

# **Well Played**

**a journal on video games,  
value and meaning**

**A Special Issue on Esports and Community**

**EDITED BY BARRY JOSEPH, STAN ALTMAN,  
& NICHOLAS FORTUGNO**

**VOLUME 12 NUMBER 1**



Well Played (Vol. 12, No. 1)



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*A Special Issue on Esports and Community*

*BARRY JOSEPH, STAN ALTMAN, AND  
NICHOLAS FORTUGNO*

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# The City College of New York

Since 1847, The City College of New York has provided a high-quality and affordable education to generations of New Yorkers in a wide variety of disciplines. CCNY embraces its position at the forefront of social change. It is ranked #1 by the Harvard, #3 by DegreeChoices and in the top 1.8% worldwide by the Center for World University Rankings. In each instance they are lauded for upward mobility, access and outcomes for our graduates, and academic excellence. At City College, more than 15,000 students pursue undergraduate and graduate degrees in eight schools and divisions, driven by significant funded research, creativity and scholarship. In 2022, CCNY launched its most expansive fundraising campaign, ever. The campaign, titled “Doing Remarkable Things Together” seeks to bring the College’s Foundation to more than \$1 billion in total assets in support of the College mission. CCNY is as diverse, dynamic and visionary as New York City itself.





# Introduction

## *Esports as Community*

BARRY JOSEPH

The Well Played Journal is a forum for in-depth close readings of video games that parse out the various meanings to be found in the experience of playing a game. This special issue is uniquely focused on esports as an emerging type of community, largely within the context of colleges and universities.

How do college esports clubs facilitate campus social life?

How do the communication systems within competitive games constrain and enable fan/player relationships?

How do these same systems limit gender equity among players?

These questions and more will be explored in the following pages.

This issue differs from others in the Well Played series in a number of ways.

First, this is being produced through a team that recently launched a public pathway to the gaming industry, composed of high school programs in low-resourced communities that lead to a new undergraduate degree in game design at the City College of New York (CCNY), with both connected to local gaming industry leaders (both AAA and indie). This Gaming Pathways Program launched in spring of 2022 through five public events, from which all of the content of this journal are drawn: two evenings of Well Played lectures, two afternoons of esports competitions, and one press conference with the mayor of New York City.

Second, as this publication draws from these public events, the diversity of voices represented across those events are reflected within these pages: college students, academics, gaming professionals and, yes, even a mayor and (separately) a nerdcore rapper. (While most Well Played articles are peer reviewed, our chapters followed a different publication path).

Third, all of these chapters were designed to be presented orally. We have worked with the contributors to adapt them where possible for print; for others we retained the conversational tone if that format was preferred.

Like all Well Played Journals, we focus here on one topic (esports as community). Through different voices and perspectives we try to understand the topic in a new way, through careful analysis and understanding the topic from the inside out.

The journal opens, echoing each of our events, with wise words from former educator and nerdcore rapper Mega Ran, who wrote these lyrics for his song celebrating how games offer a wide range of pathways to careers in everything from “information tech to architects.”

Then, Stan Altman, the Director of the Gaming Pathways Program, introduces the new initiative and sets some context. In “Games as Gateway to College,” Nick Fortungo, the educational director of the game design program at CCNY, makes the case that esports are “a great preparation for college, because now you have an angle to connect with the people around you...” This theme of esports creating communities on college campuses is explored from a personal angle in “The Power of Collegiate Esports Clubs,” as college student Matthew Lopez recounts his experience during the global pandemic finding connections through the CCNY Club. Finally, Jessie Su, attending the same school, argues for a more inclusive definition of community within her article, “Women Gamers Comming within a Toxic Community.”

The last collection of essays move from a college level to a city-wide and national level. Asi Burak, a professional in the industry, recounts his experience building a city-wide esports community through the first major esports competition held at Madison Square Garden. Masaya Heywood, a college student, follows-up with an analysis of how the needs of esports athletes differ from traditional sports, generating different fan cultures, for better and for worse. Finally, Eric Adams, the Mayor of New York City, makes the case of leveling up New York City to become a major center for gaming within the nation.

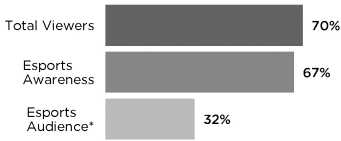
As there is so much more to be explored regarding esports and community,

this collection is intended to generate conversations and inspire others to do the same.

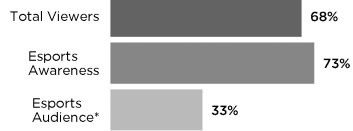
So, if you are game for it: tag – you're it!

**VIEWING & ESPORTS**

**Distribution | Gen Alpha**



**Distribution | Gen Z**



**Top Reasons to View | Gen Alpha Viewers**  
Rated 5, 6, or 7 out of 7

- #1 Get ideas on things to do in games and new ways to play 81%
- #2 Learn from other (professional) players 81%
- #3 See high-level gameplay / skills 80%

**Top Reasons to View | Gen Z Viewers**  
Rated 5, 6, or 7 out of 7

- #1 See high-level gameplay / skills 75%
- #2 Get ideas on things to do in games and new ways to play 73%
- #3 Learn from other (professional) players 71%

\*Esports Audience: Gaming video content viewers that watched esports in the past 12 months.

*Levels of interest in viewing gaming videos and in esports among Gen Alpha and Gen Z. Additional game-related research and reports can be found at Newzoo, who provided the above information. .*



# I. Gaming Pathways

*a theme song*

MEGA RAN

*In the spring of 2022, each event for the Gaming Pathways Program opened with a music video commissioned from the educator and rapper Mega Ran. It was created to highlight the ways gaming can inspire youth to integrate student's passions with life and career goals. Below are the lyrics (the video itself can be found on YouTube). We recommend reading this out loud.*

Yo, did you know that so many people in so many prominent vocations have their love and appreciation for video games to thank for it?

True story.

My momma told me I was wasting my time  
All that did was make me stay on the grind  
For all the nights I stayed in to write  
Video games might've saved my life  
AND THATS REAL

So here's a little story I'd like to tell  
About one shy kid coming out of his shell  
Thanks to video games, he claimed victory  
And, oh yeah, that kid was me

I heard somebody say "video games make you violent, dude"  
When I hear that kinda talk I really get confused  
Because there's so much violent imagery on nightly news  
For the charges brought against me, I stand accused

Are they distracting? Honestly, I hope they are  
Because my breathing techniques only will take me so far  
I know so many super talented programmers and artists  
And a career in video games is the perfect target

Remember 2020 right when COVID hit



We couldn't go outside, I was 'bout to throw a fit  
Man, I was over it,  
I could barely cope with it  
Then Animal Crossing dropped, and it was so legit

Just when I was heated and completely defeated,  
It was calming and gave me the distraction I needed  
So continuous and fluid, so you don't really need to beat it,  
There's no need to stress out about unlocking achievements

See! And they could help you in similar ways  
Civil engineers and teachers all influenced by games  
So on any career path you decide to embark  
I guarantee video games play significant parts

They said:  
Games were a waste of time,  
Now we gotta change their mind  
Make 'em see that that's another antiquated state of mind  
We can move into the future while they choose to  
Stay behind

Information tech to architects making great designs  
Step into the great beyond, empower and inspire  
motivate and encouraging all your wildest desires  
The future of education, in every part of the nation  
But still they look at it like it's a quadratic equation

Peep game!  
It's impacts on social interactions  
Pathways through gaming to cash in on passions  
Video games run the world  
So opportunities are popping up like microtransactions  
In Fortnite, now we got the foresight  
Artists and creators that are gamers need some more light  
We learn to overcome, brainstorm our way through an obstacle  
Get your head in the game, and you'll be unstoppable!



## 9 in 10

Gen Alpha and Gen Z are game enthusiasts, respectively, compared to 79% of the total online population



## 70%

of Gen Z are interested in socializing in in-game worlds beyond game play in the future (% definitely/probably)



## 1 in 2

Gen Alpha and Gen Z spend money on video games, respectively, compared to 42% of the total online population

*Young people are interested in games, socializing in in-game worlds, and spending money on video games. Additional game-related research and reports can be found at Newzoo, who provided the above information.*



## 2. The Digital Gaming Pathway Program

*using digital games to diversify the tech fields*

STAN ALTMAN

*In this chapter, Stan Altman introduces the new Gaming Pathways Program which produced this special edition of the Well Played Journal. Stan is the Director of the Gaming Pathways Program and Professor at City College of New York.*

How can we eliminate systemic obstacles that have prevented Black and brown students from pursuing careers in the technology sectors?

It has been well documented that tech corporations have a need for skilled personnel that is unmet by the available workforce. At the same time, large number of Black and brown students are unable to fill these jobs for lacking the required skills and knowledge. This is one of the challenges that the City University of New York (CUNY) works to meet.

The CUNY is the nation's largest urban public university, a transformative engine of social mobility that is a critical component of the lifeblood of New York City. Founded in 1847 as the nation's first free public institution of higher education, CUNY today has 25 colleges spread across New York City's five boroughs, serving 243,000 degree-seeking students of all ages and awarding 55,000 degrees each year.

More than 80 percent of the University's graduates stay in New York, contributing to all aspects of the city's economic, civic and cultural life and diversifying the city's workforce in every sector. The University's historic mission continues to this day: provide a public first-rate education to all students, regardless of means or background. For example, over 50% of its students are Black or brown and over 50 percent report an annual household income of less than \$30,000.

After more than two decades working at CUNY, I learned that many Black

and brown students had received negative messages growing up that they couldn't expect to succeed in STEM fields. With little to no awareness of pathways for success, many abandoned their hopes and dreams. To change this paradigm, others from CUNY and I founded the Harlem Gallery of Science (HGS) in 2016, weaving together the arts and STEM fields to create interactive exhibits and culturally relevant programs for igniting and nurturing the interests of Black and brown youth.

After exploring exhibits on sports and music, then starting a STEM mentoring program, HGS shifted its focus to digital games. We wondered how digital gaming, as a familiar activity to youth of color, might prepare them for careers in the technology sectors. To find out, a joint study conducted in 2021 by HGS and CUNY's City College of New York (CCNY) revealed that the skills developed included creative thinking, teamwork, leadership, and complex problem solving and communication skills. For example, one female gamer in a Bronx high school, when asked what career she intended to pursue, quickly responded that she wanted to be a physician assistant in an emergency room. When asked how playing video games helped her achieve these goals, she said she plays games to develop the same skills she will need to succeed in an emergency room, by playing games in which she has to think quickly, make decisions, and work closely with team members.

In response, in partnership with CCNY, HGS established the Gaming Pathways Program, to open new opportunities for education and employment for Black and brown youth within the digital gaming industry within New York City.

There are many programs that try to address developing a more diverse workforce that reflects the demographics of New York City. Some focus on high school programs. Some focus on college-based programs that reach out through a variety of after school programs. Some offer grants and scholarships and support programs to try to identify talented students of color. However, much of these efforts tend to be disjointed and not connected.

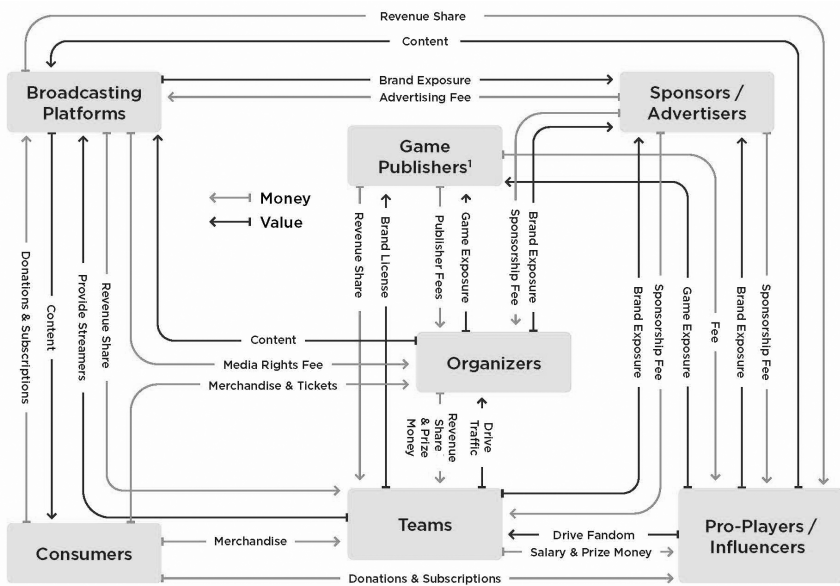
The Gaming Pathways Program addresses this through being designed as a system that eliminates the disconnecting gaps that often impede students' progress. It includes a high school program run by our partners at Urban

Arts, a new CCNY undergraduate bachelor's degree program in game design, and opportunities to connect with NYC's AAA and indie gaming companies.

Last year the NYC Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment published a report titled *Impact of the Digital Gaming Industry on NYC Economy* and concluded that the city was well positioned to expand its share of the rapidly growing digital gaming industry. Digital gaming is an industry showing explosive world-wide growth, with many well-paying tech and arts jobs. At present New York City currently ranks No. 5 in the country in economic impact from the gaming industry. The Mayor is committed to making NYC a hub for digital games. NYC will require a significant expansion of the local workforce if the city is to achieve this goal. Thus, it was a natural fit when the Gaming Pathways Program was launched through a partnership with the NYC Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment, funding the program through a \$2M contract with CCNY for the term January 1, 2022 through June 30, 2024.

Our first efforts to engage everyone – specifically high school and college students, NYC gaming industry leaders, and game-study academics – is documented within these pages. In the spring of 2022, we offered a series of public events focused on esports – both competitions and lectures. Each essay within this special issue of the *Well Played Journal* began as a presentation at one of those events. We hope, taken together, they can offer readers a glimpse into the issues addressed and some of the lessons learned during the launch of the Gaming Pathways Program, as well as a hint of the great things to come.





The boundaries of the esports industry. Additional game-related research and reports can be found at Newzoo, who provided the above information. .

# 3. Games as Gateway to College

## *why colleges should value esports*

NICK FORTUGNO

In this chapter, Nick Fortugno makes the case that esports provides preparation for life on a college campus and is a powerful socializing tool once one has arrived. Nick Fortugno is a game designer, gamification expert and entrepreneur of digital and real-world games. Nick is the educational director of the game design program at the City College of New York in the City University of New York, which is part of the Gaming Pathways program. He is also the Chief Creative Officer of Playmatics, a company that creates highly-engaging games, media, user experiences, and applications on the internet, social media networks, and a variety of connected platforms. Nick is also a co-founder of the Come Out and Play street games festival hosted in New York City.

It makes me happy to be here at City College talking about esports and I want to explain why.

There are two things I want to address really quickly at the start. We are here in this really beautiful room, on this really beautiful campus, and we're talking about esports. I don't know about you, but that strikes me as weird because, growing up, people talked about games with me in negative terms. I have a deep knowledge about games, but that's not something I necessarily got a lot of love or praise or respect for growing up, certainly not from adults in my life. I'm sure you have had similar experiences, hearing many things about why you shouldn't play games.

What DO you hear about why you shouldn't play games?

Audience members shout out:

- It's addictive.
- It's a waste of time.
- It rots your brain.
- It makes you violent.

- You can't tell the difference between the real world and the fake world.
- You spend all your time indoors.

All sounds familiar, right? And yes, we hear that about games. But what I find really fascinating is that I can read you quotes from the 18th century that are exactly the same condemnations about novels. Here are a few.

The minds of novel readers are intoxicated, their rest is broken, their health shattered, and their prospect of usefulness blighted. (“Moral Poison”: The Evils of Reading Novels, 1864)

Childishness in boys even of good ability seems to be a growing fault; and I do not know what to ascribe it, except to the great number of exciting books of amusement...that leave [a boy] totally palled...

... meaning like their skin has no color because they've been inside all day...

... not only for his regular work, but for literature of all sort.

I have seen a young lady with her table loaded with volumes of fictitious trash, poring day after day and night after night over highly wrought scenes and skillfully portrayed pictures of romance, until her cheeks grew pale, her eyes became wild and restless, and her mind wandered and was lost... She was insane, incurably insane from reading novels.” (A Massachusetts physician in 1864)

So when you hear that stuff, it's nothing new. In fact, it's SO not new that I can point to a name at the center of the window behind me and tell the same story. That name, hanging over this entire hall, is Socrates.

Do you know how Socrates died? Do you know what the crime was that got him killed?

He was killed for corrupting the youth of his era.

So this idea that the mediums that we participate with – the activities that younger people do, that the communities of younger people involved in things that interest them and challenge them and bond them – is something that rots their brains... well, I think that's a very old message that gets drum beat into every new generation by the last one whenever the new thing comes along.

So you should know that you're not alone in hearing these things, and getting this kind of criticism. And I think the example of the novel is super interesting because, now, if older family members of yours saw you reading novels, they would jump for joy at the fact that you're spending your time doing something valuable. And we can only think that games will be THAT in 150 years, because we will have something else that will be rotting the brains of our children and grandchildren by then, there will be something else that's wasting their time and keeping them away from the things that they should be doing. There will be something else that corrupts them.

And why I like being here, in this room, with these names behind me and with the kind of company we are keeping, is that we're in an institution of learning talking about games. I think that's amazing because games are not just the negative things that we hear about them – games have all of these positive aspects too. Gaming communities can be more inclusive. Games can raise challenging topics. Games can bring people together. But what I want to talk about is why that's valuable to college specifically. That is, why are we talking about esports in college? And why do colleges even have esports at all?

Part of the reason why is this question of how esports are sports. What does it mean that an esports is a sport? How is playing *League of Legends* like playing a sport?

*Audience members shout out:*

- *There's training. You practice and you get better.*
- *There is strategy. When you play you have to think.*
- *You put together a team that works together.*
- *It's a pathway to a kind of profession. You can be a professional player.*
- *If you achieve in it, you can go to competitions.*

There's another thing that I think is really interesting. When we talk about sports at college, I think we are often thinking about big sports. We think about big basketball at college. We think about big American football at college. We think about these activities that draw crowds and money.

But there's a whole other part of collegiate sports, which is people playing together on campus. Just this idea that you play on an esports team, like

you're playing League of Legend with people or Overwatch with people or even Smash with people. You're hanging out in the room training together, which is just time doing the same task as a team. And how many of you have just kind of stumbled into the spaces where you play these games, whether it's an online search for players, or you go to an esports lounge where you can play with people, and you meet people, and you bond with people in those contexts? These people become friends. These people become teammates. You strategize with them and you build those social relationships.

Colleges recognize that. Colleges like to see that people do that, especially for people coming in to college for the first time, as it becomes this really amazing way for people to make friends and connect and find community. Sports have done that traditionally. But sports are not for everyone. Not everyone is going to compete in those kinds of activities. Esports are another way of achieving the bonds and communities that sports do.

It's not a shock that sports and esports do this. It's actually another really important part of what games are, and there's a whole philosophy in games around just what it is like to play with other people and how that creates bonds and community.

Have you ever played that game when you were a little kid where you have a big parachute and they throw the parachute up and then you have to run under it? That game was designed by a game designer and theorist named Bernie De Koven. And De Koven, who passed away three years ago, was the proponent of a whole school of games that was thinking about these questions of bonds and community. It was called the New Games movement. It centered around thinking about games as an activity that people did together for a reason.

De Koven wrote a book called *The Playful Path*. This is a really wonderful book, and if you want to shut up everyone who hates that you play games, give them a copy. It contains the idea that just by playing a game together, any game with other people, you connect with the people you are playing with. De Koven calls this co-liberation. The "co-" means to cooperate. You play the parachute game, and you're going to run and have to track where everybody is. And you all have to be in sequence together to get through the parachute together. You have to sync up your activity with everyone else

playing to do this right. If you play an esports game together, you have to strategize together. You've got to be in rhythm with your team. Everybody in that system is playing at the same time thinking together, coordinating together, working together. Playing games such as League of Legends brings you into tight connection with your teammates.

The game can be seen as just a vehicle to do that. It's an excuse to spend a half an hour with six or seven people just working together in the same system.

And what De Koven points out is that there's something really freeing about that. That's the "liberation" part of co-liberation. There's something wonderful about the idea that, "I'm just going to be in this space with you for half an hour. And we're just going to do this thing together." We know we're going to have a good time. We know that because we're going to be with people we care about doing a thing together. And that can be competitive, or that can be collaborative. That can be hard or casual. That can be long or quick. But what we end up doing is all engaging in a system at the same time. And that leads us to bond, that leads us to connect in ways that we might not in other contexts.

I have run a festival with a few other people for the past 16 years called Come Out and Play. We just run games in public. Real dumb, simple games. Games with, like, lots of dodge balls or pool noodles, where maybe you just run around the streets tagging each other and stuff like that. Why do we run this thing? We can get like a couple thousand people out to one of those festivals. Why? Because it's free and people are happy to just show up and play games.

But what happens when you play games with a stranger? Well, it's hard to meet strangers. It's awkward to talk to people you don't know. You know what makes it not awkward? Having something to do. If you want it to be even less awkward, have something stupid to do, because no one's going to be precious or pretentious about doing something stupid.

If I run up to you and I say, "Hold this pool noodle with me while we run across the street and make sure we don't drop the ball that's resting on the top of the pool noodle," nobody's taking that seriously. We're just going to be silly and laugh together while we do it. And that kind of magic — that I can



just make a thing that just makes you coordinate and laugh and bond with someone you don't know, in a safe way – there's a kind of magic to that.

And we know from research that those kinds of connections are what get people through college. Having people you trust and care about with you, helping you, working with you. And games build that. They build it automatically, independent of game content, independent of type of gameplay.

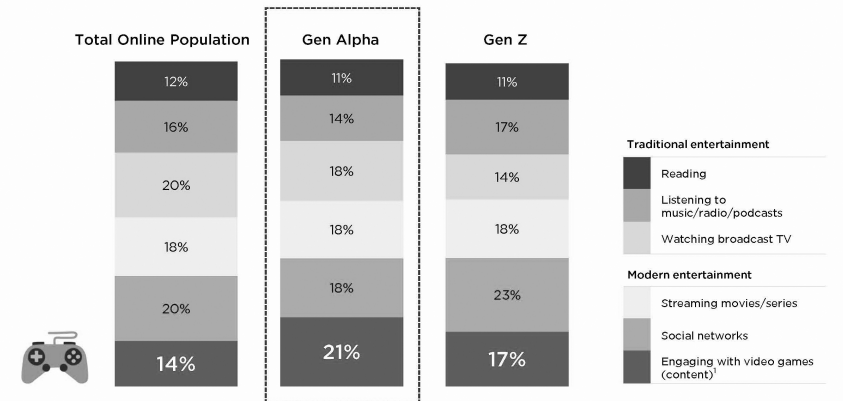
We want to teach you games because games can be a job and that's a good thing. We want to teach you games because games are an art form, a really cutting edge art form, and there's a lot of opportunity to make something new if you want to do that.

But they're also a chance for you to meet and connect with people and have a safe way of being part of a community. And if nothing else, there's a level of college which is a community, a community of thinkers, a community of learners, a community of practitioners. Games are a vehicle to bring you in.

I would say that esports, in some ways, is a great preparation for college, because they give you an angle to connect with the people around you through something that trains you, something that disciplines you, something that gives you an excuse to spend time connecting to other people. That's something that I think colleges value.

That's why it makes me happy to be here just to talk about esports. It's a fun tool for people to connect in a place that's meant to connect them.

**% LEISURE TIME SPENT PER WEEK PER ENTERTAINMENT PLATFORM (OUTSIDE OF WORK)**  
 Base: Total online population



*The percentage of leisure time spent playing games. Additional game-related research and reports can be found at Newzoo, who provided the above information.*



## 4. The Power of Collegiate Esports Clubs

*collegiate gaming during COVID*

MATTHEW LOPEZ

*Matthew Lopez explores the theme of esports as community from a personal angle, recounting his experience during the global pandemic finding connections through his school's esports Club. Matthew is a graduating senior at the City College of New York (CCNY). He majored in political science, is the president of the CCNY Esports Club, and is a resident of the Bronx.*

I currently am the president of CCNY's Esports Club, but I'd like to take us back, about two and a half years, to the very start of the pandemic, when video games were still a large part of my own life but in a very different way than today.

Back then, having video games as an outlet for myself, to just enjoy and relax and be social with some of my IRL [in real life] friends, was normal to me. Every day, I'd come back home from school or work and then play some games with friends I had just seen.

But as the pandemic started to roll in, and as things really changed, especially for me and my family, video games started to take on a different role, as did much of regular life.

Being home all day had an impact. It definitely had an impact on my college experience. It had an impact on my mental state as well. A lot of unfortunate passings really took a toll on me, mentally. And even though video games were still there for me, they were not the same.

I took it upon myself to make an investment. I was at a low point in my life, both in school and mentally, and I decided that I would try to turn it around.

I invested in a PC for myself. I decided, "You know what? I'm not going to be

going out. I'm not going to be doing anything else. This could be something that I could do positively for myself." And so I did.

I went through the grueling task of putting a PC together. Not only did I do it for one person, but I did it for three people. And through that, I found something that I hadn't really known existed before.

You see, I had been a console gamer. The CCNY Esports Club here on campus did exist, but it existed mostly through playing League of Legends, an online, PC game that just didn't interest me as a console player.

But having a PC made me think, "Well, maybe there is something to this. Maybe I can dip my toe in the water and get social."

I'm a senior now. And I've had some experiences on campus but, to my own regret, a lot of it was really just spent going to class, getting something from the cafeteria, and then just going straight home. It was the same process, every single day.

Socializing was just not on my radar. School and work and other responsibilities were really taking up a lot of my time.

But being on the CCNY Esports Discord channel, and knowing that there was a community of people that I could connect with, was something unique, something that I hadn't experienced before. I leaned into that. I wanted to make it something that I could come to rely on. And so I did.

For about a year and semester, along with five fantastic friends that I had made through direct messaging on Discord and bothering them to play Rainbow Six Siege, I played on a competitive team to represent CCNY. We went out and played.

And let me tell you something: We were awful. I think we only won one game. I still feel the vibe from it – fantastic times. But I think the important thing to come out of that experience was I had done something that I had never done before: I socialized. I felt like I was a part of a community.

That experience really meant something to me.

I decided to take it even further. I put myself out there and said, "I want to become the president of this club. I want to enact the same change in people

coming in. I want them to recognize the power of community that we really do have here.”

And that’s what this Gaming Pathways Project is all about, bringing so many people together.

I feel like my socialization, through the CCNY Esports Club, through all the games that we play, through all the new games that I play, has really brought me to a different state of mind, one where I feel motivated, where I feel like I can shape my future with my own two hands.

I can move forward now and envision a better future for myself than I probably could have two years ago.

There’s something completely unique to esports: the idea that virtually you can know so many people, and feel closer to them without meeting in person than even some of my friends in real life. That is something I genuinely wish to see expand.

This has helped me personally and it’s something that I want to help other people see and embrace as well.

As Collegiate esports gets larger and larger, I think people will start to come to realize that this is just a part of college life as we know it. It truly is. The amount of times that me and my friends have spent at night gaming, or looking at worksheets, studying for tests, these are aspects of socialization that just would not have been possible.

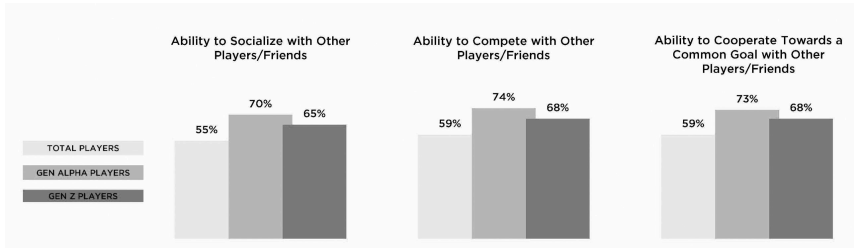
For me, personally, the motivation to get involved with CCNY’s Esports Club was the saving grace of the pandemic. It propelled me to take responsibilities that I might not have taken. It made me accountable. It made me feel like I’m welcome. Most importantly, it made me feel like I am a part of CCNY.

When I talk to people who aren’t at CCNY, when I play games with them, the first thing that I always tell them is I played Rainbow Six Siege on a CCNY team. I was the captain. I was the in-game leader. This is something that I take pride in, in the same way that an athlete at any college takes pride in the fact that they played lacrosse or soccer for their school. I take that exact same pride.

For these reasons alone, gaming and esports and these club environments



should continue to be expanded all over the country within college life in ways that are not only accessible to everybody, but open and welcoming to all.



*The importance of social features in games. Additional game-related research and reports can be found at Newzoo, who provided the above information.*

# 5. Women Gamers Comming within a Toxic Community

*threats & opportunities*

JESSIE SU

*Jessie Su explores how design decisions that shape communication systems within esports games can either support gender inclusivity or work against it, each generating their own types of gaming communities. Jessie is a Junior at CCNY studying computer science. She played League of Legend competitively for CCNY and is now ranking-up in Valorant. She runs her own Discord server and Twitch channel.*

I want to talk about how I got into gaming.

The first game that I started playing was League of Legends. Since the communication structure in that game was limited to text chat and pings, that made it easier for me to play without revealing to anyone that I was a woman playing video games.

You see, back then, six years ago in high school, I was scared to tell people that I played games. A lot of my friends that were girls didn't play games. All they wanted to do was go out to eat or do their makeup. So when I would go home, I was really happy to play League of Legends because it was fun to play and I didn't have to worry about being a girl playing games.

I met a lot of people playing League. I also joined an organization that ran tournaments for League. That's how I got into competitive gaming. I met people who were thousands of miles away. After school I would just get on and hang out with them. They became a group of people I could play with and talk to. I consider them close friends now, because that's just how gaming is: a tight knit community of friends you find online.

When I went to college, the game Valorant came out. At first I played Valorant casually. To compete, however, you need to use voice chat if you want to climb the ranks. My friend warned me, saying, "Oh, it's really toxic.

Don't talk in the game." So I was scared to talk. I didn't want to get flamed or harassed by males in the game, just because I'm a woman. So I was scared to play competitively, as I was scared to use voice chat, scared to talk. I had been told how toxic the community was, for me as a woman in a male dominated community.

And then COVID hit. Now that I was in lockdown, I had more free time. I thought to myself, "I don't want to play Valorant just for fun anymore. I kind of want to rank up." I like being competitive. But if you want to rank up you have to use voice chat. The communication structure required me to use voice chat to speak my mind about what strategy my team should use. It was not designed to be gender inclusive. Once I speak and they hear my voice, they'll be toxic to me.

But how was I supposed to climb if I was too scared to talk?

And I had good reasons to be scared. I saw female players getting flamed on TikTok saying how we are boosted. If you do bad you can feel everyone watching your every move; if you whiff, they're gonna say that you're a bad player, even if it was just a minor mess up. If you're second to last you're still gonna get blamed because you're a woman, over a male in the last spot. This is interesting because we can connect this back to the real world where women often aren't allowed to make mistakes in the workforce.

In April of 2022, a man on Twitter, @\_Od26, conducted an experiment to see how it was as a woman playing Valorant. He said"

I played under a girls name and no com'd for a week in both imm3/  
radiant and gold-immortal<sup>1</sup> just as an experiment to see how big of a  
difference there was... this is what I found.

Out of the 60 games I played while in lower elo<sup>2</sup> I had 3 people

1. These are highly ranked players within the game.
2. The Elo ranking system, originally designed for Chess, is now used in a number of sports and games, including esports.

intentionally throw games over the simple fact I was a girl. I was also dodged<sup>3</sup> significantly more than I'm used to when smurfing<sup>4</sup>.

Not only this but when I played I was watched much more closely. Even though I was way better than everyone my actions were judged much more heavily and for the 3 games I went negative there were sexist comments in each of them.

And this is just the surface of it, because he didn't talk at all.

Now I will also say because I typically over-performed in lobbies in this elo I was given praise at a much higher rate and the amount of friend request [sic] I was sent was extremely disproportionate. Which was weird to me.

My final conclusion was being a girl in lower elo is that you're watched much more closely and judged much harsher than you should be. Although the praise/compliments were nice the trade off was sexism so it's obviously not worth it.

Gaming can create a tight knit community but there are people within the community that look down upon women. The gaming community should be more welcoming to others that are not male in order to create a more exclusive gaming community.

To summarize so far: the voice chat communication structure in games like Valorant are not gender inclusive because it is a male-dominated community. The design of Valorant makes competitive players use the voice comms in order to make winning more likely, and women are made uncomfortable to speak because they feel they're going to get flamed for talking.

What solutions are there? Sure, the developers can make the reporting

3. Queue dodging is canceling a match before it begins, which is generally disliked and may penalize the player.
4. A player using an alternate account or multiple accounts, often to play against lower-ranked players.

system better, to catch flammers and issue punishment, but at the end of the day it all comes down to the gaming community policing itself.

What can help with gender inclusivity around esports is the ecosystems that surround it. For example, Twitch features many women streamers, such as Kyedae [@kyedae] who shows us that we don't have to respond to every sexist comment because silence speaks more, or shows us that playing competitively isn't as scary.

Another example is Discord, where you make friends on the internet, and can chat or play games with them without worry of being flamed. Even TikTok helps gender inclusivity because a lot of women share their bad experiences of sexism while playing games on the platform.

I would like to connect this back to how being a woman competing in esports has helped me in the real world.

It made me more passionate about planning for a career in technology because I love video games.

It helped me work on my communication skills because I talk about what strategies I want to do, and that takes a lot of speaking skills.

It strengthened my interpersonal skills, because it's ten times harder to talk to someone that's thousands miles away and try to figure out how they feel than someone you're talking to face to face.

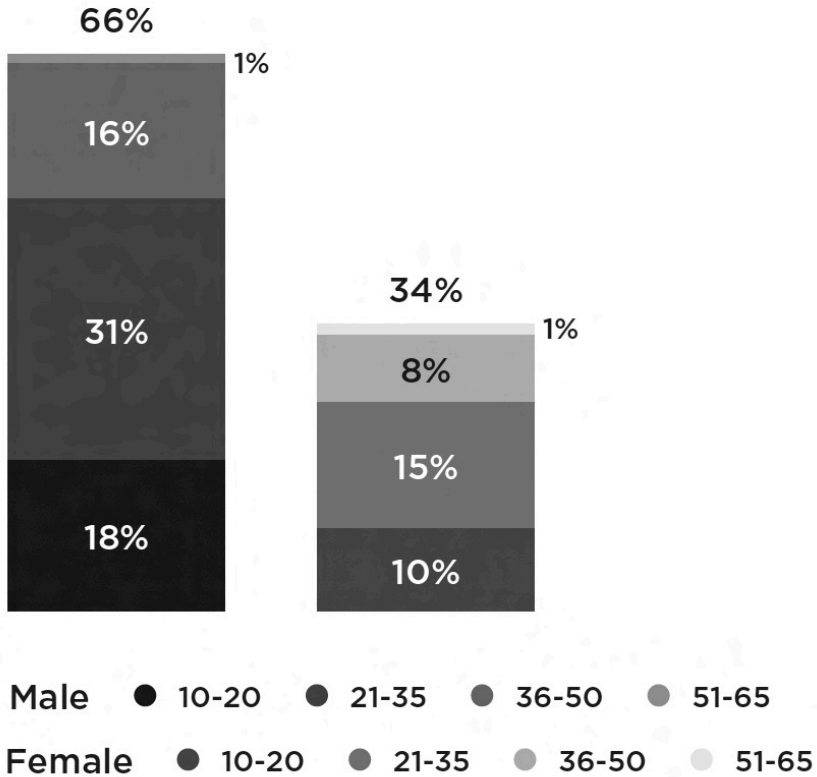
It built resilience, because after a loss, I go right back into a game because I just want to play.

And it also helped me prepare for my major because computer science is a male dominated field, so it gave me the confidence to speak out.

Again, what works for generic inclusivity is having the ability to not reveal your gender or how you identify or holding the community to a higher standard. If you do play a game and you do witness a woman or someone in the LGBTQ+ community getting harassed, say something, because staying silent is just as bad as harassing. It's better to say something rather than not because at least the person being flamed won't think everyone else is against her.

# Age/Gender Esports Enthusiasts

Global | 2021



*In 2021, women accounted for 34% of esports enthusiasts. Additional game-related research and reports can be found at Newzoo, who provided the above information.*



## 6. An Inside View

### *getting esports into Madison Square Garden*

ASI BURAK

*Asi Burak, a professional in the industry, recounts his experience building a city-wide esports community through the first major esports competition held at Madison Square Garden. Asi is the Chairman of Games for Change and Chief Business Officer at Tilting Point. He is an award-winning videogame and digital technology executive, and was named one of the “Digital 25: Leaders in Emerging Entertainment” by the Producers Guild of America (PGA) and Variety Magazine.*

Seven years ago (2015), I stepped down from leading a non-profit organization, Games for Change, and decided to do a bit of consulting.

I had a business partner, Itzik, who formerly served as an executive at Activision Blizzard. So he was there when esports was just getting started, all around the world. He made some of the first esports deals in Korea, for StarCraft and other titles.

Together, we tried to figure out how we could move the needle on esports in the United States. At the time we had a project with the Tribeca Film Festival, in New York City. They told us they wanted to do something with Madison Square Garden, which was their equity partner.

Itzik, due to his background, was excited. He said, “Let’s bring esports to the Garden.”

This was not an easy sell. The only esports the Garden had explored was Defense of the Ancients (DotA), which is not the right title to do in the U.S. (It is much more prevalent in Asia). They held the event in their smaller theater, which is around 5,000 seats. Compare that with their arena, which can hold up to 18,000 seats. They ran the event with ESL (the Electronic Sports League, a German esports organizer and production company). ESL is huge now, running tournaments around the world. But they are not a first-party publisher.



In the end, they only sold one-third of the tickets. Madison Square Garden's experience with esports was not great.

We learned all this when we met with the Garden to pitch our idea to run a competition in the Arena. Their response was, "If it can't work in the Theater, we're going to embarrass ourselves in the Arena."

We told them we knew people at Riot games. Itzik had the connection because when he was at Blizzard they had started modding their game engine from Warcraft III to create League of Legends (LoL). We had called Riot's leaders and said, "Let's do something big at Madison Square Garden!"

We told Madison Square Garden, "Forget what you've done before. We're talking here about partnering with Riot Games. We know they can pull this off because they have done it before" — earlier in Los Angeles at the Staples Center — "They sold everything out in one day. We assure you: this is the right place and the right thing to do."

We were in a position to bridge between those two worlds, that of Madison Square Garden and that of Riot Games. One party speaks business; one party speaks games and experience.

And at the end of the day, we did it, and they sold out in 24 hours, for two nights. It was the National Championship, and the winner went to Worlds (the global contest of LoL).

Since then, we have seen dozens and dozens and dozens of esports events across the United States. But that was an important one, because MSG is arguably the most famous Arena in the world. This is New York City. All the important media outlets were there. ESPN saw esports up close for the first time. And it was a bit of a moment, a big stepping out for esports.

It was a great success and a milestone for the industry.

Population	<b>373.2M</b>
Online Population	<b>328.8M</b>
Esports Awareness	<b>266.0M</b>
Games Live Streaming Audience	<b>103.7M</b>
Esports Enthusiasts	<b>22.4M</b>
Esports Revenues	<b>\$ 349.7M</b>

*Esports awareness and enthusiasts in North America. Additional game-related research and reports can be found at [Newzoo](#), who provided the above information.*



## 7. Esports and their Audiences

*how audiences and players express the "e" in esports*

MASAYA HEYWOOD

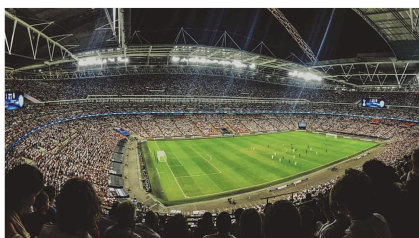
Masaya Heywood, a college student, explores how the needs of esports athletes differ from traditional sports, generating different fan cultures, for better and for worse. Masaya is a graduating senior from New York University's Game Center. He helped start the University's entry into competitive gaming and continues to help smooth the process of building a collegiate gaming program downtown.

I love seeing students gather to talk about games. We're not here just to study, right?

Viewing games through an oh-so-serious academic lens may seem counterintuitive, almost like we're missing the point. Certainly, esports isn't known for being academic. However, esports can be a hub for serious thoughts about games.

Let's start by looking at some of the key differences between esports and traditional sports, focusing on three areas: the delicate space of professional play, building teams, and player attachment and legacies.

Regarding the delicate space of professional play, esports audiences interact with their games and its players differently from traditional sports audiences due to the environment esports games demand. Let's do a thought experiment regarding bubbled players and open fields.



Two different public events: esports on the left, soccer on the right.

Players on the left are in a structural bubble, while players on the right are on an open field.

Imagine, instead, we put a glass dome over the soccer field. The physical experience of both the players and their audience would immensely change. When a soccer player only hears muffled cheers, how would that shift how they play? When a spectator can no longer yell their displeasure, would they feel less attached to the game?

Traditional sports carry many moments with real and imagined chances of audience participation. For example, if you yell at Cristiano Ronaldo to kick the soccer ball harder, he'll likely not hear the command. The crowd's murmur could dim, however, and your voice may be loud enough to reach him. Or perhaps others feel the way you do, and hearing your yell reinforces the tide of "kick the ball harder" throughout the stadium. What matters here is that you might have an impact. You can walk away feeling that your cheers and jeers might have influenced the game. You may leave with a sense that personal connection was made with one of the players. This is a great feeling to have and a cherished part of many traditional sports.

Esports, on the other hand, does not offer the same capacity for audience interaction. There's a current understanding between players, the audience, and game designers that the best and most genuine plays have minimal exterior interaction. Whether players are in a noticeable dome, as in the image above, or wearing headsets, there are obvious measures to sever the player-audience connection. Compared to traditional sports, this greater divide is born from the electronic medium of play. Video games like League of Legends and Overwatch don't require teammates or audiences to be physically close. Additionally, audience input can easily disrupt communication between team members. Information in video games is often complex and needs to be expressed quickly and precisely. Thus esports primarily aims to create a delicate playspace that makes audience members pure spectators, even when occupying the same physical space.

Since popular esports games and their tournaments have traded audience participation for player focus, there's never a chance, say, to see a fan run on the field during an esports match. However disruptive in a game of soccer, this can be seen as a fun cultural phenomenon among traditional sports

that highlights its intimate nature with its viewers. Having something similar happen in esports would be challenging and greatly disliked.

While esports builds barriers, it can also tear them down.

Players and their fans often share a close connection in esports, despite the bubble around them during official matches. An esports athlete likely doubles as a streamer, especially if they are on a team.

The online environment champions players who know how to connect with their fans and network with others. While the chance to interact with players has little room during a competitive match, the opportunities expand outside them. Interacting with stream chats, making Youtube videos, and attending community events lets fans, players and managers achieve their goals. Fans want to feel connected and learn from players, and maybe influence how they play. Players want to be known and be recognized for their skills, unlocking more opportunities to compete. Finally, managers like players who can command lots of attention for their teams and venues to increase revenue.

Moving on to the second subject, rising to the top in esports can be the opposite of how it functions in traditional sports. Take a football player. The athlete must practice hard to showcase why they're a good fit for a team. They do this in relative obscurity and may never be well known, even if they play in the NFL. This lack of initial popularity will never work if a player wants to compete in esports, such as at the League of Legends World Championship.

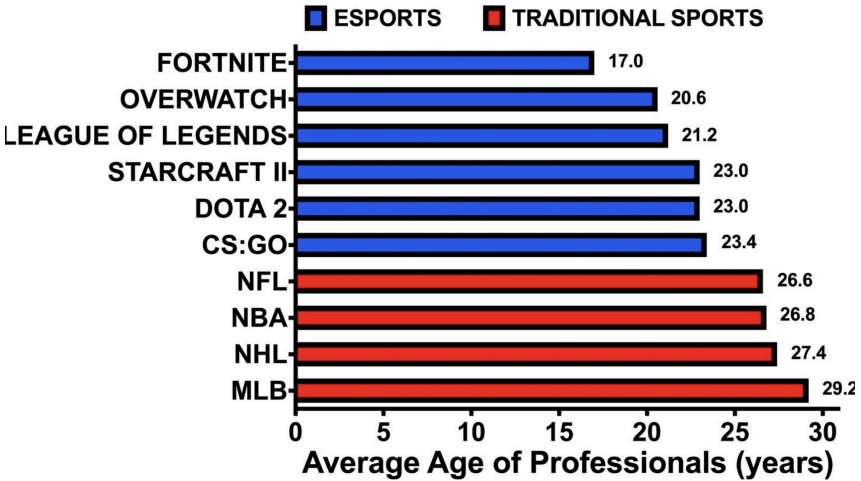
When managers are building esports teams, they want to see a personality. I recently attended PAX East. The esports managers and their recruiters wished to see Twitch viewer counts. Whenever a prospective professional player asked what esports teams like to see, the answer would be skill and views. They wanted to know that you are a streamer, that you're actively pursuing viewers, and that you can bring a brand to their company. Since esports spawned from the internet age, its players share more similarities with Instagram celebrities than traditional sports celebrities.

Finally, the newness of esports and the differences highlighted above put the future of its players in question. Internet celebrity is often fast to come and fast to go. Esports undergoes a regular churn due to new game releases

and players aging. The game industry is a fast-paced market with companies desiring to topple market-leading games. A top player in one game may need to switch games when new releases occur. The leading player's skills may not transfer one-to-one, and they must rebrand themselves in a new area. If the player does not switch, they face a smaller audience or no audience at worst. Furthermore, most esports champions do not have the time to keep up with trends. The prime-age window closes quickly, with most players retiring in their 20s.

As a result, there's less opportunity to get attached to players in esports. When players and games quickly come and go, long-lasting legacies become harder to make. It's tough to compare famous esports players to Michael Jordan or Tom Brady who have benefited from long careers that launched them into superstardom. It's yet to be determined if esports, as it is now, will produce the same kind of staying power for its future stars.

Another interesting aspect of this, as you can see below, is that older video games usually have an older audience. In comparison, younger video games have a younger audience. So we may see the games, audience, and players grow up together. As a result, the lasting player legacy may not end up as stardom but as a tight-knit community around a beloved game.



Age of esports professionals versus traditional sports professionals.

The future of esports is full of unknowns. For example, we currently see platforms like Twitch trying to break the player-audience divide by integrating tools that allow audience participation. The malleability of video games means designers can reinforce the bubble or pop it. Likewise, internet trends and the evolution of social media will dictate how esports players build connections with their fans outside of the game. It becomes further tricky to foresee future developments as both esports and traditional sports have counterfactuals to the statements I've made above. Tennis, for example, is a traditional sport that forms something akin to a bubble around its players. The silence asked for on the court lets players focus, just like giving esports players a soundproof booth during a game tournament.

Everything outlined above are trends in esports that are not absolute. The esports audience and its players are trailblazers in an electronic environment that'll likely take many years to settle. It's important to start building a new lens to look at esports rather than using the one from traditional sports.

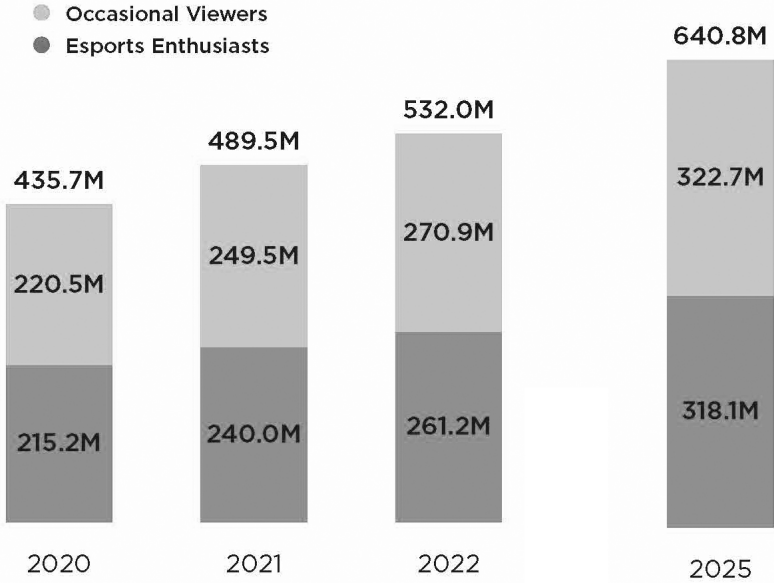
To begin maturing the field, it's essential that all its participants, from fans to CEOs, begin to form terminologies and frameworks to identify the unique pillars of esports.



# Esports Audience Growth

Global | 2020-2025

**CAGR: +8.1%**  
Enthusiasts 2020-2025



In 2022, the global esports audience is expected to grow +8.7% year on year to reach 532 million. Additional game-related research and reports can be found at Newzoo, who provided the above information.

# 8. How to Level Up a City

*competing while leaving no one behind*

ERIC ADAMS

*Eric Adams, the Mayor of New York City, makes the case of leveling up New York City to become a major center for gaming within the nation.*

We have an unbelievable opportunity to use gaming to help others. Today, it is so much more than Pac Man. We can use games to help people who are dealing with dementia to remember things. We can use games for people who want to learn financial literacy, or how to buy a house, or how to pay for college. We can use games to teach us how to enjoy our diversity and reduce the hate crimes we see in the city, responding to the anti-Asian violence, antisemitism, and attacks on the LGBTQ community.

This is also a great moment in esports. For those who have never played a sport physically, you can almost master it in esports. This is going to become a multibillion dollar industry that anyone can be a part of. Gaming is the great equalizer. Any and everyone can play.

Me and my entire team ask ourselves: How can our youth become not only consumers, but developers? Everyone wants to sell a product to you. Now you're in a position of saying, We want you to buy my product. Now you're able to create a game that is really reflective of what you think about and what you see in the world around you.

Working with the City College of New York, and our amazing Deputy Mayor of Economic and Workforce Development, and the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment, I know we have the right team to make New York City a center of innovation. We already have a proud history in innovation, from skyscrapers, to the subway system, to Bitcoin and blockchain. All these things start here and continue to grow – and if they don't start here they grow here because we get it right, all the time. And it's based on the diversity of the people that live in the city, because they bring all of their energies and spirit to the innovation that's needed.

It's now time for us to lead in the digital gaming space. New York City is a leader in so many areas: tech, film, finance... but not in gaming. Not yet. When it comes to gaming development, we are outside of the top five. We want to change that in the next few years. We want to be number one. So the goal is to support the City College of New York to start a new talent pipeline for building our gaming industry.

We know that we have the highest concentration of augmented and virtual reality gaming jobs in the nation. And we have so much talent in this city. Who among these readers will become the creators of the next Rockstar Games, or the developers of the next Rocket League or NB2K?

New York City is ready to level up. We are investing in our future, in the future of New York City gaming development, by funding the new City College of New York's bachelor's degree program in game design. These \$2 million, we believe, are going to help reach over 1000 students over the next few years, and is aimed at increasing diversity and equity in the digital gaming field.

Far too often, you're not seeing the diversity in this field. We want to increase that diversity so those who play the game will look like the people who are also designing the games. Wherever I go – if it's at Google, if it's at Netflix – we talk about paid internship programs, and building a pipeline for young people. That is the goal here. If you don't get exposed to these companies, then you don't see the possibilities out there. And we're focused on telling all of these large companies that you patronize that it is time to hire from the communities that are actually purchasing your product. And we're on a mission to accomplish that.

We recently put in place New York City's first ever digital games industry council, bringing together the top digital game companies, nonprofits and industry leaders, educators, and young people to sit down and advise the city on how to grow this important industry right here in New York, to create pathways from the classroom to careers in game design. Using public and private partnerships, we can attain the level of gaming that we want and clearly set the standard on how this industry must grow.

Now is the time to push forward. We begin this quest together. This is how

we're going to get stuff done in the city and create a more fair and equitable city, without leaving anyone behind.

New York is a great city. But it's not great because of the tall buildings. It is not great simply because of the museums and theaters. It is great because of the people. But too many people don't fulfill their full potential nor reach their greatness.

We say no to that.

Not only are you going to be successful gamers, but you're going to use these tools to help those who have been left behind.

Population	7,911.5M
Online Population	5,115.9M
Esports Awareness	2,469.5M
Games Live Streaming Audience	921.2M
Esports Enthusiasts	261.2M
Esports Revenues	\$ 1,384.0M

*Esports' reach is global (data from 2022). Additional game-related research and reports can be found at Newzoo, who provided the above information.*



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# About the ETC Press

The ETC Press was founded in 2005 under the direction of Dr. Drew Davidson, the Director of Carnegie Mellon University's Entertainment Technology Center (ETC), as an open access, digital-first publishing house.

What does all that mean?

The ETC Press publishes three types of work: peer-reviewed work (research-based books, textbooks, academic journals, conference proceedings), general audience work (trade nonfiction, singles, Well Played singles), and research and white papers

The common tie for all of these is a focus on issues related to entertainment technologies as they are applied across a variety of fields.

Our authors come from a range of backgrounds. Some are traditional academics. Some are practitioners. And some work in between. What ties them all together is their ability to write about the impact of emerging technologies and its significance in society.

To distinguish our books, the ETC Press has five imprints:

- **ETC Press:** our traditional academic and peer-reviewed publications;
- **ETC Press: Single:** our short “why it matters” books that are roughly 8,000-25,000 words;
- **ETC Press: Signature:** our special projects, trade books, and other curated works that exemplify the best work being done;
- **ETC Press: Report:** our white papers and reports produced by practitioners or academic researchers working in conjunction with partners; and
- **ETC Press: Student:** our work with undergraduate and graduate students

In keeping with that mission, the ETC Press uses emerging technologies to design all of our books and Lulu, an on-demand publisher, to distribute our e-books and print books through all the major retail chains, such as Amazon,



Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and Apple, and we work with The Game Crafter to produce tabletop games.

We don't carry an inventory ourselves. Instead, each print book is created when somebody buys a copy.

Since the ETC Press is an open-access publisher, every book, journal, and proceeding is available as a free download. We're most interested in the sharing and spreading of ideas. We also have an agreement with the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) to list ETC Press publications in the ACM Digital Library.

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- **Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike:** This license allows for authors to retain editorial control of their creations while also encouraging readers to collaboratively rewrite content.

This is definitely an experiment in the notion of publishing, and we invite people to participate. We are exploring what it means to “publish” across multiple media and multiple versions. We believe this is the future of publication, bridging virtual and physical media with fluid versions of publications as well as enabling the creative blurring of what constitutes reading and writing.