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Résumé de l'article

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The Rise and Fall of Gaming Houses: Content Creation, Precarity, and Professionalization in Esports

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of gaming houses in esports as physical manifestations of the industry's shifting relationship with labor, capital, and professionalization. By tracing the transformation of these communal living spaces from grassroots solutions to economic precarity into corporate-managed professional environments, the analysis highlights complex tensions between passion and exploitation that characterize digital labor. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from digital labor studies alongside ethnographic interviews with 33 industry professionals, this research positions gaming houses as both architectural responses to precarity and spatial embodiments of the blurred boundaries between play and work that define esports. The analysis reveals that while the aesthetic progression of gaming houses from makeshift accommodations to state-of-the-art facilities suggests industry maturation, underlying conditions of employment insecurity persist.

Author Keywords

Esports; precarity; gaming houses; digital labor; professionalization

This article examines the evolution of gaming houses in esports as physical manifestations of the industry's shifting relationship with labor, capital, and professionalization. By tracing the transformation of these communal living spaces from grassroots solutions to economic precarity into corporate-managed professional environments, the analysis illuminates complex tensions between passion and exploitation that characterize digital labor in the platform economy. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from digital labor studies alongside ethnographic interviews with industry professionals, this research positions gaming houses as both architectural responses to precarity and spatial embodiments of the blurred boundaries between play and work that define esports. The examination contributes to scholarly understanding of how emergent forms of digital leisure labor materialize in physical space, while demonstrating how professionalization efforts may aesthetically transform but not fundamentally resolve the underlying conditions of precarity that initially gave rise to the gaming house phenomenon.

YouTube and esports wikis like *Liquipedia* are replete with amateur esports historians who revel in telling the tale of esports' formative years. During an economic downturn in South Korea in the late 1990s, a combination of high unemployment rates, a public thirst for content, and lack of funds to produce said content resulted in computer gameplay being broadcast on television. *OnGameNet*, for example, was a South Korean cable television channel broadcasting

esports tournament, league matches, documentaries, and vlog content from 2000-2015. Video games were already wildly popular and thus the content was already available; matches were being played constantly, and emerging technological capabilities meant that games could be streamed live. People could now watch players who were very good at *Starcraft* compete against one another. As a result, an industry materialized in order to satiate this new demand; thus, esports became a global cultural production generating millions of dollars, which, according to narrativized histories, is how the industry took shape.

Borne out of this competitive gaming milieu in South Korea, gaming houses arose from players' desire to dedicate themselves to competitive videogaming in a constrained economic space. Gaming houses, streamer houses, and team houses are therefore popular in esports. These are cooperative living arrangements where streamers or esports professionals are able to dedicate long hours to their craft. Originally, gaming houses in esports emerge from players' desire to practice against the highest caliber opponents possible. In the influential Korean esports era of *Starcraft*, for example, large teams organized cooperative living conditions in order to focus on full-time quality practice. Early iterations of gaming houses ran the gamut from posh to dilapidated. Some well-funded and popular teams, like SK Telecom and KT Rolster, had funding from corporate sources while many others were makeshift practice spaces organized in rundown office buildings and old dormitories. Current gaming houses, on the other hand, are equipped with a host of amenities: an in-house professional chef, cleaners, fitness facilities, and even counseling services, all designed to allow players a maximum amount of efficient practice. These spaces frame esports as a hypercompetitive, all-consuming lifestyle. Gaming or team house tours have become a genre in their own right on *YouTube*, with almost all major teams producing some form of "House Tour." For the purposes of this article, "gaming house" refers to the spectrum of cooperative living arrangements in the esports ecosystem, encompassing both professional team facilities where players live and train together under organizational management, and content creator or streamer houses where influencers collaborate on media production. While these spaces serve somewhat different purposes, they share a common origin of economic precarity and evolve along similar trajectories toward professionalization. This inclusive definition allows us to analyze how the spatial organization of digital labor responds to and embodies economic pressures across various forms of gaming-related content production.

These gaming houses speak to the changing cultural attitudes and values towards video games, but also to the broader economic precarity esports finds itself in. Gaming houses have experienced a marked shift over the last decade, paired with the general professionalization of esports; balancing between economic precarity and a billion-dollar industry, gaming houses have followed a path of professionalization which sees them shift from self-organized communal living arrangements among players to formal corporate workspaces with lucrative sponsorship deals. This paper traces the development of gaming houses among professional esports teams and notes the shifting industry and cultural perceptions of these spaces.

Although gaming houses are deeply intertwined with precarious labor and the emerging professionalization of leisure culture activities, they also reveal the transnational nature of esports. Many players come from diverse backgrounds and different countries. For example, Team Liquid is based in Utrecht, Netherlands and Los Angeles, California, but their *Rainbow 6* team is Brazilian. Their North American *League of Legends* team consists of an ever-changing roster of nationalities, sometimes operating without a single player from America. This demonstrates the difficulty of considering gaming houses, teams, or its player-base as a

geographically localized phenomena. Moreover, esports operate transnationally; people often pass between coach, commentator, and region fluidly. An American shoutcaster, analyst, or coach living and working in South Korea one season could end up working in the United States or Europe the next season. So, while the majority of this paper examines esports gaming houses within the specific context of North America or the global north more broadly, it should be understood that esports' precarity, professionalization, and gaming houses occur across multiple national and cultural boundaries. While this provides limitations for understanding gaming houses, especially given the ebb and flow between players and regions, it is indicative of a broader trend in esports' emergent professionalization. This is largely because, while the player base may be transnational and changing, the precarious nature of esports is felt widely by professional and amateur players alike, regardless of region.

Building On Shaky Ground: Precarity and Emergent Professionalization

Articles documenting esports' meteoric rise often describe the passion of the players as the primary motivation for its development. Research frequently addresses the amount of unpaid, gigged, and precarious labor involved in leisure activities. "For the love of the game" is a common refrain in popular parlance and academic research to describe volunteer labor. Roland Li explains that, while the rise of esports results from a complex array of issues, "the most critical factor in the success of esports is the passion" (Li, 2016, p. iii). In the histories of esports, it is quite common to situate them in a history of other forms of competitive play. Billings and Hou (2019) point to early arcade games and record-keeping as a nascent form of esports. They trace its development as a mediated form of sport, largely defined by its competitive elements.

Yet, it is also necessary to situate the history of esports in a complex socioeconomic moment specific to South Korea. Experiencing an emerging economy which recently saw itself surpass its northern neighbors (Lankov, 2013), South Korea was uniquely positioned to have esports emerge as a consumer product during the mid 1990s. PC Bangs – the South Korean term for LAN Cafes – were already set up to enable multiple players to participate in tournament play. Moreover, with cable networks and streaming services growing, there was dead air to be filled. Combining increased leisure time with emerging streaming technologies, enterprising videogame aficionados began producing tournaments and streaming them on cable networks and the internet (Li, 2016). Gaming houses rise from this original gaming milieux, a result of interconnected sociological and economic issues. Essentially, players were searching for an affordable way to turn their dream of playing games professionally into a reality.

The 2010 documentary, *OldBoy*, provides a picture of early esports culture in South Korea. It follows former professional gamer Kang Min (also known as Nal_rA) as he attempts to qualify once again for Starleague, OnGameNet's professional *Starcraft* league. Kang Min had retired from Starleague in 2008 to become a *Starcraft* commentator, but ahead of the release of *Starcraft 2* he wanted to try to requalify for professional play after his two-year retirement. He moves into a practice apartment, but he quickly realizes that to improve, he needs to play against the best players. He laments his isolation and longs to return to the practice housing that he lived in during his professional gaming career. This nostalgia demonstrates that there is, in 2010, already a history of the gaming house as an integral part of broader esports culture. Kang Min practices with some of the top teams in South Korea and viewers are granted access to some of the training spaces and practice houses where these players live and work. Kang Min's former

team, KT Rolster, live and work in the same compound. Their sleeping quarters are simple dorm-style bunk beds in small rooms, and yet even this exceeds Kang Min's expectations. What is particularly interesting about the docuseries is the fact that it demonstrates the reaction to precarity in esports. Teams operate within a highly regimented structure with schedules for practice and mealtimes, as well as stretching and physical activity. This insistence on structure and scheduling reject the precarity and uncertainty that characterize the professionalization of esports. While these structural transformations of gaming houses reflect industry professionalization, they also illustrate deeper theoretical questions about digital labor. The shift from necessity-driven communal living to corporate-managed professional spaces warrants analysis through multiple scholarly lenses that can help us understand how gaming houses function not merely as physical spaces, but as embodiments of broader economic and social dynamics in digital labor. The following section examines these theoretical frameworks to contextualize gaming houses within critical discourses surrounding precarious digital labor.

Renovations: How Has the Gaming House Changed?

In many ways, the rise of the gaming house is a direct response to the economic precarity of the esports industry. This is why we see a shift towards more established forms of gaming houses: first, the content creation side of esports, and second, the practicing professional side. Finally, we see a third and perhaps final form emerge, which mimics the arenas and training facilities of professional traditional sports: the official team training center. These state-of-the-art training facilities represent an apotheosis of the gaming house's transformation.

In a photo essay for *ESPN*, Alejandro Cegarra and Eric Gomez visit the Gillette Infinity Gaming House near Mexico City and document the way that staff and players have adjusted to COVID-19 lockdown. The caption notes that: "The shelter-in-place order has meant several changes in lifestyle for Infinity's players and staff, including the temporary suspension of weekly cleaning services within the three-story house" (Gomez). Likewise, a *Kotaku* article provides an in-depth description of life in the Philadelphia Fusion esports house. The article mentions the in-house chef, Heidi Marsh, by name and explains that the team employs a maid service to clean the house once a week (Myers). While a Blitz esports video explains that "players don't have to think about chores, schedules, or where their next meal is coming from" because teams with corporate sponsorship outsource day-to-day domestic labor. Household duties are entirely taken care of so that players can focus on training. There is a plethora of footage, interviews, photo essays, video blogs, and tours of gaming houses around the world that focus on player wellbeing, daily life, and amenities.

Far from the co-living spaces borne of economic precarity, the gaming house evolved into a state-of-the-art facility where players were not only finessing their teamplay, but also creating an influencer-like lifestyle brand. Teams such as 100 Thieves, Astralis, and Made in Brazil boast sprawling mansions that fans can tour virtually. FaZe house is an example of the correlation between the gaming house and the content creation house. FaZe Clan began as a group of *Call of Duty* players that accumulated a substantial online following. Their popularity prompted the group to purchase two homes in Los Angeles. One home was a more traditional gaming house, while the other functioned as a content creation house for online influencers (Rueben). Thus, the house once again becomes a space that supports the precarious labor that

emerges from online leisure culture. Content creators favor these spaces because they are able to collaborate with one another to produce a high volume and variety of content. Content creation remains a precarious industry that does not always receive corporate sponsorship. The housing model is still desirable for influencers whose careers rely on remaining entertaining and relevant to their followers. As with the gaming house, fans are rewarded for their loyalty, and their parasocial relationships are strengthened when teams produce social media content about experiences in the house. As esports has professionalized, many teams have moved away from the gaming house model. Team management has recognized that living and working together is not sustainable for players' overall wellbeing. Team Liquid's Alienware facility is an example of this push toward a work-life balance for players.

Team Liquid's training facility resembles a massive professional sports training facility more than it does a domestic operation of any sort. In several videos published on the official Team Liquid *YouTube* page, Steve Arhancet, CEO of Team Liquid (TL), describes the philosophy behind the facility. He explains his realization that "having a gaming house in a residential neighborhood and having all of the staff and all of the players live out of the house…[is] antiquated, it's old…and Team Liquid wants to set a new precedent" (Blitz Esports LOL, 2018, 00:05-00:15). He goes on to explain that this will be "the next evolution of esports" (Blitz Esports LOL, 2018, 00:38). He specifically points to the fact that TL did not "have the financial resources at the time to execute a proper training facility for esports athletes" (Blitz Esports LOL, 2018, 01:05) He then explains that Liquid selected this structure in order to provide their players with a more traditional separation between their home lives and their work lives. This balance, Arhancet says, ought to prevent player burnout and demonstrates the attempts being made by organizations to prioritize player health and wellbeing. Large corporate teams such as Team Liquid operate like a business, and as Arhancet describes it this causes a kind of isolation. Each team functions as a distinct department of TL and this new facility provides and promotes opportunities for more connection and collaboration between various departments of the company. However, Arhancet spends much of the video promoting the Alienware brand and exaggerating the fact that Alienware equipment is crucial to the success of the team. While there is a movement towards promoting a better work-life balance for players, the Alienware facility makes it clear that achieving this relies on corporate sponsorship.

All this would have one imagine precarity is solved by team management, but according to recent scholarship, concern for players overall wellbeing is still pressing. Ridenhour presents a case for collective bargaining in esports. Her discussion outlines the many ways that player labor is exploited and precarity dominates the industry:

> At the highest levels of competition, esports organizations maintain facilities for training players. Once signed to a team, esports organizations 'often pay for amenities such as housing, water and electricity, coaches and trainers, and the team's food and gaming peripherals.' Living in these training facilities, players 'practice constantly' and experience 'genuine fear for their livelihood because they didn't have a good game'. (Ridenhour, 2020, p. 1881)

While professionalization allowed players guaranteed living arrangements and freed them from domestic obligations, it also meant that the quality, consistency, and amount of their labor was directly tied to their livelihood. Arieja Lajka (2018) writes that the benefits of professional play

can heighten the sense of precarity experienced by some players. While "players are set up to live with fellow gamers in shared homes," the expectation is that "they practice constantly" (Lajka). Players who do not live in gaming houses often have housing costs offset or taken care of, however "the expectation is that they'll be practicing more or less around the clock" (Lajka). With the rise of the professional gaming house in North America, players are no longer living together out of economic necessity, but their living situations are no less precarious. Their housing is situational and dependent upon their performance. This is a concern especially given that the average professional esports player retires at 25 (Ridenhour). Professionalization seems to offer some economic stability for organizations, stakeholders, and even players, but has yet to completely eradicate the precarity that has defined early esports. In total, there are 13 professional *League of Legends* teams in the North American league (LCS) and each team only has 5 positions. At the highest level of professional esports, there are incredibly few spots open to players, which means that while economic precarity is not a concern for high-level players, there is still a concern around job security. It is a hypercompetitive industry and team rosters are always changing in order to include the best players who will produce the best results for the team.

Theoretical Framework: Gaming Houses and Digital Labour Transformation

Scholars have also noted the precarity faced by many within esports. Labor is given freely in esports at all levels of play and organization. These unpaid forms of labor are often written about as a multitudinous, transnational network of amateurs, professionals, and stakeholders whose labor shapes and guides the growth of the industry as a whole. Often, these players, streamers, moderators, cosplayers, tournament organizers, and fans shape the landscape of esports through their voluntary labor. Anxieties about gigged and precarious labor are common in writing about the lives of professional players. Lin & Zhao (2020) document the precarity faced by both aspiring and professional players in China, who are commonly traded or dropped from rosters after short professional careers without much hope for any future employment options. Ridenhour (2020) notes that there are a number of unfair labor practices and a reliance on player precarity that supports the esports industry. Additionally, Hollist (2015) describes similar conditions in North America and Europe, whose players are commonly imagined as lacking valuable education or skills for a life after esports. Like professional streamers, players report incredibly long hours promoting their team, tournaments, and streams (N. Taylor, 2016). The previously mentioned findings remain consistent in the survey and interview data done for this research.

Interestingly, early research like T.L. Taylor's *Watch Me Play* (2012) tends to conflate esports and streaming into the same category. This pairing is understandable when we consider that esports houses are very similar to other content creation spaces. Content creation houses among social media influencers, for example, have also risen in recent years. These houses are often set up by corporate management firms or influencer intermediaries who manage the relationship between influencers and brand marketers, all with the intent of having content creators mingling, producing, and broadcasting their social lives within the content house (Stoldt *et al.,* 2019). Gaming houses, then, speak to an emerging culture of precarious labor within North American online content production. Moreover, many esports players move fluidly between

professional play and streaming, often transitioning to jobs which orbit their professional experience. In fact, many professional esports contracts contain explicit requirements that players spend some of their time streaming. For other games, like *SmashBros*, *Hearthstone,* or *Magic: The Gathering*, the distinction between esports competitor and professional streamer is hardly existent to begin with. Finally, it is not uncommon to see professional players immediately transition to streaming, producing, coaching, or other forms of content production when their time on a professional team ends (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019). As a result, this paper may unintentionally blur the distinction between streaming and esports when it comes to discussions of professionalization and precarity. Afterall, the esports gaming house arises out of the liminal space between professional and amateur play, which is itself connected to the broader infotainment sphere of streaming services such as *Twitch.tv*.

In fact, the very definition of esports is unclear. Hallmann and Giel (2018) explain that esports is often defined by its association with traditional sports, but they acknowledge the loose, familial characteristics that sustain any definition of sport. These characteristics include physical activity, recreation, competition, and organization, though research acknowledges these characteristics are scalar and subjective, even while it demonstrates a broad and inclusive set of definitions for esports. Taylor (2009), and Kim (2017) describe the competitive aspect of esports as subjectively and provisionally manifest, highlighting some of the imagined and socially prescribed boundaries around esports regarding competition, location, and gender. Holt (2016) contends that esports can take place in stadiums or bedrooms, planned or spontaneous, and definitions need not be limited to proprietary stakeholders. Others view esports as a leisure activity positioned within a broader network of relations. Seo and Jung (2014), referring to the enormous international markets sustaining esports, define esports as an "assemblage of consumption practices" (p. 635). Ultimately, esports—and gaming houses—exist within a nebulous border between amateur precarity and professional enshrinement, and players' decisions to live in gaming houses was initially driven by economic precarity before they were absorbed into the professional industry.

Non-player professionals in the industry also document their history with volunteer labor. At the organization level, T.L. Taylor (2012) describes older players—generally men—whose disposable income from other professional spaces shapes esports through the organization of tournaments, teams, and events. Taylor notes these patrons often had "a dream of making what would otherwise be a hobby a real job" (Taylor, 2012, p. 135). This history of esports development also speaks to a similar process in social media production generally, which, unlike traditional media forms, acquires fans through more "grassroots" methods of interactive social media (Lou & Kim, 20190). Of note, however, in her assessment of professional shout-casters—the term for live commentators—Taylor notes that women have often been excluded from these positions and require additional volunteer labor and resources to be accepted in these spaces.

Kathleen Kuehn (2013) offers a useful term, "hope labour," for describing the motivations of online social production. Kuehn documents the unsurprising fact that numerous companies have attempted to capitalize on user-centered participation. Writing about user-reviews and information sharing, Kuehn explains that many users engage in information sharing and production online for their own sense of self-worth. The primary motivation is self-realization. However, she notes that this is not the only motivation. Instead, users can also engage in free labor with the hopes that it results in a tangible benefit in the future. Similarly, esports labor is primarily a form of play, but for many, one that *could* produce beneficial

outcomes in the future. As T.L. Taylor (2012) documents, Twitch streamers admit that the majority of their free labor is done with this in mind. Not only does free labor help sustain esports, but it shares numerous motivational similarities to ongoing research in other spaces of digital social production. Similarly, Kang Min and others throughout the *OldBoy* series indicate that they are willing to sacrifice the quality of their living situation in order to gain edges in competition.

Even within the community, voluntary labor provides a sense of collective ownership to fandoms. For example, T.L. Taylor (2012, 2019) speaks to the difficulty of capturing authenticity in subcultures, and documents the struggles often experienced by various professional stakeholders attempting to organize this energetic fandom's labor. In this regard, collaborative and communal forms of labor seem to negotiate with institutional forms over capturing the effervescence and capital of fandom. For example, the gaming house has transitioned from an inconvenience of economic precarity to a space of valuable content production. This struggle to navigate the professionalization of esports is very apparent in the attempt to establish esports as a lasting commodity. Moreover, we see that precarity is one of the central issues surrounding current esports employment.

In this regard, esports is aligned with a progression of labor Phil Jones describes in *Work Without the Workers* (2021). As manufacturing departs the global north, service industries have become the dominant form of labor. According to Jones, microwork has developed as a common feature of the emerging gigged, precarious, and global networked form of labor. Described as "a quasi-magical economy of gambling and lottery" for contemporary workers, microwork represents a "grim trajectory" of a broader shift away from waged labor (Jones, 2021, p. 46). Jones' text attempts to dispel illusions of automated labor which imagine automation as computer work, and instead show the human, unpaid, and precarious labor that sustain microwork, such as Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Obviously, microwork is different from playing games, but it follows a similar trajectory established by a service industry whose gigged employment favors some forms of computer engagement over others. Just as esports emerged from South Korea's political economic moment, Jones' book provides a perspective for understanding esports as a form of global, precarious work sustained by various industrial insiders and producers who benefit from the ongoing lottery of esports professionalization. Importantly, Jones' work reveals that the boundaries of what constitutes work are deeply rooted in their political and economic moment.

This precarious labor dynamic is particularly evident in the spatial organization of esports—specifically, in how gaming houses materialize the blurred boundaries between professional and personal life. Where Jones identifies precarity in the structures of digital labor markets, the physical environments of esports embody this precarity in architectural form. Domestic imagery is a prominent part of professional esports. It seems only natural, of course, as it is something we participate in from the comfort of our desktops, offices, and other private spaces. The transformation of gaming houses reflects Julian Kücklich's (2005) portmanteau term "precarious playbour" in digital economies—work that blurs distinctions between play and labor while maintaining economic uncertainty. Kücklich coined this term to describe the blurring of boundaries between play and labor in digital economies, where activities once considered leisure become sources of value extraction while maintaining economic uncertainty for participants. As Kücklich argues, "the precariousness of playbour is not only determined by the lack of financial compensation and legal rights, but also by the industry's growing interest in harnessing the fruits

of game fans' labour" (Kücklich, 2005, p. 3). Gaming houses represent a spatial manifestation of this concept—environments specifically designed to optimize the extraction of value from the play-labor of esports professionals. The trajectory of gaming houses from makeshift player-organized accommodations to corporate-managed facilities mirrors what Kücklich identifies as the increasing commodification of player activity. Early gaming houses emerged from players' attempts to navigate economic precarity through collective living arrangements, essentially pooling resources to sustain their professional aspirations. As esports professionalized, these spaces were appropriated by corporate entities that recognized their potential for maximizing player productivity and marketability. This transformation exemplifies Kücklich's observation that "the games industry has been quick to realize the potential of recruiting [...] unpaid labour" and converting it into formalized structures of value creation (Kücklich, 2005, p. 5).

Melissa Gregg's (2011) analysis of "work's intimacy" further illuminates the unique dynamics of gaming houses. Gregg examines how digital technologies facilitate the collapse of boundaries between professional and personal life, creating what she terms an "intimate relationship with work" (Gregg, 2011, p. 2). Gaming houses represent perhaps the most extreme manifestation of this collapse, where players' entire domestic environment becomes oriented around their professional activity. Gregg notes that "when work takes place in domestic settings, it introduces a fundamentally different expectation of availability and commitment" (Gregg, 2011, p. 15). This observation is particularly relevant to gaming houses, where players are essentially always "at work" by virtue of their living situation. The evolution from early Korean team houses, where players shared cramped living quarters with minimal amenities, to luxury facilities with in-house chefs and fitness coaches, doesn't fundamentally alter this dynamic—rather, it intensifies it by creating environments where every aspect of players' lives can be optimized for competitive performance. What is particularly notable in applying Gregg's framework to gaming houses is how the intimacy of work becomes a double-edged sword. The collapse of boundaries enables intensive training regimens and team cohesion but simultaneously creates conditions for burnout and exploitation. As esports organizations professionalized, they began addressing these concerns by introducing work-life separation (as seen in Team Liquid's Alienware facility), yet this does not eliminate the fundamental dynamic Gregg identifies—it merely reconfigures it within a more sustainable model of intimate labor.

Tiziana Terranova's (2013) analysis of free labor in digital economies helps explain the development of gaming houses, as well. Terranova examines how leisure activities become sites of value production when "knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited" (Terranova, 2013, p. 37). This perfectly describes the position of esports players, whose passion for gaming becomes both their livelihood and a source of exploitable labor. Gaming houses represent infrastructural attempts to optimize this dynamic. By providing environments where players can fully immerse themselves in their craft, organizations maximize the productive potential of players' passion. Terranova's observation that digital economies thrive on "voluntary given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited" labor (Terranova, 2013, p. 33) captures the fundamental tension of gaming houses—they are simultaneously sites of player fulfillment and organizational extraction. What is particularly valuable in Terranova's framework is her recognition that free labor is not simply imposed from above but emerges from genuine enthusiasm and community building. Early gaming houses were not corporate impositions but rather player innovations—collective solutions to shared challenges. Their appropriation by

formal organizations represents what Terranova calls the "outright economic exploitation" (Terranova, 2013, p. 39) of cultural practices that originate in genuine community.

Methodological Approach, Reflexivity, and Analysis

This research combines analysis of secondary sources with primary ethnographic data from structured interviews and surveys with 33 esports professionals (content creators n=11, players n=15, coaches and team management n=4, shoutcasters n=2). Following established protocols in ethnographic research (Madison, 2011), it is necessary to acknowledge the researcher's positionality. Conducting research from North American academic institutions exclusively in English unavoidably centers Western experiences within a global industry, creating both insider access to Anglophone gaming communities and blind spots regarding experiences in other cultural contexts. Participants ranged in age from 18-43 years (mean=29.2), with industry experience spanning 1-14 years (mean=7.8). The survey asked participants their role in the industry, age, gender, years in the industry, perceived stability of the job on a scale of 1-5, whether it was a primary source of income, and to rate the social acceptability of their position from 1-5. The semi-structured interview protocol addressed employment stability, financial security, and industry professionalization. Additional interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using thematic analysis focusing on manifestations of precarity. These interviews were conducted in English, representing the author's network from professionalized time in the industry, and subsequently reflect English-language structural biases in academic and industry documentation. For example, Chinese esports represent a significant portion of the industry but is largely absent from this analysis.

Analysis of participant responses revealed several key themes related to precarity in esports. Survey data revealed consistently low assessments of industry stability, with participants rating the stability of their esports employment at an average of 2.7 on a 5-point scale (SD=1.3). Content creators reported the lowest stability ratings (M=2.4, n=11) while those in management positions rated stability marginally higher (M=3.1, n=4). Among participants with more than 8 years of experience (n=14), stability ratings remained low (M=2.6), suggesting that longevity in the industry did not significantly alter perceptions of precarity. The predominance of short-term contracts emerged as a major source of instability. As Respondent 6, a content creator with with 12 years of experience, explained: "Most of my contracts are short-term with no benefits." This contractual precarity creates a continuous state of uncertainty throughout the industry. Nearly all participants (85%) reported relying on multiple income streams to achieve financial stability. Respondent 24, a content creator, expressed a common sentiment: "Esports content can kind of pay the bills, but I need a side hustle to feel secure." This necessity for income diversification represents a practical response to structural instability.

While the survey focuses solely on precarity and acceptance, long-form interviews with all participants reveal important distinctions. Many players who filled out the survey have crossed career paths within the industry, working as a player sometimes and as a content creator other time to supplement their income. It is not uncommon, for example, for former professional players to transition into streaming services or content creation. Therefore, "role" in the survey does not accurately represent the porous nature of esports employment activity, with participants shifting between roles at various stages of their careers. Moreover, many professionals use

content creation to supplement their income even while competing full-time. Additionally, several content-creators noted that while their work was "full-time," it was only described that way because they were capable of cobbling together enough piece-work to constitute full-time employment.

The interviews revealed an industry-wide shift away from the traditional gaming house model, particularly in North American and European organizations. This evolution reflects both professionalization attempts and recognition of gaming houses' limitations. Multiple participants described the psychological toll of cohabitation with teammates. The collapse of work–life boundaries created conditions where, as one team manager explained during an interview, "players never truly got a break from the competitive environment." This directly connects to Melissa Gregg's (2011) concept of "work's intimacy," where domestic space becomes completely consumed by professional demands. Several coaches and managers reported that gaming houses sometimes exacerbated interpersonal conflicts, with one coach noting: "When players had disagreements during practice, they couldn't escape each other. They'd take that tension to dinner, to their rooms—everywhere. It became toxic quickly." This insight challenges assumptions that spatial proximity necessarily promotes team cohesion. Despite these professionalization efforts, underlying conditions of precarity remain largely unaddressed. When asked about necessary changes for the industry, participants consistently mentioned standardized contracts, collective representation through unions, and post-career transition support.

In interviews responses about the industry's future, participants expressed that esports will continue to grow, but job security won't improve without regulations. This suggests that while spatial organization of esports labor may evolve, the fundamental precarity endemic to digital capitalism persists. The limited but focused ethnographic investigation reveals gaming houses as physical manifestations of the contradictions inherent in digital labor. The transition from residential gaming houses to professional training facilities represents an attempt to legitimize esports work visually and spatially. However, without corresponding changes to contract structures, employment protections, and career sustainability, these architectural evolutions risk becoming merely aesthetic changes that mask continuing precarity. The limited but focused ethnographic investigation reveals gaming houses as physical manifestations of the contradictions inherent in digital labor.

These findings align with multiple theoretical frameworks of digital labor. Terranova's (2013) analysis identifies how digital economies extract value from passion while maintaining structural exploitation. Similarly, Kücklich's (2005) concept of "precarious playbour" is exemplified in gaming houses, where the boundaries between leisure and labor become physically embodied in shared space. The evolution from player-organized collectives to corporate facilities demonstrates what Srnicek (2017) identifies as platform capitalism's tendency to "render labor increasingly precarious while presenting the precarity as opportunity and freedom" (Srnicek, 2017, p. 47). Phil Jones' (2021) analysis of microwork as "a quasi-magical economy of gambling and lottery" further illuminates how esports professionals navigate a system that promises stability through professionalization while structurally maintaining uncertainty. The gaming house—whether in its original form or current professional iteration—thus embodies the multiple tensions between genuine community and commodity production, between passion and exploitation, and between professionalization and persistent precarity that characterize esports labor.

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Gaming houses, team houses, and other collaborative spaces represent an important cultural piece of esports history. While they may be on the decline as professionalization reduces some forms of precarity, they will likely persist among semi-professional and hobbyist players. Moreover, new teams, content creators, and aspiring professionals will almost certainly continue the legacy of these communal spaces in some form. After all, precarity still permeates esports, and gaming houses appear to arise, at least partially, in response to this condition. The evolution of the Overwatch League (OWL) offers a compelling case study of these dynamics. When launched in 2018, OWL adopted a franchise model that initially emphasized team houses and localized competition. However, as the league matured, many organizations shifted toward more traditional sports structures with separate practice facilities and individual player housing arrangements. This transition illustrates the tension between the communal traditions of esports culture and the corporate professionalization of the industry. Despite these changes, some OWL teams maintained modified versions of team houses, suggesting that even in highly structured competitive environments, these collaborative spaces serve valuable functions beyond merely addressing economic precarity. The OWL example demonstrates how gaming houses adapt rather than disappear entirely as esports continues to evolve toward mainstream legitimacy.

While this study addresses the precarity experienced in esports, further research should document the lived experiences of those who have inhabited gaming houses. Such work would preserve an important cultural phenomenon that has evolved significantly over the years for players and industry professionals. Future publications will explore these dimensions of the esports industry in greater depth.

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