



FNATIC INSIGHTS: SAFEGUARDING IN ESPORTS

INTRODUCTION

As the world's foremost esports performance brand - and one of the longest-established multi-team esports organisations - Fnatic is proud to have shaped and grown professional esports. We share our love and passion for gaming and esports with the global community of 1.2bn gamers who grind every day to level up their play.

That doesn't just mean great content, products and gaming performance; it also means examining and leading the conversation around issues which may prevent people from enjoying games or considering gaming as a career. Our recent '[Fnatic Insights' report on gender equality in gaming](#) addressed one of those issues. The report we are issuing today will mean, for some stakeholders, a more uncomfortable conversation.

Commenting on the issue of the Sheldon Report into historic abuse in football, [the Football Association noted](#):

We urge parents and carers to be aware of today's risks – particularly in the online space... abusers are both manipulative and calculating, and they will adapt their methods over time. To give you an understanding of the scale of current abuse in society, in November last year, the NSPCC outlined that 1,220 online grooming offences had occurred in the previous three months.

The Sheldon Report shows us the impact of naivety regarding safeguarding risk and child protection culture. It's time we had this conversation as an industry: so, Fnatic has issued this report to draw awareness to safeguarding risk in esports. Alongside this report, we've made a public pledge to take five simple steps to improve our safeguarding stance, and we've made available safeguarding resources via our website (fnatic.com/safeguarding) for use by any organisation.



Fnatic archive

Let's open up the discussion on safeguarding. We can build a safer system that protects current gamers and gamers of the future. This safer world of esports can be built from the ground up; with esports organisations looking within and committing to caring for all those who interact with them.

“IT'S A MATTER OF WHEN, NOT IF, A MAJOR SAFEGUARDING ISSUE ARISES IN ESPORTS. FNATIC HAS TAKEN A PROGRESSIVE, FORWARD-THINKING VIEW TO SAFEGUARDING IN THE DIGITAL SPACE. I SUPPORT THEIR EFFORTS TO SET STANDARDS IN THIS AREA, AND I ENCOURAGE OTHER ORGANISATIONS IN THE ECOSYSTEM TO FOLLOW THEIR LEAD.

Jennie Smith

Director, Safeguarding Today

OUR RESEARCH

Throughout May 2021, Fnatic conducted a survey among leading professionals in sports safeguarding and esports governance (including commissioners of the leagues in which Fnatic plays).



Average age of participants Fortnite World Cup, 2019



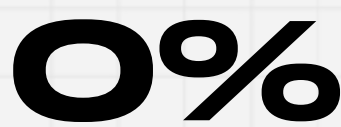
Of survey respondents agree that safeguarding is an issue in esports



Likelihood of a serious child safeguarding incident arising in esports in the next 2 years, per our survey respondents



Of survey respondents say that esports stakeholders are “not at all” prepared for a safeguarding incident



Of survey respondents say that esports stakeholders consider child protection to be “**key to their role**”



Of survey respondents say that esports stakeholders are “**ready**” to handle a safeguarding incident

01. WHAT IS SAFEGUARDING?

Sport does not always provide a safe place for people to play. Serious, systemic, long-term scandals have arisen in gymnastics, football, cycling and rugby (among others). As [the Truth Project](#) notes, common activities in sport - like unsupervised access to children and adults at risk, overnight travel for training camps or matches, a more conducive environment for physical contact, and an adult/child control dynamic - can be easily manipulated by perpetrators of abuse.

Safeguarding is the process of ensuring that an organisation actively prevents abuse, bullying, harm, harassment and neglect, and is ready to respond safely if there is a problem. Fnatic recognises that the activities which led safeguarding issues to arise in traditional sport are also present in esports. In fact, some of esports' best features may exacerbate safeguarding risks and enormously complicate the ability of national organisations to respond.

In esports, we have the opportunity to learn from the successes and failures of traditional sport. The enormous growth of professional play in titles like League of Legends shows how such learnings have benefited the esports ecosystem: esports teams have substantial fan bases, broadcast rights income and a healthy merchandise and pro apparel revenue streams; leading players in these leagues receive salaries and endorsement incomes which are broadly in line with their peers in the Bundesliga or Serie A.



Fnatic London office, Fnatic archive

02. UNDERSTANDING THE RISKS

It is reasonably common for professional gamers to commence their careers at an age before they are legally recognised as adults.

In August 2019, the Fortnite World Cup took place in New York. The event was heavily covered by the media, in part because of the substantial prize pool (\$30m) and the age of the winning participants. 16-year-old Kyle "Bugha" Giersdorf won the title and became \$3m richer. Jaden "Wolfiez" Ashman, age 15, walked away with over \$1m, making him the youngest esports millionaire from a single tournament (and a target for the British professional esports team XL, who subsequently signed him to a long-term deal). In March 2021, an American esports organisation called Team 33 announced that it had signed an eight (8) year old to a contract as a Fortnite pro.



Fortnite World Cup 2019, Epic Games

Young players have also signed pro contracts in DOTA2 (for example, Syed Sumail "SumailL" Hassan, a world champion at 16) and League of Legends (Lee "Clozer" Ju-hyeon, a 17 year-old midlaner for T1).

For elite teenage professional footballers, there are multiple layers of regulatory protection. The Football Association, football's governing body, sets the safeguarding policy and

regulatory framework across the game. In England, the Premier League has safeguarding policies and procedures in place that govern its own activities, as well as rules and requirements that govern club safeguarding arrangements. Clubs must also implement their own safeguarding policies and procedures that must be consistent with Premier League rules, the Football Association's rules and regulations and various other national and international standards.

Premier League teams are also required to employ Designated Safeguarding Officers (DSOs) who are responsible for the implementation of safeguarding standards; and the Premier League also conducts regular audits of compliance with safeguarding standards.

However, for young esports pros, none of these protections exist. So far as Fnatic is aware, no developer or tournament organiser employs a member of staff equivalent to a DSO, or even publishes a safeguarding policy which recognises its responsibility to 'at risk' persons.

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ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT AND PROTECTION IS ONE OF THE MANY AREAS IN WHICH ESPORTS HAS THE CHANCE TO BUILD ON PAINFUL LESSONS LEARNED BY TRADITIONAL SPORTS. EVERY YOUNG ESPORTS PRO HAS THE RIGHT TO FEEL SAFE WHILE DOING THEIR JOB.

Alexander Inglot

Commissioner, ESL Pro League

03. ESPORTS' UNIQUE CHALLENGES

To go one step further: in football, coaches and players commonly interact in person, in a physically bounded environment - a pitch, a gym, a locker-room. Ensuring a responsible third person is present at all times during those interactions (and spotting circumstances where a coach is seeking to exclude that person and gain solitary access to a child) is a basic first step in controlling safeguarding risk. If an incident does occur, the fact the involved parties are likely both present in the same country means that jurisdictional issues are rarely a factor - police and other authorities understand where the crime has occurred and who should prosecute it.

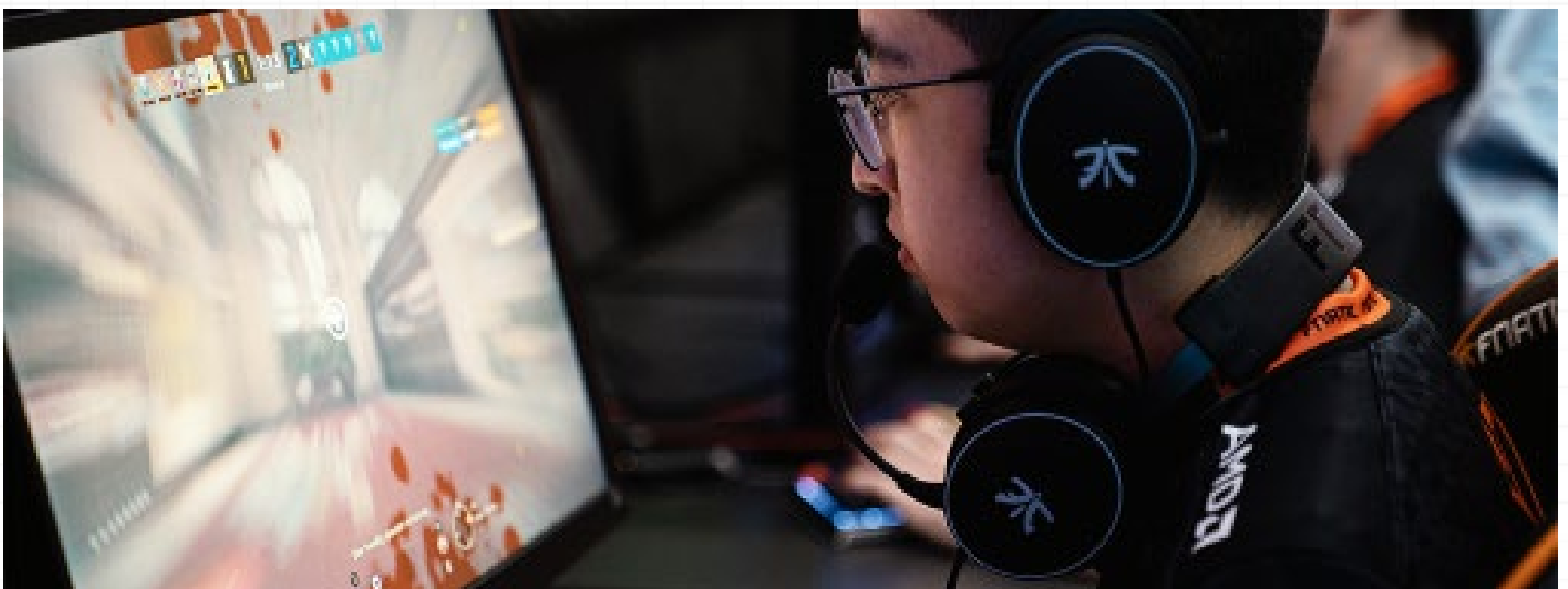
The digital nature of esports complicates the picture. Social media followership and engagement is an important factor in the commercial appeal of esports professionals. Aspiring esports professionals use their social media channels to put themselves in the 'shop window': to build a personal brand presence, post clips of their gameplay and interact with fans.

It is common for professional esports organisations to contact aspiring professionals via these social media

channels. However, communication via social media is private, and social media communication mechanisms are often built on the basis of a one-to-one conversation - excluding third parties like parents or guardians, who may not even maintain accounts on the same social platforms.

In Europe, third party access to social media communications is also heavily protected by data privacy laws. Anecdotally, it is common for esports teams to communicate with children and young people directly without making any request to involve their parents or guardians (in some traditional sports, like tennis, this act is a disciplinary offence). At Fnatic, we require that our talent and pro gaming personnel draw the conversation out of a social media environment and into a space where parents and guardians can be present.

If a safeguarding incident does occur online, the jurisdictional issues can be complex. A young player born in country A, living in country B, may be exposed to an online safeguarding risk on a platform with a server in country C, by an offender in country D. Which police force should take this case on? Who is responsible to support the young player in these circumstances?



Fnatic R6 player, Fnatic archive

O4. REGULATORY INPUT

Top tier esports teams are subject to a wide range of local laws in the countries in which they do business. In some of these countries, laws relating to work by children were written in response to the first or second industrial revolution; and accordingly did not anticipate video games, never mind a world in which a child could earn millions of dollars playing video games competitively. Evolution of legislation around gaming is complicated by its digital nature, and by cultural norms which determine whether or not gaming is seen as a “good” or “healthy” hobby.

In its 2019 discussion paper *“Child Rights and Online Gaming: Opportunities & Challenges for Children and the Industry”*, UNICEF sought to apply a child rights framework to online gaming. UNICEF observes a “tension” in online gaming between “balancing children’s right to play, participate and express themselves, while protecting them from discrimination and abuse, or violations of their right to privacy and freedom from economic exploitation... There is a vital need to understand how the industry can best leverage its potential to enhance children’s lives and contribute to their well-being while addressing concerns around present and potential harm”. UNICEF’s paper concludes with a call for ‘gaming experience providers’ to “speed up self-regulatory activities.”

The Esports Integrity Commission (**ESIC**) is a not for profit members’ association established in 2015 to deal with issues of common interest – in particular the threat that match manipulation and betting fraud and other integrity challenges pose to esports. ESIC has issued guidance regarding “Child Protection in Esports”, highlighting the consequences of esports teams’ light-touch approach to risk management in relation to children, young adults and adults at risk. ESIC has suggested esports organisations create and adhere to codes of conduct relating to children and establish clear reporting mechanisms to ensure prompt responses to claims of harm.



Global Kids Online project, UNICEF Office of Research

Despite these clear and authoritative interventions, we are not aware of any top tier esports team or tournament organiser which has in place a public safeguarding policy or a formalised safeguarding infrastructure. No stakeholder in our industry wants a child to come to harm. But, as the Sheldon Report shows, building a culture where the rights of children and vulnerable adults are protected requires active and visible attention by stakeholders - it cannot be left to chance or “common sense”.

05. WHAT FNATIC IS DOING

Safeguarding risk does not go away if esports teams choose to avoid it. Instead, Fnatic believes that:

- safeguarding - and the creation of a safe and protective environment for young people - is an essential feature of the talent development process.
- a safeguarding failure by any esports team will negatively impact public opinion of esports as an industry, leading to increased regulatory oversight of a type which may hamper esports' commercial potential.
- stakeholders in the esports ecosystem should actively share and discuss best practice in relation to safeguarding.
- by evolving safeguarding best practice for esports, esports teams can lead all sports in addressing safeguarding risk arising from digital and social media.

Fnatic is willing to take responsibility and accountability for the care of children, young people and adults at risk with whom we work. We are working consistently towards making safeguarding an immovable part of our culture.

We also understand that safeguarding can be a daunting issue. To facilitate esports organisations in developing systems of safeguarding, we have worked with leading safeguarding professionals in charities, traditional sports teams and sports governing bodies to create a Safeguarding Pledge. The pledge acts to set a minimum standard of safeguarding for esports organisations.



Fnatic London team, Fnatic archive

“SOME OF THE WORLD’S LEADING ESPORTS TALENTS ARE IN THEIR EARLY TEENS. AS TEAM VALUATIONS AND ATTENTION ON ESPORTS INCREASES, WE MUST NOT LOSE SIGHT OF OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO THESE YOUNG ATHLETES. LEADERSHIP IN ESPORTS IS NOT JUST ABOUT TROPHIES AND PRIZE MONEY - IT’S ABOUT VALUES, AND TAKING A STAND.

Patrik Sattermon

Chief Gaming Officer, Fnatic

“ESIC HAS BEEN WELL AWARE OF SAFEGUARDING RISK IN ESPORTS FOR SOME TIME. WE’RE PLEASED TO SEE THAT A LEADING ORG IS STEPPING UP TO TACKLE THIS ISSUE.

Ian Smith

Commissioner, Esports Integrity Commission

06. OUR PLEDGE

Fnatic is committed to implementing Five Rs - rights, responsibility, respect, reporting and risks. The Five Rs reflect the input of leading safeguarding professionals.

Safeguarding as a process begins with acceptance of responsibility towards children and adults at risk. Being responsible does not preclude tough conversations, or mean that we are seeking to eliminate the inevitable stresses which arise in the pursuit of elite gaming performance.

What it means is that we establish a culture of protection, and that Fnatic differentiates clearly between behaviours which drive performance and those which are abusive.



Domagoj "Doma" Fancev; joined Fnatic at 17. Fnatic archive

FNATIC’S SAFEGUARDING PLEDGE

The Five Rs



RIGHTS

We act with due consideration towards the rights of children and adults at risk who interact with Fnatic (and their parents and guardians).



RESPONSIBILITY

We accept our responsibility to safeguard children and adults at risk who interact with Fnatic. We will promote and protect their rights and well-being.



RESPECT

We create an atmosphere of respect for self and others. This includes supporting those under our care to be mindful of their physical and mental health - for example, by eating healthy foods, maintaining a work-life balance, sleeping a sufficient number of hours, and maintaining healthy relationships.



REPORTING

We encourage reporting of safeguarding concerns. We will take reports seriously. We will respond sensitively and proactively to the reports we receive.



RISKS

We will understand and address risk presented in those digital and physical environments which we can influence and control - especially those risks which have the potential to cause harm to the health or development of children and adults at risk.

07. CONCLUSION

Safeguarding starts with an acceptance of responsibility. Whether or not it chooses to acknowledge it, every esports team has a responsibility to children and adults at risk with whom it interacts. And the safer esports becomes, the more gamers will participate in and play the games we love.



Ludvig "Brollan" Brolin; joined Fnatic at 16. Fnatic archive

Fnatic considers that esports stakeholders should heed the advice of UNICEF and ESIC, and move rapidly and proactively to build a common standard for safeguarding in esports. There is no central regulator in esports, nor is there likely to be one in the near future; accordingly, it is for leading organisations to drive this matter forward and (in the words of UNICEF) 'self-regulate'.

Fnatic is ready to work with any organisation which shares our goals in relation to safeguarding. We invite esports teams to take and share our Safeguarding Pledge.

To participate in the conversation around safeguarding in esports, visit www.fnatic.com/policies/safeguarding-policy, or contact safeguarding@fnatic.com.

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OUR PROMISE TO ANYONE WHO INTERACTS WITH FNATIC IS THAT WE WILL HELP THEM GAME BETTER. “BETTER” ISN’T ONLY ABOUT WINNING; IT’S ABOUT BEING A BETTER PLAYER, A BETTER TEAMMATE, AND A HEALTHIER AND MORE ROUNDED GAMER. THE FIVE RS - RIGHTS, RESPONSIBILITY, RESPECT, REPORTING AND RISK - CONNECT DIRECTLY TO THAT PROMISE.

Sam Mathews

Founder and CEO, Fnatic

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OPENING UP A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION, AND BEING BOLD ABOUT SETTING STANDARDS AROUND A COMPLEX ISSUE, TAKES WILL, TIME AND COMMITMENT. I AM PROUD THAT FNATIC LEADS THE WAY ON SAFEGUARDING - IT’S SUCH AN IMPORTANT TOPIC WITHIN OUR INDUSTRY.

Soraya Sobh

Head of Creators, Fnatic



FNATIC is a global esports performance brand headquartered in London, laser-focused on seeking out, levelling up and amplifying gamers and creators.

Our history is unparalleled. Founded in 2004, we are the most successful esports brand of the last decade, winning more than 200 championships across 30 different games.

Today, driven by performance, Fnatic is the channel through which the most forward-thinking brands communicate with young people. We deliver industry-leading content, experiences and activations through offices and facilities in cities between Los Angeles and Tokyo.

2.6b

Gamers Worldwide
in Total

19.85b

Live watch hours
in 2020

443m

Global esports
audience

1.8b

Western Esport
W/Hours 2019

100m+

Viewers for LoL Worlds
Finals 2019



Thank you for reading.

Any questions, please send them to:

safeguarding@fnatic.com