

Women in Esports Whitepaper

Background: Workshops are private afternoon sessions of 10-12 stakeholders and are focused on action points that can be developed in local context/organizations. The goals of each workshop are to *identify key areas* within the thematic framework and *document/brainstorm a range of interventions/supports* that can then be developed within ESL, as well as other companies, organizations, and communities. High value is placed on case histories, successful prior interventions, learning from failures, and empirical data. Interventions are not one size fits all but should be thought of as a menu of things stakeholders can do within their local contexts/organizations/industry. A public, live-streamed panel follows each workshop.



Introduction: In the past year, high-profile instances of harassment in the gaming community have made national news. These events afford an opportunity to examine the broader climate of esports, and gender dynamics within it that are both longstanding and rapidly shifting due to technological changes in the space. In this first of four workshops, The Win asked a select group of professional female esports players, hosts, streamers, and industry stakeholders to trace their paths through esports so as to identify the major challenges they've faced and to devise strategies for moving forward. A major goal was to see what broad themes we might learn from women who have successfully become key members of the industry.

Major themes:

1. Passion for, and dedication to, gaming and esports

"I didn't know gaming was a 'guy thing' until way later"

Many participants identified their family's attitude toward gaming as decisively shaping their involvement in the space. For some, having a brother who enjoyed gaming—and who was more likely to receive games and consoles from others—was crucial. Other parents made an active effort to ensure equal access to games and consoles, with the result being that some female gamers didn't realize the space was male-dominated until later.

One theme that was heard throughout the day was the deep love of gaming that grew into their current involvement with esports. Participants could trace their trajectories of engagement with games, often with a lot of shared delight when talking about titles. Esports is one component of a much larger integration of gaming into their lives. It is where they have focused their professional identities in various ways (from players to those working on a platform like Twitch to working for a game developer).

It was also apparent from many of the discussions that women in esports currently are there due to tremendous dedication. Many had their current, often high-profile, job after years of having done grassroots organizing, taking on lower profile jobs in various sectors of the industry, and overall working hard to achieve their current professional status. Quite a few mentioned that their desire to be a part of the community, driven by their love of gaming, led them to look for any opportunity to get involved. For many of those at the table they have been involved in the industry for over a decade, an amazing testament to their dedication to helping build the space.

2. Harassment and sexism

“Being insulted is a regular part of the job”

Gaming is not the only profession in which one might face harassment, but the frequency and volume of comments is unusual. While publicity is a big part of professional players, streamers, and hosts lives, certain sites can guarantee an enormous increase in traffic—which often comes at the cost of an uptick in harassment.

Many participants (particularly those who are public-facing) spoke of the ongoing gauntlet of abuse and harassment they face. This can range from online chat at sites broadcasting competitions to other social media platforms like Twitter or various websites. Many organizations do not moderate their channels (often hundreds of messages per minute), which conveys the message that all speech ought to be allowed in the space. Live-streamers (who are also often pro players) regularly spend multiple hours per day behind the camera broadcasting online to thousands of viewers. They often rely heavily on volunteer moderators for assistance, but the volume of comments makes this task difficult.

It is critical to note this constant culture of harassment and sexism has tremendous impact. Participants spoke of the toll it takes on their professional lives. Both offline and online harassment have put esports women in positions where they could not respond for fear of professional retaliation, have caused them concerned for their safety (including doxxing, etc.), and have resulted in their withdrawing or leaving organizations due to the wear and tear of constant harassment. While the participants expressed a tremendous amount of resiliency, it was clear that they regularly have to navigate very difficult terrain.

3. Support networks & role models

“It’s important to see women supporting each other.”

A powerful, consistent pattern with our workshop participants was evidence of the positive impact of having both role models and a support network. They are perhaps particularly unique in having built connections over many years in the industry and often through hub organizations like the FragDolls (founded by Morgan Romine). Many consistently referred to each other as having played a powerful role in not only bringing them into the industry, but retaining them. A number of times participants spoke of seeing a higher profile woman in esports and feeling inspired they could also be involved. They spoke powerfully about their support networks with others (both men and women) as a key factor in helping them navigate the harassment or challenges of

working in the space. The theme of having someone who was also committed to your success was key; someone who could give you honest but supportive feedback, who could cheer you on, who could help you when you faced particularly challenging/harassing moments. These networks operate as powerful sites of inspiration for the women, who simultaneously support each other as peers but also look up to one another.

Perhaps because of how significant a role these networks have played amongst our participants, one of the challenges outlined was the current lack of visible role models and existing communities of like-minded players within game culture broadly. Women gamers often don't know where or how to find other women gamers. This can lead to a defeating sense of isolation both in gaming communities and industry environments. Participants emphasized that providing more ways for women to connect with other women both socially and professionally could help to spur the growth of more of these crucial support networks.

4. Male allies

“People said ‘I never realized this happened to you’”

From the first moments of the workshop it was clear participants felt there was a necessary and critical role for male allies in supporting and growing women's participation in esports. While we had constructed this first workshop to be women-only so as to really dig into their stories and histories, everyone felt that men will play a crucial role in supporting any diversity efforts going forward. Though participants at times spoke of individual men in their lives who had acted as behind-the-scenes support, the lack of high profile visible allies who would actively speak up, take action, and get involved in helping shift cultures of toxicity and harassment was discussed. The issue of educating and empowering male allies was seen a critical next step in change.

Live-streamed panel: The workshop was followed by a public panel the next day at TwitchCon entitled “Women in Esports.” The participants were Amy Brady (Twitch), Kim Phan (Blizzard), Rachel “Seltzer” Quirico (host & interviewer), T.L. Taylor (MIT, moderator), and Rumay “Hafu” Wang (pro player). A recording of the session can be found at <http://www.twitch.tv/twitchconsandstorm/v/17809341>. While the online Twitch chat was yet more evidence of some of the issues raised in the workshop and panel (examples available upon request), we received a lot of great feedback and support overall. The audience onsite was several hundred, online up to 3700, and also resulted in a *Forbes* article (<http://www.forbes.com/sites/richardprocter/2015/09/25/women-streamers-twitch-chat/>). Many of the themes discussed in the workshop were raised and panelists shared their stories and insights with the audience.



Interventions: One of the most exciting things from the workshop discussions was the amount of energy and creativity participants had for thinking about various solutions, interventions, and actions ESL, the community, and the esports industry could take to address key critical areas. These included:

- Moderation tools (both better tools for human mods and better bots/automation) and strategies for better online streaming management by tournament organizers.
- Codes of conduct & safe spaces at conventions and tournaments.
- Mentorship programs, internships, and supporting professional development.
- Meet-ups and networking programs both offline and online, focusing on having gaming in common.
- Best practices and media training.
- Visibility and accessibility of role models; an ambassador network for grassroots outreach.
- Resources for harassment and on call assistance.
- Research & data “hub” to help people debunk myths, provide data-driven support for organizational change, etc.
- Female only tournaments (debated but many agreed with the sentiment “*We need places to learn what it is to compete without being trashed*”), walk-up (low stakes) competitions at conventions and events, supporting play at collegiate and lower levels.
- Help from male allies in setting behavioral norms in their online communities.
- Resources for helping to find existing, supportive communities and build new ones.
- Awareness programs for recruiting and educating potential allies.