



# REAL GAME CHANGER

## Dr Dylan Poulus

### Qualifications:

Senior Fellow Advance Higher Education, Bachelor of Behavioural Science (Psychology) from Queensland University of Technology, PhD (QUT)

### Institution:

Southern Cross University, Faculty of Health

### Research Field:

Helping understand performance and mental health in esports, supporting safer and healthier participation as the industry continues to grow globally



## IN THEIR WORDS

**My work in esports psychology began at the community level, building and supporting university esports programs. What struck me early on was just how powerful esports could be for young people.**

For many, it created a sense of belonging, purpose, and identity at a time in life when those things can feel uncertain. I saw students build friendships, confidence, leadership skills, and pathways into education and employment through their involvement in esports.

At the same time, I also saw the other side. For some, esports and gaming became harmful rather than helpful.

Without the right structure or support, it could exacerbate stress, isolation, or mental health difficulties. Seeing both of these realities side by side shaped my motivation as a researcher.

Rather than asking whether esports is “good” or “bad”, my work focuses on understanding when, how, and for whom it can support wellbeing, and when it poses risks.

At the core of everything I do is a simple question: how do we maximise the benefits of esports participation while reducing the potential harms?

Mental health is the first lens through which I approach this. I want to understand how safe, structured, and supported esports environments can promote positive mental health outcomes, and how we can identify and protect players who may be at risk.

The impact of my research lies in translating evidence into practical safeguards, guidelines and programs that help players move from vulnerability to flourishing.

Ultimately, my goal is to ensure esports is a space where young people can thrive, not by chance, but by design.

It's the battle being fought in lounge rooms and bedrooms worldwide: Is gaming good or bad for mental health?

Southern Cross University Faculty of Health psychology researcher Dr Dylan Poulus is adamant there needs to be a clear distinction between gaming and esports (competitive gaming) before continuing the argument.

“One is this competitive, organised, goal-directed activity with hundreds of millions of viewers and millions of dollars in prize pools each year. People who play are like the Michael Jordans of the field,” Dr Poulus said.

“The other may be an escape from reality. Unfortunately, research has just grouped them together as one thing.”

He is leading international efforts to understand how esports affects mental health in an industry that's rapidly approaching Olympic recognition and engages more participants than traditional sports.

And his trajectory began when as an undergraduate at Queensland

University of Technology, he started Australia's first university-supported esports club, which quickly grew to become the most popular extra-curricular activity on campus.

His work now has secured the first-ever grant from the Australian Institute of Sport to explore high-performance esports, positioning Australia to compete effectively as esports climbs the international sporting stage.

“We're talking about a sector where, very soon, more people will do it on planet Earth than not,” Dr Poulus said.

“The example I always give is my dad taught me how to play cricket, and his dad – my granddad – taught him how to play cricket.”

“So when my dad watched me play four hours of Call of Duty on a Saturday, he just saw someone talking into a microphone with strangers from all around Australia.”

“But it was actually me and my five best friends trying to become the best team in Australia.”

“And we practised our strategies, and we did training. We were

developing the same skills you might on a rugby field – teamwork, leadership and communication.”

The global significance of this work caught the attention of Movember, the world's largest men's health charity, which approached Dr Poulus to lead their international strategy for gaming and esports research and interventions.

This platform gives him the ability to reach millions of young gamers engaging with competitive gaming across the globe.

With the worldwide focus on regulation around the use of social media by young people, he is committed to rigorous longitudinal research to generate actionable insights to inform future policy.

The recent Australian social media legislation is an example where Dr Poulus believed more research needed to be done, with the inclusion of gaming platforms actively considered during the process.

At a Movember conference in London in November, Dr Poulus facilitated a mental health guideline

development committee to draft nine guidelines that will form minimum standards to protect young people playing esports.

And now his most ambitious project, dubbed the “Goldilocks Studies” – just how much is the right amount of gaming – will track hundreds of gamers over 12 to 18 months, mapping engagement patterns against mental health outcomes to determine optimal levels of participation.

“Think about binge drinking laws. One drink a day isn't bad for you, but five drinks in one sitting is,” he said.

“We need this same nuance for gaming. Is half an hour good? Are 10 hours destructive? We risk making policy without knowing.”

“No one has looked longitudinally at what types of engagement, for what types of people, lead to what outcomes. It's just been ‘gaming equals depression’ or ‘gaming builds mental toughness’. If I pull this off, it'll be what I'm most proud of. We need the data to make better decisions for young people.”