

The Work of Belonging in Mid-level Esports

Panel organizer: Nick Taylor

Presenters: Sky Kauwelo, William Partin, and Emma Witkowski

Esports scholarship remains primarily concerned with top players, tournaments, and content producers: the highly visible products of a globalized media industry deeply invested in spectacles of elite, virtuoso gameplay. We have paid much less attention to the lively and nebulous domain of not-(yet)-professional esports players and producers. These are contexts in which competitive gaming is something much more than recreation, albeit carried out without the visibility, status, and financial / infrastructural support associated with professional esports.

This domain is broadly characterized by entrepreneurialism and precarity. Therefore, the presentations on this panel pay particular attention to the *work* of operating in the not-yet-pro esports world, whether that be the efforts of collegiate players to balance gaming and school (Kauwelo); the “aspirational labor” of semi-professional streamers (Partin); or the practices of players negotiating the Pro/Am pipeline (Witkowski). Taken together, these case studies put forward a vital research agenda for esports scholarship: mapping the underexplored practices, subjectivities, and conditions involved in belonging to esports.

Collegiate Esports: Between Homework and Play

Sky Kauwelo

An emerging esports scene has developed on college campuses across North America, with esports scholarships being offered to students to play video games. This study investigates how players participating in college esports conceptualized gaming within the discourse of work versus play. Using Robert Stebbins’ serious leisure framework, I examine 1) the overlapping dimensions of commitment and leisure in esports and 2) where and how being a collegiate esports player intersects with student development. My observations draw from time spent as a participant-observer with the University of California, Irvine’s esports team, including ethnographic observations, interviews, and reviews of archival materials.

“Lead into Gold!”: The Aspirational Labor of Shoutcasting in Dota 2

Will Partin

Alongside and behind the rapid growth of professional gaming competition, a secondary economy has developed around related services like commentary and statistical analysis. This paper examines aspiring and semi-professional commentators for Valve’s popular esports, *Dota 2*, based on extensive interviews with commentators in North America and Europe. Drawing on Brooke Erin Duffy’s notion of aspirational labor, a ideology and process of “uncompensated independent work propelled by the much venerated ideal of getting paid to do what you love”, I argue that these aspiring commentators are engaged in an entrepreneurial meta-competition that echoes and intensifies broader concerns about precarity and digital labor in the ongoing platformization of culture.

Learning the Ropes: Recruitment Practices in Pro/Am Esports

Emma Witkowski

Pro/Am esports recruitment practices are regularly framed as a metrics-driven approach, where regional/server stats (“He was a top-10 player on the local ladder”) are indicative of team try-out potential. In practice, the suite of recruitment techniques Pro/Am teams deploy are less linear and more relational. Word-of-mouth, headhunting former teammates, and Twitter-based recruitment all contribute to the process of expert team formation; a good reminder of the lively opportunity networks which underpin homogenous esports demographics across this critical development pipeline from grassroots to pro. Through qualitative interviews with Pro/Am players, coaches, and managers, the socio-material orientations and techniques involved in enlisting new teammates and coaches are unpacked with attention to the micro and meso-layers of recruitment and amorphous considerations involved in forming expert teams.

Contact information and biographies

Sky Kauwelo

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Sky Kauwelo is a PhD candidate in the Communication and Information Sciences program at the University of Hawaii. Research interests lie at the intersection between digital gaming and society, with a specific focus on issues of leisure, labor, and identity/student development within the emerging space of college esports. Sky recently taught the first introductory esports course at the University of Hawaii for spring 2018 (“Esports and Society”).

Will Partin

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Will Partin’s research examines the platformization of culture with a special emphasis on digital games, livestreaming, and esports. His interdisciplinary approach to studying platforms draws on science and technology studies, political economy of communication, and organizational communication. His writing on gaming and esports has been published in *The Atlantic*, *Rolling Stone*, *LA Review of Books*, *Jacobin*, and *Deadspin*, among others. His favorite game is *Dota 2*.

Dr. Nick Taylor

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Nick Taylor applies critical, feminist, and posthumanist perspectives to qualitative research with digital gaming communities. In particular, he is interested in the intersections of subjectivity, communicative practice, technologies, and games, as enacted through both game production and play across a variety of contexts. He is the Associate Director of the PhD program in Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media at NC State University, and lead editor (with Gerald Voorhees) of the upcoming volume *Masculinities in Play*.

Dr. Emma Witkowski

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Emma Witkowski is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Design and the co-director of the Playable Media Lab at RMIT University (Melbourne). As a socio-phenomenologically informed ethnographer, her research explores esports cultures, high performance team practices, gender and games, competitive LAN scenes, and networked careers in play. Emma teaches core games research courses within the RMIT game design program. She is a board member on the Australian Esports Association, and *MedieKultur* journal guest editor (with Torill Mortensen) on the forthcoming special edition *Media-ludic approaches: Critical reflections on games and research practice*.