

The dilemma and breakthrough of “gaming dream”: a study on the survival status and career path of semi-professional gaming youths

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Abstract. With the rapid development of the e-sports industry, semi-professional e-sports youth, as an important but relatively disadvantaged group in the e-sports career ecology, face many difficulties such as economic pressure, narrow career paths, and insufficient social cognition. This study focuses on the survival status and career path of semi-professional e-sports youth, and proposes countermeasures at the macro, meso and micro levels by analyzing the problems they face. That is, at the macro level, to improve industry policies and career protection, and to promote the standardized development of the e-sports industry; at the meso level, to improve the social perception of e-sports, and to strengthen the support of families and communities; and at the micro level, to provide players with guidance on career planning, comprehensive skills training, and mental health support, and to help them achieve sustainable development. The study shows that solving the plight of semi-professional e-sports youth not only helps to improve the career development of this group, but also has important significance for the healthy development of the e-sports industry and the diversification of the social career ecology.

Keywords: gaming dream, semi-professional gaming youth, survival status, career paths

1. Introduction

The “gaming dream”, as a professional dream for the young generation, has a strong appeal but faces many challenges and uncertainties in reality. For example, while residents of the UAE have a positive attitude towards e-sports and generally view it as a serious sport and social practice, the legitimacy and mainstreaming of e-sports as a profession has yet to be fully established. This lack of social and policy support has led to youth facing obstacles in their pursuit of e-sports professionalism [1]. From a practical point of view, there is a lack of clarity in the career paths of eSports practitioners. Most players participate in esports in a “professional manner”, but this does not mean they can achieve full professionalization or long-term stable financial returns. As a result, for many practitioners, the dream of gaming is fraught with financial and career uncertainty. The realization of the esports dream is also limited by the short-term nature of motivation and the dynamic development of the industry environment. Currently, players' motivations are more focused on emotional and psychological needs such as “indirect realization,” “aesthetics,” and “escapism,” but it is often difficult for these drivers to support professional pursuits in the long term. Players may choose to give up once the actual rewards fail to match their psychological expectations. In addition, the industry itself is dependent on the development of technology, game types, and live-streaming services, and this fast-changing nature increases the risk and instability of the profession. Taken together, although e-sports offers a brand new career option for youth, there are still multiple challenges to overcome in moving from dream to reality, including the clarification of career paths, the enhancement of social acceptance, and the further standardization and development of the industry environment.

Semi-professional e-sports youth are a group of gamers who participate in e-sports activities and have some professional characteristics, but are not yet fully professionalized. They usually have a high level of competitiveness and participation in eSports, and may participate in organized tournaments, but their financial income or social status is not yet sufficient to fully support their lives as full-time professional gamers. This group of people usually relies on other part-time jobs, schooling, or family support, and is in a transitional state between professional gaming and hobbies. Semi-professional esports youth occupy a critical but relatively marginal position in the esports industry. At its core, professional esports is organized competitive digital gaming supported by advertisers and merchants, which requires esports players to have stable financial support and a clear professional identity. However, semi-professional players are not fully integrated into this system. They are both a backup to professional e-

sports players and an important part of the gaming industry's engagement and influence. The existence of these players reflects the diverse state of e-sports industry practitioners and the stage of development in the process of professionalization of e-sports.

Relevant studies have shown that e-sports as a profession has not yet been fully standardized, and there are still many gaps in the relevant legal status, organizational contracts, and industry legitimacy [2]. These problems directly affect the development space of semi-professional e-sports youth. They often face challenges such as insufficient social recognition, limited financial support, and unclear career paths. Meanwhile, as the e-sports industry has studied health and physiology more than other socio-cultural or psychological aspects, such players may lack systematic guidance for mental health, social support, and career planning during their transition to the professional ranks.

2. Professionalization development, semi-professional youth status and social adaptation in the e-sports industry

2.1. The current status of professionalization in the e-sports industry

The eSports industry is an important emerging industry in the era of digital economy, which not only promotes the high-quality growth of the regional digital economy, but also injects vitality into the digital economic development of cities in the new era. The eSports industry plays a positive role in enhancing production efficiency, optimizing industrial structure and promoting coordinated regional development, which is one of the important manifestations of digital economic empowerment [3]. As a typical cross-industry emerging industry, the eSports industry plays a key role in China's regional development and economic growth. Relevant studies have pointed out that the technological relevance of the cultural and sports fields does not significantly promote the development of the e-sports industry, while the knowledge spillover of the information software industry significantly promotes the development of the e-sports industry [4]. This suggests that the e-sports industry is more dependent on the support of the technology and software industries than the traditional cultural or sports fields.

2.2. the state of semi-professional e-sports youth

Semi-professional e-sports youth face psychological, social and economic challenges during career transitions, and they need to have a high level of flexibility and resilience to cope with these difficulties. Research has shown that the approach of comparing life situations to games (SuperBetter approach) can effectively help them improve their well-being, coping strategies, and success rate of career transition [5]. Through this approach, e-sports youth can reconstruct a positive mental framework and view the uncertainty of career change as a "game challenge", thus reducing anxiety and stress and enhancing self-efficacy.

In addition, the SuperBetter approach breaks down complex goals in the form of "game tasks", allowing semi-professional gaming youth to better adjust their strategies and adapt to the new environment. Gamifying the process of career change not only stimulates their intrinsic motivation, but also helps them gain a sense of accomplishment from their continuous efforts, thus increasing their likelihood of success. At the same time, this metaphorical approach can also guide e-sports youth to reconstruct their career narratives, give more positive meanings to their past experiences, and enhance their confidence and hope for the future.

In summary, although e-sports is not regarded as a normal profession, through the psychological approach of gamification, "youth" can more effectively manage their psychological state, improve their adaptability and motivation, and thus find opportunities for growth in the midst of pressure. This approach provides practical help for the development of eSports youth, as well as new inspiration for research in the field of career transition and mental health.

2.3. Social adaptation of semi-professional e-sports youths

Semi-professional youth in the e-sports industry often face narrow social circles, limited communication skills and inadequate social support. Their social adaptability can be improved through methods such as "imitation" and "modeling". For example, through peer or mentor modeling, semi-professional gaming youth can observe and imitate the behavioral patterns and social interactions of mature professionals to improve their communication and teamwork. In addition, modifying the environment or adjusting the atmosphere of the gaming team can also create a more suitable social environment for them and help them better integrate into the group in competition and cooperation. The social adaptability of semi-professional e-sports youth can be analyzed and enhanced by drawing on methods to improve the play ability of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) [6]. Research has shown that social adjustment skills need to be improved through targeted intervention strategies such as environmental modification, behavioral imitation, and role modeling. These strategies are also applicable to help semi-professional gaming youth better adapt to complex social environments and career transitions.

Play is regarded as a core activity in child development, and its value lies not only in the acquisition of skills, but also in the promotion of holistic individual development [7]. Similarly, for semi-professional gaming youth, gaming activities are not only competitive career pursuits, but also carry social development functions such as collaboration, communication, creativity and problem solving. Therefore, e-sports activities can be regarded as a vocational game that helps develop social skills and mental toughness. Furthermore, work pressure and lack of education are major barriers to youth gaming practice. Similarly, for semi-

professional gaming youth, the improvement of social adjustment may face the high-stress environment of the gaming industry (e.g., performance pressure, uncertainty of career transition) and the lack of targeted coaching. To address these barriers, professional coaches, counselors, or peer support systems can be introduced to help them develop healthy social interaction patterns through modeling (demonstration) and mentoring.

3. Survival status and characteristics of semi-professional e-sports youths

3.1. Survival of semi-professional e-sports youths

Semi-professional e-sports youths live in a highly complex environment, which is characterized by intense competition in the e-sports industry, unequal distribution of resources, and uncertainty in career development. Similar to the dynamics of the “obstacle game”, these factors are often not easily recognized or effectively managed by the outside world, thus exacerbating their existential pressure [8]. For semi-professional e-sports youth, becoming aware of and choosing not to get caught up in the obstacles of bad competition, negative atmosphere, or unhealthy behaviors (e.g., over-training, over-achievement, etc.) in the industry is an important strategy for them to strike a balance in their e-sports career development. This awakening and self-restraint helps them protect their mental health and maintain long-term career plans. In addition, e-sports youth need good support systems for survival and development, including career development guidance, counseling, and health management. Similar to how Disease Management Programs (DMPs) can help eliminate the “obstacle game” field, effective external support for e-sports youth can help them avoid the interference of undesirable factors and create a healthier environment for their survival.

3.2. Characteristics of the survival state of semi-professional e-sports youths

The survival state of semi-professional e-sports youths is profoundly affected by the special environment of the e-sports industry, and has the following distinctive features:

First, economic pressure and career uncertainty. Semi-professional players usually lack a stable source of income, and most of them rely on tournament prizes, live streaming rewards or sporadic sponsorships to support their basic living needs. Compared to professional players, semi-professional players are usually in a “transition zone”, with limited opportunities to rise to the top level of the profession, and a lack of career security after quitting the gaming industry, making their survival status full of uncertainty.

Second, fierce competition and elimination risk. The gaming industry has a very low upward mobility, and only a few people can stand out and enter the top teams. For semi-professional players, they must constantly prove themselves to gain attention, but the probability of success is slim. In addition, the life cycle of semi-professional gaming youth is extremely short, and they may be eliminated at any time as they grow older, their reflexes decline, or external pressures increase.

Third, physical and mental health issues. Long-term, high-intensity training causes many semi-professional players to face problems such as hand injuries, eye fatigue, and sleep deprivation. High expectations, unsatisfactory results and competition within the industry often leave semi-professionals in a state of anxiety, loneliness and even depression. The lack of counseling and emotional support further exacerbates their psychological burden.

Fourth, in order to train and compete, semi-professional e-sports youth need to devote a lot of time, often gradually reducing their socialization with family and friends, leading to an increased sense of isolation. Social prejudice and stereotypes of e-sports make it difficult for many semi-professionals to gain acceptance, especially when they do not perform well or fail to “make it”, making it easier for them to question the legitimacy of their choices.

Fifth, lack of career support and development planning. Many young semi-professionals do not have access to higher education or vocational skills training, and when they are unable to continue their gaming careers, they face serious career transition issues. Compared to professional players, semi-professionals usually lack team support (e.g., psychological counseling, health management, career planning, etc.), and they rely more on their personal efforts to sustain their existence.

4. Career path breakthroughs for semi-professional e-sports youths

4.1. Macro level: Improvement of social system and industry environment

At the macro level, it is necessary to improve the system and environment of the e-sports industry, establish a systematic industry support system, and provide more development opportunities for semi-professional e-sports youth. For example, a professional e-sports education system can be set up to provide players with diversified career development paths, including positions such as professional players, coaches, analysts and commentators. It is also necessary to improve the career security system to ensure basic income, medical and career transition support for players. Broaden promotion channels by increasing the number of semi-professional tournament platforms, and promote industry standardization by formulating clear rules for professional qualification certification and tournament management to reduce uncertainty in development. At the same time, the government and industry associations can introduce policies to support the healthy development of the e-sports industry, such as setting up a special fund, encouraging e-sports entrepreneurship, or pushing universities to offer e-sports-related courses.

4.2. Meso level: improving social cognition and community support

At the meso level, there is a need to improve social awareness and community support to create a healthier image of e-sports culture. Through media campaigns and educational activities, we should promote a positive understanding of the e-sports industry and weaken the prejudice that “e-sports is the same as addictive gaming”. At the same time, family and community support networks should be strengthened to help parents recognize the professional value of e-sports, reduce parent-child conflicts, and enhance family emotional support for players. In addition, public gaming facilities or cultural centers can be built in communities to provide low-cost training environments and communication spaces for semi-professional players. Businesses and social organizations can also be involved in the partnership, for example, by funding player training, competitions or health management programs to jointly support the growth of e-sports youth.

4.3. Micro level: empowering the individual to achieve diversification

At the micro level, there is a need to empower individual semi-professional e-sports youth and help them achieve diversified development. First, career planning education should be provided to guide them to reasonably plan their career paths from adolescence, and psychological counseling services should be set up to help players cope with career setbacks and psychological pressure. Second, their comprehensive skills, such as content creation, data analysis and marketing and promotion, should be upgraded to lay the foundation for future career transition. At the same time, players should be helped to establish their personal brands, show their characteristics through live broadcasts and social media, accumulate fan resources and broaden their sources of income. In addition, we need to promote a healthy gaming culture, help players balance training and life, avoid health problems caused by excessive training, and provide regular health checks and psychological counseling.

5. Conclusion

The path of pursuing the “gaming dream” is full of light and challenges. For semi-professional gaming youth, it is not only a journey about dreams, but also a comprehensive test of survival pressure, social cognition and career development. Starting from the survival status and career path of semi-professional e-sports youth, this study reveals their predicament in terms of economic pressure, lack of career planning, and insufficient social support. Despite the rapid development of the e-sports industry and its gradual acceptance by the social mainstream, the survival status of semi-professional players, as a group at the bottom of the professional pyramid, is still grim, and in urgent need of attention and support from multiple forces.

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