E-Sports and Gaming Houses in Turkey: Gender, Labor, and Affect

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ABSTRACT

E-sports is a global industry based on professional and competitive playing of videogames, where revenues reach 1 billion dollars. The field of e-sports blends sports, technology and gameplay within a masculine, heteronormative, and entrepreneurial context. E-sports players work, play and live within gaming houses. Based on ethnographic research in gaming houses, e-sports events, and semi-structured interviews with players, families, and fans in Istanbul, this thesis aims to understand how professional e-sports players "playbor." "Playbor" emerges within the context of post-industrialism where the path to a "good life" comes through not hard work but passionate play. This thesis reveals the ways in which neoliberal fantasies of love have permeated e-sports. Furthermore, it shows how heteronormative gender structures already inherent in videogames and physical sports get to be reproduced themselves within e-sports. Through an interdisciplinary framework between digital game studies, media studies, and digital labor studies, this thesis ultimately demonstrates the tensions and contradictions of how contemporary youth negotiates the promises of digital play with the realities of market economy in Turkey

Keywords: Esports, Precarity, Gender, Liberalism, Labor, Affect, Subjectivity, Political Economy, Masculinity, Digital Labor, Playbor, Entrepreneurial Self, Embodiment, Love, Video Games, Gamers, Turkey

ÖZET

E-spor, bilgisayar oyunlarının profesyonel ve rekabetçi bir biçimde oynandığı ve pazar hacminin milyar dolarlara ulaştığı global bir endüstridir. E-spor, erkeklik, heteronormatiflik ve girişimcilik bağlamında sporu, teknolojiyi ve oyun oynamayı birbiri içine sokan bir alandır. Istanbul'daki oyun evleri ve e-spor etkinliklerinde yapılan etnografik araştırmaya ve profesyonel oyuncular, aileleri ve hayranlarla yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelere dayanan bu tez profesyonel e-spor oyuncularının "playbor" [play + labor \ oyun oynamak + çalışmak] pratiklerini anlamayı hedeflemektedir. "Playbor" "iyi yaşam"a giden yolun çok çalışmak kadar, tutkulu oyundan da geçtiği sanayi-sonrası bir bağlamda ortaya çıkar. Bu tez, aşk gibi neoliberal fantezilerin e-spora nasıl sızdığını göstermektedir. Buna ek olarak, bilgisayar oyunları ve fiziksel sporlarda halihazırda var olan heteronormatif cinsiyet rollerinin e-spor içerisinde nasıl yeniden üretildiğini gösterir. Son olarak bu tez, oyun çalışmaları, medya çalışmaları ve dijital emek çalışmalarının kesiştiği interdisipliner bir çerçeve üzerinden, günümüz gençliğinin Türkiye'deki piyasa ekonomisinin gerçekleriyle dijital oyunların sunduğu vaatleri müzakere etme sürecindeki gerilimlerini ve çelişkilerini göstermiş oluyor.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Espor, Güvencesizlik, Cinsiyet, Etkilenim, Emek, Politik Ekonomi, Öznellik, Erkeklik, Liberalism, Dijital Emek, Girişimcilik, Bedenileşme, Aşk, Bilgisayar Oyunu, Bilgisayar Oyunu Oyuncusu, Türkiye

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Videogames and E-sports Industry: Emergence of Gaming Houses

Video games are a big part of contemporary culture since late 1970s (Kerr, 2006; King, 2002) in the West and since 1980s in Turkey. Globally, video games market worth is estimated to be beyond 100 billion dollars, excluding hardware, gambling and betting related data (Kerr 2017, 32). Last year, industry revenues reached $36 Billion[1] in US and $700 Million [2] in Turkey. Aside from its gainful economy, the production of video games also raises an intriguing case regarding how we think about work and play. The blurring distinction between the two has been addressed by various scholars, who pointed to the ways in which play has very much become like labor (Kücklich, 2005; Yee, 2006). This blurring of work and play manifests itself especially in the case of electronic sports, which is an emergent field of hardcore gaming that aims to extract value from the devoted players' practice of passionate play (Clément et al, 2014; Consalvo, 2009; Taylor, 2012; N. Taylor, 2016)

E-sports is the professional playing of video games where players compete against each other in various video games on different platforms. In the field of e-sports, there are sponsored teams with contracted players, national, and international leagues and tournaments, coaches, analysts, dedicated broadcasting media. Given the complexity and global formation of the field, e-sports has an actively growing audience, as well. Its economy is not negligible. E-sport revenues are expected to reach $900 Million in 2018 and go over $1 Billion in 2019[3] globally.

These growing revenues are reflected in the prize pools of e-sports tournaments, as well. In other words, hard play pays off. Only one single game's, Dota's prize pool for its championship in 2017 was almost $25 Million[4]. Since 2011, there have been more than 50 tournaments with prize pools either more than or equal to a million dollar[5]. Competition for such major prizes meant the regulation and systemization of the practice of play. This competitive scene, however, has a long history. That is, the emergence of a financialized global e-sports field goes back to the marketization (event marketing) of video games since 1980s in tournaments, PC cafes, and various events (Castell and Jenkins, 1998; Taylor, 2012). Today, we are well beyond the level of local competitions, since e-sports competitions are broadcasted on different platforms, creating a competitive community at the global scale thanks to the internet[6] (Borowy, 2012).

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[1] According to Entertainment Association Software: http://www.theesa.com/article/us-video-game-industry-revenue-reaches-36-billion-2017/

[2] According to Ihlas News Agency: http://www.iha.com.tr/haber-bilgisayar-oyunlarinda-turkiyenin-pazar-hacmi-700-milyon-dolara-ulasti-652558/

[3] https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/newzoo-global-esports-economy-will-reach-905-6-million-2018-brand-investment-grows-48/, https://www.statista.com/statistics/490522/global-esports-market-revenue/

[4] http://www.dota2.com/international/overview/

[5] https://www.esportsearnings.com/tournaments

[6] It was arcade events in 1980s where either enthusiasts or companies organized gatherings, followed by consoles coming to 2000s when competitions were televised.

Although it is the internet that enables a global environment for a networked competition, e-sports teams need particular spaces to work, play, and dwell that are called "gaming houses." In gaming houses, players and sometimes other staff members of a team live and work together for at least 12-14 hours a day. In other words, passionate players have relocated from public spaces such as the PC Cafes to private residences in order to work, play, and live together. A team mate is also both a co-worker and a flat-mate. Gaming houses, then, blend professionalism, friendship, and a gendered work ethic through a particular logic of economic productivity.

E-sports: An Interdisciplinary Research Field

Videogames are now a legitimate field of study. They have their own journals such as *Games and Culture* and *Game Studies*. In these journals, many different aspects of video games have been discussed such as their inherent connection to military research (Haddon, 1988, 1993; Kline et al, 2003), art work (Jenkins 2005; Tavinor, 2009, 2014), educational aspects (Gros, 2007; Jenkins and Kurt, 2011), cultural forms (Boellstorff, 2007; Burrill, 2008; Consolva, 2007), and economic values (Crandall & Sidak, 2006; Kerr, 2016; Johns, 2006). Also, scholars have approached videogames and communities as sexist and gendered products of culture industry (Jansz & Martis, 2007; Jennifer & de Castell, 2005, 2011; Taylor 2012, N. Taylor, 2009).

Prior to the emergence of video games as a medium, a longer tradition of scholarship investigated play, game, and sports, as well as trying to define, differentiate, or compromise these three. Huizinga's renowned *Homo Ludens* (1938) approaches play as a fundamental feature of societies and defines its characteristics as free, materially unrewarding, and voluntary. While videogaming fits to be considered as *play* according to his criteria, e-sports fails to do so due to its economic rewards. Caillois (1961) builds on this work but further differentiates between *play* and *game*. He has a similar definition of *play* but for him, games are structured and competitive versions of play. That is, he suggests that play is a more open-ended activity which also forms games, but the latter are more strictly regulated by time, space, and rules. How rules structure play has also fundamentally been discussed (Callois, 1961; Juul, 2005).

Huizinga coins the term *magic circle* to define the moment and space unbound from the real world where play takes place. Similarly, how the magic circle gets to be shaped by modernity and rationalization has been scrutinized. Especially Caillois (1961) warns against the appropriation of play and games by modernity and losing its playful aspects. This appropriation takes place through systemization, institutionalization, and rationalization.

Embodying the institutionalization and rationalization of video game play, e-sports itself has become an interdisciplinary field, drawing from a diverse set of disciplines including game studies, media studies, sports sociology, psychology, and legal studies. In the realm of legal studies, Tong (2017) calls for the recognition of e-sports players as professional athletes so that they can obtain improved visas that minimize possible risks such as deportation, thereby giving more security to players. Both Chao (2017) and Hollist (2016) portray unequal and unregulated scene of e-sports where private organizers and investors have the power to define the rules and regulations. Legal scholars overall make a case for more regulatory involvement from governments and formation of international regulatory bodies which can provide safer environments for players and ensure a better growth of the industry.

Within media and communication studies, scholars discussed e-sports in relation to new formations of fandom (Özbıçakçı, 2016), spectatorship (Cheung and Huang, 2011; Taylor, 2015), and participatory culture (Hamilton, Garretson, Kerne, 2014; Nick, 2013; Niels, 2012; Kaytoue, Raissi, 2012). As these studies emphasize, the internet, thanks to new viewing and broadcasting affordances, enabled the emergence of new modes of spectatorship, fandom, and participation. As the proximity between a professional player, a fan and a spectator narrows down, new modes of participatory activities arise. Fans now can directly reach their idol professional players, ask them questions over streaming websites like Twitch. At the same time, professional players who stream on Twitch, broadcast their daily lives to their fans and spectators.

Within game studies[7], Wagner (2006) discusses the relationship between traditional sports and e-sports, ultimately coining the term "virtual high-performance teams" in order to point to the necessary training necessary in e-sports. Likewise, Adamus (2012) discusses gaming and e-sports in their cultural and technological dimensions. She emphasizes the theoretical validity of e-sports by referring to its highly integrated nature of new media technologies. Moreover, calling e-sports a "blind spot in the current scientific research" (p.487), she links e-sports to new forms of youth subcultures and youth scene in a digitalized environment. Thinking of e-sports through the lens of digitalization of traditional sports, Hebbel-Seeger (2012) shows how public images of sports are integrated into and transformed by e-sports. On the individual level and deriving methods from sports psychology Pereira, Wilwert, and Takase (2016) work with a group of professional e-sports athletes and demonstrate how traditional exercises are helpful for e-sports. Therefore, these works establish the connection between the two (e-

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[7] Interestingly esports or pro-gaming is not discussed amply in *Game Studies* but rather in communication, technology, and new media disciplines in reference to the initial. On the other hand, hardcore and competitive gaming which can be seen as the basis of e-sports or pro-gaming is widely discussed in *Game Studies*. Therefore, while it is hard to find an academic literature on esports in *Game Studies*, it is more convenient and logical to make connections to esports from theoretical discussions made about various modes of gaming in *Game Studies*.

sports and sports) and hope to absolve any unfruitful discussion regarding the "sportiness" of e-sports. Indeed, both my research and the works of Taylor and N. Taylor (2012; 2009) prove that many professional or competitive players have a background in various sports that provides them with the necessary discipline, ethic, and approach.

The porous relationship between sports and e-sports is never smooth, though. For instance, Brock (2018) builds on Caillois' work and argues professionalization of videogame playing strips it off its playful characteristics. He suggests monetary and extrinsic rewards in e-sports rationalize the fundamental activity of gaming that is play. He suggests in such conditions players turn towards the most beneficial move. These conditions he suggests leads to alienation, and "precarious play" as I will demonstrate along the lines of existing scholarship (Taylor, 2012; Taylor, 2009).

Precarious play is gendered. Zolides (2015) discusses precarity by comparing online personas of two professional gamers of two different genders. While both players have to navigate a thin line in order to succeed, women gamers are even more "attacked" in the male dominated world of e-sports that is filled with masculine heteronormativity. Jenson and de Castell (2018) make an important contribution in their discussion of immaterial, affective, and aspirational labor in e-sports from an "entrepreneurial gamer" perspective. As they put these perspectives in touch with feminist critics of labor, they make two main points. First, even though there are more women playing video games today, they are highly marginalized as masculine heteronormativity continues to reign. Second, they emphasize how precarity and exploitative working conditions are normalized under the discourse of "doing what you love" and practices of aspirational and entrepreneurial labor of post-modernity (Duffy, 2016; Tokumitsu, 2014).

My work draws on the insights of this scholarship and is especially inspired by the ethnographic perspectives derived from the works of T. L. Taylor (2012) and N. Taylor (2009, 2015, 2016). These scholars portray a detailed picture of e-sports with its history while also addressing changing forms of identities, gender, fandom, and playing in the context of a professionalizing activity.

The ethnographic perspective helps better illustrate the affects, emotions, aspirations, and intimacies in the precarious environment of professional videogame playing. My work contributes to scholarship on gendered and sexist structures of e-sports, as well as the body of work on entrepreneurialism surrounding e-sports by specifically investigating how such processes are understood, embodied, and navigated by families.

Having discussed various approaches to e-sports, I will now portray the field of e-sports in Turkey. And then I will discuss the labor in e-sports as machinic, affective, and embodied. At the same time, I will discuss the discourse of love as a constitutive affect. Gaming houses are spaces where this

labor is most intensely performed. Having discussed the labor, I will define gaming houses and discuss emerging modes of relations in those spaces. Next, I will discuss gender in e-sports at the intersection of technology and sports. By discussing gamer meritocracy, toxic language, and the marketing of fame I will present how gendered hierarchies get to be reproduced. Finally, I will locate this immense web at the context of entrepreneurial gaming and discuss family and new job prospects.

Methods

My ethnographic research lasted for 1,5 years. Since participant observation is vital for ethnographic research, I have been to six different gaming houses of five different e-sports teams. I observed players in their daily routine. I had the chance to talk to them during many smoking and coffee breaks. I also conducted more than twenty semi-structured interviews with many different actors of the field. Most of them were professional or aspiring professional e-sports players. Then, there were two casters, two tournament organizers, an assistant manager, in three different sits seven family members, two streamers one of whom used to be a professional player, a cosplayer, and an enthusiast member / leader of an amateur gaming club. Throughout, I use pseudonyms for the players and teams and refrain from disclosing any information that can reveal players' or teams' identities.

However, my ethnography wasn't as smooth as it sounds. I wanted my visits to be weekly or at least periodically but maintaining such a schedule was almost impossible with all of them. The main reason my visits were not as periodical as I wanted them to be was because the gaming houses are homes to players as much as a workplace. Even though the players' daily, weekly, and monthly routines are organized, many times before my scheduled visits, I have been called to postpone. The most common excuse was that "Things are a bit stressed." More vaguely, I would be told that "We are not just available at home today/this week." The tones of these calls were sincere though. It acknowledged that it is not only a workplace but also a home. Other times I was told that the players needed privacy or had other issues to discuss privately. "We will be too busy tomorrow to train for the match on the weekend, and the kids need their privacy." is what I was told many times. Sometimes a player had his family or friends visiting so the house was not available. Sometimes those visitors were all the way from Korea. It was this home aspect of gaming houses that made visiting those places periodically so hard. Even though I was always eager to be there at all times, assistant managers and team owners wanted to keep the home aspect of their gaming houses. That meant respecting the boundaries, or at least setting boundaries for their players.

The field of e-sports in Turkey

Turkey's E-sports League

Videogames are played competitively/professionally at various different levels of organizing such as online or offline tournaments, an event at an internet café or a fair, or nation-wide watched leagues. Likewise, the level of professionalism changes according to the organization/event. Leagues that are organized by well-founded and comprehensive organizations bring considerable recognition, expand the scene in all directions, and magnify the level of professionalism. Structured e-sports leagues become institutionalized spaces of professionalized video game playing. In this context, it becomes important to understand the structure of the most influential league in Turkey.

Riot Games is a video game developer, publisher, and e-sports organizer. Their game *League of Legends* is one of the most popular games played in e-sports scene with considerably high revenues. The league they organize in Turkey is called "Vodafone Freezone Championship League."[8] It is the most popular and only well-structured league in Turkey.

Riot Games implements their e-sports league model similarly in many different countries. They have offices in five European countries, Russia, Mexico, India, United States, China, UAE, Japan, Taiwan, Chile, Vietnam, Brazil, Korea, Australia, and Singapore. There are fourteen different regions in which the company actively hold tournaments. Except from one major league called Championship or Pro League, there are also minor (second tier) leagues in those regions. The unsuccessful teams of the major league get relegated to second tier. Also, in these regions, Riot Games holds university/college leagues where only teams consisting of university students can participate. After the end of major seasons in fourteen different regions, best teams participate in global competitions. Every year, this cycle repeats itself, in the same manner, in every region.

As a monopoly, this big organization has definitely brought incredible recognition to e-sports both globally and in Turkey. They organize major offline events that find space in traditional media outlets. There are also big money prizes that reach up to $5 Million they distribute that also makes it to headlines. In Turkey, they have partnerships with universities[9], various e-sports organizations, internet

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[8] Şampiyonluk Ligi.

[9] For instance, Bahçeşehir University gives scholarship to talented League of Legends players. They have a dedicated practice room for their selected members from the university. A student at Bahçeşehir University who also participates in Republic of Gamers' league describes his situation in the University as "It is so cool you know. They are giving us a space to play our game. When we go there we have an overtone. People start to look at you differently." Similarly, many professional and aspiring players stated importance of appreciation from fans. "They care about us, take us seriously. I always receive questions on my Facebook now. 'Abi[9] how can I do that? How can I improve this?'" Both their technological prowess and gaming capabilities are appreciated. Likewise, they are invited to autograph sessions where fans flock to get their selfies taken, or get their mousepads signed.

cafes, and holdings. Their operation is worldwide, and their webs extend over myriad of actors from investors, teams, players of any level, and fans.

Riot Games has offices around the world and one of them is in Istanbul. They organize and coordinate the league, make the teams compete, and create content for the audience in their office. This content, first and foremost, are the matches teams play weekly. These matches are streamed online and live from the office. Broadcasting the match, however, is only one aspect. Riot Games' monopoly starts showing itself here, players almost become company's assets. They are not allowed play any other game publicly or attend other tournaments. Everything players say in the office during matches are recorded and then broadcasted on *League of Legends*' Youtube channel with the title "Voice of Championship League." Players also act in promotional videos introducing the game, characters, or the league. Lastly, they have to live in the gaming houses. Because Riot Games is the developer of the game, and organizer of its league, they are able to impose such rules on teams and players. It is possible to see Riot Games like a big machine that reproduces itself by keeping players in gaming houses, making them work for better all the time, raising the skill level of the scene and professionalizing their game in a very monopolistic way. Meanwhile, the players are marketed through various social media by always branding them with the game *League of Legends* or its league with the discourses of winning and competition in heteronormative ways.

There are 8 teams in Riot Games' Turkish major league and all teams have a gaming house. The reason is that Riot Games makes it mandatory to have a gaming house to be able to participate in the league. Indeed, all the professional players in gaming houses and all aspiring professionals I have interviewed emphasized the necessity of a gaming house by generally normalizing remarks. The strict rule of having a gaming house considerably shapes the field of e-sports where the company has significant amount of power. They are constructing a professional scene through a self-defined agenda mediated by an instrumental and ludic logic of capitalism.

Apart from Riot Games, there are other international brands trying to set their foot in this growing scene. Intel, ESL, Redbull, Coca-Cola, Nvidia, SteelSeries and similar technology and youth-oriented firms are investing in e-sports by organizing tournaments and various sponsorships. In Turkey, internet cafes also play an important role. Some older and well-founded ones have their own teams and gaming houses that host competitions in several different games. Dark Passage and Zoccos' are two examples of such internet cafes. Also, Dark Passage has a team participating in LoL and *Counter-Strike*'s major tournaments in Turkey.

Apart from internet cafes directly investing in participating in e-sports, there are many other internet cafes who are starting to brand themselves as e-sports avenues/areans. GameEkstra, Hulagü

E-sports Center, Astella Gaming E-sports Arena are such places. These places either provide suitable environment for teams to practice with fast internet connection and advanced computers. Some provide rooms with only five PCs so teams can shout in peace during practices or matches. In the following section, I will discuss "the feel of the field" and show how these different actors come about in the spectacular context of e-sports in Turkey.

Large, Fancy, and Crowded: Major Tournaments

Apart from these semi-structured interviews and gaming house visits, I have been to e-sports tournaments of various sizes. Bigger, sponsored tournaments with high attendance and prize pools exceeding several thousand dollars are considered major tournaments. One of them was Zula World Cup which had a prize pool of 100,000 dollars. It was at a higher-up hotel in downtown Istanbul called Renaissance Hotel.

Another major event was the finale of the biggest Turkish e-sports game, *League of Legends*, with 12.000 live viewers watching the match in Ülker Sports Arena, a very big sporting site owned by Fenerbahçe.

A final event was the Intel ESL Turkey Championship Final in Volkswagen Arena, based in the financial district of Istanbul. In these major tournaments, it is hard to reach professional players as they are separated from the audience, until they lose. However, competition arenas are filled with young video game players, aspiring professionals, and families with different modes of engagement with the whole event.

Entering these tournaments is quite reminiscent of a major football game in Istanbul. The entrance is filled with young men smoking cigarettes or eating sandwiches not to get charged by the overpriced food in the venue. Shows, prizes, stands are presented to attendees, coming close to how Taylor (2012) describes such events similar to a spectacle. At the center of the stage is a host trying to communicate with an audience that can at times be unresponsive. Groups of young men occupy, corners, trying to get closer to stands that give out free items. This relatively hectic and chaotic environment comes to a halt when the match starts. Then the sound of the game and casters' voice fill the whole arena.

The audience is mostly comprised of young men, who are fans of the professional players. They are fans that passionately play these games. They watch their matches online but also prefer, if given the chance, to see them live. They prefer to be audience in an arena as it is not only cool and exciting but they can also have their mousepads autographed by an e-sports celebrity. Not different from other realms of media consumption, fans actively check their social media accounts as they watch the game

and at times perform identity work in their own social media platforms regarding e-sports fandom (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Özbıçakçı, 2016).

Apart from young men, there are older people attending these competitions. They are none other than the parents of these youngsters. The parents look lost, tired, and sometimes amazed. "They are all here to watch some people to play video games huh?" says one father who brought his 13-year-old son to Volkswagen Arena. As they come to e-sports games with their children, they make certain arrangements. Some drop them off and agree to meet later, whereas others wait for them around the venue, fortifying themselves around an outlet. Some parents are gamers themselves and enjoy the whole show with their children. "This is great, finally there is something we can do together with my son!" says another father carrying his 8-year-old on his shoulders. And yet, as I will discuss later too, parental support is quite gendered in that highest engagement is actually from the mothers of these professional players. It is not uncommon to see moms cheering enthusiastically on the front line of the stage, sometimes closing their eyes, and praying for their kids' success.

Dark, Crampy, and Hand-made: Small Scale Tournaments

Apart from these major tournaments, I have been to countless small-scale internet café tournaments with prize pools ranging from 200 Liras to 1000 Liras. In some of those tournaments, the prizes were only computer hardware such as keyboards, mouse, graphic cards, or free usage of computers in the internet café for some time. Participants of these internet café tournaments were rarely professional players. However, almost all the players I talked to, especially the young men in their early teens, considered e-sports as a possible career choice. Some were there to form their teams and gain experience. Some wanted to prove their strength to possible sponsors or hindering parents. Some just wanted to compete, have fun, and maybe earn some money at the end of the day.

It is possible to find a small-scale internet café tournament in any part of the city, although some places have more experience in organizing such events. Moreover, some internet of those internet cafes, such as Zocco's, Dark Passage, and Astella to name, promote themselves as venues of competitive gaming. In these venues, tournaments are held more often, and there are usually staff experienced in organizing such events. These places are usually cramped, stuffy, and dark. Lack of space and high attendance rates turn these places into hard to navigate spaces. Teams or players apply online and usually have to pay to compete. The audience is right beneath the shoulder, usually a friend or a costumer at the internet café.

It is hard to talk about professionalism in these tournaments. After a match finishes, the result is shouted over to the guy responsible for keeping the track. He then enters the score to the notepad app

on his iPhone. Final result is calculated after the last match with a pen and paper. The winner is determined and unclosed right there. While the practicality is rather friendly and unprofessional, discourse of creating a fair and professional competition environment is always suggested by the organizers. In other words, participants ask for fair play in these small-scale events.

E-sports in this sense, is lived in many different spaces, in many different ways. Being a rather new phenomenon in Turkey, professionalism is still something being tried and experimented with. There is a constant reference to professionalism but how it is carried out and interpreted changes drastically.

Events Revolving Around E-sports and Digital Gaming

I have attended three big fairs with thousands of visitors. One of them, Multiplay Chapter 6: E-Spor and Gaming Festival, was a one-day event organized by a rooted gaming magazine. It took place in a gentrification zone, far from the many city centers of Istanbul, in an old, out of use factory. The place was surrounded by car mechanics, hardware stores, curious elders, and excited young men. After waiting on a long queue, I passed beneath a black heavy curtain that separated the festival from the "real world." A misty valley filled with smoke machines and illuminated with dim red lights carried me to the main festival avenue. After such a mesmerizing entrance however, the main avenue took me back to industrial reality of early 20th century with its pipes sticking from here and there, high roof, some rusty factory machines, and large elevated windows. Luckily, seeing an augmented reality set of a new game and the excited guys around it puts me back in the digital mood.

Moving forward to the end of the factory-avenue, the place is filled with stands of different brands. At the very end, there is a big screen above a stage. On the stage, there are 10 computers. It is where the e-sports part of the festival will be carried out. As mentioned earlier, in these festivals, events, or fairs e-sports makes up only one aspect of the whole gathering. There are many different brands, streamers, mini competitions. These brands range from technology companies, fast-food joints to banks. However, they are all garnished with an aspect of digital gaming or at least relate to videogame playing in some ways. All of the attendees there were videogame players, with many hoping to be an e-sports athlete one day.

Another one was "Gaming İstanbul: International Digital Entertainment & Games Expo." This was in Istanbul Congress Center reaching 14.000 square meters of ground. This congress center is located at lively downtown of Istanbul, easily reachable by metro and public transportation. Being

around upscale neighborhoods too, this event attracted many young women as well. Likewise, many gaming related and news websites highlighted GIST having the highest women participation[10].

The event lasted for four days. Again, in GIST, there were many different brands from many different sectors mostly being game developers. There were also technology companies of different sectors from telecom to printer producers, e-sports tournament organizers, small scales internet cafes, banks, toy stores, board game makers, energy drinks. The avenue, similar to Multiplayer's, is vitalized by many different atmospheres all directed towards videogames as well. As the avenue is filled with different stands of different brands, each section is illuminated in its brand's own colors to create that atmosphere. Wandering around the fair ground, loud voices coming from big speakers mingle with each other, all trying to define the limits of their ambiance. This is even more magnified with cosplayers cruising all around the site.

While every stand and section is directed towards videogames, some parts of the fairground are designated tournament areas. In these areas, e-sports matches of many different games are organized. Again many participants, who registered weeks ago either configure their computers, compete, or watch their next opponents in and around these areas.

In these events, I have had the chance to meet many aspiring professionals. Watching a trailer, waiting in the line for a free mousepad, trying to get my name written down to try that latest technology of augmented reality, watching others compete in tournament areas, having a smoke in the lounge, or splashing water to my face in the bathroom to wake myself up were some of the moments to mingle with the friendly crowd and talk to them. Again, playing video games, talking about them, and seeing the latest ones are one of the biggest reason why these young men fill the areas. At the same time, there are many young people who join these fairs for their favorite streamers. "I don't watch TV anymore. It's always Twitch. I can find the one whose conversation fits me the best, and I can interact with them… Their ideologies, world views, the games they play fit me, so I talk with them, not with my parents. Now I am very excited to see Jahrein[11]" says a seventeen years old young man in the smoking lounge after we while we are talking about why we are there, and why he streams instead of watching TVs. In another fest, while waiting in line, two 13-14-year-old boys, cousins were talking about their favorite streamers. Trying to start conversation with them I was baffled by the endless streamers they named. "Look he is my favorite streamer, apparently he is in [the venue]," one of them told me showing the streamer's Instagram feed.

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[10] https://leadergamer.com.tr/gaming-istanbul-2018-iddiali/
http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/teknoloji/gaming-istanbul-fuari-persembe-basliyor-40725381c
[11] A famous Turkish streamer.

To sum up, e-sports is a vast field comprised of distinct practices including gameplay, watching others play, live streaming over Twitch and YouTube. Major institutional actors include companies, organizations, and governments. Meanwhile, young men mobilize their passion for play and form communities amd digital lives lives through various practices of fandom and participatory culture (Jenkins, 2005, 2006; de Castell and Jenkins, 1998).

Central to the formation of these professional communities and careers are gaming houses and labor. Next, I theorize e-sports labor and then will pull down that theoretical framework by examining how e-sports labor manifests itself within gaming houses.

The Labor of E-sports: Machinic, Affective, and Embodied

In such a complex, young, and ever-changing field, I set out to understand the labor of these professional players, gendered environment around this labor, and their close relationship with the discourse and practices of "doing what you love" (Scharff, 2016; Ross, 1998; Tokumitsu, 2014). Various concepts such as emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), immaterial labor (Lazzarato, 1996), or affective labor (Hardt, 1999) have been suggested to define labor practices within game studies and specifically e-sports.

Emotional labor was first used to understand the labor performed in service jobs (Hochshild, 1983). As service jobs started to prevail within advanced capitalist countries, feelings became important assets that needed to be regulated and performed in certain ways for higher production values. At the same time as production shifted from manual factory to computerized offices, formations of labor changed as well. Manuel labor was replaced with the use of latest information technologies without always producing material goods. This shift was theorized with "immaterial labor" (Lazzarato, 1996). Still in accordance to post-modernism and deeply related to immaterial and emotional labor, performances of affects are theorized as affective labor (Hardt, 1999). As production and consumption of culture and reproduction of society became increasingly tied to embodied subjectivities, affect theory is used to understand how strong feeling and emotions navigate in these processes. At the same time, all of these theories are highly related to feminist critiques of labor and society, as in women's centuries old unnoticed domestic work which lays over all of these three types of labor (Jarrett 2015).

Players' practices within e-sports seem more like play as they don't seem to produce any material goods (Hardt & Negri, 2001). No matter whether they are practicing at their (gaming) home, streaming their gameplay, participating in tournaments online or attending offline tournaments, they don't seem to produce any material goods. However, there is significant amount of labor that goes into e-sports as players produce symbolic experiences and data that form the basis of communication with

the audience, who, at the end of the day, are the sources of advertising money. That is, professional players work for the entertainment industry, which is run by sponsorships, broadcasting fees, and advertisements.

To succeed, players have to develop extensive knowledge of their technologies and engage with these technologies, which could be considered as the cultural content of their immaterial labor. Without player's intensive machinic experience, e-sports play/labor is not possible. At the same time, they are constantly working with and on their body. Those bodies are used and exhausted in trainings and matches. They are always under constant stress and persisting for mastery.

What kind of affective processes are at play within e-sports, then? Michael Hardt (1999) sees affective labor as the most efficient way of producing value in postmodernist societies and also as an arrangement of biopower from below. Through networks of culture and communication, production and reproduction of affects takes place at the core of forming subjectivities, communities, and socialities. Such affective qualities are described as causing the player with strong emotions such as fear, joy, disgust, happiness, contempt. Therefore, labor in e-sports which is primarily playing video games is inherently an affective activity.

There is also considerable amount of emotional labor that constitute e-sports. Emotional labor in its most basic definition is regulating and expressing emotions in certain ways (Hochschild, 1983). Caregivers, waiters, sellers being the most apparent example, this theory is extended to office workers (Pugliesi, 1999). Players in a gaming house are confined to a home-office where their flat-mates become their co-workers. In such a configuration of blurring, regulation of emotions becomes a must that these players have to perform most of the time.

E-sports as machinic experience

There is no e-sports without technologies of kinds. One major technology is the computer. Professional players spend most of their time in front of their computers, which they, aside from the joyful moments of playing, have to know inside and out. First of all, their work encompasses a deep knowledge of in-game play, mechanics, and strategies that they have to follow and improve. Professional players in gaming houses or aspiring professionals at internet cafes or homes spend up to 12-14 hours a day trying to perfect their gameplay. This gameplay mainly composes of mastering *mechanics* (in game controlling ability) of the game and team strategies. They divide their time between solo and team practices. As much as they practice as a team, they practice with other teams to test their strategies.

Getting the players of a team ready, setting up the necessary software correctly such as team speak[12] or game clients are necessities to expertise.

Players have to be deeply informed about the software and hardware of their technological mediators. For instance, even in small internet café or local tournaments, when a player sits in front of his computer, he[13] spends minutes and sometimes hours trying to adjust the machine's configurations. Players readjust their hardware including their screen, mouse, keyboard, chairs, and headphone preferences. Then they work even more on the software of their computers, equipment, and in game preferences. Every single configuration is readjusted according to their gameplay. The ways and processes of accumulating such know-how is all around a professional player's life or even on an amateur level, in a gamer's life.

Online communities provide immense information on such technological craft and players are to hunt them if they want to improve. Schools, workplaces, meetings with friends and similar peer-to-peer gatherings are other settings where such knowledge is produced and shared. Even before the start of a heated professional or semi-professional match, players will be exchanging knowledge on how to fix an unexpected issue. In that regard, off-line and online socialities form the basis of how players exchange know-how, skills, and craft.

When machines fail, bodies move. In every small-scale internet café tournament, online tournaments, practice matches, in gaming houses, or big-scale offline tournaments there is always a moment when a player raises his hand, stands up, or shouts out to delay the start of a game or completely stop it. Whether the problem occurs during or before the game, it is firstly the teammate next to that person that leans in and asks what is wrong. Hands and body move towards the teammate that is having the problem, fingers reach to the keyboard and mouse, trying to fix the issue. Meanwhile, problem is shared with other players over microphone to see if somebody else has an idea about how to fix it. If the problem persists, player takes his headset off, shouts out the issue. At that moment, the player of the opposing team, me, the staff working in the tournament lean in. Sometimes we all chip in to resolve the issue. There have even been a few times that I had the chance to help a player with his hardware problems, fixing a DPI issue[14]. In that regard, although the moment of play itself seems like a very individual act, community and sharing know-how are crucial to the field of e-sports.

So far, I discussed an important element within professional e-sports: learning to work with machines. This machinic immaterial labor, however, is based on a central affective quality: love.

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[12] Used for in-game communication.
[13] I deliberately use the pronoun he to refer to the masculine dimension of e-sports, which I elaborate later.
[14] Mouse sensitivity setting.

Love as Constitutive Affect in E-Sports: Ludic Socialities, Embodied Performances

Love is at the core of video game play and e-sports. In every interview with professional and semi-professional players, statements of love, devotion, and connection are prevalent. Players always affirm how their profession cannot be done without love. One has to love playing video games in order to improve and succeed. "How can you play a game for 12 hours a day without loving it?"[15] says one Zula player I visited at their gaming house and he is right. Devoting half and sometimes more of your life to your work requires a different kind of connection for these middle-upper class young people. "My first computer came home when I was around 8 and I will never forget that day. It was one of the happiest moment of my life" says an aspiring professional player I met at an internet café participating in Republic of Gamers University League[16]. "I've been playing video games all the way from my childhood, when I first played my Atari I was in love with it, I played it all day and night…. Then we got a PC, and the love was there. I and my friends loved and still love playing video games" says another *League of Legends* player.

Similar narrations of childhood histories are very common. A computer is bought when they are very young. They feel very happy and fall in love with video games. It is a practice that they carry on from their childhood, adding up to hundreds of hours of videogame play. In this sense, professional or aspiring professional players' reflections are very analogous. "I still feel the same joy when I sit in front of my computer. It is that happiness from childhood" is a narration many players share today regarding their childhood.

This joy of engaging with and love towards the computer is quite embodied. Watching professional players playing their video games, we see immersion. Players are controlling and navigating a character in a virtual space, but they are not out of that space. The movements they perform is embodied in them. In *Counter-Strike*, a very fast paced first person shooter game in which players try to shoot each other with different weaponry, there is special kind of shooting that is called a "flick shot." It is when a player sees an enemy and turns their aim to the target almost instinctively, killing them.

"You have to know every single detail about the game, every little movement has to be in you. You should be the character" is how Ali describes his success after winning 750 Liras as a team in a small-scale internet café tournament. As tournament progressed, teams got eliminated and matches started to become more intense, Ali became more intense as well. In critical moments, everybody is locked on the screens, waiting for something to happen. After a "sick" flick shot, Ali jumps on his

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[15] Translation mine.
[16] League of Legends' league for university students with 15.000 TL prize pool.

chair, his teammates reach for high-fives, us the audience let a huge sigh out and lean back on our chairs in admiration.

As gaming professionalizes and competition gets stronger, players start to penetrate into the game, totally reversing Shaw and Warf's "spilling out of the screen" affect. Can XANTARES Dörtkardeş is one of the most famous Turkish *Counter-Strike* player. *Counter-Strike* mostly depends on precise and fast hand eye coordination along with strategies teams deploy to outsmart each other. While talking about Can XANTARES Dörtkardeş with a 21 years old university student named Sinan at a tournament he says "I don't think XANTARES uses a crosshair [17]as an aim in the game, he uses his nose." jokingly. Especially players of fast-paced, precision required games are so involved in their games, they get physically close to their screens as well only few centimeters away from that virtual world. All eyes can see are the pixels on the screen, ears are covered with headphones on maximum volume, constant communication with the teammates through microphones, hands on the keyboard and mouse. There is a total immersion in "being that character" as Ali said that drills the virtual world and places the player inside. This is not only achieved by techniques of professionalization but rather in a harmony with that childish, affective attachment.

Yet at the same time, love and affect are not simply individual feelings limited to the machine. They are social and they "spill out of the screen" (Shaw and Warf, 2009). This spillage, I propose, is not only confined to the space in front of the computer but transferred to many other social spaces and relations. In that regard, gameplay is not to be pathologized as causes of solitude, antisocial behavior, or aggression (Bessiere et al., 2012; Shen & Williams, 2010; Wiegman & Schie, 2001, 2006; Williams, 2006). Rather, they are the basis of complex socialities lived and practiced in schools, internet cafes, and meetups. New friendships are made through videogames. My ethnographic research, like some others, shows many other possible forms of socializations are realized through videogaming within today's technologically mediated relations and environments. "I have met with my teammate at his engagement ceremony after 4 years of online friendship. We have always been teammates, friends. I saw him as an older brother even before meeting. He still is one in real life after meeting too" is how a professional ex *League of Legends*, now Overwatch player talks about his teammate/friend. In his current team, there are players from his own school, his neighborhood, and friends he had made online.

In addition to the embodied form I describe above, another particular form in which affect spills out of the screen is through cosplay, that is, costume playing/player. Players or fans dress up as their favorite fictional videogame characters, and also act like them. Cosplayers either buy or more generally personally design costumes of these characters to wear at parties, gatherings, gaming festivals, and

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[17] The marker in the game that show the aim of the gun.

tournaments (Hjorth,2009; Lamerichs, 2011). Walking around in gaming festivals or e-sports tournaments there are always cosplayers dressed in the costume of their favorite fictional characters. Passing by them, you might be struck by their magic spell or sword, or get shot by their gun. If not, you might have to dodge not to take place in the photo other by-passers taking with them. Cosplayers, not only dress but also imitate the most generic gestures and mimics of their beloved characters. Talking with them arouses a feeling of love, content, and dedication. They are in that costume, performing to be what that costume actually is (represents). As long as there are people around, they do not let their guard down, literally. It sometimes gets too hot, too crowded but they are there to perform and be. Only after going to the smoking lounge and moving backwards, I can see a couple of cosplayers with their masks off, guns and staffs laid down. So, as much as videogames do spill out of the screen, they are equally immersed and occupied by their users.

Having discussed the affective, machinic, and embodied features of e-sports and the labor it involves, we can now turn to the material infrastructures within which laboring subjectivities get to be formed: the gaming houses.

Gaming Houses

When Play Factory is also Your Home: The Blurring of Public and Private in Gaming Houses
Historically, gaming houses can be traced back to early 2000s, Seoul. The capital of Korea emerged as a city intensified with videogame tournaments after Korean government's innovative approach to promote videogames as a cultural activity that was also economically profitable in a time of financial crisis. In this crisis, the first gaming house was formed when two professional *StarCraft: Brood War* players BoxeR and YellOw moved in the same apartment in downtown Seoul to continue doing their jobs cost efficiently and more effectively in a highly competitive scene.

The same economic rationality, cost efficiency and performance, lies behind the emergence of gaming houses in Turkey, as well. The managers of the gaming houses told me the main criteria they look for when moving gaming houses was fast internet connection, closeness to downtown areas, and enough space for separate rooms for players. Managers of gaming houses also look out and even move to spaces if they feel that the new place is located in a cool neighborhood where kids can socialize.

There are 15 gaming houses in Turkey. With all the other ones that were opened and closed along the way, the number reaches 25. The general structure of a gaming house in Turkey is similar to its counterparts across the world. It is an apartment, a house, or a building dedicated to an e-sports team

in which players live together. Computers are gathered in the largest room of the house and rooms are shared between players.

One of the gaming houses I visited was a villa with a pool in a gated community. The site was at a very remote and rich part of the city. I had visited this gaming house twice before they moved out. Another research site was a very big apartment on the first floor of a building in one of the well-known and richer neighborhoods of Istanbul. After visiting that site six times, they moved to luxurious suits in a very rich residence. The residence they moved in and the surrounding buildings are part of Turkey's construction boom in a gentrified area. The residence faced a poor neighborhood with car repair shops and shanties. The other two gaming houses of a different club were in the same vicinity, almost neighboring each other. I visited these two gaming houses three times in total. The last one I was able to get in was a building complex consisting of three floors, again in an old and richer part of Istanbul.

Gaming houses mark an important intersection of public and private. E-sports players live, work, and play in these spaces. And creating the feeling of "home" in gaming houses is highly valued by team owners and managers. Correspondingly, one commonality across all gaming houses is the existence of a person helping around the house. This person does not have a job definition. These helpers who go with the title of assistant manager do the laundry, clean the pool, order food, do barbeque, get the taxi, buy contact lens solution, arrange skype meetings, pay players' phone bills, take the players to hospital and so on. "I am here to make them feel home" is what they all say regarding their positions in the gaming house.

Indeed, there are artefacts that players have to make their physical and computers spaces their home. Photos of loved ones, mugs, phone chargers, wallets, small toys, souvenirs were on their tables. Considering they spend most of their time in front of that computer screen at the gaming house, their desktops, both the literal meaning as in tops of their desks and their computer screens, were more personal and private to them than their rooms.

If home is the space for both privacy and hospitality, the gaming house represented certain tensions, too. The assistant managers were the only ones that made me feel a bit of welcome in the house upon arrival. One major reason behind this "limited welcoming" had to do with how the house had become a digital workplace. Tables in the practice rooms of all gaming houses are lined up with computers, screens, keyboards, and cables, filling up most of the space. Eyes are on the screens and headphone sets are worn, leading to feelings of invisibility on my end.

The other tension, related to my feelings of invisibility, was about privacy. Even though I am constantly reminded by the assistant managers that what they were showing me around is a home, we easily and uncaringly cruise between the rooms of the players. "Oh, he's sleeping, let's move on," the

assistant manager would say once in a while when we entered a room, and we would slowly move to the next one. This is the only time we are required to respect a player's personal space, only when they are sleeping in their room.

Players have mostly come to accept this lack of personal privacy. It is alright for me to walk into any room, anytime. This is also apparent in players' narratives, as they said they did not care much about their rooms. They saw it as "just a place to sleep and rest." Yet at the same time, team practices, strategy meetings, and coach instructions were the hardest places and moments for me to attend. They were kept more private than players' own privacy. This was felt with the players, coaches, and managers as well. "You know, this is our home, so what we talk here is very private" was what said to me before all my attendances to team meetings. This concern over privacy reached its peak when the coach of the gaming house that I most visited asked me to stop my visits as the team was going to prepare for the end of the league tournament and the coach did not want any interference with their practices.

Likewise, there is also the fusion of intimacies in gaming houses where your flat-mates are also your colleagues, team-mates, and maybe friends. Given the interweaving of these identities, it becomes crucial for e-sports players to form healthy relationships mostly through sound channels of communication and emotional labor. But when this is not achieved, toxic relations contaminate the cool gaming houses.

Team Relations: Fragile and Toxic Relations in Cool Spaces

I want to start with the story of Sercan, who was an aspiring professional when we first met. Sercan's story is one of an entrepreneurial subject. He was trying to find sponsorship for his team while also doing his internship to graduate from college. He worked at Ankara's industrial zone six hours a day and when he came back home, he would practice his gameplay, arrange team meetings and practices, follow online and offline tournaments, talk to brands for sponsorship. Three months later, his hard work was going to turn into being the e-sports manager of a newly formed club. He was trying to make the decision whether to keep on playing or just manage the teams.

After he got his first sponsorship, he managed to form a more structured team. They did not have a gaming house, but he was able to afford better keyboards and mouse controllers for his teammates. Everyone joined practice from their homes, communicating through a software called TeamSpeak. In that team he was also the team captain and in game leader[18]. "Being a captain is like being a big brother. Team should be like a family, nobody can have grudges against anyone" was how

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[18] Player who gives tactics during matches.

he described his team. For him, success could only be achieved in an atmosphere of good friendship or even kinship. He aims to establish familial relations within the team:

 "Every night before practice time, I ask everyone to join TeamSpeak fifteen, twenty minutes earlier so that we can have a conversation just chitchatting. When I feel like somebody was having a problem, I call them personally, listen to their problems. Also, we meet two, three times a month. Two of my teammates are my friends from high school anyway. We met online with the other two, but they live in Ankara as well.

Later that night, we all went to a bar and talked about families, girlfriends, and most importantly game tactics. As it became obvious during those conversations, Sercan even had to perform extra labor in order to shape friendships in the team. In that regard, his labor is not simply restricted to the playing of video games and in fact involves emotional labor regarding relationships, friendships and kinship-like networks .

For instance, Ali was a professional *League of Legends* player when we first met. He lived in a gaming house and his team was in the major *League of Legends*' league in Turkey. One day, I saw his post on Facebook saying he moved back to his parents' place. Upon calling and asking what happened, he told me when he came back to the gaming house after his day off. He found a new player sitting on his desk. "I really was not expecting it. I knew we weren't on good terms as a team and had few problems, but I was working on them. I was being friendly, explaining them how they can improve. I was gone for one day and they brought this kid who they had arranged earlier… I was trying to encourage them not be toxic, apparently I was the toxic one." He had not only lost his job but also his "home" in this precarious industry. At the time of writing this thesis, a team player who changed his team in LoL's league gave an interview and the headline goes: "It was like living with five enemies"(Playerbros, 2018). In this interview, this e-sports player explains how he was mentally tired because of the people around which reflected on their in-game communication and performance.

Considering all these, players in a gaming house always have to maintain a level of friendship with their co-workers and teammates. A Korean player I interviewed said: "They have to be my friend you know, if I don't like them as a friend, I can't like them as a teammate, a friend in the game. I can't play with toxic people. It's hard." When I ask him what he thinks about gaming houses, "It is good, we are all here, always practicing, we have to practice always. Without gaming houses, it is too hard to constantly practice." Likewise, almost all of the players in gaming houses said gaming houses improved their success and was necessary to be successful. In the same way, aspiring professionals all hoped to

be working in gaming houses one day. Even though gaming houses seem to be the norm and necessary element of success, those places also turn out to be the reason for blowouts of stress and deprivation.

During one of my visits to the gaming house of a very well-funded *League of Legends*' team, there was a carpenter. The players were in a group meeting and we went in front of a Korean player's room. Because the player's room was on the same floor with the practice room, we had to move and talk as quietly as possible. When we got to the door, carpenter and I were both surprised seeing the hole in the door. Asking the assistant manager, we learned that the player staying in that room had broken the door in half by kicking it. Asking for a reason, again the assistant manager told me that he got angry after a practice. He went on saying "These things happen a lot, that is why we are here, to make them feel home, not worry about anything."

When I asked about the incident to the player himself, his explanation was very normalizing and only glossed over the incident. "We are living in the same home and they are my friends. I think it is normal to get angry, everybody gets angry with their friends. Also, we are going through a very stressful period." In this sense, gaming houses can be very demanding places. Spending six days a week with the same people, in the same environment and trying to fulfil responsibilities in the game puts a big strain on these young people. Except from extreme examples like door breaking, players in gaming houses can be left to interfere with each other. Where team cohesion is extremely important and valued, players are left to "work on" being friends. Their labor of playing video games is imbued with constant strive for friendship as well.

There are instances when a player's misfit with the team leading to their loss of profession, home, or career. Even though they are in a very privileged position as they acknowledge it as residents and workers of gaming houses, they are in a very precarious situation as well. A situation in which losing your job also means losing your home at the same time which could simply be caused by a friendly conflict. Combining such stress with the high stakes and a fierce competitive scene, players are always in a constant effort to improve. Regulation of intimacies becomes a necessity in this industry.

Level of proximity between friends/co-workers depends on the team's success in the league. In every gaming house, sounds of chattering, silences, jokes, moments of dialogues, displays of affection and greetings differed greatly. In one of the houses, for instance, the team found out that they were going to drop from the league two weeks before the league ended. The practice room during my visit was dead silent. Players were quiet and buried in their computers with some of them still sleeping at round 2 pm. In such an atmosphere of defeat and loss, there was minimum activity in the house. Players were not even talking with each other, but with their other friends through their computers. "It sucks

that we are here, all the time, even after knowing we dropped off the league. There are still matches for us to play but I can't leave. Now I have to see all these people every day." is what the team's star player quietly told me during a smoke break. In a way, they were trapped in their workplace without knowing what would happen to their jobs and homes.

Gendering E-Sports: Intersections of Technology and Sports

Both globally and in Turkey, the professional e-sports scene is predominantly male. A 2018 report by Turkish Ministry of Youth and Sports declare the percentage of female videogame players as 46 % and state the number of amateur e-sports team to be over 15,000. Therefore, even though video gaming is statistically showed to be an equally shared activity of both genders, e-sports continues to reinforce and constitute existing heteronormative and patriarchal societal structures. For instance, throughout all my gaming house visits, I met with only two women. One of them was a relative of a player and the other was a chef, Ezgi, who defined her job as "[t]o make players feel at home by making their favorite food." When I asked her how she landed the job, she told me she had always been a hardcore player who lost two years of her undergrad education to *League of Legends*. One of her friends mentioned about a job in a gaming house and she dived right in, "How could I miss this opportunity?". Here, even though her engagement with videogaming lead her into e-sports, she is only in the industry in a supportive role. Likewise, Taylor's (2012) and Taylor's (2009) works both discuss detailly women in e-sports in secondary roles such as moms travelling to tournaments with their sons, girlfriends cheering for their partners, or running a home-made gaming house for a son's team.

In understanding the fact that all professional players who work in gaming houses are young men in Turkey, along with how this intersects with sports and technology, a useful conceptual apparatus is that of Connell and Messerschmidt (2005). These authors have theorized hegemonic masculinity, which is the configuration and embodiment of daily practices in a way to constitute, consolidate, and reinforce patriarchal societal relations. Hegemonic masculinity, however, is not absolute and shits within different times, localities, and economies (Besnier & Brownell, 2016). Still, it helps understand gendered relations surrounding video game culture. As others have discussed, representational inequalities surround the video game industry (Beasely and Standey 2002, Dietz 1998; Jansz and Maris 2007; Ivory 2006; Thornham, 2008).

In addition to representation, technology use is also gendered. As Thornham's (2011, 156) four year-long ethnographic research with adult videogame players in 11 different houses reveals, everyday technologies are sites of masculine hierarchies. Masculine embodiments ultimately make gaming "[a]n ideal terrain on which to explore and claim masculinity."(156). Thornham's discussion of how pleasure

gets to be exclusively the site of men is particularly useful. When women participate in gaming, their competence and skill is ridiculed and questioned (Fox and Tang, 2014). Therefore, many women try to hide their identity online by choosing bi-gender names and not using microphones at all. Consequently, gamer women's visibility in online and offline platforms is nowhere near their male counterparts which further incorporates the whole divide (Lockwood 2006; Stout et al. 2011). Even if women are visible, Cote (2015) and Consalvo (2012) show, there are highly vocal and violent groups that attempt to attack and push women outside the domain of play, as it became particularly evident during #Gamergate (Chess and Shaw 2015).

It is the technologically mediated form of hegemonic masculinity, i.e. geek masculinity, that feeds into this toxic male centric culture. This social-technology inherent with hegemonic masculinity, reimagines itself in new forms, embodiments, and subjectivities once introduced with new technologies such as the internet or videogames. At this intersection of technology and videogames, one form of masculinity is conceptualized as "geek masculinity". Taylor (2012) explains it as someone who is strongly interested "in technology and playing computer games" (pp. 111). She proposes "geek masculinity" as an alternative that does not follow the mainstream gender identities. This alternative provides a way out to not participate in mainstream athletic, sport activities. Lacking this physical aspect to express skill and mastery, Taylor suggest that expressions of masculinity "operates through technology, science, and gaming." (pp.111). Dunbar-Hester (2008) too claims that "technical mastery itself is a well-documented means of displaying masculinity" (p. 214).

In one of the gaming conventions, there was a panel. One of the guests was a group called *geekyapar.* It translates to *geekdoes* and they run a youtube channel and a website about videogames, technology, and science-fiction. Asked about the meaning of their name, the founder explained it "You know, being a geek means being passionate, devoting your time and your mind to your interests. I didn't want to sit home all day just reading to myself. A geek *does*. I wanted to do and share. That's why we started this." There is indeed, a geek culture and an identity In Turkey, which also shows itself in likewise conventions, fairs, and gatherings. However, geek culture and geek identity does not fit exactly into e-sports. This is not to say that some aspects of it are not seen in professional players.

Even though the geek-ness does not pop up, the passionate engagement with technology and video games still plays an important role. Not acknowledging the geek identity, they mostly consider themselves to be "gamers." However, it is not just a gamer who only plays video games passionately but one that also follows technology closely. They are always in a search for better equipment and better configurations. They pursue faster monitors, more accurate mouse controllers, try out new

updates, tinker with their hardware such as computers, chairs, headphones, post about them online, ask their friends, answer questions. These are all done to be better in a highly competitive scene.

Being better in a competitive scene is where the sporting aspect of e-sports comes. Like technology and masculinity, sport and masculine identities formed around it are widely discussed in academic field as well (Messner, 1995; Swain, 2006). In sports, masculinity is maintained and proven through physical power and expressed in its competitive environment (Connell, 1995; Messner, 1990; Wellard, 2002). Likewise, in hardcore gaming and e-sports too, many professional players are only there to compete and win. This discourse of winning, competing, being the best is prevalent in e-sports events offline and online as well.

Many of the professional players I talked to have some form of sporting background. Firstly, there is the aspect of competitive nature that is derived from sports which channels into e-sports. It is a similar kind of feeling, to compete, be better, and win. Either on a basketball court or online server. Secondly, and for me more importantly, many e-sports players with background in traditional sports, ascribe many aspects of their sporting careers to their e-sports activities. "I played in a basketball team for seven years till I broke my ankle[19]. While resting at home, I got hooked up to videogames. After so many years and with my own team, I always keep in my mind everything my coach told me" tells me a professional player, running his own team now. He kept on telling me how he organized the team, managed meetings before exercises, inscribed sportsmanship, and fair play "just like he saw in the basketball team". In many other pro gamers too, when asked about e-sports in general, they would directly give examples from traditional sports, some relating to their own history of sporting. Winning and competition are the two main concepts that always showed themselves but pro gamers with a traditional sporting background always additionally made analogies and linked similarities to how they did sports back then.

To sum up, Taylor (2012) tries to confront geek and athletic identities to see the transformation in both to better understand a pro gamer. Returning to Connell's (1995) and Messner's (1989, 1990) works on hegemonic masculinity, she proposes an intermingling of masculine geek identity and a more traditional athletic masculinity "minus the emphasis on physical qualities."(p.116) While it is true that there is a mixture of both, in Turkey specific being a geek does not hold up. Instead of geek-ness there is a strongly hold gamer identity who wants to win and compete, that is molded with interest in technology as the competition became fiercer. In some cases, this desire to compete and win is derived from a sporting background.

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[19] Interestingly, having an injury in traditional sports then starting to play videogames competitively has come up quite frequently in professional esports players.

Reproducing Gendered Hierarchies: Gamer Meritocracy, Toxic Language, and Marketing of Fame

Studies by Paaßen, Morgenroth, Stratemeyer (2017) and Fox and Tang (2014) have explored how the entrance of women to the gaming scene is obstructed on the basis of claims regarding an essential identity of a "true gamer." And I propose that we can understand and theorize the backlash against female gamers through what I call "gamer meritocracy." Every time the topic of female gamers pops up in any conversation with pro-gamers, aspirants, or fans, they underline the necessity of hard work and talent. "There is no reason to make an only women league, if they can play as good as us [meaning men], they can compete in the same league" says a pro-gamer in a gaming house. "Women are not unskilled or incompetent, they just do not work hard enough, that's why they aren't in higher levels." says another. When asked about sexist slurs he goes on "It is not against them, it's against everybody. Do they [women] want us [men] to treat them differently? Everybody is treated equally. If you are good, you win."

In these discourses, there is a clear neoliberal emphasis on working hard and trying. This stress on meritocracy, I suggest, renders all the gendered, racial, and economical structures in videogame communities invisible to male gamers. They were losers once but by working hard, they became successful gamers. Garnishing their own history and gamer identity with ideals and myths of meritocracy makes any feminist interference a threat to their embodiments. This also paves the way for attacking anyone talking from a feminist stance, as such feminist perspectives are perceived to be threats to the boundaries of their hard-worked gamer identity.

This meritocratic order is supported by the erosion of negative connotations associated with gamers. A gamer is no more an asocial, lonely, fat teenager but someone with a social status. They can in fact be celebrities and they actually represent the future. Playing latest games and playing them well is a source of social capital (Bursh and Wiseman, 2014; Taylor, 2012). There are now gamers making mainstream headlines due to the significant monetary gains on Twitch and YouTube. This is coupled with e-sports industry and therefore gamer identity becomes an even more desired social status.

This gamer meritocracy constructs a myth around a proper work ethic, but it also manifests itself through ordinary and toxic forms of masculine performances in technological settings. As spaces in which e-sports players compete are male dominated, this manifests itself through language based on symbolic violence. Whether at home or at an internet café, games become a tool of bonding and learning for young men. For them, derogatory expressions become the norm. For instance, "While having a match, we always scream at each other. 'See, how did I f- you? I make you my bitch.' Stuff

like that. We don't really mean them, we just say them in the game, during the matches, when everything gets heated. After the match he's my brother again, no hard feelings" is how a professional player working in a gaming house reflects on the use of swear words in matches. Likewise, heated moments in gaming houses are filled with such and similar words. Similarly, in a Call of Duty Tournament in 2016, the player in the winning team stands up on his chair and screams "You're going home you fucking f-g." His standing up and screaming is a moment of overflow of affects and emotions.

Such moments, as T.L. Taylor argues, cannot be thought outside the extremely commodified social space of e-sports that is heavily based on marketing. The marketing of identities is of course an affective one. Online and offline e-sports tournaments, gaming festivals, internet cafes, and websites are decorated with images of winning, competition, power, masculinity, or overly sexualized women. Marketing continues on screens via advertisements, short flashy highlight videos, mediums of social media, streaming and such. The players themselves become famous with thousands of followers on their Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook accounts. This fame and identities around it come about with considerable monetary rewards, especially in high level professional arena. Moreover, deeper social rewards, intimacies, and relations are buried in gaming, e-sports, and competitive gameplay. When I was 12, I was one of the best *Counter-Strike* players in our neighborhood, walking into an internet café to play matches knowing that I will be picked is an overwhelming feeling. Likewise, academic research conducted with modding communities, hardcore and dedicated players point out the importance of such embodiments in video gaming scene. (Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008; Postigo, 2010)

To conclude, e-sports is almost a woman-free zone in Turkey. In more than 20 small scale tournaments I attended to around Istanbul, there were only 6 female players. Moreover, almost all those female players attended the tournaments with their boyfriends. Talking to one of the woman players, she said "It's hard to go online as a girl. Too many men, it sometimes gets overwhelming… If it was not for my boyfriend, I would not be able to join this tournament. I would not even know about it." This shows that, a woman's way of entry to competitive scene becomes possible only over another man who always sits next to them. This invokes N. Taylor's (2009) work on women's absence in e-sports scene, where he shows that women who compete in competitive scene are ridiculed to be only holding the controller for their boyfriends.

This is by no means meant to suggest that alternative voices for reform do not exist. Every high-level tournament organizer I talked to complained about the dearth of women in e-sports scene. Such complaints are encouraging but as many others discuss (Bryce & Rutter, 2003; Jennifer, de Castell,

2005; Taylor, 2012), these demands should not be limited simply to visibility, because such constrained calls might potentially marginalize women to secondary and sexualized roles through a diversity quota.

"The time of book and pencil is over now. Everything is digital:" Families' Involvement and New Job Prospects

Although the protagonists of the e-sports scene are young male subjects, this is by no means that families are not involved. One of the first things that stands out in any e-sports or digital gaming festival is that middle aged people are scattered all around. They are mostly parents who bring their young children to the event. Some smoke and drink tea outside of the hall, while others are fortified next to a power outlet buried in their phones. "My son insisted a lot on coming here, so we are just here, waiting" is how some mournfully explain their situation. In our conversations, it soon becomes evident that they are obsessed with their kids' obsession with play. As they say "I don't know what we are going to do with these computer and games. Every day, every minute they are on that thing!".

However, especially in tournaments, monetization of play also changes how parents approach the issue. To begin with, bored parents are replaced with enthusiastic ones, mostly middle-aged women who cheer for a team. In a tournament with 60.000 USD winning prize, I go and start a conversation with a simple "Hi." The woman goes: "Oh, my son is playing as in game leader in the team on the left! I came all the way from Tuzla!" It is hard to have a conversation there with all the sounds, lights, and excitement so I catch up with her in the break. "We had a boot camp in my place with my children [meaning the team]. They all brought their computers to my home. Some even came from across the city! I made them cakes, pastries, served everything!" she eagerly tells. Gaming house in this sense acquires a new form, becomes a homemade gaming house. "My kids aren't shooting people, it is a strategic war. They think, make tactics, everything…. The time of book and pencil is closed now. Everything is digital. You have to be smart and adapt. It's not like the past anymore, not like our times" she continues. Even though this mother's acceptance, help, and support may sound like an extreme example of familial engagement, similar stories are prevalent in the industry. Relatives coming to support, praying to win, following their matches, or even starting videogame playing. In the end, we can see that two ends described above, "the tired parent" and "the cheering parent" reflect greatly on the change professional video game playing can evoke in families.

In addition to their supportive parents, money also empowers the e-sports players and in fact becomes the basis for legitimacy. A 14-year-old boy who came second in a local internet café tournament and won 400 Liras says "Finally I will prove to my parents what e-sports is like and maybe they'll shut up." Similarly, asking many professionals about their families the answer is analogous. "It

[parents' acceptance] was after I started to make some money." In sum, money earns the player respect that play, as a supposedly wasteful activity, did not previously have. Maybe not all parents go as far as providing a boot camp at home, but many players say that now their parents follow their matches, inform them about upcoming matters, and tell their friends proudly about their son's achievements.

Parents are the first obstacle on the path to professional arena according to players by trying to keep them away from gaming. However, it is not always the case. Zehra is a computer engineer and mother to a 10-year-old boy. She has a very different approach on her child's future career. "My son will be an e-sports athlete" says she. His son loves to play video games. "I see the future [of e-sports], it is growing, why shouldn't I let my child do something he loves?" Apart from direct monetary influences on families from their children, e-sports with its growing scene apparently has the power to effect wider audiences. Even though Zehra does not play video games and follow e-sports, she just learned about the industry by chance. After looking into it for a while she now sees e-sports as a possible career for her child.

These point to a major shift in young men's transition to employment in the context of post-fordist capitalism. Different from the context laid out by Paul Willis in his seminal *Learning to Labor* (1981), the youth in the e-sports scene are entrepreneurial subjects (Lee, 2013; Scharff, 2015). They are willing to make investments, take risk, and invest in their bodies and selves in order to land not just an ordinary but a promising and glamorous job. They treat themselves as businesses trying to make it in the market. As mentioned above, Sercan dealt with his amateur team's meetings and practices, always kept track of tournaments, reached out to brands for sponsorships, became a team captain to get people practicing. At the same time, players have to improve themselves individually. First of all, because games depend on very fast reflexes, they never have a break from practices for more than a day. Which means they always work on their in-game mechanics. Also, they follow forums, Facebook Groups, community pages to ask questions on how to improve themselves. They are the entrepreneurial subjects of video gaming industry, thriving for a possible professional career.

Invoking Hage (2003, 2004) at this moment, we can also see the production and distribution of hope these aspiring professionals find themselves in. In an era of changing economic relations and transnational capitalism young people perform and embody subjectivities for the hope of being a professional e-sports player. The image of that successful professional is broadcasted on their laptop screens, phones, festivals, and exhibitions. Even though these images of hope are distributed equally, infrastructure to play competitively differs greatly. Even if a young boy has a computer, his hardware is not enough to play competitively. They lack sufficient computers, fast internet connection, quality mouse controllers, or headphones. However, when global networks fail to distribute the sufficient

"hope" to facilitate gamers, local networks start to operate. Zula, a game developed and distributed by a Turkish firm, is investing millions of Turkish Lira[20] in its e-sports operation. Their game requires a lot less computer power compared to their global competitors and in-game language is Turkish. They are partnering up with internet cafes, soda and ice-cream brands to promote their game. They are facilitating the same e-sports hope, which would otherwise be unavailable to gamers from lower-class families. At the end, hope turns out to be an important facilitator in global network of e-sports industry. When this global scene excludes a particular geographical and social space, more localized formations of it get in motion.

Conclusion

As my research reveals, e-sports in Turkey is an uneven playground. It is possible to find events of many different kinds. They can be large, fancy, and crowded organized by established brands in huge convention halls. At the same time, it is possible to find dark, crampy, and small ones taking place in a remote neighborhood internet café. Whatever the venue is, the passion to play video games and compete is what brings young men to these venues or live in corporate gaming houses if they are lucky to break into this industry. Passionate play is quite machinic, embodied, and affective. As young men learn to play with computers, they in fact are "learning to playbor" to evoke the work of Paul Willis. Love, passion, technology, and excessive play get to work together within our informational economy.

The memory of 8-years old me, waking up at 6 am on a Saturday morning to play Atari in the living room before my parents woke up is one of the most vivid memories of my life. As I grew up, my love for videogames only relocated. It moved into my own room, internet cafes, friends' room, school canteen and so on. In those days, being in a room with four other friends and top-quality computers only to play video games all day every day is a dream I could not even imagine as I grew up.

Today, play has been freed from parental constraints. That is, my dream has come true in gaming houses and e-sports tournaments of Turkey. Nevertheless, freedom of love and play is a dialectical process in that we are witnessing the appropriation of that love by the instrumental logic of capitalism. In this process, the seemingly wasteful activity of playing videogames is transforming into a profitable practice in the context of e-sports. Specifically, gaming houses blur the boundaries between public and private, as well as the lines between friendship and colleague/co-worker/teammate. A gaming house is in fact a play factory. Relations are structured around working, getting better,

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[20] https://espor.zulaoyun.com/2018/05/30/2018esporsezonu/

competing, and winning. The dream gets contaminated with constant work, nonstop surveillance, abolishment of privacy, precarious working conditions, and fragile relations.

This neoliberal competitive ethos is also heavily gendered. Video games broadly and e-sports particularly still remain the domain of men, who, through that I call "gamer meritocracy" aim to protect their zones from "incompetent" players. This gamer meritocracy establishes the "earned" identity of a male gamer that is garnished with a toxic language and marketed in and through the e-sports scene.

The monetization of play also impacted familial relations. My research reveals that families show differing types of engagement with their children's new career. One apparent condition is that it is only monetary gain by the e-sports player that makes any positive engagement possible. Mothers pray for their son to win, remind them of their tournaments tomorrow, or set up a "boot camp" in their living room. Capitalism proves powerful enough to turn families into supportive actors of their children's video game playing. E-sports does not only change labor, youth, and gender but also families.

E-sports is an emergent site of interdisciplinary study drawing on media studies, game studies, gender studies, and digital labor studies. Despite being a new and exciting phenomenon, e-sports is structured by structural issues of inequality such as precarity and gender hierarchies, all mediated by the meritocratic and entrepreneurial logic of neoliberalism. The industry is sure to grow. We will continue playing videogames and some of us will continue do it competitively. We will watch and enjoy. However, it is important to remember the breaks, broken friendships, and extreme hard-work behind every "flick-shot" and strive for more humane ways of professionalizing video games.

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