The professionalism and precarity of Indonesian mobile game esports

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INTRODUCTION

This extended abstract attempts to present the coexistence of Indonesian mobile game esports' professionalism and precarity. It is based on my ongoing PhD research on Indonesian mobile game research which utilize semi-structured interviews with eighteen participants ranging from e-athletes, amateur competitors, esports organizations representatives, content creators, and casual players from digital ethnography paradigm (Hjorth et al., 2017) as primary data. I use constructivist grounded theory data analysis method (Charmaz, 2006) to explore emergng themes of Indonesian mobile game esports' professionalism and precarity. This presentation corresponds to my PhD research question on what roles do government representatives, promoters, esports team management, e-athletes, and social media influencers play in developing and sustaining mobile e-sports within Indonesian popular culture. This extended abstract looks at the current development of Indonesian mobile game e-sports in the aftermath of the arrival and utilization of *Mobile Legends Bang Bang* (Moonton, 2016) into competition medium, its adoption into vernacular Indonesian digital culture since 2018 (Jiwandono & Purwandi, 2020), and its cooptation as a national sporting initiative of Indonesia from 2020. The initiative has yet to thoroughly transform mobile game esports into a nationally guided sport, as its grassroot digital culture coexists alongside government's initiative to brand it as a national activity. At times, they complement each others, at other times they segregate, which on occasions create apathy on both spectrums.

The conflicting nature of aforementioned coexistence are practiced in various manner. The most widely practiced; and also the mutually beneficial, is through the extrinsic play capability of mobile game (Hjorth & Richardson, 2020; Richardson et al., 2021), and Indonesian mobile game esports internet personalities' exceptional capabilities to stimulate emulative desire among their audiences (Andreas & Arymami, 2022). Jiwandono & Purwandi (2020) argue about numerous mobile game e-sports players who receive additional income as streamers which for some surpass their main income as an e-athlete. In additon, what started as a grassroot activity between gaming influencers and their audiences would be commodified into a national digital communication strategy by Indonesian government to garner attention and affirmation from Indonesian youth as mobile game esports continue to grow in popularity and audience demography. The spectatorship of mobile game esports has created financial and socio-technical opportunities for grassroot practitioners and government affiliated actors alike.

Said opportunities are reflected on Indonesian mobile game esports' rapid professional diversification. Indonesian esports teams today employ essential personnels such as managers and coaches in addition to public relation fronts such as marketing team and social media administrators. This is due to many esports teams are trademarked as legal entities and, thus, carry the obligation to maintain a healthy finance. Esports teams also interact with existing supplementary professions such as shoutcasters; a hybrid between master of ceremony and commentators, event organizers, and vendors. This diversification indicates the maturing Indonesian mobile game esports ecosystem which five years ago was limited to event organization of competitions. In addition, the increasing involvement of Indonesian esports governing bodies through formulation of career roadmap, participation opportunity on multiple levels (e.g., regional, scholastic, collegiate), better regulations, and national branding through social media have created a better prospect for Indonesian mobile game esports.

However, Indonesian mobile game esports remains precarious as said programs are yet to be fully implemented. Participants of my PhD research were worried by vulgar and crass presentations of mobile game esports influencers who are generally unconcerned with their responsibility as key opinion leaders. Some participants argued that Indonesian mobile game esports personalities actually understand about the bad influence of their presentations which can potentially inflict on their audiences, but chose not to act responsibly on them as long as they are profitable. It also has a detrimental effect toward the legitimacy of esports. A participant argued about how the unruly presentation in an increasingly greedy social media activities have created distrust among general Indonesian population toward esports, and further enforce the stigma of digital gaming as an antisocial activity. This is exarcebated by majority Indonesians' inability to distinguish between gaming and esports which is delegitimizing the latter despite the activation of a national framework to promote mobile game esports as a legitimate sport.

Another precarious issue of Indonesian mobile game esports is career sustainability. Indonesian competitive esports has a short career span of ten years on average of which competitors' skills and abilities would markedly decline by the age of 25. There is also stiff entry competition to professional scene due to low entry barrier and popularity of mobile game esports. Additionally, e-athletes are not unionized, and matters related to wages are hardly regulated by governing bodies. It resulted in Indonesian e-athletes became prone to fall victim to financial fraud of which prize money were not paid accordingly. Lastly, an aspiration to be a professional e-athlete in some cases demands a prospect to focus on honing their skills and presentation to the point of discontinue to or drop out of higher education. On occasions, that decision would be in vain.

There are also criticisms from grassroot esports practitioners toward esports organizations about withheld funding and non-transparent athlete selection processes. That situation is exarcebated by the ironic persisting lack of professionalism among private esports teams. Many mobile game e-sports teams are founded based on hobby with overemphasize on winning competition while neglecting finance and business aspects of esports. A participant argued that many teams relied too much on self-funding and prize money without building a sustainable business model. As a result, it is not unheard of for a mobile game esports team to only last less than six months.

The professionalism and precarity of Indonesian mobile game esports are parts of the proverbial tug-of-war and synergy between the grassroot cultural practice of Indonesian mobile game e-sports and mobile game esports as a professional activity.

Together, they are forming a fluid Indonesian national gaming identity which is oriented on economic affordability and socio-technological opportunity.

BIO
Haryo Pambuko Jiwandono is a PhD candidate at RMIT University's School of Media and Communication and a researcher at Digital Ethnography Research Centre (DERC) under supervisions of Professor Ingrid Richardson and Distinguished Professor Larissa Hjörth. He is awarded with RMIT Research Stipend Scholarship (RRSS) from June 2022. His PhD research is about mobile game esports in Indonesia from digital ethnography paradigm.

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