

CHAPTER 17.

THE META

ESPORTS, OPTIMIZATION AND SETTING LIMITS

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ABSTRACT

Esports competitions play a vital role in defining the ‘meta,’ or optimal strategy, for playing video games. As a meta solidifies, it impacts players in both esports and those who play the game recreationally, limiting their options and their approaches to play. Using rhetorical analysis of the first season and a half of the Overwatch League and examples from traditional sports, this essay argues that metas and the desire for optimization structures video games in a manner that is notable and important in considerations of game design and esports play.

Introduction

Broadcasting esports has the effect of normalizing approaches and solidifying proper modes of play. Augmented through tier lists and analysis of games, prominent players and commentators normalize how particular games should be seen, frequently using exceptional players as their models for how to engage a game. The shapes the way players see games, setting limits for their approaches as they seek to optimize their results and continually reinforcing ‘the meta.’

To chart how the meta calcifies play, I draw from games research on theorycrafting and metagaming, engage in a discussion of how similar processes work in traditional sports, and move to a rhetorical analysis of events over the first season and a half of the *Overwatch* League. This essay is intended to offer a reflection point on a particular kind of impact of esports has on the broader landscape of video games and how the discourse of video games can differ from that of other, seemingly similar kinds of activities.

Theorycrafting and Metagaming

Tracing from a pejorative comment among *World of Warcraft* players, theorycrafting arose in tandem with the increasing difficulty of the game (Paul, 2011). The increasing challenge of the game meant that players needed to do research outside of the game in order to improve their chances of success. The term originally mocked players who sought to do testing outside of the game, rather than just go out and play it. However, over time, the practice was normalized and players used theorycrafting to try to understand the black box of game design through rigorous hypothesis testing and analysis (Wenz, 2013). The term has seeped into both gaming discourse and academic discussion with essays penned about analysis of metagaming discussion about how games work and even using the concept to engage in the pedagogical design of classes (Debus, 2017; Finseth, 2015).

At this point in gaming discourse, theorycrafting typically leads to the creation of a 'meta.' What exactly a meta is ranges from game to game, but it typically includes a handful of common elements. One key piece of the meta is what characters are considered strongest. In games like *League of Legends* this shows up in the form of tier lists with certain options considered more valuable than others. Game developers often engage in balancing updates to make lesser characters more powerful and

make highly ranked characters weaker, often resulting in players reassessing which choices are seen as optimal.

A second area of the meta is in the general approach to game play. Beyond character selection, strategies emerge that become popularized as a 'best' way of playing a game or approaching a common situation. This could emerge in something like using the GOATS, or triple-triple, composition in *Overwatch*, which features three characters considered tanks and three characters considered support with no traditional damage dealers (Richardson, 2019). Benefiting from the incredible survivability of the composition, a team that works well together can dominate in team fights and defeat more balance teams. The dominance of the approach led to Blizzard, the game's developer, introducing changes in an effort to weaken GOATS and players experimenting to find an answer to defeat it (Allen, 2019).

The third key piece of the meta is the balance between the success of the approach and the judgments of players. To the first end, players must seek the meta characters and approaches as better, more valuable, and more successful than other strategies and tactics. The popularity of a strategy like GOATS depends on players seeing it work again and again and then trying it for themselves. Meta characters need to be seen as successful in battle, as the first choices of players in drafts or as one of the first characters to ban other players from using. Tied to the success is actions of the player community. Metas become sticky and powerful not just because they work, but also because players enforce them through judgments within the game. Deviating from the approved values and strategies of the community could get a player mocked, warned, banned, or otherwise sanctioned for 'poor' play. Because of the community judgments that are made within video games, aligning with the meta can be seen as a strategy to avoid rocking the boat and trying to fit in with the expectations of other players.

All three of these aspects can be seen in relief by reflecting on the role of the meta in high-level traditional sports. Looking beyond esports and video games offers a fresh perspective on how judgments in games can work to structure, incentivize, and effectively limit play.

Traditional Sports and The Meta

Although esports are a relatively recent creation, traditional sports have decades of professional play from which to draw examples. Paralleling the growth of theorycrafting in games like *World of Warcraft*, baseball saw an analytics revolution that fundamentally changed what was valued and how the game was played (Lewis, 2004). As outlined in a best-selling book and subsequent movie, Michael Lewis makes the case that new-school general managers like Billy Beane sought to exploit market inefficiencies and create a new way to assess players and strategies. In baseball, this took the form of focusing on players who could draw walks, in basketball the three-point shot was emphasized, and in American football coaches sought to ‘go-for-it’ more often on fourth down.

All of these approaches were predicated on statistical analysis and testing, much like the theorycrafting done by video game players. All of these approaches also changed the way the games in question were played. In the case of basketball, the number of three-point shots skyrocketed, with top players averaging more three-point attempts in single games than most teams did a few years ago (Shea, 2018). This approach then trickled down, as college and high school teams sought to copy what was working at the highest level of the sport. Exceptional players, like Stephen Curry, bent the game even farther, routinely attempting shots from farther and farther away and stretching the dynamics and angles of the court (Goldsberry, 2019).

However, the role of exceptional players in popularizing new strategies also shows a limit of these approaches. Most players,

particularly those who are not high-level professionals, cannot copy the virtuosity of the most talented people on the planet. Stephen Curry's shooting range is historic and is likely only matched by one other current player, Damian Lillard, which means the lessons most are able to apply from his example is limited. Surely recreational players pretend to be professionals, wearing the jerseys, cheering for the teams, and copying their trademark moves. But, we cannot actually pull off what they are able to do, limiting the transferability of what professionals are able to establish as a meta approach, akin to a regular player seeking to match a professional player's actions per minute in a game like *Starcraft*.

A second example to be taken from the example of traditional sports is in the reception of new approaches. Often derided as coming from pencil-pushers who never played the game, innovative strategies are frequently rejected out of hand by some commentators. Although there is surely a valuable critique in how not all things can be quantified and measured, a strain of these objections is also in an inherent conservatism about how games should be played.

American football provides an avenue to reflect on this, as analytical approaches demonstrate that teams should attempt fourth-down conversions far more often than they do. Although the math works out, games are played in short-run instances, rather than in the long-run, which means that any individual decision that deviates from expectations is a chance to be proven wrong. Coaches who seek to chart a new path need to be successful over and over before their approach is considered valid if it rejects the knowledge of the past. To this end, one of the coaches who uses divergent strategies most often in the current NFL is Bill Belichick, who also happens to be the most successful current coach (Goff, 2018). Although tracing the causality of the relationship would be exceptionally difficult, his status as a famous, successful coach offers him the opportunity

to do things others cannot. More directly, he is unlikely to be fired for a given decision, while a less secure coach or general manager may be sanctioned for deviating from expectations. Then, once a valorized, successful person proves an approach is better, others can pick up and help popularize a new meta.

In the case of video games, individual players are unlikely to be able to run in the face of a dominant meta without significant reputational cost. Although top teams may be able to demonstrate a new path, rank and file players are often held captive by the meta that expects them to simply know what is best or face a social cost for their ignorance or desire to be different.

Traditional sports offer a model of how the meta can change games, shifting how they get played and structuring the choices that are made. This balance is both about what is seen as successful and appropriate and also about the normative judgments made by the community to enforce and regularize the meta. Taking this analysis into a discussion of esports requires a discussion of analytical method.

Rhetoric and Method

Communication studies based rhetorical analysis is an incredibly flexible approach for analyzing moments of discourse and seeking to understand what is happening in those cases. Fundamentally concerned with the questions of 'what's going on' and 'so what,' analysis in this manner is intended to help us understand systems and structures at a deeper level (Zarefsky, 2008). Predicated on the notion that all things are rhetorical and that words we use shape the way we see the world, rhetoric in video games also included elements like game design and the procedures within games (Bogost, 2007; Campbell, 1970; Paul, 2012; Schiappa, 2001). In the case of this essay, analyzing the discussion around and establishment of various metas offers an

opportunity to understand how activities in esports help structure and guide play throughout a game's environment.

Given the length of this essay, focus is placed on the role of the *Overwatch* League in structuring discourse surrounding the game as a whole. Through the prominence of the GOATS or triple-triple strategy and the counters that players sought, the establishment of a meta in esports redefined the game, limiting play, and leading to ongoing responses by players and developers that generally attempted to disrupt an unpopular meta. Texts for analysis were generated by focusing on official Blizzard communication about the league and other commentators who analyzed the trends in league play and its impact on viewership and the play of people outside of the esports league.

***Overwatch* and The Meta**

The *Overwatch* League is notable in part because of its direct connection with the game's developer, Blizzard, and in its clear attempt to parallel certain aspects of traditional sports. From the city-based teams to the funding sources for teams, which have a mix of ties between esports and traditional sports, the *Overwatch* League is a key surface on which to trace how metas impact and structure play.

In its first two seasons, *Overwatch* League consisted of series of stages that ended in a round of playoffs to crown the top team. This approach meant that there were teams that were more successful in the stages and others that were victorious in the playoffs; in the first year the New York Excelsior were dominant in the first three stages, winning two, then suffered an early elimination from the playoffs after being swept out by the Philadelphia Fusion.

The established meta shifted over the course of the season, as changes made by Blizzard altered the terrain of play and what

tactics and approaches would be most likely to meet with positive results. In a season one recap the official YouTube account for the *Overwatch* League defines the term ‘meta’ as “the tactical picking of certain comps [compositions] of heroes” and then explaining how patches that are rolled out throughout the season mean that “the meta changes with the game”(Overwatch League, 2019). Over the course of the first season, the meta was dominated by Mercy in Stage 1, Widowmaker in Stage 2, Tracer in Stage 3, and then the meta shattered in Stage 4 with the release of a new character, Brigitte Lindholm (Labarca, 2019).

Over the course of the first season, Mercy went from being picked in 96% of matches and serving as the cornerstone of what was called a “dive meta” to suffering a nerf before Stage 2 that relegated her to position as a much lesser choice. The introduction of Brigitte was specifically designed to counter the dive meta that started the season, but led to the solidification of a new approach.

Nearing the end of the first *Overwatch* League season, in a separate, small tournament, a team named GOATS dominated after an early loss rolling to a tournament win with the composition discussed above, leading to their triple-triple style gaining “notoriety as a low-skill/high-reward strategy” (Bray, 2019). The problem is that the approach is largely reviled, as it is not perceived by the community as fun to watch and, when one team runs it, the other is placed in a position where their best choice is to use the same approach or choose a highly-specific counter composition (Grayson, 2019b). The dominance of this particular meta means that every team is placed in a position where they are effectively being assessed on their ability to play this particular version of *Overwatch*, even as the developers make changes in an attempt to shake up the meta (D’Orazio, 2019). In Stage 1 of season two, the five characters that make up the core of GOATS all saw usage rates above 83%, with the sixth

just under 70% and 16 characters at 5% or less (Trautman, 2019a).

Heading into Stage 2, one commentary on the game noted that the changes Blizzard was announcing showed how they were “not messing around with their attempts to shake up the meta, as Stage 2 will see plenty of changes to the game” (Hartling, 2019). From the introduction of a new character, Baptiste, to being played on “one of *Overwatch*’s most aggressive balance patches to date,” the end result was more about small adjustments to individual team play styles than a wholesale change to the meta (Trautman, 2019b).

The stakes and dominance of the meta are important for three key reasons: the impact on the broader community of the game, the effect on pro players, and Blizzard’s desire to define how their game works and what that indicates about esports more generally.

The dominance of GOATS necessarily dictated discussion in the broader community of *Overwatch* players as commentary focused on certain heroes, team composition, and playstyle. As one critique of the strategy notes, the growing prominence in professional play lead to a change in how the game was played “Across all levels and all elos [a measurement of skill], expansive DPS was spurned in favor of close-counter TripleTank brawls” which were less aesthetically pleasing, as the dive meta “was a leopard skillfully pouncing on a wayward gazelle,’ while mirror GOATS matches look like “two river hippos wrestling for the last puddle of mud” (Bray, 2019). Going into games, players expected others to conform to their expectations of the perceived optimal approach to the game.

In an interview about the establishment of GOATS as meta, game director Jeff Kaplan argued that players will always grow to despise a meta, but in video games cannot avoid them as

“players always want to play optimally” and changing the meta either requires action by Blizzard or a new, better answer found by players (Grayson, 2019a). Kaplan also contends that while most players may be attempting to play the dominant strategy, they are unlikely to have the skill to execute it. As Nathan Grayson summarizes in his interview with Kaplan “They might be picking the same characters because they’ve heard that GOATS is powerful, but they’re not actually executing the strategies that would cause that team to actually dominate” (Grayson, 2019a).

Beyond the impact on the millions of rank and file players, establishment of a meta also has a dramatic impact on professional players as certain characters go in and out of fashion. Players that were dominant under a meta where their favored character was powerful may slip into fringe status when forced to play a character they are not as good at. A summary of the impact of changes in season 2 concludes by stating that “For all the players in the OWL [*Overwatch* League], it is vital that they find their place in the changing meta. Those who are falling behind must actively adapt; the previous meta that suited their strengths is now gone and they don’t have much time to find their place in the new one” (Jang & Paek, 2019).

The role of the meta and the expectation that players should always seek the optimal approach means that a meta is always already solidifying and inherently limits how to play a game that has professional players modeling the ‘best’ way to play. In attempting to copy their approach, the rank and file fall victim to an ethos of optimization, while professional players are subject to the whims of a game developer that could turn them from an MVP to an unknown or vice versa.

Metas presume that there is an answer, one that can be divined, copied, and put into practice. And, with an overarching focus on systems, skill, and eliminating the role of luck, esports are a

leading force in defining how video games should be played, even if only a tiny fraction of players are able to compete on the same level as the pros they watch in events like the *Overwatch* League.

Conclusion

Esports, optimization and video games operate within a larger rhetorical context that shapes how they impact structures of play. As an example, one of the smaller changes announced for the second stage of the second season was to get rid of coin flips for seeding, a decision spurred by an “uproar [that] came over Twitter” when it was used at the end of Stage 1 and was praised as “anything that avoids complete luck will be welcomed” (Hartling, 2019). The role of the meta in a game like *Overwatch* demonstrates how video games are treated as puzzles to be solved, forcing players to conform or fall behind.

Similar dynamics exist in traditional sports, as leagues see styles of play come and go and adapt rules to stop some approaches and encourage others, but there is typically far more variance in the style of play and less of a focus on a singular set of tactics.

Although watching professional play necessarily demonstrates a level of exceptionalism that will never be matched by most, yet still likely serves as a model for many, the intersection of esports and dominant metas limits play, creating a box of expectations all players are placed in whether they are good enough to execute that approach or not.

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