

## This Freedom Day and Every Day, Let's Exercise Our Right to Play

As Juneteenth approaches, I wanted to take a brief look at the unique challenges that Black people face in the esports industry in the U.S. and explore what the esports industry, and the Black community itself, has done to increase Black representation.

Companies across all industries started to speak out about racial injustice in response to the racially-targeted tragedies percolating in the U.S. Since the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has been at the forefront of many companies' minds.<sup>1</sup> Day by day, more companies are designating a DEI officer, recruiting and hiring underrepresented voices in leadership positions, or educating their employees about diverse perspectives and histories. For example, in December of 2021, Major League Soccer implemented several changes to its Diversity Hiring Policy to recruit individuals from underrepresented backgrounds in coach and managerial positions.<sup>2</sup>

The esports industry has also made strides within recent years to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion. However, change takes time and there are many things that can be improved.

The esports industry suffers from a dearth of Black representation in comparison to other ethnic groups. In a study released in July 2021 by the Entertainment Software Association, Black people represented only 8% of the player community, despite representing 13% of the American population as a whole.<sup>3</sup> The rosters of the top teams for the highest-earning esports games, such as Dota 2, Overwatch, or CS:GO, rarely include Black players.<sup>4</sup> However, in fighting games and sports games, you'll find more Black players playing professionally than in other genres. Typically these games have lower barriers to entry as they can be accessed in arcades or using consoles, which are a more affordable option in comparison to purchasing powerful PCs.<sup>5</sup> But compared to other esports, fighting games and sports games also have much smaller

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<sup>1</sup> Winfield, Alecia, *How #BLM has redefined D&I in the workplace*, Human Resource Executive (Oct. 2, 2020), <https://hr executive.com/how-blm-has-redefined-di-in-the-workplace/>.

<sup>2</sup> *MLS announces updates and enhancements to Diversity Hiring Policy*, Major League Soccer (Dec 7, 2021, 09:30 AM), <https://www.mlssoccer.com/news/mls-announces-updates-and-enhancements-to-diversity-hiring-policy> (among the changes, include: a new requirement that at least two non-white candidates be in the finalist pool, and that one of those candidates be Black;\$50,000 - \$100,000 public sanctions for non-compliance; and an equal and comparable review process for all candidates).

<sup>3</sup> Totilo, Stephen, *Study: Gaming population leans more male and less racially diverse* (Jul. 13, 2021), <https://www.axios.com/2021/07/13/america-gaming-population-male-diversity>. See Entertainment Software Association, *2021 Essential Facts About the Video Game Industry* (July 2021), <https://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/2021-Essential-Facts-About-the-Video-Game-Industry.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Winkie, Luke, *Why is Esports So Segregated?*, Atlantic (May 5, 2021), <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2021/05/why-esports-so-segregated/618768/>. See Uwadiare, Jennifer, *11 Highest Earning eSports Games* (May 6, 2022), <https://thebingeful.com/highest-earning-esports-games/>.

<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Center, *Home broadband adoption, computer ownership vary by race, ethnicity in the U.S.* (Jul. 16, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/07/16/home-broadband-adoption-computer-ownership-vary-by-race-ethnicity-in-the-u-s/#:~:text=25%20to%20Feb.,and%2067%25%20of%20Hispanic%20adults> (80% of white adults report owning a PC compared with 69% of Black adults).

prize pools<sup>6</sup>, making it more difficult for Black players to sustain themselves compared to players in other esports.

In addition to economic disparities impacting Black players' opportunities to participate in esports that offer higher payouts, Black players are more likely to be targeted and impacted by toxic online culture. For example, a study from the Anti-Defamation League in 2021 revealed that 42% of Black gamers, up from 31% in 2021, experienced disruptive behavior or were targeted due to their race in online multiplayer games.<sup>7</sup> Earlier this year, in reaction to a slew of hate raids that plagued the Twitch platform, several Black streamers wrote an open letter to Twitch demanding that the platform improve its content moderation algorithm, provide support for individuals who are racially harassed, and agree to a racial equity audit.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, discrimination and hateful speech often go unaddressed unless there is a major outcry by fans. While there have been notable examples of failure to punish or prevent racist harassment unless prompted by public backlash,<sup>9</sup> several major names in esports have taken action to promote inclusion and combat toxic online culture. In 2018, the Overwatch League fined several players for using and/or posting offensive slurs, memes, emotes, or other content online.<sup>10</sup> In 2020, Evil Geniuses took a zero tolerance policy with regard to racist rhetoric used by players in the past.<sup>11</sup> One can hope that these policies will continue to promote diversity in esports by fostering a safe environment that welcomes and retains Black players. In fact, it appears that companies recognize the importance of having diverse perspectives, with a number of Black individuals joining esports organizations in leadership positions.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See e.g., *Capcom Pro Tour is Back and Bigger Than Ever for 2021*, Capcom Pro Tour (Mar. 17, 2021), <https://capcomprotour.com/capcom-pro-tour-is-back-and-bigger-than-ever-for-2021/>; Takaashi, Dean, *Team Spirit takes home \$18.2M as winner of The International Dota 2 Championship*, Venture Beat (Oct. 17, 2021), <https://venturebeat.com/2021/10/17/team-spirit-takes-home-18-2m-as-winner-of-the-international-dota-2-championship/> (prize pool for the 2021Capcom Cup VII for Street Fighter championship was expected to be \$200,000 compared to the 2021 Dota 2 championship, which offered a total prize pool of over \$40 million, with the top team taking home over \$18.2 million).

<sup>7</sup> *Hate is No Game: Harassment and Positive Social Experiences in Online Games 2021*, ADL (Sep. 13, 2021), <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/hate-no-game-harassment-and-positive-social-experiences-online-games-2021>.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Black Twitch Creators, *Color of Change, Black Creators Are Being Hate Raided By Online Racists*, <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSe75bu9nXUX-0PguZrafWmaQKZ6FkbQBV3wmwPZ9FGcm0DQVg/viewform?stream=top>.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g., *id.*

<sup>10</sup> *Disciplinary Action: Taimou, TaiRong, Silkthread, and xQc*, Overwatch League (Mar. 9, 2018), <https://overwatchleague.com/en-us/news/21610248/disciplinary-action-taimou-tairong-silkthread-and-xqc>.

<sup>11</sup> Evil Geniuses, TWITTER (Jun. 23, 2020, 7:44 PM), [https://twitter.com/EvilGeniuses/status/1275575451293847552?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etw%5Eetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1275575451293847552%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1\\_c10&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ginx.tv%2Fen%2Fmarvel-vs-capcom-infinite%2Fevil-geniuses-drop-former-evil-champion-nychrisg-for-past-racial-and-sexist-comments](https://twitter.com/EvilGeniuses/status/1275575451293847552?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etw%5Eetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1275575451293847552%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_c10&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ginx.tv%2Fen%2Fmarvel-vs-capcom-infinite%2Fevil-geniuses-drop-former-evil-champion-nychrisg-for-past-racial-and-sexist-comments) ("We at EG value each member of our community, and have zero tolerance for harassment. After investigation, it was evident that Chris' statements, though made in 2017, continue to have real, harmful impact in our community."). See Fozy Jazzabelle, *EvilGeniuses' NYChrisG's Comments Show Misogynoir is Still Part of the Fighting Game Community*, Black Girl Nerds (Jun. 29, 2017), <https://blackgirlnerds.com/evilgeniuses-nychrisgs-comments-show-misogynoir-still-part-fighting-game-community/>.

<sup>12</sup> See *Aerial Powers Joins Team Liquid as Streamer and Diversity Ambassador*, Team Liquid (Jan. 13, 2021), <https://www.teamliquid.com/news/2021/01/13/aerial-powers-joins-team-liquid-as-streamer-and-diversity-ambassador>; Amenabar, Teddy, *Evil Geniuses' new mastermind must reckon with the past to*

Black gamers have also worked hard to ensure that they continue to grow and thrive in the esports industry. In 2020, the HBCU Esports League launched its inaugural season, giving students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities the opportunity to compete in games such as Call of Duty and NBA2K.<sup>13</sup> Some HBCUs are also providing classes in esports and gaming.<sup>14</sup> Other Black-founded organizations, such as the Black Collegiate Gaming Association, BESNTV, and Black Girls Game provide support, community, and opportunity for Black gamers.

Looking towards the future, I hope that we will see more diverse player rosters inclusive of Black players outside of fighting and sports games and more Black people working within the esports industry. Esports is for everyone. And while there are no quick solutions to the deeply entrenched problems a long history of discriminatory policies in U.S. has caused,<sup>15</sup> the esports industry should continue to strive toward facilitating a welcoming and inclusive environment for all.

*By Saphya Monet Council*

*This essay could not have been possible if it wasn't for the encouragement and support of my colleague, Anna Chang.*

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*chart a future course*, Wash. Post (Jul. 15, 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/esports/2020/07/15/evil-genius-new-mastermind-must-reckon-with-past-chart-future-course/>.

<sup>13</sup> HBCU Esports, <https://www.hbcuesports.gg/about>; Smith-Barrow, Delence, *HBCUs entering the game: Black colleges join the esports bandwagon*, Wash. Post (Sep. 18, 2020), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/hbcus-entering-the-game-black-colleges-join-the-esports-bandwagon/2020/09/18/83713d6e-f91f-11ea-be57-d00bb9bc632d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/hbcus-entering-the-game-black-colleges-join-the-esports-bandwagon/2020/09/18/83713d6e-f91f-11ea-be57-d00bb9bc632d_story.html).

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> Hartman, et al. *The Race Gap*, <https://graphics.reuters.com/GLOBAL-RACE/USA/nmopajawjva/#0>.