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Competition, Corporatization and Culture: A Contrast of Person-to-Person and Online Video Gaming Communities In America

Jeffrey Miles Rossen
Bard College, jr0770@bard.edu

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Competition, Corporatization and Culture:

A Contrast of Person-to-Person and Online Video Gaming Communities In America

Senior Project submitted to

The Division of American Studies

of Bard College

By

Jeff Rossen

Annandale-On-Hudson, New York

May 2016

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Introduction

As historian Johan Huizinga says in his 1944 book, *Homo Ludens,* "Play is older than culture" [1] and "culture arises in the form of play"[2]. He goes on to characterize play as being voluntary and free, set in a world that is not real or ordinary, having elements of tension and rules, and being an activity with no material interest and no profit gained by it. Modern games, including arcade games and video games, have much in common with the games of Huizinga's time -- they are voluntary, most are set in an imaginary world, they have rules and tension, and they certainly are building their own culture, and yet, much has changed in the world of play since Huizinga's work.

Though video games have become one of the most dominant and lucrative sectors of the entertainment industry, the culture itself remains a mystery to many outsiders. According to a recent study by the Entertainment Software Association [3], 155 million Americans regularly play some form of video game. These games span many categories including mobile games played on smart phone apps, arcade games, console games and PC games. Four out of five households in America own a device to play video games and 42% of people in this country play at least 3 hours of video games per week [4] with females making up 33% of the gaming population. Despite common conceptions of video game communities being homogenous "boys clubs", it seems gamer culture is expanding to accommodate a much broader player base.

Video games can be broken into three categories: action, art, and competition. *Grand Theft Auto* comes to mind as a prime example of the first category since it is essentially the " Action Movie" of video games. In fact, in it's opening week alone, Grand Theft Auto IV earned $500 million while Star Wars Episode VII, the highest grossing film in 2015 only earned $247

million in it's opening weekend [5]. These games are action based, narrative heavy, and usually single player.

Art house games, such as *Kentucky Route Zero* and *Talos Principle*, focus on the unique artistic capabilities of the video game medium. Both of these games beautifully represent the art house game sub-genre in that they engage the player in critical philosophical thought about the significance of the game medium in telling a story. In keeping with the film industry comparison, it is easy to think about art house or "indie games" as a parallel to independent art films. Art house games are usually independently financed and take on a very different lens than what their mainstream counterpart has to offer. While these genres of gaming are certainly massive components of gamer culture, my project focuses on something very different: competitive gaming. While it is easy to compare video games to film since both mediums incorporate the moving image, the component of interactivity is central in highlighting the differences between the two mediums. Competitive gaming breaks away from a film comparison in that it places the players at the forefront of the narrative: if anything, these games are closer to sports than movies. Competitive games are designed to allow gamers to face off against each other, battling in reflex precision, game knowledge, and wit.

Competitive video games have been around for many years, especially in Asian countries and notably South Korea, but they have taken off in America over the past few years, likely as a result of growing Internet access and the bounty of well-designed free-to-play downloadable games. The communities that surround these competitive games vary greatly in ideology, form and size. On Twitch.tv, an Amazon owned live-streaming platform for video games, as of

January 2016 at least 100, 000 people are watching *League of Legends* at any given time (Fig 1.).

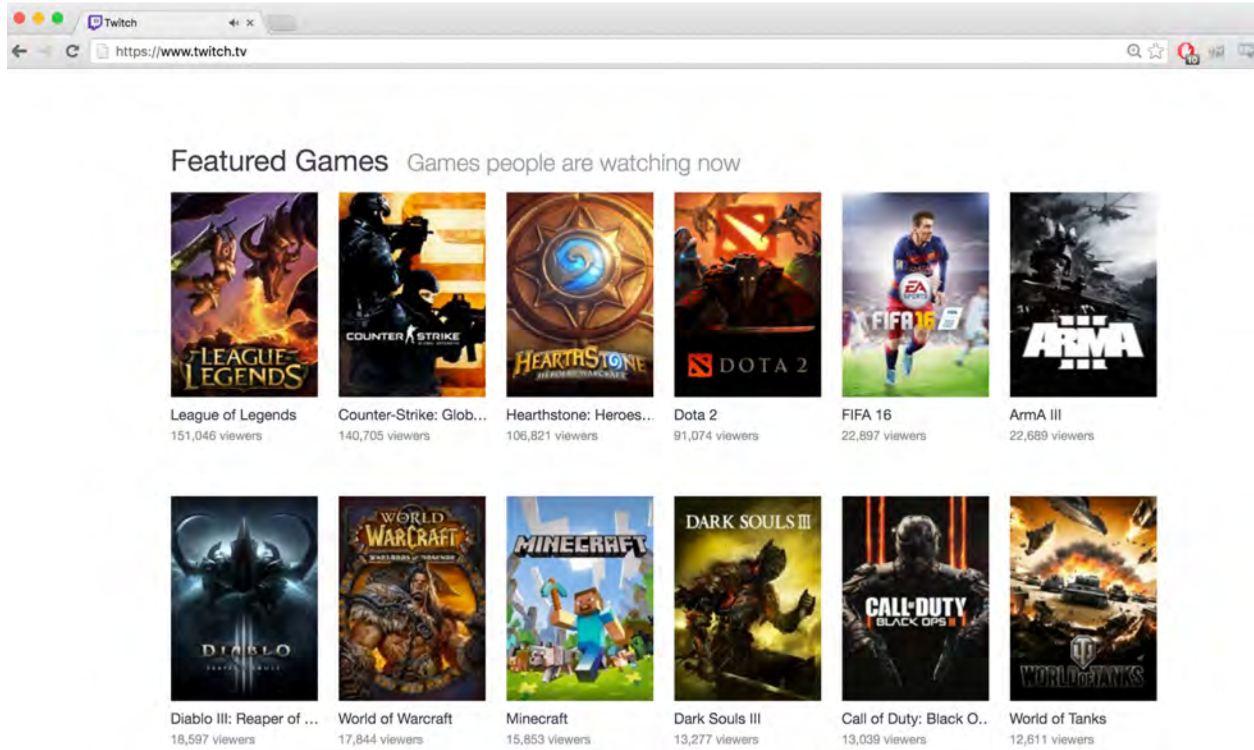

Figure 1. Screenshot of Twitch.tv homepage depicting the popularity of League of Legends

Super Smash Brothers, a console based person-to-person fighting game, would on average have only 100 viewers. Narrative games or more obscure art house games might get even fewer viewers. In this sense it becomes clear that competitive gaming is the dominant force in gaming culture. As competitive games have been taken more seriously, some communities have managed to propel their games into “eSports”. These games have gained such popularity that they are now treated as spectator sports with “professional level play”. The players can be sponsored and paid by corporations, and often there are large sums of prize money as a reward for the victors of tournaments. While many gamers take part in purely entertainment-based gaming, or artistic games, the community around competitive gaming, in both online and person-to-person gaming, seems to be more dominant and enthusiastic. As of 2012, there were 32

million active monthly players competing in *League of Legends* [6]. At any given time, there are 100,000 spectators just watching other people play *League of Legends*, a number that can jump substantially for any officially sanctioned professional *League of Legends* events. They have their own LCS or League Championship Series in Los Angeles, in which fans of the competitive game can pay a small fee to watch professional players compete live in a designated stadium called the LCS Arena. The LCS is also broadcasted live on Twitch.tv weekly during the competitive season. The LCS finals now get more views than the World Series [7].

In this Senior Project, I will be making an analytical comparison of gamer culture contrasting person-to-person gaming with online gaming, and exploring the differences in the communities that form around these games. I will attempt to do this by comparing two of the most popular competitive games on the market - *League of Legends*: the video game with the largest active player base in the world right now - a Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) game vs. *Super Smash Brothers* - a person-to-person Fighting Game with minimal online capabilities that attracts a smaller cult-following.

As a gamer myself, I have ventured into both person-to-person games and online gaming. I have played *League of Legends* for five years and in order to reach a high level of play in online gaming, I was required to a isolate myself from society, interacting only with online peers. In contrast, in person-to-person gaming communities, such as the Fighting Game Community (FGC), to which *Super Smash Brothers* belongs, it is imperative for the competitors to seek out new challengers by traveling to huge person-to-person tournaments, introducing themselves to strange faces and embracing a much more social game style. I have only played *Super Smash Brothers* competitively in tournaments for the last 6 months and already I have made countless new friends as a result of the person-to-person nature of the game. At Bard, I created the *Super*

Smash Brothers Club as a way to practice against players of all skill groups and this has resulted in the creation of an incredibly social network of unlikely peers.

In developing this comparison, I will be discussing the history of these games' developments, the nature of corporate backing and the rise of "eSports", analyzing notions of identity within these gaming communities and comparing the social behavior represented by each of these communities. In order to guide my research, I will look to the writings of Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois, as well as modern scholars of video game culture such as David Sirlin, T.L. Taylor and Carly A. Kocurek. The goal of this comparison will be to draw meaningful conclusions about how these very different embodiments of American competitive gaming culture can create such strikingly different communities.

Chapter One: The History of *Super Smash Brothers* and *League of Legends*

"From the life of childhood right up to the highest achievements of civilization one of the strongest incentives to perfection, both individual and social, is the desire to be praised and honoured for one's excellence. In praising another each praises himself. We want to be honoured for our virtues. We want the satisfaction of having done something well. Doing something well means doing it better than others. In order to excel one must prove one's excellence, in order to merit recognition, merit must be made manifest. Competition serves to give proof of superiority." - Ludologist Johan Huizinga [8].

In 2001, Masahiro Sakurai, the lead designer for *Super Smash Brothers* at Nintendo, invented *Super Smash Brothers Melee*, the second iteration of the *Super Smash Brothers* series. The game took characters from various fan favorite Nintendo games and allowed players to battle against each other as their favorite Nintendo characters. Sakurai never intended the game to be played competitively - "But really, my vision of Smash Bros. is that it it's a party game, really. You've got four people battling it out and you're really not sure who's winning or losing" (Fig 2). To him, it was supposed to be fun and wacky game play centered on randomness and chance. This is what ludologist Roger Caillois would define as Alea.

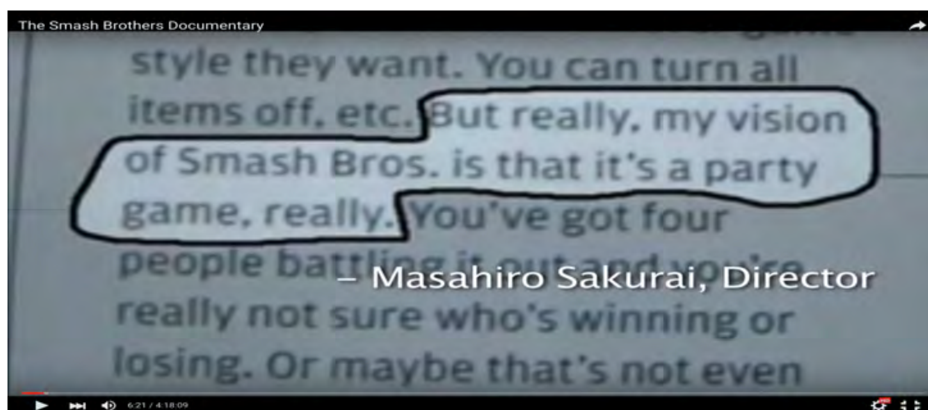

Figure 2. Screenshot from The Smash Brothers documentary quoting Masahiro Sakurai on his vision for the game.

In the early 2000's a cult following began to develop around the game. These players turned a four-player party game into a two-player fighting game focused on game knowledge, strategy and execution. They saw something more competitive or Agon centric, Callois' term for competition or strategy, in their take on the game.

In the introduction for Roger Caillois' seminal work, Man, Play, and Games, he defines four categories of play and games: Alea (chance), Agon (strategy), Mimicry (roleplaying), and Illinx (vertigo) [9]. Alea and Agon are the main forms of play present in the *Super Smash Brothers* series. The developer's vision of the game is rooted in Alea -- Masahiro Sakurai wanted *Smash* to be chaotic and dominated by chance. Nintendo has always been a family company, geared toward making games accessible to all ages, and chance is a great game mechanic to level the playing field. In spite of Sakurai's vision for the game, the American players began to treat it competitively. As they developed the rulesets and the meta-game for competitive play, they began to favor Agon over Alea and attempted to minimize the impact of chance in competitive *Super Smash Brothers*.

In my mind, Alea creates a sense of "fun" in games in that it subverts the expectations of competition by overpowering expertise with chance. In David Sirlin's book entitled Playing to Win, he addresses the concept of fun as foreign to the world of competition. "There are also those who play games for something known as 'fun.' That subject will not be covered here. I believe there is a great deal more of this 'fun' to be had while playing to win than while only playing casually, but there is no use in entering that debate now. This 'fun' is a subjective thing, hard to pin down, but winning is not. That's what we have on our side: winning is clear and absolute" [10]. Perhaps this longing for clarity in a competitive setting is responsible for motivating American *Smash* players to move toward a more Agon-centric meta-game. Caillois

may have agreed with this opinion. When writing about Alea, Caillois says, "In contrast to Agon, Alea negates work, patience, experience, and qualifications. Professionalization, application, and training are eliminated. In one instant, winnings may be wiped out. Alea is total disgrace or absolute favor. It grants the lucky player infinitely more than he could procure by a lifetime of labor, discipline, and fatigue"[11]. Clearly, in regards to a competitive setting, Agon allows the players to demonstrate true skill, whereas Alea simply dilutes the competition with random chance. *Super Smash Brothers* is unique when compared to other 2.5D fighting games (like *Street Fighter*, *Mortal Combat*, etc.) While in a standard fighting game, the objective is to attack your opponent thus depleting their health bar, *Smash* takes an alternative approach. Instead, the player attempts to rack up damage or *percentage* on their opponent's character. This percentage acts as a multiplier on how far the opponent's character will be knocked back by your character's attacks.

Figure 3. Percentage gauge from Super Smash Brothers Melee

The ultimate goal is to knock one's opponent out of the boundaries of the screen and prevent them from returning to the stage. The game was instantly popular because it was based on the cute, cuddly Nintendo characters, like Mario, Peach, Bowser and Fox, from other Nintendo games. Many of these characters would be considered recognizable staples of the Nintendo universe, and some of these characters like Mario, Link and Donkey Kong were invented as far back as the 1980s.

The control scheme for *Super Smash Brothers* was also much more approachable than those of the standard 2.5D fighter. In *Street Fighter*, in order to make Ryu, the protagonist, shoot a fireball, the player would have to input a "quarter circle forward" motion (down, down + forward, forward) on their control stick and then hit the punch button within the right window of time. Whereas, in *Super Smash Brothers*, in order to make Mario shoot a fireball, it was as simple as hitting the "B" button. This fluidity of controls allowed for new players to easily pick up the game, yet added an immense amount of depth to the highest levels of competition, in which the players would focus more on the greater picture of the macro-game rather than focusing on the tedious inputs of the micro-game. Instead of being concerned with the difficulties with how to make one's characters perform in action, these fluid controls allowed the player to focus on the bigger picture, picking up on their opponent's habits, punishing their mistakes, and generally outperforming their competition.

Figure 4. GameCube Controller – Still used for Super Smash Brothers Melee 15 years after release

As the game became more popular, some players, especially Americans, began to boast of their skills in Smash on online message boards. People quickly began to wonder who was the best Smash player in the United States and these message boards facilitated the communication between players who would then travel and compete with each other for the title of best in their region. Trash talk and “money matches” (challenging someone in a match and betting money that you will win) became staples of Smash culture and the competitive nature of the scene began to flourish.

The early competitive Super Smash Brothers scene was a very different machine from its contemporary counterpart. Tournaments were very informal and victory seemed to have a greater emphasis on pride rather than prize money. The early years of competitive Smash (2001 – 2005) had a very clear-cut narrative – at first everyone wanted to see who was the best. Players from all around the country were making claims of their superiority and traveling from unofficial tournaments in people’s mother’s basements in New Jersey to unofficial tournaments

in people's mother's basements in Arizona. Before long, there was no question that Ken Hoang, a teenager from California, was undoubtedly the king of Smash.

At this point in the competitive "Meta-Game" of *Super Smash Brothers*, players were still arguing over the basic rules of how the game should be played in order to optimize a competitive environment. One example is the issue of "Items", which many players felt added too much *Alea* or chance into the equation, which skewed the balance of the game. These items would appear on the stage in the form of capsules or crates, and once broken open would reveal a random selection of powerful (or in some cases not so powerful) tools. For example one player might open a crate to reveal a "Beam Sword" which is essentially a Light Saber out of Star Wars, while another player might open a crate and receive a dumpling. The Beam Sword would massively extend the range of one player's attacks while the dumpling would only restore a small amount of percentage (the game's version of health). The default setting in the game is to have Items turned on. Items spawn randomly and would allow for an otherwise competitive display of skill to be dictated by chance. By turning off Items, American Smash players took the first step of developing the Meta-Game of competitive *Super Smash Brothers*.

The concept of "Meta-Game" deserves more attention, as it is a pivotal component of competitive gaming. Perhaps drawing an allusion to Chess may help clarify this concept. While one can play Chess very casually, there are more optimal choices of moves depending on what one's opponent is doing. A good chess player will know how to beat a bad chess player within a handful of turns as a result of his or her understanding of the meta-game. Understanding the meta-game, or in my definition, going beyond the rules of the game to improve the competitive quality of the game, is often the defining point in what separates a good player from a "scrub". In David Sirlin's book, he defines the "scrub" as a player who is new to a game or at least not

very good at it. The scrub has no understanding of the meta-game, and thus lacks any true understanding of strategy within the competitive setting. Sirlin recognizes that a common side effect of the Scrub mentality is to label tactics they don't understand how to beat, as "cheap". "This 'cheapness' is the true mantra of the scrub". In elaborating on this he references *Street Fighter*, but S*uper Smash Brothers* works just as well because the mechanics are very similar. Sirlin points out that a common example of this disillusionment in fighting games is the notion that performing a Throw is "cheap". Sirlin goes on to explain this, "A throw is a special kind of move that grabs an opponent and damages him, even when the opponent is defending against all other kinds of attacks. The entire purpose of the throw is to be able to damage an opponent who sits and blocks and doesn't attack"[12]. Essentially, Sirlin is suggesting that the "Scrub" doesn't understand the full extent of the rules of the game. Fighting games are centered around a triangulation, much like Rock Paper Scissors. Blocking will beat an Attack much like Rock will beat Scissors, Throwing will beat a block much like Paper will beat Rock, and Attacking will beat Throwing in the same way that Scissors will beat Paper. The Scrub, however, doesn't even know he is playing an accelerated version of Rock Paper Scissors and yet somehow is attempting to make an argument that Paper is unfair. This is why these games can be so different at a casual level and a competitive level — at the height of competition, if both players completely understand the meta-game, then suddenly the competition is much more interesting. This is the point at which Sirlin argues that gaming becomes a conversation, or in his words, a debate. "Let us look at what it is to play competitively. You argue your points with your opponent, and he argues his. 'I think this series of moves is optimal,' you say, and he retorts, "Not when you take this into account."'(Sirlin Introduction). Sirlin elaborates on this debate metaphor in suggesting that a good debate needs evenly matched opponents — this is also true in games. "If you can

simply push the opponent over in any of a dozen ways of your choosing, there is no debate to be had… Only when you can truly respond to each other's points and keep a meaningful debate going is there anything truly interesting going on. I would call this 'fun'"[10]. In competitive gaming, in order to be on the same page as your opponent, you must have an equal understanding of the meta-game.

In *Super Smash Brothers Melee*, the meta-game has taken a fascinating course as a result of the longevity of the game, in combination with the lack of live balance that has become so common in contemporary competitive games. While many modern competitive games are updated periodically in "patches" (software updates made by the game developers intended to balance the game or introduce new content), *Melee* is unique in that after 15 years of competitive play it remains completely untouched by the developers. Though the game has not been altered in any way since its initial release, the meta-game acts as a living representation of the players' progression through the history of the game's competitive existence and has shifted dramatically over the years. Meleeinfo.com, one of the more detailed archives of the competitive *Super Smash Brothers Melee* history, breaks down the competitive scene's narrative into five components: The Early Game (2001-2005), The Golden Age (2006-2007), The Dark Age (2008-2009), The Revival (2010-2012), and finally The Platinum Age (2013-Present). Each of these segments of the game's history focuses on the different top players that made the game so interesting at the time as well as the meta-game of the time that dictated the pace and style of game play. A similar focus dictates the premise of the The Smash Brothers, a 2013 documentary with over 1 million views on YouTube. The meta-game of *Super Smash Brothers Melee* developed as a result of an incredibly innovative competitive community. For example, in "The Early Game" years of Melee, players developed a series of techniques that revolutionized the

pace of the game. “Wavedashing,” “L-Cancelling,” “Chain-grabs,” and “Dash Dancing” are all now thought of as fundamental techniques in the realm of competitive *Melee*, but there was a time when no one knew about these innovations and the players had to discover these techniques on their own. The Wavedash is perhaps one of the most interesting technique in *Super Smash Brothers Melee*, as it exploits an unintended mechanic within the game’s design as a way to accelerate one’s character’s movement in a short burst allowing previously impossible combo follow-ups to become possible. A Wavedash is performed when a player dodges down into the ground from the air but also at an angle, allowing their character to slide either forward or backwards upon landing. This mechanic has become virtually necessary to compete at a high level of play, but there was a time when Ken Hoang, the former best player in the world, was winning tournaments while having no idea how to Wavedash. In fact, in The Smash Brothers documentary, Ken recalls the first time he played in a tournament against competitors who were already savvy to this advanced technique and they were all laughing at him for not being able to wavedash. Their laughter soon quieted as Ken proceeded to decimate his competition with basic fundamentals. Ken would, however, learn to incorporate the wavedash, along with many other advanced techniques into his game play, and before long he became the undoubted “King of Smash”.

Riot Games was founded in 2006 by Marc Merill and Brandon Beck, with the intention of creating a game modeled after the hugely successful Warcraft 3 mod known as Defense of the Ancients or DOTA. After 3 years of development, Riot released *League of Legends*, a free to play competitive computer game that pitted two teams of five individuals against each other. Each player selects a single character to control out of a massive roster of “champions”, attempting to create cohesive team compositions with characters whose abilities synergize well

together, while also basing their choices to counter the strengths of characters selected by the opposing team. This genre of game, known as a Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (or MOBA) has since grown to become one of the most popular forms of competitive computer gaming.

Perhaps the greatest difference in the development styles of *Super Smash Brothers* and *League of Legends* can be found in the visible presence of their parent companies. While *Super Smash Brothers Melee*, a game released in 2001 and still played competitively to date has never been patched, its meta-game has continued to develop as a result of players discovering new techniques and countering the previously considered best strategies with new innovations. This means that the pacing of the competitive meta-game, along with the narrative of competitive play rests entirely in the hands of the player base for *Super Smash Brothers Melee*. *League of Legends* was developed with the intention of being a competitive, Agon-centric game, and its very core revolves around the notion of a continuously shifting meta-game. While Nintendo simply created their game and left it for players to explore, Riot's idea was to constantly have a hand in the way the game is being played by patching the game frequently. They would add new characters and make adjustments to the power levels of existing characters in an effort to balance the game, allowing their game to live and breathe as a constantly changing project. While live patching was nothing new to gaming at the time (2009), the idea of creating a competitive game that would undergo drastic changes so frequently was certainly an impressive feat, especially when considering the amount of new characters or "champions" that Riot would eventually introduce into their game. At the time of the game's release, *League of Legends* had a total of 17 playable champions. Riot released new characters into their game quite frequently however, to the point where now, in 2016 there are currently over 120 playable characters. Compare this to *Super Smash Brothers Melee*, which has a total of 25 playable characters, and we can begin to

understand just how daunting of a task it is to balance over 120 characters in efforts to keep them equally powerful and viable in competitive play. This is where the true beauty of the constantly shifting meta-game comes into play for *League of Legends*. Not every character has to be equally powerful at the same time in *League of Legends*, because soon enough Riot will make changes in the game, causing a shift in the meta-game, allowing for a completely different set of characters to excel.

On July 13th 2010, Riot Games announced the beginning of the first season of competitive play. This meant that they released a separate feature in the game's client which allowed for players to either queue for "Normal" matches, geared toward the casual player, or "Ranked" matches aimed at pleasing those of a more competitive mindset. While there was no difference in the game mode itself, the Ranked system allowed players to gain or lose points, affecting their national ranking and placing themselves in skill brackets. This system, known as the ELO system, was invented by the Hungarian-born, American physicist Arpad Elo, as an improved ranking system for Chess, and is commonly used in many competitive player-vs-player games, sports, and video games alike. In order to allow their player base to further separate "fun" from "competition", on the same day as the release of Ranked queues, Riot released a custom game mode centered around chance known as All Random All Mid (or ARAM). This game mode would randomly select a character for each of the players, and send them all to the

same section of the map (the middle lane) (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Map of League of Legends "Summoner's Rift" Game Mode

This is a clear example of Riot approaching Alea or chance in a way that Nintendo differs: Riot is essentially suggesting that yes, chance is a fun game mechanic, but it is frustrating in a competitive setting. Another instance of this departure from Alea in competition was the removal of the "Dodge" stat in *League of Legends*, which happened fairly early into the game's existence. Before the removal of this stat, players could purchase items that would allow their characters to randomly ignore incoming damage at an increased percentage based on their

"Dodge" rating. At the time of Dodge's removal in the game, a developer at Riot under the alias ByronicHero made a statement about the company's reasoning behind this change, which focused on the frustrating nature of Dodge's relationship with chance. "Dodge also has much more potential to remove satisfaction in a noticeable way than other defensive stats, mostly due to its random nature. Failing to finish off an opponent with an auto-attack because they happened to get their 5% chance to dodge is a pretty poor experience for the attacker, especially since the escape isn't based on good gameplay decision or skill-based way to survive. The fun to un-fun ratio is poor" [13]. In short, Riot is condemning Alea as counterintuitive to the fun of competition— a notion that directly contradicts Masahiro Sakurai's vision for *Super Smash Brothers*. This example highlights Riot's influence on controlling the meta-game of *League of Legends*, in that they get to choose which mechanics stay in the game and which they want to remove, however, this is not to say that that the competitive player base has not had an influence on the development of the meta-game. If you have played *League of Legends* in the last five years, you will be familiar with the unspoken rule for assembling a team composition and distributing your players strategically across the map. As there are five players on each team, and the map consists of three lanes, divided by uncharted territory known as the "jungle", it is common etiquette in *League of Legends* to send one player to the top lane, one player to the mid lane, one player to the jungle, and send the remaining two players to the bottom lane with very specific strategic intentions. Every match of *League of Legends* is expected to be played this way and up until recently, in 2016, this was not enforced by the game's engine. Now Riot has finally decided to implement a system in which the player must queue into one of these positions, and there is no flexibility in the matter. This system was not, however, developed by Riot, and in fact there was a time in the early stages of the game that this pivotal component of

the meta-game did not exist. It wasn't until the World Finals of Season 1, when two professional teams competed head to head for a prize sum of $100,000 dollars, and demonstrated this strategy, that this system became the norm. To me, this suggests that no matter how influential a game's developer may be in day-to-day balancing, the players are the ones who truly define the meta-game.

To sum up in terms of Callois' definitions, although Super Smash Brothers Melee was originally designed with much more Alea than Agon, the cult players of this game took it upon themselves to find a way to turn it into a combat of Agon. League of Legends, was intended to be pure Agon competition, but the game developers at Riot realized that they needed to make it more fun for competitors of different skill levels and took it upon themselves to balance their game with updates and new characters. While competition may thrive in Agon-centric games, successful games in the 21st century still need a balance of both Alea and Agon.

Chapter 2: E-sports vs. Grassroots

"Play is not merely an individual pastime. It may not even be that as frequently as is supposed. To be sure, there are a number of games, notably games of skill, in which an entirely personal ability is displayed and which should not occasion surprise when played alone. However, games of skill may quickly become games of competitive skill. There is an obvious proof of this. As

individualized as one imagines the operation of the contraption to be --whether kite, top, yo-yo, diabolo, cup-and-ball, or hoop--it would quickly lose its capacity to amuse if there were no competitors or spectators, at least potentially….Possessors of the same toys congregate in an accustomed or convenient place where they test their skill. This is often essential to their pleasure." Roger Callois, Man, Play and Games [14].

In this chapter of my project I will be applying a comparative approach between person-to-person gaming communities and online gaming communities in an attempt to understand two very different manifestations of professional competitive gaming. On the side of person-to-person gaming communities, such as the arcade-influenced Fighting Game Community, which includes *Super Smash Brothers*, we can observe the nature of a grassroots tournament scene. These competitions are funded and organized by members of the community, resulting in a modest, community oriented competitive scene. While they only appeal to a relatively small number of viewers, these competitions serve as inherently social staples of the culture. On the other hand, we can explore the recent influx of corporatized "eSports" that now dominates the online competitive computer gaming world. While the humble traditions surrounding arcade-culture in person-to-person gaming competitions have always appealed to a small niche of involved gamers, the massive production value of the eSports industry is revolutionizing the way the world sees competitive gaming. There are spectators watching competitive eSports now who don't even play the game competitively. It is fascinating, then, to consider the influence that these massive differences in representations of the pinnacle of competition has on the gaming communities themselves. Will this influx of corporate financing and media-coverage have a positive or negative effect on gaming communities? How do the communities surrounding these very different iterations of competitive gaming vary as a result of this clear distinction? How has

gaming evolved to the point in which people are debating if professional video gamers should be treated as athletes? These are all questions I will attempt to resolve throughout this chapter.

Pong, one of the very first competitive videos game, was installed in a bar by its developer, Nolan Bushnell of Atari, in 1972. As the story goes, the next day, the bar owner called to tell Bushnell that the machine was broken, and when Bushnell came to see what the problem was, he discovered that the game change box was overstuffed with quarters and that the popularity of a competitive game was the problem. Within weeks he was manufacturing and selling thousands more of these arcade cabinets to be installed in bars and arcades all over the country.

Arcade gaming continued in the 80's with games like *Donkey Kong*, *Centipede*, and *Pac-Man* and the competitive nature of these games led players to hold competitions. In these competitions, players would attempt to earn the highest score they could on the machine, for the chance to have their initials displayed at the top of the machine's leader boards. While some gamers were content with the simple pleasures of holding a high score on a single player game, future gamers would strive to defeat their challengers in real time face-to-face competition.

Street Fighter was one of the earliest versions of a player versus player arcade game in which the two competitors would each put in a quarter and only the winner would get to continue. Players would line up in their local arcades to take their shot at defeating the current streak-holder in hopes of getting another chance to play on the same coin. In his 1991 essay, entitled *Play it again, Pac-Man*, Charles Bernstein highlights an interesting correlation between sex and videogames. "Like sex, good play on an arcade video game not only earns extra plays but also extends and expands the length of the current play, with the ultimate lure of an unlimited stretch of time in which the end bell never tolls" [15]. Players could practice as long as they

were winning and thus, were preparing for tournaments in that they were already taking their competitors' money.

Gaming culture has been criticized since the dawn of arcades. Carly A. Kocurek points out in her book, *Coin Operated Americans*, that many critics of gaming culture were concerned that arcades were causing anti-social behavior in teens as a result of spending so much time engaged in a seemingly useless activity. It cost money to play the games, and many teens used their lunch money quarters in these games instead of spending on food. An article about the opening of an arcade in Lynbrook, NY in 1982, said " The residents said that the centers, which feature games that challenge the players with electronic sounds and flashing lights, have become hang-outs for noisy teenagers who drink too much beer, leave garbage around, and vandalize the property of nearby residents" [16].

Despite the criticism of concerned adults, America's youth only grew more excited about the advent of competitive gaming. In 1980, Atari held the first video game competition for an arcade game called *Space Invaders*, a Japanese made two-dimensional intergalactic shooting game. The tournament attracted 10,000 people. Seven years later, there was a tournament for a game called *Quake*, one of the earlier first-person shooter (or FPS), which are known for creating a sense of realism by using the game's camera angle to simulate looking through the eyes of the shooter. Two thousand people came to that competition and the winner won a Ferrari, which had been owned by the lead developer of *Quake*. The Cyberathlete Professional League was formed shortly after the event, and was soon offering a cumulative $15,000 in prize money through CPL sponsored tournaments.

Allow me to pause for a moment and define a term that has gained much traction over the last decade: eSports. One of the hosts on IGN's gaming talk show, "eSports Weekly" attempts to

bring clarity to the term by defining eSports as a representation of "competitive gaming at its most pure." While the term "eSports" is certainly representative of an optimized approach toward competitive gaming, I would like to clarify that the term is colloquially used to suggest the presence of a corporate influence on competitive tournaments, with a heavy focus on broadcasting and high-production value. Most eSports tournaments are organized and funded by external parties, usually representing a financial interest in competitive gaming as a business. This is contrasted in the FGC by a longstanding tradition of community organized and self-funded tournaments reminiscent of the arcade gaming world. The term eSports, however, has ultimately been adopted by mass-media as a way of discussing the professionalized business of competitive gaming.

eSports began gaining traction at the turn of the millennium in South Korea when the nation became obsessed with *StarCraft,* a notable RTS (Real Time Strategy) science fiction game, developed by Blizzard Entertainment. The game was incredibly fast-paced and set two competitors against each other in a battle of efficiency, speed, strategy, and adaptation. As the game became more and more prominent throughout South Korea, production value increased in the broadcasting of competitive matches and people began to profit off of competitive video games as spectator sports. Again, the key distinction that separated professional *StarCraft* from any run-of-the mill competitive game was the interest in broadcasting the game as a spectator sport, and as a result, monetizing the competitive scene on a massive scale. "In 2004, the final of the Starcraft Pro League attracted 100,000 fans to Gwangalli Beach in the southern beach city of Busan" [17]. Paul Sams, the CEO of Blizzard, the company that owned *StarCraft* said, "That really was when we knew, oh my goodness, this has gone to an entirely different level" [17].

When talking about eSports in the year 2016, *League of Legends* is the major topic. For a game that was only released a short while ago in 2009, *League of Legends* has made a remarkable impact on the world of eSports. *League of Legends* is a game so massive in its following that in 2014, its world finals had more views than the World Series [7]. Essentially, competitive video games have reached the point in American mass culture in which they can be compared to, or even surpass in popularity, baseball, the sport that we know as America's great pastime. I would like to highlight for any readers who may be unfamiliar with the nature of eSports events, that these viewers are not even playing the game at these events. Instead, viewers pay between fifteen and twenty dollars for a seat in a stadium venue, where they can watch professional teams sit down at their computers on the stage and play out a series of matches while the game itself is being projected onto massive screens for the viewers to follow along. [Vid 2].

The game's appeal as a spectator sport has not been limited to the occasional tournament on a grand scale. *League of Legends* major professional events have managed to sell out many impressive sports stadium arenas such as The Staples Center in Los Angeles and Madison Square Garden in New York. At the same time, League of Legends has also consistently been the single most popular video game broadcast on the Amazon-owned streaming platform Twitch.tv. eSports viewed on the Internet and television have become so popular that more than 70 million people watch internationally. Imagine being a football fan and being able to watch a first person perspective of Peyton Manning practicing every day while offering insightful commentary to aspiring football players. This is in essence the appeal of watching professional gamers stream their casual practice matches online. At the same time, some of the most popular streamers are

not even professional gamers -- while they may be good at the game, they are also entertaining performers and their streams are often just as popular as the professional players.

In Season 3 of competitive *League of Legends*, Riot Games created the League Championship Series (LCS) and declared a monopoly on the broadcasting of competitive *League of Legends*. Before this, competitive *League of Legends* was much more community oriented and free form. The LCS essentially acts as a major league for the game, similar to the NBA or the NFL. In order to play in the LCS, one has to be signed by a professional team, backed financially by an eSports corporation. As a result of this, the player base of the game is forced to exist almost entirely online, in physical isolation from other players. Only the top 0.01 percentile of players are considered good enough to be signed to a team, and thus there is no person-to-person community for aspiring amateurs to meet like-minded individuals.

At the same time that eSports was having enormous growth with its huge sellout tournaments, online playing, and online viewing, a very different kind of video game competition was happening in a more grassroots way. Fighting games, or simply put, games that entail two characters trying to punch each other out, began in the late 70's in arcades across the country. *Knights in Armor*, invented in 1976, could be considered the first fighting game. It was a very simple jousting game in which competitors chose either the white knight or the black knight and fought each other with lances, with only the abilities to move the characters and line up their lances. In this same year, Sega came out with a boxing game, *Heavyweight Champ*, with 2D characters fighting each other via elementary arcade game controllers. There were many more simple fighting games which were invented and marketed during the late 70's and early 80's until the market became saturated with so many home consoles, each only playing a few games. Because of this intense competition for market share and the number of home

consoles, there was an arcade crash in 1983, which shut down many arcades and game developers.

Fighting games did not die out altogether with the crash. Martial arts games became popular in the 80's with *Karate Champ*, a single-player fighting game controlled with two joysticks and including special moves, implemented by combinations of the joysticks. One year later, Data East, the developer of *Karate Champ*, brought out *Karate Champ: Player VS. Player*, a fighting game with a second set of joysticks, in which players could now face off in person against each other.

Perhaps the most iconic series in fighting game history, *Street Fighter*, had its first release in 1987. The series went on to establish many of the signature features of the genre, including the implementation of "rounds", which broke up game play into a best of three short matches. *Street Fighter* also established "combos" as a signature element of the fighting game, in which players could demonstrate their mastery of complex combos that require immense rhythmic precision and huge amounts of practice.

Street Fighter has certainly had a massive influence on the development of other fighting games, including Super Smash Brothers. In fact, in an interview with the games journalism publication, Kotaku, Masahiro Sakurai (the head developer of Super Smash) recalls a *Street Fighter II* tournament consisting of over 100 people, in which he came out number 1. Toward the end of the arcade era, fighting games like *Mortal Combat*, and *Super Smash Brothers* began to shine because they were available on home consoles such as the PlayStation and the Nintendo GameCube. While the gamers were beginning to leave behind the hassle of the arcade in favor of playing at home on their couches, the hyper-competitive culture surrounding these arcade-style fighters was easily integrated into this new era of gaming. In an interview on the IGN

gaming talk show, “eSports Weekly”, two of the bigger names representing the Street Fighter and Smash communities respectively, Mike Ross and Daniel Lee acknowledge this divide between arcade gamers and console gamers to be both generational and socio-economic [Vid 3]. Age served as a factor in that if someone grew up playing games at an Arcade, often times the arcade is the place where they felt comfortable playing games. For younger gamers, the new wave of console gaming came equipped with an invaluable trait: convenience. Instead of having to trek down to the arcade any time they wanted to play, they could simply invite over their friends and power up their Nintendo. On the other hand, socio-economic factors may have played an equally prominent role in paving the difference between arcade and console gamers. If you came from a lower economic background, odds are you could not afford to purchase an expensive home console -- instead you could simply walk into the arcade and play with the spare change in your pocket. Mike Ross, one of the biggest names in the FGC, suggests that this act of “betting your lunch money” is representative of the essence of FGC culture. In the arcade, your quarter’s value is dependent on your own skill -- you can keep playing on that quarter until someone beats you. This is at the heart of what it means to compete in gaming, and as such the arcade-style Fighting Game culture remains immensely competitive even after transitioning into a console-based gaming experience.

There are many Fighting Game franchises with active communities just begging for the chance to shine on a big stage, but unlike in eSports, the tournaments are community funded and because there is a lack of corporate organization, the focus of these tournaments is on a small number of titles. There is no weekly “LCS” for Fighting Games, instead people will stream weekly tournaments at their local hobby shops or video game stores in an effort to promote their communities and create a sustainable competitive environment through which to practice and

improve. While there are many small frequent tournaments in the Fighting Game Community (often referred to as “weeklies” or “locals”), there are also larger tournaments that shape the narrative of the competitive season -- these are called “majors” or “regionals”. The Evolution Championship Series, or EVO, is the biggest “major” in the fighting game world and happens every year in Las Vegas, Nevada. EVO is not just a stage for a single video game franchise, but instead is a collective tournament of multiple games in the fighting game genre. While the tournament is relatively small in comparison to the sold-out League of Legends major events at Madison Square Garden and the Staples Center, EVO is by far the biggest event in the Fighting Game Community and has hosted as many as two thousand entrants for a single game. Many representatives of the smaller communities in the FGC, may spend months practicing their game for a chance to prove themselves as a true competitor on the big stage, yet their game may not even get chosen for EVO every year. Currently there are 9 separate games being featured at EVO. Though this number is relatively small when considering the plethora of titles and communities that exist throughout the FGC, EVO still acts as a beacon of positivity for the Fighting Game Community. EVO encourages the communities around a variety of different games to promote their own competitive scenes in hopes of creating a community active enough for their game to be selected for the tournament. Though the tournament is comprised of many different games that have minimal player overlap, the staging of it is unique in that it promotes cross-pollination between all the different niches of the Fighting Game Community and fosters positive relationships between these groups of gamers.

The dichotomy in structural organization of gaming tournaments is striking when contrasting online eSports and person-to-person Fighting Games. It is worth considering how these differences have manifested in the cultures surrounding these communities. The

connection between console fighters and arcade-style fighters has grown increasingly close over the years, however one of the major issues with the FGC is becoming apparent as more and more games compete for a chance at the big stage. As the Fighting Game Community has always been a grassroots, community-funded establishment, they have struggled to optimize their viewership in the ways that eSports have done.

Chapter 3: The Culture of Gaming: Commercialization, Identity, and Harassment

"It is not absurd to try diagnosing a civilization in terms of the games that are especially popular there. In fact, if games are cultural factors and images, it follows that to a certain degree a civilization and its content may be characterized by its games. They necessarily reflect its culture pattern and provide useful indications as to the preferences, weakness, and strength of a given society at a particular stage of its evolution." - Roger Callois, Man, Play, and Games [19].

Commercialization of Gaming:
The Pro's and Cons of the Rise of eSports and the Fall of Grassroots Competitions

Gaming in its purest form should be recreational. Callois, even back in 1961, warns against the corruption of games in modern life with the intrusion of economic competitions. In his chapter on Corruption of Games, he says "For professional boxers, bicycle riders, or actors, *Agon,* or *Mimicry* has ceased being a recreation intended as a relaxation from fatigue or a relief from the monotony of oppressive and exhausting work. It is their very work, necessary to their subsistence, a constant and absorbing activity, replete with obstacles and problems, from which they properly find relaxation by playing at a game to which they are not contracted" [20]. Thus Caillois might find the notion of "Professional Gaming" contradictory.

With the introduction of eSports, video gaming has effectively stopped being recreation and become a business of professionals, like professional football or basketball. Players go into training, living in "gaming houses" with other professional gamers, keeping a rigorous schedule

of working out, gaming, sleeping and eating, in order to achieve peak performance. Often times, the professional players are expected to practice for up to twelve hours a day. In online eSports, corporations have taken an interest in the surging popularity surrounding major competitions. Following in suit, some of the bigger names in professional sports have begun investing in eSports organizations. Recently, Shaquille O'Neal, Rick Fox, and Alex Rodriguez have all publicly announced their financial involvement in eSports [21]. When some of the biggest names in American sports begin breaking out their checkbooks to endorse video game competitions, a question is posed: are eSports really so appealing that celebrities of the sports world would want to help them grow? Perhaps, but Rodriguez and O'Neal are not just athletes, they are also businessmen. Both of them are multimillionaires who have invested large sums of money into various business ventures, and with the influx of money coming into eSports, it seems likely that these businessmen are looking for an opportunity to increase their capital. Eager investors looking to get in on the eSports business isn't necessarily a bad thing; the money allows for higher levels of production value for live competitions, better amenities for players living in gaming houses, and even increased salaries for the players themselves. However, the potential for corruption in an industry financed by major corporations, surrounding naive teenage computer gamers is incredibly high, and issues of contractual negligence and player abuse have surfaced.

Consider for a moment what happens when corrupt investors enter the picture. Martin Shkreli, for example, best known for his corporate greed in having increased the price of AIDS medication, also decided to invest in eSports. In fact, Shkreli has invested in three professional *League of Legends* teams and each of these instances have resulted in controversy. In May of 2015, Martin Shkreli founded the organization "Odyssey Gaming" with the goal of qualifying his

team for the North American LCS (*League Championship Series* — the NBA of competitive *League of Legends*). Shkreli approached this business venture as a very positive step forward for competitive gaming. At the time he was putting the team together, Shkreli even wrote, "we hope to set the industry standard for the relationship between team members and the companies they partner with" [22]. Shkreli did not hold true to his promise, but instead reinforced just how susceptible this new industry is to corrupt investors with questionable ethics. After his team failed to qualify for any of the professional leagues, Shkreli bought his way into another organization, "Maelstrom Gaming" which had already qualified for the amateur competitive league known as the Challenger Series. After his new team failed to qualify into the highest echelon of competitive *League of Legends* in North America, the NALCS, Shkreli walked away from both organizations and refused to pay the players and coaches for their time. Rohit Nathani, a well known player and coach, was among Shkreli's contracted players. He is now seeking legal action in hopes of attaining the $35,000 dollars Shkreli owes him. Nathani's lawyer expressed his disappointment and pointed out that this is not uncommon in the eSports industry for corrupt investors to take advantage of the eager young gamers looking to turn their pastimes into careers. "It is incredibly unfortunate that despite the eSports industry's growth in the past few years, people like Rohit are continually not being paid by their teams" [22]. Even before his two failed attempts at qualifying into the North American LCS, Shkreli had attempted to finance a team in the European LCS. The team, known as "Ex Nihilo", ultimately failed to advance into the EULCS, but that did not stop Shkreli from abusing his money to work the system. Through a loophole in Riot Games' competitive ruleset, Shkreli was able to buy out the contracts of over half of the players on Copenhagen Wolves Academy, the team that had placed above Ex Nihilo, thus rendering them ineligible to compete and securing Ex Nihilo a spot on the

big stage. Despite all of this, Ex Nihilo placed poorly throughout the season and once again, Shkreli walked away from his players without paying. Between all of his endeavours in competitive League of Legends, Shkreli allegedly owes a cumulative $75,000 dollars to various individuals who feel they were taken advantage of and are now seeking compensation. This anecdote is not intended to suggest that all eSports organizations are facilitated by such shameless individuals as Shkreli, but rather to highlight how easy it is for investors to take advantage of aspiring eSports athletes.

With online eSports like *League of Legends* paving the way for smaller gaming scenes like the Fighting Game Community, anxieties around corporate sponsorships in smaller gaming communities are high. Daniel "Tafokints" Lee is one of the most influential figures in the *Super Smash Brothers* community. As an avid competitor, commentator and analyst of the game over the last decade, Tafo's opinion carries great weight within the community. Tafo recently spoke out about his concerns with the overlap between eSports and the FGC in an interview on IGN's YouTube talk show entitled "eSports Weekly". As horror stories about corrupt eSports organizations taking advantage of players have become more and more common, Tafo is skeptical of the future of Smash in eSports. "It is going to be kind of scary for friends and acquaintances I've come to love as family to possibly get cheated and have their lives ruined for a while" [Vid 3].

The community surrounding *Super Smash Brothers* is relevant to this conversation because they have been able to sustain a grassroots competitive scene for 15 years without the aid of corporate sponsorship. Now that online eSports like *League of Legends* and *Dota 2* have proven the capabilities of competitive games to succeed as spectator sports generating real

money, it is only natural that the same corporations sponsoring players in online games would look toward the most popular person-to-person games as the next frontier.

Up until recently, Super Smash Brothers was never considered "eSports material" nor endorsed by Nintendo in competitive gaming. Most likely accredited to the community's subversion of the game's original vision, the community was left to start its own grassroots competitive scene. However, in the last couple of years, Super Smash Bros has become one of the more popular series in the FGC (Fighting Game Community) and is beginning to show early signs of a shift towards eSports. With *Super Smash Brothers Melee* growing more and more popular as a staple in competitive gaming and the 2014 release of *Super Smash Brothers 4 Wii U*, which appeals to a new generation of gamers, Smash is at a critical turning point in its future as a competitive game.

In the last couple of years, big name eSports companies have begun sponsoring Smash Brothers players for the first time [23]. Many of the top players from the *Melee* community began receiving offers around 2014 as the result of two historic Super Smash events. In 2013, the Smash community held a fundraiser in attempts to get EVO, the premier FGC Tournament in America to add Smash to the roster of fighting games at the annual tournament. Despite cross-community tension between Smashers and more traditional arcade-style fighting game players, the Smash community managed to raise nearly $100,000 for charity [24]. This proved to the coordinators of EVO that Smash players were deeply caring individuals, and so passionate about the game that they deserved a place on the stage to compete with the whole FGC watching. The other major event in 2013 that added to Smash's popularity as an eSport was the release of the fan-made documentary, "The Smash Brothers" [Vid 1]. This film is a four-and-a-half hour exploration of the competitive history of Super Smash Brothers Melee using interviews with the

community. Its home-footage is rough, but it exudes the passion and excitement that is so prevalent in this niche of the gaming world. The documentary was released on YouTube, where it has currently attracted over 1 million views. One of its primary focuses is an in-depth look at the six “Gods” of Smash and their respective impacts on the competitive scene. Though the filmmaker had no such motivation, the documentary acted as a catalyst for sponsorships from eSports corporations such as Team Liquid, Cloud 9, and others, to sign contracts with these “Gods” of Smash. For a professional Smash player, signing with a major eSports team is a life-changing experience. Sponsorship usually includes a flat-rate salary, bonuses for placing in the upper ranks of a tournament, airfare to tournaments, hotel rooms, and free gaming equipment. In addition to all of that, sponsored players know that they will be getting paid to play no matter how they place in a tournament. For the sponsor, the main benefit seems to be corporate promotion. While walking around a Smash tournament, one will see all sorts of characters; some people show up dressed in full cosplay attire for their favorite characters, others sport backpacks and gamer-affiliated graphic t-shirts. In a sea of twenty thousand gamers, it can be hard to pick out a new player from a veteran; however, the best of the best – the sponsored players – come to these events wearing jerseys that represent their respective sponsorships. Much like in traditional sports, the backs of these jerseys are often embroidered with a name – though instead of “Manning” or “Favre” the names would be “Apossl” or “Hungrybox” (Fig 6).

Figure 6. Jersey of VGBC APOSL, Professional Super Smash Brothers Player

In 2014, the first big wave of eSports' sponsorships came to Smash. Major eSports corporations signed Ken, KoreanDJ, Mango, PPMD and more of the best Melee players. As of late 2015, notable Super Smash Brothers 4 Wii U players have been added to this list, including Zero, Ally, Nakat, Mew2king, and many more.

It is clear to see that these corporations have become fascinated with Smash as a platform for corporate gain -- the question that Daniel "Tafokints" Lee and many others in the Smash community are asking is how will the Smash community change as a result of this? "How do we maintain the grass roots identity of Smash that has driven the community for the past 15 years when all of the sudden we have all these outside companies that had an **interest** in Smash but now see an **opportunity**?" Lee ponders the question before responding optimistically, "I think the way we answer that is we take every decision case by case and make smart, good decisions." While I appreciate the method Tafo suggests, I find it hard to believe that the introduction of millions of corporate dollars wouldn't begin to affect the decisions being made FOR the community. The autonomy of the Smash community has always been associated with the poor relationship between competitive Smashers and Nintendo Japan, but what happens once big name companies start to pay for these events and fewer and fewer decisions are left up to the players themselves? If major tournament's become influenced by corporations to make decisions that would jeopardize the community-centric nature of Super Smash Brothers in hopes of achieving larger viewer counts and bigger prize pools, it is possible that the grassroots essence of the community will soon be replaced with corporate greed. If this were to happen, who knows how the community would grow to adapt to a corporately idealized version of their game? It's not just the possibility of corporate corruption that drives fear into the hearts of the community, it's the possibility that a shift towards eSports would change the entire identity of the Smash

community. Would the Smash community still be as uniquely social, supportive, and community oriented as it is today? This is the true cause for concern about the integration of eSports into Smash.

Identity

The contrast between online gaming communities and person-to-person gaming communities is not limited to the presence of eSports corporations. These communities are inherently different as a result of one crucial difference: the element of face-to-face human interaction. Participating in a gaming space can take many shapes and forms depending on the environment, and the contrast in behavior between online gaming communities and person-to-person gaming communities makes this very evident. Identity is often attached to one's very core and may even seem inescapable, however in gaming culture it is very flexible. The way in which players identify in a gaming space is very much centered around the socially accepted norms of a space — this is why internet anonymity has become such a challenge for online gaming communities.

Identity in a gaming space is an incredibly liberating concept. One of the most unique qualities a video gamer has is the ability to retract from their physical space and body, and get lost in the world of the game. I have already discussed Roger Caillois in regards to Agon and Alea (strategy and chance), but there is another aspect of his game theory that is integral to video game culture. What Caillois refers to as Mimicry is at the center of every fantasy role-playing game in history. Caillois defines Mimicry as when the player "forgets, disguises, or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another" [25]. Many cultural critics have expressed concerns about the alienating aspect of video game culture, and have often suggested that roleplaying games are simply a form of escapism. This is not merely escapism, however, and if

anything, it seems closer to a rebirth: exploring the world through a different set of eyes, behind the mask of a different name, and perhaps approaching life with a different personality. Chris "Wife" Fabiszack was one of the biggest names in the "Golden Era" of *Super Smash Brothers Melee*. As a commentator, professional player, and published author, Wife has expressed some of the most profound observations on the nature of the game to date. In an interview in *The Smash Brothers Documentary*, Wife discusses the notion of identity in *Super Smash Brothers*, "I wouldn't say that I found myself in *Smash*, but I found a second self in *Smash*." Wife goes on to give examples of this, "Having this gamer tag and this alternate life and this alternate set of friends and this alternate set of goals allowed me to have an identity that was very different. In regular life, some people would call me the most positive person they've met — I'm a very positive person… But in *Smash* I'm arrogant. I'm arrogant and I can be condescending and I know what I want and I'm aggressive and forceful, and it's fun to have that second identity. I wonder how many people found a community [in *Smash*] where they were able to express themselves when they couldn't before"[Vid 1]. This notion of duality and identifying in a gamespace is extremely important to contemporary gaming culture. All gamers take on another persona in competitive games, and as Wife points out in the documentary, *Smash* is a game that allows players to express themselves through their play style: it is a very expressive game. Wife even suggests that he could watch matches of professional players without looking at the names and know just by their playstyles whom he is watching. The notion of identity permeates throughout Smash culture in a very visceral way. But the ways gamers interact through their alternate identities varies greatly depending on the environment in which they are playing. *Smash* is a person-to-person fighting game, and in order to improve one's skills, competitors are

forced to socialize at tournaments, ask their opponents what they can do to improve, and present themselves as respectable, positive members of the community.

While the Smash community has undoubtedly perpetuated a culture of positive social behavior, gaming communities rooted in internet anonymity have struggled with the challenges of “trolls”, racists, homophobes and multiple forms of online harassment. Identifying in an online, anonymous game space creates a physical and psychological distance between players. This distance, in conjunction with the highly competitive nature of these games, is often enough to spark conflict between players online — but what is more worrisome is the lack of consequence for horrific behavior in these online environments. Abhorrent behavior in online gaming spaces has become such a common experience that Riot Games has an entire team dedicated to the issue of “toxic” players. Jeffrey Lin, also known as Riot Lyte, is the lead developer of social systems at Riot Games. While most developers of hugely popular online games have virtually ignored the presence of verbal abuse and harassment in their games, Riot has made it their mission to punish and rehabilitate as many “toxic” players as they can through a system they call “The Tribunal”. The Tribunal is essentially a user populated jury that allows players to review the chat logs of players who have been reported for negative behavior multiple times and then allows the “jurors” to determine whether or not the toxic player should be punished. Punishments vary from chat restriction in which the players are only allowed to type a handful of messages per game, to temporary bans and even permanent bans for repeat offenders. Despite their best efforts, the challenge of preventing a user-base of 32 million players (primarily young adult males) from verbally abusing each other in a hyper-competitive game is perhaps too great to completely absolve [26]. While playing *League of Legends* it is not unlikely you will be criticized by someone you encounter online, and hate speech is rather common. In fact, a

popular *League of Legends* YouTube personality known as “Disco Heat” has become known for his videos in which he records players acting immaturely and publicly shames them in a series he calls “League of Children” [Vid 4]. These videos are immensely popular in the *League of Legends* community, perhaps as they foster a sense of vigilantism and taking action against the racists, bigots, and other unpleasant encounters that have become so common in the online gaming experience.

Though the professional *League of Legends* scene is very strict about the way pro players represent themselves, the viewers that make up the majority of the community cannot be silenced, and through their ignorance we begin to see a clear picture of how different the FGC and online gaming communities can be. Perhaps the most painful example of this can be seen in the recent events regarding Remy, the first female professional *League of Legends* player. Remi was born male, and has since undergone surgery to aid in her transition to becoming female — none of which should matter in the slightest. However, the community’s reaction to Remi’s presence in the pro circuit was appalling. Watching the live events on Twitch.tv made it painfully evident that the loudest voices in the community were ignorant and hateful. Any time Remi appeared on screen the live chat window would erupt with the phrases like “Fake girl” or “Fake boobs”, eventually creating a self-perpetuating meme that followed Remy throughout her public appearances. This horrific behavior is terrifying in that *League of Legends* is perhaps the most prominent window into competitive gaming culture in existence. Remi’s professional career did not last long, as she decided to retire due to personal issues “most notably anxiety and self-esteem” which had been amplified by the stress of the spotlight [27].

When compared to the FGC, it becomes clear that not all gamers are as cruel and intolerant as the League of Legend players. Ricky Ortiz has been one of the strongest

competitors in the professional *Street Fighter* scene for years. Throughout Ricky's time in the pro scene, he transitioned from male to female, and there has been virtually no controversy about this occurrence. Ricky is praised as one of the best to ever play the game, gender identity has nothing to do with it and viewers have been both supportive and respectful of Ricky. Perhaps the fact that the FGC and the *Street Fighter* community are smaller person-to-person gaming communities has perpetuated an environment of respectful and positive social behavior, whereas the mask of internet anonymity has allowed for hateful voices to hide safely behind their computer monitors in online gaming communities. Diversity as a whole is very different between the FGC and online eSports communities. An image was recently circulated on Twitter, highlighting the contrasts in racial diversity between the FGC and the online eSports scenes — and pointing out that the FGC is much more racially diverse [Fig 7]. However women are still a huge minority in both of these gaming communities.

Figure 7. An Image that circulated on Twitter depicting the racial homogeneity of eSports broadcasters contrasted with the racially diverse figures of the Fighting Game Community.

Misogyny in Gamer Culture

According to the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), 33% of gamers are female [3]. While the idea that one in every three gamers is female is wonderfully optimistic, this statistic seems skewed, perhaps by the ESA's definition of "gamer". The ESA considers mobile games, Facebook games, online chess and other stretches of the "video game medium" as equal components of gamer culture – however in reality these aren't the types of games that make up the subculture of "gamers" that we see in the media, which seem mainly to be White and Asian males. Perhaps this statistic makes more sense when we look further and discover that the average age of female gamers is 43 years old. Understanding this age discrepancy between the predominance of White and Asian teenage males playing competitive online games and forty year old women playing mobile games allows us to address the reality of gamer culture. It is sadly very male dominated and has garnered a reputation of recurring misogyny. Riot Games says that 90% of League of Legends' players are males between the ages of 15 and 25 [6]. Perhaps the reason this arena is overwhelmingly male dominated has to do with the unfortunate fact that online gaming seems to be a hostile place for women. A 2013 study from Ohio University found examples of misogyny such as a female player signing on to a video game with a friendly phrase like "hi Everyone" and being greeted back with responses like "shut up, you whore" and "Slut" [28].

In the recent past, one major media event has highlighted the misogynistic tendencies of the "gamer" community and has caused major backlash against gamers. This virtual movement, called "GamerGate" began when video game consumers felt wronged by a series of incidents surrounding the reception of the art house game *Depression Quest*. *Depression Quest* was created by female game designer, Zoe Quinn. At the time of the game's release, in 2013, it was very much a departure from mainstream video games like *League of Legends* or *World of Warcraft*, because it sought to emulate the experience of depression. *Depression Quest* told the story of a person suffering from the mental illness and their attempts to deal with the disease. The game received widespread praise from major gaming publications but was heavily criticized by a large portion of players. This conflict was further perpetuated when one of the designer Zoe Quinn's ex-boyfriends posted an emotional manifesto accusing Zoe of having cheated on him with videogame journalists in order to obtain positive reviews for Depression Quest. In response to this, Quinn fell victim to widespread cyber bullying including death and rape threats, probably only because of her gender. A number of Quinn's colleagues who came to her defense were also harassed, including Phil Fish, a game designer, who quit his job as a result of the harassment he received. The Gamergate hashtag remained on the Internet under the pretense of a platform for the online discussion of issues surrounding video games journalism. In reality, it was mostly full of organized attacks on those who dared stand against #Gamergate [29].

While Gamergate is certainly a prominent and recent example of misogynistic behavior in gamer subcultures, this sort of behavior is in no way new. However, women in gaming have recently begun to strike back against the highly male dominated culture surrounding games. In response to having experienced male-preferred language, misogynistic tendencies, and a general lack of female presence in the online video game, *World of Warcraft*, Artist Angela Washko

founded "The Council on Gender Sensitivity and Behavioral Awareness in *World of Warcraft*" in 2012 [30]. Washko herself had been playing the game since 2006, but grew tired of the male dominated energy surrounding this online role-playing universe and began to fight back against the ever-present misogyny. She would approach characters in the game and via the chat system ask them what they thought of the term "feminism". Then, she would screen record and blog their responses [Vid 6]. Washko hypothesized that perhaps these game spaces are so misogynistic because of the lack of body-to-body public accountability in an online space. "Such communities act as 'moral free' safe zones through which we can act our baseline desires with no consequences" [32].

These issues of misogyny in game spaces aren't limited to novice female gamers, but extend all the way to professional female gamers. For example, in an interview with Fusion, a professional female gamer, Hafu Chan, shared some of her experiences with harassment in the highest echelons of competitive gaming [Vid 5]. Hafu has been involved in competitive gaming since she was in high school, and began streaming on Twitch.tv in college. Shortly after she began streaming, she decided to drop out of school to pursue eSports and streaming as a full time career. Having won dozens of competitions across a variety of game titles, there is no doubt Hafu is one of the strongest competitors in eSports to date, but perhaps what is more fascinating is her unique position as a female in the highest rankings of competitive gamers. Hafu streams daily, attracting thousands of viewers — but something worth noting in this is that 95% of Twitch users are male and thus her viewers are almost entirely male. When asked about the types of harassment she has witnessed as a female in professional gaming or on Twitch.tv, Hafu explained that she has always experienced some form of harassment in gaming. She mentions that when she was playing competitive *World of Warcraft*, people created gossip blogs about her,

frequently posting pictures of her posing with a fan and writing up long farfetched rumors of her romantic involvement with the men posing in these pictures. Hafu goes on to say that with the advent of live streaming and Twitch, things have only escalated. "But now there's Twitch, and when you have like 70,000 people watching your stream and all you see is terrible things being said about you.. .It kind of makes you think 'why am I competing?'... It just makes me unhappy. It's hard to be a part of something when I don't feel welcome in the community." Some of Hafu's viewers have been incredibly supportive — in fact the biggest donation (essentially a form of tipping on Twitch.tv) that Hafu ever received was $2,000. On the other hand, there are many people who sit around in chat just to say horrible things. When Hafu was asked what the worst part of streaming is she reminisces about some of the most upsetting messages she has received, "People leave messages like 'Hafu looks like a skeleton, stupid whore chink', that kind of crap." When Hafu was 17, she briefly considered giving up competition when a team entered a tournament under the name "Going to Rape Hafu at Regionals". "I got turned off of competing because harassment sucks." Ultimately Hafu has remained committed to her passion for competitive gaming, but hearing her story does make one wonder how many women have been scared away from gaming communities as a result of this horrible behavior.

eSports has been evolving at an astonishing rate, but the one component that seems to be lagging behind is diversity. This prompts the question of "How do we make competitive gaming safe and accessible to women?" Stephanie Harvey, a professional *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* player, has a suggestion that emanates from traditional sports. At the 2016 Game Developers Conference (GDC), Harvey teamed up with Morgan Romine, PHD and director of initiatives at Intel to discuss how to best increase the presence of women in eSports [31]. Dr. Romine cited the impact that Title IX had in legitimizing women's sports as a way of suggesting

a short term solution to the problem: the creation of a "Women Only" professional gaming league which would allow a safe space for women to participate in competitive gaming culture. In traditional sports, one of the major arguments for a separation in men's and women's leagues is the physiological differences between genders. This argument is meaningless in co-ed eSports competition, since physiological differences do not shape the outcome of the competition the way they do in physical sports. However, the vast amount of online harassment directed at women in gaming, and the fact that so few females participate in eSports, has caused some of the loudest voices representing female participation in eSports to fight for the creation of a "Women Only" gaming league.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the notion of competition is probably the strongest factor in both console and online gaming. Shattering a high score was a dream on an arcade cabinet in the early arcade games like Donkey Kong, when the battle was about beating a high score, not a person. Then Street Fighter and other 2D fighting games came along and allowed players to compete head-to-head in the same room. With the advent of more technology, we moved on to Internet Video Games such as Warcraft 3 and Starcraft. Arcade gaming decreased in popularity when home consoles were ubiquitous and PC gaming ruled the Internet. Now, in our contemporary context, we have seen an intersection between all of these genres, while PC gaming is the main avenue for online gaming, the player-to-player experience of arcade gaming has not been entirely lost.

Both person-to-person fighting games and online games have their pros and cons and it is worth noting those here. Online gaming has the virtues of team-building mentality and creates a virtual community for people who are isolated. It also has financial rewards: corporate sponsorships, salaries, and prize money. On the other hand, it also has become very commercialized with eSports, which resulted in the mistreatment of players. These productions also require expensive equipment, and the focus on online gaming spaces has led to anonymous bullying and misogyny.

Person-to-person gaming in the FGC, as we have seen, is more social in nature. The grass roots nature of the community allows the players to be more in charge of the game than the corporations. It also encourages amateurs as well as professionals to play, and has created a

uniquely diverse population relative to other gaming communities. Fighting Game events are much focused on socializing and encouraging players to challenge eachother rather than simply spectating. The FGC has demonstrated that when players are face-to-face in a room, even when on machines, they have better social behavior than online anonymity.

In the world of competitive gaming, there is a major divide between person-to-person gaming and multi-massive online gaming. The former reflects the past of arcade gaming with players physically coming together to face off. This created social communities based around traveling, meeting new opponents and adapting to new situations. The latter is a suggestion of the future, representing the age of Internet ubiquity in which the user can get lost in time and space in an online community where personal identity comes secondary to game play. While the rise of eSports has created an entire industry around competitive gaming, we are shifting away from the unique social experience of person-to-person gaming communities. In my experience, corporatized eSports are incredibly exciting and fun to watch, but the social element of creating one's own personal narrative, as a competitor seems to be missing. Sitting in the LCS arena to watch a game of professional *League of Legends* is an awesome experience, but it highlights that these events are no longer about one's own experience with the game. When I went to EVO last summer, every person I met in the crowd had competed in the event. The crowd completely embodied the FGC; they were social, eager to meet more sparring partners, and excited to develop their personal narratives as competitors. Whereas with online eSports, people seem disconnected from the community. It becomes about watching the best in the world, much like at a real sporting event, but the members of the crowd seem to blend in as nameless spectators. Is it possible to maintain the incredibly social nature of person-to-person gaming communities in the realm of online eSports? Or is the gap of physical distance created by online, anonymous

gaming spaces too great to close? In my opinion, what is important is that as we continue to move into the future of online gaming, we make an effort to retain the positive social nature of person-to-person gaming and not capitulate to anonymous hostility. We must look to games like *Super Smash Brothers* and *Street Fighter* that have perpetuated respectful, social communities as we continue to grapple with the challenges of harassment and Internet anonymity. Ultimately these environments should not be hostile; they should be about playing games, making friends, and improving as competitors — all of which should be fun. However, in a world where gaming has ceased to be recreation and has become a profession, perhaps some of the innocence of play has been lost.

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