Countering Hate in Esports and Gaming 10/23/23

1. Executive Summary

Esports is a near two billion dollar industry, with significant global impact culturally. The industry has been growing significantly since the 2010s, and is expected to grow at around 25% per year until 2030. Those projections however may be somewhat conservative. Nations such as Saudi Arabia have invested heavily into esports, already the singular nation has invested billions in the space, and Bloomberg expects the investment to continue hitting around $30 billion dollars by 2030[1].

Esports also has attracted investment from major celebrities. Drake, Steph Currey, and Michael Jordan all have just to name a few[2]. In addition to investment some huge celebrities still play the games without having direct involvement. These include Ben Affleck, AOC, Snoop Dogg, and Nicki Minaj. The latter two actually have fully custom skins in Call of Duty that players can purchase.

Viewership is measured in CCV, or concurrent viewers. This is a snippet of all viewers watching at a specific time, not total viewership during the event. As for viewership and engagement metrics League of Legends which is the world's most played game boasted over 40 million viewers for the League Championship Series Finals in 2021[3]. It had a peak concurrent viewership of over 70 million viewers. Counter-Strike's IEM Cologne tournament in 2022 was its most watched ever with over 1 million concurrent viewers[4]. Rocket League, another popular esport, garnered over 300,000 concurrent viewers for its finals[5].

 In addition to the financial growth, celebrity involvement, and high viewership numbers for tournaments, these games still are massive outside of the dedicated esports community. League of Legends boasts over 120 million monthly players[6]. The current top 5 most played games on the platform Steam are all competitive and boast over 100,000 current players, with Counter-Strike 2 currently holding over one million[7]. Gaming, and specifically competitive games are played by millions of individuals around the world. They represent an opportunity for people to learn about each other, or could emerge as avenues for hate speech and discrimination.

2. CAH Involvement

The CAH has a unique opportunity to get involved in this growing sphere. Although gaming may be global, and therefore somewhat inherently diverse, extreme social issues still exist. It isn't rare to find users engaged in racist, anti-Semitic, homophobic, and other forms of hate speech.

The ADL's 2022 "State of the Game Survey" found that 1 in 10 players between the ages of 1317 are exposed to white supremacist ideology. 4 out of 5 adult gamers face harassment when engaging with online games. In the 13-17 age group, around 30% have had to quit playing specific games because of how bad the harassment was.

When the CAH conducted our original survey of attendees at Tekko, we found similar responses. Here is a collection of quotes from respondents.

> "Hate and discrimination absolutely ruins the experience of online gaming. There are games I have stopped playing (dead by daylight) or avoid altogether due to the toxic discrimination that takes place in their communities."
> "Gender/anti LGBTQ discrimination in response to someone's voice in chat; all slurs used openly and randomly"
> "Gatekeeping gender. Toxicity trying to mask as racial jokes"
> "Hate speech. Worst part is, I don't think they say it with care to the minorities they are based on. Just like saying horrible things."
> "As a female I mask my voice or don't join vc to avoid ire. "

These types of statements are even more true as one climbs the ranks. It isn't rare to see professional players embroiled in some form of controversy regarding statements made, or actions taken to gatekeeper individuals from what they view as undesirable.

Outside of the social end, gaming has become an important area for political demonstration and discussion. This however leads to significant problems, and developers having to figure out where the line is between protected political speech, and legitimate hate speech and extremism. Just in the past few weeks Adin Ross, a major gaming streamer on Kick.tv called for liberals to be "hung from trees". Until the gaming industry is provided with standards, guidelines, and tools to aid in countering hateful content - these problems will continue to impact how people can enjoy games.

3. Research Track 1: Qualitative

3.1 Objective: Provide standards and guidance for developers in gaming to combat hate and extremism.

Developers have told us that they view there to be a lack of standards in the gaming industry for how to deal with extremist and hateful content. This results in an unfortunate disconnect between developers with how this content should be dealt with. This track of researchers is seeking to create a set of standards for how developers could address these types of issues. This is especially important for smaller independent studios who may lack any reference for how to do so.

Sub track 1: Qualitative Interviewing

The goal of this track is to tell the stories of gamers who have experienced hate and extremist content while engaging with games. We hope to take these stories, and use them to inform the development of open-source tools and publicly accessible standards for developers of all sizes to use.

Sub Track 2: Survey

Conducting additional surveys focusing on a specific question will help us to identify what causes instances of hate speech and extremism to break out in an online chat. There has been a significant amount of research done into the quantitative measurement of hate, but not much has been done into what actually triggers someone to engage in hate speech in a game. We hope to conduct a survey to analyze what those trigger moments are, and identify methods to reduce them.

4. Research Track 1: Qualitative

4.1 Objective: Create open-source tools for developers to use to combat hate.

After having engaged with developers from Roblox, Schell Games, Meta, Niantic, and others there is a clear and distinct need for more open source tooling within gaming to counter hate and extremism. This leads to two main goals within tech:

1. The production of a public data set to train models on.
2. The creation of open-source tools to use in games.

Carnegie Mellon University

University of Pittsburgh

Including the dearth of tools, there is a substantial lack of easily accessible data for researchers from any background to access. Game developers are bound by GPDR, DSA, and Child protection legislation which makes external data sharing almost impossible. Due to the lack of data, developers can not release transparent benchmarks regarding how their software for moderation functions. A developer can publicly state that a model has an F1 score of .9 and 90% accuracy, but there aren't any good ways to verify it externally. Creating a public data set would allow for better benchmarking, and an increase in the ability for researchers to create models in the space.

Partially due to the lack of data, there is a significant lack of tools in gaming for moderation. This hampers smaller developers who may be releasing their first game with multiplayer or competitive ends.