

CHAPTER 2.

FANDOM CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN ESPORTS

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ABSTRACT

Esports offer a new and unique opportunity for fans. Not only can fans watch professional players, but they can experience the game directly as players themselves. In this paper, we explore esports fan identity at the intersection of viewer and player in Overwatch, League of Legends and FIFA forums, considering a spectrum and influence of geek to sports orientation. We explore differences and similarities between these esports fandoms in regard to expression of knowledge, identification with professional players, and the search for legitimacy. These groups generally use knowledge and skill to demonstrate legitimacy, as a form of (sub)cultural capital. Fans display concerns about where they fit in regard to both traditional sports and other esports. However, whereas in traditional sports, outgroups are defined as membership in rival teams, in esports, outgroup status is conferred to casuals. Esports fandom is tribal in the sense that it is a method for fans to display tribal affiliation as “real” game players against the newer, lower level players.

INTRODUCTION

Esports, an emerging and growing market, reaches a digital and international young audience, with a viewership surpassing traditional sports viewership (Lynch, 2017; Scholz, 2019). Generally understood as competitive gaming, esports has varying definitions across academia at the intersection of games, sports, and mass entertainment (Reitman et al, 2019). Although video games are often associated with geek identity and culture (Shaw, 2010), the influence from sports poses new questions about the intersection of spaces, identity, and culture in this fandom, which has sparked recent debates about considering esports a sport (Reitman et al, 2019). In this paper, we explore esports fan's identities based on their interests and discussions. Understanding that different games attract different audiences, we use three games that offer varying degrees of traditional sports models and fantasy-based elements: *FIFA*, *Overwatch* (*OW*), and *League of Legends* (*LoL*). First, we use *FIFA* as a more direct comparison to traditional sports. The game content and marketing are based around actual players in soccer, and would be expected to reflect a traditional sports fandom because of its origins and the lack of fantasy elements involved. Second, we use *OW* as an intermediary structuring activity. While the game itself involves fictional characters and fantasy elements, the league structured in a way that mirrors the expectations of traditional sports. Third, we use *LoL* as a game closer to geek culture and further removed from traditional sports models. The game is heavily based in fantasy, and the organizational patterns diverge most strongly from traditional models of sports.

BACKGROUND

Digital games present a dual nature as both cultural artifacts and culture. Digital games are artifacts that can be analyzed as media properties, but also as cultural spaces that are enacted by

participants (Hand & Moore, 2006; Steinkuehler, 2006; Shaw 2010). Game communities and available identities emerge and evolve in response to existing socio-cultural frameworks, whether they be existing game communities, media franchises, or friend groups; even seemingly coherent game cultures are comprised of multiple, often competing subcultures and communities, which in turn have a variety of conventions, values, and practices specific to each one (Mäyrä, 2006, Squire & Steinkuehler, 2006; Taylor, 2012). Gamers create and relate to digital communities through both material and symbolic artifacts, producing a “membership” and uniting people in virtual spaces. (Hand & Moore, 2006). As Squire (2002) notes, fan groups produce, “complex social structures that mediate the game playing experience”, where social factors and contexts help to shape both meaning and identity. This is evident in language (Mäyrä, 2006; Hendricks & Wrinkler, 2014), values, interactions, and practices adopted and developed by groups and individuals (Mäyrä, 2006; Steinkuehler, 2006). People constantly negotiate multiple identities depending on the space and the social context (Hendricks and Winkler, 2006). In games, this occurs through geeky expressions, such as cosplay (Hill, 2017), identifying with in-game avatars or groups (Looy, 2015; Taylor, 2006), and using jargon and geek references in their discourse (Mäyrä, 2006; Hendricks & Wrinkler, 2014).

Skill and knowledge are also important pieces of identity for geeks, lending to a sense of pride, enjoyment, credibility, and the creation of social community (Taylor, 2012; Taylor, 2009). For esports specifically, fans can borrow from both digital and sports cultures (Taylor, 2012). While sports video games are largely compared to traditional sports, they have typically been isolated from broader gaming culture (Shaw, 2010). However, esports professional players use other sports to help them express and locate their activity as well as gaining legitimacy (Taylor, 2012). Even though esports is fundamentally different

because it's computer-mediated (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017), sports organizations are also aware of the rise of esports, forcing them to compete against it, or invest in it (Scholz, 2019). There is some support for the latter option, as esports fans' consumption behaviors sometimes overlap with traditional sports consumption behaviors, and fans have expressed fandom in similar ways, with the primary differences being that they consume much more voraciously (Brown, Billings, Murphy, & Puesan, 2018), even though the nature of the technology-mediated game influences the consumption motives (Hamari, & Sjöblom, 2017). Similarities in audience behaviors become more evident through factors such as viewership, casting (Sell, 2015), sponsorship (Scholz, 2019), rooting for a team and identifying with athletes (Absten, 2011). Esports fans exhibit both geeky and more sports-oriented expressions. Scholars have recently turned to forums to understand esports fan identity construction, particularly in terms of boundary-making and behaviors of inclusion/exclusion (Xue, Newman, & Du, 2019).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What characteristics do online esports fandoms (FIFA, LoL, and OW) exhibit?
2. How are identities constructed within online esports fandoms (FIFA, LoL, and OW)?

METHODS

For this research, we used qualitative methods to understand esports fandom through the assessment of fan behaviors, levels of participation and expression. Data was collected from 6 Reddit forums from OW, LoL, and FIFA (Table 1). Publicly available online forums have been a valuable medium for studying fan identity, allowing a direct access to fans' discussions as they occur naturally, without pressures exerted from research settings (E.g. Whiteman, 2009). We explored

Reddit forums associated with esports choosing the top two forums in terms of audience and content for FIFA, OW and LoL. We developed a list of 16 keywords to facilitate analysis: favorite, prefer, cosplay, playoff, final, fan art, match, jersey, season, (pro) player, ranking, caster, fantasy team, and fantasy league. For data extraction, we only considered the first 100 posts after applying Reddit’s filters of “top” and “in the past year” to maximize engagement and relevance in a fast paced and changing community. We required a minimum of 5 posts per keyword with non-zero upvotes and a minimum of 5 comments. We analyzed a maximum of 10 posts per keyword. From each post, we coded the contents, upvotes, number of comments and top 10 comments. Comments were anonymized and their respective sub comments were noted if relevant. Afterwards, the dataset was processed by qualitative coding and thematic analysis, ultimately revealing similarities and differences in trends. All the quotes present in this paper are paraphrased to preserve the privacy of the forum users.

Reddit Forum Name	Subscribers	Active Users at Any Given Time	Posts Collected
CompetitiveOverwatch	218,000	2,500	135
OverwatchLeague	51,000	100	122
lolesports	10,800	10	70
leagueoflegends	3,000,000	15,000	141
FIFA	250,000	10,000	26
SeriousFIFA	8,500	10	6

Table 1. Forums analyzed.

RESULTS: FAN IDENTITY AND EXPRESSION

Performance of knowledge

Knowledge expression is a key aspect of fan’s discourse, and players displayed expertise across multiple areas of the game, often employing expertise as an exclusionary tactic to denote in group/ out group status. It is evidenced through discussions of strategy, game and character analysis, the game meta¹, and

1. “Meta” refers to the combination of characters that are strategically used to optimize team composition.

professional players' capabilities given the game format, through jargon-heavy discourse, which allows for boundary creation. In OW forums, fans often note their own rank and skill level as a form of credibility and social positioning. Fans will also suggest that if viewers do not have knowledge or direct experience with the game, they should not be watching esports matches at all. Earned game knowledge gives them a starting point for discussion and also proves to other users that they *really know* what is happening in the game. Thus, fans bring to forums a sense that they can discuss aspects of professional play, albeit from a less amateur standpoint. For example:

Technically dive should be able to combat Orisa bunker, but Winston is the biggest victim of the Reaper buff² and the DPS power creep, his diving partner DVa was nerfed³, and armor also got nerfed.

Similarly, knowledge in LoL is commonly displayed through analyst-level discussions about rankings, roster changes, and predictions about the game. For example, forum users make a detailed review of the World Championship's best plays, player's choices, character use, and factors that might influence the players. Fans assume basic knowledge of the game and tend to focus on more complex concepts support their argument including previous matches, historical analysis, coach's opinions, and other sources such as interviews. Knowing the history and using external sources gives fans credibility in this specific community.

Beyond analysis, knowledge is used to forge a boundary between "casuals" versus "fans". Casuals are usually described as lacking knowledge about the game, being confused, or not caring about the game as much as the fans do. This is especially true for the Overwatch and FIFA forums. Fans sense that

2. "Buff" describes an increase of power, usually in a character's abilities.

3. "Nerf" describes a decrease of power, usually in a character's abilities.

developers make decisions to try to bring in more casual viewers or players to support more revenue, viewing this as disrespectful to the core audience and even causing resentment amongst them. While this is not expressed by every user, the feeling is common and tends to get a lot of support. This extends to assessments of company decisions, almost as if fans had insider knowledge. For example, in FIFA:

EA is mocking the entire community of competitive gaming by using FIFA, media, and professional soccer players to legitimize and advertise the game to the general public so that they can make more money.

Knowledge is the gatekeeping of the community, where the “others” are the casual players. It gives a sense of identity and belonging and is negotiated as part of the credibility of the fans. Thus, fans perform in the space by proving their knowledge, evidenced through a heavy presence of jargon, display of skill, their own gameplay and rank as point of personal legitimacy.

Identification with others

Fans relate to multiple actors and stakeholders inside esports with leagues, teams and players the most mentioned. In LoL fans identify with all actors, but mostly teams. When referring to professional players, fans mostly comment on skill, win rate, and performance in a roster or league. The expression of their preference is not discrete or clear, and these three layers commonly come up deeply interrelated in the same discussion,. This discussion gives a perception of a bigger community, giving multiple chances for camaraderie and debate, as well as showing a deep understanding of how the structure works.

I'm a Fnatic fan, and I genuinely want them to start with a rookie and make another Caps. I love PoE but he can find another team. EU shouldn't lose its essence for growing talents. r/lolesports

However, most of the attention goes to professional players. The

video game itself serves as a medium through which fans relate to pro players. Fans use their own experience to analyze plays, suggest changes, criticize or root for players, and sympathize with issues experienced due to buffing/nerfing and bugs. Another way of relating to the players is through sharing frustration and failure. For example, in *Overwatch*, fans understand the frustration with the current meta and the despair caused by sudden nerfs, buffs or even crashes in the games. In *FIFA*, fans discuss tournaments in which pro players suffer at the hands of glitches and even console shutdowns. Fans seem to specifically denounce the failures as the responsibility of the developers and organizers, reinforcing the blame and resentment mentioned before. However, *FIFA*'s pro player's skill and status are constantly questioned based on performance, the game's monetization, and the presence of "bugs" or any other feature in the game that might give them an advantage and don't reflect their skill. Another way of relating is through the influence or impact the player has done in the community. For example in *FIFA*, ZwebackHD is admired based on his positive attitude and high quality content.

Pro players are seen as skilled celebrities, but at the same time are seen as relatable, and have an active, central part of the community's discussions. Fans may be able to conduct armchair analysis, but direct experience and high ranking in the game lends a layer of credibility and confidence for these users. This offers a unique identification position for viewers that is separate from traditional sports.

Legitimacy

The legitimacy of esports as a sport remains questionable in the literature as well as for fans. Users of the forums tend to try to locate themselves in a spectrum of legitimacy with frequent comparisons to traditional sports. In *LoL* forums, comparisons

to sports are meant to be validating and fans assume LoL is a sport:

This year is so weird. In soccer, Germany gets eliminated. In hockey, the Capitals win the Stanley Cup, and in League (...) GenG out in Groups and KT eliminated in Quarters.

In FIFA, fans compare the fidelity of the game to the physical soccer. The comments are divided between criticisms of the lack of realism, and the idea that since it is a video game it doesn't necessarily have to adhere to reality. In OW, on the other hand, when a fan questions a decision made by the league or video game company, other users often come in with a comparison to traditional sports. However, it can also be used to critique various decisions made by the league. For example, in OW:

He is being paid to do a job. Baseball has preseason games two days before opening day. This is actually normal, to have preseason matches right up until the real season starts.

Regarding the legitimacy inside the esports world, while LoL does not express any doubts on being a sport, OW and LoL express some uncertainty. In FIFA, issues that come up in esports matches such as glitches and bugs, as well as the reaction from the commentators "patching over" those errors, stir a debate of whether the game is an sport or not. Fans commonly react to these perceived issues with sarcasm, comparing it to other esports where these errors "don't happen". Another point that has been highlighted is how the presence of AI de-legitimizes professional play since it's not seen in any other sport. For example,

Fifa could be a good esports game, but they should focus on pro clubs...10 players on both sides controlled by the AI doesn't make sense. Make it similar to CS:GO.

Within this discussion of identity, forum users struggle to find

their position in the broader scope of both traditional sports and esports.

DISCUSSION

Because video games frequently have patches, bugs, and crashes, they necessarily present a challenge to legitimization. Patching and adjustments to character abilities cause the game to feel like it is in constant transformation, evidenced in the comments about buffs and nerfs. This means that fans and players of esports, unlike those in traditional sports, need to be adaptable since the game itself evolves quite rapidly. However, not all changes are welcome and is evidenced by increasing frustration in the discussions. Bugs and crashes also frustrate fans and create an atmosphere of doubt by questioning the seriousness of the game (developer). The developer is perceived as “compromising the game” by focusing on the monetization to attract casual viewers instead of improving the game. Bugs and crashes also affect the perception of skill. Since knowledge and skills are the foundations of credibility in this community, changes in the game are seen as a “contamination” of the professional player’s skill.

Another challenge raised regarding the legitimization is the presence of Artificial intelligence (AI) as part of the team itself. In OW and LoL, the presence of AI, such as the minions in the “jungle” is external to the players themselves and not questioned in any moment. However, the fact that teammates are controlled AI deeply affects the legitimacy of FIFA. Are human players the only ones admissible to play in esports? Or would a better AI be acceptable in the eyes of the fans? Future work on AI’s perceptions in esports, such as the case of FIFA and Starcraft would open a parth for these questions and a deeper analysis.

Esports fans also struggle to locate their position and identity as a fandom in the context of the broader scope of both traditional sports and esports. Even though esports is a hypercompetitive

atmosphere (Taylor, 2012), unlike traditional sports, there is no set “other” – no historical rival team to hate or define oneself against. Across games, esports fans define themselves against novice players, or casual players. Whereas in traditional sports, players affiliate by geographical region or teams (Absten, 2011), esports fans transcend geographical barriers, and feel free to support any teams they want, justifying with their own knowledge and performance or just personal preference.

CONCLUSION

Esports fans’ identities are complex and are influenced by the intersections presented by situational and social contexts. Fans use knowledge, mostly based on personal experience and skill, as community gatekeeping (Taylor, 2012). From diving into deep, jargon-heavy discussions to distancing themselves from “casuals”, they use knowledge to gain legitimacy (Taylor 2012; Taylor, 2009). As such, esports are a natural extension of earlier ethnographies of game players that argued for game play as a culture of expertise (Squire, 2008). Fans are also able to identify with the team, leagues, and players by means of the style of play, characters, meta, and game strategy (Taylor, 2012). Esports adds to earlier conceptions of games a new meta-game, where players compete to display knowledge of game play almost as a way to prove their affiliation. Finally, fans struggle to locate their position as a fandom in the context of the broader scope of both traditional sports and esports, where the “other” is not a rival or region, but rather, less skilled casual players. There is not a cohesive community or culture in esports, but rather sub-cultures developed among fans of each game. Furthermore, the nature of these digital subcultures allow esports to surpass geographical boundaries.

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