Morgan Romine on the history of women in esports

Features

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by Eron Rauch

We discuss how the challenges women face in esports have changed-- a lot!-- over the past few decades.

Overwatch has been trying out interesting new ideas for how to run video game competitions in its rise to a global esports powerhouse. But even as D.Va becomes a political symbol amongst Korean youth, there remains one aspect of esports that hasn't changed much: the lack of top-tier women professional players. So I thought it would be the perfect time to talk with Morgan Romine, Director of Initiatives at Any Key, an organization working to help competitive video gaming become more inclusive, about the history and future of women in esports.

E: One of the things that becomes increasingly obvious after you watch a few major esports competitions is that there are basically zero women competitors on the biggest stages. Is this representative of the demographics of video gaming as a whole?

M: No, definitely not. If you're looking at gaming as a whole there are a lot of women who are playing lots of different types of games. Probably more relevantly though if you're looking at competitive gaming there are still a lot of women who are playing and who are in the audiences for these competitions.

Then if you're talking more broadly, if you go to a PAX for example, there is a much better gender balance there. And then you have people who are playing a lot of these games, but maybe who don't go to the esports events. So it kind of depends on the game and depends on the community, but I would say definitively there are a lot more women who are playing those games than who are represented on those stages.

E: Has the current lack of women the upper tiers of esports, or even in the amateur circuit, always been that way?

M: I mean, it's never been great, but I can say pretty confidently even ten years ago when I was part of the Frag Dolls team, and when the PMS clan was a lot more active, we would go to MLG events all the time and there were women who were there who were playing. They were certainly the minority, but they were there and visible. You just don't see that today, partially I think because of how the online space has dominated the amateur level. You still have some of the in-person competitions for MLGs but they are much fewer and further between, which is a cultural barrier to entry.

E: So what precisely is different between a LAN event and an online that would tend to skew the demographics?

M: When we used to have a lot of smaller regional LAN events, it was much easier for women to go with friends who they play with and are confident playing with, and then meet other people who are competitors. It was easier to meet other women who are competing and meet pros who would be willing to play against them to improve their skills. It's easier to be inclusive when you're in-person. Being online can be very alienating and the sense of being anonymous means it's harder to feel like you're make a connection—harder to feel like you're being welcomed.

So many of the women we've talked to who are trying to make it now and find their own competitive teams have said that they feel very much alone and don't even know where to look. So it's a little bit of a reinforcement cycle where it's hard for women to find the communities and role models that might help to encourage them to play, which then means that we have fewer women who are being those rolel models.

The path to becoming a professional esports player is not easy for anybody. Its very competitive, its very hard, it takes a lot of work, and so dealing with that on top of the cultural obstacles of dealing with harassment, of being told that girls are inherently worse at video games. Or trying really hard to find a team and not many teams want to pick you up because they don't want to take the risk of picking up a woman player because of the potential harassment they'll get. Or because they think you won't be good enough. Or maybe because you'll cause drama with the guys on the team, or something.

ZOOM

E: Making that transition from playing as a hobby to playing as your living is incredibly challenging, even for the best male players. Are there any particularly noticeable things that are barriers to entry for women at the highest tier of the professional level?

M: Let's say you're a woman who decides, "Hey, I'm a woman who is pretty good at this *Overwatch* game, what do I need to do to get to that top tier, to be on those main stages, what has to happen?" A woman is going to encounter several other problems and obstacles that a male player simply isn't. Which of course isn't to diminish the challenges involved in becoming a pro if you're a guy.

So it's not an automatic, "Oh, you're good enough," it's like, "She's good enough but now we have to consider she going to live with all these guys. Is there going to be drama? Is there going to be drama with the girlfriends? Is there going to be problems with the team chemistry?"

But there are so many problems we encounter even before that. There is the example of Remilia who still as of now is the only woman who has successfully cracked the LCS [*LoL*'s professional series]. She was saying before they successfully did that she didn't have any interest in dealing with being on an LCS team for real. She didn't want to deal with the spotlight and all of the harassment that comes with it. She said she wanted to proved that she could do it, and that a woman could get that far. Then as soon as her team made it she quit.

It was sort of an anti-climactic but also a meaningful statement if you're looking at these competitive environments and the just the cost involved for women. And it's certainly worse these days because there are so few trying to do that.

E: I follow LCS pretty closely and I remember that it came as a shock to me when I learned that Remilia wasn't fired—which was what the entire community had basically said via Twitch chat and Twitter speculation.

M: That's exactly picture perfect of the kind of drama that she was illustrating that she didn't want to deal with. The misinformation is crazy and the invasion of personal life and personal space is ratcheted up times ten when you're talking about a woman gamer. And its not that these other LCS players are not under a tremendous amount of scrutiny, because they are! But when you are a marginalized member and you somehow stand out otherwise, I don't blame anyone for not wanting to deal with that.

E: And are asked to stand in for the hopes and dreams of everyone from that entire gender or population, and that's a lot of pressure...

M: Yeah, that's a lot to ask for. Which is why for us we're trying to focus more of our efforts at this point with building the kind of social support networks that can provide a rally space, a safe space, and a cheerleading squad, for the types of people who might want to actually go through that that process and subject themselves to the inevitable harassment. You have to have a team behind you to support you otherwise it becomes impossible.

In the *Counterstrike* community, the fact that they have women's leagues has actually helped them to coalesce around teams and communities that will support them. And there are all sorts of controversy around the idea of women's leagues and whether or not we need them and if they're a good thing, if they enforce segregation, and whatever. But I don't think that anybody can argue that the support networks that are built in those women-dominated spaces are beneficial to the players and actually helps them to develop skills that would be necessary to break through to that professional level.

E: What are some of the effects, both economically and socially, for the video game community by having these competitive spaces be fairly un-diverse. Are the companies losing out on revenue here? Is the social fabric of game-space hampering video games' growth potential?

M: So in terms of cultural patterns, with a lack of diversity it becomes like cultural inbreeding. You will reinforce some of the worst habits over and over again which then makes it more exclusive.

Then as far as the business is concerned, I think just now you are starting to see the realization within the esports industry (using air quotes there) that there is a finite amount of money out there. Because up until now they been enjoying exponential growth.

Booming popularity and millions of viewers and advertisers willing to throw millions of dollars at these millions of viewers. But there is actually only a finite number of advertisers who want to advertise to that super-hardcore white, male audience.

E: So let's go back to *Overwatch* a bit. If you had the ear of Blizzard, what would hypothetically be a few things they could do to their esports infrastructure that might help bring some more women players on board?

Rachel "Seltzer" Quirico

M: The first of the three prongs that were employing are supporting role models. So I certainly believe that having having Seltzer (Rachel Quirico) is really helpful because she is a consistent and well respected face for women in competitive gaming. Being able to support role models like her would be crucial. An easy thing that Blizzard could do would be to always make sure that kind of diversity is represented in their casts, their events, and in their representatives they have for *Overwatch*.

[The second is] encouraging inclusive community spaces. We've been working with companies like Twitch and smaller game publishers to try to build a code of conduct that would encourage their communities to be more welcoming and inclusive and discourage exclusive toxic behavior. That coming from a game publisher is really powerful.

Then the third thing I would say would be offering a diversity of competitive opportunities. It seems to me like we're sort of hollowing out the middle where you'd have lower stakes competitions. It seems like everything these days is geared towards that final million dollar Compendium or LCS Championship or whatever. To have alternative spaces for competition gives people a different way to compete and different way to think about competing. That encourages a greater diversity of competitors.

E: Let's assume you're not a billion dollar company; are there things that the next tier down, such as streamers, journalists, or podcasters can do to help out the diversity in esports?

M: Visibility on marginalized players is always good because their is sort of a hierarchy in esports currently where it's the top teams that get attention. They're the ones that get the bandwidth. There are actually a surprising number of women who are working behind the scenes of esports and often in leadership positions. They don't necessarily broadcast it because they are getting stuff done and don't need to deal with potential backlash. But they're there, and they're doing stuff, they're making big decisions. I think that those stories are important and valuable to hear.

As far as streamers are concerned I feel like streamers are in a really good position to educate watchers on what kind of online behavior is acceptable and how to be part of a community in an inclusive and healthy way.

E: If maybe all of this seems a little like inside baseball to average fan, is there anything that someone who just loves esports could do to help out with any of this?

M: I would say that they should follow the streams where people are positive—which people tend to do anyways. But I would say don't give your eyeballs to streams that are toxic because they are making money off of those eyeballs. I think there are enough options out there that they can chose who they are watching.

But in the cases of the streams for major events, where you don't have a choice because you have the one stream that is happening, chiming in with positivity can add up. There are a lot of people who will watch the stream and just close the chat because it's a dumpster fire. I would say there is something worthwhile to sticking around too. It's not a matter of picking fights with trolls either. It's just a matter of being supportive and cheering and lending positivity because that kind of thing builds momentum.

E: I have one last question: what would you say to any young women out there who want to start out in competitive video games?

M: I would say that you should find your friends. They exist! There are communities out there. Maybe find some women streamers out there playing the game that you like. Look around. Put in the effort to finding those communities: They do exist.

If you're persistent about asking around for the groups of women who are playing certain games together you will find them. And that's a really wonderful place to start because then you are finding a group of people who have dealt with a lot of the stuff you're dealing with and help insulate you from a lot of that stuff. Even that doesn't have to be women only. Inclusive communities where there are guys who are supportive and happy to encourage woman is just as valid.

Gaming with friends is great, and I encourage people to start there. Find your people, find your community, and it will make playing those games much more fun, which is the first step.

For more information about Any Key's diversity initiatives and research, visit http://www.anykey.org/. To see more about Morgan Romine's work as a cultural anthropologist, visit her site at http://morganromine.com/. Special thanks to IndieCade 2016 for hosting the fantastic conversation between Morgan and pro Counterstrike player Emmalee Garrido that first brought the work of Any Key to my attention.

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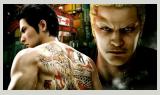

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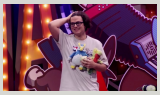

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