The Grassroots Game: Players, Participants, and Infrastructures in Esports from the Ground Up*

Panel Extended Abstract[†]

Author   Author   Author

Author   Discussant

ABSTRACT

Professional competitive sporting practices, from Association Football to Counter-Strike, are perhaps unsurprisingly formed on grassroots participation and activity (Eichberg 2008, Kane 2005). Michael "Carmac" Blicharz of the Electronic Sports League (ESL) refers to the local Polish net cafes and community tournaments of the late 1990's as "hatcheries" of talent (Witkowski, forthcoming). Beyond cultivating players, amateur and enthusiast communities have also long been a space for innovating forms of content production and distribution. The economic models for esports have also long navigated between community and commercial axes, drawing on passionate fan engagement while also harnessing broader forms of sponsorship. From local events to amateur leagues, esports history has been deeply tied to bottom up practices (Taylor 2016, Taylor & Witkowski, 2010).

Familiar stories recalling locally practiced teams, passionate (often amateur) owner/managers, and piecemeal forms of socio-economic support are at the heart of many elite level to pro league narratives. While traditional elite level sports industries acknowledge the importance of grassroots involvement and "support" local initiatives (which sees both praise and critique across disciplines and regions), as esports becomes professionalized it faces the challenge of reconciling grassroots participation with increasing formalization and commercialization.

This panel look at compelling ground up histories and practices of grassroots esports involvement, from industry and state level engagement to homespun practices. We explore both the ongoing local and community-based engagements as they exist alongside and within an increasingly institutionalized industry. Our field of view is international and the cases explore esports in North American, China, and Australia, as well as situating the scene as a multi-national venture with global markets. We explore how various funding models are interwoven with fandom and leveraging community. We look at how media rhetoric around addiction is impacting amateur and pro-aspirational esports play. We tackle how infrastructures, from broadband networks to the material spaces of game cafes, form important nodes in understanding how a local esports scene functions. And we present a history of esports broadcasting which situates our current media moment as rising out of a DIY culture. The panel is made up of researchers who have been working in esports for multiple years and we will be joined by [anonymized industry professional], to serve as a discussant.

KEYWORDS

Esports, competitive gaming, media industries, economics

$40 Million and Counting: Crowdfunding and the Political Economy of Professional DOTA2

Author 1

In 2016, professional Dota 2 players won nearly $40 million in prize money, by far the most of any videogame with an established professional circuit. But unlike other major esports, the majority of this eye-popping sum was raised through crowdfunding. At last year's holding of The International, for example, fans of Dota 2 levied nearly $20 million dollars for Dota 2's premier tournament's prize pool, making it the most valuable esports event in history. This stands in stark contrast to professional Dota 2's biggest competitor, the League Championship Series, which has a comparatively small prize pool (~$2,000,000) mostly provided by its publisher.

These distinctions between of Dota 2 and League of Legends scene are an object lesson in how working conditions for player-laborers are shaped by the political economy of each game's professional scene. Focusing on Dota 2 (but using League of Legends as an illustrative comparison), this presentation situates a number of interviews with prominent Dota 2 players about their working conditions inside a larger analysis of the political economy of Dota 2. Though the extremely large, crowdfunded tournaments make for good headlines and have made elite players very wealthy, I argue that it has nonetheless contributed to precarious working conditions among top Dota 2 players. I suggest that the huge prize pools in crowdfunded Dota 2 events have made Dota 2 players dependent on prize winnings (and not salary) for their livelihood. As a result, they are strongly incentivized to win at any cost, which has led to instability among top rosters. In 2016, for example, Kurtis "Aui_2000" Ling was dropped from his team's roster only weeks before The International, leaving Ling no time to find a new team and effectively cutting him off from millions of dollars in possible earnings.

These questions take on an acute importance at a moment when esports in North America is entering a period of "institutionalization," and publishers are testing different models for their games' professional scenes. By contextualizing players' explanations of their career decisions within a larger political economic framework, this presentation demonstrates a model for better understanding working conditions for professional gamers.

Addicts, Losers, or "Honorable" College Students? Envisioning the Amateur Esports Player in China

Author 2

According to reports circulating in the Chinese press, in 2016 over 170 million people in China played esports. But despite the staggering size of this player/fan-base, the rise of the Chinese competitive gaming scene has been hampered by the widespread belief that gaming is harmful; in the mainstream media, gaming enthusiasts have often been depicted as Internet "addicts" (Golub and Lingley, 2008; Szablewicz, 2010). This narrative has slowly begun to change as local governments and e-commerce giants like Alibaba have thrown their weight behind the burgeoning Chinese esports scene. At public events, local officials make an effort to bolster the image of esports by suggesting that it is important to separate unhealthy game "addiction" from healthy esports competition. At press conferences, esports players tout the benefits of finishing

school before pursuing esports careers—this despite the fact that many pros drop out of school to join the competitive gaming circuit. Indeed, in China, as with South Korea, there is a fine line separating those gamers who are considered to be "addicted" from those who play either socially or professionally (Chee, 2006; Szablewicz, 2011).

While professional esports is slowly gaining respect within China, amateur players continue to grapple with social stigma and the specter of "addiction." In this presentation, This paper examines the discursive framing of the amateur esports player through the lens of popular online movies, web tutorials, and WeChat communication between professional teams and their fans. From media that depict typical League of Legends fans as loveable "losers," middle-aged "fatties," and out-of-work college grads to sleek web movies that populate the world of esports with handsome bad boys and cute school girls, Szablewicz shows how such materials envision the typical Chinese esports player/fan while also grappling with dominant media narratives about gamers and gaming addiction.

The C-league: Grassroots Netcafe Esports Tournament Play

Author 3

In the fast-paced business of esports as media sports, Australia--currently undergoing rapid growth in esports--is a compelling region to consider. Perhaps most central to this growth is the rollout of the "NBN" (national broadband network), which reinforces and reveals the esports "have's" and "have nots". Individual livestreamers and Pro/Am players talk about relocating into NBN ready neighborhoods, while other esports teams create workarounds for "fast play", which includes using laptops tethered to 4G mobile connections or occasionally finding alternative practice spaces outside of their homes. Net cafés are one of those alternative spaces. And while histories of South Korean net cafés find "PC Bangs" on every other city street corner, nurturing the everyday presence of esports as well as fan involvement (Jin 2010), the place of net cafés in Australia is far more discreet to the point of going unnoticed for those not looking for a fast game. While Australian esports teams have entered net cafés as a last resort back-up training space (CakeLoL, 2016), there are other voluntary and intended kinds of esports practices finding their place in net cafés. Small purse tournaments, organized by passionate owners and their gender diverse staff, regularly host round-robin events. University gaming clubs hold regular meet-ups and organize competitions on rented machines. And at the

more polished net cafés, locally formed teams hang-out on weekends, engaging in tournament play, practice, and sharing goofy team photos via the net café's social media profile. Beyond tournament play, grassroots civic life finds a form within: a poster mocking Donald Trump's immigration policy; a tips-jar guised as a fan-poll (Which is better Dota or League?); tactically placed hygienic wipes encourage sanitization. While these places organize a low-stakes, less visible form of esports participation, they also enact a grassroots response to what esports involvement means amid rapid socio-technical development.

This talk explores grassroots esports practices shaped on three diverse Melbourne net cafés, offering a glimpse at how the public space of esports tournament play is reformulated as a form of "sports for all" (Eichberg 2009) – a C-league for practiced players. Far from the glossy stages and paraphernalia of esports as media sports, net cafés in Melbourne are creating other structures and opportunities to do esports together: no glitz, very little glamour, and little remuneration for play. Disassociated from legacy media sports entanglements or state support, these grassroots public tournaments and places remind us of the oft hidden and local work happening below elite level competition, and express how mainstream esports both tones and is reformulated in a local light.

From DIY to Media Industries: Esports and the Growth of Live Streaming

Author 4

This talk explores the history of networked broadcast productions within esports with an eye to its do-it-yourself histories and evolving professionalization practices behind the scenes. The earliest days of esports were formed not only through players converting their intensive gaming into formal competitive modes, but esports producers finding ways to share esports with audiences. Complex assemblages of technologies, actors, and organizations - often with a distinctly hacker mentality - were harnessed to facilitate spectatorship in esports.

The earliest days of esports broadcasting were formed by both amateur and quasi-professional enthusiasts, often with no prior media training, tackling production and distribution of content in the absence of formal channels. While some of this work was technical in nature, it also involved constructing imagined audiences and formulating modes of spectatorship that were resonant for competitive gaming.

With the growth of major broadcast platforms such as Twitch, we've seen this previously grassroots set of

expertise and frameworks for participation face new forms of industrialization, formalization, and monetization. Emerging platforms and production organizations have now extended the range of technologies, structures, and economic models being deployed. As a DIY/enthusiastic framework confronts industrial practice the resulting transformation of esports into an entertainment media product has posed both opportunities and challenges to participation. Drawing on material from my forthcoming book on the subject this talk will focus on presenting some of this history and current critical collisions.

REFERENCES

[1] CakeLoL. 15 March 2017. My story with Tainted Minds and Riot OCE. TwitLonger, available at http://www.twitlonger.com/show/n_1spn2ta.

[2] Chee, Florence. 2006. The games we play online and offline: making wang-tta in Korea. *Popular Communication* 4(3), 225-239.

[3] Eichberg, Henning. 2009. Bodily democracy: Towards a philosophy of sport for all. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 3 (3).

[4] Golub, Alex and Kate Lingley. 2008. Just like the Qing empire: Internet addiction, MMOGs, and moral crisis in contemporary China. *Games and Culture*, 3(1), 59-75.

[5] Jin, Dal Yong. 2010. *Korea's Online Gaming Empire.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

[6] Szablewicz, Marcella. 2010. The ill effects of "opium for the spirit": A critical cultural analysis of China's internet addiction moral panic. *Chinese Journal of Communication.* 3(4), p. 453-470.

[7] Szablewicz, Marcella. 2011. From addicts to athletes: Participation in the discursive construction of digital games in urban China. In *Selected Papers of Internet Research.* http://spir.aoir.org/index.php/spir/article/view/35/37.

[8] Taylor, T.L. 2016. *Raising the stakes: E-sports and the professionalization of computer gaming.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

[9] Taylor, T.L. and Emma Witkowski. 2010. This is how we play it: What a mega-LAN can teach us about games. *Foundations of Digital Games Conference Proceedings*, Monterey, CA.

[10] Witkowski, Emma. Forthcoming. Counter-Strike: Spectatorship and e-sports. In Nina Huntemann and Matt Payne (eds) *How to Play Videogames.* New York: NYU Press.