure addressed the role of socioeconomic status: “The financial stability and the privilege that comes with it is a huge factor. It’s just a matter of how you as an individual kind of, you know, work around the things that you don’t have access to. You know, being smart enough to take on the things that you can, it’s rough.” Those from both higher and lower socioeconomic backgrounds, with varying degree of support from their families acknowledged the significant advantage afforded to those coming from and with, the assistance of higher socioeconomic families.

## 7.4 Geographic Challenges

The growth of professional gaming has allowed for the participation of individuals from countries around the world (Macey & Hamari, 2018; Skubida, 2016). There exists however both traditional geographic inequalities as well as new difficulties that have emerged with this industry. Legacy challenges, including discrimination on the basis of country of origin, continue to impact even digital industries, while location, both in the world as well as within countries, is also an important factor in an individual’s ability to meaningfully participate in professional gaming.

Digital technologies have resulted in widespread changes within society and shifts in participation in the economy (Freddi, 2018; Schoukens & Barrio, 2017; Valenduc & Vendramin, 2016). There remains, however, coupled with this ability to participate digitally, an inequality as it relates to the capacity of people involved in the professional gaming industry to reach the pinnacle of it. Those trying to reach the upper echelons of this industry continue to experience considerable hardships, and geographic location is an

especially prominent concern. Through conversations with participants it became fairly clear that they see geography as playing an important role in the ability of some individuals to reach higher tiers of the industry. Visa issues, flight and other logistical costs associated with geographic location, as well as discrimination based on origin country are all factors relevant to the geographic challenges of this industry.

#### 7.4.1 Visas

One of the challenges for those living in countries that do not have Local Area Network (LAN) events regularly is obtaining a visa to enter countries that are hosting these events. For esports in particular, many of the opportunities to earn substantial money is at these in-person live events. As such, being unable to attend, impacts the viability of working in this industry as a career option. Difficulties surrounding visas and immigration for the purposes of working in professional gaming have become increasingly common and problematic (Brannon, 2018; Whan Tong, 2017). There are many well-documented examples of visa challenges, with participant fourteen, a man employed in the professional gaming infrastructure, commenting that when working events in esports:

It's very much an open secret, when people go work esports events they are usually working illegally. Like they are going to customs in the United States (US) or the United Kingdom (UK) or EU (European Union) or whatever and you are telling a half-truth that you are going to a gaming event and if they push you, you have to tell them you are going for fun, you are going to spectate. When the reality is you are going there to work.

This became an issue in Dota 2 recently, when former Dota 2 professional player and current streamer from Sweden, AdmiralBulldog, was invited to participate as an on-camera analyst for the International Dota 2 events held in Seattle, Washington in August of 2017 and 2018. In both instances, visa issues prevented him from attending the event

(Esanu, 2018; Masters, 2018). Difficulties such as these will certainly become less common as professional gaming gains prominence and legitimacy.

In the United States, the landscape has been changing for professional gaming and as of March 2019, “Professional athletes who are ‘internationally recognized’ are eligible for the P-1 visa and esports (video games) at the professional level have become such major athletic events that esports players have been granted these visas more and more often” (Nguyen, Peck, & Clifton, 2019).<sup>64</sup> While the issuance of visas to individuals involved in esports has increased greatly, there remains work to do to ensure that individuals such as AdmiralBulldog and participant fourteen described previously, are able to obtain visas for work in countries. While they may not be eligible for P-1 visas, which are reserved for athletes in many countries, a shift towards the recognition of their role within professional gaming is essential for creating and fostering an inclusive and equitable industry.

In addition to legitimate difficulties with obtaining visas, particular countries have also become notorious for denying visas for individuals coming from specific countries. Malaysia and the Philippines are two examples of this problem. One such case of an individual being denied a visa based on country of origin concerned Dota 2 player Neta “33” Shapira. Several participants spoke about the experiences of Neta as a challenge for individuals emerging from countries that typically face discrimination and undue

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<sup>64</sup> This designation in the United States visa system is for individuals who are “coming temporarily to the United States solely for the purpose of performing at a specific athletic competition” (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2019).

scrutiny. In November 2018, PGL<sup>65</sup> hosted the first Major of the Dota Pro Circuit in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Shortly before the event, information became public regarding the status of support player “33” and his ability to obtain a visa and enter Malaysia. According to a Twitter statement by team captain Peter Dager: “Upon news of the first major being in Malaysia we were very concerned about Neta’s ability to obtain a visa. I don’t know all the details but from what I’ve been told Malaysia doesn’t think very highly of Israel” (Dagar, 2018). Due to the relationship between Malaysia and Israel, and in spite of the best efforts of the tournament organizer, the team, and Valve Software, Neta was ultimately denied a visa to enter Malaysia and was unable to participate in the tournament.

This targeting of specific players based on nationality and their passport is not reflective of isolated incidents. In the fall of 2018, brothers Syed and Yawar Hassan were denied visas to enter Germany. Despite being permanent residents of the United States, they continue to hold Pakistani passports. As a result of their holding of Pakistani passports they were unable to secure visas to attend the ESL One Hamburg event (Reyes, 2018). Syed was previously denied entry to China for similar visa issues in 2016 (Aram, 2016). Instances such as these, where individuals are denied visas for issues not related to their work or involvement in professional gaming, represent existing challenges and difficulties in the world that are mimicked in this industry.

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<sup>65</sup> PGL is a large esports tournament organizer based in Romania. They organize and hold tournaments within various games, including Dota 2.



## 7.4.2 Travel and physical distance

While this emerging industry primarily exists in the digital sphere, there remains considerable emphasis, especially within the esports segment of the industry, on in-person LAN events. Beyond the difficulties and challenges associated with visas and country of origin, the financial strain placed on tournament organizers and organizations to move people around the world also impacts an individual's ability to work in this industry. The importance of physical space is attributable to the fact that while streaming is ostensibly location neutral, the majority of esports competitions and events take place in person on LAN. As of May 2019, nine of the top ten highest prize pools awarded in esports were LAN competitions (Nordmark & Heath, 2019). While the online streaming area of professional gaming is generally agnostic with respect to geographic location, a person's involvement in esports can be impacted quite significantly by physical location. While this is not a challenge that is unique to this industry, there remains the idea that professional gaming allows for anyone, from anywhere, to participate. While this may be a generally accurate categorization, it fails to recognize the considerable difficulties that continue to inhibit full participation and work in this industry. The challenge arises for individuals that live physically distant to these competitions, since the costs relating to their involvement in these events can rise considerably. These costs include flying individuals to events, securing visas for individuals outside of the European Union (EU) for EU competitions, and securing better internet connections for those remotely working events.

Participant twenty-five, a man working in the infrastructure of the industry commented on this specifically: "Tournament organizers don't have unlimited budgets; they don't

have bottomless wallets. So, if you can hire someone of similar quality and you only have to pay them half the price to fly them there and you pay them the same wage while they are there, why wouldn't you do it?" He continued by mentioning that he had specifically been denied working events in the EU because: "They were wanting to hire people that were *based in that location* as opposed to, you know, people that would have to travel for it." This was followed by an acknowledgement that his physical location was impacting his ability to transition into the industry full-time: "I have been told many times, 'oh it is going to be so much easier for you, you'll get hired for all sorts of gigs' if I moved overseas." This sentiment was elaborated upon by participant thirty-one, a man working in the infrastructure of gaming:

I know, *a caster*, when he started out it was definitely a struggle for him to get events, it is still a struggle for him to get events, but I know his struggle is because a lot of events are taking place in Europe and he couldn't, no one is going to consider a new caster from *outside of Europe* to bring, that extra flight costs to bring to Europe in order to cast a tournament, you know? It's just not logical.

The additional costs for organizers and companies that are already operating on thin-margins makes situations such as these common. ESL, one of the largest tournament organizers of esports competitions was, as of 2017, still not profitable (Brautigam, 2017). For these companies, every dollar is important and for those with flight and accommodation costs, even \$1,000 or \$2,000 difference can have an impact on bottom lines.

This physical distance extends to online work, with research subject thirty-one mentioning "I know three people just thinking off the top of my head, who cannot cast in

other regions because they either live with their parents or they live in buildings where there are *roommates*. You can't cast other regions."<sup>66</sup> Individuals being unable to play in, spectate, or cast particular regions of the world due to ping is a considerable issue. This was touched on by participant thirty-four, a streamer who is a man, when he explained that "In XXXX there are XXXX teams are super weak and are not able to geographically compete with other teams just because of internet latency and things like that and also the socioeconomic status in those countries."<sup>67</sup> He described the challenges facing individuals competing against North American or European players who are located in South America. In addition to socioeconomic factors, issues such as ping are common. Participant thirty-four continued:

You have issues with the ping, like how can you say they can compete and actually try and win when they constantly are, you know, like playing with two or three times the delay. It just doesn't make sense. Sure, there has been progress but most of it is just using a band-aid instead of actually fixing any issues or dealing with the ping disadvantage that people from South America experience.

Not only do individuals working in the gaming industry in these regions have generally lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Our World in Data, 2018), but they also struggle with issues related to ping and latency that impact their ability to fully participate in this emerging industry.

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<sup>66</sup> The issue is that depending on the region you are in, internet connection even for spectating games is important. Generally, servers are split up depending on continents or sub-continents. Ping is the "network connection strength" (Al Dafai, 2016, p. 9), the time it takes "for your computer to respond to a request by another computer" (Painter, 2019). As the location of the servers that individuals are playing on moves further apart, ping rises. Once you get above a certain ping, playing and/or spectating the games becomes challenging and at times not possible because of the significant delay.

<sup>67</sup> The particular game this individual plays/is referring to, as well as the specific region of the world this person is describing are redacted to help protect anonymity.

The implications both for individuals not hired for events due to financial constraints as well as individuals being region-bound in their ability to work online events can be considerable. Persons experiencing this hardship are faced with decisions to either move physical location, or be ostensibly capped financially and career wise. This is not unlike the issues faced by individuals working *offline*; however, these difficulties take place in an industry whose foundation is online. One individual, participant twenty-five expanded on his previous statements about being told by friends and individuals in the industry that he would be more successful if he moved overseas: “I am mindful of what if it doesn’t happen in XXXX<sup>68</sup>, what if it doesn’t happen here? I love XXXX, I love home. I would be really hesitant to move overseas to do this sort of thing.” This necessity to move in order to reach one’s potential in an industry that is viewed primarily as digital is a consideration that requires further research and investigation.

The location within a country an individual resides may also be a factor in their ability to work in this industry. The convergence of income and geography introduces challenges whereby individuals located in higher cost of living locations, such as major cities in the United States and Europe, experience difficulties in remaining competitive for jobs.

Participant four, a player and streamer who identifies as a man, commented that their success in professional gaming can be at least partially attributed to the fact that although they were “making very minimal amounts to live off of. I moved to a cheap place in the country and *worked* from a little room, and I was living off like 12k or whatever”. In order for him to fully pursue professional gaming, this individual moved to a remote area

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<sup>68</sup> Both redactions in this quotation are to not-disclose the country this participant is from. Both are simply the name of his country.

with cheaper costs of living and weaker, albeit usable, internet. Participant eleven, a man and former player further addressed the challenges of ping and location:

Here especially, I live in XXXX<sup>69</sup>, so it's not like my ping is great. All my tournaments are US East. I ping anywhere from 80 to 120, it fluctuates pretty hard. So it's never consistent, it kind of goes all over the place. So trying to play against more seasoned players playing on next to no ping. It can be hard, but at the same time it's not insurmountable. It's okay, I would rather play in XXXX."<sup>70</sup> For this participant, who is no longer a competitive esports player, the inability to compete with similar ping and latency to other individuals living in more favourable locations certainly had an impact on his ability to succeed in the industry.

These geographic challenges are more relevant for those individuals involved in the esports segment of the gaming industry. This is especially true for the difficulties in attending live events and the implications surrounding an individual's country of origin. The prevalence and general significance of LAN competitions necessitates that individuals have the flexibility to participate both online as well as in-person at LAN events. While this is especially focused on those individuals involved in esports, it extends to individuals in all work areas of the industry, including players, infrastructure, and management or ownership. The inability to effectively operate and work both online and over LAN for a variety of issues, including difficulties with visas, and challenges with distance and location, can and does have a significant impact on a person's ability to participate fully in this digital industry.

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<sup>69</sup> Individuals' location is redacted but they live in a rural area, in the middle of North America not near either coast. Servers in North America are generally located on either the West or East coast. The further an individual is from each coast, the higher the average ping they would experience when playing games or being online generally.

<sup>70</sup> This individual described where he would like to live and why relative to his current location. Living in a more urban area near either coast in North America would improve ping and the ability to equitably compete in esports.

## 7.5 Conclusion

The experiences of individuals involved in the professional gaming industry are rife with challenges and adversities. The existing literature does not entirely capture these hardships within professional gaming (Colclough & Tolbert II, 1992). This study contributes to the understanding of inequality by expanding the scope of research in this area. Relying solely on those playing games does not adequately capture the entire picture of this industry. More specifically, this chapter provides commentary on not just the experiences of those playing video games within the industry but also those working in supporting, peripheral, management, and ownership positions. The experiences of the participants, and the personal discrimination, economic inequality, and geographic challenges, they discussed, exist throughout all areas of work within professional gaming. Throughout all three difficulties participants expressed optimism that the situation will improve. This optimism was tempered with a clear understanding that there remains considerable work to be done to improve equality in this industry.

This was particularly true of individuals working within organizations and companies in this industry who noted that while these issues are being addressed, their concerns have not yet been eradicated. Such findings are consistent with the literature which finds that organizational responsiveness to harassment, sexism, and discrimination are important (Fox & Tang, 2017; Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007; Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007). Lack of organized and swift response is “interpreted as tolerance of sexual harassment and associated with higher rates of harassment as well as worse outcomes for victims” (Fox & Tang, 2017, p. 8). Developing strategies and approaches to addressing these adversities, both at a personal and structural level, will shift professional gaming towards a more

level playing field; one in which women, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and persons living in geographically disadvantageous conditions are able to more equally participate.

The geographic challenges discussed in this chapter are likely the most difficult to address. Beyond progress in the visa process for individuals attempting to work in this industry beyond their country of citizenship, improvement is difficult. The limitations related to geographic location and ping are primarily technical, without clear and immediate solutions. While quality access to the internet in rural areas ought to be a priority, the technological limitations of individuals ping may preclude participation in this industry for those living in certain areas. This is particularly true for individuals trying to work as a player in esports, where ping is a more significant impediment to success than other areas of the industry.

The inequalities, discrimination, and geographic issues prevalent within professional gaming are similar to those in other industries. The manifestation of these challenges however can differ greatly from those in more traditional sectors of the economy. The experiences of the participants often contained unique and novel difficulties unique to professional gaming. Understanding these social inequalities assists in shaping understanding of this emerging industry and the experiences of those working within it.

## Chapter 8

### 8 Discussion

This project has expanded on the existing literature on professional gaming and work.

The project used an exploratory approach and semi-structured interviews to investigate two primary research questions: 1) What is the nature of work in professional gaming? 2)

What are the experiences of those pursuing careers and working in this industry?

Interviews were conducted with thirty-four individuals who were working or who had previously worked in the professional gaming industry. This chapter summarizes the major research findings, highlights study contributions, discusses the future of work, identifies limitations, and makes recommendations for future research.

#### 8.1 Importance of the research

It may be easy to dismiss professional gaming as ‘not real work’ and instead define it as leisure or play. This emerging industry may actually represent a harbinger of the future direction of work. While work in the gaming industry is diverse, it is work. Those working in this industry produce use value and professional gaming itself is a multi-billion-dollar industry (Merwin et al., 2018). The experiences of the participants in this emerging industry reflect the trends happening in society more broadly (Ibañez & Lopez, 2018): The precarity of work, the health impacts of this precarity, and the reproduction of social inequalities through work that are prevalent in all sectors of the economy (Adams & Welsh, 2008; Bentley, Baker, & Aitken, 2019; Lewchuk et al., 2015). The lines between work and leisure appear to be blurring generally; they have long been blurred for those working in the gaming sector. By examining the nature of work in professional gaming, we can improve our understanding of the changing nature of work more broadly.



Indeed, it could be argued that work in professional gaming represents the future of work (Burroughs & Rama, 2015; Taylor, 2018). The challenges and difficulties that impact individuals working in society more broadly not only exist, but are often intensified in professional gaming (Brock & Fraser, 2018; Cote, 2017; Hollist, 2015; Koetsier, 2018; Reitman et al., 2019; Ruotsalainen & Friman, 2018). Professional gaming provides a unique opportunity to study a new and emerging industry, and develop an understanding of the future of work. Challenges with remote work, difficulty separating work and leisure, and precarity of work are endemic to this industry, and increasingly, society more broadly. The nature of work is changing. Twenty-first century employment and workplaces are constantly evolving, shifting, and are increasingly digital (Neff, 2012); professional gaming is on the bleeding edge of these changes. Understanding the difficulties and challenges within this industry not only provides insight on the experiences of those working in professional gaming, but also others who are working in a twenty-first century digital economy.

Central to this research was a proper conceptualization of the professional gaming industry. It is evident that individuals working in professional gaming have a range of perspectives and opinions on the distinctions between the various areas of work in this industry. It is also apparent that differences do exist, and that those doing research in this area need to recognize these differences, and properly conceptualize them. This is crucial, as there are meaningful differences in the intention and nature of those individuals streaming themselves playing a casual single-player game for audiences and those competing on a competitive team in a multiplayer video game. Beyond the players themselves, while not as divergent, the experiences of those in the infrastructure of these

sub-areas are diverse. More attention ought to be given to those working in the periphery or supporting occupations within professional gaming. This is essential for two reasons. First, the literature on professional gaming and esports has focused almost exclusively on individuals playing the video games. Second, individuals working in these supporting roles often experience similar, albeit distinct challenges and difficulties when it comes to working in professional gaming. As this industry continues to grow it is important to understand the experiences of individuals working in all areas of this sector.

## 8.2 Overview of Major Findings

### 8.2.1 The growth, development, and landscape of professional gaming

This research has focused on professional gaming as work that produces the “transferable use value” identified by Tilly (1998). This is true for individuals employed in roles across the industry, from ‘gamers’ to those working in the infrastructure and ownership and management. Previous research has focused on gamers, but this research has expanded the focus to include the experiences of individuals working in supporting roles in the professional gaming industry. This is a developing literature (Taylor, 2012, 2018).

Two findings deserve special attention. First, individuals who game for pay are diverse. Their backgrounds, entry into, and relationship with the industry are not uniform. While their experiences may have similarities, it is important to recognize that working in professional gaming is not a homogenous job. Nuance is required to properly understand the relationship to their work that individuals employed in professional gaming have. Second, it is important to understand where these lines are drawn between leisure, streaming, and professional gaming. While this research has suggested some preliminary

distinctions that may be useful (esports and streaming), further nuance is required to develop a full understanding of the intricacies that exist between games and genres. The experiences of those working in League of Legends (Riot Games) or Overwatch (Blizzard), games that have a centralized body which oversees competition in that particular game, are materially different from games such as Dota 2 (Valve) or Call of Duty (Activision) (Fischer, 2018). Riot Games and Blizzard are heavily involved in the organization, production, and regulation of esports competitions within their games. They exert considerable control and power over those competing in these games (Agha, 2015; Good, 2018; Overwatch League, 2018). Valve is especially known as being considerably laxer with regulating individuals competing in their games and often taking a ‘hands-off’ approach. The freedom that players might have within these titles can vary considerably. This dichotomy of streaming and esports may not go far enough. Further specificity may be required to truly understand this industry. The engagement with audiences, social support, and ultimately successfully working in professional gaming are impacted by these factors and are mediated by what specific area (streaming or esports), genre, game, and region they are working in.

### **8.2.2 The employment experiences of those working in an emerging industry such as professional gaming**

Despite the maturation and growth of the industry, real challenges continue to occur for those working in professional gaming (Merwin et al., 2018). The improved working conditions in the industry were highlighted by many of the participants; however, continued exploitation and questionable working arrangements remain. These difficulties are also not ubiquitous across all areas of the industry and may be occupation specific.

The challenges surrounding access to appropriate technology by players, or the legitimacy of their work when contrasted to individuals working in managerial positions is one such example. The participants overwhelmingly described experiencing precarious and non-standard working conditions that have been a defining characteristic of the gaming industry for a decade (Sotamaa & Karppi, 2010). Precarious employment is the result of exploitative employment relationships. Non-standard employment has become increasingly normalized (Green & Livanos, 2017). The normalization of freelance and contract work in this industry was expressed by the participants. They viewed these working arrangements with great concern and disappointment. Ozimek (2019) found that workers in the Polish videogame industry often faced exploitative and non-standard work arrangements and had experienced “normalization of misuse of employment contracts” (p. 312). The experiences of the participants working in the professional gaming industry were not dissimilar to those employed in the production of video games.

These understandings of work precarity are indicative of trends more generally in society (Bentley et al., 2019; Hoang et al., 2020; Kalleberg, 2009; Kalleberg et al., 2000; Lewchuk et al., 2015). While the precarity of work in Canada has increased over the last number of years, the prevalence of non-standard employment in professional gaming raises concerns for the future of work (Hardy et al., 2018; Lewchuk et al., 2015). The nature of the exploitation described by the participants is cause for concern. As our economy continues to shift towards virtual and digital work, the questionable employment practices discussed by the participants may occur with increasing frequency (Bergan, Gorman-Murray, & Power, 2020; Graham et al., 2017; Sutherland, Jarrahi, Dunn, & Nelson, 2020). This may be especially true when employment and labour

relationships cross international borders, making regulation and compliance with employment standards more difficult to enforce.

Researchers and industry insiders have called for the increased involvement of organizations and an overall professionalization of the industry as a means of addressing some of these challenges faced by workers (Blum, 2016; Seo, 2016; Valenduc & Vendramin, 2016; Yun, 2019). The professionalization and corporatization of the industry were discussed by many of the participants as contributing both positively and negatively to their work experience. On the one hand, the exploitative employment practices and questionable work arrangements were less common amongst those working in areas of professional gaming that had greater levels of organizational and professional development. On the other hand, individuals felt as though the essence and soul of their jobs were or eventually would be dictated by corporate interests. Commodification and corporatization are, then, not without their benefits, but they remain a point of contention and concern among workers in the sector.

Credential inflation (or creep) was also linked with professionalization and corporatization – reducing opportunities for many who had entered the field earlier, when certain credentials were not required. Unionization was discussed by a number of the participants, however, it was not a central theme and the literature suggests paths towards unions in this industry are difficult and not-straightforward (Hollist, 2015; Korpimies, 2017).

### 8.2.3 Social support, and social, cultural, and gaming capital during work in professional gaming

Work and opportunities in the gaming industry – like other industries – is shaped by social and cultural capital. The importance of social capital in particular has been documented in this industry (Molyneux et al., 2015; Taylor, 2018; Trepte et al., 2012). This study expanded on the literature and unveiled a convergence between individuals' social capital and the exploitive employment practices of this industry. Often, the participants were accessing 'jobs' through their networks while simultaneously accepting positions that were either unpaid or below market value. Many of the participants felt that this undermined the compensation and fairness in professional gaming and resulted in continued exploitation.

The participants highlighted the importance of both social capital and gaming capital for success in the industry. In particular, they noted the interplay between gaming capital and social capital. The convergence of social capital and gaming capital can be applied beyond the gaming context to twenty-first century employment more broadly (Stokes, 2019; Taylor, 2018; N. Taylor et al., 2015). As workplaces and employment become increasingly transient and virtual, the relative importance of digital fluency and knowhow becomes progressively more essential (S. Kim & Hollensbe, 2018). Individuals may need to lean on and require more technical competency to ensure that they are not left behind in new, digital workplaces (Arntz et al., 2020; Bergan et al., 2020; Dubey & Tripathi, 2020; Kramer & Kramer, 2020). Accessing social capital may necessitate a certain level of digital literacy, particularly in an age of primarily remote work. The necessity to

seamlessly switch between on-location and virtual work requires a certain requisite level of digital competency not unlike the gaming capital discussed in this research.

Moreover, the role of fans and spectators within this industry stretches beyond that discussed in the literature (Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017; Taylor, 2012). Taylor (2018) extensively documented the impact that spectators, viewers, and fans have on those working in livestreaming. The present study is the first to expand attention to include the impact that these consumers of professional gaming have on individuals beyond simply those working as players. Individuals working in professional gaming as audio specialists, play-by-play commentators, analysts, and tournament organizers are all affected by interactions with consumers of their content. The immediacy of the feedback and critiques during streams they were involved in both positively and negatively contributed to their work experiences. For some participants, words of encouragement and acknowledgement of their work provided instantaneous gratification that supported their decision that working in this industry was the right choice.

The sense of community that emerges from these streams identified by Taylor (2018), was acknowledged by the participants as positively contributing to their work. The immediate feedback did however negatively impact some participants. The stress associated with real-time critiques of their work in chat and online was difficult to navigate. Many of the participants developed strategies and approaches to either avoid the negative commentary or focus on the positive feedback.

Much the same as the role of fans and spectators, the literature on social support has historically been limited to those playing the games. Researchers have also documented

the role of social support systems *within* video games (Freeman & Wohn, 2017b).

Research on social support and work more broadly in society has found that the existence of social support can mediate some of the difficulties associated with work (Irak, Kalkışım, & Yıldırım, 2020; Pluut, Ilies, Curşeu, & Liu, 2018; Yasmin & Husna, 2020). The present study expanded on this literature by investigating the role of social support on individuals' transition into and success within professional gaming. The level of support for the participants varied greatly. Social support provided by members of their social networks played an important role in their pursuit of work in this industry. The emotional concern had a contributory rather than determinative impact on individual's success in professional gaming.

#### 8.2.4 The intersection of leisure, work, and identity in professional gaming

While the commodification of leisure is not necessarily new, the extent to which the gaming industry “sells entertainment products, but also capitalizes on the products of the leisure derived from them” is different (Kücklich, 2005, p. 1). The appropriation of hobby through control of the means of production ultimately results in “industry's domination and determination of the shape of the hobby” (Butsch, 1984, p. 231). This is especially true in the case of professional gaming; here gaming is no longer a leisure activity, but is rather serious leisure that often evolves into work (Taylor, 2018).

This theme identified by Kücklich was implicit in many of the interviews. The difficulty in navigating the boundary between work and leisure proved incredibly challenging for many. The ambiguity between work and play discussed by the participants is consistent with the literature (Aguiar et al., 2017; Y.-H. Lee & Lin, 2011). The implications of the



commodification of professional gamers' leisure activities extend beyond their specific context and reflect a broader control of culture by capitalist forces (Butsch, 1984; Littlefield & Siudzinski, 2012; Pursell, 2015).

Understanding the outcomes from these challenges is essential for developing strategies to mitigate these effects. The negative consequences associated with the convergence of leisure, work, and identity proved challenging for many of the participants. For some of the participants these difficulties ultimately resulted in them leaving the industry and seeking work unrelated to professional gaming. The experiences of these individuals is not unlike that experienced by workers in society generally who have become disenfranchised by precarious work and employment situations (Quintero, 2010).

The commercialization of leisure and the accompanying challenges around identity and mental health are not isolated. Focusing on the health implications of individuals' leisure and work activities, especially amongst those working in periphery jobs in the industry, is a novel approach to understand work in professional gaming. . Acknowledging the mental health challenges associated with this convergence of leisure and work improves our understanding of the intersection of play and labour. This study shifted the focus from the impact of playing video games on mental health to the impact that working within professional gaming has on health.

Understanding the blurring of work and leisure, which permeates the professional gaming industry, can assist in developing a better understanding of the intersection of work and leisure in other work contexts and industries (Jones & Taylor, 2017; Polkowska, 2016). Understanding the interplay between leisure and work is essential, particularly with the

incredible shift towards work-from-home arrangements and remote work that has taken place during 2020 (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020; Kramer & Kramer, 2020).

### 8.2.5 The challenges and difficulties experienced by individuals working in professional gaming

Individuals hoping to transition into and achieve success in the professional gaming industry face numerous obstacles and challenges. Participants struggled with economic and geographic difficulties in addition to personal challenges such as discrimination. Many of the participants spoke to the presumptive masculinity and continued discrimination against women indicative of this industry. There is a well-documented history of sexism and harassment in this industry (BBC, 2016; Chatzakou et al., 2017; Fox & Tang, 2014; Hanton, 2015; Stermer & Burkley, 2015). The perception amongst the participants is that despite progress and improvement there remains considerable improvement necessary respecting the treatment of women and minority groups within the professional gaming industry. Their experiences reinforce the notion that persistent and deep-rooted sexism and discrimination continues to exist. The marginalized employ different strategies including non-disclosure of gender, and passive and active approaches to addressing these issues, all of which result in some degree of personal consequences.

Economic inequalities also emerged as significant. With increased attention and recognition of esports by the media, and the corporatization of the sector, financial compensation has received more attention (Holley, 2019; Webb, 2020). There remains scant research on the financial insecurities and inequalities that exist within professional gaming (Railsback & Caporusso, 2018; Rudolf et al., 2020). These insecurities often arise

as a result of precarious employment and exploitation experienced by individuals working in this industry.

In addition to the exploitation faced by participants, they also dealt with issues surrounding financial security and assistance. Despite the advancements and opportunities that digital technology has afforded, there remains considerable opportunity for economic exclusion in the digital economy (Graham et al., 2017). Participants described this exclusion including the inability to access proper technology, equipment, or the internet. In addition, the interviewees also highlighted the importance of what House (1983) described as instrumental support. Here, the participants described the importance of the socioeconomic background of individuals working in this industry and the connection between higher family socioeconomic status and the likelihood of success in this industry. This finding is not unlike those observed more broadly in society when considering access to education or economic ‘success’ by examining individuals’ socioeconomic backgrounds (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019; Walpole, 2003). Rather, this effect may be heightened by the fact that similar to some forms of higher education such as medical school, a baseline technological suite may be out of reach for many low-income individuals (Le, 2017).

The financial challenges that individuals striving to work in this industry confront include exploitation, expectation of free labour, infrequent or missing payments, and procuring appropriate technology. These challenges can be mitigated through financial support from parents or friends. Those individuals who are able to work for free, not be paid sometimes, and/or afford the best equipment are much more likely to succeed than people who do not enjoy the same level of instrumental support (Freeman & Wohn, 2017b).

Geographic issues were a significant impediment for a number of the participants working in this industry. While some were able to work part-time in professional gaming, their geographic location and inability to acquire a visa were direct reasons why they could not transition into full-time work in professional gaming. These difficulties with remote work are reflective of the challenges faced in society more generally as more work has shifted online (Bergan et al., 2020; Graham et al., 2017).

### 8.3 The Future of Work

The experiences of the participants in this research revealed the nature of work in an emerging industry, professional gaming, and its associated challenges and difficulties. While work has traditionally been bound by immediate geography, individuals working in professional gaming are often not bound by physical location (Graham et al., 2017). Individuals work has historically been extrinsically linked for the majority of human history to the geographic vicinity in which they live (Graham et al., 2017). The twenty-first century economy, and more recently the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (COVID-19) pandemic, has accelerated a shift towards geographically agnostic work and employment (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020; Irani, 2015; Neff, 2012). This shift towards digital and virtual work is accompanied by a set of challenges not unlike those described by the participants in this study. These difficulties are amplified by the tremendous corporatization and commodification that professional gaming has experienced (Graham et al., 2017; Neff, 2012). The employment landscape in gaming may represent a societal shifts towards hyper commodification of work and labour experienced by workers more broadly in the economy (Ba', 2020; Lavery, 2014).

The changing nature of work necessitates new approaches to understanding how exploitation and alienation manifest in a virtual workplace. The mental and physical health challenges of virtual and digital labour described by the participants make understanding this shift especially important. The questions surrounding the efficacy of their work may be necessarily specific to an industry that emerges from leisure activities; however, the challenges surrounding the legitimacy of virtual or remote work are important and real concerns (Dubey & Tripathi, 2020; Kramer & Kramer, 2020).

## 8.4 Limitations and Research Recommendations

This exploratory research has contributed to our understanding of the experiences of individuals working in this emerging industry. It is important, however, to consider the limitations of the current study and discuss how future research on professional gaming can address these concerns. First, selection bias in responses to the various recruitment efforts is a limitation of the research. Access to professional gamers at the pinnacle of their particular games was a challenge. These individuals often have highly successful playing and/or streaming careers. Over thirty said players were contacted and I received two responses, both of which ultimately did not participate in the research due to scheduling issues. Beyond high profile players, all individuals who are especially busy or successful may be less likely to respond to contacts to participate in research. This can be due to a multitude of factors, including the likelihood that those individuals who are most visible or successful receive a considerably higher number of requests to speak about professional gaming. One participant specifically addressed this during an interview. After discussing the difficulty of recruiting participants for the research, particularly prominent players and talent, the participant commented that “there are just, because of

what it is, there is just a lot of people interested in it, you know, a lot of these folks are getting a ton of requests every day. There's just nothing. There's not anything to make one stand out from another”.

The experiences of racialized minorities and members of the LGBTQ community were missing in the data: no individuals who identified as racialized minorities chose to participate in the research, and only one individual who self-identified as being a member of the LGBTQ community did so. Individuals from these groups have historically been underrepresented in the video game industry as a whole, as well as within professional gaming (AnyKey, 2019; Kauwelo & Winter, 2019). Existing research in this area suggests that LGBTQ individuals face discrimination and harassment that is similar to the experiences of women described in this research (Holden, Baker, & Edelman, 2019; Kauwelo & Winter, 2019). As such, it is important for future research to capture members of these communities. This includes seeking out organizations which support members of these groups within the gaming community, such as AnyKey, and elicit their support in the recruitment of participants from these underrepresented groups.

There remains ample opportunity for inquiry on topics linked to professional gaming.

This exploratory research has uncovered specific areas of this industry that require further investigation. In particular, this study has highlighted the need to understand all facets of the gaming industry, an approach that requires examination beyond simply those individuals playing the games. Understanding the transitions, trajectories, working conditions, identity development, and inequalities experienced by *everyone* working in professional gaming will help inform policy decisions and gain insight into this emerging industry. More specifically, better understanding the legal implications of the exploitative

and questionable employment relationships for those working in professional gaming will not only provide greater insight into the experiences of those working in this industry but also lay down a path towards greater rights and improved working conditions.

Additionally, the nuances between various areas of the professional gaming industry extend beyond simply differences between esports and streaming. There exist material differences between different games, communities, companies, organizations, and consumers. These divergences are similar to the variation between traditional sports.

While there are broad generalizations that may be true for all major professional sports, it is often necessary and essential to consider each of them as distinct industries. The same is true for esports. While games may contain similarities, as the professional gaming industry matures, the intricacies between and within esports and streaming will be increasingly important to consider.

Specific steps that can be taken to satisfy these suggestions include careful use of two different methods. The first approach would focus on individuals involved in one particular game, genre, or area of the industry. Here, the scope of the research is narrowed down to a specific sub-area of professional gaming that ensures limited conceptual and practical challenges from speaking with individuals in vastly different areas of the industry. Conversely, casting a wide net and speaking with individuals involved in all areas of the industry, while potentially more impactful in terms of generalizability, could result in difficulties in data collection.

## 8.5 Concluding Remarks

Professional gaming, both esports and streaming, will continue to grow and develop moving forward (Reitman et al., 2019). This exploratory research highlights the need for continued investigation and focus on this emerging industry. The findings from this research support the notion that although many observers from outside of professional gaming may not necessarily view it as legitimate work, individuals working in this industry are legitimizing employment in gaming as a form of work (Griffiths, 2017). This research builds on the foundation of Taylor (2012, 2018) and provides a framework for continued research on this industry. There remain significant challenges for those working in this industry. The exploitation of workers, health difficulties, and discrimination and inequality within professional gaming is ongoing. While improvements and progress has been made on many of these issues, challenges remain. This research on professional gaming in the twenty-first century economy is important to developing our understanding of the future of work.



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# Appendices

## Appendix 1- Ethics Approval



**Date:** 8 January 2019

**To:** Dr. Tracey Adams

**Project ID:** 112922

**Study Title:** Professional gaming and work: Challenges, trajectories, and labour market impacts amongst professional gamers.

**Application Type:** NMREB Initial Application

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Full Board Reporting Date:** February 1 2019

**Date Approval Issued:** 08/Jan/2019

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 08/Jan/2020

Dear Dr. Tracey Adams

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. All other required institutional approvals must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.

**Documents Approved:**

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
December 20 LOI Clean	Verbal Consent/Assent	20/Dec/2018	2
Digital poster December 20 Updated	Recruitment Materials	20/Dec/2018	2
Email Recruitment December 20 Clean	Recruitment Materials	20/Dec/2018	2
Interview guide CLEAN December 20	Interview Guide	20/Dec/2018	2
Reminder_Email	Recruitment Materials	21/Nov/2018	1

No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Kelly Patterson, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

## Appendix 2- Digital Recruitment Poster



### **Subject Line: Invitation to participate in research**

Hello,

Due to your expertise and experiences with professional gaming, you are being invited to participate in a study that we, Michael Haight (PhD Candidate) and Dr. Tracey Adams (Principal Investigator) and Dr. Anabel Quan-Haase (Co-Investigator) are conducting. Briefly, the study involves an interview about your participation in professional gaming.

This interview will take place over Discord and take approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview can be scheduled at your convenience.

If you would like to participate in this study please contact:

Michael Haight  
PhD candidate  
Department of Sociology  
Western University



## Appendix 3- Letter of Information



Department of Sociology

### Letter of Information and Consent

**Project Title: Professional gaming and work: Challenges, trajectories, and labour market impacts amongst professional gamers.**

**Investigators:**

Michael Haight, PhD Candidate, Department of Sociology, Western University;  
 Dr. Tracey Adams, Principal investigator, Department of Sociology, Western University;

Dr. Anabel Quan-Haase, Co-investigator, Faculty of Information and Media Studies and Department of Sociology, Western University

#### Invitation to Participate

You are being invited to participate in this study of professional gamers. You are eligible to participate if you are aged 16 and older, and play video games, at least in part, for financial compensation. This includes both playing on an organized team as well as streaming.

#### Purpose of the Letter

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with information required for you to make an informed decision regarding participation in this research study.

#### Why is this study being done?

Through this research we aim to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges, trajectories, and work experiences related to professional gaming, particularly amongst youth.

#### Duration of the Study

If you agree to participate you will be asked to engage in one interview lasting about 30-45 minutes.

#### Study Procedures

Participants will be interviewed about their experiences in professional gaming. Interviews will last about 30-45 minutes and will take place via Discord. The interview will be audio recorded to ensure an accurate transcript of the interview.



LiGRE Software, a Canadian company, will be used to analyze the interviews and provide voice-to-text transcription through software. All data remains on Canadian servers and is protected through the “industry’s best practices for firewalls, network segmentation, and SSL traffic encryption.” Michael Haight will use study numbers in the transcripts, and pseudonyms in published works.

### **Possible Risks and Harms**

There are no known risks involved from participating in this study. Participating in the present study does not hinder your ability to participate in concurrent studies or in future studies. You do not waive any legal rights by consenting to participate in this research.

### **Possible Benefits**

Information gathered from your participation in this study may provide a better understanding of a growing gaming industry, and the work patterns of young workers, especially those in professional gaming.

### **Withdrawal from the Study**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any individual questions or withdraw from the study. If you wish to have your information removed, please let the researcher know. If you do not wish to have the interview audio recorded, the interview will not move forward.

### **Confidentiality**

Information that is collected during the study will be stored securely (password protected and encrypted) and used solely for research and teaching purposes. The audio recordings of the interviews will be encrypted and kept on a drive separate from any identifying characteristics. The files that link identifying markers and participant numbers/pseudonyms will be encrypted and stored separately on different hard drives. In the unlikely event that you become aware of someone else's participation through the discord server, you are asked to respect their privacy and confidentiality, and not disclose their participation to anyone else. Results of the



study will be available from the researchers when the study is completed. If the results of the study are published, no information that discloses your identity will be released or published. Additionally, if you would like to withdraw your information from being used in the study you may do so at any time by contacting Michael Haight.

Please be advised that representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-records to monitor the conduct of the research.

### **Compensation**

There is no compensation for participating in this research.

### **Rights of Participants**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose not to participate or to leave the study at any time it will have no effect on your work or employment. We will give you additional information that is learned during the study that might affect your decision to stay in the study.

You do not waive any legal right by providing consent to participate.

### **Contacts for Further Information**

If you require further information about this research, you may contact Michael Haight [redacted] or principal investigator Dr. Tracey Adams at (519) 661-2111 [redacted] or via e-mail at [redacted]. You may also contact the co-investigator Anabel Quan-Haase at [redacted].

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics (519) 661-3036, email: [ethics@uwo.ca](mailto:ethics@uwo.ca).

**Publication**

If you would like to receive a copy of study results, please contact Michael Haight, or Dr. Tracey Adams or Dr. Anabel Quan-Haase through the contact information above.

This letter is yours to keep.

**Verbal Consent**

1. I have read the Letter of Information and have had the nature of the study explained to me. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in the study.
2. I consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research.



## Appendix 4- Interview Guide

### Interview Guide

#### Demographic information

1. Age:
  - a. Blank fillable space
2. Gender: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Student:
  - a. Yes full time
  - b. Yes part time
  - c. No
4. Level of highest education (including education)
  - a. High school
  - b. College
  - c. Undergraduate University
  - d. Graduate University
5. Living situation:
  - a. Live alone
  - b. Live with parents
  - c. Live with roommates
  - d. Live with partner
6. Household income:
  - a. Blank fillable space
7. Personal income:
  - a. Blank fillable space
8. Does any portion of your personal or household income come from playing, spectating, or streaming video games?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
9. How long has your income at least partially relied on professional gaming?
  - a. Fillable blank
10. Job:
  - a. Fillable blank
11. If yes to job is it:
  - a. Full time
  - b. Part time
12. Hours per week spent at:
  - a. Job outside of professional gaming: \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Professional gaming: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Major research focus 1: Work-school transitions**

1. When did you first start playing video games?
  - a. Professionally?
2. Can you speak to the decision-making process around this transition?
  - a. What factors played into your decision?
  - b. Prompts for potential impacts on decision
    - i. Labour or job market
    - ii. Difficulty/challenges at school
    - iii. Knowledge or understanding of the industry
3. In what ways, if any, did playing video games or playing games professional impact your schooling?
4. What impact, if any, did your family, friends, or significant others have on this process?
  - a. What role did your “fans” or followers have?
5. Looking forward, what do you see your future in terms of schooling or education?

### **Major research focus 2: Challenges and trajectories**

1. Considering the entirety of your time in professional gaming can you speak to the relationship between it and your income?
  - a. Do you play games professionally full time or part time and why?
    - i. Is professional gaming full time a career path you are interested in?
  - b. Have you ever had a period of time where you had difficulty ‘making ends meet’?
    - i. Elaborate on this, what happened?
      1. What did you do?
      2. What contributed to your decision making process?
      3. Did you ultimately decide to continue to pursue professional gaming?
2. What challenges have you faced either in professional gaming?
  - a. Potential prompts
    - i. Quality of the internet connection
    - ii. Location (ping)
    - iii. Computer equipment
    - iv. Age?
      1. How have these challenges impacted your ability to pursue professional gaming full time?
3. Can you speak through your process of ‘going professional’
  - a. What was the catalyst for this transition?

1. What is ultimately your goal with professional gaming?
  - a. Career?
  - b. Make a significant amount of money then leave?
    - i. If it is to make a career out of professional gaming, can you speak to the transition between being a 'gamer' to other jobs within the prevue of gaming?
      1. How might this transition take place?
      2. What challenges have you experienced or forsee?
  - c. How does the process of retirement work?
    - i. Is it different from esports versus streaming?
      1. Can you retire to streaming?

### **Major research focus 3: Viewership and work relationship**

1. Do you still play games in your leisure or hobby time?
  - a. How has this changed with your involvement in professional gaming?
    - i. Additional prompts
      - 1.
2. When thinking of your own experience in professional gaming, can you speak to your interaction with viewers?
  - a. Can you elaborate on the experiences, either positive or negative between yourself and spectators of your stream or team?
    - i. Have these interactions impacted your thoughts on professional gaming?
    - ii. Has it impacted your decision to continue to be involved in professional gaming or leave?
3. Describe, in your opinion, the relationship between viewer and professional gamer?
  - a. How may this be specific to individual streamers?
  - b. How may this be different for individuals who play esports?
4. What job, career, occupation, or activity would you most closely compare professional gamers with?
  - a. Streamers?
  - b. Esports?
    - i. If these answers are different, why?
      1. What is the reason for this distinction?
        - a. Skill of the player?
        - b. Relationship with the spectators?
        - c. Nature of the job?

**Appendix 5- List of Acronyms**

AHL- American Hockey League  
AOE- Age of Empires  
CEO- Chief executive officer  
COD- Call of Duty  
COO- Chief operating officer  
CS:GO- Counter-Strike: Global Offensive  
DPC- Dota Pro Circuit  
DOTA- Defence of the Ancients  
EU- European Union  
ICD-11- International Classification of Diseases (11th revision)  
ICT- Information communication technology  
LOL- League of Legends  
MLB- Major League Baseball  
MOBA- Multiplayer online battle arena  
MOD- Modification  
NACE- The National Association of Collegiate Esports  
NBC- National Broadcasting Company  
NFL- National Football League  
NHL- National Hockey League  
NMREB- Non-Medical Research Ethics Board  
PC – Personal computer  
PUBG- PlayerUnknown’s Battlegrounds  
RSI- Repetitive strain injury  
SES- Socioeconomic status  
SIT- Social Identity Theory  
UK- United Kingdom  
US- United States  
USD- United States Dollar  
VC- Venture Capital  
VGA- Video game addiction  
VOIP- Voice Over Internet Protocol  
WHO- World Health Organization

## Appendix 6- List of Definitions

**Analyst:** One of the two types of casters. Individuals who are analysts are typically highly knowledgeable or skilled within the particular game they work in. During the course of an esports game the analyst will provide feedback and commentary on the gameplay. This position is similar to that of retired professional athletes who transition into broadcasting. These individuals use their expertise to provide analysis of the hockey or football game and as opposed to play by play announcers provide explanations and opinions on the current game in real-time.

**Casting:** This occurs during the course of esports competitions. Individuals who are casting fall into one of two categories. See *Analyst* or *Play by Play announcer*.

**Gamergate:** This incident began through a blog post about an ex-girlfriend and quickly devolved into a “social justice” initiative. While it was “held up as a pseudo-political movement by its adherents, there is substantial evidence that Gamergate is more accurately described as an organized campaign of hate and harassment [towards women]” (Chatzakou et al., 2017, p. 1). This has been identified as a landmark example of the stress, harassment, and discrimination that women experience online and more specifically within the gaming community.

**LAN:** Local Area Network or LAN in the context of gaming refers to competitions that are held at physical locations via local computer/internet networks. These types of competitions are typically considered ‘fairer’ and more equitable as they reduce inequities between the players relating to internet or computer quality.

**Latency:** Latency is the “network connection strength” (Al Dafai, 2016, p. 9), the time it takes “for your computer to respond to a request by another computer” (Painter, 2019). The latency is typically measured as ‘ping’. As the location of the servers that individuals are playing on moves further apart, latency/ping typically rises. Once you get above a certain ping, playing and/or spectating the games becomes challenging and at times not possible because of the significant delay.

**Ninja:** Ninja is a professional gamer who has both competed in competitions as well as successfully streamed in front of hundreds of thousands of viewers. He is one of, if not the most, recognizable streamer in 2020.

**Ping:** Is a unit used to measure latency. See *Latency*.

**Play by play announcer:** As opposed to analysts who provide opinions and explanations for the gameplay within an esports competition, play by play announcers focus exclusively on describing the gameplay. They describe the movement of the characters within the game and provide an auditory accompaniment to the visual gameplay. Their job is typically not to analyze the gameplay but rather describe and give a play by play dictation of what is happening.

**Streaming:** Individuals ‘stream’ themselves playing video games on various websites. These ‘streams’ are akin to live YouTube videos where spectators have opportunities to watch and interact with someone playing a video game in real time.

**Twitch.tv:** Formerly Justin.TV, this website allows individuals to stream themselves playing video games. See *Streaming*.

## Curriculum Vitae

### Michael Haight

#### EDUCATION

- JD Law*, University of Western Ontario, London ON *Expected April 2022*
- Ph.D. Sociology*, University of Western Ontario, London, ON 2020  
 Supervisors: Tracey Adams, Anabel Quan-Haase  
 Social Inequality Exam, 2015  
 Committee: Tracey Adams (Chair), Sam Clark, Paul-Philippe Pare  
 Sociological Media Theory Exam, 2014  
 Committee: Anabel Quan-Haase (Chair), Scott Schaffer, James Cote  
 Thesis:
- M.A. Sociology*, University of Western Ontario, London, ON 2012  
 Program and policy evaluation specialization  
 Thesis: Revisiting the digital divide in the Canadian context
- B.A. Honours Specialization Criminology*, King's University College, London, ON 2011

#### RESEARCH AREAS

Digital divide; Social inequality; Digital inequality; Esports; Video games.

#### PUBLICATIONS

##### Refereed

- 2014 Haight, M., Quan-Haase, A. & Corbett, B. (2014). Revisiting the digital divide in Canada: The impact of demographic factors on access to the internet, level of online activity, and social networking site usage. *Information, Communication & Society*, 17(4), 503-519.

##### Non-Refereed

- 2016 Haight, M., Quan-Haase, A. & Rhinesmith, C. (2016) The Complexity of 'Relevance' as a Barrier to Broadband Adoption. *The Benton Foundation*.
- 2016 Haight, M., M. Colledge. (2016) The risk of building infrastructure without building digital literacy. *The Globe and Mail*.
- 2015 Haight, M., A. Quan-Haase. (2015) Digital inclusion Project: Findings and Implications, A Canadian Perspective. *The Benton Foundation*.

##### Other Contributions

- 2013 "Digital divide persists in Canada, both in access and Internet fluency." *The Financial Post*. URL: [http://business.financialpost.com/2013/03/21/digital-divide-persists-in-canada-both-in-access-and-internet-fluency/?\\_\\_lsa=51c0-db2d](http://business.financialpost.com/2013/03/21/digital-divide-persists-in-canada-both-in-access-and-internet-fluency/?__lsa=51c0-db2d)

- 2012 “Income, education, rural life all impact digital accessibility.” *The London Free Press*. URL: <http://www.lfpress.com/2012/09/26/income-education-rural-life-all-impact-digital-accessibility>

## GRANTS AND AWARDS

- 2014-2017 Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship- Doctoral, \$105,000  
 2014-2015 Ontario Graduate Scholarship (Declined), \$15,000  
 2013-2014 MITACS-Accelerate, \$30,000

## TEACHING

### Course Instructor

*Kings University College*

- 2020-2021 Statistics for Sociology (2205A and 2205B)  
 2012-2020 Introduction to Sociology (1020)  
 2017-2019 Statistics for Sociology intersession Summers 2017-2019 (2205)

## PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATIONS

- 2015 “Digital Inclusion: Barriers to Access as Experienced by Residents of Low-Income Housing.” *Partnership for Progress on the Digital Divide Annual Meeting*, Phoenix, AZ.  
 2015 “Barriers to internet access: Digital inequality as experienced by residents of low-income housing.” *American Sociological Association Annual Meeting*, Chicago, IL.  
 2014 “Digital inequality: Expressions of citizenship in access to, participation in, and engagement with digital media.” *International Political Science Association Annual Meeting*. Montreal, QC.  
 2013 “Internet Inequality in Canada: Demographic Trends in Internet Use and Skills. American Sociological Association.” *American Sociological Association Annual Meeting*, New York, NY.  
 2013 “Internet inequality: How policy affects differences in access and digital literacy in the Canadian context.” *Canadian Communication Association Annual Meeting*, Victoria, BC.  
 2013 “Digital Connectivity in Canada: Generational Differences in Net Usage, Digital Skills, and Social Media Adoption.” *Canadian Sociological Association Annual Meeting*, Victoria, BC.  
 2012 “Revisiting the Digital Divide: Preliminary findings from the 2010 Canadian Internet Use Survey (CIUS).” *Canadian Sociological Association Annual Meeting*, Waterloo, ON.