

# The Phenomenon of Esports: Design and Spectatorship in the World of Competitive Gaming



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## Introduction

The dawn of coin operated arcades in the 1970's introduced the world to the first round of competitive video games. For the first time video games were accessible for the public at a low cost. This newfound freedom of use bred competition, both in multiplayer games and in single player games where high scores could be compared between players. Nowadays, videogames are played online and at LAN events, in local tournaments and internationally, for millions of dollars and across multiple platforms. As the popularity of these gaming competitions has grown and the vernacular of the genre has developed – especially with the introduction of the term “esport” – the discussion of what constitutes a sport has come to the forefront of conversation of sports philosophy. Additionally, complexities have arisen in what defines cheating and what types of player policy are most appropriate for esports. I argue that esports do qualify as sports, that cheating is defined as that which detracts from the competitive nature of the sport, and that several distinct differences regarding players and organizations in esports call for a uniquely adaptive approach to policy making within esports.

## The Physical Distinction of Sports and Esports

The practice of esports is an in-depth field, and to discuss it in earnest requires a preface to the genre as a whole. This is mostly easily done by means of comparison between classical sports and esports. To open the conversation of traditional sports versus esports, the most common arguments made against esports qualifying as sports is that of physicality. In essence, the sedentary nature of video games is contrasted to the active nature of traditional sports with the intent of discrediting arguments that esports are, in fact, sports. To broach the topic of physicality with regards to esports it is important to first establish why physicality is important to

sports normally. That, in turn, demands defining what it means to be a sport, which subsequently brings to question what makes a game. Merriam-Webster defines a game as “a physical or mental competition conducted according to rules with the participants in direct opposition to each other,” and sport as “a contest or game in which people do certain physical activities according to a specific set of rules and compete against each other<sup>1</sup>.” While both definitions are good bases, further investigation is necessary to either rule out or definitively include esports. Hilvoorde and Pot<sup>2</sup>, as well as Jenny<sup>3</sup> make the point that some physical component is, in fact, necessary for an activity to be qualified as a sport. Such a physical component does not, in Hilvoorde’s mind, include those necessary to play such games as cards or chess. The distinction is the aspect of skill involved with the physical mechanics. The commonalities between the two arguments likely tie into the shared definition they argue against, that defined by Wagner<sup>4</sup> as “an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies.” Jenny furthers this argument, deliberately attempting to distance the definition of esports from either “a competitive method of professionally playing video games” or Wagner’s, citing each definition as failing to address both the complexities of esports and their relationship to historical sport activities. For example, while such games as chess or poker do possess some physical element of moving game elements, those movements do not entail a substantial amount of skill, similar to how there is not considerable physical skill required to eat or walk.

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<sup>1</sup> Dictionary by Merriam-Webster

<sup>2</sup> Embodiment and Fundamental Motor Skills in Esports

<sup>3</sup> Virtual(Ly) Athletes: Where ESports Fit Within the Definition of ‘Sport’

<sup>4</sup> Wagner, M. G. (2006, June). On the scientific relevance of esports.

This might seem to disregard certain activities that are commonly considered sports, such as running. Running does, however, seem to demand some amount of physical prowess not immediately accessible to the average person. Alternatively, however, running does offer an interesting argument for the importance of exertion in sports, however this is belied by the inclusion of certain activities as sports. Billiards, darts, and shooting are three cases that make a strong argument for the physical demands of a sport being more skill than exertion. While extremely unfit individuals may struggle to perform some of the tasks demanded by these sports, the average person could reasonably be assumed capable of completing the actions professionals do. The fact that they cannot is not based on the exertion of the sport, but rather the muscle memory and practiced skill that professional players have developed and honed. Furthermore, there seem to be other sports that fit one aspect of the definition while failing elsewhere, thus creating a circle of inconsistencies when attempting to define a sport based on its physicality. Running lacks the fine motor control but pushes an argument for exertion, darts and billiards tend towards the opposite, and something like golf or curling seems to demand both fine and gross motor skills but does not necessarily demand excessive exertion. Those involved with the golf scene may argue that there has been a trend among golf athletes towards a younger and fitter player base, however that seems to be the case for most games, including those played on the computer. This is because, although the emphasis is considerably less with video games, reaction time and twitch reflexes are still in high demand, which lends itself if not towards incredible levels of fitness then at least against the prevalence of obesity. A common element all sports share, however, is that of competition, which Jenny cites as one of the core distinguishing points between a game and a sport.

So, while esports practices do not place severe muscle strain on their players, it is not reasonable to claim that anyone could pick up a controller and be on par with fighting game masters or grab a mouse and keyboard and have aim comparable to that of the best first-person-shooter players in the world. It is noteworthy that such a definition of physicality does eliminate electronic card games and their like from the conversation, however that is reflected in how traditional sports are considered as well. Despite ESPN's relatively recent inclusion of poker in its broadcasting rotation, and despite many other aspects being shared between card games and sports, arguments of physicality do seem to exempt board and card games from the category of sports. What is important to consider when investigating the nature of physicality with esports is what it means for a movement in real life to translate to one in game. It seems obvious that to control an avatar is not synonymous with performing the actions the avatar is performing. Şentuna argues that the virtual world where video games take place are in fact constructs of imagination, environments of escape that are in reality "a mental image or belief that derives from feelings in Platonic philosophy<sup>5</sup>." While Şentuna is correct that actions conducted in a video game do not directly impact the physical world, a physical input is connected in a one-to-one relationship to action in the virtual world, or phantasia as termed by Şentuna. In other words, denoting the virtual world as one of only imagination overlooks the physical rules imposed upon the avatars and how they interact with their world. Hilvoorde makes a similar argument, though one not extensively investigated, regarding a dualistic perspective of humanity, where our bodies functionally exist separate from our minds as an entity of utility, to be trained and manipulated. Under this purview, training with a virtual avatar differs little from with ones own body. Returning to Şentuna's argument, since the player controls the avatar and the avatar behaves

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<sup>5</sup> What kind of an activity is a virtual game? A postmodern approach in relation to concept of phantasm by Deleuze and the philosophy of Huizinga

legally within the world they exist in, the control of the player is making a definitive impact on the virtual world where the game exists.

An interesting distinction between traditional sports and esports is that of rules versus laws, in that a soccer player in the physical world does not pick up the ball because they have agreed not to, whereas a virtual soccer player does not pick up the ball because they cannot. However, such a distinction does not detract from the aspect of physicality in esports, as it is perfectly feasible that another game could be made where the player's avatar could pick up the ball or perform any other action a person would be able to in real life. More than just a matter of capability, however, is there a matter of expectation accompanying virtual environments and avatars. As I will discuss later, game design is often based around a sense of feel. This contributes heavily to the concept of play and fair play, as well as how competitive the game is. When a player manipulates an avatar in game, their immersion and consequently their investment in the world they find themselves in differs based upon a number of factors. There are aesthetic, social, and personal or historical elements of this. *Second Life*, a virtual reality role playing game, is an interesting example of this. As discussed by Boellstorff,<sup>6</sup> despite the extensive opportunities for customization in that game, the majority of players create an avatar that looks much like them, or, if not that, then some idealized appearance tied to one gender or another. These avatars were real to those who guided them, and it is because of the stock these persons put in their characters that harassment in the form of griefing or trolling arises.

To relate the concept of avatars to a more competitive setting, the game *Overwatch* has gone through extensive changes and patches (updates that either add new content or correct or balance existing content). Within these patches are occasionally new characters that add life,

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<sup>6</sup> Tom Boellstorff. "Placing the Virtual Body: Avatar, Chora, Cypherg."

reduce stagnation, and broaden the horizons of the game. Not every character, however, impacts the game in a popular way. There have been a number of characters that seem to upset the balance of Overwatch and damage the way the game was intended to be played, in the eyes of some, at least. However, developers have to be extremely careful in how they balance these more impactful heroes, both in the sense of game design and in the sense of community connection. Players become attached to certain characters. Their abilities, personalities, voices, and appearances are important to people who play the game. In this way we can see that not only do modifiable characters designed by players become important to those that guide them, but so do stock characters introduced by the game developers. Players feel a sense of connection in playing that character, be it through identity, a sense of empowerment, or a familiarity within a game they enjoy. In fact, within the Super Smash Brothers games, a mildly successful player might become recognized for the character they play, but an exceptionally successful player will be known for what color they play with too. And, to highlight the curiosity of this phenomenon, in Super Smash Brothers Melee (the Game Cube edition of Smash), there are often as few as four separate colors for each character. Moreover, the non-competitive games that have kept a considerable following the longest are role playing and story games, games like Dungeons and Dragons or Undertale.

There is a challenge facing esports as a broad topic tied to the complexity of video games. While traditional sports possess a certain amount of complexity, typically the objectives and rules of the game are fairly cut and dry, and complexities arise in adjustments from successful tactics and subsequent reactions to those adjustments. It should be noted that the term complexity differs from depth in gaming vernacular. A game of great complexity might be one like Mouse Trap, which has a convoluted goal and many moving pieces. It does not necessarily,

however, possess depth. Depth is the attribute most games strive for, as it is what enables longevity in a game and is the core principle behind the idea of “outplay.” Depth is what drives the advancement of strategy, which is the central concept of what is referred to as a meta. A meta, an abbreviation of meta game, is commonly described as the game within the game. In conversation, the meta refers to the most successful and prevalent strategy currently implemented. This can change over time, due to either player adaptation or changes to the rules or mechanics of the game. Within video games complexities tend to complement the depth of playability, since physical outperformance cannot typically be achieved through the sheer increase of muscle mass or endurance, but the distinction is an important one when considering why video games are so relatively complex. What makes video games separate in this sense, and for that matter more akin to board or card games, is the involvement of game developers and the semi-frequent to frequent introduction of new mechanics. These complexities take many forms, but any number of examples could serve to illustrate the ways in which traditional sports avoid this issue. Take the game Heroes of the Storm, a multiplayer-online-battle-arena (or MOBA) that boasts eighty-five different characters who each possess a unique set of skills and abilities. Furthermore, the game includes fifteen separate “battlegrounds,” arenas that have distinct objectives, topographies, and layouts. In contrast, there might be slightly different rules for a game of pickup basketball versus three-versus-three versus collegiate basketball, but the aim of the game remains the same in all three cases, as does the court.

The diversity from game to game adds an element of temporality to each esports, as players also have to adapt to changing rulesets put in place by the developers in addition to understanding how to play a game entirely different in many ways from any other in the world. This temporality exists both in the sense that an individual game will take on several different

appearances (at least to those who know it) within its lifespan, but also that games tend to be released in waves. Platformer games, a genre based upon movement mechanics and getting from one point to another, became popular following the rise of Super Mario and Sonic. RTS (Real Time Strategy) games rose to popularity after the success of Age of Empires and Warcraft. Battle Royale games are currently the fad, and became popular after the success of Player Unknown Battlegrounds was followed by the boom of Fortnite.

A last note on the subject of video game complexity has to do with the meta game and the subtleties therein. Because video games are typically in a state of flux there is an increasing demand for adaptability as a skillset, especially in identifying a win condition. A win condition is a mini-objective within a game that is not synonymous with the objective but makes the objective possible. Playing to a win condition is what constitutes a meta, where one win condition and one strategy of approaching it becomes more and more defined until it constitutes a meta. A couple examples of win conditions in soccer could be moving the ball around the field to open space in the center to create an opportunity for a shot or identifying and shutting down the best player on the enemy team. Typically, the more specific the win condition and path to achieve it is, the more successful the strategy. The meta, then, is what is commonly agreed upon as the most successful means of pursuing a win condition to achieve victory. It might be said that, in amateur play, identifying and isolating the opposing team's best player is a fairly reasonable win condition. However, as the teams and quality of play improves, this strategy proves less consistent since the average player quality is both higher and more consistent. Therefore, the meta is different from high to low levels of play, since there is a qualitative difference in play between the tiers within the same game that impacts the viability of pursuing one win condition.

Video games tend to be far more complex than traditional sports, due in part to the physical limitations of the physical world and in part to the pursuit of novelty and creativity in video game design. Consequently, changes can be made often and severely to how the game is played, resulting in metas artificially altered over an extremely short time span within a singular game. This variability has ramifications for the longevity of the game, since fans may grow attached to one era or variant of the game and find themselves estranged when the game suddenly changes with a new patch. Similarly, players can find themselves plagued with a lack of professional security if the skills and knowledge they develop within a game are made moot by the sudden transition of the game away from what they know and excel at. Therefore, the game developers need not only to balance their game around social interaction and experience and gameplay itself, but also longevity with regard to casual and competitive communities alike.

## Cheating in a Virtual Environment

The complex nature of esports does not conflict with their potential to qualify as sports. It does, however, serve to open the conversation for the challenge in identifying cheating in esports. Cheating, as discussed in Bernie De Koven's *The Well-Played Game*, is that which rejects the terms of play<sup>7</sup> in order to gain an unfair advantage. The interesting aspect of this perspective is how it neglects the take on what makes cheating taboo regarding such performance enhancers as steroids. While it is clear that cheating is done to circumvent the way in which the game is meant to be played, what makes something cheating rather than a fundamental element of the game is not clear. To put it another way, steroids are prohibited in athletics while lightweight cleats and aerodynamic jerseys are not. The distinction of why one is banned and

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<sup>7</sup> The Well-Played Game a Players Philosophy

another is not is even less clear with a case like high altitude training, which provides a distinct physiological advantage to individuals who utilize it, but is not banned. The defining line between the two is one of harm, where steroids lead to bodily harm while high altitude training is not shown to. In terms of esports, this can take the form of abusing prescription medication such as Adderall, which improves the focus and reaction time of players. Alternatively, the offside rule of soccer says an offensive player cannot receive the ball from a friendly pass while positioned between the last two defenders on the opponents' half of the field. The rule is not in place to protect players, but rather to define what the game should be, which is why it and like rules are agreed upon by the communities in the game. Evidence of this philosophy can clearly be seen in Fina's treatment of the Speedo LZR Racer, which was banned after seventy-nine world records were set in one year by players wearing that specific swim suit.<sup>8</sup> The official statement from Fina, the swimming governing body for international competition was that "Fina wishes to recall the main and core principle is that swimming is a sport essentially based on the physical performance of the athlete."<sup>9</sup> The concept behind Fina's decision is echoed in any number of traditional sports, both obviously as in the recall of records set with the swimsuit and subtly in the rulesets defined for each game.

Returning to the subject of esports, the way in which cheating is confronted in esports possesses all the aspects familiar to traditional sports, while also including the complications associated with esports. In the following paragraphs we will investigate the three types of non-physical cheating in esports: exploits, hacking, and macros. We begin with exploits, which are the deliberate use of bugs or incorrect coding to perform actions typically seen as illegal within the virtual reality of the game. In almost every scenario this is seen as a poor sportsmanship and

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<sup>8</sup> Fina Extends Swimsuit Regulations

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

in some cases constitutes punitive measures. Examples of exploits could include standing in places not typically available in order to hide from an opponent or using glitches to access abilities not normally intended. Where the grey area lies is primarily in games that have outlived their predicted lifespan or in some other way have drifted away from the original intents of their designers. A prime example of this occurring is Super Smash Brothers Melee. Melee was released during the box console era, where game designers would create, test, produce, and release a game to be sold in stores like GameStop and RadioShack. The game would come in a case, and once it was in your possession that was the version of the game you owned. That starkly contrasts with games today, which are patched on a monthly, weekly, or even daily basis to correct for bugs or gameplay flaws. Because these older games did not undergo the same level of post-release editing that games do now, developers were not capable of reacting to community feedback. For better or worse, these bugs set their teeth in Melee and became an intrinsic part of the game and community alike, especially once a competitive scene arose. What was considered bugs by the developers (who would release later iterations of the game without the notable elements) was dubbed tech, meaning technical skill, by the community. An example any Melee player of minimal competence would recognize is wavedashing, a simple piece of tech-skill that allows a player to slide across the stage. The ability to wavedash is an exploit of the physics properties of another ability called air-dodging, which was intended to be in the game. The mechanics of why wavedashing can occur is less important than the fact that it does, it is used, and for that matter the later generations of Smash that were released without it are considerably less popular than Melee still is with it, even seventeen years after its release. Because Nintendo, the developers of the Super Smash Brothers series, chose to remain uninvolved from the competitive aspect of their game, and because another central authority does not exist to govern

the play of Melee, the community members are the ones who set the basis for how the game was to be played. These rules were determined by an official council, but the council came together to fill the void of authority once melee became popular, not before. Furthermore, the leading rule makers for Melee have on multiple occasions reached out to Nintendo, but Nintendo either spurned either attempts to connect the game's developers<sup>10</sup> and competitive scene or disregarded the rule sets established by the Melee community and were consequently disregarded themselves. This process, the development of rulesets that befit the community, the developers, or, ideally, both is the core of how people come to recognize cheating, but because of esports' unique position and relative novelty these definitions require some amount of tact and care in defining. Because wavedashing and all the other accidental mechanics Nintendo put in their game came to define how the relevant communities determined their game was to be played, that was how it stayed.

Determining who the relevant communities is also complicated. Generally speaking, they consist of players, commentators, developers, and audience, but where the bulk of decision-making lies is not always consistent. Within Melee, because of Nintendo's lack of involvement, the stress was clearly in the hands of the players, at least at the beginning. However, with audiences peaking at two-hundred-and-thirty-two-thousand<sup>11</sup> during 2016's biggest tournament, more authority must be given to the audience now than ever. "The opinion of the audience must, however, be balanced with those of the professional players, partly because the audience is not expected to comprehend the deeper intricacies of the game, and partly because professional players dedicate far more time on average to the game than casual or semi-professional players. When games are balanced from the casual perspective they tend to be well liked or even loved,

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<sup>10</sup> Liao, Harrison, and Harrison Liao. "A History of the Super Smash Bros Family Beef."

<sup>11</sup> "EVO 2016 Sees Higher Viewership on Twitch than on ESPN2." TheScore Esports

but oftentimes the competitive scene is what keeps them alive and growing, far beyond their natural lifespan.

I argue that rule making relies to some extent upon the core principle of Aristotle's virtue ethics,<sup>12</sup> in that judgement (or practical wisdom) is the tool necessary for making the best decision, although in this instance it is for the game rather than a person. This entails a comprehension of the game (i.e. the game's form), an appreciation for the community (the matter in virtue ethics), and a vision of the game's future (or telos). In each instance the longevity of the game depends upon a number of factors, and the execution of thusly differs from title to title and community to community. It could mean bridging the competitive-casual gap. This decision typically arises when the game lacks a broader audience, and while professional players may appreciate the game the most, the game itself cannot survive without revenue and interest exceeding the elite minority who would play it professionally. It could mean seeking the advice of professional players. This type of action typically is indicative of a strong casual-competitive connection, and thus the concern of retention is less directed towards the masses and more towards those who bring attention to the game. And it could be that the developers must make a judgement call that seems unintuitive to the player base but does to developers, given the data and future design plans they have access to. It is not cut and dry, but a matter of practical application.

The second and most obvious instance of cheating is through hacks. Hacks come in any number of forms, from aimbots that enable players to possess perfect aim without any need for mouse control to wall hacks that allow players to see through walls and other environmental obfuscations. Hacks go behind the backs of developers and are designed to undercut the other

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<sup>12</sup> Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, [www.iep.utm.edu/virtue/](http://www.iep.utm.edu/virtue/)

players in the game in which they are used. Hacks are universally frowned upon, and in a recent case in South Korea hacking led to thirteen cases of arrest under charges of violating Information and Communication Technologies laws.<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that South Korean gaming culture is much more mainstream and intense than that in America. South Korea, the proverbial Mecca of esports, has both dominated the competitive scene of nearly every Triple-A title in the last fifteen years, and integrity in their gaming is one of their most dearly held tenants. The only point of controversy regarding hacking is to do with modding, that is rewriting the code of the game to effectively recreate the game. However, since modding fundamentally redesigns the play of the game, making arguments of whether or not modding is cheating become moot.

Lastly, perhaps the most complex and uncertain conversation to do with cheating is that of macros and scripts. Essentially, a macro or script enables a player to execute multiple commands or actions with a single input. This is distinctly different from hacking, as hacking alters the game's code or behavior of the code, while macros and scripts do not change any amount of code within the game but instead allow for multiple successive or concurrent inputs of a legal action in a single key-stroke. One could consider a hack to be influencing code internally, while a macro is an external type of coding. In a game like Starcraft II, where professional players regularly execute in excess of three-hundred actions per minute (abbreviated as APM), an absence of macro commands would slow the game down to such an extent that it would fundamentally alter how the game is played. Such a difference would be extremely damaging to the competitive scene of Starcraft II, so much so it could be compared to a new rule preventing basketball players from jumping or denying goal keepers from using their hands in soccer. On the other hand, in the speed running community macros and scripts are widely frowned upon,

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<sup>13</sup> Thirteen Arrested in South Korean Overwatch Hacking Investigation

and in the past records have been revoked upon the use of macros coming to light. Speed running communities are built around completing an objective within a game as quickly as possible, so while shortcuts and the occasional exploit are typically permissible, macros are generally seen as fundamentally detracting from the skill required to play the game. One example of this is in Team Fortress 2 (or TF2) rocket jumping maps. Rocket jumping is advanced tech within the game of TF2 that is a product of the engine which the game runs on. For sake of clarity, a game engine defines the physics of the world and how an avatar interacts with its environment. Although TF2 is traditionally a first-person-shooter game, because of community enthusiasm for the intricacies of rocket jumping an entire sub-community developed. The sub community exists to teach and learn both beginner and advanced techniques, design maps where individuals can practice and test the skills they learned, and track records of the fastest runs on popular maps. Because the practice of rocket jumping is so muscle memory and timing oriented, individuals who are caught creating shortcuts to bypass certain mechanical hurdles are considered cheaters and scorned by the community.

A third case study to consider, however, calls back to the Melee community once again. In early 2016, Aziz “Hax\$” Al-Yami was forced to step down from several major tournaments because of chronic hand pain inflicted by persistent playing of Melee on the GameCube controller (which remains the standard today).<sup>14</sup> Following his forced retirement from Melee, Hax\$ dedicated time to creating the B0XX, a different controller based on a more ergonomic design so as to enable him to play the game. The controller became a source of great controversy within the community. Despite the core principle of an alternative controller largely being considered unoffensive, the fact that the controller enabled certain commands – such as

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<sup>14</sup> We Need to Talk about Melee Banning the B0XX

wavedashing – to be shortcut was not received well. This case represents a middle ground between Starcraft and TF2, where the game both necessitates some amount of assistance to be playable in the fashion that professionals deem best, but simultaneously is at risk of a new system that increases the ease of use to the point that it detracts from those capable without the enhancement. The BOXX also fits in a curious in-between space where it is a software advantage, but also is physically designed to be more ergonomic and intuitive than a traditional GameCube controller. At this point the two philosophies must merge under the virtue ethics context introduced earlier. What best enables the game to survive and thrive? Given the pattern of top-level players in Melee being confronted with hand and wrist issues, a controller of a more ergonomic design that shortcut some lower level technical skills would not but unjust. The complications would arise in making the new (and clearly advantageous system) available to a community that has lived for seventeen years exclusively on the GameCube controller. The challenge of creating a standard, then, involves several components. Ideally, those who prefer or require a more ergonomic controller should not be withheld from playing, those who prefer the classic GameCube controller should not be at a disadvantage, and neither item's price point should act as such a disincentive as to isolate would be players and fans. Clearly not all these goals can be weighed evenly, but fairly addressing the entirety of the player base requires looking beyond the majority influence.

## Infrastructure in Esports: A Budding Enterprise

A large source of problems in Melee, among other esports, stem from the absence of infrastructure and history both within a single game and across esports as a genre. Consider the attractions of professional play in traditional sports as compared to in esports. Traditional sports athletes are lauded, worshipped even, and are known to make staggering amounts of money.

Esports athletes, on the other hand, are not typically viewed as attractive (physically or socially), there is not a history of considerable money, and furthermore the routes by which to transition from a casual player to a professional one are considerably more convoluted than for traditional equivalents. What, then, is the motivation for becoming a professional gamer? For the past fifteen years or so the answer to that question by and large has been pride or love of the game. The winningest Team Fortress 2 player has earned only twenty-four thousand dollars lifetime from tournaments, and that is four times more than the tenth highest earner has.<sup>15</sup> An additional barricade for esports athletes is that of player burnout. Given the diversity of games and informality of a great deal of professional play in video games until recently, players typically have difficulty dealing with burnout and increased exposure. The issue, it would seem, is not one of passion or competitive drive, but one of a lack of preparation and training for this occurrence. The dogma-like mentality that traditional sport athletes often view their sport and teammates with is not imprinted or impressed upon esports athletes as often, and coupled with a much less glamorous light at the end of the tunnel the pain can often seem to outweigh the payoff. Beyond that, traditional athletes are far from unfamiliar with burnout, but the infrastructure is better cemented to provide players with support and structure an environment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as addressed by Cresswell and Eklund.<sup>16</sup> The Overwatch League (abbreviated OWL) kicked off its inaugural season January 2018 and already players are missing weekly matches to take mental health breaks.<sup>17</sup> This problem is compounded by the age and maturity of players. Despite the lack of certain strains of exposure that is often lamented young professional athletes are exposed to, upcoming esports stars still face immense pressure to

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<sup>15</sup> Team Fortress 2 Prize Pools & Top Players - ESports Profile :: e-Sports Earnings

<sup>16</sup> Scott L. Cresswell & Robert C. Eklund (2005) Motivation and Burnout in Professional Rugby Players

<sup>17</sup> Dallas Fuel Struggles without EFFECT, Falling 1-3 to Florida Mayhem

perform, practice, and improve. Because players, by and large, play professionally as a means of making a living while doing what they love, this effect is felt twice over. NRG Esports, owned by Shaquille O’Neill, signed 17-year old Jay “sinatraa” Won<sup>18</sup> for a one-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollar-a-year contract before the league began and he was eligible to play both (the minimum age to play in OWL is eighteen). As a corollary to player maturity, Jay Won spent every cent of his annual earnings within one week on designer clothing, according to unofficial source and close friend of Jay, Niko Christianson.

For many esports athletes the spotlight is nothing new. Twitch.tv offers a platform from which players and personalities can play games while interacting to a live chat feed for viewers. However, the rules Twitch imposes on its streamers are fairly loose, despite being strictly enforced (e.g. there is no tolerance for racist or other bigoted behaviors or nudity of any type, but the manner in which streamers conduct themselves is largely up to them). Thus, it is the case that players, even ones with experience in the public eye, find themselves suddenly out of depth when asked to behave professionally so as to represent a team and organization. This might seem a small ask, but for these players the extent to which they are under the spotlight at times exceeds even politicians and traditional sports professionals. For OWL players, their schedule routinely consists of eight hours of practice, which is split depending on the day between game review, planning, and practice in game.<sup>19</sup> After finishing their practice, it is quite typical of players to go home and play more, during which time they often stream, either to maintain the community they were developing before joining OWL or to nurture a consistent secondary income. It is on these streams that most often problems of unprofessionalism arise. It should seem obvious, considering the professionalism displayed by pro athletes on Twitter, that young adults who are

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<sup>18</sup> NRG Signs 17-Year-Old Overwatch pro Sinatraa for \$150K

<sup>19</sup> Alonzo, Damian. “What It's like Being an Overwatch League Pro.”

under constant pressure would have slipups when placed under live-action surveillance with an open microphone and camera trained on them in their own homes. Players who were previously more or less free to behave as they wanted and say what they would are now on watch by not only Twitch administrators, but also OWL community managers and much of the OWL viewer base, who waste no time highlighting player mistakes. One small difference is that nothing in Twitch Terms of Service denies streamers to consume alcohol on stream, so long as it is done safely, but OWL members (staff and players alike) are under a zero-alcohol-tolerance policy. The fundamental differences between the players' past and present lifestyles are numerous and stark. Not only are they exposed many times more than before, the stress and time commitment to play is far greater too.

The challenge for the league policy makers is, then, complex in a number of senses. How do they preserve the face of the organization while maintaining the lifestyle their players have grown to love, that in fact first attracted and engaged them in the scene? What forums and media should their players be allowed to communicate through? How do they implement structure for their players without making them feel trapped? Once again it seems to boil down to a trial of judgement. While it is not feasible to uniquely tailor the ruleset to each individual, outlier cases should be taken as such, and if enough cases seem to be outliers then the median ruleset must be adjusted. In the case of OWL, I would advocate restrictions from certain media as a punitive measure for teams to dole out as they see fit, as opposed to bans preventing players from competing from several weeks of matches in a row, which fostered resentment and only left players with more time to make mistakes on social media. There is, in fact, a history of this, where player XQC, otherwise known as Felix Lengyel, was benched and fined a number of times

in a row for a series of offenses.<sup>2021</sup> His case is particularly controversial, as retrospectively actions taken against him seem like a witch-hunt of sorts, looking to make an example out of an inflammatory player in the league. During his periods on the bench, he would stream and be active on social media regularly, which only exacerbated the problem and further divided him from his team, and his team from the rest of the league. The hiring of a public relations and social media manager, or big sibling, if you would, could also help tether the players and reduce the number of incidents by entrusting someone to assign therapy or advice as they saw fit.

While newer esports are addressing this concern more readily, the issue of injuries and physical health in esports is also a distinct problem. Players André "IDDQD" Dahlström and Timo "Taimou" Kettunen are both familiar with this. Each are players renowned for possessing among the best aim in the world, but who have been plagued with wrist injuries over the last year, relating to wrist heavy aim styles.<sup>2223</sup> Newer esports organizations often hire a trainer who facilitates a regimen for players to keep them in good health while they focus on their gaming, but less organized esports struggle with addressing such problems. The Hax\$ example from Melee is one case where the community developed an identity that is ultimately unhealthy in at least one sense.<sup>24</sup> And despite saying that many organizations have hired trainers, many have not. Obesity, it so happens, is not a hugely common problem for esports athletes, since being excessively overweight impacts fine motor skills, but considering the strenuous practice schedule demanded of them healthy living can often go by the wayside. OWL player Brandon "Seagull"

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<sup>20</sup>Chalk, Andy. "Overwatch League Suspends XQc Again, This Time for 'Racially Disparaging' Emotes (Updated)."

<sup>21</sup> Wolf, Jacob. "Dallas Fuel Suspend XQc for Anti-Gay Slurs; Overwatch League Fines Player."

<sup>22</sup> Dahlström, André. "IDDQD Wrist Injury."

<sup>23</sup> Taimou. "Taimou Wrist Injury."

<sup>24</sup> Hax's Retirement, and the Uncertain World of Esports Injuries

Larned, for example, worked for months to earn his place on his team's starting lineup, but in the process gained weight and subsequently a sleep apnea problem.<sup>25</sup>

The philosophical implications of virtual worlds in fair play, cheating, competition, spectatorship, and athleticism are immense on their own, but as is the case with much philosophy, the impact it makes in the lives of people is where the rubber hits the road. The communities games foster, the lifestyle they endorse, and the demographics they reach are integral in the discussion of philosophical worth, just as interpretation of philosophy is dependent on the effects of its application. As the technology of play advances, so too must the terminology and policy by which games are defined. Esports are a young practice, and as such are in a state of flux, surrounded by a yuck factor and controversy of opinions alike. The definitions and boundaries laid out thus far will serve to provide a set of guidelines in a discussion of communities and individuals, of the relations between players, developers, professionals, and even business people. Understanding how to approach cheating, what is and is not a sport, and how budding esports organizations must navigate that is crucial in engaging properly with an ethnographic study of gaming and esports: there is so much to the conversation, in terms of games, levels of play, organization of professional play, and more besides.

## Evaluating Esports

It seems appropriate now to acknowledge my original intent to pair my philosophical approach with one of sociology. While not an unreasonable pursuit, sociological articles presented a common trend of seeking to identify addiction in gaming or otherwise negative, measurable, social criteria, such as inactivity, poor social skills, or the like. However,

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<sup>25</sup> "Seagull Says He's Done Competing as Overwatch Pro." Reuters

collectively these papers failed to provide suitable evidence that gaming provokes negative behavior in its participants. Seok and DeCosta, for instance, found in a 2012 study that addiction rates of Korean adolescents to video games was a mere 2.7%, based off of peripheral conditions. This percentage represents an incredibly insignificant portion of their study sample, and beyond that it took place in South Korea, the competitive gaming capital of the world. The prevalence of these studies on internet or gaming addiction, paired with their nearly ubiquitous failure to prove a relationship between gaming and addiction, seems to lend credence to the argument that video games and gaming as a practice is criticized largely on the basis of a yuck factor rather than some more fundamental grounds. The yuck factor is seen in any new technology that seems to undermine what was historically considered a core aspect of some mode of life or type of action. Automatic transmission in cars was, at its conception, rejected for deteriorating the experience of driving; with the explosion of the printing press at the turn of the twentieth century books became far more accessible, and people feared books were eroding social skills by keeping people inside and reading. Historically speaking, it has been the norm rather than the exception that new technology is rejected rather than readily accepted, regardless of its positive implications. More recently, an Oxford study was completed that almost immediately went viral within gaming circles. The article, titled “Violent video game engagement is not associated with adolescents’ aggressive behaviour: evidence from a registered report,”<sup>26</sup> was met with faux shock by many highly visible names in the gaming community. Rod “Slasher” Breslau, perhaps the lead leak reporter across a wide variety of video game titles, responded “no shit, signed everyone who plays video games.”<sup>27</sup> This is furthered supported by Nielson and Karhulahti, who

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<sup>26</sup> Andrew K. Przybylski Netta Weinstein, “Violent video game engagement is not associated with adolescents’ aggressive behaviour: evidence from a registered report”

<sup>27</sup> Breslau, Rod Slasher. “Violence in Gaming Study Response.”

address the American Psychiatric Association's (or AMA's) peripheral conditions for addiction.<sup>28</sup> Among these criteria are:

- 1) Preoccupation with internet games
- 2) Withdrawal symptoms when removed from internet games
- 3) Increased tolerance for internet games
- 4) Unsuccessful attempts to control participation in internet games
- 5) Loss of interest in previous hobbies or entertainment except video games
- 6) Continued participation in internet games despite knowledge of psychological problems
- 7) Has deceived family members or other close relations about internet games
- 8) Use internet games to relieve or escape a mood
- 9) Has jeopardized a job, relationship, or education for internet games

Nielson and Karhulahti respond to each in particular, but their reasoning and research all point towards a simple central concept: if video games can be viewed as a passion, carrier, or sport, then many of these criteria simply do not qualify. Others that may qualify, like using games to relieve or escape a mood, are not firm enough to represent addiction independently, due to the quantity of activities that fill this role. Furthermore, it should be said that the vagueness with which "internet games" is addressed by the ADA suggest an incredible ignorance as to the variety of game. A better argument may be that single player games are replacing books for many adolescents, which may very well merit concern, but repeatedly it has been the case that psychological and sociological studies are interested not in understanding the new technology but rather discrediting it as a viable lifestyle or practice.

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<sup>28</sup> Nielson and Karhulahti, "The problematic coexistence of 'internet gaming disorder' and esports"

## Game Development and Developer Intent

Having said as much about sociological research as it pertains to video games, I instead will be engaging with the culture and communities of gaming via ethnography. Touching back on the concept of different genres within gaming, the ways in which persons interact depends heavily on the experience of gameplay they encounter. In doing so it should be noted that I am departing from my previous definition of what makes a video game qualify as a sport, but the field of esports as a whole encompasses more than just those games, and so demands a broader view in order to effectively analyze. Lowood circumvents this concern by describing such gameplay environments as falling under the category of “high-performance gameplay,”<sup>29</sup> but I will use esports and competitive gaming synonymously, as the list of games that demand high-performance but are not competitive is brief and lacks pertinence in this study. Certain genres beget competition, others creativity, others still pull people into stories and fantastical worlds in an experience personal, and yet shared by hundreds if not thousands of others. Several facets of game design impact how these experiences are generated, but it may be best to start at the beginning of game design theory before delving into how games can be made to be interactive, competitive, and immersive. To rehash, Ben Brode, an ex-leading designer of the popular electronic card game Hearthstone, posted a thread discussing depth versus complexity.<sup>30</sup> He offered an example of tic-tac-toe, a game which offers both little depth and complexity. To increase complexity, Brode offers a rule where, “when an ‘O’ is drawn below an ‘X’ in the left column, the player must exclaim ‘Uno!’” This rule does not add depth to the game but does

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<sup>29</sup> Lowood, Henry. (2006). “High-performance play: The making of machinima.”

<sup>30</sup> Brode, Ben. “Complexity and Its Relationship to Depth Is One of the Things I See People Misunderstand Most Often. A Thread.”

increase the complexity. This simple example seems to lend itself to the general principle of game design, where developers aim to create games of extreme depth but of little complexity.

There are two issues with this concept, however. The first of which is that, while not effective in terms of drawing new players in, complexity is often something appreciated by longer standing players. It makes sense, then, that the longest lasting games must possess some element of complexity as well as depth in order to maintain player interest. The best-case scenario is one where the added complexity fits well into the general play of the game, thereby increasing depth by creating more avenues of outplay to classic matchups. This type of added complexity also rewards time put into the game, such that players who take the time and effort to learn about the inner workings of the complexity will be those best suited to take advantage of it. Brode goes on, however, to elaborate on the desired depth of games. “There’s a wrinkle,” Brode states, where “you only need depth such that you have more depth than humans can handle.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, to exceed the depth of human capacity too greatly is to create a concept or mechanic that is not just easy to learn, difficult to master, but in fact may be easy to learn, impossible to master. This creates a design conundrum where an unreachable skill ceiling may waste developer resources on a concept that players will never masterfully grapple with, but at the same time players are notorious for exceeding the designer expectations when it comes to how far a mechanic or concept in game can be pushed. It would seem, then, that developers in some way need to identify and build for a player skill ceiling even before the game is released, all while simultaneously planning for future adjustments that allow players to flex and test their growth. To clarify, a skill ceiling is the upper output a player can utilize given a certain set of tools. The concept of a skill ceiling is commonly directed towards a weapon, character, or other element of

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

gameplay that a player can optimize and gain mastery of. A skill floor, on the other hand, is the minimum knowledge a player must possess in order to begin properly incorporating a gameplay element: a gateway, of sorts, to comprehending and outputting high level play.<sup>32</sup> The correlation to be made, then, is that complexity seems to in some sense represent a skill floor, and depth a skill ceiling.

A reasonable question at this point would be “why are we discussing game design fundamentals when the conversation is supposed to be centered on gaming communities?” The answer to that lies in player experience. The formation of a community is around a common experience, and once indoctrinated to a community that experience may warp or change, or new experiences may even arise centered around the community itself. I mentioned before a set of axes: those of interactivity, immersion, and competition. These are points by which an experience of a community is easy enough to define, but ones that depend heavily on game design. And, while these factors are built into the game in a plethora of ways, they are not simply designed for. In other words, there is no dial or lever that simply bumps up the degree of competition in a game. These factors, then, are formed through a number of different design decisions, including ones that impact depth and complexity. When discussing long lasting, popular, competitive games, however, it is nigh impossible to provide an example of a high-complexity low-depth game. And, beyond that, games that lack depth but find success must by necessity lack complexity. Easy examples of this style of design can be found in mobile games, such as Candy Crush or Pokémon Go. These games are not intended to provide a competitive atmosphere or reward a high degree of mastery but do create a common (if repetitive) experience, have appealing aesthetics, and reward large quantities of time in game.

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<sup>32</sup> Draper, Stephen. “Esports Terminology: What Are Skill Ceilings and Skill Floors?”

Alternatively, competitive games take place over many genres, and while many do seem to embrace this mentality of maximizing the depth to complexity ratio, they are consistently more complex than the vast majority of casual games. Designing a game to be competitive requires many criteria, but perhaps not those most immediately apparent. For example, many single-player games are played for time in a practice referred to as speed running, so multiplayer capacity is not necessarily an element of competition. Generally, two approaches are taken to innovation in esports. A game can reward mastery of a set of fundamentals, which differ from game to game, or a game can reward innovation. These options, notably, are not mutually exclusive, but due to the stagnant ruleset and more developed culture of traditional sports innovation is typically not nearly as rewarded there as in esports. For instance, in card games such as Hearthstone, once a meta develops normally sub-par cards and decks may rise into play in order to counter that which is dominant. This does happen in traditional sports, but due to the extent of physical and technical mastery possible and the lack of a changing ruleset it happens much slower. For instance, in soccer during the 1950's-1960's the strategy for many professional teams (English teams in particular) typically consisted of loading your fastest players to the front of the field and setting up a play to give your striker, or forward, a breakaway opportunity. This strategy became outdated as the physical fitness of the average player improved, and defenders learned how to better give and take away a space buffer from the attacking team, thus making through passes a less consistently effective strategy. This fundamental change in gameplay, however, took place over years rather than weeks or months, which again demonstrates the pace of change in gameplay without an adaptive ruleset.

A second problem to do with the mastery approach again calls back to player experience. Certain metas may allow for incredible amounts of learning that enables better teams to outplay

worse ones, but are not enjoyable for either players, spectators, or both. To provide an example, consider a game of tic-tac-toe where “X” could act twice for every time “O” acted. This would tilt the balance of the game extremely in the favor of “X,” which in a competitive gaming environment would look like everyone playing “X” and nobody playing as “O.” Obviously that is not how the game of tic-tac-toe works, but bear with me, as it is exactly how competitive metas develop. Now say that, in order to make people who prefer playing “O” feel like their choice is a more viable one, if you play “X” you must draw with your off-hand, or perhaps you are shocked whenever “O” places a marker. Here we see what is referred to as a top-down design correction, which recognizes that something is too strong and attempt to nerf, or weaken, it. However, recognizing the problem is not synonymous with recognizing the solution. We can see in this example that creating a negative experience for “X” players by either compounding their losses or making playing “X” unpleasant might reduce the amount “X” is played but does not allow for enjoyable gameplay experience for either player. “X” is still able to act twice for every one of “O’s” actions, but they cannot enjoy the game while doing it. This example is not to discredit top-down balancing as a whole, but to acknowledge the dangers of creating an experience that is competitive and does reward hard work but does so at the cost of hating the game.

Immersion, as contrasted to competition, has far less to do with balance and far more to do with game feeling, although it should be said that in at least some sense each core element of competition, immersion, and interaction impacts the next, if not directly. Immersion generally refers to a degree of investment of a player in the virtual environment they inhabit, but I will narrow that definition into two smaller definitions: sensory and empathetic immersion. Under these definitions the competitive element of games and its involvement in developing a flow

state does not become such an overpowering factor in the design of immersion. The flow state, as defined by Csikszentmihalyi, consists of eight separate components: clear goals; high degree of concentration; a loss of the feeling of self-consciousness (sense of serenity); distorted sense of time; direct and immediate feedback; balance between ability level and challenge; sense of personal control; intrinsically rewarding.<sup>33</sup> Many similarities might be noted between the flow state and how one might measure immersion: loss of awareness of time, the degree of investment in the flow activity as related to the playing of a game, etc. However, Jennett, Cox, and others argue as I do in my definitions of immersion, that the intensity of the flow state does not suitably capture the picture of immersion:<sup>34</sup> indeed, such a definition would actively blur the lines between competition and immersion in my argument. Sensory immersion, then, is a type of wonderment that comes from feeling as if the virtual world you are exploring is real and of importance, or even beauty. There can, of course, exist problems when running up against the uncanny valley, where an experience is nearly real but wrong enough that the brain rejects it entirely. This, however, is where deliberate game aesthetics and art styles come into play. The Pixar films are hardly hyper-realistic in terms of art style. However, in Pixar films, characters have a sense of weight and movement to them, which makes them feel real even if their style is not meant to mimic real life to a high degree. In the same way, games can embrace an art style in order to impose sensory immersion even greater than realism. Games need not even necessarily possess rules of physics identical to the real world: they just need to be consistent, and immersion can be achieved as players adapt and accept the rules and aesthetics of the world.

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<sup>33</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, M., 1990. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*.

<sup>34</sup> Jennett, C., Cox, A. L., Cairns, P., Dhoparee, S., Epps, A., Tijs, T., & Walton, A. (2008). Measuring and defining the experience of immersion in games

Alternatively, empathetic or emotional immersion, comes from a sense of connection to a character, story, or part of the world itself. Games like Minecraft speak strongly to this. The mechanics are simple, the art style follows an understated pixel-art theme, and yet the game has become a cult classic since its release in 2009. This has everything to do with the element of creation in Minecraft: it does not push a challenging mastery of skills and mechanics, it is definitely not the most aesthetically appealing game released since 2009, and even its physics engine can seem unconventional at times. But, because players take to a fresh world and make it their own by building houses, mining resources, and creating something of their own, each game and town gains value in and of itself. Just as Tolkien argues, the mere act of creation begets value upon the item, and in Minecraft we can see that virtual creations, just as intellectual ones, deserve recognition of worth.

Lastly, interaction generally takes on two forms when looked at from either a player or developer standpoint. The first is with regards to a single-player experience, while the second is focused on the relation of players in a multiplayer game. The single-player interpretation of interactivity ties heavily into immersion, which is why I mention it first. Sensory immersion can come about through aesthetic design alone and does not require this element, but it is severely strengthened by it. In a single-player experience, the only type of interaction that matters is that of player with world. A game Minecraft also fits this example, but perhaps more interesting is a game like *The Stanley Parable*. The premise of the story is simple: you are Stanley, and you have worked in an office as long as you remember. All of a sudden you realize no one else is there and go to investigate. The decisions you have available to you are simple and limited: you choose left or right door, to follow or break from the set path, and so on. The mechanics are similarly sparse, as you can only walk. Not jump, not run, not pick things up, just walk. However, the small

choices you make immensely affect the story you find yourself thrust into, and suddenly your lack of choices does not feel like a limitation, but an opportunity for expression. And, even further, when your choices do not seem to affect the story, a narrator makes this point obvious, casting doubt on concepts of free-will and turning what might have been a point of frustration and delay into a story-telling element. Interactivity in a single-player game, then, is the degree to which the game makes the player feel like their actions have an impact on the world they find themselves in. In some senses this clearly is dependent on the technology powering the game, but as seen in *The Stanley Parable*, that is not always the case. I use the example of *The Stanley Parable* to make clear how creativity on the part of the developers can eschew classic conceptualizations of what it means to be interactive and to interact with the world of the player. *Minecraft* is certainly a highly interactive game where a player can change the world around them, but what better way to introduce interactivity in single-player games than one where you cannot so much as jump?

In multiplayer games, on the other hand, interactivity has little to do with what players can do to influence the world around them and everything to do with how players can influence the outcome of a game where other players are trying to prevent them from doing so. This is where competition meets interactivity and the concept of outplay enters the conversation. Outplay in competitive nomenclature can mean that one individual is more skilled in the game mechanics than another player (e.g. their aim is better), but towards the upper end of play outplay is much more complicated, and requires both an understanding of what your opponents motives and intentions are as well as how to counter them. In the simplest of examples, if you know your opponent in rock-paper-scissors is always going to play rock, the outplay is to play paper. The aspect of knowledge is important here, since outplay relies upon an absence of

randomness in gameplay in order to truly assert who the more capable player is. With the concept of outplay in mind, a second naturally arises. Say, in a game of rock-paper-scissors, rock does not always beat scissors does not always beat paper does not always beat rock. Perhaps, in a fashion more realistic for most games, each matchup is only favored towards the typical winner: rock would beat scissors sixty-percent of the time, and so on and so forth. In this way, rock is referred to as a soft-counter to scissors: it beats scissors, but not universally, and there are tactics scissors can utilize that could potentially tilt the matchup the other way. In interactive gameplay, both hard and soft-counters can be seen, but soft-counters tend to be more interactive than hard-counters. This is because a player of relatively low skill can hard-counter a player of relatively high skill and still defeat them, which means the ability of the better player to interact with a win condition and achieve victory was nigh non-existent. Within the Hearthstone development team, the phrase “fun and interactive gameplay” has been used time and again as a mission statement of design ideals within the team. What this looks like in a two-player card-game is that the actions of one player does not independently decide the fate of the game: rather, both players must play and react in order to gain an advantage that culminates in the victory of one player over the other. The concept of interactivity in multiplayer game is, then, directly connected to the elements that make it competitive, but is not necessarily the core component of what drives competition in a game.

## Player Community Interaction

Returning to the topic of spectatorship, streaming and content creation comes with all the typical problems as a business pursuit. Witkowski investigates questions of intellectual property, citing streamers for Super Mario Maker (SMM), a platformer/sandbox game, and Counter Strike:

Global Offensive (CS:GO), a tactical first-person-shooter title.<sup>35</sup> Starting with SMM, Witkowski delves into the case of player and streamer “GrandPOOBear,” who found a considerable amount of success in streaming on Twitch both level completion and creation. Nintendo, the creators of the Super Mario franchise and a notoriously jealous developer, deleted his records and levels alike. The motivation behind Nintendo’s action was unclear at the time of the incident, but was hypothesized to be either a response to the use of poo in GrandPOOBear’s streamer tag or the streamer’s criticism of Nintendo’s “heavy-handed approach to protecting its brand and image.”<sup>36</sup> GrandPOOBear’s experience fits neatly into the collective experience of those deeply immersed in other Nintendo game communities.

Super Smash Brothers Melee, as previously referenced, have grown a strong grassroots community independently, and perhaps in spite of, Nintendo’s staunch refusal to aid the Melee competitive community. As a result, the Melee community is extremely close, in part to do with their disconnect from Nintendo and in part to do with Melee being a console game, thus inspiring weekly local tournaments in between larger national tournaments, unofficially referred to as majors or super-majors. The value of these weekly tournaments exceeds the development of a competitive scene, since they also enable regular face-to-face interaction among players, a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly more irregular with the growth of online video games. Returning to GrandPOOBear and SMM, there is also an irony to do with Nintendo’s marketing when contrasted to their player outreach. Witkowski notes that Nintendo of America, a sub-section of Nintendo as a whole, historically published a magazine titled “Nintendo Power”

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<sup>35</sup> Witkowski, E., & Manning, J. (2018). “Player power: Networked careers in esports and high-performance game livestreaming practices.”

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

that regularly promoted a public image of pursuing and responding to player interests in Nintendo's decision making structure.

In contrast to the case of GrandPOOBear and Nintendo, Witkowski discusses a very different professional gamer population in the CS:GO competitive community. Despite the considerable and growing popularity for the strategic first-person-shooter (it boasts the second highest prize pool of any esports on record, second only to DOTA 2), the navigation of player contracts, payment, and organization coordination has been far from flawless. Organizations in esports are, for clarity's sake, functionally sporting franchises that are not tied to a location. This is becoming less and less the case as esports progress, but historically that is the easiest way to view them. One key distinction is that often, due to novelty of the industry, players would remain as a team and change organizations, but again that is occurring less often as organizations attempt to stabilize themselves for the long haul and develop connections to a city as an enduring franchise. Witkowski cites player Chad "Spunji" Burchill, who claims neither he nor his teammates "ever actually go paid on time, over a twelve-month period," among a laundry list of other offenses on the side of the players' organization, league, and other agents. This mirrors the experience of many other esports athletes, such as in the case of Denial Esports. After months of mistreatment, players came forth to reveal their abuse at the hands of Denial Esports and its owner, Robby Ringnalda. Players had to pay for their own housing, utilities, and tournament entry fees, all of which Denial Esports was contractually obligated to cover. And, to add to the burden, this all occurred with late or inconsistent salary payments.<sup>37</sup> To make a bad situation worse, Ringnalda, upon being outed as a fraud, attempted to cut and run, milking what he could out of investors before trying to leave the esports scene behind and cover up his fraudulent

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<sup>37</sup> Carpenter, Nicole. "Denial Esports Owner Robby Ringnalda Allegedly Owes Players More than \$35,000."

promises.<sup>38</sup> The players were eventually compensated, but this scenario highlights the challenges facing a competitive gaming population, challenges which effect both the stability of esports as a franchise and a burgeoning player base.

The long string of failures within the professional gaming community eventually manifested itself in the #playerrights movement, a hashtag that took Twitter by storm in 2017. The movement attracted the global attention of organizations, players, coaches, and legal practitioners, human rights legislators, and the UN. This cumulated in the Universal Declaration of Player Rights, published by the World Players Association in December of 2017.<sup>39</sup> The platform of #playerrights exceeds esports and marks the uncommon occurrence of esports and traditional sorts coming together for a cause.

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<sup>38</sup> Hitt, Kevin. "Denial Esports Seeks Bailout of Debts Owed to Players."

<sup>39</sup> Matt Painter, "World Players Association Launches Universal Declaration of Player Rights."



## UNIVERSAL DECLARATION of **PLAYER RIGHTS**



#WorldPlayersUnited

### EVERY PLAYER:

1. HAS THE RIGHT to a sporting environment that is well governed, free of corruption, manipulation and cheating and protects, respects and guarantees the fundamental human rights of everyone involved in or affected by sport, including the player
2. HAS THE RIGHT to access and pursue sport as a career and profession based solely on merit
3. IS ENTITLED to equality of opportunity in the pursuit of sport without distinction of any kind and free of discrimination, harassment and violence. A player's right to pursue sport cannot be limited because of his or her race, colour, birth, age, language, sexual orientation, gender, disability, pregnancy, religion, political or other opinion, responsibilities as a carer, property or other status
4. who is a minor IS ENTITLED to the opportunity to freely pursue sport in an inclusive, adapted and safe manner, and to have his or her rights as a child protected, respected and guaranteed
5. HAS THE RIGHT to work, to the free choice of employment, and to move freely in pursuit of that work and employment
6. HAS THE RIGHT to organise and collectively bargain and to form and join player and athlete associations and unions for the protection of his or her interests
7. HAS THE RIGHT to share fairly in the economic activity and wealth of his or her sport which players have helped generate
8. HAS THE RIGHT to just and favourable remuneration and conditions of work, including a minimum wage, fair hours of work, rest, leisure, the protection of wages, the certainty of a secure contract, the protection of his or her status as a worker within the employment relationship and equal pay for equal work
9. IS ENTITLED to a safe and secure workplace and sporting environment, which promotes the player's safety, physical and mental health and his or her social wellbeing. He or she must be treated and supported with utmost integrity by healthcare professionals when injured or ill, and have direction and control over that treatment and support
10. HAS THE RIGHT to an education and the pursuit of work and life beyond sport supplemented by the resources of the sport
11. HAS THE RIGHT to a private life, privacy and protection in relation to the collection, storage and transfer of personal data
12. IS ENTITLED to have his or her name, image and performance protected. A player's name, image and performance may only be commercially utilised with his or her consent, voluntarily given
13. HAS THE RIGHT to freedom of opinion and expression
14. HAS THE RIGHT to the protection of the law and equality before it
15. IS ENTITLED to due process including, where charged, to the presumption of innocence. Any penalty must be lawful, proportionate and just
16. IS ENTITLED to have any dispute resolved through an impartial and expeditious grievance mechanism in which the player has an equal say in the appointment of the grievance panel, arbitrator or other decision-making person or body. His or her sport must ensure he or she is provided with access to an effective remedy where his or her rights under this Declaration have not been protected or respected
17. HAS A DUTY to respect the rights of his or her fellow players under this Declaration, and to respect the fundamental human rights of everyone involved with or affected by sport.

DECLARED BY THE ORGANISED PLAYERS OF THE WORLD IN WASHINGTON DC, USA ON THE 14TH OF DECEMBER 2017.

VOICE - DIGNITY - HUMANITY

## Universal Declaration of Player Rights<sup>40</sup>

The movement to improve the working conditions of players identified a number of abuses players suffered at the hands of mismanaged organizations. Abuse of underpayment, abuse of working hours leading to a decay of the work-life balance, abuse of accommodations, and more besides. Many of these were commonly written off as the norm, not dissimilarly to how Marx's proletariat convinced themselves the system in which they were exploited was just. Players from grassroots competitive communities now considered old-school, despite being less than two decades in age, still frequently argue with new players about their motivations in performing. A common cry of these old guard players fits the mold of "we never played for the money, we were in it for the pride." This argument fits the lifestyle of committing headlong into

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

an extremely high ratio of practice time to pay but is problematic for a number of reasons. How much money are the game developers making off of publicity generated by these players? How are talented young players expected to commit to such a high-risk low-reward prospect? How can players on the edge of breaking through maintain a work-life balance and avoid burnout when their job security is threatened by their peers who spend every spare second gaming? How do you convince a community to practice less for the above reasons and prevent animosity between players who are not all equally able to bend to these unreasonable expectations? Until recently these questions were largely unanswered, the burden being laid at the feet of the players well before developers felt any pressure to make a more hospitable system.

However, as the money, and consequently publicity, in esports becomes harder and harder to ignore, the legitimacy of competitive leagues and organizations has necessarily improved. The Overwatch League's effort to localize franchises has enabled organizations to both tie themselves to existing, stable, sports organizations and through that build up the infrastructure to better support their players. Teams in the league often live together in team houses, and if not then they certainly live in the same city and practice in the same facilities. Most of these facilities include workout facilities and are attended by trainers and physical therapists, who teach about and help players live a healthy lifestyle. This tutelage includes the basics of eating well and working out, but also includes more gaming specific instructions like how to exercise and stretch hands and wrists or how to correct posture to prevent other long-term damages. And, aside from the physical requirements of players, mental needs are being better attended to now than ever before. Teams regularly have social activities unrelated to games, athlete therapists, and a strong network of individual support built into their coaching staffs and team mentality.

Seo and Jung too recognize this growth of industry, identifying the normalization of rulesets and the “institutionalised governance of [esports],”<sup>41</sup> citing the more historical organizations such as the Electronics Sports League (ESL) or the Korean eSports Association. These tournament organizers and gaming authorities are not the entities most responsible for having pushed the industry of esports in terms of player treatment and rights activism, but were instrumental in the formation of common rulesets and the protection of fair competition, without which the #playerrights movement would have had little basis from which to rise up in the esports scene.

The protection of competition and pursuit of just player treatment is the direction esports must necessarily head in order to remain a viable and fair enterprise. While many exceptions were made to facilitate the growth of the esports scene from a fledgling grassroots movement into a legitimate practice, the time has come for players to demand more and organizations to provide it.

## Streaming and Spectatorship in Esports

While much of the discussion thus far has been focused on the big picture approach to gaming as a profession and competitive gaming, there are other smaller outlets to success in the esports business. Streaming especially has led many players to find financial success, particularly on Twitch. Within Twitch subcultures have explosively risen, formed around the most popular streamers and consequently seeping outward into broader Twitch and gamer culture. This concept of spectatorship, the impact and relationship of viewer on performer and vice versa, is a curious one regarding esports and especially Twitch. This is particularly the case when

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<sup>41</sup> Seo, Y., & Jung, S.-U. (2016). Beyond solitary play in computer games: The social practices of eSports.

considering the personal and often low budget nature of a player's stream juxtaposed to the impersonal and high production state of competitive esports broadcasting, which is oftentimes hosted by either the Twitch account of the league the game is played in or the developers of the game itself. The latter provides an interesting example, as it would be analogous to high stakes football tournaments being broadcast by the NFL themselves rather than on ESPN. The former, however, is the most recent and unique phenomenon surrounding spectatorship and esports. My mother once asked me, frustrated by the time I invested in watching a favorite streamer of mine "Will BaRRaCCuDDa be there for you? Will he pay your medical bills or come to family events?" This question is somewhat unfair, even if I was difficult in high school, as those questions would not typically apply to the friends of an adolescent. She was right, however, that the relationship between fan and content producer is not the same as one between two friends. That being said, Twitch streamers are involved with their community in an immediate and regular way unexplored before streaming became popular. While not interacting in a face-to-face context, streamers are typically engaged with their audience in nearly real time, often with a delay as little as ten seconds.

Naturally, this phenomenon scales upward in an inverse relationship, where the more popular the streamer the more difficult it is to engage with them. Smaller streams, those only a couple hundred viewers or fewer, can provoke genuine conversations, where individuals can share how their day went, what they are looking forward to, and of course the game they are watching. In essence, everything but your name and location can be fair game for conversation when the chat moves slowly enough. I think this chatroom experience is what bothers many people unfamiliar with the platform. Historically, chatrooms have been shelters for sexual predators, hermits, and other societal outcasts. However, it is more often the case than not that

streamers aim to protect their chat experience, giving moderator permissions to personal friends or longtime viewers who have accrued trust. This makes for a more amiable experience, and when that is not the case care is still taken to keep those who choose to involve themselves in chat in line.

The experience I describe is, in honesty, the pinnacle of the Twitch chat experience. To those familiar with the platform, a far more common case involves a great deal of spam, memes, and chat moving faster than most can track. This version of Twitch chat is less moderated and spawned by anonymity, huge followings of popular players, and the subcultures previously mentioned. Several factors play into the culture of a Twitch channel, but the two of the most relevant are player personality and channel specific emotes. Emotes on Twitch are images used to express certain emotions or reactions, not unlike emojis on the iPhone or emoticons but typically more specific in meaning and more detailed in appearance.



“LUL,” pictured above left, is a universally available emote and is used to indicate laughter in text. “seagLUL,” pictured above right, is a channel specific adaptation of LUL from the Twitch channel A\_Seagull.

Channel specific emotes, then, begin to embody a multitude of concepts. Sometimes a streamer will edit a picture of themselves to look like a global emote, those available to any person with a Twitch account. This seems redundant, but serves both to allow supporters to show their enthusiasm for a stream and acts as free advertising, since viewers tend to react with the

most specific emote they have available. Seen above, seagLUL and LUL possess the same general meaning, but using seagLUL demonstrates allegiance and support of a favorite streamer. This concept of an elitism of sorts among gamers is what drives the profits of streamers and companies alike, as players drive to possess the rarest and most exclusive items, cosmetics, or loot. This pride can take an interesting twist, however, if the broader Twitch community rejects the subcommunity of a specific channel. Rejection can occur for a number of reasons: distaste for a streamer, irritation with spam of a channel specific emote, etc., but ironically this rejection rarely damages a streamers income. On the contrary, any publicity is good publicity, and consequently such negative attention attracts people either to find out what the fuss is or to join the counter-culture faction, so to speak.

Many Twitch streamers have seen success by embracing classically successful elements of entertainment, both in business terms and in showmanship. Dr. Disrespect, one of the more popular streamers for Battle Royale games, has adopted both a guise and attitude for his stream.



“Dr. Disrespect,” or Herschel "Guy" Beahm IV

Beahm's persona originated in 2010,<sup>42</sup> and his comically ostentatious nature attracted a sizeable fanbase at an incredible rate. Beahm stays true to his character at nearly all times on stream, referring to himself as "an award winning international champion in the online gaming community." The stream personas streamers develop can, however, be double edged. They attract audiences and form fandoms, but create a detachment of identity for fans regarding the entertainer. Dr. Disrespect's house was shot at on two separate occasions,<sup>43</sup> and while in his case the shooting was not with a lethal weapon it did result in property damage of both his car and upstairs window, not to mention the psychological ramifications of feeling attacked in one's home. There is a long history of fans or audiences acting aggressively towards celebrities due to a cocktail of feelings such as ownership, betrayal, and even simple perniciousness. David Beckham, for instance, received death threats following his England's defeat at the 1998 World Cup,<sup>44</sup> which he unsurprisingly claimed was extremely difficult for both him and his family. This is compounded by the personal nature of Twitch leading viewers to believe they know Twitch personalities better than the average celebrity and can cumulate in particularly harmful trolling or pranks. In late 2017 a streamer was killed during a swatting prank in Wichita.<sup>45</sup> Swatting, the practice of calling in false terrorist or domestic violence threats at the address of an internet figure, has in the past led to damage of property and the personal harm of individuals and their families,<sup>46</sup> but the fact that Andrew Finch marks the first death to this type of attack is an incredible unlikelihood. The individual responsible for the swatting call has since been identified and sentenced to twenty years in prison.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> "Dr DisRespect." Matt Schimkowitz

<sup>43</sup> Glaze, Virginia. "Dr DisRespect House Shooter Used BB Gun, Authorities Say."

<sup>44</sup> Wahl, Grant. The Beckham Experiment: How the Worlds Most Famous Athlete Tried to Conquer America

<sup>45</sup> Manna, Nichole. "Call of Duty Gaming Community Points to 'Swatting' in Deadly Wichita Police Shooting."

<sup>46</sup> Clark, Peter Allen, and Peter Allen Clark. "'Swatting' Comes to Its Terrible, Predictable Culmination as Man Reportedly Dies."

<sup>47</sup> McWhertor, Michael. "Man Sentenced to 20 Years for Fatal Call of Duty 'Swatting'."

## Conclusion

In writing this thesis I found that more often than not I had to turn inward in order to ask what I really know about the subject I am most passionate about in the world. I found that, more often than not, each of my questions brought to light more questions, all of which were tied to fundamental concepts, be it of business, of game design, or definitions of key terms. As such, more than a few questions I encountered along the way were left by the wayside for later inquiry. How do developers create social features to improve player relations without enabling toxicity of an anonymous platform? How does virtual and augmented reality fit into the development of game aesthetics? Where does that technology fit into the market of gaming going forward, and can it find a place in the competitive scene? How does the development process of large budget games differ from indie games (independent video game, or games made by small companies or individuals, often with little budget), and how do larger developers plan ahead to ensure the longevity of their titles?

In tabling these questions for the moment, I was able to engage with many others of critical import. What does game design look like for long lasting, competitive, interactive, immersive games? What is most important among these in game design? How should rules be established to enable fair play among competitive scenes? I must again turn to Aristotle and virtue ethics: what makes a game good is more than any one element of its design, and the success of one element neither necessarily stifles the others nor does it depend upon them. Long lasting games with great replay value tend to be the competitive ones, but that is not the sole marker of what makes a game a success.

As for esports practices, the field is growing more rapidly than any other sporting market on the planet, and the steps being taken to protect player health, financial stability, and rights are

necessary for the continued practice of competitive gaming. The governing bodies that established rulesets and conducted leagues were a good start, but more needs to be done and is being done in order to ensure the viability of esports, and eventually to see them seated alongside traditional sports in terms of acceptance. The recent explosion of organizations and peripheral careers in the field of esports and gaming has been integral to this process and does not appear to be on its way out any time soon.

## Glossary

- 1) Meta – The game within the game. The meta is what the most successful, and consequently, common, mode of play is referred to. Within traditional sports, it may be said that the meta in basketball favors tall players, while the meta in horseback riding favors smaller jockeys.
- 2) Win condition – A mini objective within a game that does not inherently hold value but helps to achieve victory in the larger game. In soccer, the objective is to score goals while not being scored on. A win condition might be to set up a cross from the wing in order to put the ball in a scoring position. Multiple win conditions can exist within a single game at one time, but typically one dominates either team's play at a given time.
- 3) Outplay – The successful implementation of a win condition over one's opponent. Outplay at a higher level becomes more difficult complicated as the win conditions become more layered and the room for error becomes slimmer. Outplay suggests not just the completion of your own win condition, but the identification and out maneuvering of your opponents'.
- 4) Depth – Depth is the extent to which a concept or game can be explored and mastered once the initial boundaries of skill or knowledge have been acquired. Depth is what allows for outplay in mirrored or unfavorable matchups.
- 5) Complexity – The breadth of knowledge or skills that must be acquired before depth can begin to be explored. Complexity often can be seen as rules or minimum technical proficiency.
- 6) Immersion – The degree to which a virtual world absorbs the player. This can happen aesthetically or emotionally, aesthetically by the quality of the synthetic sensory outputs of the game (graphics, sound mastering, going forward this list could potentially include tactile or olfactory sensory simulations) and emotionally by storytelling and character attachment.
- 7) Interactivity
  - a. Multiplayer – The degree to which the player can control the game-state. Can the player influence whether her team wins or loses? Can the player execute a win condition or prevent the opposition from executing theirs?
  - b. Singleplayer – The degree to which a player can interact with their gameplay environment. Being able to alter the simulated world through their actions. This type of interaction has direct ramifications on immersion.

- 8) Matchups
- a. Mirror – A mirror match(up) is one where the competing teams all possess the same innate advantages and disadvantages. In rock-paper-scissors all matches are mirror matches, since the timing of the reveal and the options available are the same for all players. The lack of depth, therefore, is what prevents outplay.
  - b. Mismatch – A mismatch is one where the strengths and weaknesses of one team differs from the other. This can be seen in the triangle theory of boxing, where swarmers are favored against out-boxers are favored against sluggers are favored against swarmers. However, due to the depth of boxing, one does not always beat the other in the order presented.
- 9) Skill ceiling – The limits of a game’s depth; the degree to which mastery can be applied to a character, playstyle, or skillset.
- 10) Skill floor – The limiting factor of a game’s complexity; the degree of knowledge mandatory for depth and mastery to be explored.
- 11) Nerf/Buff – Fundamental design balancing terms. A nerf is a decrease in power level, a buff is an increase.
- 12) Top down design – Addressing the most prevalent and over powering elements of a game first, typically with nerfs.
- 13) Bottom up design – Addressing the most underrepresented or under powered elements of a game first, typically with buffs.
- 14) Hard-counter – A hard-counter is a strategy or matchup where one style or character totally outdoes the other, with extremely little opportunity for outplay on the disadvantaged side.
- 15) Soft-counter – A character or strategy with a soft-counter traditionally is at a disadvantage against their soft-counter, but with proper application of skill and knowledge the matchup becomes less unfavorable.

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