Featuring:
Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay (moderator)
Amanda Martin, Government Affairs, Entertainment Software Association (introduction)
Dr. Rachel Kowert, PhD, Research Director, Take This, Inc.
Tanya DePass, Founder and Director, I Need Diverse Games

Meredith Martino, WIG Executive Director:
Welcome! I’m Women In Government’s Executive Director Meredith Martino, and I’d like to thank you for joining us today for Women In Government's policy roundtable, “The Positive Impact of Play: The Benefits of Video Game Play.”

Women In Government convenes state legislators and stakeholder experts with broad perspectives and experiences to amplify the work of female lawmakers. Women In Government has an all-legislator Board of Directors that guides meaningful policy programs that directly address issues that are being faced by state legislators nationwide.

Just a few quick housekeeping items before we get started. I’d encourage all participants to introduce themselves in the Chat Box located in the zoom toolbar. Please share any questions or comments here and, given the nature of our discussion today, I’d also encourage you to add your first or favorite game video game that you’ve played. I was always a fan of Q*bert. My 11 year old son loves Apex, and my 18 year old daughter loves Destiny.

A few other housekeeping notes. You may want to select “Speaker View” from the Zoom view options if you are watching and not just listening in. And finally, we encourage you to please connect with Women In Government on all of our social media platforms.

Now I’d like to pass the virtual microphone over to Amanda Martin from the Entertainment Software Association to make some opening remarks.

Amanda Martin:
Thank you, Meredith, and thank you to Women In Government. ESA is happy to partner with Women in Government to host a series of events that highlight the value of video games to states and to players across the country.

We are living in the United States of Play with 2 out of every 3 Americans playing video games. Of those 227 million players, 90% say that video games bring joy to their lives. 87% say gaming provides mental stimulation and stress relief, and 81% say video games help build teamwork and collaboration skills.

To clear up any misconceptions, I should tell you that the average age of a video game player is 31, and nearly half of all gamers identify as women. As the video game audience expands and changes, it is a priority of the industry to maintain a positive, inclusive, and safe online experience for all players. Keeping players safe is not a competitive issue for the industry. It is a collaborative and shared priority that requires collective action and commitment.
Our hope is this program will expand your knowledge around the positive impact of playing video games and get you thinking about ways to encourage girls and women to seek positive outlets to help address real world anxieties. Video games provide an outlet to address some of this and can inspire young women and girls towards a STEAM career.

Ideally a more inclusive workforce will result in game worlds that represent the population around them, giving everyone a chance to identify with different characters in the games. Creating space to encourage women and girls to participate fully in the video game ecosystem benefits all of us.

Now I’d like to invite our moderator, Delaware Senator Kyle Gay, to introduce our speakers today.

Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
That’s great. Thank you so much, Amanda. I actually am virtually here in the Delaware General Assembly in our legislative hall come getting ready to go on the floor later this afternoon, so it’s great to stop here first and have this awesome conversation with our panelists.

I’m really excited to connect with all the WIG members online with us today. We’re going to put full bios into the Chat to save time for the great discussion, but I want to introduce Dr Rachel Kowert. She’s got a PhD, and she’s a Research Director for Take This.

Our second panelist is Tanya DePass. She is a Twitch partner streamer, and she’s the Founder and Director of I Need Diverse Games.

I am so excited to be here today. I have to tell you that I went home and told my husband I’m talking to Tanya and that I got to meet a streamer before he ever did, even though he is the Twitch fan in the household, so you are going to hear some great information from everyone today.

Dr. Kowert’s insights into the psychology of gaming and what we can do together to focus on the positive aspects of play, I think, are going to really transform the way that a lot of us think about the gaming industry and about the opportunities in gaming, especially for women.

I’m going to get started. I think we already asked everyone to share their favorite game. I’ve been told don’t be shy. We want to hear all of the games and especially if there’s a game that dates you, we want to know exactly how long you’ve been gaming.

I also see a message that my Internet is not the best, so I want to make sure that if I do freeze, please give me some grace today. We’re working on government Wi-Fi at the moment.

So just to begin and introduce the topic that we’re talking about today, video games are the world’s biggest form of entertainment. They’re bigger than box office movies and music combined. We’ve heard today that they transcend age, gender, race, platform, and even politics. I am proud to say that I am a gamer. My daughters, who are three and five, also play video games with my husband and I - supervised and limited, so don’t worry.
During the pandemic, we, like everyone, and a lot of families were forced to deal with unexpected isolation. We also turn to video games, not only to connect with each other, but to connect with the outside world. And we know that people go to video games for this sense of belonging, as well.

As we’re going back into normal life, I think there’s going to be a lot of speculation about this time spent online for the young kids in front of the screen. But when we talk about this online time, it’s important that we distinguish between video game play and things like social media and other online platforms.

Our two panelists today play an important role in the video game ecosystem. Dr. Kowert is an acclaimed researcher who studies the effects of video games on the brain, and Tanya is a video game streamer who uses her skills in video games to connect with people and to live her true passion.

I want to first invite our speakers to talk a little bit about how they got into their current roles, and I will invite Rachel – Dr. Kowert - to start.

Dr. Rachel Kowert:
Thank you for the wonderful introduction. My journey into studying video games was kind of a winding one, which I think a lot of us, if you ask people who work in games, it’s never really straight path.

I wanted to be a therapist. I got a Master’s in Counseling Psychology, and when I was doing therapy as part of that degree, I was seeing a lot of concerns raised from parents about the uses and effects of games, and at the time there wasn't any research in the area. There was one or two research papers, and that was it.

I was feeling really helpless at being able to provide information to parents and educators and lawmakers about the uses and effects of games - what we should be worried about and what we shouldn't be worried about.

I didn't actually realize you could be a video game researcher because it wasn’t a thing at the time, so, then I pivoted and went and got my PhD looking at the uses and effects of games.

Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
Awesome. Tanya?

Tanya DePass:
I've been playing video games for a long time - ColecoVision in the arcades, things like that, and for me, it was right time right place. I was a little bit upset about video games and the lack of diversity and started I Need Diverse Games.

From there just was a lightning in a bottle kind of moment where I was able to use that to turn it into a career - not intentionally, but here we are today. For me, I use my streams both to educate to have fun. I do both tabletop and video games. I’m actually making a tabletop game now, and it's more than
a passion at this point. It is my livelihood, and I want to Twitch to be a safe space, especially my channel and my community.

But I want people to do better and be better about sharing games on the platform and for the platform itself to be better in ensuring safety for its marginalized streamers.

**Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:**
I really appreciate that, and a quick follow up question because you talked about a lot of things. Some of our participants might not know as much about Twitch, about the platform. It’s kind of a open closed platform. Maybe you could just give us a quick primer so we all kind of on the same page.

**Tanya DePass:**
So, Twitch is a platform owned by Amazon where people live stream content, be that video games, RPGs, makers in crafting art and music.

It’s unlike a YouTube video. You can interact with the person on screen or people on screen in real time. You can monetarily support them. You can you watch the VOD later if you do miss their content. It is a very interactive entertainment platform. It’s not just video games and hasn’t been for very long time.

**Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:**
That’s great, and I’ll just do an asterisk that when you hear VOD, it means video on demand. I can be your translator today to the best of my ability.

I want to go back to Dr. Kowert. Your white paper talks about using video games to change the stigma around mental health. You said you went into this field because there wasn’t that research that you were looking for, so can you talk a little bit about how this idea came about and walk us through some of the white paper?

**Dr. Rachel Kowert:**
Yes, at Take This, we periodically create these white papers to present the research and what we know about different areas of interest intersecting between mental health and video games. Our most recent one was looking at games as tools for change and how they can be used as tools to change the stigma in and around mental health.

The goal was really to kind of create a blueprint for game makers, not just those who are looking to create games specifically for mental health, which has kind of been a growing industry in the last couple years, but even to just not actively contribute to mental health stigma in games.

We talk a lot at Take This about game makers who set their games in a mental health institution, for instance, and make it kind of a scary horror game, so we want to provide this information to let them know we have powerful messaging in the games and in the media we create. How can we use that to our advantage to not actively contribute to mental health stigma and also actively combat that stigma?
Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
That's fantastic. I can remember a couple years ago there was a game where it was a father dealing with the death of a young child, and I remember the creator said he actually used the gaming development process to deal with his own emotions around his real life challenges.

I feel like to your point, there's so many ways that folks can interact and use this art form to both understand mental health concerns and combat them, so thank you.

Tanya, can you talk to us a little bit about - you mentioned representation, you mentioned diversity in your opening remarks - why is that important visibility when it relates to the mental health and entry mental health and society as well?

Tanya DePass:
Because a lot of games often treat mental health as a gimmick or a reason for someone to be a villain, or that's the kind of motive for doing that's wrong or evil in a video game.

For Twitch, I can share a game that has mental health in it. I can talk through it as I’m playing the game and bring up important points, but also create a community where, if someone is not having a good day, it can be a place where they can safely talk about that or bring it up if they need help.

We have the tools and resources to give to them. An important caveat I have so that Rachel will not get after me later - one thing we always do is reminding people that while I am part of Take This and a Take This ambassador, a streamer is not a mental health professional and even if they are mental health professional, they are not your mental health professional. So, we give a space for people to feel safe enough to say that they are struggling but not try to fix it for them.

But we also can look at games - I believe the game you are talking about is That Dragon, Cancer. There are games like that where there are very serious scenes are very important messages - as a community, we can watch it, we can discuss it, and we can also opt out.

There was a game a friend was playing where in the very first five minutes a young girl watches her dog get killed, and it was like - none of us opted in for that. The streamer didn't opt in for that. And we just kind of all agreed, “We're done with this game for now. This is not okay for our mental health. This is not okay for the community.”

So, having those spaces where we can have those discussions are super important on Twitch, and being able to do it safely but also recognizing our limits, even for those of us that are in the mental health community, for those streamers that may have a mental health professional background.

Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
Absolutely, and I know, Rachel, in your white paper, you talk about the studios that are helping people manage mental health, and they want to make sure that they're accurately representing the mental health scenarios. Can you talk about some of those games and studios that you're referencing?
Dr. Rachel Kowert:
Yeah, there's a lot, and like you just mentioned, there's two prongs. There's studios that are actively supporting the mental health of their employees. Outer Loop Games would be a great example. They have no systematic crunch policy, not crunching to meet a deadline week after week after month after month, which is terrible for your mental health, and I'm pretty sure they just instituted a four day work week as well to better have that work-life balance.

Then the other side of the coin is mental health representation in games. Double Fine is a great example out in California. They just released Psychonauts 2, which is nominated for Game of the Year award. In the game there's a lot of mental health themes, and they actually sought outside consulting to make sure, “Are we representing these things appropriately?” “Should there be a content warnings at the beginning?”

I don't know which game Tanya is referencing about the dog dying, but it's like that should have had a content warning, perhaps like you're going to see death and grief. If you're not prepared for this, you should be prepared that that's what you're going to experience.

So, I would say that Double Fine and Outer Loop Games are probably two exceptional examples, but they're definitely not the only ones.

Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
And do you think that we're moving towards a world in which there will be more of those discussions, or do you still see challenges in bringing those discussions into the studios?

Dr. Rachel Kowert:
I think we are moving towards – I think there's been a lot of press in the last year or two about gaming industry leaders who are not taking care of the mental health of their employees, and I think that that's bringing the discussion to the table, which is half the battle, right? Recognizing that this is a concern that needs to be discussed.

Systemic crunches are never okay. It's long been the standard in the industry, and people are finally being like, “Wait a minute. This should not be the standard in the industry. This is terrible for our physical and mental well-being.” So, I'm hopeful that it's changing.

Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
I need to get some of those systemic crunch – the folks advocating against them. I need to get them in this law field, so that we can help mental health over here too. That's for another day.

Tanya, you're in it all the time. You said this is your profession. You really are a leader in your community where you're kind of connecting with so many people daily on this platform. How has streaming helped your mental health and helped you promote mental health awareness?
Tanya DePass:
For me personally it's helped because if I have a day where I'm just not up to being “on” as I like to say, I can go turn on a friend’s stream where I don't have to interact. I can lurk, and a lot of people don't realize having stream on and just listening is often referred to as lurking if you don't interact and chat.

I can just listen if they're crafting, if they're doing music. It’s something where I have that soothing thing where I don't have to interact. I don't have to be on. I don't have to talk if I don't want to.

But when I’m in front of the camera, I’m being very vocal about the games, where, “Hey, this game should have the content warning.” Our community is very proactive about, “Hey, this thing happens in a game. You should really have this content warning” - especially if one of us gets to play it before someone else when we're getting early access. We're very good about trying to warn people. “Hey, this game features death,” or “This game features loss of a child,” or something like that.

An example is Assassin’s Creed Origins - there's several Assassin's Creed games - but the one set basically in ancient Egypt where the protagonist is motivated by the death of his child in front of him, and having had friends that have lost children, I’m like, “You don't want to watch this game. You don't want to be here.”

Having that constant warning pop up in the chat or on call for moderators and being mindful of – “This may not bother me, but I never know who's watching the stream,” - because again someone could be lurking, and have a moment of “Oh, I wish I hadn’t seen that” if you play a super violent game or do a watch party and the content is super violent or has death or what have you.

It's made me also very mindful of ableist language and all those things that we grew up saying that we didn't think about. Now, I’m more mindful and try to catch myself if I either watch content with ableism in it, or if I catch myself using those words and reel it back and be mindful of who I know is there and who could possibly be watching.

Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
I think that’s such a great point, and I think that probably resonates a lot with the legislators and those in government who are on. We are often put in in front of a group to talk or to represent, and you’re doing the same thing, and I found that it's caused me to be much more introspective and intentional with my language and actually has created a host of learning opportunities for myself and others.

I think the more we each strive to do that, whether we're streaming in front of 20 million people like I know you do or standing up in front of a group, I think that’s a really great point. I appreciate you sharing that.

Dr. Kowert, you were recently at the game developer conference talking about moral panic around video games. This has been a recurring theme for many, many years. Can you walk us through where that comes from and the stereotypes around it? Also, what can we do to combat some of those stereotypes to emphasize the positive aspects of gaming?
Dr. Rachel Kowert:
Moral panic is really the thing that hinders video game discussions the most, especially when you try to talk about and highlight the positive aspects.

Very simply, moral panic is an easy solution to a complex problem – we’re ascribing it easy solution to a complex problem. It has existed since the beginning of time. It usually circles around new technologies, so the fear of Dungeons and Dragons, for instance, creating a generation of devil worshippers or whatever kind of that narrative was, the fear of rock and roll when Elvis became popular.

So, we see it in history, and then we have the fear and moral panic around video games, and it’s the idea that we think video games are kind of causing these negative outcomes across the board - you know, being antisocial or being overweight or being violent.

We’ve seen these moral panics around games for about 50 years. The vast majority of these fears that circle the moral panic have been debunked by decades of research, but this idea that they're linked remains, because when something bad happens, we want to just say it’s that one thing that must be the cause of it.

How do we prevent it? It’s really a knowledge is power kind of situation. We have lots of research now. It’s understandable to be afraid of new technology when it's new because we don't know what uses and effects it might have, but when it comes to games, we’ve been studying them for a good 50 to 60 years. We know a lot in terms of the way it does and doesn’t impact us.

Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
We can imagine that at least some of that moral panic is subsiding because now we see people like Tanya who have careers in this space. Tanya, can you talk about your own personal view of how it may be shifting, how games are viewed now by the wider public, and what might be causing some of those changes?

Tanya DePass:
I think games are viewed more as an everyone does them thing instead of the nerdy guy in his mom's basement huddled in the corner with the controller, and everyone calls him geek and nerd.

I’m aging myself by talking about that era, but I think a lot of people see things as in I can be a games journalist, like with Rachel I can be games research or I can be an academic around games, and it’s not simply a childish thing that a lot of people think games are because a lot of games (A) are not cheap, (B) the system you play them on is not cheap or computer but also through streaming, through YouTube, through things like that.

People see that there is a path to be engaged to be in the industry and not necessarily make the games. The only caveat is that a lot of people need to realize that there’s a whole lot of work that leads into being in a position where you’re making your whole living off this.
And a lot of people still don’t make their whole living off video games unless they’re in the industry, so I’m going to throw a little cold dash of realism on there.

Yes, there’s a path, there’s absolutely a way to get into games. There’s a way to get into this industry, and it doesn’t always have to be coding. It doesn’t always have to be writing and art because so many people think if they can’t code, they’ll never make a game, and that is absolutely not the truth.

I’m in the games industry, I have not actually made a video game, but I’m making a tabletop game, but without the experience I’ve had, I wouldn’t even know how to start doing the tabletop side.

Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
Absolutely so, and will it be better or worse than The Cones of Dunshire? That’s what I want to know.

Tanya DePass:
I hope it’s better. We’ve got two seasons of the streaming under our belt, so if it’s not better than that, I am so sorry.

Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
I’m excited for you. That sounds like a really fun endeavor!

So, let’s get to the meat of it. Rachel, is video game addiction real? You knew this question was coming.

Dr. Rachel Kowert:
It’s a difficult question to answer. Diplomatically, I will say there are absolutely people who use games in problematic ways that causes problem in their daily lives. I don’t want to discount that experience. There are people that have that experience absolutely.

In terms of gaming addiction as being a separate, clinical, diagnosable kind of standalone psychological phenomenon, the research doesn’t support that distinction. The World Health Organization did move forward with that designation, but there’s been a lot of controversy around it. There was an open letter signed by more than 50 scholars in the field, citing there wasn’t enough evidence to support this. The American Psychiatric Association has not moved forward with this designation, with the same argument of there’s not enough evidence to support this.

There’s a lot of difference in the way the public uses addiction and the way a clinician or psychologist would use addiction. So, from a clinical stance, from a psychology stance, which is where I come from, video game addiction is not a separate diagnosable psychological phenomenon. The evidence just doesn’t support that that is a standalone thing, but people can and do use games in a way that’s problematic.

It’s just much more likely that games are being used as a maladaptive coping strategy for anxiety or depression or social isolation or COVID quarantine or all of these other things that leads you to look for some kind of coping mechanism that may in turn become maladaptive.
Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
And not to throw you a question that you weren't necessarily expecting, but I just am curious - do you feel that we have adequate tools or information or education around those maladaptive techniques or situations where a parent could say, actually, this has become something that we should be concerned about?

Dr. Rachel Kowert:
Thank you for asking that question. It's a great question. If you think that your child or someone you know is using games that's causing problems in all areas of their life - so physically, socially, psychologically, occupationally - they're not doing well in school, they're not talking to their friends, if it's affecting their life in a negative way, that's when you seek professional mental health support.

But the key is to find a mental health professional who is aware of what games are and has a cultural competency around games because if you're going to somebody who says, “Ah, the games are the problem,” and they take the games away, the case may be that the games can be the coping strategy. You don't want to just take the coping strategy away. That's going to lead to bigger problems. What you want to do is figure out the anxiety, the depression, what's underlying that's promoting that behavior that's become negative influence in their lives.

So, if you're in that situation, please visit takethis.org. We actually do have a list of mental health professionals who have some kind of competency in and around games, so they can be understanding of the cultural factors and whatnot that goes into playing video games and being part of that community.

Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
Oh, that's a great point, and I think it goes to why we're having this conversation today. More information is better, and the more we know about games and can all talk about the communities is fantastic.

Tanya, some of the other pieces that people get concerned about with games are that toxicity that we hear about in games. Obviously, an interactive platform means that people can be positive and negative, so can you talk a little bit about dealing with that in your daily life as a streamer?

Tanya DePass:
For me, as a streamer in general, and being a woman, a black woman and queer on the Internet, what we do is we have safeguards. We have both human moderators and bots, and we use all the tools that Twitch gives me.

There's a thing called auto-mod where it actually uses machine learning, so if you come into the chat and a bad faith actor comes in and they start using language that isn't great or start using slurs, that auto-mod catches them so that the rest of the chat won't even see them.

The human moderators can make those judgment calls when you're not 100% sure if this is someone super young or if it's a language issue or they're just not used to Twitch and the community or they're
new to our community and they’re bringing behavior from other communities that is perfectly fine there into our space. We’re like, “No, we don’t do that here.” I try to use timeout, and I try to use bans. Obviously, if someone comes in and calls me a slur, that’s an automatic ban.

Toxicity is there. The one thing I can think of that is always going to stick with me is Twitch has tags. Now, there's a bunch of tags - identity tags - but at first, the only rolled out an LGBTQIA tag, and that tag caused a lot of grief for people. In my case I got a stalker out of it because they did not - they just didn't want to understand that while your friends may be very lucky and not get harassed, I’m getting harassed.

Then, they basically proved my point by not just harassment me during that one stream, but on and off for two years. And it turned out, they weren't even in the U.S., so there wasn't a lot I could do, and Twitch wasn't very active in doing that, even though I did report after report after report.

So, there’s a lot of times where the toxicity doesn't make sense. It's just someone with nothing better to do that is hateful. But then there is the toxicity of a girl on the Internet, a woman playing games, and you can have your list of banned words. You can set up your auto-mod.

But the one thing I would encourage people is, if possible, let it not stop you because the goal was to get me to stop streaming, and the goal was to get me to leave the platform, and because I’m a bit ornery, I did not. I believe in the power of pettiness. But it was hard for two years to deal with someone who showed up every time I streamed and would harass and would send people.

There’s toxicity, but I’d like to believe – and I’m putting on my optimism hat, that overall, the people you encounter on the platform are positive, and if it wasn't, I wouldn't be doing this still for almost eight years.

**Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:**
We're sorry you had to deal with that, and a lot of us, I think, on the line who think about policy hear that story and think about how we can help in some way. How can we set the tone and set expectations for our society? So, the more you tell that story, I think it becomes - it will resonate, and we'll do something. Eventually, we'll figure it out. I'm the optimist here today.

**Tanya DePass:**
If I may, the one thing that would really help is getting people to understand what the Internet is, and that it’s never as simple as just get off the Internet, turn off your Twitter, don't stream, and if someone uses Twitch or YouTube or what have you as a part of their income stream, they can't just delete their Twitter account. They can't just delete their Twitch stream.

For me Twitter and Twitter are my two biggest social platforms, and cutting those off cuts off probably about half my income. So, it's never simple. So, some empathy and not assuming that, “Well, you're online publicly, so therefore you got to deal with it. That's the mindset that needs to stop.
Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
Absolutely, and as we heard from Dr. Kowert, if there is a need for games and other reasons, we don't want to tell children just to leave the gaming if it's providing positive impacts for them as well.

I want to ask both of you - I appreciate you sharing some of the challenges because we're here to be realistic about the challenges - but also think about how we can move in a positive direction forward. What are some of the positive aspects of the gaming world that you each would like to share with the attendees?

Tanya DePass:
You know the fact that can have community. You can make friends. I've made global friendships about gaming. A friend who lives in Scotland started streaming because of me and a conversation we had while he was doing his Master's thesis on gaming.

So, there's so many positive aspects. His friendship and the game I'm making into The Motherlands would not exist if not for the opportunity to do the actual play show on my channel and with collaborating on Twitch.

There's just so many different ways in which you can have a great community. You can grow as a person. I'm definitely a better person now because so many people that I wouldn't have encountered, especially with the now three years of the pandemic we're dealing with, I would have never met these people because I would have been off doing the things I normally do and not encountering them and learning a lot – and not to use people as a learning tool, it's terrible, please never do that - but it helped me as an individual with growth.

Just all the different ways that while Twitch and Twitter and social media can definitely be the lowest reaches of Dante’s inferno, they've also helped me, and I honestly wouldn't be doing this if it weren't for the impact of Twitch and Twitter.

Dr. Rachel Kowert:
The social impact is huge. There was a research study that came out - count on me to talk about the research - a year ago that talked about Twitch streams in particular and how they provided a sense of social connectedness and emotional support during difficult times in their lives. This was during the COVID-19 pandemic, and even lurking, as Tanya was talking about earlier, just having it on in the background, gave people a sense of social comfort because it's like that person is there in real time. It's not like watching a YouTube video. It's like I'm watching a person in their living room right now, and it helped people feel less alone.

Games are also really great learning tools. They teach us a whole host of things without even trying. You learn about world history if you play a game like Civilization. You learn about teamwork if you play any kind of team-based multiplayer game.

Games are great for stress relief. They are great for mood management, so bringing us from a negative to a neutral or positive one, from bored to less bored, or unhappy to more happy. I could go on, but I’ll stop there. They are great tools for lots of things.
Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
I love to hear it. Just more of a little bit of foundational question, but from your understanding of the universe of games - because Tanya has talked about tabletop - we've talked about things like single player games. There's obviously games where you're collaborating over the Internet.

When you’re talking about games, are you talking about all of these aspects of gaming, or are you really focused on - is there something that we should know about the differences between different types of games and how we should think about them?

Dr. Rachel Kowert:
That's a great question. I think a lot of people have the assumption that these effects are not universal, and it really can be. For me, my stress relief game is like an Animal Crossing, something really relaxing, a farming simulator. That’s my sweet spot of finding something that’s relaxing.

For my husband, he likes the first person shooter type games, the fast paced, highly competitive type games. For him, that is stress relieving, so there can be differences between games, but every game holds the potential to have these positive effects.

Taking an example from the research, if you look at games that look at the effect of violent video games, they'll take a game like Call of Duty. But another researcher will take Call of Duty and look at how that can improve and hone our visual acuity skills, so there's something positive to be said about every kind of game in terms of the potential to learn and socially connect.

Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
I appreciate you sharing. Before we go into some back and forth and hopefully answering some questions, I do want to think a little bit about how legislators in Women In Government on today can further young women's interest in gaming.

We talk a lot about STEM. Our Women's Caucus here in Delaware just recently had a Doctor of Chemistry come and talk to us about her experience and what we can do to ensure that young women - young, diverse people - are going through these STEM programs.

We think a lot about coding, but you mentioned that you could be a business manager in gaming. So, can you talk a little bit about some of the avenues that we might be able to promote so that young women have an opportunity to explore this field?

Tanya DePass:
Thank about critical thinking, which sounds a little weird, but being able to look at a game and disseminate it, be able to then go back and kind of repackaged it back to people in a way where if you're writing reviews - if you want to get into games journalism, if you are looking at a game from a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) standpoint, which is what I do a lot of the time – “What are the tropes I’m seeing here?” “What are the things I’m seeing here?”
And then being able to think about solutions that you can then take back to a studio because a lot of people think that, “Oh well, I’m marginalized; therefore, I can do DEI work.” But all they see is everything that’s wrong, and they don’t see a way to offer a solution. “Have you considered this wording?” Writing is really important because you need to be able to go into a script or a dialogue section and go, “This doesn’t sound quite right. This is outdated language. Here’s what I suggest instead.”

Also, just learn how to collaborate and network, because a lot of us don’t get those skills in high school or college, honestly, unless you’re on the business side because it’s part of what they teach you. That’s going to get you anywhere in any field.

But realize that gaming also is not just your brothers. Don’t think that gaming needs to stop when you quote unquote “grow up.” You can game at any age, and it’s never too late to get into gaming. It’s never too late to get into Twitch or content creation.

Understand that if you have an analytical mind, you can jump into a lot of things, but that doesn't mean that you always have to be an analytical person. If there's just something about games that you love, focus on that. Hone that skill and go from there.

Let's not be catty girls and women because a lot of people have a highlander mentality when it comes to games, being the only one. There’s room for all of us at the table, be that the virtual table with digital or actually tabletop. There’s room for all of us to grow.

Dr. Rachel Kowert:
There's so many aspects of the industry that aren't just coding, although girls can absolutely code also and be part of that.

I think we’re seeing more diversity in the industry, which is helping girls realize they are welcome here. So, there's been a long stereotype about games being just for boys and the industry being just for boys, and we do still see that to some extent, but as representation and diversity in the industry changes, I think girls and women are realizing they are welcome in this space, and there's a lot of places that they can engage whether it's coding or community management or art or sound design.

There’s so many different avenues to get engaged, and like me, I loved games my whole life. I was always Player Two, I had an older brother - you know, OG Mario Brothers, I’ve been playing games my whole life. And I never realized it could be a career for me. I loved research, and I funneled that into a career in game, so there’s just a million possibilities.

Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
One of the things that I have recently become aware of is the idea that we would have esports in schools and at college levels. Could either of you share more about what that looks like and how that is impactful for getting women more interested in these types of fields?
Dr. Rachel Kowert:
Esports has been growing. Over 100 universities have scholarships now for esports. The YMCA is about to open up some esports clubs as well across the country, so it’s growing, and that is a great way for women and girls to get involved in games in a competitive space.

Again, games have long been not only stereotyped as just for boys, but especially competitive gaming has long been stereotyped for boys, so the more ubiquitous esports becomes in schools and in the YMCAs, and the more that parents realize that this could be an avenue for a college scholarship - I think that surprises a lot of parents when you mention that you can get full ride scholarships for esports – that helps destigmatize games as being something frivolous, as Tanya said.

The opposite of place isn’t work. The opposite of play is depression. Play is important. Not only is playing important for our lifespan, we can also have a career in it as well.

Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
I think the more we can grow in and be creative with our gaming and the way we interact socially - I mean so much of what we do is online, and we might as well have some fun with it, right?

I’m really so grateful for everything you both have shared. I want to make sure that we go into our question and answer, but before I do, I want to reiterate some of what Dr. Kowert had told us about resources available. Parental tools available to keep gameplay fun and appropriate are at the ESRB website. You can also find the tools in Spanish as well.

We want to make sure that both gamers who are listening but also parents of gamers who are listening are empowered today with more information, so that we can continue to make this a positive outcome activity.

We will look to our Chat Box for questions from some of our attendees, and I’ve been looking and watching everyone’s favorite games. I’m taking little notes – “Oh, I haven’t heard of that one.” Any questions for our gamers? If not I’m going to have to ask Tanya what it was like to stream with Stacey Abrams because that’s what I really want to know.

Tanya DePass:
It's on YouTube. It was fun, a little bit of chaos because being busy and being a legislator, Stacey came in directly from talking to a constituent, and we had a little bit of tech issue. There's no stream without tech issues, but of course, that was the day when my audio decided not to work.

It was fun, it was a little bit of chaos, and it was also really cool because I got to talk to another nerdy black lady. It wasn't just, “Hey, give Stacey money.” We're talking about cool stuff and Star Trek and RPGs (Role Playing Games) and since she won, she still owes me a D & D game.

Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
That's fantastic. You said earlier that we have to change the stereotype. It’s not just the nerdy guy in his mom's basement. I would say that's completely right. I’m the nerdy girl in my own basement.
Tanya DePass:
I’m the nerdy girl in my office, complete with stuff that you can’t see because of Zoom focusing.

Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
Tara had a question wondering if there’s certain platforms that moderate content and communication among players more than others. So where is that differential in the market right now on the different types of platforms?

Tanya DePass:
I would say Xbox is probably doing a really good job. I feel safest there. When I’ve submitted concerns or tickets about any harassment, or someone’s bothering me and I don’t want them to contact me, I feel like Xbox has been the most responsive.

Twitch finally implemented a response if you put in a report where you can say, “Hey this person is harassing me.” “They’re being racist.” You can even report their username is a problem, and in the interest of our panel, and if you are concerned someone may be into self-harm or harm others, that’s actually an option in a Twitch report.

Twitter’s the worst because I’ve reported things, and I’ve got back, “They’re not violating TOS (Terms of Service)” and I’m like, “Great, good to know.”

Dr. Rachel Kowert:
Certain games and game spaces definitely have different reputations for being better or worse. I don’t want to necessarily call anybody out specifically, but there’s no standards. There’s no kind of industry standard, which I feel like there should be, for moderating hateful and harassing content in gaming spaces. So, some are worse than others.

Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
I think this is something that the legislators who are on can really identify with. I receive hate direct messages, and people will “@” me with some disturbing things. I think the key is making sure that the person who’s using it feels safe. I have been disappointed like you said, Tanya, at certain points along the way.

I shared with you all earlier that I used to work for a technology company, where we would deal with requests from the FBI, so there has to be a two way street. We want to make sure that there’s open communication. I think that’s also an interesting policy angle for us to talk about in the future.

How can we ensure that we're providing the resources so that folks can be safe on these platforms? It's complicated, it's difficult, but it's important if we want there to be spaces where we can come together.

The self-harm report is really interesting to me, and it goes back to the questions we talked about in the beginning about the concern for mental health and recognizing those. Is that the only platform that you've seen that type of report on?
Tanya DePass:
When I’ve gone to do a report - I’m not sure if that’s an option on PlayStation or Xbox or even Twitter – but sometimes I’ve had people come into streams, and you don’t ever want to assume someone’s just trolling, but we have had people come in and talk about how they feel like they want to harm themselves or they’re having suicidal ideation.

Again, we are not mental health professionals, and we often try to point people to our tools, but you can say this username - because Twitch is going to have their info, and we don’t – and say, “I’m concerned,” or “They're in my chat, and they’re saying these things,” and then they can look into it.

I don't know what exactly Twitch does. Hopefully, they send mental health professionals or other trained people and not police, but that is an option I've not seen anywhere else.

Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
I’m glad it’s being addressed in a form, and that's great to hear. There's a question here about the ESRB, Rachel, and I wanted to talk about the tools that are available, but also perhaps one of the misconceptions is that maybe you have to be a gamer to understand how to help someone who's in that community.

Parents should be empowered to know that there's a lot they can do, even if they're not sitting down and playing Fortnite with their kids.

Dr. Rachel Kowert:
I don’t play Fortnite with my kids. They also play Minecraft, but I don’t play Minecraft with them.

So first off, parents don't have to play with them to understand. My seven year old loves Minecraft. I look over her shoulder and ask questions while she’s playing. “What are you doing?” “Who are you playing with?” “Why do you like it?” “Can you show me the latest thing that you built?” We should be engaged.

I always say - and I don't say this to be mean, but all parents can relate - if you can sit through a three year old soccer game, you can sit through a five minute conversation with your kid about video games. Three year olds do not know where the ball goes. It’s the worst thing to watch, but they’re cute in their outfits.

Just being engaged, just asking a few questions over the dinner table or looking over their shoulder, especially when your children are younger and you want to know who they're playing with, for me that’s my most important concern.

ESRB is a great resource for parents. First, there's age ratings, so if your child is asking for a certain game and you're not sure if it's age appropriate, you can go to ESRB.org, and you can look up the game. Not only does it tell you the age rating, it has little blurbs to tell you why it got this rating. Is it because of violence? Is it because of suggestive language? Why did this game get an M for Mature? Then you can decide if it’s appropriate for your child or not.
Then, there is also parental tools.org, which is a great resource that walks you through how to do the different parental controls. “How do I limit money spending of my child on this platform?” “How can I prevent my child from buying every single Minecraft map if my credit card is linked to their Minecraft account?” “How can I limit time or not allow them to download games that are over a certain age rating?”

When we're talking to parents or constituents, and this concern again goes back to moral panic and this fear around the unknown, there's so much information out there, even on just those two websites, to empower yourself with information and knowledge.

Again, just ask. I go to things all the time and talk about mental health and games, and inevitably I get someone who comes up to me after the meeting and they say, “My child plays Fortnite. Can you tell me if that's okay?” That's always just the top concern. Knowledge is power, and the knowledge is out there.

Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
What it sounds to me from everything you've shared today - which has been really, really informative - it's sounds like it’s less about the content of the game, but more about how you interact with it and how you understand the content, which I think is true for any type of entertainment, right? I think really normalizing that concept is really important.

Dr. Rachel Kowert:
Yeah, that’s a great point. It’s one piece of media. We have movies, and we have television. I would not let my seven year old watch an R rated movie, right? So, I’m not going to let her play an M-rated game. We treat video games kind of like this separate unknown thing because they're interactive, but at the end of the day, it's just one piece of entertainment.

Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
Tanya, I have to ask, what has been some of the most rewarding aspects of making this career, changing this from a hobby to a career? How does that change how you look at it?

Tanya DePass:
It's interesting because games are work, and it's hard to find things that are just fun. Every game purchase or code I’m offered, I have to really think about, “Does this fit with my community?” “Is this something they want to see?” “Is this something I even have an interest in?”

For those that don't realize, once you start signing up for code lists or getting on people's PR lists, you may wake up and people just send out codes, and they don't ask if you want to play the game, and they don't see if it’s a fit with your content.

When it comes to games that I buy, I need to think about, “Is this game for me?” “Is this something I’m going to stream?” If I stream it, here's all of the checkpoints. “Can I run it?” “Can I run it well?” “Is anyone else I know streaming it?” “Is anyone on my Twitch stream streaming it?”
So, I have to put way more thought into buying a game or accepting a game code than previously, but also, I have to make sure that I leave something for me.

And even just discussing things on Twitter, if I say, “Oh, looking forward to X game,” there's always someone who goes, “Can't wait to hear your thoughts!” I’m like, “I had absolutely no intention of sharing my thoughts. I just wanted to play this game.”

You know, I love fighting games, I like shooting games, but I’m also a 48 year old adult that knows the difference between right and wrong. I don't have that same influence a lot of people think video games have.

So, it’s made me more mindful of what I choose, what I consume. It’s also like, “Oh, this is 10 streams if I pick up this game. Do I really want to get it, or do I even want to say I bought it?”

**Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:**
And what I think what you're describing probably resonates with a lot of folks on here - that burnout concept, right? We face it in really any industry when we're committed to what we're doing and committed to our enterprise.

I know self-care is a buzzword, but it's important to understand what one needs in order to be most successful in their role, and I’m just curious what your limits are, how you identify what you need, and what mechanisms, if you don't get to cope with games, makes you happy outside of it?

**Tanya DePass:**
A lot of times just getting more sleep. I don't sleep very well, unfortunately. As people get vaccinated, as we're able to move around, going to some events, being very careful, hanging out with my partner, and just getting away from all my technology - maybe taking my phone, maybe taking my iPad and just hanging out with him.

Writing - I got into dice making over the pandemic, so figuring out how to make some cool dice and then being patient to let them cure, painting minis, things that don't require me to touch technology are my thing. Also reading - I’m rereading N.K. Jemison’s “The Fifth Season” just for fun.

**Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:**
That's fantastic. We all need some time for ourselves, and I know it can be very difficult in the public eye to find that time and to allow ourselves that time, so I’m glad.

I want to thank everyone. I really want to thank the participants and the attendees for being here. I saw there’s some legislative staff who are here, and just really thanks for all you do to contribute to the legislative process, and I greatly appreciate that from my role.

I want to thank Dr. Kowert and Tanya. This has been really fun for me to talk about games with some gals, so I appreciate it, and I am really excited about the work that you're both doing. Please continue to be that positive ambassador for gaming, and we’ll hopefully be in touch to talk about ways where we can continue to help get girls into the industry.
Dr. Rachel Kowert:
Thanks for having me.

Tanya DePass:
Absolutely. Any time, and please feel free to message me when you want to talk about gaming.

Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
Absolutely, I’ll be watching. I’ll be lurking.

Tanya DePass:
All right, lurk away.

Delaware State Senator Kyle Evans Gay:
I want to remind you about additional webinars that are coming up.

Monday, March 14th at 2:00 pm Eastern, there’s going to be a webinar on “Biomarker Testing and Personalized Healthcare Opportunities to Address Disparities and Improve Outcomes in Cancer Care.”

And then, on Monday March 28th at 2:00 pm Eastern, you can register for “Preserving and Promoting Professional Certification.”

And unless there’s anything else, this meeting in adjourned. Thank you, everyone.

Meredith Martino, WIG Executive Director:
Thank you so much, Senator Gay. Thank you, everyone.

Tanya DePass:
Thanks, everybody.