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Professional Counter-Strike: An Analysis of Media Objects, Esports Culture, and Gamer Representation

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PROFESSIONAL COUNTER-STRIKE: AN ANALYSIS OF MEDIA OBJECTS,
ESPORTS CULTURE, AND GAMER REPRESENTATION

by

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ABSTRACT

Esports are growing in popularity at a rapid pace worldwide. In contemporary society,

individuals watch esports broadcasts as part of their normal media consuming practices.

This dissertation focuses on *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (*CS:GO*), which is

currently the most recognized first-person shooter esport worldwide and the third most

popular game across all esports genres (Irwin & Naweed, 2020). Interested in how the

cultural knowledge and experience of esports and gamers who populate the scene are

represented in media, I explored professional *CS:GO* esports broadcasts from two

prominent professional leagues, ESL Pro League (EPL) and ELEAGUE. A thematic

analysis of textual and audio-visual data from professional *CS:GO* broadcasts revealed

that esports culture is a novel phenomenon, similar to sport, but situated within video

games. Using traditional sports metaphors and comparisons, as well as sportscast style

match coverage and gameplay reporting, EPL and ELEAGUE illustrate *CS:GO* as a

global sport. At the same time, both leagues emphasize technicity and rely on gamer

jargon to frame professional *CS:GO* as a hybrid mediasport, intrinsically tied to game

culture. EPL and ELEAGUE utilize narratives and images to portray gamers as

simultaneously geeks and jocks by highlighting players' traditional sports backgrounds

while also describing them as "natural gamers." Finally, EPL and ELEAGUE represent

gamers as young males who are mostly white, offering audiences a limited worldview

that supports a dominant social, cultural, and global ideology.

Keywords: *Media Representation, Esports Culture*

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Jimmy and Salme, thank you for supporting me on this long journey. Although it is difficult being so far away, you never questioned my capability, and always encouraged me. I could not have persevered through all of the obstacles if it were not for your continuous love and support.

To my brother, Ben, thank you for introducing me to *Counter-Strike* all those years ago at Larchmont Computer. I have always looked up to you, not just in the real world, but in the digital gameworld too.

Throughout the process of this dissertation, my research methods naturally brought me to digital screens to watch professional *CS:GO* matches. Upon learning this, my brother Ben and close friends Christian, Joey, and Pete joined me in watching professional *CS* matches and even playing *CS* for the first time in years. Your support has meant everything to me. Thank you guys for always being in my corner.

I would be remiss not to mention my cohort at the University of Southern Mississippi. Moving from New York to Hattiesburg was a culture shock to say the least, but integrating to doctoral studies in the deep south was made pleasant by the likes of Sean, Braden, Seth, both Amy's, Carley, Jessica, and many others.

Last, but never least, I want to thank my wife Elaine. I cannot put into words just how selfless and supportive you have been over the course of this project. Thank you for your unending patience, your willingness to listen, and your empathy. I truly would not have gotten to this point without you.

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FPS   First-Person Shooter

CS   *Counter-Strike*

CS:GO   *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*

EPL   ESL Pro League

CHAPTER I Introduction

Growing up in the 1990s and 2000s, video games and especially esports were conceptualized and perceived much differently than they are today. When I was 16 years old, in 2006, I was an aspiring esports player in the game Counter-Strike: Source (hereafter CS:S). At that time professional gaming was not seen as a legitimate career path, but instead widely considered a leisure activity meant purely for entertainment purposes. My parents, although supportive of my gaming activities, did not encourage me to pursue a career as a professional gamer – and understandably so. They did, however, understand my dedication to this unique form of video gaming, and the reason why I had to miss many family dinners in order to compete in organized matches. My friends, some of whom played CS:S with me, and others who played video games to a similar extent, were not as invested as I was in esports. To be a "gamer" back then was negatively stereotyped as being a lazy, antisocial, teenager who spent too much time in their parent's basement yelling at the television/computer. Because of this, I hid my gamer identity in public settings, choosing only to disclose my passion to my closest friends – and even they, at times, did not understand why I dedicated so much time and energy toward the activity. In short, being an esports player at that time was difficult. There were several identity and communication challenges – some of which still exist for players today. Currently, I still dabble in the occasional Counter-Strike match, although not in organized league form – just pick-up games. Staying up-to-date with frequent game updates, and professional players and teams within the CS scene, I still follow competitive CS. As such, I have dedicated my dissertation to researching CS esports and their representation in media texts.

This dissertation explores the discursive practices of esports broadcasts. Just as Esports pervade video game player and spectator practices exhibited in popular culture, media studies, and game studies, so too does this dissertation. Starting with an explanation of game culture and gamers, to first-person shooter games and *Counter-Strike*, and finally to esports broadcasts, this project focuses on esports culture and gamer representations in esports broadcasts – drawing on communication theories to better understand this increasingly popular phenomenon. The central goal of this project is to foster a deeper understanding of esports culture and gamers as represented in professional esports broadcasts.

Broadcasting esports to global audiences results in widespread consumption and a growth in understanding of this unique form of video game play. A major premise of this research is that, by decoding and explaining these esports broadcasts, scholars can acquire a deeper understanding of emerging esports practices, and specifically, how broadcasts reflect esports culture and gamer identities. Esports players shape our practices as gamers and game viewers by teaching us what it means to compete in esports, and how central the gamer identity is to their everyday lives (Taylor, 2018).

Considering culture in the context of esports broadcasts increases scholars' understanding of the concept by locating it in a far-reaching mediated environment. Exploring this notion through analyzing audio-visual broadcasts of professional esports league matches, I employed thematic analysis and a grounded theory approach to analyze esports culture and gamer representation. I document the ways in which particular communicative forms are positioned as central to the execution and performance of esports and cyber athleticism.

Esports and Spectatorship

It's May of 2016, and I am sitting at the bar in a newly established Buffalo Wild Wings restaurant in Poughkeepsie, New York with my older brother and my best friend Christian. After ordering some ice cold adult beverages, we caught up in conversation about the latest developments in our lives. My brother moved to Brooklyn and began working at the Bitcoin Center on Wall Street. Christian met a local girl and he's enjoying not being single. I chimed in with the struggles of starting my PhD in Southern Mississippi. After a short lull in conversation, I began looking around at the endless sea of televisions all broadcasting various sports. On one TV there was basketball. On another there was baseball. And then it caught my eye: Counter-Strike, the video game I grew up playing with the very same people who I am now seated with at the bar, is on TV – and not just any TV, the largest one in the establishment, located behind the bar. I immediately turn to Christian, and before I can say anything he shouts "Dude! Are you kidding me? Did you see that headshot?" I'm more amazed at the fact that this is even being broadcasted at a sports bar, but the inner-nerd responds, "Yeah. He shouldn't have been peaking with that little time left in the round, what a noob." For the rest of the night, the three of us ordered round after round of beer and watched Counter-Strike matches in a sports bar full of people until closing time. That night stuck with me and when I returned to Mississippi for the next semester of doctoral studies, I knew what my dissertation topic would be.

The above scene depicts an emergent domain in digital gaming sweeping homes and various establishments across the world: professional video game broadcasts. Esports are phenomena that are growing in popularity at a rapid pace worldwide (Taylor, 2018).

They have a global audience of more than 450 million people, and that number is increasing each year (Pannekeet, 2017). Esports will be included in the 2022 Asian Games, and are being considered by the International Olympic Committee to be added as event in the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris (Payne, 2017). In 2019, the esports industry is projected to generate over one billion dollars in revenue (Pannekeet, 2017) and continue growing as audience and viewership numbers have steadily increased over the past five years.

For many Americans, esports are an entirely novel entertainment experience. In the United States, we used to believe that the things we enjoyed in a game could only be experienced in the context of video gaming, because the pleasure and concentration that existed in the gaming environment was never displayed as a spectator event. In past years, the notion of watching others compete in video games was largely misunderstood by most Americans. Today, competitive video game viewership has skyrocketed and is considered one of the fastest growing spectator sports around the world (Rovell, 2016).

In addition, esports have attracted attention from various television broadcast investors, including sports-related networks such as Turner Broadcasting System (TBS) and the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) among others. Watching esports creates an understanding of competitive gaming as a form of sport. It is defined by its own network of skills, competencies, and understandings of esports as a performance of competitive rivalry comprised of skilled players, teams, and their narratives.

To study esports, it is most useful to narrow one's research to a particular video game genre or title within that genre. This project focuses on *Counter-Strike: Global*

Offensive (hereafter *CS:GO*). *CS:GO* serves as a representative for the larger category of first-person shooter (hereafter FPS) esports, particularly due to its emergence during an integral period in the history of competitive gaming. *CS:GO* is currently the most recognized FPS esport worldwide and the third most popular game title across all esports genres (Irwin & Naweed, 2020). Having survived twenty years, the *Counter-Strike* franchise has acquired an extremely large player and fanbase worldwide, making it a powerful vehicle for cultural analysis.

CS:GO audiences typically follow professional leagues and tournaments on various media as part of their daily media-consuming activities. These spectators represent two distinct entertainment cultures, one in gaming and the other watching esports, which results in the construction of a new form of audience identity (Taylor, 2018). This movement signifies an ongoing cultural shift whereby like-minded individuals who share a common understanding and appreciation of esports, such as *CS:GO,* are able to consume the activity in ways that were unavailable just a few years ago. The growth and transformation of the esports industry is credited, in part, to the advancement of technology allowing global audiences to consume esports broadcasts for free and on-demand via the internet (Taylor, 2018).These developments illustrate the significance and popularity of professional *CS:GO* esports today. They lead us to question what messages, with what desired effect are being portrayed in popular *CS:GO* esports broadcasts?

This dissertation focuses on the interrelationship between digital gaming, sport, and media through the exploration of esports broadcasts. The content, images, and discourses in esports broadcasts do more than simply report scores and news; they reflect

and characterize gaming and esports communities in key ways, often taking critical

stances on esports culture, thus teaching individuals how to understand esports. As these

broadcasts profoundly influence communities through cultural representations, they

deserve further investigation. The aforementioned notions are analyzed through Hall's

(1980) theory of cultural studies involving encoding and decoding. This dissertation aims

to expand upon Hall's research by exploring media representation in the context of

esports broadcasts beginning with two broad research questions:

RQ1: How have professional *CS:GO* esports broadcasts shaped audience

understanding of esports culture?

RQ2: How have professional *CS:GO* esports broadcasts shaped audience

understanding of gamers?

Exploring these questions is beneficial to academics and the general public for

several reasons. First, it is important to learn about the way in which a new cultural object

of knowledge like esports gets shaped and legitimated because of its hybridity. Media

depictions of esports leagues broadcasted on both television and live-streaming sites

highlight important positive and negative aspects of the activity in ways that encourage

and discourage video game play. By airing these leagues worldwide and employing

strategic promotion and framing techniques, organizations contribute to shifting the

overall direction in the narrative of esports. Esports league broadcasts address aspects of

video gamer experiences that never before had a public dimension. Players and teams

displayed are represented as the embodiment of the esports gamer identity (Ashton &

Newman, 2012). This contributes to the creation of an intersubjective environment for the expression of gaming. By regularly broadcasting professional video game matches, esports leagues educate audiences about what esports are, and what it means to be an esports player, fan, etc. As individuals increasingly view these programs, their understanding of the activity, which is influenced by these broadcasts, will spread through the public sphere. Additionally, representation plays a significant role in the rhetoric employed by esports league broadcasts. As these leagues increase in popularity and reach millions of gamers and game viewers, their illustration of gamers becomes all the more important. Thus, I will be exploring the way gamer representations become contested and shaped through professional *CS:GO* esports league broadcasts.

My consideration of professional *CS:GO* broadcasts seeks to highlight how the broadcasts illustrate, organize, and reinforce some of the distinct cultural values that *CS:GO* represents. The exploration is predicated on the fact that existing studies in the field of communication neglect the evolution of esports in digital media environments, the current state and cultural values of esports, or the increasingly contested representations of cyberathletes (Jenny et al., 2016) in esports broadcasts.

Communication scholars should be especially interested because the entire phenomenon of esports is centered around what is ultimately a new communication technology. Seldom has academic research been conducted on the topic of esports, and especially esports broadcasts. Exploring professional *CS:GO* in these terms is intended to show how representations of the esport generate meaning and have complex cultural resonance. Instead of focusing only on particular texts, or historical snapshots of esports history, the approach I employed locates esports media within a broader communicative

field, using professional *CS:GO* broadcasts as a window into how esports culture and gamer representations are produced and negotiated.

The methodology of this dissertation involves thematic analysis focusing on media representations and discourses concerning both gamers and esports culture. Rich qualitative materials are sought resulting from observation, note-taking, and textual analysis of esports broadcasts. Specifically, I consider professional *CS:GO* league broadcasts. Given the broad range of communication within and surrounding professional *CS:GO*, texts considered for this analysis involve various media including YouTube and Twitch videos, news media reports, and esports websites including ESL Pro League (pro.eslgaming.com/csgo/proleague/) and ELEAGUE (www.eleague.com). This assortment of media reflects the various ways that individuals typically consume esports content today. They allow a means of engagement with and immersion in the research data (Johnstone, 2018) yielding an assortment of information, esports match coverage and results, commentary, criticism, and recorded video footage of in- and out-of-game events. They also contribute a means for cross-referencing emergent themes identified in broadcasted matches.

One's experience in playing and watching esports is inevitably informed by esports media, and the way media constructs meaning around esports. Media analysis provides an opportunity to interrogate the coding of professional esports participants and esports writ large. Thus, the exploration of *CS:GO* esports media allows me to unpack various ways in which meaning is created through the address of an imagined audience – one that is assumed to have particular interests, tastes, and subjectivities (Kennedy & Hills, 2009, p. 5).

It's 9:30 P.M. on a school night, and I'm listening to Crazy Train by Ozzy Osbourne on Winamp while playing Deathmatch mode to warm up for my 10:00 P.M. CAL match in Counter-Strike: Source. I'm practicing my AWP flick shots and quickscopes on De_Dust2, because that's the map we're playing in tonight's match. When I reach 50 kills, roughly 25 minutes later, I leave the Deathmatch server, minimize CS, and join my team's Ventrilo server. Clan leader and strat caller MANIAC greets me saying, "What's up TeDo? Are you warmed up and ready to frag out?". "Born ready," I sarcastically reply. Within minutes the remainder of our starting players join Ventrilo, and boot up CS. We paste the match server's IP address into console with the prefix "connect" to join the match. As we enter the server, we select the Terrorist side, because we are the Home team. Once all five members of both teams have joined the match server, MANIAC types "status" into console and checks the opposing team's steam ID's to ensure they are registered on the team's CAL page. Once verified, each player types "record" into console (starting our demos) and we meet in the middle of the map for the screenshot round. Players from both teams line up and screenshots are taken in the middle of the map. "U guys rdy?" the opposing team leader asks in chat. "Yes, L-O-3" MANIAC replies. After three consecutive round restarts, we go live and the match begins.

The scene above depicts a weekly occurrence in my life growing up as a competitive gamer. Participating in meaningful matches in organized online leagues such as Cyberathlete Amateur League (CAL), I experienced esports play at a high level of competition, reaching CAL-Main in 2006 with [BABS] (an online gaming clan comprised of various internet friends). This is significant because, from an

epistemological standpoint, I believe that research cannot be completely objective and value free. Instead, what we know is tied to who we are (Miller, 2005). As my relationship with the topic of *CS:GO* esports will color this dissertation, I will briefly explain my history with competitive *Counter-Strike*.

For nearly 20 years I have played various versions of *Counter-Strike.* Although I was never paid to play the game, I logged approximately 20 to 30 hours per week over the course of several years in competitive *Counter-Strike* matches. In 2006, at the ripe age of 16, I reached the semi-professional competitive level in *Counter-Strike: Source*. I am not an "expert" in the sense that I actively compete against top-ranked opponents, but I am in the sense that I have invested an abundance of time on play, progressed beyond competence, and routinely achieved high ratings on in-game statistics during play sessions (Reeves et al., 2009). Having invested a great deal of time toward learning and understanding the vast intricacies of the game from a player's perspective, I may have a deeper comprehension than others who did not play the game but only researched it. When investigating esports, "first-hand experiences are helpful (or perhaps necessary) to understand and interpret players' experiences" (Rambusch, Jakobsson, & Pargman, 2007, p. 159). To bolster this understanding, I have conducted a thematic analysis informed by my prior knowledge, which helped me test my intuitions, working them out rigorously and systematically.

Preview of Chapters

This dissertation consists of six chapters. In chapter two I provide the conceptual framework from which this study is designed. Communication theories regarding culture

and media representation are explored. Esports provide the context for gamer and spectator practices exhibited in popular culture, media studies, and game studies. As such, chapter two outlines the relevance and significance of each conceptual framework as it relates to this project.

Chapter three focuses on culture, outlining significant directions that scholarship involving esports have pursued. Following, I introduce the video game *Counter-Strike*, and explore professional *Counter-Strike* esports including the current version *CS:GO*. Because *CS:GO* esports broadcasts evolved from early grassroots *Counter-Strike* leagues, tournaments, and broadcasts, understanding their influence help in comprehending how esports broadcasts have evolved.

Chapter four outlines the methodological guidelines of this dissertation. By explaining the significance of texts chosen for the project, this chapter illustrates precise steps taken to explore representations in esports broadcasts. Exploring professional *CS:GO* league broadcasts and their advertisements allowed me to highlight how these texts work to promote a particular understanding and attitude regarding esports culture and gamer representation.

In chapter five, twelve thematic categories are defined using examples to explain the ways in which discourses and representations in professional *CS:GO* esports broadcasts work to accomplish particular objectives. Emergent themes pertaining to esports culture and gamer representation are highlighted from various seasons of ESL Pro League and ELEAGUE broadcasts. Themes are then discussed in a dialogical fashion, illuminating how these broadcasts have evolved over time.

The concluding chapter brings categorical pieces together to contribute a deeper understanding of professional *CS:GO* by focusing on game culture and gamer representation. The discussion section addresses both research questions, using themes to highlight significant aspects of culture. Then limitations of the research project are provided. Finally, avenues for future research involving esports broadcasts are provided.

CHAPTER II CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Esports represent an emerging phenomenon that has recently exploded in popularity, with a plethora of books, articles, and dissertations appearing each year. For communication researchers, video gaming and esports are intriguing because they impact how individuals behave both on and offline, in a context involving a new mode of communication. The purpose of this section is to bridge understandings of key communication concepts of interpretivism, culture, narrative, popular culture, media studies, and game studies with esports – situating this dissertation in concert with them.

Interpretivism and Culture

In this section I will explain the relationship between interpretivism and culture, defining culture through an interpretivist lens. Interpretivism, for the purpose of this study, is defined as the strategies used to interpret meanings and actions within media broadcasts (Williams, 2000). The goal of interpretivist research is to "understand the particular social worlds from the perspective of the social actors who inhabit them" (Carragee, 1990, p. 83).

Interpretive mass communication research is concerned with the processes and constructs that social actors use to build meaning around media texts (Lindlof & Meyer, 1987). Interpretivists seek a better understanding of media consumption practices from the perspective of media consumers (Carragee, 1990). Using Geertz's (1979) study of the Balinese cockfight and Fisher's (1993) study of children and fruit machine gambling as a guide, I adopt an interpretivist approach to study esports culture and gamer representation in professional *CS:GO* esports broadcasts.

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In order to better understand characteristics of a culture, both Geertz (1979) and Fisher (1993) focus on interpreting meanings and actions within particular contexts according to the subjective frame of reference of the actors observed. Geertz's (1979) study centered on using "thick description" to understand the ritual of cockfighting in Balinese society. Thick description involves detailed and contextualized description moving from a general description of the environment to interpretations of what is actually occurring in the context of a cockfight. Utilizing thick description, Geertz attempts to uncover symbolic meanings of the ritual for Balinese actors, focusing on specific features and interpreting what they symbolize.

Fisher's (1993) study of fruit machine gambling involved observation of individuals within British culture to help us understand what it means to gamble. She constructed a typology of five categories of fruit machine players, describing the way in which individuals used arcades, strategies players employed in fruit machine gambling, and meanings that players attached to the activity. Both Fishers' (1993) and Geertz (1979) studies help us better understand cultures, and problems that exist within them.

Interpretivist researchers seek moderatum generalizations (Williams, 2000). Moderatum generalizations occur when aspects of a particular sub-culture (professional *CS:GO* culture) can be seen as instances of a broader recognizable set of features within a larger culture (esports culture). These generalizations concern everyday life within a culture, and are the basis of inductive reasoning.

Communication and culture are closely related. The term *culture* encompasses a variety of ways in which individuals may study human conduct. Culture has been described as "'cultivation', as 'a whole way of life', as 'like a language', as 'power', and

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as a 'tool'" (Barker et al., 2001, p. 3). Williams (1983) explained that culture is constituted by the practices and meanings of ordinary individuals in everyday life. Put differently, "culture is lived experience; the texts, practices, and meaning of all people as they conduct their lives within the totality of 'a whole way of life'" (Barker et al., 2001, p. 3). As the study of culture expands nearly all fields of the human sciences, it is important for researchers to shape the concept of culture into one that best fits the focus of their particular study (Sewell, 2005).

Utilizing an interpretivist approach, which is prominent in cultural studies, I define culture as existing within individuals' interpretations of events and contexts. (Sewell, 2005). Interpretivists believe that individuals shape the patterns of their behaviors and provide meanings to their experiences. From this perspective, culture exists within individuals' interpretations of events and contexts.

Cultural beliefs, attitudes, and values are significant forces that shape an individual's identity. They resonate with who people believe they are, and how they live their lives. Cultural identity can be seen as the values, beliefs, norms, language, and symbols that individuals share. Cultural identity is always in flux, being constructed and reconstructed in different social contexts (Hall, 1996).

Mead (1934) posited that culture involves rituals, which can be found in everyday interaction. Rituals affirm and reaffirm relationships within cultures, teaching members particular values that are important to a cultural community. In the context of cultural studies, communication researchers are in a particularly suitable position to investigate discourses due to their "shared interest in symbols – in the idea that words, images, and representations matter" (Butterworth, 2014, pp. 33-34) not just as information-sharing,

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but as significant objects of knowledge used to understand how cultures work (Grano, 2016, p. 34). Esports as a cultural experience reflects specific rituals, values, understandings and narratives through shared experiences and objects of knowledge.

Cultures are not fixed in-time; they are always changing and evolving. Thus, to understand culture involves examining how meaning is made and re-made through signifying practices within particular institutional contexts (Williams, 1983). The cultural approach to communication studies involves understanding implicit and explicit meanings that individuals build into their words and behavior (Carey, 1992). To understand the relationship between culture and communication, researchers often attend to individuals' or groups' works and practices (Williams, 1983). A primary goal of this dissertation is to analyze how meaning is communicated and how reality is expressed by cultural symbols within esports broadcasts.

Narrative

Stories help us make sense of our lives and the lives of others (Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2015). Telling and listening to stories help socially construct and revise individuals' identities. In esports broadcasts, narratives are frequently shared for various purposes. To better understand communicative processes of narratives, communication researchers often employ narrative theory. Research grounded in narrative inquiry explores the ways that individuals "communicatively construct their individual and relational identities, make sense of the world and their interpersonal interactions, cope with loss, … explain relational qualities and outcomes such as satisfaction, well-being, and divorce" (Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2015, p. 263). Narrative theories guide researchers

in examining the ways in which stories construct, negotiate, or reject individual and relational identities.

Communication-based narrative theories are typically concerned with gaining a deeper understanding of content, process, outcomes, and functions of narratives, stories, and storytelling (Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2015). Some narrative research focuses on thematic content of stories with the goal of understanding how identities are constructed or to make sense of events. This type of narrative inquiry examines the links between story content and structure, as well as the functions that stories serve for particular audiences.

Narrative paradigm, conceptualized by Walter Fisher, is a particularly useful theory because it "provides a 'logic' for assessing stories, for determining whether or not one should adhere to the stories one is encouraged or endorsed to accept as the basis for decisions or actions" (Fisher, 1985, p. 348). This theory assumes that all forms of communication can be viewed fundamentally as stories or interpretations of various aspects of the world occurring within a specific context and shaped by character, culture, and history (Fisher, 1989). Employing the narrative paradigm involves analysis of stories and "insists on the recognition that no text is devoid of context – relationships to other texts … The meaning and value of a story are always a matter of how it stands with or against other stories" (p. 361). Scholars have increasingly adopted narrative approaches in order to "examine the stories, images, ideas, and sounds within mediated environments as dynamic fragments that are constantly being interpreted and reinterpreted based on how they are understood through narrative lenses as well as how they circulate through discourse." (Herrmann & Herbig, 2018, p. 255).

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Narrative approaches have been employed in various contexts including sports and media. Gleaves (2017) explored meaningful narratives in sport and concluded that "sports are fundamentally about telling a story about themselves." (p. 29). By viewing sport through a narrative lens, individuals may gain a more complete understanding of what sport is about. In the context of media, Herrmann and Herbig (2018) examined the relationship between narratives and external discourses in the television show *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*. The authors found that "the contemporary influence of Kolchak points to an important shift in our understandings of… narratives… [and] larger cultural narratives as well… [becoming] part of everyday discourse about authority and power." (p. 236). Finally, Rivenburgh (2009) explored international media-sport narratives from a variety of literature and posited that story elements may influence how individuals understand intergroup relations. She specifically highlighted that sports media may act as discursive spaces for messages of peace.

Narrative theory offers a powerful way of thinking about esports broadcasts, which are undertheorized and discussed in esports research. Narratives help individuals understand phenomena such as esports through explanatory stories (Gleaves, 2017). Esports are meaning-making enterprises, due to their ability to create meaning through narratives that people and organizations have shaped esports to tell. Narratives are a recurring theme in esports broadcasts. Esports competitions are narrated by professional commentators who are known as casters (Taylor, 2012). Casters rely on narratives to help audiences make sense of the often complicated, cryptic, and messy aspects of professional esports events into manageable packages. The use of stories in esports broadcasts create a connection between viewers and subjects – drawing interest and

teaching viewers about a variety of elements encompassing the competition. This project

centers on professional *CS:GO*; an esport that is inherently laden with meaningful

experiences. These meaningful experiences are intentionally introduced and shaped by

both game and sport culture, which are assembled into narratives that explain the teams,

players, and *CS:GO* as a global competition for global audiences.

Popular Culture

I am interested in how esports culture and gamers are represented in esports

media. This section explores the ways that cultural practices within textual artifacts

produce certain knowledges and positions for individuals, and then attempts to

understand culture as a form of social expression.

The role of culture is defined by Giroux (2004) as an education site where

identities are often transformed and power is executed. Culture can be viewed as a social

sphere of influence where possessions and social practices such as esports are produced,

consumed, invested, and distributed (Giroux, 2004). Culture is comprised of specific

knowledge, social practices, possessions, and contexts. It continuously evolves and is

subject to various interpretations and changes throughout time and space (Giroux, 2004).

Cultural studies are contextual-based and the questions that scholars propose vary

in each cultural context (Giroux, 2004). Scholars who conduct cultural studies often study

mass publications through various mediums examining how they represent social

experience and identity (Storey, 2006). A major element of this dissertation involves

comprehending various meaning-making activities portrayed in the imagery and

discourses of esports broadcasts.

Scarcely any cultural studies have investigated esport broadcast's production and circulation within popular culture. Popular culture involves historically variable acts and artifacts that are viewed as an authentic culture, which stems from the people and is increasingly considered a pedagogical medium where learning takes place (Storey, 2006). Studying popular culture involves much more than elementary discussions of leisure and entertainment activities. Instead, researchers employ theories to investigate and unpack deep-rooted meanings in texts and practices that individuals within a population subscribe to (Storey, 2006).

Similar to narrative, the study of popular culture occurs within the critical and interpretive paradigms of communication theory. The critical paradigm is concerned with critique stemming from Marxism and the Frankfurt School (Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2015). It views communication as a social composition of power and oppression in which all assumptions may be challenged. Critical theorists maintain that it is vital to recognize the taken-for-granted systems, power structures, beliefs and ideologies that dominate society (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008).

The interpretive paradigm posits that our social world "consists of multiple realities according to the subjective position of the person or group" (Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2014, p. 9). The goal of interpretive research is to understand how social realities are produced and maintained through normative practices of individuals and groups (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). Interpretive researchers value context-specific research and focus on meanings and meaning-making from the native's point of view, or the perspectives and communicative choices of those being studied (Braithwaite & Schrodt, 2015).

Interpretivism is useful in studying popular culture because it "allows for a reading of media 'texts' in the context of larger cultural meanings" (Campbell, 1995, p. 5). As a communication scholar investigating media messages from critical and interpretivist perspectives, a primary goal is to highlight intrinsic and extrinsic implications that messages hold about life inside mainstream America.

Popular culture studies often analyze media messages. Kellner (2010) proposed, "We are immersed from cradle to grave in a media and consumer society, and thus it is important to learn how to understand, interpret, and criticize its institutions, practices, discourses, images, and spectacles" (p. 5). In order to properly critique media messages it is important to first recognize the strength and pleasure of it. Then, one may unpack the role of media in a culture from a critical perspective, and contextualize their discussion within certain power relations.

A primary goal of popular culture studies is to make connections between particular texts and practices, contexts, and audiences (Kellner, 2010). They are typically conducted "in order to constitute or reconstruct the experiences, values, etc. … of particular groups or classes or whole societies, in order to better understand the lives of those who lived in the culture" (Storey, 2006, p. 58). Scholars tend to examine both intrinsic and extrinsic meanings of acts and artifacts as they influence groups within a society. One avenue of popular culture that demands further inquiry is that of esports, as performance of cultural identities on media that are globally consumed may impact audience members' understanding of the phenomena.

Media Studies

The study of media texts are a significant activity of cultural studies (Barker et al., 2001). These texts serve a significant role in the construction of cultural identities. They allow us to "experience something of lives and cultural identities of others even as we stay home" (Barker et al., 2001, p. 8). Media studies define audiences as active in their encounters with media. By concentrating on "moments of reception" (Carragee, 1990, p. 86) interpretive media studies involve interactions between media texts and audiences, highlighting how audiences construct meanings of texts that they view. Liebes and Katz (1986) conducted an analysis concerning audiences' decoding of the television show *Dallas*. They describe decoding as an active and social process. Similarly, in a study of television news, Barkin and Gurevitch (1987) posited that meanings "emerge and are reproduced in the interaction between texts and viewers" (p. 18).

Media present images that hold multiple meanings through 'representation' (Hall, 1980). Hall's (1980) process of encoding and decoding provide scholars with a suitable framework for analyzing various types of media texts and practices. Producers of media 'encode' texts with specific images and messages that they anticipate audiences will 'decode' upon viewing.

Television programs do not have singular meanings, but instead are considered somewhat open texts that are interpreted in various ways by individuals (Hall, 1980). All texts and practices that are analyzed from a cultural perspective are polysemic (Barthes, 2010) and thus involve topics of transformation and contention (Kellner, 2010). Reading and viewing broadcasts is a process of negotiation between the viewer and the media messages being consumed. A correlation exists between an individual's social situations

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and the meanings generated from media messages (Allen, 1992). Audiences tend to decode and utilize texts according to particular elements of their gender, race, class, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality (Kellner, 2010).

Cultural values are constructed and shaped through discourses and images in the public sphere (Barthes, 2010). Organizations transmit information, such as cultural values, through mass media to achieve publicity. As that information is disseminated through media, the content becomes intersubjective. In this way, media connects the outside world with the pictures in audiences' heads (Lippmann, 1946).

By analyzing media representations, we can unlock the meaning of polysemic images (Hall, 1980). Analysis of media culture requires close multidimensional readings to properly analyze the various discourses at play including ideological positions, narrative strategies, image constitution and effects (Kellner, 2010). The analysis of culture based on particular meaningful texts allows researchers to highlight recurring themes in shared behaviors and beliefs of a society (Storey, 2006). This approach also allows researchers to better understand how and why various discourses and images are employed to disseminate messages to target audiences.

Additionally, advertising is a major point of emphasis among popular culture scholars. Ever since media systems were created, our lives have become dominated by advertising to the point that commercial culture is now a part of our identities (Lewis & Jhally, 1998). Advertisements resonate with meaning for audiences based on cultural resources employed, and are analyzed by scholars to better understand the use-value of messages for specific audiences (Jhally, 2014). Advertisements included in professional *CS:GO* league broadcasts were analyzed in this dissertation.

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Scholarship pertaining to the mediated experience of traditional sports spectatorship is useful for this dissertation, as esports spectatorship is remarkably similar in many ways. Wenner (1998) introduced the term *mediasport* to describe contemporary sport as a phenomenon that is broadcast to global audiences. The broadcasting of sports to a global audience alters the experience from a pure sport competition to a mediated event, which is framed in particular ways by media producers (Entman, 1993).

Televised esports can be understood as comprising five communicative elements; image, graphics, sounds effects, voice, and music (Kennedy & Hills, 2009). To analyze esports broadcasts it is beneficial to employ communication models that account for these elements. Allen (1992) considered how television involves the creation of meaning, highlighting the importance of flow for understanding complex operations of meaning within broadcasts. He explained that, by pausing and freezing images on television, researchers lose the sound of voices, music, and other effects that occur simultaneously in broadcasts. Instead, analysis of esports broadcasts involves consideration of how meanings occur within and across the five communicative elements, as well as in relation to intertextual references (Kennedy & Hills, 2009). In consideration of Allen's (1992) communicative elements, I will explore how each contributes to our understanding of the esports experience.

Numerous audio and visual factors ought to be considered when analyzing sports media (Kennedy & Hills, 2009). The multiplicity of images presented in esports broadcasts creates "complex … potentially limitless combinations of signs that are not reducible to the predictability of a 'grammar'" (Kennedy & Hills, 2009, p. 55). Additionally, esports player and caster clothing communicate significant messages to

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audiences. Players tend to wear matching jerseys, which appear remarkably similar to soccer jerseys. Casters often wear business casual attire such as blazers and dress shirts – similar to that of traditional sport commentators.

The experience of esports broadcasted on television or live-stream involves multiple layers of communication in the form of continuously changing images and sounds. They typically involve esports players' bodies draped in colorful team jerseys laden with team and sponsorship logos, first-person in-game displays of gun battles and other actions, graphics surrounding the screen depicting team and individual player statistics, as well as round-time and scoreboard updates. In the esports studio or arena, dimly lit overhead lights provide enough illumination to see players sitting at their computers without producing glare on players' screens during competitions. Loud electronic dance music is typically played as the camera periodically pans over the crowd in between commercial breaks and other lulls in gameplay. Frequent shots of the crowd display young people, both male and female, draped in video game, esport, and team-related paraphernalia. The crowd is often shown yelling, cheering, and booing during and directly after significant in-game happenings (such as clutches, victories, etc.).

Esports broadcasts are interspersed from beginning to end with an array of visual and audio displays including prerecorded sequences that provide behind-the-scenes looks at players and teams, live expert commentary, in-game match footage, and displays of players and teams sitting at their computers. Each display does important work to help frame the event for viewers. The "flow of multiple, simultaneously occurring channels of communication creates a complex structure of intertextuality, accumulating a web of

associations" (Kennedy & Hills, 2009, p. 55). Viewers come to understand esports directly from the synergy of these audio and visual displays created by media producers.

In displaying particular images and discourses within esports broadcasts, media producers are responsible for teaching audiences what is and is not part of a particular esport. Research in traditional sport broadcasts have explored how sport broadcasts, through imagery and commentary, use specific characteristics to explain sports and the athletes who play them (Eastman, 2001). Esports broadcaster's representations both highlight and neglect certain characteristics that reflect the importance of particular traits over others, especially relating to identity performance (Taylor, 2012). As esports audiences increasingly consume these broadcasts, they are gaining an understanding of esports culture and identity through these narratives.

Game Studies

Esports inherently involve game culture. Because of this fact, it would be remiss for this dissertation to not employ frameworks and explanations derived from game studies research. Thus, in concert with esports scholarship, I will examine frameworks concerning gamer identity (Shaw, 2010, 2011, 2012; Taylor, 2012; Kowert et al., 2012; Johnson, 2014; Oates & Brookey, 2015; PaaBen et al., 2017; Seo, 2016; Kirkpatrick, 2017) and game culture (Adamus, 2012; Shaw, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013; Taylor, 2012; Seo & Jung, 2016). Additionally, by gaining a basic understanding of gamer identity and game culture, one may better understand analyses in chapter four pertaining to esports culture and gamers as represented in professional *CS:GO* broadcasts.

Gamer Identity

Gamer is a term that encompasses any individual who plays video games. The notion of who counts as a gamer is a crucial aspect to studying video games within a cultural studies framework (Shaw, 2010). Today, video games have become so ubiquitous that they have permeated mainstream entertainment and popular culture. To this end, Paaßen, Morgenroth, and Stratemeyer (2017) proposed that 97% of American teenagers play some type of video game. This suggests that nearly every person in America will eventually be a gamer in the future.

Gamers have historically been defined by a certain geek style. The concept of *geek masculinity* was introduced by Taylor (2012) as technical mastery over technology and a breadth of knowledge about a particular game. Geeks are often considered fragile, feminine, and not athletic (Kendall, 2011). For many gamers and game spectators, video games are a casual activity; they come and go as they please. Meanwhile, for others, video games are a daily activity that heavily influences their self-identity and social life.

One's gamer identity is defined by what they play and how they play (Shaw, 2010). What they play encompasses not only the platform individuals use to play video games such as a personal computer (hereafter PC), console (PlayStation, Xbox, etc.), or phone/tablet, but additionally, the genre of games that they prefer to play. Controller use versus mouse and keyboard is a major aspect of gamer categorization. Console gamers tend to use controllers, while PC gamers use a mouse and keyboard. Because this dissertation focuses on PC gamers, an explanation of how the mouse and keyboard are used by players is provided in the next section. How they play refers to the frequency, concentration, amount of effort, and dedication that one puts into the activity of gaming.

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Highly identified gamers, such as esports players, tend to play and watch video games more often than casual or leisurely gamers.

In video games, and especially in esports, individuals are not referred to by their legal names, but instead by "gamer tags." For example, popular North American *CS:GO* player Jake Yip is known as "Stewie2k." Gamer tags serve a significant symbolic role, communicating information "about a player's intent, and about a player's perceived status, interests, age, gender, or sexuality" (Wright, Boria, & Breidenbach, 2002, p. 106). This same notion applies for casters, coaches, and others esports stakeholders as they all have unique gamer tags which are used in place of their names in esports broadcasts.

Game Culture

Game culture has been defined as a type of subculture marked by specific tastes and as a form of art (Shaw, 2010). The relationship between an individual's definition of gamer and how one plays video games encompasses several issues, as well as positive and negative connotations.

Video games and the individuals who play them have long been criticized, especially in North America, as strictly a leisure activity, or more bluntly a complete waste of time (Li, 2017). Negative connotations concerning gamer culture relate video game play with obesity, obsessive play, and violent tendencies resulting from extensive amounts of gaming (Kowert et al., 2012). Gamers have also been characterized as unpopular, unattractive, idle, and antisocial (Taylor, 2012). These negative stereotypes lead video game players to not identify as gamers (Shaw, 2012).

Contrary to gaming and gamer stereotypes, studies have shown that gaming is a valid way to acquire important life skills that apply to the contemporary job market. Video games require thinking and learning on-the-go. Positive outcomes of gaming include players' enhanced learning, problem solving skills, and logical thinking (Sandford & Williamson, 2006). A study by Weiss and Schiele (2013) highlighted that gamers self-descriptions emphasize competence, skills, and competitiveness.

Admittedly, stereotypes of gaming and gamers differ depending on whether they are defined by game players themselves, by observers, or by non-game players/observers (Paaßen et al., 2017). In recent years, scholars such as Taylor (2018) contest that the term *gamer* is becoming a thing of the past. As individuals increasingly play video games and old stereotypes die out, perhaps the term gamer will fade away as well. For now, though, I will continue to refer to video game players and consumers as gamers.

Gamers have created a new global language consisting of internet and video game-specific acronyms, memes, and other content that connect them while excluding non-gamers (Cade & Gates, 2017). Gaming culture involves abbreviations to describe genres of games such as RPG (role-playing game), MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing game), FPS (first-person shooter), MOBA (multiplayer online battle arena), and others. Gamers have also created terms to describe certain types of players within the game world including newbie or noob for short (player who is performing poorly in-game because new or just bad), griefer (describing the behavior of player who intentionally annoys or aggravates others within the game), smurf (player who is disguised as a low rank player, but is actually very skilled), and others. Certain actions within games have their own terminology, which tend be specific to particular game

genres or titles. The term *rage quit* for example denotes a player who suddenly leaves a game out of anger.

A recent development in gaming culture has been its emergence into mass media. Over the past decade, gaming has changed dimension. Video games used to be played predominantly in the home, but with the recent spike in esports popularity they are out in public taking various forms. Today, esports have exploded onto the mainstream stage of American entertainment appearing on television and internet streaming sites such as YouTube and Twitch. With television shows such as *ELEAGUE* on TBS, official esports leagues including Overwatch League (OWL), and global tournaments such as The International Dota 2 world championship, esports have drawn immense attention and curiosity to the point that individuals are leaving their homes to view esports in-person. Significant professional events are now held in large arenas such as the Barclays Center in Brooklyn, Key Arena in Seattle, Staples Centre in Los Angeles and Wembley Arena in London (Nino De Guzman, 2015), drawing crowds in the tens of thousands in person, and millions online (Taylor, 2018).

Additionally, the increasing establishment of LAN centers (also known as internet/gaming cafés) allow individuals to play against others using state-of-the-art computers and peripherals. As gaming continues to move away from the private sector and into the public eye, it represents progression toward a cultural shift, one in which gamers no longer need to hide their passion for gaming, but instead can celebrate it with other like-minded individuals in the public sphere.

Up to now, approaches to game culture and gamer identity have predominantly explored players and events in various game genres such as RPGs (*Everquest*, *World of*

Warcraft), RTSs (*StarCraft*), and MOBAs (*League of Legends*), but few have considered first-person shooters. By highlighting important aspects of FPS games and specifically the *Counter-Strike* series, the next section will establish a deeper understanding of FPSs, which inform this dissertation.

First-Person Shooter Games

  In researching video games, it is important to distinguish which types of games are being studied, the modes of play within the game, and the types of players being investigated (Shaw, 2010). As the main discussion in this dissertation involves media portrayals of two professional *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO)* esports leagues, an understanding of FPS games for the PC are imperative. Additionally, as professional *CS:GO* esports broadcasts frequently display in-game footage from a first-person player perspective, it is important to understand the various elements displayed on-screen.

  FPS games feature weapon-based combat from a first-person perspective (Bartholl, 2007). This perspective refers to the player's point-of-view within the game world. Although the earliest FPS games date back to the 1970s with *Maze War* (1973) and *Spasim* (1974), the violent FPS titles that we are accustomed to did not emerge until the 1990s (Voorhees et al., 2012). *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) is widely regarded as the original FPS archetype, which was quickly followed by popular titles such as *Doom* (1993) and Quake (1996). In 1998 Valve released Half-Life, and one year later, a mod called *Counter-Strike* was born. Today, FPS games are widely considered to be the most popular video game genre with multiple esports titles including *Overwatch*, *Call of Duty*, and *CS:GO*.

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The FPS genre is frequently described as a run and gun experience in which players engage in actions such as shooting at enemies and taking cover, monitoring information in the heads-up display (explained below), and working toward the completion of various objectives (Voorhees et al., 2012). While in-game, FPS players act as active agents by managing resources including armor, ammunition, and grenades, carefully planning and enacting strategies, and attempting to out-maneuver enemies.

Video game researchers often categorize FPS games based on theme (military, historical, survival, science-fiction, horror) and purpose (propaganda function, entertainment orientation, competitive esport). *Counter-Strike* is classified as a military arena-based FPS with numerous game modes including a competitive esports mode. Most military FPS games involve "similar physics simulations, accurate weapon details and sounds, avatar modes, and environmental textures, and … feature standardized multiplayer game modes, yet each game plays and responds differently and each has its own 'feel'" (Moore, 2012, p. 351). Player movement and in-game sounds differ even between games in the same series, and "each render terrain, lighting, accuracy, and weapon damage differently, forcing players to re-evaluate their tactical choices and playing styles" (p. 352). These games are not military simulations in the same sense as flight or tank simulators, but they market their own sense of "realism," promoting conformity to the standard of weapon and physics models, photorealistic particle rendering, and other environmental details within the gamespace (Moore, 2012).

The virtual environment, also known as gamespace, is where the simulation takes place and functions to "provide a consistent experience of a cogent space in which to do battle" (Manning, 2012, p. 53). In *CS:GO* the virtual environment is rendered in a

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photorealistic style reflecting terrorists and counter-terrorists battling in various settings such as a desert, nuclear power plant, and skyscraper among others. *CS:GO'*s strong emphasis on realism and straightforward mechanics separate it from titles such as *Overwatch* and *Team Fortress 2* which appear cartoonish with unrealistic player renderings and game environments. *CS:GO* also stands out from other popular military first-person shooters such as the *Battlefield* and *Call of Duty* series in that it involves much slower paced combat and an emphasis on tactics and teamwork. Unlike the aforementioned game titles, *Counter-Strike* does not involve vehicles – just avatar-versus-avatar combat, and limits player movement to the basics – not including the prone or sprint features popular in military FPS games today.

Moving in PC games is accomplished by manipulating the mouse and keyboard in concert. Mouse movement enables the player to direct their view and use weapons. Keyboard manipulation enables the player to direct their movement forward, backward, or sideways, and provides key binds for crouching, jumping, weapon reload, or weapon drop. Based on one's specific body and playstyle, each player enacts certain variations to the space they engage with (Witkowski, 2012). They become accustomed to the playing field and perform actions similar to the stretching routines of traditional athletes in pre-game warmups. Some players favor wide spaces, allowing them to stretch their elbows out and whip their mouse back and forth uninhibited. Others tuck their elbows in closer to their body, making short and discrete mouse movements.

First-person shooters require players to navigate through virtual environments using the limited vision allowed by one's computer monitor. In any FPS, the center of the screen is the player's focal point. This is because the crosshair used to indicate the

direction one is aiming (and thus shooting) is located in the centermost portion of the screen. The edges of a player's screen typically contain important information in the form of a heads up display (hereafter HUD). All video games tend to communicate information regarding rules and the game state to players, although different games tend to relay such information in a variety of ways. FPS games communicate vital information in the form of HUD, textboxes, and audio messages. For example, in *CS:GO*, the moment a team plants the bomb, all players hear an in-game audio message stating "bomb has been planted."

The HUD provides insightful updates for players that raise their awareness of dynamic conditions of play in the gamespace without hindering their vision. In most FPS games, HUD information incudes "time remaining, state of objectives, health, ammo, in-game chat and a score-based feed (denoting certain achievements, successes/failures, kill information)" (Manning, 2012, p. 48). *CS:GO* includes the above HUD information, along with a small radar in the top right corner of the screen. The radar shows where teammates are, illustrated by green circles, and alerts players when enemies have been spotted with a red circle. Additionally, the radar alerts players when the bomb has been spotted with a bomb symbol that pings when players place their crosshair over it. These HUD indicators ensure that players are constantly informed regarding the unfolding actions with the gamespace.

FPS players perceive virtual environments from the perspective of the avatar and as a result, audiovisual depictions are directly tied to the avatar's in-game senses (Navarro, 2012). Because *CS:GO* is played on a computer, only sight and sound can be recreated. This lack of sensorial information results in compensation via hyper

concentration on sight and sound. By focusing on sounds within the virtual environment, players can surmise what is around them. An example of this reliance on sound can be witnessed in broadcasts when players pre-fire areas in which opponents cannot be seen, but are only heard.

FPS games are considered a rich sensory experience, demanding multiple layers of physical action, close attention and focus on in-game sensory information, as well as dexterous accuracy. In competitive FPS games, success depends on material performances that are at once technological and physical (Witkowski, 2012). The essence of skillful play involves "moving and managing one's own appearance and presence while playing" (Reeves et al., 2009, p. 213). In-game movements in competitive FPS titles such as *CS:GO* are "carefully guarded, practiced, and strategized with a team, as well as fine-tuned in players' bodies" (Witkowski, 2012, p. 357). Players must optimize small details in order to move efficiently. For example, in *CS:GO*, players holding a rifle run slowly, which is why they are often seen running with only a knife equipped, unless engaged with enemies.

In competitive team games players are tasked with working together against the opposition, which adds additional layers to in-game actions. Player's attention in-game is mainly focused on gauging what other players are doing (Manning, 2012, p. 57). When engaged with enemies, it is vital for players to quickly recognize potential threats including where enemies are approaching from, what weapon they are using, and how much health they have (Reeves, Brown, & Laurier, 2009).

Now that significant features of FPS games have been described, I will move on to the particular FPS title chosen for this study: *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*. To

comprehend meanings within a particular text one should understand the text itself as well as the configuration of knowledge within the text. Watching esports requires particular competencies and skills that are specific to each esport. Understanding the game itself, the competitive game mode, and the rules of competition are essential in order to follow the game in real-time (Seo & Jung, 2016). Thus, to understand professional *CS:GO* esports broadcasts it is beneficial to first gain an understanding of the *Counter-Strike* series, and move toward comprehension of *CS:GO* as an esport.

Counter-Strike

      The *Counter-Strike* series began as a modification of the game *Half-Life* on the PC. It was created by Jess Cliffe and Minh Le in 1999 (McLaughlin, 2012) and was commercially released in 2000 through Valve Inc. (Li, 2017). The game has continued to evolve with five different versions including *Counter-Strike 1.5* (1999), *Counter-Strike 1.6* (2000), *Counter-Strike: Condition* Zero (2004), and *Counter-Strike: Source* (2004) being released before its current incarnation *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (2012). Over the past 20 years *Counter-Strike* has acquired an immense player and fan-base. Today, *CS:GO* is the largest FPS in esports and one of the leaders breaching mainstream audiences (Lam, 2016). *CS:GO* has sold over 30 million copies worldwide, and averages nearly 375,000 unique players daily (Galyonkin, 2018).

      CS:GO is a multiplayer battle between two teams: the terrorists and the counter-terrorists. A player's experience begins with the selection of a game-mode; Deathmatch, Arms race, Demolition, Classic Casual, Danger Zone, or Classic Competitive.

Additionally, players may select "Browse Community Servers" to join dedicated servers with custom settings and game modes.

Once a game mode is selected, the player will enter a server and spawn in a particular "map," of which there are many. Each map is a self-contained 3-D virtual environment with various textures that represent different locations and climates. For example, the map De_Dust2, a desert map that is mostly outdoors, differs from De_Vertigo, an indoor map taking place in a skyscraper. Each map contains unique features including different terrorist and counter-terrorist player skins, terrain, obstacles, and exploits.

The player spawns once they have selected to play as either terrorist or counter-terrorist. *CS:GO* game modes besides Deathmatch and Arms Race operate on a rounds-based system – meaning, once a player dies, they must wait until the round is over to respawn. Upon spawning in the beginning of a round, players quickly purchase guns, armor, and utility (frag grenades, flashbang grenades, smoke grenades, incendiary grenades, defusal kit) and attempt to complete certain objectives. Depending on the map, players are either tasked with guarding/rescuing hostages (notated by "CS_" before the map name), or planting/defusing a bomb (notated by a "DE_" before the map name). There are three different "map pools" that players may choose from; Active Duty Map Pool (De_ maps), Reserve Map Pool (De_ maps), and Hostage Rescue Maps (Cs_ maps). The round concludes when the objective is accomplished or when one team is completely eliminated. If neither situation occurs, a timer ensures that each round eventually comes to an end (typically 2-3 minutes per round depending on the game mode).

In the competitive esports game mode, each team consists of five players and competes in a best-of-30 rounds (first to 16 rounds wins) match on a bomb defusal map. Matches can take between thirty and ninety minutes to complete, with each round lasting a maximum of two minutes. Professional *CS:GO* leagues operate in competitive esports game mode and strictly compete on maps in the "Active Duty Map Pool."

From a scholarly perspective *Counter-Strike* has inspired various publications since its 1999 release. The game has attracted analyses from a variety of perspectives (Wright, Boria, & Breidenbach, 2002; Rambusch, Jakobsson, & Pargman, 2007; Reeves, Brown, & Laurier, 2009; Li, 2017; Witkowski, 2012; Saleem & Anderson, 2013; Kindermann, Javor, & Reuter, 2016, Hopp & Fisher, 2017; Irwin & Naweed, 2020, Reer & Kramer, 2018, Reer & Kramer, 2019, Macey & Hamari, 2019) however, no study has investigated the representation of gamers and gaming culture in *CS* broadcasts.

Counter-Strike culture has been explored in numerous ways over the past twenty years. Wright et al. (2002) investigated patterns of in-game communication among *Counter-Strike* players by examining log text files from 70 hours of *CS* gameplay as well as interviews and participant observation data. The authors identified five general categories of in-game communication: creative game talk, game conflict talk, insult/distancing talk, performance talk, and game technical/external talk. They posited that *CS* serves as an environment in which one may study human performances in a mock combat setting:

> "When you play a multiplayer FPS video game, like *Counter-Strike*, you enter a complex social world, a subculture, bringing together all of the problems and possibilities of power relationships dominant in the non-virtual world" (p. 103).

Wright et al. (2002) concluded that becoming proficient in insider language and behavior is imperative if players wish to excel from a novice newbie to an experienced veteran.

Rambusch et al. (2007) examined cultural, cognitive, technological, and economic elements of *Counter-Strike: Source* and *Counter-Strike 1.6* players' gameplay activities through discourse analysis. Their analysis helps us better understand gameplay in *CS* and provides qualitative descriptions illustrating how various factors influence gameplay activities. The authors concluded "There does not yet seem to exist a universally accepted format for broadcasting or commentating matches which makes it difficult for the unvitiated to understand what is happening on the screen" (p. 162). While true at the time, in the thirteen years since this study, the esports industry has grown tremendously, and now has universally accepted live-streaming sites like Twitch and YouTube for broadcasting matches.

Other scholars have focused on the physicality and performance among *Counter-Strike* players. Reeves et al. (2009) explored gameplay in *Counter-Strike: Source* using an ethnomethodological approach. The authors highlighted players' displays of dexterity as an example of expert technology use. They explained how *CS* is similar to chess in that "players, in their continual appraisal of their experiences, see each game relative to previous games" (p. 224), and how players display esports expertise and competence in their gameplay.

Kindermann et al., (2016) examined the impact of playing *Counter-Strike* on one's cortisol and memory in a scientific experiment. Participants' salivary cortisol and memory consolidation were measured before and after playing *Counter-Strike*. The

authors concluded that *Counter-Strike* play results in elevated cortisol levels and impairs the memory consolidation process.

Witkowski (2012) studied the "sportiness" of esports through observations and interviews with *CS* players and organizers. Focusing on player practices in *Counter-Strike 1.6*, and *Counter-Strike: Source*, she explored how player physicality manifests in competitive LAN tournament contexts. Witkowski provides in-depth discussions of the relationships between player performances and technologies. She concludes that "Playing Counter-Strike in the context of the LAN is a rich sensory experience that calls for layer upon layer of physically demanding action in order to be competitive" (p. 369).

Few have explored representation and stereotypes in *Counter-Strike*. Saleem and Anderson (2013) investigated the effects of stereotypical Arab-terrorist representations in *Counter-Strike: Condition Zero* relating to attitudes, perceptions, and affect in two experiments. After playing *CS:CZ* and one non-violent video game, participants answered questionnaires assessing their attitudes and evaluations of the games. Results indicated that *CS:CZ* yielded significantly higher anti-Arab attitudes than nonviolent games. Saleem and Anderson (2013) concluded that stereotypical representations in *CS:CZ* may prime aggressive and negative perceptions, attitudes, and affect toward stereotyped groups.

Hopp & Fisher (2017) explored gender-based differences and player enjoyment in *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* using survey and experimental methodology. Participants answered a pre-questionnaire, played ten minutes of *CS:GO*, and then completed a post-questionnaire assessing game outcomes. Results of the study indicated that "normative gendering of FPS game environments … as male dominated is neither

baked in nor unassailable" (p. 355). The authors suggested that gender differences occur

due to stereotype linkages, which can be lessened through efficacy enhancement.

Focusing on player identity, several scholars have explored need satisfaction in

Counter-Strike. Reer and Krämer (2019) studied the differences between online role-

playing game (*World of Warcraft)* and multiplayer FPS game (*Counter-Strike: Global*

Offensive) communities using survey methodology. The authors focused on social

support and social capital acquisition. They found that *CS:GO* match play and clan

membership can positively impact the social lives of players.

In a different study, Reer & Krämer (2018) examined players psychological need

satisfaction and well-being in *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* clans using survey

methodology. The authors asked players about their behaviors within the context of clans,

how clan membership satisfied their psychological needs, and the psychological

outcomes of playing in *CS:GO* clans. Findings indicated that clan membership correlates

with satisfying important psychological needs and short-term well-being for players.

Recently, studies have shifted away from *Counter-Strike* players to research

spectators. Irwin and Naweed (2020) explored how disparate perspectives of in-game rule

breaking and unsportsmanlike behavior are disputed and defended by *Counter-Strike:*

Global Offensive esports spectators. The authors observed professional players in

tournaments and conducted interviews with *CS:GO* spectators, concluding that although

most bad behaviors like throwing and match-fixing are perceived negatively by

spectators, other behaviors such as grief play are welcomed and even celebrated.

Macey and Hamari (2019) investigated demographic characteristics and

participation rates among *CS:GO* esports spectators that gamble. The authors found that

purchasing loot boxes was the most popular gambling activity in *CS:GO*, "demonstrating that traditional definitions of gambling require attention to possible re-negotiation in light of newly emergent practices" (p. 37). They concluded that young males are the most prevalent participants in esports-related gambling activities.

While the above studies have explored *CS* from several perspectives, none have examined media representations of professional *CS*. Exploring the game from a media broadcast perspective is intended to show how representations of the esport generate meaning and have complex cultural resonance. Through analyzing audio-visual broadcasts of professional *CS:GO* league matches, this dissertation documents the ways in which particular communicative forms are positioned as central to the execution and performance of cyber athleticism. In particular, this analysis explores how media organizations use particular communicative forms to enact the transformation of FPS game play into a professional spectator sport. Before one can fully grasp the concept of *CS:GO* esports broadcasts, however, it is important to understand key variables including esports culture, esports participants, and a brief history of esports broadcasts.

CHAPTER III - ESPORTS CULTURE, PARTICIPANTS, AND BROADCASTS

The competitive playing of video games has gone by many names: competitive gaming, professional gaming, cyber sports, and cyber athletics (Weiss & Schiele, 2013). In recent years, as the category has stabilized, most references have consolidated around "esports," which is also reflected in scholarly literature (Taylor, 2012). Additionally, the Associated Press (Darcy, 2017) declared "esports" the official spelling (not eSports), therefore, in this dissertation, I use the term *esports* exclusively to refer to this activity.

Esports involve individual and team-based competitions through video games, and imply a public mainstream dimension of the larger realm of video games and gaming. They take a game that people have experience playing or watching and integrate it with technical innovation and aspirational qualities to introduce it to mainstream audience (Taylor, 2018). Esports are not defined by the video game being played, but rather "how these games are played that primarily differentiates competitive gaming from other forms of playing" (Seo, 2016, p. 266).

Understanding critical aspects of culture and identities displayed in professional *CS:GO* broadcasts involve a deeper understanding of esports as more than just casual video gaming. Thus, in this section I will define and explain esports culture, esports identities, and esports broadcasts. Within each subsection I will outline key factors in esports and how they relate to *CS:GO* esports specifically. Providing an overview of these factors and relating them to contemporary *CS:GO* esports will allow for better comprehension of content and examples that will come later in the results and discussion sections.

Esports Culture

In order to make esports visible and have them taken seriously as cultural products, gaming and esports culture must be defined as something specific that is separate from regular culture (Shaw, 2010). Defining esports and investigating various elements of the industry are significant steps toward better understanding the phenomenon. Esports have been defined by various scholars and media writers over the past twenty years. Adams, Devia-Allen, and Moore (2019) cited various definitions, highlighting strengths and weaknesses of each. They defined esports as "a sport in which games are played and facilitated by electronic systems connecting players and teams to one another via a human-computer interface." (p. 5). Put differently, esports are a particular form of sport that involves electronic systems which serve as the prime method of facilitation. These electronic systems, and the overall mediated nature of esports, is what separates them from traditional sports (Hamari & Sjoblom, 2017). Meaning, although esports players operate games within the "real physical world," the outcomes of these actions transpire in the digital environment. It is worth noting that I use the term *traditional sports* throughout this dissertation in reference to modern commercialized sport forms, distinguishing them from esports.

Esports as a social institution demonstrates and declares many values of both traditional sports and video gaming as well as the various tensions among them. Playing and watching esports creates an understanding of competitive gaming as a form of sport involving performances of competitive rivalry comprised of skilled players, teams, and the narratives. Esports competitions are unique from traditional sports in that they are

defined by a separate network of skills, competencies, and understandings that largely involve technology use.

Within the esports industry, there are a multitude of communities differentiated by platforms, game titles, and cultures (Adams et al., 2019). Additionally, various video game genres are displayed, involved, and represented in esports competitions including: fighting games such a *Street Fighter*, real-time strategy games (hereafter RTS) including *StarCraft*, multiplayer online battle arenas (hereafter MOBA) such as *League of Legends*, turn-based card games like *Hearthstone*, and first-person shooters such as *Counter-Strike*. Comparable to the variety of traditional sports that exist, each esports title consists of its own unique elements and calls for certain individual and team-based skills. For example, *Hearthstone* is a turn-based online card game, which involves one-on-one competition between players with digital card decks. Compared to FPS games, turn-based games are slower-paced and require more knowledge than dexterous skill.

Esports competitions take place online or via Local Area Network. LAN events involve players competing in the same physical space with their computers wired together, connected on a local area network to do battle (Li, 2017). LAN events are widely considered the purest form of esports competitions because, as players are located in the same physical space, slowdowns due to distance and internet connectivity (known as lag) are not an issue. Face-to-face esports competitions have always been the "gold-standard" for esports and people who only compete in the online format are looked down upon by community members as "LANdodgers" (Taylor, 2012, p. 89).

Most players tend to develop their skills in online competitions before testing themselves in face-to-face LAN formats (Taylor, 2012). Differences between LAN

games and online gaming as described by Donaldson (2016) are "defined by the respective personal contexts of the players, such as skill and personal play style, and [online] is defined by the results of ongoing play and experimentation by a massive, interconnected community of players." (p. 1). LAN competitions are considered to be high-pressure events as compared to online competitions. Esports players must manage their emotional state to be successful in high-end play. Taylor, (2012) explained:

> "Nervousness, stage fright, jitters, self-consciousness, difficulty focusing, and even fear are common descriptions of what it feels like to make that shift from being 'king of your bedroom' to meeting your online competitors and facing them in person" (p. 89)

Thus, making the shift from amateur esports player to professional involves the mastery of internal and physical bodily reactions similar to that of other public performers (Witkowski, 2012).

The roots of online and LAN esports competitions are key developments, which aid in understanding the scene as it is today. This long and rich tradition of competitive play at both amateur and professional levels has played an integral role in the professionalization of esports (Taylor, 2012). Esports league and tournament play motivate the creation and management of teams to compete for various prizes and recognition within particular game titles.

Esports are integrally bonded to the dominant social structure of many developed countries in Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Because of this, esports are also connected to those countries' ideologies, beliefs, and values (Trujillo & Ekdom, 1985). Esports ethos infuses games "with a particular social meaning, whereby their consumption

becomes not merely a form of casual leisure or work, but a symbolic expression of competitiveness, fairness, respect for others, and self-improvement" (Seo, 2016, p. 266). Esports culture is bound up with the distinctive generational characteristics of the current "gaming generation" (Seo, 2016, p. 272) who grew up in a transitional period of technology, witnessing massive technological developments and the transition of video games from obscurity to mass cultural ubiquity (Taylor, 2018). This also tracks with the rapid and discontinuous transformation of society that is characteristic of late modernity.

Adamus (2012) proposed that esports are a unique type of youth subculture. They are considered an environment for young individuals to deal with experiences in life, providing an opportunity to feel competent in a particular field. Esports culture influences and interpenetrates the wider cultural imaginary (Shaw, 2010). It weaves through an individual's leisure, work, communities, and even one's sense of self (Taylor, 2012).

Esports culture is constantly in flux and each geographical region tends to have its own unique elements that separate it from others. The most active countries in the esports industry tend to be developed countries in North America, South America, Europe, and Asia. Over the past ten years, numerous countries in Asia and Europe have adopted professional gaming as a legitimate form of competition recognized as a sport including South Korea, China, Russia, Bulgaria, Sweden, and Taiwan (Stein & Scholz, 2016).

South Korea is considered the birthplace of esports and is regarded as a model for the future of esports worldwide (Li, 2017). Taylor (2012) in her book *Raising the Stakes: E-sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming* provides a detailed overview of the South Korean esports model. According to this model, South Korean esports involve the intertwining of "government support, technology infrastructure, broad

industry sponsorship, strong organizational institutions (KeSPA), legal and market accommodations (IP pricing, net cafes), and a mainstreamed game culture" (pp. 26-27). These factors contribute to the powerful social and cultural environment in which professional gaming has thrived. Taylor (2012) explained their impact on the international esports industry writ large:

"South Korea is a powerful node in the story of pro gaming, both for the way it paints a picture of what a professional scene that has entered the cultural mainstream actually looks like, but also for the imaginative (even mythical) power it holds for the trying to foster pro gaming in North America and Europe" (p. 18)

In South Korea, individuals grow up in a gaming culture where the norm is people playing video games outside of the home setting. Fundamental aspects of teenage culture involve Internet cafes, known as PC bangs. For many South Korean individuals, esports replaces traditional sports from the perspective that matches are held in large stadiums and on television (Erzberger, 2016). Top esports players are considered to be celebrities and are mobbed in the streets whenever they are recognized.

While South Korea is considered the birthplace of esports, they are not the birthplace of *Counter-Strike*. In fact, Li (2017) posited that Eastern cultures such as South Korea and China prefer RTS games like *StarCraft*, while Western cultures including North America, South America, and Europe prefer FPSs like *CS:GO*. In the competitive *Counter-Strike* scene, Europe is credited with the adoption of esports long before the Americas even though *CS* is an American-made game. Their early adoption may be due to European countries' faster internet speeds, and in Scandinavian countries, colder climate which encouraged individuals to stay indoors and play computer games (Li,

2017). North America's late adoption of esports is the result of a cultural barrier. Video

games, and especially esports, have long been considered a periphery activity with

negative stereotypes swirling about (Li, 2017).

Today, however, esports have become so popular that major events are now held in

large stadiums around the world and draw crowds in the tens of thousands in-person and

millions online (Taylor, 2018). Individuals increasingly play and watch others playing

video games as part of their daily media-consuming activities regardless of their

geographical location.   Contemporary esports culture involves enhanced organization

and structure across various leagues and tournaments (Kane & Spradley, 2017). In the

past, esports have been criticized as having a lack of regulation (Hollist, 2015), however,

in recent years esports organizations have modeled themselves after operations of well-

known traditional sport leagues. Large organized leagues such as the Electronic Sports

League (ESL), and Overwatch League (OWL) among others make up the backbone of

the contemporary esports industry, providing fundamental organization such as rules,

regulations, and funding.

Rules and regulations in each esport are largely controlled by the structure of the

game's software. However, leagues and tournaments have developed additional rules and

guidelines that go beyond that of the software (Taylor, 2012) often prohibiting certain in-

game actions such as cheating, "botting" (using undetectable bot software to perform

actions in-game), and glitching (exploiting errors in-game to a player's/team's benefit)

among others. In 2016, the World Esports Association (WESA) was created as a

governing body for all esports with cooperation from major organizers, players, and

teams (Bowman & Cranmer, 2019). Today it has become commonplace for tournament

and league organizers to host competitions in accordance with guidelines established by WESA. A prime example of this can found in the professional *CS:GO* esports scene, as the ESL Pro League (hereafter EPL) closely follows rules and regulations outlined by WESA to conduct league organization and match play (Bowman & Cranmer, 2019).

The contemporary esports scene also has a growing infrastructure of esports-related industries including legal experts, statistical analysts, marketing and sponsorship consultancies (Takahashi, 2018). Esports organizations would be unable to pay for player salaries, travel costs, and team peripherals such as keyboards, mice, and headsets without funding (Takahashi, 2018). Taylor (2012) explained how funding mechanisms operate within the esports scene. Simply put, sponsorships support leagues and tournaments by paying for operational costs and doling out prizes. Thus, esports teams, leagues, and tournament organizers spend significant resources cultivating relationships with sponsors.

Alongside this growth in infrastructure, high schools, colleges, and universities across the United States are increasingly supporting esports players with scholarships and scholastic leagues (Bowman & Cranmer, 2019). Additionally, media structures surrounding esports have grown exponentially over the past decade. An example of this can be seen in ESPN's long-term investment in covering esports and Hulu's partnership with ESL providing exclusive access to esports competitions (Crook, 2017).

At the professional level, *CS:GO* is largely organized by Valve. Valve hosts and co-hosts various events throughout each year, while highlighting specific events called Majors that are more significant than others (George & Sherrick, 2019). Two Major tournaments are played every year, which are hosted by trustworthy third-party organizations chosen by Valve, including ESL and ELEAGUE.

Esports Participants

Esports involve a variety of actors, most notably players, spectators, casters, and behind-the-scenes actors that make competitions, events, and broadcasts possible. In the section below I provide an in-depth look at players, spectators, and other esports participants.

Esports Players

Focusing on the classification of esports players, Stein and Scholz (2016) identified three distinct categories: casual, amateur, and professional. The amount of effort, concentration and dedication individuals put into gaming contributes to their classification. Esports players "regularly train, compete, and participate in leagues and tournaments" (Martončik, 2015, p. 208). Professional esports players are considered masters of their esport – meaning, they are better than the overwhelming majority of others at a particular game and can play in-person at high-stakes, high-pressure LAN (local area network, or in-person) events. They regularly train for 10 to 12 hours each day on average, either alone or with their team, to fine-tune their skills and expertise (Taylor, 2012). Because of this, esports players experience injuries that differ from traditional athletes, and retire at earlier points in their careers.

Professional esports play involves "embodied skill and mastery, technical facility, game and systems mastery, tactical and strategic thinking, skilled improvisation, social and psychological skills, and at the top-most end, career and institutional savvy" (Taylor, 2012, p. 90). At the professional level, players embody skill and mastery when they are practicing and competing. They display impressive cognitive work in not only becoming experts in their games, but in skillful displays within the game itself involving their eyes,

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ears, and hands. With regard to technical facility, professionalism among esports players is displayed in their knowledge and abilities to customize and manage user interfaces, troubleshoot technical problems involving hardware and software, and speak confidently about technical matters within gamer and esports culture. Game and systems mastery concerns players' engagement with a game as a system with a fixed rule set and win conditions. Continuous engagement with a particular game and game mode (for instance, competitive *CS:GO*), results in a deeper understanding of how components work within the system, allowing players to advance in the game. In *CS:GO*, players must know all maps, weapons, utility, as well as "understanding the physics of a system, and knowing basic like commands, macros, and shortcuts" (Taylor, 2012, p. 93). In concert with game and systems mastery, professional players must master league and tournament rules, which involve intricate details and game exploits that amateur players may not even know about – but which could result in disqualification for a player and/or team.

At the core of professional esports play, strategic and tactical mastery is what separates amateur and semi-pro players from professionals. Professional players engage in "a sophisticated form of cognitive and physical work, mediated through technology and perfected through hours of play with others" (Taylor, 2012, p. 94). They routinely enact skilled improvisation and imagination in both their practice and play. While many amateur players are able to master certain moves and techniques, and learn new strategies, professional players continually innovate new play options and exhaustively practice them before revealing them in important matches.

Social and psychological skills are also a major aspect of professional esports play. From the moment a player joins their first esports team, they become embedded in a

social network and community of practice. By playing in competitive matches, players become socialized to particular expectations and norms within a game. At the professional level, players develop mental models of their opponents by conducting research and watching replays of opponents prior matches. Much like a baseball pitcher studies opposing batters, this is done in order to counteract and out-strategize opponents play.

In team-based esports such as *CS:GO*, players must learn how to overcome social and psychological challenges in order to become better team members. Learning one's particular role on a team, how to work in concert with teammates, how to listen to- and make call-outs, how to give and receive directions, and how to handle criticism are all critical skills for esports players. Even the best individual esports players are unsuccessful when unable to work with and communicate with teammates (Taylor, 2012).

Professional players are faced with additional social and psychological challenges such as learning how to behave before, during, and after matches. Trash talking between opponents is common in esports. Players learn early on how to use trash talk to get into their opponents' head, throwing off their focus. While amateur players may get away with excessive trash talk and post-game celebrations, professional players do not. Professional players are tasked with knowing proper practices in a variety of contexts, paying close attention to league and tournament rules as well as the cultural norms of nations in which those leagues and tournaments occur.

A major factor dividing esports professionals with long careers and those with short careers involves their attention to career and institutional savvy. Successful esports

professionals tend to build a "recognizable name/brand for themselves, having a public

reputation dealing with contracts and sponsorships, changing teams as needed to maintain

a stable playing trajectory and … adapting their play to fir the evolving nature of the

competitive scene" (Taylor, 2012, pp. 97-98). Unlike traditional sports, professional

esports players often do not have agents who help navigate institutional opportunities and

contracts. In some popular esports such as *CS:GO*, however, this notion is changing as

players have recently formed a union to protect themselves from unfair labor practices

and increasingly hire agents at the professional level (Yossarian, 2018)). Recently,

professional esports players have reported earning high salaries, but similar to the

grassroots days of esports, players still rely on tournament prize money for the majority

of their income.

What motivates esports players to pursue and/or continue a career playing video

games? Weiss and Schiele (2013) highlighted competition, challenge, and escapism as

need gratifications that positively affected esports use, and found social relationship

needs as insignificant among esports players. In an examination of numerous types of

esports players' life goals, Martončik (2015) highlighted that esports can function as a

means of satisfying the need for power, as well as the need for belonging. Focusing on

Counter-Strike and *World of Warcraft* players' motives for multiplayer gaming,

Frostling-Henningsson (2009) identified social aspects and escapism as primary motives.

At the professional level, esports players seek extrinsic benefits including prize money

and social status within gaming communities. These findings suggest that different

genres, games, and game modes are played to satisfy a variety of needs

By focusing solely on players, we often neglect key social actors that are essential to the development of the sport industry. When considering the history of esports, spectators are significant stakeholders, "Whether waiting for a turn at an arcade machine, having a console controller passed over, or watching a heated online battle continue after your character has 'died,' spectating has been a part of gaming since the beginning." (Taylor, 2018, p. 37). Without spectators, esports would not be possible.

Esports Spectators

Esports spectators represent two distinct entertainment cultures in gaming and watching esports, which results in the construction of a new form of audience (Taylor, 2018). Spectators are not directly playing the game, but instead are following the game as it is being played by others (Cheung & Huang, 2011). Cheung and Huang (2011) explored esports spectators in the popular real time strategy game *Starcraft*, and categorized spectators into nine different types: crowd, commentator, assistant, entertained, unsatisfied, pupil, inspired, curious, and bystanders.

Many esports spectators are also players. This is a unique feature of esports spectatorship in comparison to traditional sport spectatorship. In traditional sports, spectators are widely understood as those who watch others play, but not regarded as (active) participants of the sport activity itself (Guttmann, 1986; Whannel 2009). Esports spectatorship is often enacted for the purpose of using knowledge gained into one's own gaming experience or practice. Thus, individuals tend to watch certain esports as a result of playing particular games. Rather than watching purely for entertainment purposes,

spectators watch experienced players and teams to learn from professionals, which they can later employ in their own play (Reeves et al., 2009).

Spectatorship plays a significant role in the identification of individuals as esports fans. To be a fan of something involves more than casual consumption. It includes strong, positive relationships with objects of fandom such as media texts (Gray, 2003). Much of what makes a fan comes from identity, thoughts, and social interactions, which influence one's eventual consumption (Crawford, 2004). Fans often self-identify by attending events, wearing related merchandise, and engaging with media objects such as esports broadcasts (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). Three factors emphasized in fandom studies include "strong attachment to the media text, participation in communities around the media text, and production and consumption around the text" (Newbury, 2017, p. 18).

Similar to the classification of esports players, esports fans may be classified as high and low level fans. High level fans are more likely to attend live esports events, pay greater amounts of money for tickets, spend money on esport-related merchandise, and are fans for a greater number of years than others. In contrast, low level fans illustrate lower levels of emotion related to esports, less financial commitment, and less overall involvement with interpretive communities of which they are members (O'Shea & Alonso, 2012).

Esports spectatorship is influenced by cultural contexts and often occurs within a network of social and cultural practices within a shared community of gamers (Arnseth, 2006). Esports fans typically identify with certain communities in order to fulfill a need to gain cohesion and resist isolation. Esports fans of specific video game genres, titles, and teams/organizations can be considered their own interpretive community in that they

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are exclusive. Fans of *Counter-Strike* represent one of the oldest gaming communities, and over the past 20 years, have accumulated a global fanbase that exceeds the majority of other game titles and esports.

The crafting of esport fan culture takes place in a variety of venues including in-person at competitions, as well as online and on television through recorded streams and programs (Christophers & Scholz, 2010). At professional esports events, those who come to watch often become immersed in the competitive culture (Seo & Jung, 2016). These competitions "authenticate the consumption of esports in a real world, traversing the boundaries between what consumers do inside the computer games and how they engage with esports offline" (Seo & Jung, 2016, p. 12). Esports events offer fans a site to share their devotion to gaming and esports with other like-minded individuals.

Esports fans exceedingly consume esports events digitally. Today, like-minded individuals who share a common understanding and appreciation of esports are able to consume the activity in ways that were unavailable just a few years ago. The emergence of esports broadcasts and media coverage in contemporary culture have contributed significantly to the growth of esports audiences. The expansion of broadband and online streaming video has been essential for the growth of esports spectatorship and has allowed easy access to esports competitions for global audiences (Taylor, 2018). Additionally, specialized viewing tools exist today that allow consumers to watch esports on a multiplicity of media including phones, tablets, laptops, computers, and televisions.

Esports audiences typically watch others playing competitive games for the purpose of obtaining some desired end or satisfying some need (Chen, 2011). They are motivated to watch competitions in order to learn about games, but also to facilitate

escapism (Georgen et al., 2015). As esports broadcasts and events are still a relatively

new phenomenon, more research in this area should highlight additional gratifications

sought by audiences in a variety of esports genres.

Other Esports Stakeholders

An essential component of the esports experience are the casters (Li, 2017).

Similar to traditional sportscasts, two sets of casters are typically employed: color

commentators and play-by-play announcers. Both sets of casters are armed with deep

gameplay knowledge, familiarity with players and teams, and knowledge of current

events in the particular esports scene. Color commentators typically set the stage for

competitions by introducing players, teams, and others involved in esports events, as well

as providing meaning to the events. The action presented on screen is described in real-

time by play-by-play announcers who, just like traditional sport announcers, provide a

rapid flow of the action taking place on-screen (Li, 2017).

Play-by-play announcers teach audiences how to understand esports broadcasts as

similar to traditional sportscasts with a narrative style (Sell, 2015). These casters provide

discourses that supply audiences with the knowledge necessary to understand both

watching the game and playing the game. They not only teach new players about the

game being broadcasted, but through their dialogue they further spectators' knowledge of

the game.

Casters provide a variety of discourses including insight into strategies and citing

statistics that contribute to important spectator understandings (Li, 2017). In traditional

sportscasts, commentators may cite free-throw percentages or batting averages of players,

whereas in esports such as CS:GO, casters cite statistics such as a player's kill-to-death ratio (hereafter KDR) or a team's win percentage on a particular map. Additionally, casters break down strategies and provide in-depth explanations of how and why particular strategies succeeded or failed. As a result, players learn various aspects of a game or competitions through esports broadcast imagery and discourses (Georgen et al., 2015).

Unlike traditional sportscasts, in-game action must be captured using in-game software rather than a camera. Thus, individuals with a particular skillset and game understanding known as observers control the in-game camera. Observers choose to prioritize certain action such as gun battles, bomb plants/defusals, and grenade throws that are then displayed on-screen during broadcasts (Li, 2017). While this may seem simple, an entire broadcast may be ruined by an untrained observer if they are unable to capture the most relevant action taking place each round. Mike Burks, producer of the CGS stated, "*Counter-Strike* is hard for television because scoring can occur anyplace within the game" (quoted in Kane, 2008, p. 221).

In the section below, I provide a brief history of esports, specifically highlighting key moments in *Counter-Strike* esports, including their introduction and evolution over time. I also describe the evolution of esports broadcasts from their humble beginnings in local arcades to our current state of esports as spectator sports with major tournaments held in large arenas in front of tens of thousands of in-person fans and millions of other viewers online. Following this brief historical summary, I outline the methods employed in this dissertation.

History of Esports and Esports Broadcasts

Contrary to the immense popularity of esports competitions today, they were considered a niche segment within game culture until relatively recently. While it is difficult to pinpoint the precise moment when video games supported widespread competition, it is evident that esports come from a long history spanning as far back as the 1970s (Billings & Hou, 2019). Back then and throughout the 1980s, arcades were the predominant arena for video game play. Arcades were a significant space for the growth of esports, as they fostered competition and allowed for live in-person spectatorship of gameplay (Taylor, 2018). During this period, players competed against machines or pre-designed programs, and high scores were the mechanism by which players' performances were evaluated. The scoring system served as a competitive metric motivating players to spend large amounts of time and money to improve their video game skills. Video game competitions grew increasingly popular, and naturally resulted in the creation of tournaments (Billings & Hou, 2019).

In 1980 the National Space Invaders Championship hosted by Atari was considered to be the first large-scale video game competition with over 10,000 participants (Hope, 2014). A few years later, competitive video gaming became more organized and regulated with the introduction of Twin Galaxies, a video game information base consisting of high scores, player rankings, and data from matches and tournaments. Twin Galaxies served to publicize and promote competitive gaming in ways that resemble tactics employed by various esports organizations today.

Esports have been closely tied to various media practices throughout their existence (Taylor, 2018). The earliest years of esports production involved video capture, in-game

replay files, and audio overlay. Before in-game replay files were available, video recordings of gamers at the arcade machine were captured to record high scores (Taylor, 2018, p.146). In 1982 the show *Starcade* aired as the earliest TV show featuring competitive gaming (Billings & Hou, 2019). This broadcast did important work building support and educating those who lacked exposure to competitive gaming.

In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s the advancement of information technology resulted in a massive transformation for competitive gaming, and the video game industry writ large. The emergence of home game consoles that plugged into TV sets and new games designed for those devices brought gaming into the home (Billings & Hou, 2019). This era contributed to the growth in understanding of video games as leisure practices to be played in the home, and consequently resulted in fewer large-scale video game tournaments within the decade (Billings & Hou, 2019). Additionally, players could now choose from a variety of games. While new, technologically advanced games were released each year, classic arcade games were still popular and many arcade titles were also offered on consoles (i.e. Street Fighter II). This resulted in fragmentation of the video game industry, as players could choose from a plethora of game genres and titles within each genre to spend their time and money. The fragmentation of the game industry is an issue that video game and esports stakeholders still face today, especially in choosing what game title to represent as esports for professional leagues and tournaments.

The growth of PCs as gaming devices also occurred in the 1990s, which significantly contributed to the growth of competitive gaming. While most arcade games involved contests between players asynchronously through high scores, this era introduced the

notion of head-to-head competitions either online or in-person. Arcade and console split-screen play are significant aspects of the esport scene, however, the rise of networked gaming is what sparked the formation of esports as we know them today.

The Internet compensated for the fragmentation of the gaming industry, making niche activities such as esports possible (Taylor, 2012). Widespread access to fast internet connections allowed player-versus-player competitions with others who were not located in the same physical space. Meaning, even if players only know a few others who live near them that are interested in competitive gaming, the ability to go online, connect, and compete with others allowed the creation of esports communities (Taylor, 2012).

Networked gaming exploded in popularity in the mid 1990s and provided new opportunities for broadcasting esports. As competitive gaming expanded to PCs with the ability to save in-game replays, sharing files became the norm. Soon after, individuals began to interweave replays with voice commentary, which serves as the oldest version of the esports commentary we see in professional esports broadcasts today (Taylor, 2018).

Taylor (2018) in her book *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Competitive Game Live Streaming* illustrates three "waves" in esports development. The first wave describes esports as rooted in leisure communities, whereby amateur and professional-amateur (hereafter pro-am) competitions reigned supreme. *Grassroots* is the term used by scholars such as Taylor (2012) to describe the early years of esports competitions. Professional esports were largely unstable and involved volunteer work, small and unreliable prize pools, and little to no buy-in from individuals outside of the scene including sponsors.

The second wave depicts esports framed as sports, and involved "third-party organizations – sustained infrastructures of competition, formalization, and professionalism" (p. 136). In 1996, the first large-scale PC LAN event known as Quakecon occurred in Texas (Taylor, 2012). The event was considered a "LAN party" for gamers to assemble in a face-to-face environment, and although gaming competitions were a part of the event, it was largely community driven and meant for casual gamers. One year later the Cyberathletic Professional League (hereafter CPL) was formed by Angel Munoz and is credited as the first large-scale professional PC gaming tournament in America (Billings & Hou, 2019). The CPL is significant in that it fostered on- and offline spectatorship and corporate sponsorships, and as a result, allowed for larger prize pools in competitions (Gaudiosi, 2013). CPL tournaments became go-to examples for media coverage of professional gaming and were covered, albeit briefly, by popular conglomerates ESPN and MTV in the early 2000s. *Quake* was the top competitive FPS title at CPL in its first two years of existence, however, by 2001 *Counter-Strike* took over (Li, 2017a).

Counter-Strike forced its way into the esports scene in 2001, attracting players from across the United States and Europe to compete (Taylor, 2012). CPL Winter and Summer tournaments were the first Major *Counter-Strike* events. According to esports historian Duncan "Thorin" Shields (2018) *Counter-Strike* was "such a success on a grassroots level of people who played the game and made up a big community, and showed there was interest, and supported early tournaments, that it actually managed to dislodge *Quake* and *StarCraft*… to become a massive esport for over a decade." Since its debut at CPL, *Counter-Strike* has been a mainstay at tournaments such as the World

Cyber Games (2001-02), Electronic Sports World Cup (2003), and Intel Extreme Masters (2007-08) among others. Today multiple leagues and tournaments exist specifically for the FPS title (Shields, 2018).

Impacting the second-wave growth of esports development, the Electronic Sports World Cup (2003), was a major international esports tournament featuring *Counter-Strike*. It is noteworthy in that the entire tournament was framed as the Olympics of *CS*. Teams were grouped according to their nationality, and competed against other countries for medals - a tactic often employed by tournament organizers today.

In the mid 2000s television was widely considered the path to mainstream attention, larger audiences, and increased profits for esports (Li, 2017). Before the current era of esports broadcasted as a type of popular media, attempts were made to broadcast esports programs around the world. South Korea had an entire channel dedicated to the real-time strategy game StarCraft since the year 2000. From 2002 to 2005 gaming network G4TV operated as a dedicated television channel for all things video gaming. They even had a dedicated competitive esport-style show called "Versus." Unfortunately, there seemed to be little demand for that type of media product in Europe or the Americas at the time and G4TV failed (Schneider, 2012).

The Championship Gaming Series (hereafter CGS) launched in 2007 as a partnership between DirecTV, British Sky Broadcasting, and Star TV (Taylor, 2018). CGS is significant as it brought in traditional sports media and esports industry professionals and contributed innovative elements to the American esports scene, transforming competitive play for the televised format. It also contracted various esports stakeholders including players, team managers, casters, administrators, and others to manage various sectors of

the league with salaries and bonuses. This is also significant because, at the time, these roles were filled on either a volunteer basis or via ad hoc contract work. CGS provided these individuals with stable work, illustrating the esports industry as legitimate work, existing on solid ground. Shortly after its debut, the CGS failed due to "game choices [and] altered structures and rule sets" that did not appeal to hardcore fans (Taylor, 2018, p. 140). The downfall of CGS was significant in that it brought down much of the then-existing esports structures in North America, and led stakeholders to view television as risky and costly (Young & Strait, 2019).

The lack of esports broadcast success prior to the current day can be attributed to several factors including technological advancements and audience understanding of the activity. The growth of internet-based live streaming has influenced esports stakeholders to move further from broadcast television (Taylor, 2018). Contemporary esports organizations consider their audience to be primarily internet-based, so live-streaming esports competitions is favored over broadcast television.

The notion of live-streaming video game play is a key aspect of esports and video game culture today, which Taylor (2018) explores in great detail in her book *Watch me play: Twitch and the rise of game live streaming*. Simply put, live streaming is about sharing one's play by broadcasting it online through streaming sites to a public audience. Today, the overwhelming majority of professional esports matches are made available for free using Twitch (Li, 2017). While television corporations distribute content to vast network of local subsidiaries, live-streaming platforms such as Twitch can reach any spectator who has internet access to allow them to both consume and produce live

streams of gameplay (Ewalt, 2014). This feature of live-streaming constructs the potential to create global audiences that can view the same content in real-time.

The third and current wave frames esports as media entertainment, in which close attention is given to the production of media and entertainment as well as the audience. In this wave, major esports tournaments are "harnessed as media events with an emphasis on the visual and narrative" (Taylor, 2018, p. 137). While there was no clear defining moment for the popularization of esports in North America and Europe, the shift to live streaming video game play in 2012 certainly contributed to building audiences and attracting fans to various esports (Taylor, 2018). In esports, live streaming provides players and teams opportunities to build their audience, brand, and incomes. Some video games, such as *CS:GO*, have even integrated the ability to watch live streams of matches within the game interface itself (Seo & Jung, 2016). With the emergence of esports, the overall sport media landscape is changing (van Driel et al., 2019). These changes were not unexpected, as esports have tried and failed in the past to televise competitions and enter mainstream entertainment (Taylor, 2018). However, now that our daily lives are saturated in media consumption, esports have thrived, and esports broadcasts have become normalized.

In today's "third wave" media environment, individuals regularly watch esports competitions as part of their everyday media viewing activities. From an esports spectator's point-of-view, *Counter-Strike* is considered an easy game to watch and learn the basics of when compared to other esports (Shields, 2018).

Esports culture has undergone significant transformations in the past decade. In the 2000s it was largely comprised of grassroots organizations who relied on volunteer

workers to staff esports events. In contemporary society, esports are considered part of mainstream popular culture, providing careers for a variety of esports participants including players, casters, and other stakeholders. Esports spectators now view esports broadcasts as part of their normal media-consumption activities. However, little is known about broadcasts' representations of esports culture and participants who comprise the scene.

Culture and identity are portrayed and discussed in esports media, and components of cultural identity are (re)constructed, transformed, and represented in such media (Sarisakaloğlu, 2020). As esports continue to grow in popularity, reaching millions of viewers on TV and live-streaming sites, it is important to understand the discourses, images, and representations, which shape our understanding of esports culture and esports participants (often referred to as gamers). This led to the exploration of professional esports broadcasts, focusing on two broad research questions; (1) How have professional *CS:GO* esports broadcasts shaped audience understanding of esports culture? And (2) How have professional *CS:GO* esports broadcasts shaped audience understanding of gamers? These questions are explored via thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012); a method often used to understand culture by investigating the production of meaning through the signifying work of representation (Hall, 1997).

CHAPTER IV – METHODS

The ways in which esports broadcasts represent gamers and esports culture are fascinating developments that are seldom explored. I am curious specifically about how the cultural knowledge and experience of esports is represented in media, and how these representations are shaping our understanding of gamers and esports culture. By examining professional *CS:GO* esports broadcasts, I highlight the means of capturing and coding both in-game, and out-of-game, representations of gamers and esports culture.

ELEAGUE and ESL Pro League broadcasts present a worthwhile opportunity to explore esports culture and gamer representations more deeply. For *Counter-Strike* fans and esports audiences writ large, EPL and ELEAGUE are two of the most popular leagues that broadcast professional *CS:GO* matches. EPL and ELEAGUE provide representative cases for the suitability of traditional broadcast media and live-streaming media for esports. These leagues were carefully selected, as they represent unique esports perspectives; one long-standing and produced in Germany, and the other new and produced in America.

First, ESL (formerly known as Electronic Sports League) is the longest standing global esports organization and production company (Taylor, 2018). ESL is run by Turtle Entertainment, one of the oldest esports organizations worldwide running tournaments since 2000. ESL has 11 different offices with multiple television studios located around the world, and is based in Cologne, Germany. The organization launched in 2000 as an online gaming league, and today it hosts nine professional esports leagues as well as online and LAN competitions around the globe. ESL Pro League (hereafter EPL) is the

longest-running professional *CS:GO* league worldwide, dating back to 2012 (when the titled debuted) and is currently in its eleventh season. EPL is significant because it represents the homeland of esports for European viewers and many others. EPL's representation of esports culture and gamers provides a stable example of esports league representation via broadcast due to its long-standing success.

Second, ELEAGUE is a professional esports league and television show on the Turner Broadcasting System (TBS) that is dedicated to competitive video gaming. Season one was the first regularly aired professional *CS:GO* league in America (which occurred between May 24 and July 30, 2016). It was broadcasted on cable television as well as online through Twitch to a global audience. As of 2021, ELEAGUE has broadcasted two full seasons of *CS:GO* league play, several major international tournaments, and has continued to promote the industry by expanding into a variety of other esports titles representing numerous genres. ELEAGUE is significant because it represents the birthplace of esports for many American viewers. Thus, its representation of esports culture and gamers is worthy of analysis.

Contrary to other esports broadcast studies that only analyze one match or one day of competitive matches within a particular tournament (see Turtiainen et al., 2020), I employed a longitudinal approach to gain a deeper understanding of esports broadcasts from various perspectives. Throughout the course of this dissertation, I observed approximately 108 professional *CS:GO* match broadcasts across five different seasons from two disparate leagues. By examining both regular season and playoff matches, I acquired a more holistic understanding of professional esports leagues.

While major esport tournaments are played in stadiums and large arenas (Taylor, 2018), regular season esport league matches are not. In EPL seasons one and four, regular season matches were played entirely online. It was not until season nine they moved into the LAN format for exhibition matches. In ELEAGUE seasons one and two, all regular season matches were played on LAN. For playoff and Grand Finals matches, both EPL and ELEAGUE moved into large arenas, playing in LAN format for thousands of in-person spectators.

Throughout the process of watching ELEAGUE and EPL broadcasts, I became immersed in the data – gaining familiarity with professional *CS:GO* discourses and imagery, in addition to noting key ideas and recurrent themes. In total, I viewed approximately 81 hours of professional *CS:GO* broadcasts across two leagues, spanning five seasons between 2015 and 2019. I observed a variety of matches from two seasons of ELEAGUE as well as matches from three seasons of EPL in order to become better acquainted with *CS:GO* esport discourses from a variety of perspectives.

Both seasons of ELEAGUE took place in 2016. Season one aired between May 24 and July 30, and season two aired between October 21 and December 3. I watched 19 hours of ELEAGUE season one broadcasts, including the Grand Finals, both Semi-Finals matches, all four Quarter-Finals matches, and 12 regular season episodes (each episode contained two best-of-three maps matches). Additionally, I watched 16 hours of ELEAGUE season two broadcasts, consisting of Grand Finals, two Semi-Finals matches, and 12 episodes of regular season play. I watched a total of 35 hours of ELEAGUE broadcasts between the two seasons.

Watching EPL broadcasts from seasons one, four, and ten, allowed me to note patterns in imagery and discourse across four-year time span between 2015 and 2019. I chose each season for a specific purpose. Season one of EPL took place between May 4 and July 5, 2015. It was the first professional *CS:GO* league broadcast to air worldwide, and set the stage for future broadcasts emulate the various processes employed. Season four occurred between seasons one and two of ELEAGUE, from August 17 to October 30, 2016, and was included to investigate overlapping dialogues between the two leagues involving players, teams, tournaments, etc. Finally, I investigated season ten because it was the most recent season to be broadcast at the time this dissertation was written, and provided insight regarding contemporary professional *CS:GO* broadcast elements. Season ten took place from October 8 to December 8, 2019.

For EPL season one, I watched 16 hours of league broadcasts including the Grand Finals, both Semi-Finals matches, and 12 regular season matches. I only watched 11 hours of EPL season four broadcasts, consisting of Grand Finals, both Semi-Finals, one Quarter Finals, and seven regular season matches. Because EPL season ten was the most recent league broadcast, and included new sponsors, advertisements, casters, and more teams from various regions, I watched 19 hours including the Grand Finals, both Semi-Finals, two Quarter-Finals, and 15 regular season matches. Across all three seasons I watched a total of 46 hours of league broadcasts.

The reason I believe these professional *CS:GO* league broadcasts provided a view into gamer representation and esports culture is because, complementary to other media texts, they have the discursive capacity to inform individuals' behavior, thoughts, desires, and fears (Kellner, 2010; Rojek, 2010; White, 1992). These particular broadcasts

represent ideological content that is bound up with their social and political dimensions, which may be "found partly in the text itself, and partly in the relation of the reading subject to that text" (Fiske, 1992, p. 304). They are considered to be part of the process by which culture is defined, and how attitudes toward the external world are portrayed.

To address my research questions, I conducted a qualitative thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2011) of audio-visual data from professional *CS:GO* esports broadcasts. Qualitative thematic analysis is a technique used to analyze textual data and explicate themes (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). It is a systematic process that involves coding, examining of meaning, and description of social reality through theme creation and development.

Themes are created by research to unify data that may appear disparate to the uninitiated outsider (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Guest et al., 2011). They capture implicit meanings that exist beneath the surface of the data. Theme development involves intuition, and requires the researcher "to return repeatedly to the coding process throughout the analysis process" (Vaismoradi et al., 2016, p. 102). Themes are "usefully thought of as key characteristics in the story we are telling about the data … [and] each theme has an 'essence' or core concept that underpins and unites the observations" (Clarke & Braun, 2018, p. 108). In this dissertation, each theme is organized around central concepts of esports culture and gamer representation.

There are four phases of theme development: initialization, construction, rectification, and finalization. In this initialization phase, materials are gathered for data analysis. Data in the form of observation notes were collected from professional *CS:GO* league broadcasts. I attentively observed and listened to broadcasts for ideas relevant to

my two research questions. Through repeated observation and notetaking, I described

trends concerning esports culture and gamer representations from the audiences'

perspectives. As I closely observed each broadcast, I identified the beginning and end of

each noteworthy section by recording the time that they took place within the video. I

then went back and re-watched those particular sections carefully transcribing quotations

and describing in rich detail what I observed. This meticulous process was necessary so

that each noteworthy section could be traced back.

I coded the data through an iterative and inductive process informed by grounded

theory (Glaser et al., 2017). The initial stage of the coding process involved creating

codable data from my notes and remaining as close to the data as possible (Tracy, 2012).

By carefully reading through notes from each season of each league, I transformed my

data into codable form by typing up all notes in a Word document and organizing them in

a particular, uniform fashion. Each season was given its own document, and each episode

and/or match included labels notating the teams competing as well as a hyperlink to the

broadcast via YouTube or Twitch (some broadcasts consisted of multiple matches

between various teams, while others consisted of matches between the same teams).

Observations and quotations noted in particular episodes included timestamps for the

purpose of returning to that particular segment of data. After one episode's data was

organized into a form that I could easily annotate with codes and analyze, I moved on to

the next episode until the entire season of a particular league was well-organized.

Altogether, 151 double-spaced pages of professional *CS:GO* league broadcast notes were

compiled (69 pages of ESL Pro League notes, and 84 pages of ELEAGUE notes).

Identifying units of analysis is a necessary step in the coding process (Foss, 2015). Units of analysis refer to specific kinds of examples that help the researcher know which aspects of the data to focus on. They act as a scanning mechanism for coding data. Units of analysis exist in the form of particular concepts, ideas, or actions that highlight significant features of one's data, aiding in answering one's research question(s). For this dissertation, my units of analysis were esports culture and gamer representation.

Once I determined the units of analysis, I then went back through my dataset and picked out aspects of the data that were most relevant to answering my research questions. Highlighting aspects of my data pertaining to esports culture and gamer representation, I was then able to unpack observations and quotations in the dataset and code them.

Coding is a process by which individuals "systematically and carefully [review their] data to find and mark passages, images, or scenes … to constitute [their] unit of analysis" (Foss, 2015, p. 244) and involves assigning particular segments of data a code (word or phrase that summarizes a key attribute or feature of some aspect of the data). Working from the dataset of *CS:GO* league broadcast notes, I systematically went through each page of data and marked the beginning and end of each excerpt that constituted or contained content reflecting game culture or gamer representation.

The second phase, construction, involves reflecting "on the process of organizing codes and compar[ing] them in terms of similarities and differences to assign a place to each cluster of codes in relation to the research question[s]" (Vaismoradi et al., 2016, p. 105). Construction consists of classifying codes, comparing them, labeling them, translating them, and finally defining and describing them. After locating relevant

excerpts in my data pertaining to esports culture and gamer representation, I wrote a code next to the excerpt. Initial codes involved terms or phrases that captured what I observed (Tracy, 2012). For example, a code for players seen wearing matching team jerseys was *Jock Representation*. Initial coding involves actions along with gerund, which indicate what the data means in greater detail. To be clear about contextual details surrounding particular segments of data, I kept enough information in marked segments and added notes to ensure accuracy. For the *Jock Representation* example above, I noted how some teams wore matching jerseys that looked similar to professional soccer jerseys, while other teams wore tank tops and t-shirts with only a team logo on it, and no player names displayed on the backs. This process allows researchers to gain contextual perspectives of their data (Tracy, 2012). I employed this coding strategy for all pages of my data across all seasons of both EPL and ELEAGUE.

Initial coding was done with naiveté. I attempted to forget what I already knew about my topic to avoid using background and accumulated knowledge of the game/teams/players to create codes. Additionally, as I moved through my dataset, I discovered that some excerpts required multiple codes because they contained several units of analysis. For example, an episode of ELEAGUE season one involved player testimonials regarding why they play professional *Counter-Strike*. Player responses ranged from "because it's a team-based game, kind of like a sport" to "because we want to be the very best at the game. That is our dream". This excerpt was coded as *Sport Legitimation* and *Developing Narrative*.

To keep track of all categorized data I used color-codes. Each color represented a different code, and a list of colors with corresponding codes was kept. Thus, each excerpt

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of data that involved units of analysis was marked, coded, and colored. To easily refer

back to the original excerpt, labels displayed which league match the excerpt came from,

as well as timestamps from when the discourse and imagery occurred. For example, the

excerpt listed above was noted as:

ELEAGUE Season 1: Week 1 Day 2: Retrieved from

https://www.twitch.tv/videos/231698383?filter=all&sort=time

02:30:42 – 02:32:18

- Player testimonials regarding "why do you play *CS*?"
  - o "Because it's a team-based game, kind of like an actual sport"
  - o "We're just an Australian team that worked their way up the ranks and became noticed by the Renegades organization"
  - o "The travel is pretty intense. It does get frustrating having to travel a lot … it comes with the territory I guess"
  - o "We want to be the very best at the game. That's our dream"
    - SPORT LEGITIMATION
    - TRANSNATIONAL RHETORIC
    - DEVELOPING NARRATIVE

Once I categorized all coded excerpts, I created new documents for each theme.

At the top of each thematic document, I described the characteristics, attributes, or

mechanisms that the excerpts in the pile shared. After copying and pasting each color

coded excerpt from the notes to the thematic document, I checked each excerpt to ensure

all codes were relevant to the label they had been given. Excerpts were broadly

categorized into twelve thematic categories: (1) *Game Culture*, (2) *Geek Representation*,

(3) *Developing Narrative*, (4) *Sport Legitimation*, (5) *Jock Representation*, (6) *Gameplay

Reporting*, (7) *Educational Moment*, (8) *Skilled Expertise*, (9) *Transactional Dynamism*,

(10) *Sponsorship/Advertisement*, (11) *Audience Participation*, and (12) *Transnational

Rhetoric*. These twelve categories allowed for an overall process of decision making and

action with regard to my units of analysis focusing on esports culture and gamer representation without imposing a specific theory upon the data.

Next, I condensed initial codes into conceptual language that focused more on answering my two research questions. By providing a clear conceptual framework, focused coding allowed for a constant comparative method, which tested concepts against emergent codes (Tracy, 2012). Focused coding displayed the connectivity between categories, allowing patterns to emerge. These patterns then allowed me to draw certain conclusions from the various relationships identified.

Rectification is the third phase, which involved taking stock of the entire dataset, continuously reappraising the coding process, and distancing myself from the data temporarily in order to "increase … sensitivity and reduce any premature and incomplete data analysis" (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Having become familiarized with emergent themes from the aforementioned texts, I then identified thematic categories, and continuously refined them by making judgements about meaning, relevance, importance, and connections between ideas (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). Ensuring that the research questions were being addressed, I analyzed key characteristics laid out in each category using a grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). This method provides systematic, yet flexible procedures for handling and shaping rich qualitative data (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2015). The grounded theory approach requires simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis, which allows for the emergence of systematic themes by comparing the content of various texts to one another. By continuously returning to the texts, I was able to strategically sample various discourses and spot emerging themes. Utilizing grounded theory as a methodology allowed me to

explore emerging themes from broadcasts without theoretical boundaries and biases. After analyzing and coding 81 hours of *CS:GO* league broadcasts, I reached a saturation point. Upon reaching the saturation point, I distanced myself from the data to assess the accuracy of my codes.

The last phase, Finalization, involved describing and connecting various themes in an attempt to answer both research questions. By exploring the influence of esports broadcasts through thematic analysis, I elicited intimate details about esports culture and gamer representation, describing how they fit into contemporary society (Tracy, 2012). Findings include rich detail and deep explanations illustrating why they matter, which, in studying an emerging phenomenon like esports is crucial.

Employing thematic analysis methodology may augment cultural studies (Guest et al., 2011). To understand culture is to investigate the ways in which meanings are produced through signifying practices. Thus, cultural studies are primarily concerned with culture as the signifying work of representation (Hall, 1997). Thematic analysis provides the skills, tools, and understandings necessary to demonstrate the work of language and imagery in the construction of the social world. Analysis of cultural studies combines formal analysis with critique of how cultural meanings convey certain ideologies of gender, race, class, nationality, and sexuality (Kellner, 2010). It can show us how the social world is not only constructed, but regulated through language and imagery.

Thematic analysis operates on the assumption that meaning lay within the text itself (Guest et al., 2011). To conduct cultural studies of texts, then, is to concern oneself with the meaning-making process of readers and viewers. Thematic analysis allows

systematic exploration of communicated messages. Each analysis functions to influence

future analyses of similar interest within the realm of communication theories. In this

dissertation I explore why a specific type of popular entertainment (esports broadcasts)

are meaningful to particular publics. By analyzing discourse and imagery employed in

esports broadcasts, this dissertation will contribute to our understanding of how esports

broadcasts function in contemporary society.

A significant element of understanding media representations, especially in the

realm of esports broadcasts, a relatively new and under-researched phenomenon, involves

exploring the text of the rhetoric employed by broadcasters. The exploration I engage in

here, of analyzing professional *CS:GO* esports broadcasts, constitutes part of a larger

discussion involving the emergent forms of competitive FPS gaming that are modeled

based upon the transformation of video games into spectator sports.

By considering one specific esport title (*CS:GO*), I highlight significant themes as

cultural products that are separate from other esports and other types of play. As

individuals increasingly consume professional CS:GO esports broadcasts, it is important

to investigate how they are representing esports culture and identity to a global audience.

CHAPTER V – RESULTS

EPL and ELEAGUE provided unique sports culture settings as context. Before diving into each of the twelve categories, it is worth noting some distinct elements of each league that affect their contributions to certain categorical content. Both EPL and ELEAGUE portrayed a synergistic competitive sport-like environment with game culture elements prevalent throughout their broadcasts. The leagues incorporated a variety of sportscast elements including a broadcast booth consisting of top-tier casters, play-by-play commentators, large digital screen displays throughout the studio, and teams wearing uniforms during competition. Both leagues also included a variety of game culture elements including an emphasis on technicity (technology sponsors, terminology), game-related memorabilia (player and fan attire, posters, etc.), and the fact that the majority of league broadcasts involved in-game displays. The content produced and displayed by each league incorporated similar narrative and gameplay reporting approaches, and both leagues highlighted elements of transactional dynamism within their broadcast content.

An annotated schedule of the EPL and ELEAGUE professional *CS:GO* leagues is provided below. It includes information about each season such as league location, dates of competition, total prize pool, number of teams, grand finals results. See "Annotated EPL and ELEAGUE Schedule" below in Table 1.

Table 1 *Annotated EPL and ELEAGUE Schedule*

League and Season	League Location	Dates of Competition	Total Prize Pool	Total Teams	Grand Finals
EPL s1	Cologne, Germany	May 4 – July 5 (2015)	$500K	24	Fnatic > Cloud9
ELEAGUE s1	Atlanta, Georgia USA	May 24 – July 30 (2016)	$1.4 Million	24	Virtus.Pro > Fnatic
EPL s4	Sao Paolo, Brazil	August 17 – October 30 (2016)	$750K	28	Cloud9 > SK Gaming
ELEAGUE s2	Atlanta, Georgia USA	October 21 – December 3 (2016)	$1.1 Million	16	OpTic Gaming > Astralis
EPL s10	Odense, Denmark	October 8 – December 8 (2019)	$750K	48	Mousesports > Fnatic

The annotated schedule of EPL and ELEAGUE seasons was included for the purpose of aiding the readers with relevant information from each season. It includes league location, dates of competition, total prize pool, number of teams, and Grand Finals results. This information was pulled from Liquipedia.net, which is widely considered the *Counter-Strike* encyclopedia. It provided background knowledge to better understand league representations.

Significant differences between the two leagues involve history, audience, online vs. LAN play, and sponsorships. As previously stated, ESL Pro League began broadcasting its professional *CS:GO* league in 2015 and is considered the longest standing premier professional *CS:GO* league worldwide. By the time ELEAGUE season one aired, EPL had already finished its third season. This is significant because EPL was able to draw upon multiple seasons of content such as replays, player and coach interviews, statistics, and general experience in their broadcasts (which as a new entity, ELEAGUE did not). Drawing upon archival footage helped EPL tell player, team, and regional narratives. Additionally, their use of statistics helped casters report the game by

highlighting player and team performances from seasons past. ELEAGUE relied on

produced video segments, player interviews, and behind-the-scenes footage of teams to

help tell their stories. In terms of size and scale, EPL is the premier professional *CS:GO*

league. It has expanded from North American and European regional teams in season one

to now encompassing North America, Europe, Oceania, and Asia regions. ELEAGUE, in

comparison, only produced two seasons of its *CS:GO* league, both in 2016, and

incorporated teams from Europe, North America, and Oceania but not Asia. Admittedly,

players and casters explained at various points throughout the two seasons of ELEAGUE

that travel and visa issues were a major problem for international talent to come to

America, and may have prohibited Asian players from competing. Key differences

between the leagues are highlighted as comparisons in Table 2.

Table 2 *League Comparison*

LEAGUE:	EPL	ELEAGUE
HISTORY	Began in 2015 and is currently in its twelfth season.	Began in 2016, broadcasted two seasons and moved on from *CS:GO* in 2017 to broadcast other esports
GAME CULTURE vs. SPORTSCAST	Some sportscast elements (environment, attire, organization of match broadcast), and heavily rooted in game culture via caster discourses, reliance on gamer jargon, casters-as-gamers evident in discourses	Significant sportscast elements (environment, attire, organization of match broadcast, seriousness), some game culture elements and popular culture built-in to show segments (memes, sponsored segments)
SIZE AND SCALE	**S1:** Regular season online with small broadcast booth, playoffs LAN in small studio (Cologne, Germany) **S4:** Regular season online with small studio broadcast booth, playoffs LAN in large arena (Sao Paolo, Brazil) **S10:** Regular season played on LAN in large studio, playoffs in large arena (Odense, Denmark)	**S1:** Regular season games played on LAN in large studio, playoffs in large arena (Atlanta, USA) **S2:** Regular season games played on LAN, playoffs in same studio as regular season (Atlanta, USA)
AUDIENCE	Perceived as gamers, esports followers, *CS:GO* players and fans	Perceived as gamers and sport fans, esports newcomers, *CS:GO* newbies
ONLINE vs. LAN	**S1 & S4:** Regular season online, playoffs in LAN format **S10:** Regular season and playoffs in LAN format	**S1 & S2:** Regular season and playoffs in LAN format
SPONSORSHIPS	**Lifestyle:** Mountain Dew, U.S. Airforce **Technology:** ESEA, BenQ, G2A, Betway, CSMoney, GGBet, Kinguin, MSI, Paysafecard, TheScoreEsports, Sandisk, Saylnet, Xfinity, Logitech	**Lifestyle:** Buffalo Wild Wings, Arby's, Dominos, Snickers, Credit Karma, Turner Sports **Technology:** DirectX, iBuyPower

EPL broadcasts were rooted in game culture to a greater extent than ELEAGUE, especially during EPL's inaugural season. The overall production quality appeared to be more grassroots compared to ELEAGUE's broadcast, especially in terms of studio size,

production value, and caster discussions. The Grand Finals of EPL season one, for example, took place in a small dark room in front of nearly fifty in-person audience members. When Team Fnatic won the Finals, they slowly and awkwardly inched out from behind their gaming desks, wearing skinny jeans and backwards hats as they embraced each other and held the trophy for the camera. This display highlighted the grassroots nature of esports, which describes the early years of professional *CS:GO*. The Grand Finals of ELEAGUE season one, in contrast, took place in a large theater for an in-person crowd in the thousands. When Virtus.Pro won the trophy, they screamed and pumped their fists in the air as the crowd cheered loudly.

Caster discourses in EPL regularly involved popular culture references and inside jokes, rather than strictly gameplay reporting. Casters frequently referenced their own *CS:GO* gameplay during broadcasts, and joked about their lack of skill and trolling techniques. ELEAGUE casters, on the contrary, focused more on reporting the match and conveyed a more serious sports-style tone.

In terms of audience, ELEAGUE differs from EPL in that it was largely designed for an audience of *CS:GO* newcomers, while EPL seems to be designed for the initiated *CS:GO* audience. ELEAGUE teaches its audience about basics aspects of the game and explains game-specific terminology via caster discourses as well as produced video segments and informative graphics. ELEAGUE focuses on audience understanding concerning both the game and the broadcast. In ELEAGUE season one, casters explained "how to watch" if you are new, highlighting aspects of the heads up display (HUD) such as the mini-map, its location in the top-left of the screen, and its importance to players.

All of the information needed to follow *CS:GO* matches, and make sense of visually complex virtual information are provided within the HUD of EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts. The HUD provides "an illustration of the ways that knowledge of the game becomes critical in helping render a playing field legible to fans" (Taylor, 2018, p. 158). EPL and ELEAGUE provide similar information in their HUDs, helping audiences make sense of virtual information in real-time during matches.

EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts provided audiences with richer information than what individual players see within the game. League broadcast HUDs include mini maps that reveal the location of all players from both teams. Entire lineups for each team are visually represented on the right and left and side of the HUD, including professional headshot photos of each player next to their in-game name. In the same space, players' weapon, utility, and amount of in-game money and displayed. When a player is eliminated during gameplay, their icon fades to grey signifying their death. As a result of these digital displays, *CS:GO* audiences come to understand esports as more of a mediated activity than a physically demanding traditional sport that occurs within a physical playing field.

Casters also explained how in broadcasts the viewers can see in "X-ray vision" viewing the outlines of players through walls. They went on to discuss how although spectators can see through walls, the players cannot. In contrast, EPL broadcasts made no attempts to explain the jargon being used by players and casters alike. Team strategies and player positions were referenced and explained using in-depth terminology and game-specific jargon that only the initiated *CS:GO* audience could understand. The notion of differences in perceived audiences creates a clear line in the sand between EPL

and ELEAGUE, with EPL firmly rooted in competitive *CS:GO* culture, and ELEAGUE

paving a path for American newcomers to the competitive CS:GO scene.

Discourses and images in EPL largely reflected an audience that is well-versed in

CS:GO and esports terminology. While EPL and ELEAGUE used much of the same

jargon terms, EPL used such terms more often, they went unexplained and there were no

produced pieces or discourses designed to teach audience members about the game. Even

in season one of EPL, caster discourses suggest that audience members should already

know the names of players and teams, various maps and names of positions within those

maps, and other *CS:GO-* and esport-specific terminology. For example, in season one of

EPL, casters discussed a recent "patch" that was released without ever explaining what a

patch was. Instead, they assumed that audience members understood these jargon terms

and dove deeper into the ramifications of the patch.

EPL and ELEAGUE had different formats for regular season matches.

ELEAGUE was conducted solely in the LAN format, while early seasons of EPL

involved regional online matches. In seasons one and four of EPL, regular season

matches were played online against regional opponents, and only playoffs matches were

played in-person (on LAN). In season nine this format was changed, and in season ten all

matches (regular season and playoffs) were played on LAN (ESL Pro League, 2019).

The differences between online and LAN competition significantly impact the

league broadcasts. When teams compete on LAN, audiences can see players and coaches

sitting at their desks, dressed in uniforms, performing side by side. When the same

competition occurs online, broadcasts must rely on individual player webcams that vary

in terms of quality and point-of-view to capture player performances. In fact, some EPL

season one matches did not feature in-person player displays at all. Casters appear

disconnected from the players in online competitions, as they provide commentary from

an external site (usually a broadcast booth located in the studio). Because ELEAGUE

took place on LAN in a large sports-style studio, the league seemed more legitimate.

ELEAGUE's high production value gave the league significant credibility in terms of

financial investment, and created more visual connections to sport.

The existence of professional esports leagues largely rely on corporate

sponsorships. Both EPL and ELEAGUE have several technology and lifestyle sponsors

that help fund the leagues. While the individual sponsors vary, the type of sponsors that

exist in EPL but not in ELEAGUE are fascinating. EPL is sponsored by Betway, a

website dedicated to esports betting. ELEAGUE does not have any affiliation with

esports betting because esports betting is illegal in the United States (legalized only by

certain states and individual casinos). EPL is also sponsored by Paysafecard, an online

payment service that individuals use to bet on esports and purchase in-game items such as

weapon skins and stickers. ELEAGUE is not affiliated with any online payment services.

This description explored the significant differences between EPL and ELEAGUE

broadcasts. Next, I will define the themes utilized in answering research questions one

and two, before introducing each thematic category.

In answering each research question, I called upon various, sometimes

overlapping, themes. *Developing Narrative* and *Gameplay Reporting* themes played a

significant role in my responses to both research questions, as they were the

organizational patterns used by EPL and ELEAGUE to help audiences understand the

phenomenon and synthesize what was happening in in familiar ways.

Research question one concerned audience understanding of esports culture as a result of consuming professional EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts, and is answered in three parts. In the first part, I explain esports as a "hybrid mediasport," using *Audience Participation*, *Sport Legitimation*, and *Game Culture* themes to explain esports culture as an intersection of hybrid media and mediasport. The second part uses *Sport Legitimation*, *Transnational Rhetoric, Jock Representation*, *Gameplay Reporting*, *Skilled* Expertise, *Sponsorship/Advertisement*, and *Transactional Dynamism* to explain how esports culture represents as a global sport. The final part calls upon *Game Culture*, *Geek Representation*, and *Sponsorship/Advertisement* to explain esports culture as rooted in game culture norms and values, specialized language, and symbols.

Research question two explored audiences' understanding of gamers resulting from EPL and ELEAGUE broadcast consumption. The discussion involves two parts. Part one delineates the ways in which gamers are represented as geeks, using *Geek Representation* and *Game Culture* themes. The second part uses *Jock Representation* and *Skilled Expertise* themes to explain how gamers are represented as cyberathletes.

Key Themes

As noted in the last chapter, I identified twelve unique themes pertaining to the two research questions focusing on culture and identity. (See Table 3.) These themes were (1) *Game Culture*, (2) *Geek Representation*, (3) *Developing Narrative* (4) *Sport Legitimation*, (5) *Jock Representation*, (6) *Gameplay Reporting*, (7) *Educational Moment*, (8) *Skilled Expertise*, (9) *Transactional Dynamism*, (10) *Sponsorship/Advertisement*, (11) *Audience Participation*, and (12) *Transnational*

Rhetoric. Here I will summarize each theme by providing definitions and examples.

Thematic categories are outlined below in Table 3, which includes titles, definitions, and

at least one example for each theme. I organized the themes in such a way that related

themes follow each other one after the next.

Table 3 *Thematic Categories*

THEME	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Game Culture	Language, norms, and rituals tied to game culture including: Online vs. LAN, Nomenclature, Technicity, Audience expectations, Trolling, Popular Internet Culture	Online vs. LAN: *"We know he can do it on online games… We need to see him do it on LAN."* Nomeclature: *"Server," "Deleted," "Surprise buy," "Mac daddy," "Dead round,"* Technicity: *"Configs," "Twitch stream crash"* Popular Internet Culture: *"It's always interesting… when you see a new meme being born… that's definitely going to be on Reddit."*
Geek Representation	Discourses and images relating to hardcore gamer performances, gamer stereotypes, and valorization of gamer performances including trolling	Hardcore Gamer Performance: *Gamer tags, Esports jerseys, Player's emotional investment, Personalized gaming equipment* Gamer Stereotype: *"Cloud9 trying to dispel the myth that all gamers are big fat nerds"* Valorization of Gamer Performances: *"Forrest is… a natural at all video games… one of the biggest trolls in the scene"*

Table 3 Continued

Developing Narrative	Stories about players, coaches, casters, teams, geographical regions, and the game *CS:GO*	Players: *"FaLLeN is our in-game leader, he is our technical mastermind, the captain of Luminosity."* Teams: *"NaVi never beat Fnatic in a series… Fnatic is 22-8 versus NaVi all time."* Regions: *"Dust2 is the staple map of America. Especially against European teams."* Game: *"That … is the story of CS. It's a thinking man's game as well as an aim game."*
Sport Legitimation	Discourse and imagery portraying *CS:GO* as a sport	League Organization: *"This is a … million-dollar league. 12 of the best [teams]"* Sportscast atmosphere: broadcast booth, separate team stages, team uniforms, studio with digital screens Sportscast elements: instant replays, match predictions, bottom-screen ticker, timeouts, graphic overlays, scoreboard, *"Tonight's Rosters," "Map stats"* Role of audience: Cheering and jeering, chanting player names, team names, and region names (*"U-S-A"*). Play-by-play commentary: competitive sport-like terminology and rhetoric including winning and losing, and score reporting. Traditional sport references/comparisons: *"New York Knicks fans are thinking hey, let's choose Team Liquid… They choke when it matters."*

Table 3 Continued

Jock Representation	Athletic performances and portrayals of players as athletes	Athletic history: *"I played football and handball… got a knee injury"* Competitive mentality and aspirations: *"We want to be the very best at the game. That's our dream."*
Gameplay Reporting	League and tournament related pre-game segments, play-by-play commentary, and post-game segments	Match Preview: *"Gambit versus Complexity in the final match of day two."* Reporting the score: *"Nine-to-six. SK manage to pull the last round back against all odds"* Play-by-play commentary: *"Neo, Byali, Pasha start to make the play. Neo gets Shroud down and already they've just smothered the site in smoke."* Match information and statistics: *"VP score lines have been pretty subpar … in 2015… they've won three times and lost five."* Postgame reactions: *"Cloud9 will move forward into the Semifinals with an absolutely shocking score on this second map."*

Table 3 Continued

Educational Moment	Content that functions to explain various aspects of professional *CS:GO* including game, league, broadcast, and player/team knowledge pertaining to static and dynamic aspects of the game	Game: *"Map fly-through," "This is a map that's... CT-sided,"* Strategy: *"Since the counter-terrorist has to move his crosshair significantly to kill the jumping player, that player's teammate was able to trade kills."* League: *"Optic needs 16 rounds total to win this map"* Broadcast: *"without the X-Ray, it's very difficult to see where the enemies are through that thick smoke. That's what the player's see. They don't see through walls."* Terminology: *"Terminology 101"* produced video segments
Skilled Expertise	Highlighting of player, coach, and team skills and attributes.	"Player of the match" segments: *"Blazin' Hot Player of the Match"* Expressing praise and disappointment for teamwork, discipline, dynamic play, and communication: *"This time on the CT side some very nice calling, some very nice setups... getting those picks."* Precise aim and reaction speed: *"They have to react instantly... It's one of the qualities you have to have to be a pro CS player."* Player and team training: *"We play with our team about six or seven hours every day."* Mindset: *"better to stay level-headed than excited."*

Table 3 Continued

Transactional Dynamism	Business dealings in various forms including player, team, and league transactions, earnings, and prizes.	Prize Pool: *"Fourteen teams now will be playing… for seven-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollars."* Transactions: *"the future of this team… is they're gonna have to… look to Europe to get… talent there."* Acquisitions: *"TSM is a big organization… they spent a decent amount of money on some of these players. Buying them out of contracts, paying them top salaries."* Earnings: *"that puts… this current formation of Fnatic at over six-hundred-thousand-dollars in winnings."*
Sponsorship/Advertisement	Sponsorships and commercial advertisements for league sponsored lifestyle and technology products and services	Sponsor Display: In-game text, real-life player uniforms and equipment, broadcast booth, digital screens in studio Sponsor Discourse: *"Blazin' Hot Player of the Match presented by Buffalo Wild Wings."* League Self-Promotion: *"Check out the ELEAGUE shop, we've got a bunch of styles for you to choose which team you want to represent, or just represent ELEAGUE in general in some ELEAGUE branded gear."* Sponsored Show Segment: *"Paysafecard Pick 'Em Challenge," "Mountain Dew AMP Game Fuel's Play of the Day"* Commercial Advertisement: *"If you know CS:GO, then you'll know that the best way to bet on esports is with Betway."*

Table 3 Continued

Audience Participation	Audience displays and caster commentary pertaining to the audience including social media engagement	Audience Display: *Fans waving national flags, holding up signs, wearing team and game-related memorabilia.* Cheers and Jeers: *Fans booing, cheering, and chanting: "U-S-A," "Vir-Tus-Pro," "Let's go Astra-Lis, let's go"* Caster Acknowledgement: *"We've got an awesome studio audience here to support the home town heroes, Cloud9"* Social Media Engagement: *"Let us know your thoughts… on Twitter… Our personal social medias are @MachineETV and @TheyCallMePansy"*
Transnational Rhetoric	Discourses and imagery involving global competition, player and team nationalities, regional *CS* history, geographical growth of *CS:GO*, and nationalistic displays	Global Competition: *"We're going to see 24 elite… teams from across the world compete."* Player/Team Nationality: *"Triple kill for the Russian player," "The German team pulls off the comeback"* Regional *CS* History: *"Swedish [CS] has always been strong"* Geographical *CS* Growth: *"Now we're starting to see more LANs here in North America"* Nationalistic Display: In-game and in-person features of national flags via player jerseys, in-game scoreboard, and shots of fans wearing nationalistic clothing and waving flags

In Figure 1 below I visually represent the relationship between the twelve aforementioned themes. Meta themes exist in the form of *Game Culture* and *Sport Legitimation*. Each meta theme encompasses a representation-related subtheme. These themes are mutually constitutive and rarely operate in isolation. *Game Culture* and *Geek Representation* themes are mutually constitutive, and the same relationship exists in *Sport Legitimation* and *Jock Representation*.

Developing Narrative and *Gameplay Reporting* themes represent the organizational patterns by which league broadcasts introduce images and discourses. All other themes exist within the aforementioned Meta themes, and are represented in narratives and gameplay reports. This includes the following themes: *Educational Moment, Skilled Expertise, Transactional Dynamism, Sponsorship/Advertisement*, *Audience Participation* and *Transnational Rhetoric*. *Transnational Rhetoric* permeates all other themes. The figure below visually represents these relationships

Figure 1. Thematic Relationships

Developing Narrative

Gameplay Reporting

Game Culture

Sport Legitimation

Transnational Rhetoric

Audience Participation

Skilled Expertise

Educational Moment

Transactional Dynamism

Sponsorship/Advertisement

Geek Representation

Jock Representation
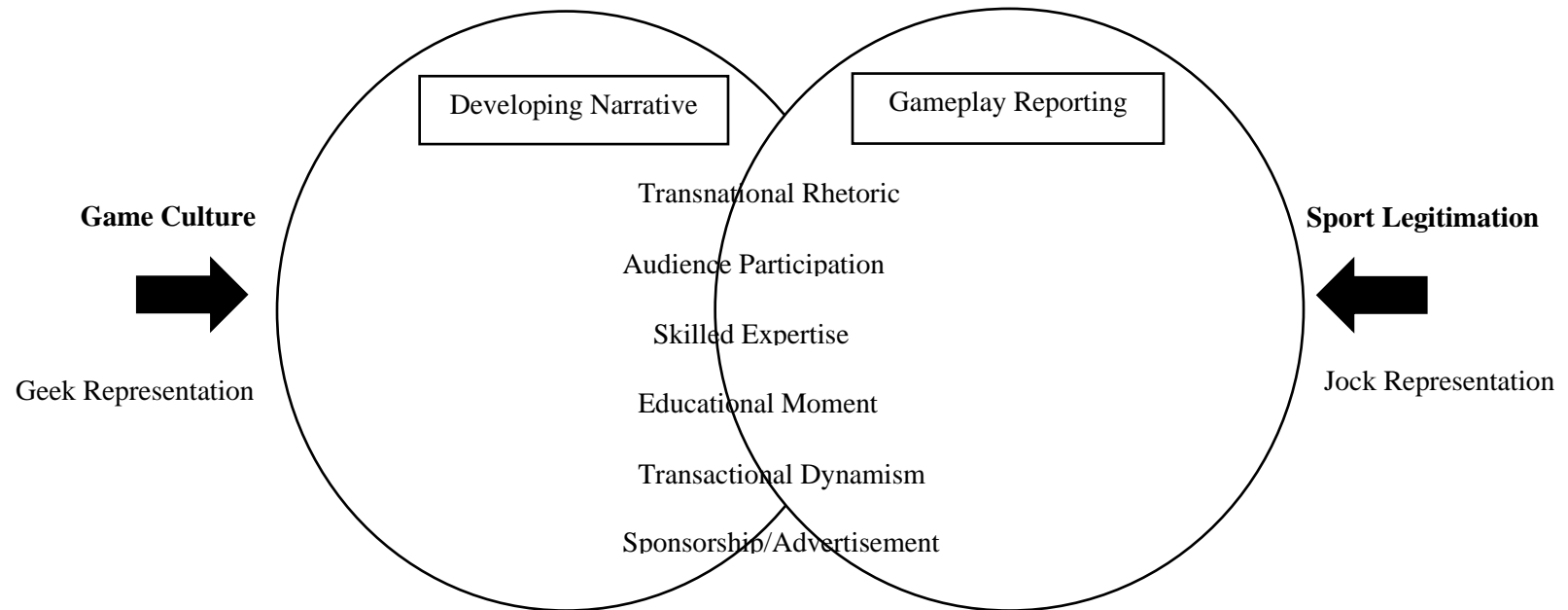
Game Culture

Game culture, in terms of language, rituals, and tastes, plays a major role in the discourse and imagery portrayed in professional *CS:GO* broadcasts. The meta theme of *Game Culture* has a direct correlation to *Geek Representation* and incorporates several subthemes including online versus LAN, *CS:GO* jargon, audience-as-gamer expectations, technicity, trolling behavior, and popular internet culture/memes. Some of the above-mentioned subthemes overlap into other themes; however, in this section they will be described in direct relation to game culture.

A major point of emphasis in EPL and ELEAGUE discourses involve comparisons between online and LAN play. More than just the context of play (with LAN being in-person and online taking place over the Internet), caster discourses highlighted the importance of skill, playstyle, and results as they related to each. In ELEAGUE season one, for example, casters stated that every *CS:GO* player is considered an "onliner" when they first come into the scene, and once they gain recognition and rank up, they get noticed by better teams, eventually gaining the opportunity to perform on LAN. In both leagues, casters explain that players are typically better online versus offline. Recurring examples of this can be seen in caster discourses such as "We know he can do it on online games, that doesn't really matter that much… We need to see him do it on LAN," and "looks great online, but does that translate to LAN?" As such, when a player had a noteworthy round on LAN during league broadcasts, casters often emphasized the significance. In ELEAGUE season one, for example, casters reflected on an American player's performance, stating, "Tarik, for the longest time, had a reputation in the American scene and internationally too as someone who is mainly a streamer and

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mainly someone who played better online than he did at big events. And right now, this is a huge game. Maybe even the biggest game of his career."

Comparisons between online and LAN were also discussed in terms of fatigue from over-playing and team performances. In EPL season one casters explained that, due to their demanding schedules, professional *CS:GO* teams often treat online matches as practice. They went on to explain how teams play online with such regularity that they rarely have time to review match replays and implement new strategies before the next league or tournament begins. Both EPL and ELEAGUE casters expressed that over-playing *CS:GO* (both online and on LAN) results in fatigue, sometimes causing players to retire and team performances to suffer. In the postgame analysis portion of an ELEAGUE season one episode, for example, casters described Virtus.pro's team performance by stating, "When they get online they just lose focus. That's why Virtus.Pro really enjoy the structure of ELEAGUE being completely on LAN." This is consistent with George and Sherrick (2019) who highlighted fatigue as a major concern for professional *CS:GO* players noting, "premier Counter-Strike LAN tournaments took place on 2014 of the 366 days in 2016, and this number does not include the numerous online tournaments, which may outnumber LAN tournaments" (p. 46).

The culture of gaming has unique terminology and vernacular, which is predominantly born from virtual spaces (Cade & Gates, 2017). Gamers have their own language to describe types of players, their roles, and actions within games. Jargon terms specific to game culture and specifically *CS:GO* were a recurrent theme throughout both EPL and ELEAGUE. To begin, all matches are played in a digital environment known as a game "server." Casters recurrently referenced the digital battlefield as the server,

instead of calling it a field, court, arena, etc. For example, "Skill wise, I feel like it's pretty evenly matched here on the server."

A recurring theme in play-by-play commentary involved describing actions through the use of terms and phrases rooted in *CS:GO* culture. Terminology revolved around in-game tactics, strategies, violence as objectives, economy, and communication. The term *default* was used in both EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts to reference the usual or normal strategies and tactics including player placements in a game round. Much like an NBA announcer might describe a team's defensive strategy as man-to-man or zone, *CS:GO* casters described team's strategies and player positions using the term default (i.e. "Cloud9 going with the two-one-two default hold, with Skadoodle alone AWPing in mid").

A plethora of additional terms were used to describe in-game actions via play-by-play commentary including pre-aim, wall-bang, shoulder peak, run-boost, jump shot, bunny hop, ace, and clutch, among others. Each term refers to a unique action, and in the *Educational Moment* section, many of these terms will be explained in greater detail. Violent discourse and imagery as part of the game's objectives is common in many video games and esports broadcasts, especially first-person shooters. In professional *CS:GO* league broadcasts, violence is depicted via in-game footage of players killing each other's' avatars, as well as casters using terms such as fight, duel, kill, frag, and headshot to describe such actions. In explaining kills and violent in-game actions, casters sometimes remind audiences that they are in fact watching a video game by describing player's real life actions using language such as clicking and holding down particular buttons to eliminate opponents, and upon doing so, saying the enemy has been "deleted."

In EPL season one, for instance, casters described a violent massacre of multiple players stating, "Byali just holds down mouse-one for the win."

The in-game economy plays a major role in each round of a CS:GO match, and is a significant focal point for caster discourses. Economy-related *CS:GO* jargon terms are routinely used each round during match play, and are focal points for postgame analyses. As such, audiences are presented with jargon terms such as "half-buy," "full-buy," "full-save," and "surprise buy," which are used to explain player and team purchases at the beginning of each round. Other economy-related terms and phrases are used in relation to the economy. In ELEAGUE season one for example, casters used the phrase "make it rain" to describe how one player bought weapons for multiple teammates in a round. And in EPL season one, casters used the phrase "fat fingers" to explain how a player purchased the wrong weapon when the rest of his team was on full-save. These economy-related terms and phrases are explained in greater detail in the *Educational Moment* section below.

In concert with in-game actions, a variety of other terms (mostly nouns) specific to *CS:GO* culture were regularly used in league broadcasts. The terms frag-movie, demo, and VOD (video-on-demand), refer to recorded matches. Frag-movies are the esports equivalent of highlight reels in traditional sports, while demos and VODs are complete game replays. Both casters and players referenced watching demos and VODs as part of their match preparation. Additionally, the term stream was used often throughout both league broadcasts as they were both available via Twitch streams. Streaming was also referenced as a side-occupation for many players. For example, in ELEAGUE season

one, casters explained that OpTic player Tarik is taking a break from the competitive scene until the end of the year, because he wants to focus on streaming.

Traditional video game and FPS terms such as pixel, crosshair, health-bar, mini-map, lag, and hit-boxes were regularly included in caster discourses, often to reflect on player performances. This is evidenced in EPL season one when a player won a pivotal round with just one health remaining. Casters described the moment stating, "the healthbar has gone nearly completely black!" Additionally, casters referenced particular weapons with nicknames emergent from CS culture. In EPL season one, casters referred to the Mac-10 as the Mac Daddy. In ELEAGUE season one, casters called the Desert Eagle Magnum the Deagle. And in EPL season ten, the AWP sniper rifle is nicknamed the Big Green Gun.

Another term used in league broadcasts that does not fit neatly into the category above but is related to game culture is *Counter-Strike* physics. *Counter-Strike* physics were explained in scenarios where casters experienced cognitive dissonance. Casters would see and/or hear something specific, but the game would display something different. One such instance occurred during ELEAGUE season one, whereby a player is seen taking multiple shots at an enemy whose back is turned and misses multiple shots before finally getting the kill. The caster then explained that there are sometimes "tricky hitboxes" in *CS:GO*, by which even if a player is aiming directly at somebody's head, the shots will not register as headshots – but instead as body shots. Another occurrence in ELEAGUE season one involved a player throwing a Molotov cocktail which exploded in midair, igniting the air on fire. The caster explained, "very confusing how that Molotov

made the air catch on fire. I don't think we should get into the *Counter-Strike* physics right now."

A major element of game culture involves technical proficiency, which is defined by a network of skills, competencies, and understandings concerning technology use (Shaw, 2010). In both league broadcasts, technicity and technical issues played a role, as players and casters frequently experienced technology-related problems and thus, discourses reflected a certain degree of technical proficiency. When players encountered issues before or during match play, technical pauses and timeouts were taken, and league officials would huddle around a player's computers while discussing the issue and attempting to fix the problem. In one instance, during ELEAGUE season one, a player exited the game too early by mistake, losing his "round loss bonus" in-game economy upon returning. To fix this issue, a "dead round" was announced and coordinated by officials. Each team met in the middle of the map, with players recreating the previous round in terms of guns and armor purchased, as well as kills and deaths recorded. Casters explained this round stating:

> "It seems like we're actually gonna be replaying this pistol round. They're gonna recreate the pistol round… sometimes this is just how it plays out… on a technical note, and if you're a new player watching… sometimes what's called a match 'meta' can be a little tricky if people disconnect at the wrong time, so what they're gonna do here is basically get the kills they would've got in the pistol round, and that way they sort of manually recreate the round."

Other technical problems included a player needing to verify his Steam account after exiting a game too early by having his phone retrieved by a referee, a player's

computer crashing due to pressing the 'windows key' and having referees reboot the computer and remove the windows key from the keyboard, a player's computer not working properly and referees replacing the entire computer, and in one scenario a team needed to fix their "configs" (in-game configurations), which was met by a caster promptly stating, "if you don't know what a config is, just google it. I'm not going to explain it." In each instance of technical difficulties, referees wearing league-sponsored attire were shown crowding around the player and computer in question. Casters acknowledged the issues by first stating that technical difficulties were being experienced, and then going into greater detail as to the specific problem. After stating the problem, however, casters did not continue to dissect or analyze why the problem occurred. Instead, they would either transition into a match analysis or cut to a commercial break. Additionally, moments of technical difficulties were followed by a variety of full-screen memes that included the text "technical difficulties." Once the technical issues were resolved, referees would confer with members of each team to decide or explain the repercussions of the technical problems on the match. In instances when no significant in-game actions had occurred prior to the technical problem, the round in question would be replayed. When technical problems occurred after significant in-game actions, however, the round would not be replayed.

Some issues did not involve players, but instead the broadcast. For example, on the second day of ELEAGUE season one, the observer's stream crashed in the middle of a match displaying the error message "No Steam Logon." Casters reacted stating, "Oops! We'll see if we can sort this issue out… Maybe I can do a bit of spectating in the meantime." Because this was an observer issue and not a player, the match was not

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paused and the issue was fixed in under one minute. In another instance of ELEAGUE season one, a technical timeout was taken to fix the Twitch stream after the live-feed crashed. Upon being alerted of the problem casters stated "We know there are issues with the stream and we have experts working now to fix the issue." They then acknowledged audience members for their help in alerting them of this issue stating, "Thanks to those of you who were pointing out that there were some problems with the stream, it should be fixed now."

Because esports spectatorship is commonly enacted for the purpose of using knowledge gained into one's own gaming experience or practice, it is no surprise that both league broadcasts involve discourses that speak directly to audience-as-gamer expectations. By expressing elements of their own *Counter-Strike* play and providing advice to improve one's play, casters relate to the audience as gamers. When discussing the busy schedule of professional players in EPL season one, casters explained how they too became tired and unfocused after playing too many games of *CS:GO* consecutively. Also in EPL season one, when explaining a team's terrorist strategy, the casters stated "it's the three-two-split, the one that I tried to make you learn on Inferno," suggesting that the casters not only play *CS:GO*, but implement professional strategies in their own gameplay. This was followed by casters making fun of each other for their unimpressive online skill ranking. In ELEAGUE, casters often reflected on the skilled expertise of professional players and especially their unconventional tactics by telling audience members not to mimic those actions when playing their own matches online. An example of this could be seen in the semifinals of ELEAGUE season one, when a player attempted to shoot an enemy across the map with a submachine gun. Casters described the action

stating, "I feel like you just try and avoid that. If you're at home watching, don't try that in a matchmaking game ever."

Trolling behavior, or as Aarseth (2007) labels it, transgressive behavior, frequently occurred throughout both league broadcasts. It involves a "symbolic gesture of rebellion against the tyranny of the game… a way for the played subject to regain their sense of identity and uniqueness through the mechanisms of the game itself" (pp. 132-133). Video games such as *CS:GO* provide an opportunity for control and freedom through one's in-game actions and communication. To troll is to intentionally deviate from the idealized playstyle by which the majority of *CS:GO* players subscribe. For example, most players use their most powerful weapons during match play because it gives them the best chance of winning. Trolls might intentionally use a knife when others are using assault rifles. By practicing trolling behavior, players may strategically unhinge and tilt enemy players, resulting in a noticeable change in their gameplay. It is often enacted with the purpose of negatively impacting the opponent, or just for a laugh.

In both EPL and ELEAGUE, trolling behavior occurred in various ways including player actions and caster discourses. When a team was dominating their opponent, players on the winning team routinely attempted, and sometimes even succeeded, in knifing enemies. To attempt a knife kill in a professional match with money on the line is a very risky play, however, it signified dominance and negatively impacted the enemy team. Another trolling behavior enacted via gameplay included intentionally shooting teammates at the end of a round (not killing them, but injuring them), which signifies that a team is "not even trying" or "not taking the match seriously." Finally, using weapons that deviate from the conventional pro-player arsenal such as a shotgun, auto-sniper, or

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heavy machine gun are ways that players trolled their enemies through in-game actions. Using these weapons on the top competitive stage is seen as cocky and disrespectful, and serves the purpose of trolling the enemy, especially if they lose to such weapons.

In addition to player's trolling behaviors, casters frequently engaged in their own trolling behaviors through discourses during broadcasts. A recurring trolling behavior that casters enacted in both league broadcasts involved highlighting struggling players or teams. In ELEAGUE season one, for example, casters stated, "We need search and rescue to look for Xyp9x. He's got three kills in twenty rounds!" and "Where is FaZe Clan? We need to initiate an investigation into this… Allu is pulling a James Bond right now. He is 0-0-7 (zero kills, zero assists, and seven deaths). With a license NOT to kill." In these examples, casters highlight lackluster performances by players and teams in such a way that it is comical for the audience. Instead of genuinely expressing concern for bad performances, they poke fun at the situation. This same type of trolling via caster discourses could be seen in EPL season ten as casters stated, "somebody get the missing posters and start stapling them up around the arena. Where are Team Liquid?"

Casters also engaged in discourses that serve as examples of trolling behavior that players might engage in themselves during match play. When players pull off clutch rounds or eliminate enemies who have superior weaponry, casters sometimes mimic player voices to trash talk the opponent. In the EPL season ten Grand Finals, for example, after Mousesports player ChrisJ eliminated an opponent who was waiting for him around a close corner, the casters reacted stating, "Boom! The middle finger from ChrisJ. Sit Down! The pistol whip!" Another example of caster trolling discourse can be seen in ELEAGUE season two when OpTic Gaming called a tactical timeout while leading the

match by several rounds. The casters weighed in, stating "Is this a joke, are they trying to have SK reflect on how they just got wrecked by two players?" Caster trolling discourses even involved capturing players' reactions to in-game stimuli: "What is this emotion coming out of Flusha? He just threw his mouse and pounded his desk!... It's so fun to get these players' cameras on them, just to see their faces when they lose."

Lastly, casters conversed about and explained their own trolling techniques in *CS:GO* matchmaking during broadcasts. In EPL season four for example, before the Grand Finals match went live, casters reflected on their personal troll tactics through the use of in-game "binds." One caster explained how he uses in-game "all-chat" messages to say things like "clever boy" after killing the same player two times in a row. This disclosure influenced other casters to weigh in, explaining their performances of trolling behaviors for the sake of a laugh in *CS:GO*. Binding particular keys to automatically type and send messages meant to troll others is a longstanding occurrence in *CS* culture. As the above examples illustrate, both player actions and casters discourses represent trolling behavior, which is seen by many as a staple of competitive *CS:GO* culture.

Popular culture references and memes were a ubiquitous element of EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts through discourses and imagery. Casters frequently referred to mainstream popular media such as TV shows and movies throughout broadcasts, especially when matches were not close in score. In ELEAGUE season one, for example, one caster hummed the Game of Thrones theme song, and made a joke about how another caster looked like the character Little Finger. Another situation in ELEAGUE season one involved an in-game scenario whereby a player was pinned down by an enemy sniper, in which the caster referenced the movie *Enemy at The Gates*, stating "who

will jump across to bait the sniper." Even when specific movies and shows were not referenced by name, casters suggested that in-game happenings reflected that of cinematic entertainment, "That was like a scene coming straight out of a movie wasn't it? Standing and taking bullets for your teammate while he is defusing. So the enemy runs out of bullets, and you win the round."

Other popular culture references are worth mentioning. On several occasions, as the camera panned over audience members, individuals could be seen "dabbing," shouting at the camera, and/or holding up signs displaying printed out memes. In ELEAGUE season two, audience members are heard shouting "WOOOO!" on multiple occasions as a tribute to the popular Rick Flare meme. Interestingly, this tendency of North American audiences shouting "WOOOO!" at *CS:GO* events became their calling card, and casters acknowledged this in broadcasts.

Along with popular culture references, memes played a significant role in both EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts. EPL broadcasts did not generate unique memes or display recycled memes, however, casters referred to popular memes during broadcasts. In EPL season one when a caster failed to properly pronounce a player's name, she made fun of herself saying "I can literally count to potato," referencing a particular meme circulating in popular culture at the time. In contrast, memes were a recurring element of ELEAGUE broadcasts, and were often displayed and discussed in relation to specific discourses and occurrences pertaining to the broadcast. During break in gameplay, whether it be pregame or postgame coverage, memes were displayed. When technical difficulties resulted in timeouts and pauses in match play, memes were also displayed. One meme displayed during a technical timeout in ELEAGUE season one showed a

shirtless obese man in his underwear sitting on a rug fixing an old computer and included the caption "I.T. has been contacted." Other memes involved images of caster's faces pasted onto movies scenes such as *Saturday Night Fever, Pan's Labyrinth, Captain America, Sausage Party*, and others. Interestingly, during the ELEAGUE season two Grand Finals, casters discussed a meme as it was displayed on the screen for audiences to see, "It's always interesting, Semla, when you see a new meme being born. With that styling… That's definitely, definitely going to be on Reddit.

Reddit is the "front page of the internet," widely considered to be the most popular internet site for news and discussions. It is essentially a collection of forums made up of various social groups and dedicated to particular subjects. Frequent references to Reddit were made throughout EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts. In ELEAGUE season one, an old photograph of a current professional player as a young boy at a LAN tournament was displayed, and the casters explained that the photo was found on Reddit. Also in ELEAGUE season one, casters discussed in-game gun sounds and one caster stated, "I was reading a discussion on Reddit about why it's hard to reproduce gun sounds." This sparked a side conversation about realistic gun sounds during a professional match. When Cloud9 won a pivotal round due a clutch play by Shroud, casters reacted stating, "And it won't be on his stream on Reddit, it will be here at ELEAGUE on LAN!" EPL broadcasts did not display images from Reddit and caster discourses involved less frequent references to the site in comparison to ELEAGUE.

Geek Representation

Individuals with a strong interest in gaming are often considered geeks and/or nerds. Taylor (2012) posited that "In geek culture, the valorization of highly refined skill and mastery operates through technology, science, and gaming… These performances of expertise, skill, and knowledge are not only sources of social connection and pleasure, but also work as important markers for inclusion and exclusion" (p. 111). In EPL and ELEAGUE, discourses and images highlighted casters' players' and fans' geek identities in various ways including gamer stereotypes, hardcore gamer performances, and casters' valorization of skilled gaming performances (Kowert et al., 2012).

A fundamental component of each league broadcast involves gamers sitting at computers performing their geek identities. Players are not the only ones performing as geeks during competitions, because professional esports do not exist without an audience, casters, organizers, and producers – all of which perform unique geek identities. Casters use particular language throughout each broadcast to perform their geek identities, audience members communicate their geek identities by cheering and reacting to gamer performances, organizers and producers frame broadcasts in particular ways for audiences to consume.

Caster discourses reinforce gamer identities simply by stating players' names throughout broadcasts. Hearing unique gamer tags like Stewie2k, Fallen, and Pashabiceps remind audiences that professional esports cyberathletes are fundamentally gamers just the audience members who watch them. These professional gamers each chose a gamer tag and exist in the virtual world of video game competitions. In-game footage repeatedly displays players' names as they follow their in-game movements, and their names appear

in the scoreboard whenever they eliminate enemies or are eliminated themselves. The repeated displays and caster discourses regarding player names reinforces audience understanding of gamers as "cyber" athletes.

Professional *CS:GO* players are depicted as hardcore gamers through verbal and nonverbal means. Verbally, players perform their geek identities by explaining their attitude and orientation toward the game. Passionate player testimonials in both league broadcasts reinforce gamer's identities as highly invested in video games as a serious professional pursuit. Also, their reliance on game culture jargon is a clear indicator of their Geek Representation. Nonverbally, players perform geek identities via their on-screen actions, and their attire. Players are regularly displayed in both league broadcasts appearing extremely focused and emotionally invested in competitions. These broadcasts do particular work to show audiences how professional gamers take esports competitions very seriously. Player displays often highlight emotional investment. After a hard-fought win, players are shown celebrating with fist pumps, cheers, and screams. When they lose, players are seen angrily spiking their mouse, or disappointed with their head in their hands.

Similar to the way professional athletes wear the same jerseys but personalized shoes, cleats, sweatbands, arm sleeves, high and low socks, and face paint, gamers wear particular clothing that sets them apart from others. In both leagues, images displayed in broadcasts captured important elements of professionalism in *CS:GO*, while also highlighting unique aspects of game culture. Players were seen wearing matching jerseys and using identical computers and headsets during matches, however, they wore random hats (American sports teams, beanies, neon patterns), different types of pants (jeans, jean

shorts, tennis shorts, sweatpants, etc.), and shoes (flip-fops, sneakers, slip-ons). In EPL

season one, players wore street clothes including jeans, cargo shorts, and even tank tops.

By season ten, it was rare to see players wearing jeans, and all teams donned matching

jerseys (not t-shirts or tank tops). The ability to wear these particular clothing items

during professional competitions highlights an important aspect of game culture – the fact

that the action takes place digitally. Because of this, players need not wear particular

sporting pants, sneakers, cleats, or helmets. Instead, players can choose to wear what they

are most comfortable in or wear garments tied to their personal sponsorships.

Additionally, audience displays often captured young, male and female observers,

draped in video game, esport, and specifically professional *CS:GO* team memorabilia.

These shots of audience members wearing the merchandise and attending esports events

reinforce the notion that esports audiences are also gamers. Similar to attendance at

events, participation in social media conversations around league broadcasts, especially

using league-specific hashtags (such as #ESLProLeague and #ELEAGUE) illustrate

performing Geek Representation via esports knowledge and discourses.

Broadcasts also highlighted players as hardcore gamers through displays of their

gaming equipment. While all professional *CS:GO* players wear the same headsets, sit in

the same gaming chairs, and use the same computers during league LAN-based matches,

they are allowed to use their own personalized peripherals such as keyboard, mouse, and

mousepad. Both ELEAGUE and EPL broadcasts incorporate player displays that

highlight this notion. Prior to the start of each match, players are seen plugging in their

equipment and testing out their mouse and keyboard and input their "configs" (in-game

settings configurations). They then proceed to whip their mice back and forth across their

mousepads testing in-game sensitivity and reaction speed. When each match concludes, after the postgame handshake, players are displayed unplugging their equipment and packing it away. Highlighting the salience of technicity in professional gamer identities, promotional pieces and pregame footage in league broadcasts involved shots of players walking to match stages with their personal keyboards, mice, and mousepads tucked under their arms.

According to the gamer stereotype, esports players are predominantly young, white, and male (Shaw, 2010). The majority of professional CS:GO players, coaches, and casters in EPL and ELEAGUE are also young, white, and male. In fact, there are no female players. Although female casters and behind-the-scenes talent exist in both CS:GO leagues, they are vastly outnumbered by their male counterparts.

Caster discourses reinforce gamer stereotypes by highlighting player age. They applaud young players and disparage those who have been around the CS scene for over a decade. In ELEAGUE season one, for example, casters introduced Magisk stating "He's 18 years old. He's really, really young... He could be competing for the top player in the world within a year." On the contrary, when casters welcomed a famed and now retired ex *CS 1.6* professional player Sir Scoots to the broadcast booth, they introduced him as "one of *Counter-Strike's* founding fathers," stating that they broke him out of a retirement home to have him on the broadcast. In addition to the casters' disparaging comments about Sir Scoots age, they displayed a full screen graphic of a face-in-hole meme of the host Richard Lewis wheeling Sir Scoots out of a retirement home. The emphasis placed on age, whether it be youth or old age, illustrates the importance placed on age for competitive gamers, especially in the professional *CS:GO* esports scene.

Gamers are also stereotypically depicted as isolated and unpopular. In both league broadcasts, immaturity and awkwardness of player actions and caster discourses contribute to unpopular gamer representations. In ELEAGUE season one, for instance, NiP player GeT_RiGhT is shown holding a stuffed animal teddy bear at his computer before a match. Caster discourses highlighted how GeT_RiGhT has had that bear for years, taking it to every tournament he's played in. After the match, GeT_RiGhT was interviewed and explained how the teddy bear was given to him by his girlfriend, and serves as motivation for him to perform well. The teddy bear has an engraving in Swedish that translates to "No kills, no cuddles."

Additionally, the stereotypical notion that gamers are overweight and lazy was reinforced with frequent shots of players drinking and even eating during live match play. This action is unique to game culture, and highlights an element of the gamer stereotype whereby players are fat and lazy often found eating at their computers. In professional matches, players are not displayed eating a bag of Doritos and drinking Mountain Dew per se, but they are consuming beverages such as Redbull, Monster, Mountain Dew AMP Game Fuel, Dr. Pepper, Coke Zero, and water nonetheless. On rare occasions, players are even displayed eating granola bars and chewing gum. In traditional sports, players on the sideline are often displayed drinking out of water bottles, and in baseball some players chew gum or eat sunflower seeds. In professional *CS:GO*, players do not have a sideline, and instead sit at a desk throughout the duration of a match. The ability of pro players to consume food and beverages while initiated in game play is something unique to game culture, and reinforces fat and lazy gamer stereotypes. In EPL season one, casters even explicitly acknowledged the fat and lazy gamer stereotype while displaying Cloud9

players wearing tank tops that were showing off their athletic physique. Casters jokingly proclaimed "Cloud9 trying dispel the myth that all gamers are big fat nerds. Hahahaha. Just keeping those tank tops on. FREAKAZOID just flexing there."

Alongside player displays, audience interaction segments also highlight Geek Representation via fat and lazy gamer stereotypes. When displaying fan tweets, casters provide discourses that directly and indirectly acknowledge stereotypes. For example, one fan tweet showed a TV displaying ELEAGUE alongside an open Domino's pizza box, and casters stated "Wow. Eating some Dominos. Yes! That's perfect… Just need a bag of Doritos and can of Mountain Dew and we're set. Hahaha! All the stereotypes. I like it."

Game Culture and *Geek Representation* categories have much in common, including an emphasis on technology, popular internet culture, and unique nomenclature. In both league broadcasts *Game Culture* and *Geek Representation* were often dual-coded as images and discourses involved both categories resulting in significant overlap. The next meta theme, *Sport Legitimation*, incorporates the additional categories *Jock Representation* and *Gameplay Reporting*.

Sport Legitimation

Categories of *Sport Legitimation* and *Jock Representation* are mutually constitutive and only on few occasions operate in isolation. Both league broadcasts are interspersed with an array of visual and audio displays including prerecorded sequences that portray professional *CS:GO* as a sport and players as cyberathletes. Sport legitimation and Jock Representation representations focus on competition, organization,

and skill. These representations involve in-person arena footage, digital in-game footage, and a variety of graphic overlays displaying statistical information.

Both ELEAGUE and EPL are well-organized, rule governed leagues with clear structures. In ELEAGUE season one, host Richard Lewis explained the league format as a "ten week season" in which "twenty-four teams from around the world will compete for a one point two million dollar prize pool." He then explained the "group phase" in greater detail. Similarly, in EPL season one, casters Leigh "Deman" Smith and Lauren "Pansy" Scott explained the league format stating, "This is a five-hundred-thousand-dollar season. It's a million-dollar league. Two seasons stuck in there. Of course, Finals will be following it… 12 of the best [teams]… a really good well-structured online league." Following both league structure explanations, match schedules were presented as full-screen graphics, with voice-overlay explanations to better describe when and where matches were being played. Throughout both league broadcasts, casters routinely explained league rules and regulations, especially those dealing with technical difficulties. For example, in EPL season ten during a technical timeout, casters explained that players are not allowed to communicate with one another during technical pauses in play.

The environment in which league matches are played is a major element of sport legitimation. Esports broadcasts are molded by producers, casters, camera operators, and in-game observers (Rowe, 2004). In both leagues, regular season exhibition matches occur in smaller studios than playoff and Grand Finals matches, which take place in large arenas and stadiums. Although the arena is smaller for exhibition matches, the atmosphere in terms of digital displays (gigantic LED screens), broadcaster desks, team's

PC and peripheral setups, flashing lights and spotlights, and music is largely the same in both venue types (studio and stadium). The most significant difference between playoff matches and exhibition matches are the number of in-person attendees, and the larger space. Exhibition matches for ELEAGUE took place in Turner Studios, Atlanta, for in-person crowds of up to 250. EPL exhibition matches for seasons one and four took place online, and in season ten, although teams played each other on LAN, no spectators present in-person. In ELEAGUE season one, playoffs occurred in the Fox Theater, Atlanta, for a crowd of more than 4,000 in-person. In EPL season one, the playoffs occurred in a small studio for roughly 50 spectators. In season four, the playoffs moved to Ginasio do Ibirapuera stadium in Brazil for spectators in excess of 10,000 in-person. And in season ten, the playoffs occurred in Jyske Bank Arena in Odense for over 4,000 attendees. Within the actual broadcast studios or arenas, dimly lit overhead lights, colored lights, and spotlights provide just enough illumination to see players sitting at their computers without producing glare on players' screens during matches. Loud electronic dance music (and sometimes rock and roll) is typically played in-between matches and in pre- and post-game segments. At halftime, a bottom-screen "ticker" displays first-half player and team stats, scores, and upcoming matches. In EPL season 10, drone footage displays a birds-eye perspective of the outside of the stadium, just like a traditional sportscast.

In both ELEAGUE and EPL broadcasts, whenever audience members are present, the camera periodically pans over the crowd throughout matches capturing their reactions. Frequent shots of the crowd display esports fans draped in video game, esport, and team-related paraphernalia. The crowd is often shown yelling, cheering, and booing

during and directly after significant in-game happenings (such as clutches, victories, etc.). Additionally, audience cheers and jeers can be heard during casters play-by-play commentary even when they are not being displayed. Audience team-related chants such as "Vir-Tus-Pro," Let's go OpTic," regional chants including "U-S-A," and cheers such as "Woooo!" are routinely overheard during caster's match commentary. Jeering typically occurs during the pregame prediction segment, whenever casters bet against the "home" team.

Before matches begin and directly after matches conclude, caster discourses, instant replays, and graphic overlays reinforce frames of sport legitimation and Jock Representation. Just as traditional sports incorporate pregame match predictions, so too does ELEAGUE and EPL. Hosts and casters weigh in with their pregame predictions before each match as part of their regular pregame show discourse. Using graphic overlays, each caster's prediction is recorded and displayed in a bottom-screen graphic throughout the pregame segment. Other graphics such as "Tonight's Rosters" and "Map Stats" are routinely incorporated into pregame and postgame broadcast segments. At the conclusion of each match (and occasionally during lapses in play mid-match), casters analyze team and individual player performances, frequently citing statistics and using instant replays to breakdown tactics and strategies in greater detail. Just as sportscasters draw on the screen when breaking down plays, so too do *CS:GO* casters. In EPL season ten, for example, a segment called "Timeout Tactics" involves former professional player (now caster) Spunj breaking down strategies by interacting with a large digital screen displaying a birds-eye view of gameplay during a particular round. Spunj uses zoom-in

technology, rewind, fast-forward, pause, and other manipulation features including

drawing on the screen to provide in-depth analyses of tactics and strategies.

Casters in both leagues also used traditional sport examples and analogies, albeit

rarely, to describe player and team performances. In ELEAGUE season one, for example,

host Richard Lewis compared Team Liquid to the New York Knicks stating, "I think

New York Knicks fans are thinking hey, let's choose Team Liquid. This works for me.

They choke when it matters, consistently." In EPL season one, casters described

Cloud9's lackluster gameplay stating, "Cloud9 was the one that really dropped the ball

towards the end of the first half. They had an eight to zero [lead]… and then [CLG]

started playing aggressive and it caught them off guard [Cloud9] started losing rounds,

and then they took a timeout. Which helped them climb back in."

In ELEAGUE season one, direct comparisons between professional *CS:GO* and

traditional sports, as well as *CS:GO* players as athletes, were provided in produced video

segments consisting of player testimonials. Team Renegades player introductions, for

example, included why they chose careers as professional gamers, tying *CS:GO* to

traditional sports like "[*CS:GO* is a] team-based game, kind of like an actual sport."

Other players highlighted competition stating "[*CS:GO*] was just my competitive outlet,"

and "I love the game. Love the competitiveness about it." Another ELEAGUE season

one produced video segment directly compared *CS:GO* players to traditional sport

athletes by having a variety of players from culturally disparate teams explain how their

experiences with injuries in sport led to a career in gaming:

CLG hazed: "Originally, I wanted to be an Olympic speed skater… I was

trying to impress a girl. I flipped and I hit my arm on a bench and it just

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totally snapped my arm… That injury I think is the only reason that I found *CS:GO*"

NaVi GuardiaN: "I was playing football (soccer) my whole life.. Knee injuries. Knee broken. "

Team Liquid Pimp: "I was pretty good at handball… I'd rather be playing computer games than hurting my knee playing handball"

CLG reltuC: "Baseball and soccer… I picked *up Counter-Strike* to be competitive. Because I just like to compete… All that time I couldn't leave my house so… video games were there for me to compete in so I became one of the best."

Astralis dev1ce: "I played badminton. I got an injury and I had to be out for three months"

FaZe Jkaem: "I played football and handball… When I was 18 years [old] I got a knee injury… I was not allowed to train or anything, so then it was *CS* all the time. When the adrenaline is pumping and you're winning rounds there's nothing better than the feeling of just having comrades and someone supporting you is important to me."

Team SoloMid cadiaN: "I played handball for pretty much my entire life…

The competitiveness is something that really drives me… always wanting to

be the best"

Fnatic Olofmeister: "I played soccer for 14 years… I got an injury and had

like one year off, so then I got more into gaming."

Parallel to direct comparisons between esports and traditional sports, subtle in-game displays reflect images and information that we have grown to expect from twenty-first century sportscasts such as scoreboards and statistics. In both professional *CS:GO* league match broadcasts a multiplicity of information crowds the viewer's screen. To the uninitiated, this information seems intrusive, and perhaps unnecessary. However, every piece of information provided is vital toward understanding the competition. In the beginning of each round during match play, team scoreboards appear on the left and right sides of the screen depicting terrorist and counter-terrorist player scores (kills, deaths, and assists), weapons, armor, and utility. At the top-middle portion of the screen round-time, team economy, and match score are displayed. Once the round has begun, players are often observed from the first-person in-game perspective. While observing a player from the first-person point-of-view, a small graphic appears in the lower-middle portion of the screen displaying the player's profile picture (typically a bust shot of the player wearing their team uniform), their equipped weapon, and in EPL season ten, their kills, deaths, and assists.

Jock Representation

Jock Representation largely involves player displays, caster discourses involving players and coaches, and player narratives. Players, coaches, casters, and other broadcast talent closely resemble traditional sportscasts with their attire as well as the equipment they don in league broadcasts. In both leagues, players and coaches consistently wear matching short-sleeved team jerseys. Occasionally, players and coaches wear team sweatshirts over their jerseys. While some teams, such as Astralis, wear the same athletic pants during competitions, others do not. All players do, however, wear the same headsets and use the same gaming PCs during match play. They also use the same in-game "clan tag" (team name) during gameplay, so teams appear uniformed on the in-game scoreboard. Broadcast booth and play-by-by caster's attire varied between the two leagues. In ELEAGUE, casters wore suit jackets, button down shirts (sometimes with ties), and dress pants. In EPL seasons one and four casters wore similar business casual attire, however, in EPL season ten casters wore casual street clothing consisting of t-shirts, jackets, and jeans, and sometimes wore ESL sponsored attire. Casters in both leagues wore matching headsets during broadcasts.

In addition to the attire of players, coaches, and casters, the way in which both leagues display these individuals are reminiscent of a sportscast. During gameplay, players appear focused on the screens in front of them, while simultaneously clicking their mice, tapping their keyboards, and communicating with teammates through their headsets. Players are routinely captured reacting both positively and negatively to in-game actions in similar ways that one may see in a traditional sport. Players celebrate successful in-game rounds and match victories by fist pumping, cheering, waving their

arms up and down to pump up the crowd, high-fiving teammates, fist-bumping teammates, and huddling up with teammates. Additionally, in both leagues, when a team wins the Grand Finals they are awarded a gigantic trophy and often showered in confetti. Championship teams are awarded the trophy on the stage in which gameplay occurs, and as a team, they take turns hoisting up the trophy while being embraced by their teammates and coach. On the other hand, when players lose rounds and are defeated in matches, their frustration and disappointment are displayed via players yelling, ripping off their headsets, throwing their mice, pounding their desks, holding their faces in their hands, and even crying. Lastly, teams display sportsmanship rituals such as shaking hands with opponents after each match, and typing "gg" or "good game" in the in-game chat.

Lastly, play-by-play and booth caster's commentary focusing on professionalism and skilled expertise frame *CS:GO* as a sport and players and as athletes. Professionalism was displayed by players in pre- and post-game interviews citing traditional sport values such as confidence in themselves and their teammates, and a desire to be the "best at the game." In ELEAGUE season one, for example, confident discourse was employed by players such as Forest who stated, "I'm the best *CS* player that's ever lived," and Dev1ce stating, "I wouldn't say we're scared of any opponent." Desire to be the best was a common theme, as Virtus.Pro player TaZ stated, "The key to our success as a team… is that we want to win more… we want to create a legacy." Additionally, players routinely credited their opponents as worthy adversaries and stressed the importance of not underestimating others no matter the odds. For example, following Fnatic's EPL season one Grand Final victory over the North American Cloud9 team, Olofmeister stated,

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"Cloud9 proved… they are one of the best teams in the world. They pushed us to our limits."

Skilled expertise is another aspect of sport legitimation and Jock Representation, which is evident in caster discourses as well as player testimonials regarding training and game skill. The extreme focus of players during gameplay and discourses regarding the number of hours that players spend training individually and as a team represent *CS:GO* players as professionals in their craft. For a more detailed description see the *Skilled Expertise* section below.

Developing Narrative

A significant theme involves stories about players, coaches, and casters, teams, geographical regions, and the game *CS:GO*. I called this theme *Developing Narrative*. The use of stories in professional *CS:GO* league broadcasts create a connection between viewers and subjects – drawing interest and teaching viewers about a variety of elements encompassing the competition. Stories concerning the aforementioned subjects focused on introduction, skillset, history, sacrifice, aspiration, training, and changes.

Narratives were frequently used by both leagues to introduce various subjects. In season one of ELEAGUE, for example, teams, players, and coaches were introduced via produced video segments shot in their hometowns. These introductions typically began with a player stating their name, age, hometown, and included over-the-shoulder shots of players competing in *CS:GO* from their home computers, with wide shots of their neighborhood, and testimonials from teammates, friends, and family members. After the first few weeks of the inaugural ELEAGUE season, introductions largely took the form

of caster discourse. Team Natus Vincere, for example, was introduced by casters stating, "Europe is home to this band of brothers. Led by the veteran from Ukraine, they have the young rifles from Russia, and of course, the all-star sniper from Slovakia." EPL introduced players and teams in a similar fashion, but focused more on skillset and match history than geographical region. In EPL season one, for example, casters introduced team Titan stating, "Next up is Titan. This is a team that has struggled recently. They just about squeaked through to get to IEM Katowice through the qualifying stage. Then they just bombed straight out of the tournament."

Narrative introductions in ELEAGUE extended past players and teams to include geographical regions and elements of the actual game, such as maps. For example, in a season one pregame discussion, casters introduced the map De_Dust2 stating, "Dust2 is the staple map of America. Especially against European teams… It is the ultimate map for PUGs (pick-up games). It's been that way since forever. Timeless". EPL, for the most part, did not include narrative introductions for game elements. Instead, pregame discussions focused on team's and player's experience and record on particular maps.

Narratives relating to skillset described the roles, skills, and expertise that particular players, teams, and regions are known for. Both EPL and ELEAGUE employed an abundance of skillset narratives. EPL casters routinely described player skillsets when they impacted a game either positively or negatively. In EPL season four, Cloud9 player Stewie2k led his team to the Grand Finals. Casters highlighted that "Stewie has turned out to be the entry fragger, the strat caller, and the in-game leader for this team". Similarly, describing teams involved in the league for season one, EPL casters explained "Team Dignitas is a young team, very talented with lots of potential. They are

a very emotional team, high one their wins, and low on their losses." Analogous skillset narratives were provided in ELEAGUE. In season one for example, a Luminosity player described his teammate, "FaLLeN is our in-game leader, he is our technical mastermind, the captain of Luminosity." Team skillsets were discussed in a similar fashion, "On an individual skill level, it does seem that this team (Cloud9) is not going to be competitive in international tournaments with European teams involved. They need a tactical expert. And they have a weak player who could be turned into a coach, as he seems to struggle even in the North American tournaments."

Both ELEAGUE and EPL provided narratives describing skillsets required to be successful in *CS:GO*. In EPL season one, casters highlighted the importance of intelligence and skill in *CS:GO* by stating, "That, of course, is the story of *CS*. It's a thinking man's game as well as an aim game." ELEAGUE provided similar discourses, in this case highlighting strategy and team play, "A consistent way to win games in *Counter-Strike*: You need to have strategy. You need to have teamwork." Additionally, some skillset narratives in EPL and ELEAGUE focused on particular region's play style and abilities or lack thereof. Casters in ELEAGUE season two, for example, stated "Denmark has an abundance of talent. The skill ceiling for each of these players come through is immense. They've got some incredible young players." In EPL season one, casters highlighted the difference skill between North American and European teams stating, "On the other side, we have the North American hopes (Cloud9) coming through. But these two European teams, the dominators of the *CS* scene for so long, are in a league of their own."

Narratives were also employed by both leagues to describe *Counter-Strike* histories of players, teams, and geographical regions. While EPL largely relied on caster discourses to provide historical narratives, ELEAGUE used player testimonials, family member and teammate interviews, and various images from sources like Reddit, along with caster discourses. Player histories largely involved age - when they began playing *CS*, when they became professional players, and how long they have been playing for. For example, current Brazilian player FaLLeN described his *CS* history in ELEAGUE season one stating "I started playing when I was 12. When I was 18 or 19 I got invited to play on the best team in Brazil." Narratives of team history described how long team members had been together for and their match history as described in ELEAGUE season one, "NaVi never beat Fnatic in a series. As we look at the head-to-head matchup, Fnatic is 22-8 verusis NaVi all time."

Geographical region historical narratives typically described periods of dominance or defeat. In EPL season four, for example, casters explained the historical shortcomings of North American *Counter-Strike* by stating, "We've known for a long time that the skill was there in North America, just the team was never put together properly. Roles and decision-making have always been an issue. Players have really had to learn this game." Casters in ELEAGUE season two explained North Americas historical shortcomings stating, "It's something NA (North American) teams are very prone to. If they can get their 'anti-eco's' and 'force-buys' in order, they can start being some dangerous teams."

Stories of player and team sacrifice recurred throughout both league broadcasts. This is consistent with findings from George and Sherrick (2019) who highlighted that

professional *CS:GO* players' demanding travel, training, and competitive match schedules result in player fatigue. Narratives of sacrifice largely involved the difficulties of international travel and the frequency with which competitors play. In the first season of ELEAGUE for example, one Australian Renegades member described the hardships of being a professional *CS:GO* player stating, "We've had to give up everything in our lives you know, family, girlfriends." Similar narratives were portrayed in EPL, such as Cloud9 player n0thing's response after winning the season four Final, "There's always another tournament, right? It's one of the hardest things about being a pro *CS* player." Narratives of sacrifice also involved teams, for example, in EPL season one, casters explained "There are so many games on HLTV (news site that lists all CS:GO match streams) at any given time. Teams play so regularly that they never have time to review match replays." In ELEAGUE season one, casters highlighted the struggle of foreign teams having to relocate to America and the struggle of meeting visa requirements. One team even got replaced after qualifying for the league because multiple team members were unable to meet their visa requirements.

Player and team aspirations were another recurring storyline in both leagues. Aspiration narratives were provided by players, coaches, and casters, and often involved being "the best" and winning significant matches and trophies. In ELEAGUE season one for example, Team Liquid player Hiko explained that if he does not win a major tournament his career will be a "waste of time." In an ELEAGUE season one pre-game group interview, when asked why they play the game, Renegades players explained, "We want to be the very best at the game. That's our dream." In EPL season four, after Cloud9 won the championship, one caster explained that "Most professional players wait their

entire professional career to win just one Major Championship. And for Cloud9 this was their first!"

Narratives of player and team training were presented in both league broadcasts. Throughout both leagues, teams, players, and coaches provided testimonials and casters provided commentary regarding professional *CS:GO* training. These narratives focused on types of activities and time spent. NiP player GeT_RiGhT, for example, explained that his daily regimen leading up to season one of ELEAGUE consisted of twelve hour days, five days per week. GeT_RiGhT practiced nearly seven hours per day with his team and an additional six hours per day alone to work on his individual skills. His practice sessions consisted of watching demos of previous matches and playing pick-up-games. In EPL casters cite similar methods of practice and player regimens. They also discuss the use of custom maps known as "aim maps," which help players improve their reaction time and accuracy.

Team and game changes are the final recurring narratives that occur in both league broadcasts. Stories of team change frequently involve player additions and removals from the roster. In ELEAGUE season one, casters explained how one team [TSM] lost its entire roster to another organization [Astralis], "This is an organization that used to have one of the best teams in the world, they had Astralis and Danish lineup. Then they lost that team, and went with this all-American lineup." Similar narratives were employed by EPL to describe team changes, for example in EPL season one casters explained, "Mousesports are the heavy favorite, with a stacked lineup consisting of three players that were poached from PENTA. The roster was designed to win a major international tournament." In addition to team changes, casters in both leagues explained

changes involving the actual game (*CS:GO*). In the first broadcast of EPL season one, for example, casters explained the significance of a recent game update highlighting how the changes resulted in backlash from players. Because the popular "AWP" sniper rifle had been updated, players had to adjust and use the weapon in a different way than they had grown accustomed to.

In sum, stories about players, coaches, casters, teams, geographical regions, and *CS:GO* play a major role in professional *CS:GO* broadcasts. The *Developing Narrative* theme overlaps with various additional categories including *Game Culture, Geek Representation, Jock Representation, Sport Legitimation*, and *Transnational Rhetoric*. Both *Developing Narrative* and *Gameplay Reporting* categories are also primary methods by which league broadcasts educate audiences about the game as an esport, and the actors involved.

Gameplay Reporting

Gameplay Reporting is a major theme that, like the major *Developing Narrative* theme, encompasses subcategories *Educational Moment* and *Skilled Expertise*. It involves commentary that describes for viewers what they are seeing on the screen, not only reporting the score, but match-related information and statistics pertaining to the current matchup as well as previous and future matches. The *Gameplay Reporting* theme includes league and tournament related pre-game segments, play-by-play commentary, halftime and post-game segments.

In the beginning of each broadcast, prior to the start of the match, both leagues employed pregame segments whereby casters previewed upcoming matchups, introduced

teams and their rosters, communicated excitement and importance of matches, predicted winners, impact players, and provided team comparisons including head-to-head match and map history. Match previews provide the names, and sometimes the geographical region, of teams about to face off in competition. In ELEAGUE season one, for example, casters previewed a match stating, "Gambit versus Complexity in the final match of day two. Will the North Americans be able to salvage something in the end?" As matches gained importance and the stakes increased, especially when in-person audience members were present, casters communicated excitement before matches began. In the ELEAGUE season one semi-finals for example casters stated, "Ladies and gentlemen, who is ready for some Counter-Strike!? We started this season with twenty-four of the world's best teams in Counter-Strike. We are down to just four."

Both league broadcasts incorporated map veto segments into their pregame match coverage. In map veto segments, each team chooses certain maps that they want to play, and ban other maps that they do not want to play. Depending on whether the matchup is a best-of-three format or a best-of-one format, teams will either select three total maps to play on, or just one. In the regular season of ELEAGUE, matches were played in a best-of-one format, whereby teams took turns banning maps until one map was leftover. Casters explained this process in season one for example stating,

> "The way that it works here… you have three bans… and then one [team] bans two and then a random [map is selected]. The thing is, both teams in general don't want to play Nuke, so you have to figure that [ban] is coming in at some point in time… At the moment we have Cobblestone for Mousesports because they traditionally aren't good on it. Famously that's like on of the best Immortals

maps… The Cache ban from Immortals, just because… it's a classic Mousesports map. You knew Dust2 would be taken out, that *the* Mousesports map, forever basically. Nuke ban does eventually come in… and it's actually going to be Mirage."

EPL map veto segments operated in a similar fashion, however, in season ten, teams played in a best-of-three format during the regular season. In a best-of-three format, teams took turns banning one map, then picking one map, and then banning one more each, and a third map was randomly picked from the two remaining maps in the pool. Casters in EPL season four, for example, narrated this process in each pregame show stating,

"As the veto does occur… bans on Dust2 and Nuke… VP taking Cobble. Cache going Godsent's way, and then you've got… Train to decide it. If you look at the first two bans it's commonsense knowing VP's performance on Dust2… And then Nuke, you've got Godsent [with] a brand-new roster, a mix of Swedes, not going to look to play VP on that one… This is a sexy map pool. Cobble, Cache, and then Train if we need it."

Directly following, and sometimes prior to the map veto segment, casters discussed predictions for the upcoming match. Pregame prediction segments in both league broadcasts consisted of casters choosing which team they believe will win the match, as well as which player they believe will have the biggest impact. An example of this can be seen in ELEAGUE season one as follows:

[Host] "We're ready for predictions, gentlemen… who's gonna win this opening map?"

[Caster1] "I think Fnatic is gonna take Cobble. I think it's gonna be a little bit

close though."

[Caster2] "Yeah, Cobblestone's an interesting one, because FaZe won quite big

over Dignitas there, but historically you'd expect that to be the weaker

map for them. I think FaZe has a chance on Mirage, but I'll still take

Fnatic to go up 2-0."

Alongside predicting which teams will win, casters in both leagues also predicted which player will have the most significant impact in the match. ELEAGUE season one included pregame discourses regarding impact players sporadically, however, in ELEAGUE season two predictions of impact players were part of a sponsored segment called the "HyperX X-Factor." These pregame segments occurred in each episode, introducing impact players via caster discourses and graphics displaying relevant statistics. For example:

[Host] "Let's talk about the X-Factor… We've gone with the stand-in for

Fnatic, a guy called Jumpy."

[Caster1] "He is actually an old school [Counter-Strike] 1.6 player… In CS:GO

he was always around but in those lesser teams… This year we saw all those

teams picking up coaches… he comes along as the coach… and now obviously

he's forced to stand-in just because of the situation with Dennis… He is the X-

Factor because he could be absolutely terrible and that can cost them the game, or

maybe he could just be okay… Fill the hole, and as a result the rest of the players

can take over."

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EPL included similar pregame player discussions, but they were not part of sponsored segments and were done informally and sporadically by casters rarely including graphics to complement their discourses. In EPL season ten, for example, casters previewed a match between Sprout and Vitality highlighting the importance of Sprout's main AWPer stating, "Syrson… he's been doing work for a long time, just in the lower levels of CS. This is his chance to show that this style can work out… He is the clear star for this team. He needs to show up. He leads in terms of just general stat-line, opening kills, he's even the best in terms of flash assists on his whole team."

Another significant aspect of pregame segments involved head-to-head team and player comparisons. Team and player comparisons often included discourses surrounding skills, experience, strategy, playstyle, leadership, and match history. In EPL season one, for example, casters compared teams before a semi-finals match stating, "Virtus.pro, top of the groups, against the North Americans, who they just love running over. They're good at it."

During pregame comparison segments casters cited a variety of statistics, displaying full- and half-screen graphics to complement discourses. In ELEAGUE season one, for instance, casters compared NaVi and Fnatic by citing statistics from previous matches between the two teams. Casters explained that Fnatic had the upper hand due to their previous success against NaVi. To complement caster discourses, a full-screen graphic displayed:

"Fnatic vs. NaVi

Fnatic: 22-8 vs. NaVi all-time

Fnatic: 3-0 vs. NaVi in 2016

Olofmeister: 101.2 ADR, 1.49 K/D ratio

Guardian: 79.8 ADR, 1.04 K/D ratio"

Other statistical comparisons involved team and player records on specific maps. In EPL season one, for example, casters compared Virtus.pro and Team Solo Mid (TSM) before a Dust2 match stating, "They've met a total of fifteen times in 2015. VP won ten times and only lost six times. VP haven't been on Dust2 in 2015, not even once so far… Virtus.pro, their Dust2 scorelines have been pretty subpar. They've played a total of eight times in 2015, even with a couple of no-name teams in there. They've won three times and lost five." Likewise, in ELEAGUE season one casters explained that Fnatic had a slight advantage over FaZe on the map de_cobblestone. A half-screen graphic then emerged displaying:

 "2016 LAN Records on Cobblestone

Fnatic 4-0

FaZe 2-1"

Alongside reporting statistics, casters often compared psychological aspects of teams and players leading into matchups. In ELEAGUE season one, casters discussed how in pre-game interviews NaVi players expressed that they did not believe they will win. This prompted casters to communicate, "There's such a mind game that they're also going to have to overcome, on top of the skill of Fnatic… Where this battle takes place, is the psychological battleground. That is the deciding factor between these two teams."

During match play, casters provided real-time, continuous, play-by-play commentary describing the action as it unfolds. Play-by-play commentary involved score keeping as well as match-related discussions between casters including team and player economy, strategic and tactical discourse, and explanations of skilled expertise. To complement caster discourses, both league broadcasts incorporated full- and half-screen graphics to illustrate important match-related information. Instant replays were also regularly used in both leagues to highlight significant individual and team actions.

To begin each round, casters in both leagues described the economy of each team, and the weapons and utility being purchased by the teams. In doing so, they often used jargon terms such as "full-save," "half-buy," and "full-buy." In the EPL season four Grand Finals, for example, casters described the beginning of the fourth round stating, "Take a look at the cash here... Not really enough to justify a buy here from the Brazilian side. They could put an AWP on Fer with some Deagles and Famases, but I just don't think it's worth it at this point." Casters in both leagues routinely used *CS:GO*-specific jargon in play-by-play commentary to describe the action taking place, including positions on the map, weapons and utility being used, and strategies employed (such as the three-two split).

Throughout each round, real-time play-by-play commentary in both leagues involved casters describing the in-game action as it unfolded. In EPL season one, for example, casters described a round between Cloud9 and Virtus.pro stating:

"We're gonna see a nice play coming out towards that B bombsite. Got that three-two play coming out. Neo, Byali, Pasha start to make the play. Neo gets Shroud down and already they've just smothered the site in smoke. They know what they

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want. Nothing and Freakazoid are very close though. Smoke and fire seem to be pushing them back, the bomb will be put down. Nothing peaking between the two smokes picks up one, but Neo unfortunately will take him out though. Freakazoid, gets the first kill on Neo, looking for number two, there's a man off to his left, he's using that smoke to his advantage. Still a three on two situation, if he can pick up this kill onto Pasha it might open things up. But Byali, picks up two. And now Skadoodle, the last man alive, trying to save the AWP. Looks like he will just back away, and bring it into the next round."

As each round unfolded, and especially at the conclusion of the round, casters analyzed strategies. If a tactical- or technical-timeout is taken, providing casters added time, they even utilized the interactive map-overview feature to provide in-depth analyses of team strategies and tactics including utility use and player movement by drawing on the mini-map. Also, at the end of each round, casters in both leagues regularly announced the score, and sometimes added relevant statistics. In the ELEAGUE season one Grand Finals, for instance, casters described the end of the eleventh round by stating, "Virtus.pro extending their lead, and now up seven to four against the Swedish Fnatic here. Top-fragging is Snax with fourteen kills, and Dennis on the other team with thirteen."

When the first half of gameplay concluded, casters stated the first-half score and signified that a break would occur. In the EPL season four Grand Finals for example, casters stated, "Nine-to-six. SK manage to pull the last round back against all odds… Still anyone's game. SK known for being formidable on this map will swap over to the T-

side… We'll take a quick break before it starts. Don't go anywhere. This one will get very interesting indeed." The halftime announcement was often followed by a first-half highlight reel of in-game replays as well as a full- or half-screen graphic display of the first half scoreboard. In both leagues, the halftime scoreboard contained similar information including team scores and individual player statistics (kills, deaths, and assists).

Finally, post-game segments involved relaying final scores, wins, and losses via caster discourses and graphic overlays. In addition to the reporting of scores, casters often put results into a bigger picture, explaining the impact on league standings and playoff seeding. For instance, at the conclusion of an EPL season four quarterfinals match one caster stated, "Cloud9 will move forward into the Semifinals with an absolutely shocking score on this second map. Sixteen to two against OpTic. A bit disappointing, I imagine for the OpTic fans at home considering how good they looked coming off of [ESL One] New York… To end the tournament like this, certainly not what they expected."

When play-by-play casters finished reporting the game, they oftentimes transitioned back to broadcast booth casters who provided deeper analysis of matches. Booth casters used replays and graphics to showcase significant plays and highlight player performances. Both leagues included postgame segments dedicated to highlighting a specific player. In ELEAGUE, these segments were called the "Blazin' Hot Player of the Match," and casters discussed why the player was chosen, citing statistics such as kills-to-deaths ratio (KDR), average damage per round (ADR), and clutches (winning the round as the last player alive on your team). EPL highlighted player performances in a similar way, however, in seasons one and four these segments were done sporadically

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and informally. In season ten, built in segments were included for casters to discuss individual player performances in the post-game. After NiP defeated Sprout in a group stage match, for example, a full-screen graphic displayed NiP player Twist's match statistics, including KDR, headshot percentage, and sniper kills. One caster then stated, "I wanted to highlight Twist's stats here… Nineteen AWP kills to his name… Look at his overall kills. He was the highest rated player in the server. He had twenty-five kills. He had a lot of impact here." Additionally, at the end of each match day in EPL season ten, casters discussed the "Mountain Dew Game Fuel AMP Power Play," analyzing one player's impact from one of the day's matches. Casters used instant replay and interactive screen technology to highlight specific player actions. In the same NiP versus Sprout match for instance, casters discussed the Power Play stating, "Twist on Mirage was a massive factor to them taking the victory. It was a shooting gallery for him, and it was good to see him activated with the AWP." After analyzing the match and highlighting individual players, casters often discussed team's power rankings and playoff seeding.

Gameplay reporting also sought to satisfy viewers' interest in team- and player-related news stories that keep them current on the leagues and their players. In this way, gameplay reporting compliments the theme of *Developing Narratives*, which focuses on actors' broader pictures and stories within the *CS:GO* esports industry.

Educational Moment

A recurring theme in *Gameplay Reporting* and to a lesser extent *Developing Narrative* involves educational moments whereby viewers learn information by watching the league broadcast and listening to caster discourses. Educational moments train EPL

and ELEAGUE viewers to concentrate their attention on particular stimuli during broadcasts. They provide the skills and knowledge necessary to watch *CS:GO* matches in a certain way. League spectators learn how to interpret *CS:GO* broadcasts and especially player and team performances through various communicative acts including broadcast booth pre and post-game discourse, produced footage (graphics and advertisements), player testimonials, and play-by-play caster commentary. This content functions to explain various aspects of professional *CS:GO* including game, league, broadcast, and player/team knowledge pertaining to static and dynamic aspects of the game.

As noted, ELEAGUE differs from EPL in that it largely teaches audiences about the basics of the game. ELEAGUE season one included a variety of produced content and caster discourse that directly speaks to *CS:GO* newcomers. For example, one produced segment involved a montage of player testimonials explaining *CS:GO*: "There's a good team and a bad team. One side defends, one team attacks. It's an easy concept to understand. You make that shot, the guy goes down, you win the round," "It's equivalent to watching an action movie… You get to see players compete over time, and storylines develop." Moreover, various "Counter-Strike 101" segments were displayed throughout each season to explain core elements of the game such as terminology, economy, bomb placement, and others.

Educational moments related to the game (*CS:GO*) included static elements such as maps, economy, and weapon choice. Virtual environments or "maps" were a major focal point for teaching and learning in broadcasts. Maps are considered both static and dynamic aspects of the game, in the sense that new maps are sometimes added, and old maps may be updated or even removed, albeit rarely, to competitive map pools each

season. Names of various places within each specific map are important knowledge for both players and audiences to understand, so that they can discern where and why actions are taking place during a match – such as terrorist's offensive strategies (three-two split A, rush B, etc.), and counter-terrorist's defensive player placement ("pop dog," "Gandalf," "secret," etc.).

ELEAGUE provided "map fly-throughs"; recurring segments dedicated to displaying and teaching the audience about an upcoming map before the match began. Map fly-throughs were produced segments displaying the virtual terrain with voice-over commentary explaining where each team spawned to start the round, as well as where each bombsite was located. This basic knowledge is well-known by most initiated spectators, however, and was not included in EPL broadcasts.

Caster discourses in both leagues explained maps in terms of which side they favored (terrorist-sided, or counter-terrorist-sided), updates implemented to maps, and exploits in maps. ELEAGUE in particular recurrently explained how and why each map had certain advantages. In ELEAGUE season one, for example, play-by-play casters explained that losing several rounds on the counter-terrorist side of De_Cobblestone was not a big deal, because the map is "T-sided" (meaning, it favors the terrorist faction). On De_Overpass, ELEAGUE casters stated, "In case there are any newcomers to the game out there, this is a map that's sort of a CT-sided map. It's the FaZe Clan right now that's supposed to be winning the majority of the rounds here. So the fact that OpTic is already up to seven out of the 15 they're gonna play in this first half, that's just very concerning."

Weapon choice is an important aspect of professional *CS:GO*, and both leagues routinely discussed weapons and their proper use. In ELEAGUE season one for example,

casters explained how to properly use the desert eagle magnum while spectating a player

that had the weapon equipped, "Niko has the 'deagle' here, he will take pot shots at the

enemy heads, just barely peaking his own head. Notice how he does not spam shots

continuously, but takes a shot, waits a second or two, and then takes another." These

discussions regarding proper use weaponry teaches the audience through good and bad

examples via gameplay reporting.

Economy was another focal point of teaching and learning in both league

broadcasts. The basics of in-game economy was explained in ELEAGUE through

produced segments called "Economy 101." In Economy 101's, the in-game buy menu is

displayed along with a voice-overlay explaining important information for newcomers

such as: how in-game money is earned, what money can be spent on, the starting amount

of money for each team, what "save rounds" consist of, what "force buys" consist of, and

the overall economic goal of fully buying to give yourself the best opportunity to take out

opponents with powerful weapons, fully equipped utility, and armor. Economy was

recurrently discussed in play-by-play commentary as it is relevant to the way play

unfolds each and every round. Economy-related jargon terms such as "half-buy," "full-

buy," "full-save," and "surprise buy" explained what each team purchases at the

beginning of a round. In ELEAGUE these terms are explained in great detail, however, in

EPL they are used without explanation. For example, in season one of ELEAGUE,

casters explained "That is the traditional pattern, to not buy after losing the first round.

As you can see, Cloud9 bought, hence the surprise buy." In EPL, however, a typical

round begins with casters quickly acknowledging the economy of each team such as,

"Virtus.Pro with enough money to have a weak-buy after this round if they lose, but the round following would certainly be a save if they continue to lose."

Caster discourses helped audiences understand various aspects of team and individual player actions as they occur on screen. These discourses largely reflected dynamic aspects of the game such as terrorist strategies, counter-terrorist positions, utility use (smoke grenades, flash grenades, incendiary grenades, and explosive grenades), player movements (why players are walking, running, or jumping in particular situations), gunfights (importance of playing particular angles, and enacting situational peaks), timing (rushing, picking, camping, flanking, lurking, etc.), communication (what, when, and how to communicate with teammates), and sound (hearing enemy footsteps and weapon sounds as important information). In pregame, halftime, postgame, during tactical timeouts, and sometimes quickly after the conclusion of a round in mid-game situations, terrorist and counter-terrorist strategies were analyzed. Casters used a combination of on-screen graphics, instant replays, and verbal discourse to explain strategies, similar to the way traditional sportscasters use graphics and instant-replay – drawing on the screen while simultaneously explaining the significance of player actions. Casters in ELEAGUE season two, for example, discussed a terrorist team's strategy stating, "There was a level of depth in that pistol round that was so intelligent. They all go in together, rather than one by one, and it results in a victory." In EPL season four, casters explained the significance of a player jumping to peak around a corner as a brilliant move in order to ensure that the enemy player camping the corner does not get multiple kills stating, "since the counter-terrorist has to move his crosshair significantly to kill the jumping player, that player's teammate was able to trade kills. The counter-

terrorist was unable to just 'tap away' at the oncoming players, instead having to significantly adjust his crosshair. Brilliant play."

Aside from aspects of the game, both EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts involved content that taught viewers about the respective leagues. Early episodes of ELEAGUE season one, for example, involve produced footage explaining the ELEAGUE format. The video explained that ELEAGUE consisted of a ten-week season in which 24 teams from around the world would compete for a 1.2-million-dollar prize pool in Valve's *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*. The video went on to break down the group phase, the playoffs, and the Grand Final. EPL explained their league format in each season as well, albeit without referencing *CS:GO*, because, presumably, audiences were already *CS:GO* fans.

Rules and scoring were major focal points in the discourse and imagery of both leagues. Produced footage and broadcast booth commentary provided *CS:GO* overviews that explained how to win the game. For example, before an ELEAGUE season one playoff match, the caster stated, "Just a reminder for everybody here, if it's your first time watching *Counter-Strike*, we're looking for the first team to get 16 rounds here. This is the last map. OpTic needs 16 rounds total to win this map." Additionally, play-by-play casters explained rules and scoring whenever in-game actions demanded further explanation. In an ELEAGUE season one exhibition match, a player went the entire round without getting any kills but still led his team in points. The caster chimed in stating, "The top fragger doesn't always top the scoreboard. Players also receive points for doing the donkey work - completing map objectives."

Technical problems resulting in a timeout also provided casters an opportunity to teach audiences about league rules. In one instance of ELEAGUE season one, a player was accidently disconnected from the match. This resulted in a "technical timeout." The caster explained that since no players had died in the round before the player disconnected, the round is considered "dead" and will be restarted upon the player's reconnection to the server.

Game updates regularly occur multiple times each month. When the game is updated, users must download the update before they can play the game. Oftentimes updates fix in-game bugs and map exploits, but sometimes they create bugs and exploits. In ELEAGUE season one the map De_Cobblestone was updated and played competitively for the first time in the beginning of the season. Casters introduced the "new look Cobblestone" stating that it was updated in-between the start of ELEAGUE season one and the previous Major LAN tournament. The casters provided specific details as to what changed in the map, highlighting that a staircase was added on bombsite "B," making the bombsite harder to hold as a counter-terrorist, and easier to take as terrorist. Additionally, game updates sometimes impact weaponry, either increasing or decreasing a weapon's damage, recoil, or cost. These changes force teams and players to change their strategies. Casters educate audiences about game updates as a normalized aspect of their gameplay reporting discourses. When game updates are significant (i.e. map changes) leagues also include graphics to complement their discourses explaining how the game has changed.

EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts regularly displayed first-person in-game perspectives, which differed from that of the players. Broadcast spectators see a plethora

of information that players do not. In both leagues, broadcasts' in-game perspectives

displayed the health, weapons, and utility of players from both teams on opposite sides of

the screen (terrorists on the right, counter-terrorists on the left). Broadcasts also displayed

the total team economy on the top of the screen. While players in-game can view their

team's health, weapons, utility, and economy, they cannot see that same information for

their opponents. Additionally, broadcasts provide "X-Ray" vision to better see where

players are located through walls, smoke grenades, and other obstacles. Players,

obviously, cannot see through these obstacles. To the initiated *CS:GO* observer, this

information may seem obvious, however, to newcomers, this information was paramount

in understanding the actions taking place on screen.

In season one of ELEAGUE, casters switched back and forth between player and

observer in-game perspectives to show the difference, while simultaneously explaining

"You can see without the X-Ray, it's very difficult to see where the enemies are through

that thick smoke. That's what the player's see. They don't see through walls, they don't

see the outline through smoke. And it makes the game much more difficult."

Additionally, they explained that when a player dies, their screen fades to black. Because

of this, dead players tend to verbally explain all of the information they acquired about

enemy positions and their weapons upon dying, so that their living teammates can adjust

accordingly.

Esport- and *CS:GO*-specific jargon was frequently utilized in both league

broadcasts. In ELEAGUE, jargon terms were explained in great detail through

"Terminology 101" produced video segments, pre- and post-game booth caster discourse,

and play-by-play caster discourse. Terminology 101 segments introduced terms such as

wallbang (shooting somebody through a wall or any surface), *popflash* (when you made the perfect flash grenade toss without the enemy being able to see it coming), *clutch* (when a player wins the round as the last one alive against one or multiple opponents), *ace* (when one player eliminates all five members of the opposing team), and *ninja defuse* (defusing the bomb without the enemy team knowing you are doing it). Other terms were introduced by casters naturally during the broadcast. In one scenario, a caster explained the term *trade-frag* in the middle of a round stating "Counter-Strike is very much a game about trade frags. When your teammate takes an engagement, he goes down, another teammate can come in and get the trade, especially when entering a bombsite." Casters routinely explained terms as part of their ongoing match commentary, explaining terms such as *pick* (when you do not use utility, but instead go into another player's crosshair and try to shoot them before they shoot you), *lurker* (when a player intentionally goes the opposite direction of their teammates so he can pick off enemies rotating to the site), *hero-AWP* (when a player saves, buys, or picks up an AWP from an enemy player and tries to take/win every duel to carry his team to victory). Other terms that were routinely used throughout broadcasts went undefined, but their significance was explained. ADR scores (Average Damage per Round) were explained during a match to criticize a player for performing poorly. Casters stated the significance of ADR stating "at 12-24, he has a 0.45 ADR. At the pro level, a decent ADR is .70-.75". In EPL, the same terminology was used, however, the terms largely went unexplained.

Educational Moments served the purpose of teaching *CS:GO* league broadcast audiences about numerous aspects of professional *CS:GO* including game, league, broadcast, and player/team knowledge involving both static and dynamic aspects of the

game. They accounted for a large portion of *Gameplay Reporting* content, however, *Skilled Expertise* also played a significant role.

Skilled Expertise

A major focus of *Gameplay Reporting* involved images and discourses highlighting *Skilled Expertise*. Through pregame predictions and postgame reactions, play-by-play caster commentary, player and coach testimonials, player and team introductions, and "player of the match" superlatives, both leagues highlight skills as a major component of professional play. Additionally, play-by-play and booth caster discourses reinforced the notion that skilled expertise is a requirement to compete in professional esports leagues. Significant themes in *Skilled Expertise* involved player and team praise and disappointment, playstyle, decision-making, precision aim and reaction speed, audio awareness, training, and mindset.

Expressing both praise and disappointment for players and teams frequently involved discussions of skilled expertise. Both ELEAGUE and EPL incorporated a "player of the match" segment in their broadcasts. During postgame discussion segments, casters and occasionally the host praised one player for their exceptional performance during the match. In ELEAGUE, this segment was known as the "Blazin' Hot Player of the Match," and involved an explanation as to why that particular player was selected. For example, in season one of ELEAGUE, Mousesports player Niko was selected as the Blazin' Hot Player of the Match for his "solid kills, and high KDR (kills to deaths ratio)." In EPL, one player was praised as the "highest rated player in the server" at the

conclusion of each match. Additionally, one exceptional play was selected as the "Game Fuel AMP Power Play" and dissected by casters.

In pregame prediction and postgame reaction segments, casters expressed praise and disappointment for players and teams through discourses reflecting various aspects of gameplay. When North American team Echo Fox beat NaVi in ELEAGUE season one, for instance, casters described it as the "biggest upset of ELEAGUE so far" and praised Echo Fox's play stating,

> "That first half out of Echo Fox on the CT side was actually very impressive…
> Much different from Train… This time on the CT side some very nice calling,
> some very nice setups… getting those picks… What worked for them stylistically
> was they were very passive on the CT side."

Contrastingly, after the Swedish veterans and heavy favorite, NiP, lost to North American Cloud9 in EPL season four, casters expressed disappointment stating,

> "Watching NiP drop 2-3 rounds against pistols. I mean, you're not gonna win
> matches like that… That's a trigger point I think for everyone… especially
> someone like Spunj, a former in-game leader, is gonna be so, so frustrated…
> When NiP came in… this was the model team for how to play anti-ecos. At the
> time they were barely losing any of them. They were being very, very safe in
> them. And they were so good in maintaining all their weaponry. Not putting
> themselves in danger in those rounds. And here we just saw an utter collapse. The
> complete opposite of that."

Play-by-play caster commentary frequently commended teams and individual players based on their skilled in-game actions. Casters praised teams by highlighting a teamwork, discipline, dynamic play, and communication. For example, in ELEAGUE season one, casters explained team Astralis' disciplined play stating,

"Astralis [are] playing very measured. They have rifles. OpTic are on another save. And they are taking their time, not trading any kills. Playing very methodical… Going through their grenade protocol. Using utility to clear out areas before entering."

Another focal point of *Skilled Expertise* involved dynamic playstyle, tactical decision-making, calculated risks, disciplined play, precision shooting and expeditious reactions, attention to in-game sound, training, and mindset. Thoroughness in terms of utility use and checking corners was celebrated by casters, while lazy play and questionable decisions were disparaged. Casters' play-by-play commentary in ELEAGUE season two, for example, highlighted team OpTic's dynamic play by stating,

"That is one of the most frustrating things to play against is a dynamic team that can change their pace so much. Even round for round. Because, as you're trying to adjust to previous play by which you were just beaten, suddenly, they're switching it up before you can even find a solution to that, they're playing a different style… It's a very good job right now on OpTic… Individually they're playing well, but this constant change of pace is making it very hard for… FaZe to come up with anything."

In the EPL season ten Grand Finals, tactical decision-making was the focal point in a pivotal round as casters explained, "That was just a mid-round decision from Karrigan. He knew he forced rotations. He knew that Fnatic had sent players through that CT spawn after he got traded from killing JW. Doing the math there, that's four players on B for Fnatic, and Mousesports are just going to double-back into the empty A-site. Masterful call from him."

Precision shooting and expeditious reactions were emphasized through imagery of first-person player perspectives as well as casters' play-by-play commentary in both league broadcasts using a combination of discourse and imagery. A recurring aspect of league broadcasts involved first-person perspectives of players in-game. From this perspective, audiences witnessed players' disciplined gameplay, which includes placing their crosshair at head-level always aiming in the direction of enemies (whether they are visible or not), never wavering. From the first-person person perspective, audiences also attended to the quick reactions that players have to in-game stimuli including enemy players, utility (smoke grenades, flashbang grenades, incendiary grenades, explosive grenades), and obstacles within the virtual environment. Casters routinely highlighted and celebrated precision aim and reaction speed.

Additionally, instant replay was used to compliment caster discourses that highlight precision shooting and expeditious reactions. Casters used phrases such as, "instant one-click headshot," "pixel shot," "brilliant jumping peak," "wall-bang headshot," and "perfect precise shot" to describe players' precision shooting. This is exemplified in EPL season ten, as casters described Ropz's round-saving shot on an enemy play with only seconds left in the round, "It's so hard to hit that head with just one

bullet from the Desert Eagle. A perfect and precise shot as time expires," and Dupreeh's

headshot through the double-doors in Dust2 without even peaking, "Wall-bang headshot!

You don't see those too often… We're gonna have to see that replay." Casters also

emphasized players' quick reflexes, even citing them as a requirement to play at the

professional level. In the ELEAGUE season two Finals for example, as Stanislaw pushed

through a smoke grenade killing an enemy and casters explained, "They have to react

instantly. And some of these players are just lightening quick. It's one of the qualities you

have to have to be a pro CS player. The tactical mind, but also the mechanics. The ability

to be so fast," and in EPL season four casters highlighted n0thing's reflexes stating,

"N0thing with a great headshot on Coldzera as he jumps onto cat[walk]. It takes very

quick reactions indeed, we will show the replay."

Audio awareness was highlighted in both leagues via players' abilities to use

sound cues to eliminate enemies, especially when visual cues were not present. Casters in

ELEAGUE season one, for example, highlighted the significance of in-game sound

stating, "Xyp9x, yes okay you can see that the players see things, but they can also hear

footsteps. And that's how Xyp9x is able to hit that shot. He hears m1xwell coming." In

ELEAGE season two, casters highlighted sound cues as the motivating factor behind a

player's round-changing play stating, "He's stepping. He makes noise. And that's what

triggers Stanislaw to go and peak around the corner… It's a calculated risk, and it pays of

massively for his team there."

Team and player training comprised another significant aspect of skilled expertise

in league broadcasts. Testimonials from players and teams, caster discourses, and

produced video segments emphasized the importance of individual and team practice,

researching opponents' strategies via recorded demos, communication, and maintaining the right mindset. Players and teams most often highlighted practicing *Counter-Strike* as training for professional league matches. In ELEAGUE season one, NiP player GeT_RiGhT was asked about his daily schedule as a professional player; he responded "We play with our team about six or seven hours every day… Then I play a lot of Counter-Strike myself, just alone to prepare for the games coming up… Maybe twelve hours a day." Casters in the broadcast booth added,

> He does play so much Counter-Strike it makes me laugh that people don't realize… He just loves the game. Practices all the time. After team practice, he is the guy who sits down and plays, plays, plays… The first time I met GeT_RiGhT, he's referencing demos (recorded matches) from like 2003 and 2004 that he watched when he was trying to become somebody… It is special… How many people have watched that many demos?… and even mentioning, so casually, practicing twelve hour days… I don't even know anything that I can do for twelve hours per day.

> Most teams "played online matchmaking… discussing new tactics, coming up

with new strategies," however, some teams highlighted playing other video games to prepare for matches. Unreal Tournament and Overwatch were two games that players cited in ELEAGUE season one as part of their training for league matches. For instance, in preparing for the semi-finals against NaVi, "Fnatic… went to the pool, played Overwatch… they're feeling really confident."

Watching videos (also known as demos) was a common training technique employed by professional players and teams in both leagues. For example, after defeating

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Virtus Pro in the EPL season one semifinals, Fnatic player Flusha was asked how his team will prepare for the Grand Finals, and he highlighted researching opponent's strategies stating "We'll watch some VODs (videos on demand) from today and look at what we can out-strat them on, and what they're doing good, and what map we shouldn't play against them."

Additionally, produced video segments such as recorded interviews and ELEAGUE's "Domino's Pre-Game Rituals" display player and caster testimonials of professional player's training before league matches. In season one of ELEAGUE, the Domino's Pre-Game Rituals segment illustrated how Flusha of team Fnatic gazes upon his in-game trophy case (inventory) before each match, reminding himself of past successes, and his current goal.

Having the right mindset and keeping one's emotions in check were recurring themes in ELEAGUE and EPL player and team training for professional competitions. In ELEAGUE season one, Counter Logic Gaming player jdm64 explained the importance of staying focused in professional competitions stating, "There's so much strategy behind the game, and when you're with your team too, there's a lot of communication. You have make sure that you're focused one hundred percent of the time." Additionally, before the ELEAGUE season two Grand Finals, OpTiC player RUSH explained the importance of remaining calm in important matches stating, "I think it's better to stay level-headed than excited, because excited can make you make mistakes randomly. If you're more level-headed and clam, you play focused." And when Fnatic came back to beat Cloud9 in the EPL season one Grand Finals, casters highlighted their mental toughness stating, "What a

comeback by Fnatic. The mental strength it takes to come back like this is not easy at all… I'm super impressed. That doesn't happen too often."

On the other hand, when players displayed negative emotions such as frustration, casters were quick to point it out. In ELEAGUE season one, as Fnatic was losing, casters stated "What is this emotion coming out of Flusha? I haven't seen him react that way in ages! He just threw his mouse and slammed his desk! He usually doesn't show this kind of emotion." Casters also brought attention to players and teams who were prone to choking in big moments, crediting the mental and emotional aspects of training. In ELEAGUE season one, for example, casters discussed team Astralis's struggles focusing on "the mental aspect, having confidence… not putting pressure on yourself. Not putting pressure on your teammates… This is where you're going to see that mental preparation come into play. This is where that focus has to carry through." Moreover, in the EPL season one Grand Finals, Cloud9 blew a significant lead and lost in overtime. Casters noted "Cloud9, you go into this overtime situation, the fact that they lost the last six rounds on CT… They were already on tilt. They were already having problems. And then to go into overtime and lose another three rounds... Another collapse for Cloud9… That's just crushing… Body language tells your everything."

Skilled Expertise highlights the notion that certain criteria are required to compete in professional *CS:GO* esport leagues. Together, *Skilled Expertise* and *Educational Moment* make up the majority of *Gameplay Reporting* content. In the next section, *Transactional Dynamism* highlights business dealings that contribute to the survival of professional *CS:GO*.

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Transactional Dynamism

The *Transactional Dynamism* theme strikes a balance between the *Gameplay Reporting* and *Developing Narrative* themes by highlighting up-to-date news with long-term impact on the state of the leagues, teams, and players being discussed. Business dealings, in various forms, encompass a significant portion of discourses and imagery represented in both league broadcasts. *Transactional Dynamism* in this dissertation refers to the "complex mixture of organizational establishment and entrepreneurial speculation" (Young et al., 2019, p. 76). It includes league prize pools, and player and team transactions, acquisitions, earnings from entities related to *CS:GO* esports.

Money was a recurring theme in both league broadcasts, as prize pools, organizational transactions, and team/player earnings were frequently cited. In the inaugural episode of season one in each league, casters described the league by highlighting the total dollar amount of league prize pools. For example, EPL season four opened with the host stating, "ladies and gentlemen, good evening and welcome to season four of the ESL Pro League. Nine weeks. Fourteen teams now will be playing… for seven-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollars." The prize pool was a recurring theme in ELEAGUE season one, as the one point two million dollar purse was the "biggest prize pool ever in [professional] *CS:GO*". Caster discourses, player testimonials, and graphic displays throughout the season reminded viewers of the high monetary stakes at play.

A recurring theme in team introductions included changes made to the team such as trades, player and coach acquisitions, retirements, and benching due to poor play or injury. During discussions of such team changes, some casters even highlighted the commonality of turnover in professional *CS:GO*. In EPL season one for example, casters

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explained the matchup between PENTA Esports and Mousesports by stating "the lineups just imploded. Players changing from one team to the other… these changed happened probably an hour prior to the game starting. It became official about ten minutes before the game started." They went on to explain the commonality of team changes and highlighted how "you sometimes see… teams completely change their roster and then they have like a week of incredible results." Team roster changes were also discussed in ELEAGUE broadcasts where casters discussed the importance of having "big name talent" and their economic impact on organizations. In one instance, Team SoloMid (TSM) replaced their entire Danish roster and casters held "TSM… back when they had that Danish team, when they were a top three team in the world… they didn't give them the resources they needed to truly succeed." Casters then described TSM's new roster, stating, "dollar-for-dollar this must be the worst, most overrated team in all of *CS:GO*, because… TSM is a big organization in League of Legends and other games… they spent a decent amount of money on some of these players. Buying them out of contracts, paying them top salaries… they put the money out there, but they haven't been able to put [successful] players on the field."

Casters even proposed a solution for TSM to become a contender again, citing player acquisition and describing European and North American player markets;

> "I think the future of this team, assuming they don't succeed is they're gonna have to go down that… OpTiC route and look to Europe to get someone who's talent there, and just not on a good enough team… In terms of NA (North American) talent at the moment, it's all bought up. It's all bought up and paid for

on different teams. They have to gamble at the moment for young talent and hope

that someone just has an unbelievable development."

In both leagues, player turnover was well documented. Early retirement from

professional play is common in the *CS:GO* scene for reasons such as age, loss of game

interest, desire to play a different esport, and other professional pursuits such as

streaming. When players made costly in-game mistakes such as team-killing, casters

were quick to remind audiences that "Plenty of young players are waiting in the wings,

on the sidelines, in PUGs (pick-up games) and in online leagues, that are dying for their

chance at the big stage." These discourses were often revisited when teams performed

poorly or did not live up to their potential in a particular league and season.

Additionally, economic elements of esports were discussed in terms of team

earnings on multiple occasions in both league broadcasts. After winning EPL season one,

casters discussed team Fnatic's earnings stating, "that puts this current team, this current

formation of Fnatic at over six-hundred-thousand dollars in winnings… one-hundred-

thousand in their pockets for taking this one." ELEAGUE took it a step further in season

two by displaying a full-screen graphic breaking down seven tournament prize pools won

by SK Gaming in 2016, totaling over one and a half million dollars. Casters reacted

sarcastically stating, "They've made some money. They've made just a little bit of

money. That maybe explains the [gaming] house and a couple of other things too."

Business dealings including expansion, investment, earning, and acquisition

encompass a significant portion of discourses and imagery represented in both league

broadcasts. By highlighting economic elements of professional *CS:GO* esports, these

broadcasts are situating the activity as a professional pursuit in an organized and lucrative

marketplace. A major element of transactional dynamism in professional *CS:GO* league broadcasts involves sponsorships and advertisements.

Sponsorship/Advertisement

Sponsorships and advertisements are key to economic models and support professional *CS:GO* leagues, prizes, and operational costs. Contrary to the grassroots beginnings of esports leagues, EPL and ELEAGUE are sponsored by both lifestyle brands and technology brands. Sponsorships exist in a variety of images and discourses within both league broadcasts. Similar to traditional sports, commercial advertisements for league sponsored products and services are a normalized aspect of league broadcasts and are built-in to caster discourses and graphic overlays. Several sponsors even craft commercial advertisements specifically for ELEAGUE and EPL. After briefly comparing league sponsorships below, I describe league's self-promotion, sponsor displays, sponsored show segments, and commercial advertisements.

ELEAGUE had more lifestyle than technology sponsors including Arby's, Buffalo Wild Wings, Dominos, Snickers, and Credit Karma. Their technology sponsors were iBuyPower and HyperX. ESL Pro League, on the contrary, had many more technology than lifestyle sponsors. EPL's lifestyle sponsors include Mountain Dew, AMP Game Fuel and U.S. Air Force. Betway, CSMoney, ESEA, GGBet, Kinguin, Logitech, MSI, Paysafecard, TheScoreEsports, Sandisk, Saylnet, and Xfinity make up the technology sponsors. These sponsors were displayed in-game and in-person during league broadcasts in various ways.

To begin each league broadcast, casters discussed upcoming matchups in a pregame show. This segment comprised mainly of casters discourses and informative full- and half-screen graphics. During the pregame show, casters typically engaged in league promotion by advertising upcoming league-related events (Major Tournaments) and league merchandise. As each league concluded with playoffs and a Grand Finals match, viewers were frequently reminded that they could purchase tickets and attend those matches. Also, unrelated Major Tournaments, such as the ELEAGUE Major or ESL One New York, which had no impact on league play, were frequently cited by casters in their respective leagues – urging viewers to attend or "miss out on all the action." Both leagues used full- and half-screen graphics in concert with caster discourses to advertise league-related merchandise. In EPL broadcasts, casters used pre- and post-game segments to remind audiences that they can wear the same outfits that the pros don by visiting the ESL Pro Shop online. Similarly, in ELEAGUE, casters prompt viewers to "check out the ELEAGUE shop, we've got a bunch of styles for you to choose which team you want to represent, or just represent ELEAGUE in general in some ELEAGUE branded gear."

Logos of various sponsors including EPL and ELEAGUE logos were posted in numerous places both in- and out-of-game in league broadcasts. In-game sponsorship displays appeared more often in EPL than ELEAGUE, with all sponsors' logos displayed on the bottom of the screen, as part of the viewer's heads-up display. In EPL seasons one and four, all sponsor logos were listed at the bottom of the screen permanently throughout all broadcasts. In EPL season ten, logos still appear on the bottom of the screen, but transition in and out, one sponsor logo at a time, throughout the duration of

match broadcasts. ELEAGUE did not regularly display sponsors' logos in-game. Both leagues permanently displayed their brand logos (ESL and ELEAGUE) in-game.

Professional *CS:GO* teams also displayed their own sponsorships in broadcasts. Players wore sponsored gear during broadcasts, either related to team or personal sponsorships, including pants, sweatshirts, and hats. Team jerseys worn by players were often covered from top to bottom with sponsorship logos and text. Peripheral equipment used by players such as mice and keyboards also correlated with team and player sponsors (not provided by leagues). Interestingly, in EPL season one, several teams and players used their in-game names to display sponsorships. Cloud9, for example, wore the clan tag Cloud9 G2A. Teams Virtus Pro and Fnatic did not attach sponsors to their actual clan tag, however, players posted sponsors directly following their in-game names such as "Virtus pro Snax g2a.com," and "fnatic KRIMZ * Kinguin". This trend died out after EPL season one, and did not exist in ELEAGUE.

Sponsorship logos also appear out-of-game in various places throughout both league broadcasts. Casters in both leagues sit or stand behind a desk that bears the league logo as well as other sponsorship logos during broadcasts. In EPL, the caster's desk sometimes displayed sponsorships in the form of material items. For example, in the EPL season four Grand Finals, the host is seen sitting at the broadcast desk with a "Kinguin" stuffed animal sitting in front of him. In EPL season ten, caster and team desks have several cans of Mountain Dew AMP Game Fuel sitting on them. The gaming desks that teams sit behind during competition also bear league logos. In ELEAGUE a large digital screen exists behind each team displaying their team logo, however, in EPL wallpaper displaying league sponsors as well as the league logo exist behind each team.

Additionally, gaming equipment used by players such as computers, monitors, headsets, and gaming chairs all bear league logos. Finally, in ELEAGUE, large digital screens around the arena regularly cycle through sponsorship logo displays when matches are not live. EPL relies less on digital screen displays, and more on static material displays such as wallpaper, stuffed animals, etc.

Sponsorship-related discourse involves casters verbally acknowledging one or more of their sponsors during a broadcast, and occurs predominantly during lapses of gameplay – pre- and post-game discussions, halftime, and during technical and tactical timeouts. Additionally, produced segments incorporating sponsors are a significant aspect of league broadcasts, such as ELEAGUE's "Blazin' Hot Player of the Match presented by Buffalo Wild Wings", which involve sponsorship via caster discourse.

Sponsored segments in both leagues involved full- and partial-screen graphic displays that included logos of sponsors. These graphics were displayed during sponsored segments as well as breaks in gameplay such as halftime. Additionally, sponsorship logos were displayed in bottom-screen "news tickers" in both leagues. News ticker displays occurred outside of gameplay, often during pre- and post-game and halftime segments. Alongside sponsorship logos, they included league-related news such as previous match scores, upcoming match times, and various headlines such as "Magisk flexing his AWP skills on Train."

Sponsored broadcast segments were used in both leagues to reinforce graphic displays and caster discourses. As previously mentioned, in ELEAGUE seasons one and two a postgame segment built in to caster analyses was called the "Buffalo Wild Wings Blazin' Hot Player of the Match". During this segment, casters often included off-topic

discussions about Buffalo Wild Wings instead of, or alongside player analysis. In ELEAGUE season one, for example, two casters could not agree on the Blazin' Hot Player of the Match, so one described the choice stating, "Perhaps not blazin' hot, but mango habanero," which is a Buffalo Wild Wings flavor that is one notch below blazin' hot. Other similar sponsored segments include; Domino's Countdown, a pregame lower-screen graphic timer that counts down until match time; Domino's Pre-Game Rituals, a segment devoted to players explaining their pregame routines to prepare for matches; Arby's Map Flythrough, a segment displayed just before the match begins to familiarize viewers with the upcoming map in which the match will be played; Arby's Locked and Loaded, a pre-recorded video segment whereby two teammates face off in a timed aim-map competition; Snickers Pregame Show, a sponsored segment typically introduced in the very beginning of the broadcast; HyperX "The X-Factor," a pregame prediction segment whereby casters weigh in on who they believe the impact player will be in the upcoming match; and finally iBuyPower Map Records, a pregame segment in which casters discuss both teams records on the upcoming map.

EPL also employed sponsored segments within league broadcasts. Seasons one and four did not include such segments, however, seasons ten included several. The Paysafecard Pick Em' Challenge, for example, is a pregame segment whereby casters predict the winning team of an upcoming match; Mountain Dew AMP Game Fuel's Play of the Day is a postgame segment in which one play from the day's matches is voted on by viewers via Twitter, and then analyzed by casters. A unique sponsored segment in EPL involves Betway, one of the most popular online esports betting sites. At various points throughout each match, Betway betting odds are displayed on the screen for both

teams. For example, "Astralis 1.18 vs. G2 Esports 4.30" was displayed in the seventeenth round of a regular season match. While Betway graphics are displayed, casters frequently discuss the odds, stating for example, "Those Betway odds are dominant!"

During extended breaks from gameplay, both leagues displayed commercials of sponsored goods and services, sometimes directly related to *CS:GO* leagues. In ELEAGUE season one, for example, one Buffalo Wild Wings commercial presented several televisions inside of the sports bar – some tuned to CS:GO, others to baseball, football, and soccer. A voiceover stated, "Some people believe that esports aren't really sports. And it's okay to be wrong. You see we show ELEAGUE on our TVs. And our TVs only show sports." Other commercials centered around in-jokes for gamers that reinforced themes and concepts specific to esports or *CS:GO* through intertextual references. One Arby's ad displayed a close-up of a sandwich along with the *CS:GO* ticking bomb sound effect. The bomb ticker goes off, followed by an explosion, as the audience hears: "Arby's. We have the meats." Similarly, in EPL season ten, a Betway commercial displayed in-game footage from *CS:GO* of a chicken wobbling around various maps during gameplay. A voiceover stated, "I've been there since the beginning. Every map. Every frag. Every moment. I run, but I never hide. With Knowledge comes power. And power is to be wielded wisely. Which is why, as the expert, I bet with Betway. If you know *CS:GO*, then you'll know that the best way to bet on esports is with Betway. For the love of the game." Other commercials from EPL broadcasts include an Intel ad providing a player profile of *CS:GO* star KennyS, a Mountain Dew AMP Game Fuel ad involving gamer jargon, and an ESL Pro Shop ad displaying attractive young people casually wearing ESL gear.

Sponsorships and advertisements are vital in supporting professional *CS:GO* leagues, prizes, and operational costs. EPL and ELEAGUE are sponsored by numerous lifestyle and technology brands, which exist in a variety of images and discourses throughout both league broadcasts. Next, I introduce the *Audience Participation* theme, which contains another key element of professional *CS:GO* leagues – the audience.

Audience Participation

　　Audience Participation is a significant theme in both league broadcasts. Without an in-person and online audience, these competitions would cease to exist. ELEAGUE and EPL displayed frequent shots of the in-person audience as well as include digital and in-person audiences in broadcast discourses in several ways. Pre-game, halftime, and post-game shots were most often used to display crowd members, however, sometimes broadcasts displayed fan reactions after pivotal rounds mid-match. Below I describe audience displays including nationalistic-, pop culture-, and game culture-related audience displays, as well as crowd cheers and jeers. Following audience displays are caster acknowledgements of the audience and finally social media engagements.

　　Audience displays often illustrated young, male observers, predominantly draped in professional *CS:GO* team memorabilia. On rare occasions such as league Finals events held in large arenas, crowd displays showed women in attendance. While some shots included female *CS:GO* fans wearing team memorabilia, many audience displays depicted parents wearing casual clothing and looking confused, not cheering or fixated on the competition, but looking around the arena and half-smiling.

Nationalistic audience engagement involved crowd displays and chants. Waving national flags was a fixture of crowd displays in both league broadcasts. Depending on the host country of the league event and the teams competing, national flags could of various countries can be spotted out and were frequently highlighted in close-up shots of audience members. In addition to crowd displays, loud audience chants can be heard in the background of caster discourses, especially in significant matches. Throughout season one of ELEAGUE whenever American teams performed well, whether it be a successful round, or a match victory, fans in the crowd can be heard chanting "U-S-A, U-S-A, U-S-A!"

Other crowd displays showed fans holding up signs, and/or performing actions related to popular and game culture. In ELEAGUE season one, for example, an audience member was seen doing a "dab," whereby he thrust his face toward his bent elbow, while simultaneously directing his other arm upward and back in a straightened position. This move can be found in music videos, news programs, and high schools. In both leagues, fans were seen and heard chanting "Wooooo!" which is a saying famously used by Rick Flare in professional wrestling. This exclamation was used so frequently at American professional *CS:GO* LAN events that casters began to acknowledge it whenever it arose.

Game culture existed in audience displays in two primary forms; audience clothing, and signs. In one crowd display during the EPL season four Finals, an audience member is zoomed in on holding a sign that reads "CHICKENS." To the uninitiated this is puzzling, however, to those who play and watch *CS:GO*, it is comical because chickens exist in-game and are sometimes interacted with by players or acknowledged by casters.

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Audience engagement also exists in the form of crowd cheers and jeers in both league broadcasts. Based on where the league broadcasts take place, teams that belong to that country tend to enjoy a home turf advantage whereby fans routinely cheer their success and jeer other teams' success. A regular aspect of league matches involved pregame predictions by broadcasters regarding which team will win the match. When the home turf team was predicted to win, the crowd cheered, and when they were predicted to lose, the crowd jeered. Admittedly, this was not always the case, especially for American teams, as they rarely advanced to the playoffs or Finals. In situations where the home country teams were eliminated, audiences often cheered on other teams. In ELEAGUE season one, for example, although the league took place in Atlanta, fans cheered on team Virtus Pro in the semi-finals and finals. Virtus Pro's roster consisted of Polish players. Throughout these high stakes matches, audiences can be heard cheering loudly whenever Virtus Pro eliminated enemy players, won rounds, and especially when they won matches. Cheers rained down from audiences with increasing volume for each victory, large and small, "Vir-Tus-Pro! Vir-Tus-Pro! Vir-Tus-Pro!" until Virtus Pro won the ELEAGUE season one championship.

Audience chants, cheers, and jeers were routinely acknowledged by casters as they provided play-by-play commentary. The season four championship of EPL for example, was held in Sao Paolo Brazil. Brazilian team SK Gaming won the first round of the first match, and the audience cheered so loudly that casters could hardly be heard. Casters promptly reminded audiences that LAN events add immense pressure on "home" teams to perform well. Season ten of EPL was held in Odense Denmark, and home team Astralis made it all the way to the semi-finals before falling to Mousesports. The

overwhelming majority of audience members in the stadium wore black and red Astralis jerseys, waved Danish flags, and frequently chanted "Let's go Astra-Lis, Let's go!" After Astralis lost in the semi-finals the crowd surprisingly adopted Mousesports as their favorite to win the Finals. Casters explained that this adoption did not occur because Mousesports eliminated Astralis, but because Mousesports has a Danish player, Karrigan, and the opposing team was made up entirely of Swedes. Throughout the Grand Finals, audience members cheered for Mousesports and started chants for Karrigan. Casters even exclaimed, "we've got a lot of support for Karrigan and Mousesports here in Odense." In this sense, the audience provided a sort of "home field advantage."

Segments of both league broadcasts addressed audience members through caster discourses and player actions. A recurring aspect of broadcasts involved casters communicating excitement and importance of specific moments during league matches by hyping up and acknowledging the audience, giving gameplay reports life. Similar to a high-stakes hockey game, esports casters employ hyped-up commentary "intended for those 'unconverted' viewers whose interest has to be stimulated by communicating a sense of high drama in the events on screen" (Rowe, 2004, p. 119). In ELEAGUE, for example, casters acknowledged the audience stating, "We've got an awesome studio audience here to support the home town heroes, Cloud9," "We've got some dedicated ELEAGUE fans in attendance," "You can feel the excitement in the air" and "The fans are loving it right now." Similarly, in EPL casters stated, "Now the crowd is starting to come to life. They're enjoying this!" followed by an explanation of how the crowd impacts the game; "Because the crowd got back into it, and got so loud, Cloud9 was unable to get their calls in quickly and concisely, which came back to bite them in the

end." Casters created hype before and during matches with comments such as, "This is fantastic, man! It's a packed house… it's so important that these guys make noise because this match is going to be legendary," and "If they want OpTic to win, they're gonna need to cheer a little louder for them." In one instance, a Virtus Pro player stood up from his gaming chair, waving both arms up and down, nonverbally signaling audience members to cheer. Casters acknowledged the move stating, "TaZ firing up the crowd as well!" Hyping audiences for significant matches was illustrated most clearly in ELEAGUE season two as casters stated "There we go. They [audience] got the chants. I mean, they need your energy guys. If the OpTic fans are here, OpTic really need to hear support. Still the underdogs in this match." As the audience continued to chant "Let's go OpTic, Let's go!" casters added, "The OpTic changt is not being swapped out for a USA chant. We've even brought some [American] flags into the studio. Just in case the miracle does happen."

Casters also reflected on audience reactions that did not involve cheering or jeering, but silence. In EPL season four, when Cloud9 beat the home team favorites SK Gaming in the Finals, casters explained, "Usually the crowd erupts when a team wins a tournament, but as you can see, that's not the case here." A mixture of wide- and close-up-shots of audience members displayed fans in their seats experiencing shock and disappointment, as the heavy favorite and home team SK Gaming lost the Finals in convincing fashion 16-5. Interestingly, after the match, SK Gaming in-game leader FaLLeN was asked by an interviewer on stage "A lot of fans want to be a pro player like you, do you have any tips?" and FaLLeN responded, "Get your friends to get *Counter-Strike* and start playing with them. The game teaches you life lessons, like never give up.

Even though we lost the Grand Finals, we won't give up. We will be right back in the next tournament."

Audiences were also addressed when technical difficulties occurred. In one instance of ELEAGUE season one, a technical timeout was taken and casters thanked the viewers on their Twitch stream for alerting them of the issue after stating, "We did have a bit of a technical issue, and thanks to those of you pointing out that there were some problems with the stream. It should be fixed now." Later on during that same episode casters stated, "Now we've got to restart the Twitch stream, so if you're watching on Twitch, we know there's a few tech issues. We're gonna reset that for you, do not go anywhere. It's gonna be fixed, and we will see you after this short commercial break." When technical timeouts and match delays occurred in EPL, casters also acknowledged audiences. For example, after waiting nearly an hour for the Group Finals match to begin in EPL season four, host Alex "Machine" Richardson stated, "Thank you so much for your patience. Technical problems have plagued us here as we try to get NiP and Cloud9 running… If you have just joined us the likelihood is that you've sat there and wondered 'what on earth have these guys got to talk about'… Just as they thought they had got things up and running, I'm not kidding, there seems to be another issue."

Casters in both leagues regularly invited audience members to join league conversations via Twitter and Twitch chat, although this was emphasized much more in ELEAGUE than EPL. Each episode of ELEAGUE referenced and displayed fan tweets, sometimes provoking direct responses (e.g. a tweet containing a picture of ELEAGUE on TV at a sports bar led casters to comment "Look at this. Sitting in a sports bar with the biggest television showing Astralis versus Mousesports. That's great. That looks actually

really cool. What a way to enjoy an evening. I love that.") Additionally, ELEAGUE invited audience engagement via Twitter with produced segments. In one instance, a full screen graphic displaying professional players and a message reading "Who's on your dream team? Tweet your comments using the following hashtags: #CSGOAWP, #CSGORIFLE, #CSGOSUPPORT, #CSGOIGL, #CSGOGOD." was used to encourage audience participation via Twitter. The host introduced this graphic saying, "We're gonna be showing you who we think are the best players in the world, and you can get involved yourself on social media. Go to Twitter and use the hashtag CSGOAWP, CSGORIFLE, CSGOSUPPORT, CSGOIGL, and CSGOGOD to tell us who you think your best player are."

EPL broadcasts encouraged audiences to join league conversations on Twitter, but instead of using produced segments and displaying actual tweets during live broadcasts, they relied solely on caster discourses and subtle lower-screen graphics. A recurring aspect of EPL broadcasts involved beginning each show with an introduction of casters while displaying their individual Twitter usernames with a lower-screen graphic. In addition to broadcast introductions, EPL casters also ended broadcasts by inviting audiences to join the conversation on Twitter. In EPL season one for example, casters ended one of the first broadcasts stating, "Let us know your thoughts with the voting system that's in place, where you can see things shaping up. And do let us know on Twitter as well. Our personal social medias are @MachineETV and @TheyCallMePansy… and for us at ESL its @ESLCS" before signing off.

In-person and online audiences are paramount to esports league success. ELEAGUE and EPL displayed, discussed, and engaged with audience members in

various ways, which was categorized as *Audience Participation*. The next section describes the omnirelevant theme of *Transnational Rhetoric*.

Transnational Rhetoric

Transnational discourse and imagery were a pervasive aspect of both league broadcasts, and permeated all other categories, except *Sponsorship/Advertisement*, in some form. Transnational discourse took many forms including global competition, player and team introductions, play-by-play commentary highlighting nationalities, regional comparisons between players and teams, playstyles including strategies and map preferences, professional *CS* history, and geographical growth of *CS:GO*. Transnational imagery included displays of national flags both in- and out-of-game, as well as produced footage from players' and teams' home countries.

From the very first episode of each league broadcast, the respective leagues were framed with transnational rhetoric highlighting global competition. ELEAGUE season one opened with host Richard Lewis stating, "Hello esports fans and welcome to the opening day of ELEAGUE, where we're going to see 24 elite Counter-Strike: Global Offensive teams from across the world compete for 1.2 million dollars." Similarly, EPL opened its inaugural season with casters stating "Welcome ladies and gentlemen to the ESL ESEA Pro League. It is the beginning of a brand new league… This is a 500,000-dollar season. You may have seen ESEA season 18 Finals happen in America, and of course ESL Pro League Finals that happened here [in Europe] so they've come together and they are as one now. Twelve of the best teams. There's no other way of putting it. These teams are phenomenal."

Transnational rhetoric in ELEAGUE and EPL broadcasts focused on globalized competition in two ways: recurrent phrases suggesting worldwide competition, and discourses explaining the significance of international versus regional play. First, emphasizing global competition, league broadcasts recurrently described players and teams as "best player in the world," "world class," and "amongst the best in world." Examples drawn from both leagues illustrate players as international superstars. Swedish player Olofmeister was recurrently described as the best player in the world with casters adding, "His skill is unbelievable," "he's got some crazy level of intuition," and Guardian was referred to as the "big star from Slovakia," with casters labeling him the "best AWP player in the world." Device, another European player, was called the "Danish legend," and described as one of the "most well rounded players in the world."

Second, by significantly favoring players and teams that succeed in international competitions, rather than within their respective geographical regions, caster discourses reinforced the importance of global competition. In ELEAGUE season one for example, casters spoke about Cloud9's youngest player Stewie2k stating, "Every international competition they have, he is having the most success against international teams. Right now against North American teams they've been able to win most of these matchups, but without Stewie in the lineup, this team will go nowhere internationally… They have to have loftier goals than being the best team in North America."

Transnational rhetoric was heavily relied on in play-by-play commentary. On numerous occasions player and team nationalities served as a replacement their names. For example, in ELEAGUE season one, the following phrases were used by casters in real-time match commentary: "Triple kill for the Russian player," "Spiidi coming through

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and it's all up the Bosnian player," "9-6 in favor of the Swedes early on here," "That will be an eighth round for the Polish side," "The German team pulls off the comeback." EPL casters employed similar transnational rhetoric in their play-by-play announcing such as: "Liquid haven't even seen a Swede in this round," "Great defense here put up by the Polish team," "G2 leading by one round. Not enough to feel the belief in the majority French squad."

Both league broadcasts ascribed nationalities to each player and team, serving as the primary content for their introductions. European players and teams were introduced as savvy CS veterans, with phrases such as "the Ukrainian phenom," "the best German player," and "the hope of Danish CS." Teams were described in a similar way, often highlighting their superior skill and vast history in the CS scene. Team Fnatic, for example, was introduced as the "Swedish all-stars.," Virtus.Pro as the "Polish powerhouse." On the other hand, North American teams were introduced as newcomers to professional CS and held on a different plane than the Europeans. Team OpTic was introduced as the "Underdog North Americans," Cloud9 as the "standard bearers of North American *Counter-Strike*," and Echo Fox as the "North American hopefuls."

Although most teams were comprised of members from the same country, some consisted of players from several nations. Casters in ELEAGUE introduced FaZe Clan as a "very international team…Two players are from Norway, one from Denmark, their sniper from Portugal, and Kioshima from France." International roster discussions often centered around team communication. In EPL season ten, casters criticized FaZe players for their chaotic communication, "being from all different nationalities, [they are] forced to speak English in order for all members to understand," and another team BIG "has

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three German members, two international, so English for them too." Casters explained

how multilingual teams made slower callouts during matches and did so less frequently

than teams comprised of members from the same country.

Casters from both leagues frequently used transnational rhetoric when comparing

players and teams. In ELEAGUE season one, casters got into a debate about whether or

not a player deserved to be on a professional team after a lackluster performance. One

caster asked, "You don't think he can hang with the top-level Europeans?" and the other

responded, "I don't think he can. If you want to be the best in NA, you can maybe have a

player like that. If you want to be on like a world class level, you might have to reach a

little higher." Casters in ELEAGUE season two compared American team OpTic and

Danish Astralis stating, "OpTic… don't have the depth just yet… it's so difficult when

they go up against a more structured team such as Astralis, who have the experience, who

are veterans, they're European, playing in the competitive area of the world – you need

your star players to show up if you're actually gonna go toe-to-toe with Astralis. In

season four of EPL the distinction between European and American teams was made

abundantly clear when casters previewed the Grand Final with surprise, "It's SK versus

Cloud9. Two American teams. No one from the Europe leagues at all. That is insane."

Team and regional playstyles were another popular subject with which

transnational rhetoric was employed by both leagues. Caster discourses ascribed

particular styles of play to each team, reflecting their home country, by highlighting

various aspects in play-by-play and booth commentary. Europeans were generally praised

for their veteran tactics and superior skills. Danish team Astralis, for example, were

described as "playing very measured… taking their time, not trading any kills." Natus

Vincere, a team comprised of Russians, Slovakians, and Ukrainians, were described as "methodical," always clearing out areas with grenades before entering, and executing perfectly timed strategies.

North Americans, on the contrary, were considered newcomers to the professional scene in the early seasons of each league, and were criticized for their overly aggressive style and reckless gameplay. Throughout season one of ELEAGUE, casters discussed North American playstyles as inconsistent and scatter-brained. North Americans were also notorious for pushing through smoke grenades when they could not see what was waiting for them on the other side. As a result, whenever players threw off-target grenades, fired their weapons inaccurately, or pushed through smokes it was referred to with the prefix "NA" for North American. Casters would say things like "Questionable grenade thrown by nitr0. That's an NA-nade," referring to a grenade throw that missed its target; "That's an NA-spray right there – a full on panic spray," when a player held down the trigger when shooting and completely missing the target; and when players and teams pushed through smoke grenades - "Smoke goes down and Skadoodle is immediately going to try and go through it. Channeling that NA," "The man advantage for Cloud9, but Shroud pushes through smoke! He felt the NA too much there, man,." Interestingly, when a non-American team pushed through smoke it was still referred to with prefix NA, but praised rather than criticized - "MouseSports just decide to NA rush through the smoke onto the B-site, like what is that? How do you predict that? Some clever stuff coming out from MouseSports."

Additionally, ELEAGUE casters provided player and team testimonials to back up their claims about regional playstyles stating, "Some European teams we've talked

to… we ask 'what do you think about North American teams?' they'll be thinking, well, they're predictable. Once you put pressure on them, they just start falling back into default holds, and they don't really pressure you anymore. So you get to have the whole map to yourself and then you just get to do what you want."

Regional playstyles also include map preferences whereby teams of particular regions tend to pick certain maps while avoiding others. Casters in ELEAGUE season one discussed why North American teams shy away from De_Train stating, "Train takes a lot of communication and a lot of coordination with your teammates, and those are two areas that North American doesn't shine very well in." The map De_Dust2, on the hand, was regarded as a map that American teams favor; "Dust2… it's the staple map of America. Especially against European teams."

Lastly, transnational rhetoric was used to highlight *CS:GO* history and growth of the *CS:GO* esports scene. Various eras of *Counter-Strike* are referenced via caster discourses throughout both league broadcasts. In ELEAGUE season one, after Swedish team Fnatic won back-to-back Major Championships, casters discussed the repercussions of a star player's injury stating, "Swedish *Counter-Strike* has always been strong, but it seemed when Olofmeister was injured that perhaps it could be another era of *Counter-Strike*, Brazilian perhaps." When introducing team Natus Vincere in EPL season four, casters explained how NaVi "tend to run into French teams in the quarter finals, who then go on to win, since this is the era of French dominance." In EPL season ten casters explained how North American teams have risen in the global competitive ranks, "taking out European powers on a regular basis, and now contenders for Major titles." In sum, various eras of dominance are alluded to in caster discourses for both ELEAGUE and

EPL. They provide audiences with historical knowledge of professional CS through transnational rhetoric.

Growth of the professional *CS:GO* scene was often discussed in terms of geographical outreach. With Europe being the homeland of *CS*, the growth of *CS* in the Americas was highlighted as significant for both players and fans. In ELEAGUE season one, casters discussed the significance of Cloud9 finally having "home turf" as league matches were played in Atlanta. They explained how home turf has existed in professional *CS* for a long time, but not always for American teams, since there have not been many tournaments and even fewer leagues in America. With ELEAGUE, however, that all changed and "now we're starting to see more LANs here in North America. Cloud9 doesn't have to go for that 12-17-hour transit over ocean. Just a few hour flight over from Santa Monica, California, where they're from." Furthermore, in EPL season four, when SK Gaming made it to the semi-finals, casters highlighted the geographical spread of professional *CS:GO* esports stating, "SK will play in front of their home crowd in Brazil. The first major tier-one tournament we've had in this nation!"

Transnational imagery included frequent displays of national flags both in-game and in-person at league venues. Additionally, transnational imagery existed in produced video segments representing players' and teams' home countries and the country in which the league was being played.

In sum, EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts represent a synergistic relationship between meta themes *Game Culture* and *Sport Legitimation. Game Culture* and *Sport Legitimation* each have representation-related subthemes, which are mutually constitutive and rarely operate in isolation. *Game Culture's* representation-related subtheme is *Geek*

Representation. Sport Legitimation's representation-related subtheme theme is *Jock Representation.* The aforementioned themes as well as *Audience Participation, Transactional Dynamism, Sponsorship/Advertisement*, *Educational Moment* and *Skilled Expertise* are disseminated through *Developing Narratives*, and *Gameplay Reporting*. *Gameplay Reporting* emphasizes subthemes *Educational Moment* and *Skilled Expertise*. *Developing Narrative* encompasses a variety of themes, but significantly inform *Geek Representation* and *Jock Representation*. A significant component of *Transactional Dynamism* involves subtheme *Sponsorship/Advertisement*. *Transnational Rhetoric* permeates all other themes in some way. Further discussion of these themes as they relate to the research questions, and the implications that accompany them, are explored in the following chapter.

CHAPTER VI DISCUSSION

Counter-Strike: Global Offensive is the most popular FPS esport worldwide (Irwin & Naweed, 2020). Over the course of its twenty-year existence, the *Counter-Strike* series has accumulated an immense global following of game players and fans. Today *CS:GO* is widely considered a mainstay in esports with professional leagues and tournaments held year round. Two prominent professional *CS:GO* esports leagues are the ESL Pro League and ELEAGUE. ESL Pro League is significant because it is longest standing professional *Counter-Strike* league worldwide. ELEAGUE, on the contrary, represents the first regularly aired professional *Counter-Strike* league in the United States. Together, these leagues serve as active participants in creating, shaping, and molding esports culture worldwide.

Esports media significantly impact audience understandings, and play an integral role in shaping public discourse about esports culture and gamers writ large. The ideology of esports "is diffused through stories, myths, celebrities, brands, and other symbols that wax and wane within the social world of competitive video gaming" (Seo, 2016, p. 268). Polysemic images are encoded by media producers and decoded by audiences (Hall, 1980). Broadcasts reflect not only the norm of media producers, but the norms of the broader culture that contextualizes the broadcast (Newbury, 2017).

EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts, like other media texts, have the discursive capacity to inform behavior, thoughts, desires, and fears, especially for activities with which they are unfamiliar (Kellner, 2010; Rojek, 2010; White, 1992). Their ideological content may be "found partly in the text itself, and partly in the relation of the reading subject to that text" (Fiske, 1992, p. 304). By producing specific discourses and images,

league broadcasts hold significant power over how viewers think of themselves and their relationship to esports.

Cultural meanings in EPL and ELEAGUE convey particular ideologies through broadcast images and caster discourses. Both leagues portray esports as a form of hybrid mediasport. They highlight esports as legitimate sport-like competition, and one that is rooted in game culture. EPL and ELEAGUE illustrate esports as a serious professional endeavor, highlighting nuance, excitement, international competition, technology, and even humor throughout league broadcasts. They represent esport players and gamers writ large as more than just geeks sitting at computers, but as skilled cyberathletes honing teamwork and leadership attributes who are well versed in technology and gamer jargon.

Existing studies neglect to adequately account for the evolution of professional competitive gaming culture and gamer representations in digital media environments. To comprehend meanings within a particular text, researchers should understand both the text itself and the configuration of knowledge within the text. This dissertation investigated professional *CS:GO* broadcast representations of esports culture and gamers over the span of multiple seasons between 2015 and 2019.

In this dissertation I employed qualitative thematic analysis methodology (Guest et al., 2011) to examine professional *CS:GO* esports broadcasts. Thematic analysis allows systematic exploration of communicated messages, believing that meaning exists within the text itself (Guest et al., 2011). I highlighted the means of capturing and coding in-game, and in-person, representations of gamers and esports culture.

I investigated two of the most popular professional *CS:GO* leagues, EPL and ELEAGUE. EPL, produced in Germany, is the longest-standing professional *CS:GO*

league in the world, and ELEAGUE is the first regularly aired professional *CS:GO* league broadcasted in the United States. Together, these leagues provided unique esports perspectives.

By observing a total of 81 hours of professional *CS:GO* broadcasts across two leagues, spanning five seasons, I became acquainted with *CS:GO* discourses and images from various perspectives. Data in the form of observation notes were collected from professional *CS:GO* league broadcasts, focusing on esports culture and gamer representations. I then coded the data using an iterative and inductive process informed by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A total of 151 double-spaced pages of broadcast notes were compiled (69 pages of EPL notes, and 84 pages of ELEAGUE notes).

Highlighting aspects of the data pertaining to esports culture and gamer representation, I was then able to unpack observations and quotations in the dataset and code them. Twelve thematic categories emerged from the cording process: (1) *Game Culture*, (2) *Geek Representation*, (3) *Developing Narrative*, (4) *Sport Legitimation*, (5) *Jock Representation*, (6) *Gameplay Reporting*, (7) *Educational Moment*, (8) *Skilled Expertise*, (9) *Transactional Dynamism*, (10) *Sponsorship/Advertisement*, (11) *Audience Participation*, and (12) *Transnational Rhetoric*.

The purpose of this dissertation is to contribute to our understanding of how esports broadcasts function in contemporary society. By examining the influence of esports broadcasts through thematic analysis, I elicited intimate details about esports culture and gamer representation, describing how they fit into society (Tracy, 2012). I highlighted significant themes as cultural products that are separate from other esports

and other types of play. As individuals increasingly consume professional CS:GO esports broadcasts, it is important to investigate how they are representing esports culture and identity to a global audience.

In this chapter I will explore the answers to both research questions using emergent themes. I begin by highlighting the importance of media objects, framing, and audience adaptation. I then attempt to fully answer each research question, drawing themes together to address what we can learn about esports culture and gamer representation from this multi-faceted view of esports league broadcasts.

<div align="center">Media Objects, Framing, and Audience Adaptation</div>

The foundation of this dissertation involves a cultural investigation of esports as a media object, and the framing of esports league competitions by media producers. It does not concern analyzing esports in general, or *CS:GO* as a game, but rather their representations in professional league broadcasts.

Cultural studies are "concerned with the social significance and systematic analysis of cultural practices, experiences, and institutions" (Hargraves & McDonald, 2002, p. 48). The field of esports and culture reflects "the values, ceremonies, and way of life characteristics of a given group and the place of [e]sport within that way of life" (Jarvie, 2013, p. 5). Similar to the notion of society, culture encourages one to consider symbols, rituals, and meanings at play within a specific cultural setting.

Professional *CS:GO* leagues, and accompanying broadcast representations, exist as cultural experiences reflecting particular rituals, values, understandings, and narratives through shared experiences and objects of knowledge. What EPL and ELEAGUE

communicate in league broadcasts is acculturated in and through symbols, which indicate particular knowledge, values, and meanings. These symbols in the form of words, images, and representations matter in that they share information and function as objects of knowledge, which audiences use to understand how esports culture works (Grano, 2016, p. 34).

Framing and audience are key to understanding media representations. Framing is presenting information in a way that audiences can easily understand and interpret through common organizational patterns (Entman, 1993). It plays a key role in gathering audiences' attention and building comprehension of complex *CS:GO* esports happenings. Professional esports producers frame *CS:GO* leagues in particular ways, resulting in significant audience understandings (Coble et al., 2019).

Framing informs audiences of what casters, who are *Counter-Strike* esports experts, find as important, and therefore, serve as objects of knowledge. In EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts, complex virtual information is framed using traditional sport metaphors and comparisons, as well as sportscast style reporting and match coverage. Additionally, both leagues incorporate a multiplicity of digital technologies, emphasize technicity, and utilize game vernacular to frame professional *CS:GO* as a hybrid mediasport intrinsically tied to game culture.

Using a variety of discourses and images, EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts represent game culture and gamers in unique ways. By framing competitions as a clash of game and sport culture, existing in a mediatized environment, broadcast producers teach audiences how to consume professional *CS:GO*. As highlighted in the *League Comparison* section, EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts incorporate a variety of themes,

placing emphasis on game and sport phenomena to influence audiences' understanding of esports culture. Additionally, their portrayal of esports actors, including players, coaches, casters, and fans, teach audiences how to understand and communicate about the *CS:GO* community and the social category of gamers writ large.

By regularly spectating EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts, viewers learn how to interpret *CS:GO* broadcasts and actors' performances through gameplay reports and narratives, which are explained in greater detail below.

Gameplay Reports and Narratives as Organizational Tools

Esports broadcast commentary describes for viewers what they are seeing on the screen. Casters enhance the esports viewing experience through gameplay reports and narratives. They provide supplementary information and insider expert knowledge, helping viewers better understand the action taking place on screen. As an esport, *CS:GO* is inherently laden with meaningful experiences shaped by digital media technologies, game culture, and sport culture. These meaningful experiences are intentionally assembled by broadcasters into sports-style reports and stories that explain important aspects of esports culture and the actors that make up the scene. Organizing discourses and images in this way provides a perpetual framework for viewers to understand esports culture and gamers.

Developing Narratives and *Gameplay Reporting* themes illustrate the sense-making mechanisms by which viewers come to understand representations of esports culture and gamers. Weick et al. (2005) explained the central principle of sense-making stating, "once people begin to act, they generate tangible outcomes in some context and

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this helps them discover what is occurring, what needs to be explained, and what should be done next" (p. 55). In the context of *CS:GO* esports league broadcasts, the sense-making process is significant (see *Educational Moment* theme), as professional leagues emphasize the importance of understanding intricate details of matches as they unfold. EPL and ELEAGUE relate complex virtual information to audiences by framing information into common organizational patterns so that audiences may understand the phenomenon and synthesize what is happening in real-time in familiar ways.

Narratives

Esports broadcasts represent the world of esports through narratives. Stories are used to imbue esports-related subjects with popularly digestible meaning (Rowe, 2004) amplifying tension and excitement (Newbury, 2017). Narratives generated by esports broadcasters also work to organize competitions into comprehensible and habitable places for consumption. They function as sense-making mechanisms whereby viewers come to understand esports culture and gamers (Gleaves, 2017). Both EPL and ELEAGUE used narratives as an organizational method and framing technique to help audiences make sense of visually complex virtual information concerning esports actors, teams, geographical regions, and the game itself.

Professional esports leagues are built on stories. Narratives in EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts involved human interest stories that introduced audiences to esports actors, teams, geographical regions, and *CS:GO*. They included explanations of skillsets, histories, sacrifices, and aspirations. Similar to a television drama, representations in concert with caster discourses cultivate narratives that help league

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consumers make sense of deeper meanings involving league actors, teams, regions, and the *CS:GO* itself. By creating and maintaining storylines, casters illustrate players and teams as heroes and villains, friends and rivals, teaching the audience about pivotal actors that make up the league. Highlighting players and teams in this way placed increased importance on matches. By describing teams' historic runs as dynasties, casters immortalize players and teams and historic staples of the game. And on the contrary, by illustrating certain geographical regions as new, less-skilled, and as underdog competitors, taught audience members how to communicate about that region within *CS:GO* communities.

As described in the *Developing Narrative* theme, esports discourses and images incorporate external elements such as footage of teams inside their "gaming house," or players inside the house they grew up in, doing things other than esports. These external elements narrate and interpret events and actors in the esports world. Esports broadcasts and their ideologies, in this way, can be seen as connected to the world outside of the esports arena. Visual representations and verbal discourses of players and teams outside of the esport context position these gamers as relatable figures.

As one continuous, longitudinal storyline, *CS:GO* esports broadcasts and the narratives they communicate serve the purpose of collective memory for the *CS:GO* community. The collective memory of a community creates points of reference for individuals of the same community – and serve as anchors to centrally important objects of knowledge (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995). Collective memory offers key points of continuation and connection over time for individuals of a specific community. Each season of each league tells a unique story involving familiar characters in the form of

players, coaches, and casters. Over time players, coaches, and casters come and go from the scene.

In EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts, casters provide audiences with a deeper connection to *CS:GO* esports players, teams, geographical regions and the game itself by tying together the present while also acknowledging the past through narratives. League narratives served the purpose of memory and meaning, tying from various *Counter-Strike* eras (*CS: 1.6*, *CS: Source*, etc.) and geographical regions together as one cohesive *CS:GO* community. Stories told in EPL and ELEAGUE act as a continuous dialogue in the *CS:GO* community, permeating throughout the duration of each season and into future seasons, accumulating over time, and creating historical narratives for players, coaches, casters, teams, leagues, geographical regions, and the game itself.

Watching EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts with regularity fosters interest in not only the competition, but the actors and teams involved. After a certain level of investment, watching professional *CS:GO* league broadcasts becomes more than "just a game," but a dramatic entertainment experience. By following the collection of stories spanning hundreds of league broadcasts across multiple seasons, viewers experience increased *CS:GO* community affiliation. Once individuals gain an appreciation for the esport, they adopt favorite players, teams, and form attachments to geographical regions. As individuals increasingly view and discuss *CS:GO* league broadcasts they acquire subcultural capital in the *CS:GO* community, which is discussed in greater detail below.

Narratives originating from esports broadcasts often spread throughout wider domains of popular websites (such as Reddit), social media (like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram), and video streaming sites (predominantly Twitch and YouTube).

Gameplay Reports

As illustrated in the *Gameplay Reporting* theme, EPL and ELEAGUE used gameplay reports to organize match results, team synopses, and league rules into comprehensible and habitable contexts for consumption. Both league broadcasts organized and framed esports competitions using gameplay reports and storylines that are commonly used in sport. To this end, esports viewers were attracted through traditional sports reports and narratives of individuals overcoming adversity, teams' scurrying to get the latest prodigy, and guarantees of bombastic and passionate competition.

Gameplay reports played a significant role in the representation of gamers and esports culture. Choosing to organize league broadcasts this way suggests that perceived audiences for EPL and ELEAGUE are skilled in understanding not only video game competitions, but sports. The sportscast-style reporting and broadcast environments used in EPL and ELEAGUE serve as legitimizing factors for individuals to view esports as sports. Because individuals consume traditional sportscasts and esports in much the same way, it is reasonable to suspect that they correlate esports with sports.

Through narratives and gameplay reports, professional *CS:GO* esports broadcasts act as a window into the production and formation of esports culture and gamers (Hutchins, 2008). Below I attempt to answer research question one, highlighting emergent themes and their roles in shaping our understanding of esports culture. I argue that by watching professional *CS:GO* league broadcasts, audiences are exposed to representations of esports culture as involving hybrid mediasport systems that interweave both video game and sports cultures.

RQ1

Esports broadcast commentary and imagery are powerful symbolic instruments that have the power to shape individuals' understanding of the culture. Elements of professional *CS:GO* broadcast ethos imbue *CS:GO* with particular social meanings, whereby individuals' consumption becomes a symbolic expression of esports culture. What is said and displayed in esports broadcasts may be subjected to analysis to highlight particular views of the world, situated in language and imagery of esports (Rowe, 2004).

The cultural experiences and objects of knowledge described in the results section are instances of *CS:GO* culture. *CS:GO* culture is defined by a multiplicity of interconnected media and is closely tied to both game culture and sports. There is a profound connection between representations in professional *CS:GO* broadcasts, audience understanding, and the unfolding of our larger contemporary culture. To explore this connection my first research question asked, "How have professional *CS:GO* esports broadcasts shaped audience understanding of esports culture?"

Discourses and representations of EPL and ELEAGUE work to accomplish three interrelated objectives concerning culture: First, the hybridity of media systems and digital technologies displayed and discussed in both league broadcasts work to position esports as a hybrid mediasport. Second, by employing sportscast-like scenic elements and discourses borrowed from sport culture that resonate with the intended audience, EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts present *CS:GO* as a sport. Moreover, they work to legitimate competitive *CS:GO*'s status as a sport by highlighting symbolic order and prioritizing values associated with traditional sports. Third, verbal and visual content in EPL and

ELEAGUE broadcasts work to display professional *CS:GO* esports as rooted in game culture by emphasizing technicity, gamer jargon, and reinforcing other aspects of video game and internet culture that resonate with the intended audience.

Esports as Hyrbid Mediasport

Professional *CS:GO* league broadcasts represent the intersection of various media and esports actors, which constitute esports culture. By highlighting cultural practices in EPL and ELEAGUE we may recognize the relationship between media technologies and players, casters, behind-the-scenes actors, and audiences, which make up the phenomenon in its contemporary form. Findings in this study, especially *Audience Participation*, *Sport Legitimation*, and *Game Culture* themes, highlight the extensive use and understanding of digital technologies as omnirelevant in esports culture. Below I conceptualize esports culture as *hybrid mediasport*, drawing upon two significant theories; hybrid media (Chadwick, 2017), and mediasport (Wenner, 1998). Together, these concepts help us understand the relationship between media and esports actors comprising esports culture.

Hybrid Media

Hybrid media systems concern the intersection of old and new media technologies, organizational forms, behaviors, and norms. Media systems, according to Chadwick (2017), have become hybrid. Information and communication technologies (ICTS) are being used in the simultaneous fragmentation and integration process where old media (television) are being merged with and adapted to contemporary formats and

norms brought about by new digital media (Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018). Cultural shifts and media both play significant roles in the establishment of nuanced hybrid spheres (Chadwick, 2017). They create interdependence in local, national, and transnational spheres. ICTs and the internet are particularly powerful hybrid media systems that integrate a wide range of old technologies in the process of creating new genres.

The media involved in esports broadcasts are multiple and interweaving, generating a form of hybrid media. In the results section I highlight the prevalence of intersecting media technologies represented and discussed in EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts. They are prevalent in *Game Culture*, *Sport Legitimation*, and *Audience Participation* themes.

Mediasport

Mediasport is a term introduced by Wenner (1998) that refers to "the cultural fusing of sport with communication" (p. xii). It involves three interrelated sections; mediasport institutions, mediasport texts, and mediasport audiences. Mediasport institutions concern "how marketplace dynamics build on cultural sensibilities about sport" (Wenner, 1998, p. 6). They focus on economic and political developments of global organizations who combine media and sport into entertainment strategies. These notions are highlighted in *Transactional Dynamism* and *Sponsorship/Advertisement* themes, but are not the focus of this discussion.

Mediasport texts relate to the nature in which media frames and covers sports. They involve media contributions to cultural discourses, and "how they influence our realities about heroism, nation, race, and gender" (Wenner, 1998, p. 6). Several themes

including *Sport Legitimation, Transnational Rhetoric, Gameplay Reporting*, and

Developing Narrative themes correlate with mediasport texts. In the second section

dedicated to answering RQ1, "*CS:GO* as a Global Sport," I discuss these notions further.

Finally, mediasport audiences concern the audiences' reception of cultural values

through sports media. These intersecting sections of media and sport traffic ideologies

through associations (Wenner, 1998). Mediasport audiences are a major focal point of

this dissertation, and are most prevalent in the *Audience Participation* theme.

Below I discuss technological changes as a pervasive element in mediasport that

are "molded by social, cultural, economic, and political factors" (Rowe, 2004, p. 204). In

this way, mediasport relates to hybrid media. Using hybrid media and mediasport and as

a lens to analyze esports media broadcasts, I explain esports performance and observation

in the context of EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts.

Hybrid Mediasport

Esports and especially esports broadcasts may be seen as hybrid media because

they exist through a convergence of mediated networks (Taylor, 2018). This hybrid

media system of multitudinous technologies is represented in EPL and ELEAGUE

broadcasts as constituting both esports performance and observation. Each esport has its

own unique history and style of representation in broadcast media (Rowe, 2004), their

"content and aesthetics… involve a mix of technology, inspirational sports/media

waypoints, and the vibe and values happening within the local scene" (Taylor, 2018, p.

154). EPL and ELEAGUE highlight various ways in which professional *Counter-Strike*

league broadcasts incorporate new media technologies to associate video games with sports.

Esports are thoroughly mediated competitions (Turtiainen et al., 2020). Players compete in virtual battlegrounds connected to teammates and opponents through internet or LAN connections (see *Game Culture* theme). Although onsite casters, players, and fans are displayed in-person at times during esports broadcasts, the consequential actions leading to victory or defeat take place in the digital battleground. In EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts scenic elements as well as discourses and images highlight the connection between esports culture and media.

EPL and ELEAGUE discourses and images represent *CS:GO* as a sport in which the action largely takes place through mediated means (see *Sport Legitimation* theme). By favoring in-game footage to in-person shots, EPL and ELEAGUE reinforce viewers' understandings of esports as existing primarily within the virtual gameworld. The repeated displays and conversations about virtual environments in EPL and ELEAGUE normalizes them. In both league broadcasts, the majority of footage involved first-person in-game player perspectives. Virtual in-game displays show players engaging in fast-paced life-or-death combat (see *Skilled Expertise* theme), while in-person players are displayed speaking into microphones connected to large headsets, staring into their computer screens. This type of display reminds the audience that teammates and opponents are connected through digital technologies. Players seen communicating with teammates sitting right next to them via headsets and microphones, reinforces the audiences understanding that *CS:GO* esports exist at the intersection of team-based competition and technology.

Esports matches themselves are a form of media, and are played online or on LAN (Turtiainen et al., 2020). The contemporary scene involves combining in-person LAN events with broadcasts streamed online for most professional esports broadcasts. Online esports events as well as in-person LAN events have "a symbiotic relationship with media technologies; they exist, rise, and thrive alongside emerging production and distribution systems" (Taylor, 2018, p. 145). Playing esports online is frequently discussed in relation to LAN play, and vice versa in EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts. Moreover, visual representations and discussions of online and LAN play are a point of emphasis, highlighting the significance of technology at the heart of esports culture. As outlined in the literature review, LAN is considered the "purest" form of esports play, because experiencing even the slightest "lag" (when there is a delay in the feedback of the game) is considered a significant obstacle for competitive play (Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2012).

Professional *CS:GO* LAN competitions involve a plethora of advanced digital technologies as well as carefully positioned gamer, caster, and audience body orientation within the space (see *Sport Legitimation* theme). They serve as model performances for viewers, and especially other esports broadcasters, to understand the game in all of its intricacies: the competing players sitting together in a row upon a stage; teams' tables and chairs aligned in a row, facing the audience; casters sitting at a separate desk surrounded by cameras with audience members draped around them. These elements facilitate the gaming experience, and our viewership of the gaming experience. Whether it be on LAN or online, the integration of watching, learning, interacting, and playing all go into the professional *CS:GO* league spectator experience.

In EPL seasons one and four, teams competed online during the regular season and moved to LAN format for the playoffs. Online regular season league matches involved slightly different images and discourses than matches played on LAN. Broadcasts involved significantly more in-game displays and never showed players or actors located outside of the studio. Additionally, players' in-game avatars consisted of team logos (not the real-life player headshots we see today), so viewers at home were unable to see what players looked like outside of the game. This disconnect is something gamers are accustomed to when playing online, but the uninitiated esports audience may find it confusing or displeasing. In season nine EPL moved all matches into LAN format and did away with online regular season play. ELEAGUE seasons one and two did not incorporate online play into their league structure.

For large-scale events such as the EPL and ELEAGUE Grand Finals, esports are represented as spectacles involving a multiplicity of media components. They involve multiple layers of communication in the form of continuously changing images and sounds, and are broadcast live over the internet to a global audience for free (Taylor, 2018). Moving from small online-only broadcasts to in-person LAN events involves "scaling up esports productions, and iterating processes to account for a range of media technologies, new aesthetic and genre convention, [and] forms of audiences (onsite and online)" (Taylor, 2018, p. 158).

The relationships between esports and media is defined by the use of ICTs. Hybrid media permeates esports culture and is represented in EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts. Over the past decade, the form, content, and uses of esports broadcasts have changed significantly. Contemporary esports broadcasts are interspersed with a multitude

of media including prerecorded sequences, live commentary, in-game match footage, and displays of players sitting at their computers.

Significant transformations involving television and live-streaming are a strong example of old media merging with new media to provide global audiences with esports entertainment for free. Esports broadcasters are increasingly abandoning old broadcasting models designed around television, to adopt new models designed around the internet, interactivity, and on-demand content (Taylor, 2018). The rise of internet-based streaming sites such as YouTube and Twitch have resulted in esports broadcasts moving away from television and receiving more attention. Today, more live and recorded esports events are consumed than any prior point in history (Wohn & Freeman, 2020). To this end, Taylor (2018) predicted that "traditional broadcast television is going to go away and online streaming is going to be where esports are located" (p. 141).

New media technologies have also transformed the ways that esports audiences view matches. It is impossible to spectate esports without at least one layer of mediation (Hamari & Sjoblom, 2017). While casters, players, and fans sometimes share the same physical studio or arena space during competitions, the playing field for esports competitions are fundamentally rooted in "networked spaces where players and individual instantiations of games are communicating with servers, and production systems are picking up feeds and working with them… before getting transmitted out to audiences" (Taylor, 2018, pp. 162-163).

Esports broadcasts are intended for audiences who are watching from afar (Taylor, 2018). Rather than broadcasting esports on television, EPL and ELEAGUE met audiences where they were – on the internet (see *Audience Participation* theme).

Emerging digital technologies such as live-streaming sites and state-of-the-art esports production equipment "provide a catalyst for reconceptualizing… aspects of culture, requiring the rethinking of social relations, and reimagining of cultural… participation" (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 2). Both EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts aired on Twitch and existed on YouTube either in live-streaming form or as a video recording. The distribution of *CS:GO* league content through streaming sites highlights how esports leagues now reach audiences "in ways that feel more 'natural' to esports viewers" (Taylor, 2018, p. 141). Watching professional esports via streaming media is more common than watching in-person or on television (Turtiainen et al., 2020). The prevalence of live-streaming and recorded video-on-demand technology use by esports audiences bolsters our understanding of esports involving hybrid media.

Contemporary esports audiences have developed particular social and cultural expectations involving media – particularly its use and role as a vehicle for esport competitions. Technological innovations such as live-streaming and social media are the norm for esports participation today. The current media landscape involves wide variety of media devices, including televisions, computers, and smartphones, which individuals use as part of their daily media consuming activities. As highlighted in the *Audience Participation* theme, EPL and ELEAGUE viewers have grown accustomed to consuming content through various media including television, live-streaming sites, and social media. As a result, they encounter esports with a particular set of expectations regarding the role of media, especially interactive media, in esports culture.

New media technologies provide opportunities for esports audiences to organize collectively. Live streaming sites such as Twitch and YouTube have become a digital

extension of the esports stadium (Taylor, 2018). These platforms, alongside social media

sites, allow esports spectators to simultaneously engage with esports broadcasts and other

spectators "in real time over multiple platforms using different devices" (Mattoni &

Ceccobelli, 2018, p. 541).

EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts foster communities of viewers, serving as a

vehicle for observing and participating in league matches through various media

including live-streaming sites and social media. As illustrated in the *Audience*

Participation theme, during EPL and ELEAGUE broadcast, esports audiences interact

with casters, players, and other viewers through various media.

In EPL and ELEAGUE, broadcast images and caster discourses bolster audience

understandings of professional *CS:GO* competitions as a social activity. Casters foster an

environment in which fans are invited to interact with one another as well as the casters

themselves through various media with explicit and implicit invitations to discuss

paratextual topics within and outside the context of league broadcasted matches. Using

message systems afforded by live-streaming sites like Twitch, as well as social media

sites like Twitter, esports audiences socialize with players, casters, and other like-minded

individuals throughout the duration of the match, and beyond.

Twitch chat and Twitter are the main sources of interaction between viewers and

esports league actors. In EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts, these sources of interaction are

highlighted as significant to the *CS:GO* community. By featuring fan tweets and

encouraging fan interaction via "the chat" in Twitch, both leagues foster parasocial

relationships between esports actors and viewers. The concept of parasocial interaction

has been used by media scholars to describe the feelings of intimacy and interpersonal

closeness felt by media consumers toward celebrities that mimic the feelings associated with real social relationships (Giles, 2002). Similar to contemporary professional sporting events, casters in EPL and ELEAGUE regularly invited audience members to join their conversations by participating through other media channels like Twitter using #ESLProLeague or #ELEAGUE. During league broadcasts, casters asked audience members questions such as "What is your favorite M4A1 skin?" or "Do we have any Allu fans in the chat?". By inviting audience members into dialogues with other like-minded individuals, EPL and ELEAGUE fostered relationships, allowing individuals the opportunity to engage with the larger *CS:GO* community. When audiences attend *CS:GO* league matches in person, observe via live-stream or television, and contribute to conversations on social media and Twitch chat they are gaining and reinforcing their specialized knowledge with newly forged parasocial relationships.

Professional *CS:GO* esports leagues such as EPL and ELEAGUE serve as a space for like-minded individuals to interact with professional esports actors, as well as each other in ways that were not possible just one decade ago. Both leagues display and discuss players' social media posts during league broadcasts, calling attention to the significance of new media technologies in *CS:GO* culture. The same tweets that are displayed in league broadcasts may be accessed by viewers who use the same media.

Esports broadcasts can be seen as an indicator of wider changes in contemporary society. They are "reflective and partially productive of a wider shift towards… the mediatization of postmodernized societies" (Rowe, 2004, p. 121). By conceptualizing esports culture as *hybrid mediasport*, I highlighted the convergence of multiple media in EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts, which forge a novel representation of esports culture.

Professional CS:GO Esports Rooted in Game Culture

EPL and ELEAGUE symbolically integrate internet and gaming culture with the culture of athletic competition in league broadcasts. Discourses and images in EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts highlight the prevalence of game culture in *CS:GO* esports leagues. Several themes including *Game Culture*, *Geek Representation*, and *Sponsorship/Advertisement* highlight shared norms and values, specialized language, and symbols that distinguish professional *CS:GO* esports as positioned within game culture. To be more specific, discourses involving violence, *CS:GO* jargon, technicity, trolling behavior, and popular internet culture references illustrate league broadcasts as rooted in game culture.

Counter-Strike is inherently about violence and killing, and EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts celebrate this in their broadcasts. In-game displays depict virtual avatars shooting, exploding, and knifing each other as a primary objective. Caster discourses normalize vernacular like "kill," "frag," "headshot," and other violent terms in reporting the action taking place on-screen. In both leagues, casters glorify violence and applaud killing. They react negatively to rounds that involve "save" scenarios whereby players survive by hiding and thus saving their weapons, armor, and utility. The prevalence and celebration of death is something unique to esports, and closely tied to game culture.

Interestingly, EPL and ELEAGUE make no attempt to discuss, even in passing, the substantive content of the game – which explicitly invokes the global war on terror and pits military agents of developed countries against cells of terrorists attempting to bomb civilian infrastructure. It seems odd that the narrative context around which the

objectives of the match are played is ignored in EPL and ELEAGUE matches, however, it can be seen as part of professional *CS:GO*'s legitimation as sport.

Watching league broadcasts help individuals understand *CS:GO* esports culture as a form of social expression. EPL and ELEAGUE regularly use vernacular born in virtual spaces (see *Game Culture* theme) to describe actors and actions in the context of esports matches. These jargon terms involved types of players, their roles, actions within games, and the in-game economy. Language holds significant meaning, and "the metaphors we all use to describe the patterns we see shape how we understand our world" (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 3). The use of traditional video game and FPS terms such as server, pixel, crosshair, health-bar, mini-map, lag, and hit-boxes remind audiences that they are watching a video game. In EPL season ten, for example, casters described how Cloud9 won pivotal rounds by holding 'W' (the forward movement button on the keyboard). The repeated use of game terminology in broadcasts reinforces audiences understanding of professional *CS:GO* as rooted in game culture.

Becoming proficient in *CS:GO* jargon and behavior demarcates individuals as *CS* community members. Particular knowledge of *CS:GO* and esports is necessary in following league match broadcasts. In professional *CS:GO*, teams create strategies whereby each player enacts a particular combat role. Player roles include terms such as AWPer, rifler, entry-fragger, and lurker, are frequently used in player introductions as well as play-by-play commentary. Gameplay terminology such as wall-bang, shoulder peak, run-boost, bunny hop, ace, and clutch among others were frequently used in play-by-play casting to describe in-game actions. Additionally, the in-game economy including terms like half-buy, surprise buy, and full-save (see others in *Game Culture*

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theme) was a focal point of caster discourses in each round of league matches. Without prior knowledge of these terms, it is easy to become lost while following *CS:GO* esports matches. Thus, repeated use of *CS:GO* jargon in broadcasts serves as reminder to audiences that esports exist within game culture, requiring them to learn a unique vocabulary born in virtual spaces.

Trolling behavior is common in EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts, and represents a unique aspect of game and internet culture. Seeing and hearing professional *CS:GO* players, coaches, and casters engage in trolling behavior reinforces audience understanding that not only is it acceptable to troll others, but it is expected among *CS:GO* community members. As described in the *Game Culture* theme, trolling behavior involves intentionally deviating from the idealized playstyle by which most players subscribe. EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts highlight the prevalence of trolling in *CS:GO* by engaging in and celebrating trash talk and particular in-game actions, often for the purpose of humor. Players are represented trolling in-game by communicating disrespect in various ways, such as using weapons outside of the norm. Using an automatic shotgun, a giant machine gun, a Zeus, or a knife when a player can afford better weaponry is a significant trolling behavior represented by players in EPL and ELEAGUE. Additionally, players in both league broadcasts are seen dancing on top of enemies' dead bodies and shooting their corpses on the ground. Caster discourses and play-by-play commentary largely celebrate trolling behavior. EPL and ELEAGUE casters even engage in trolling behavior themselves by pointing out player's and team's lackluster performances, and by trash talking. When a player was struggling to find frags in ELEAGUE season two for example, casters were quick to point it out, stating "Allu is pulling a James Bond right

now. He is 0-0-7, with a license not to kill." And when a player with an inferior weapon took out an opponent who was fully armed in EPL season one, casters remarked "Boom! The middle finger from ChrisJ. Sit down!" These trolling behaviors are unique to game culture, and are seen as more humorous than disrespectful in the context of esports.

EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts are consumed and celebrated within contemporary popular culture. Popular culture is closely tied to internet culture in that objects of knowledge are shared online, and exist on the internet. EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts produce certain knowledge and positions for audiences, which are implicitly and explicitly tied to popular culture. Popular culture references and memes punctuate each ELEAGUE episode and are openly discussed in EPL as well. The inclusion of discourses and images related to blogging sites and social media throughout broadcasts exposes audiences to particular internet sites that are significant within popular culture, and more importantly, the *CS:GO* community. Reddit, Twitter, and Twitch are the subject of recurring discourses in both league broadcasts. As illustrated in the *Audience Participation* theme, popular culture moves and phrases (dabbing, "wooo-ing") are a pervasive aspect of professional *CS:GO* league broadcasts. The frequent occurrence and celebration of these acts reinforce internet culture as a form of social knowledge that is important to the *CS:GO* community.

The continued success and increasing popularity of professional esports leagues such as EPL and ELEAGUE are indicative of a meta-change in social systems whereby individuals regularly consume and subscribe to video game competitions and the actors involved. While the notion of watching others play video games seemed abstract just five years ago, today it is a popular endeavor that exists within mainstream popular culture.

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EPL and ELEAGUE employed discourses and images associated with violence, *CS:GO* jargon, trolling behavior, and popular internet culture. As a result, both broadcasts offer a unique space and social environment where audiences come to understand esports culture and the gamers who inhabit it.

CS:GO as a Global Sport

In recent years, the debate as to whether esports will be accepted as legitimate sports has pervaded both sports media and esports media. Today, the esport industry involves activities that are attempting to legitimize themselves as sports. EPL and ELEAGUE employed globalizing discourses and sportscast framing techniques in their broadcasts to legitimize professional *CS:GO* as a global sport. Both leagues symbolically emphasized a culture of athletic competition in their broadcasts, which work to solidify the image of cyberathletic competition as sport in the popular imaginary.

In both EPL and ELEAGUE, *CS:GO* competitions are framed as a form of team-based sport, closely tied to nationality, where rules and regulations govern play. As illustrated in *Sport Legitimation* and *Jock Representation* themes, players and teams are displayed and discussed as skilled cyberathletes (see *Skilled Expertise* theme), performing in high stakes matches against top competitors from a variety of countries across the world. Transnational discourses and nationalistic displays produced by EPL and ELEAGUE were often entwined with strategies to cultivate global esports fandom, and legitimate *CS:GO* as a global sport.

EPL and ELEAGUE rhetorically construct the case for the cultural legitimation of esports through discourses and representation. A significant portion of the form and

content of both league broadcasts are driven by the motive to implant the view that

CS:GO as an esport is intelligible and legitimate. Legitimation is the process by which a

perspective or ideology becomes normative and taken-for-granted by a group or within a

culture (Berger et al., 1966). It is a major focal point in esports communication and the

presentation of esports products and services (Hallmann & Giel, 2018). EPL and

ELEAGUE enact legitimation in broadcasts by overlaying *CS:GO* competitions with

sports infrastructure, mirroring sportscasts and traditional sport events. League broadcasts

provide pre-packaged concepts and representations, bundling affective attachments that

guide and motivate the performance of fandom, and trading on virtues connected to

traditional sport. Themes of *Sport Legitimation*, *Jock Representation*, *Gameplay*

Reporting, *Transactional Dynamism* and *Sponsorship/Advertisement* highlight various

norms and values, specialized language, and symbols that demarcate professional *CS:GO*

as a sport.

The legitimacy of esports justifies and facilitates the consumption of cultural

performances that were once marked as undesirable, unserious, and unproductive,

inverting those popular judgements by elevating the best competitive gamers to the

praiseworthy status enjoyed by professional athletes. As esports have become remarkably

popular over the past two decades, especially in Asia and Europe, they have attracted

money and media attention, initiating a new transformative era for esports.

The *Sport Legitimation* theme highlights how visual and verbal framing in EPL

and ELEAGUE broadcasts represent professional *CS:GO* leagues an integration of

organizational, physical, and technological bases for international competition. Through

visual displays, league introductions, player and team references, and caster discourses,

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both EPL and ELEAGUE were framed as well-organized, rule governed leagues with clear structures.

EPL and ELEAGUE deployed scenic elements to cast their leagues as a sport. Regular season matches took place in small studios in front of live audiences. In playoff and Grand Finals matches, both leagues moved competitions to large arenas. The atmosphere of EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts directly reflected traditional sports, with multiple large digital screens, broadcaster desks, team stages, flashing lights and spotlights, and music.

Broadcasts were formatted like traditional sportscasts, using instant replay functionality, graphic overlays including team and player statistics, and pre- and post-game segments similar to the ones seen in traditional sportscasts. Additionally, both leagues incorporated top-level talent in the form of broadcast booth casters, play-by-play casters, interviewers, in-game observers, and television production teams. The esports actors in both leagues wore matching uniforms and were situated in particular areas reminiscent of traditional sports. Teams sat together on separate stages with coaches sitting behind players. Casters were situated in front of their desks in the middle of the arena, while referees waited backstage, only emerging in pre-game and technical pause situations.

Additionally, the presence of in-person audiences captured observing EPL and ELEAGUE matches worked to legitimate *CS:GO* as sport. Audience members present in the studio or arena were periodically captured in league broadcasts cheering and jeering, highlighting typical fan behaviors. Fans were often shown wearing esports apparel, signifying their membership in the community.

Organizing discourses into gameplay reports, EPL and ELEAGUE trained viewers to watch their broadcasts in a way that was similar to traditional sportscasts. The *Gameplay Reporting* theme highlighted how EPL and ELEAGUE's match coverage involved several elements that are comparable to traditional sports, such as pre-game, halftime, and post-game segments, use of instant replay, and more. The prevalence of these elements in each broadcast provide audiences with an understanding of esports broadcasted this way as the norm, and thus, tied to sports.

The content of caster discourses played a significant role in shaping audience perceptions. Utilizing the art of comparison was a significant tactic employed in both leagues to legitimate *CS:GO* as a sport. Discourses in EPL and ELEAGUE made direct and indirect comparisons between esports and traditional sports. As illustrated in the *Sport Legitimation* theme, direct comparisons between professional *CS:GO* and traditional sports were provided in various ways. One method involved pre-recorded video segments of player testimonials. In ELEAGUE season one Team Renegades player AZR stated, "[*CS:GO* is a] team-based game, kind of like an actual sport."

Indirect comparisons involving sport metaphors and examples were also commonplace in EPL and ELEAGUE. The host of ELEAGUE used traditional sport teams as examples of esports team performances. In one instance he stated, "I think New York Knicks fans are thinking hey, let's choose Team Liquid… They choke when it matters, consistently." And in EPL season one, casters described Cloud9's performance with a traditional sport metaphor stating, "Cloud9 was the one that really dropped the ball towards the end of the first half. They had eight to zero [lead]… and then … started

losing rounds." Together, direct and indirect comparisons to sport highlight the connections between esports and traditional sports.

League broadcasts also emphasized how *CS:GO* esports players' storylines were tied to traditional sports. In ELEAGUE season one, for example, direct comparisons between *CS:GO* and traditional sports were presented by players, such as Jkaem the Danish rifler from FaZe Clan, explaining how injuries in traditional sports led to a career in gaming:

"I played football and handball… When I was 18 years [old] I got a knee injury… I was not allowed to train or anything, so then it was CS all the time. When the adrenaline is pumping and you're winning rounds there's nothing better than the feeling of just having comrades and someone supporting you is important to me."

Repeated sports comparisons and references in concert with sportscast setting and framing teach audiences to consume professional *CS:GO* leagues as a sport.

As illustrated in the *Gameplay Reporting* theme, EPL and ELEAGUE rely on traditional methods of sports reporting to help viewers understand league broadcasts. Play-by-play casters taught audiences how to understand *CS:GO* esports broadcasts as similar to traditional sportscasts with a narrative style and through gameplay reports (Sell, 2015). Casters in both leagues were armed with deep gameplay knowledge, familiarity with players and teams, and knowledge of current events in the *CS:GO* esports scene. They set the stage for competitions by introducing *CS:GO* esports actors and teams, and provided meaning to broadcast events.

EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts highlighted values that are commonplace in traditional sport such as teamwork, leadership, and sportsmanship. Displays of team huddles prior to matches and during timeouts, in-game displays of teamwork and discussions of strategies, and postgame team celebrations illustrated the prevalence of teamwork in *CS:GO*. Casters routinely discussed the importance of leadership, discussing the role of in-game leaders in nearly every match. Finally, after each LAN-based match, teams met in the middle their respective stages to shake hands, showing audiences that *CS:GO* involves sportsmanship, just like traditional sports. These values and norms, which are pervasive in esports culture, serve as another layer of legitimation.

More than just a competition between local teams, EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts framed *CS:GO* matches as *global* sports. Globalizing rhetoric involving strategic and persuasive discourses that legitimate and promote transnational networks and identities (Fairclough, 2007) were employed in both league broadcasts. Transnational discourses produced by EPL and ELEAGUE were often entwined with strategies to cultivate global esports fandom, increase viewership, and ultimately generate larger profits. Both leagues were successful in reaching diverse global audiences and constructing partnerships with a variety of lifestyle and technology partners.

By ascribing a certain nationality to each team (whether all members belong to that nationality or not), EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts represented *CS:GO* as a setting for transnational competition. Both leagues positioned players, coaches, casters, and fans as representatives of their nations with nationalistic displays (fans waving national flags, team jerseys including national flags, and in-game displays of national flags next to team names) and in-depth interviews. As evidenced in the *Transnational Rhetoric* theme,

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national identification is central to the organization of professional *CS:GO* and the representations that flow through its broadcasts (Young & Strait, 2019). Teams in EPL and ELEAGUE were largely comprised of players from the same country or continent, and represented their countries via national flags displayed both in- and out-of-game.

Audiences are also reminded of the global dimension of *CS:GO* esports indirectly, e.g., several match broadcasts in which fans are displayed waving national flags, and overheard chanting nationalistic phrases like "U-S-A!". Additionally, discussions related to international travel including player sacrifices and issues are part of the dramatic narratives constructed by casters in both leagues. Highlighting the frequency with which esports actors travel in order to compete in *CS:GO* reinforces audiences understanding of the activity as a global sport.

The global dimension of *CS:GO* esports was explicitly highlighted in EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts via direct statements by players and casters. Discourses of nationalism and national identification were consistently used throughout broadcasts by booth commentators and play-by-play casters in reference to players, teams, and audience members. National identification references were overt, and used more often than player and team names. These continuous references to players and teams by nationality teach audiences to affiliate certain playstyles, skills, and tendencies with geographical regions, creating an understanding of esports as a global sport.

National identification discourses and images reinforce viewers' understandings of esports as a global competition. Each country has its own cultural identity in the *Counter-Strike* esports world, and particular geographical regions are correlated with *CS* in disparate ways. While countries such as South Korea and China are known for their

dominance in MOBA games such as *League of Legends*, Europeans are synonymous with *Counter-Strike*. Europe is considered the homeland of competitive *CS*, and European countries produce top-tier talent at a young age. Throughout both EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts, European players and teams were described as savvy veterans and staples of the professional scene. This tactic is not unique to EPL or ELEAGUE, as the "reconstruction of nationalism within global digital play presents itself with some frequency" (Taylor, 2012, p. 245).

In EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts, portrayal of esports as widely adopted by numerous countries across the world calls attention to its rising popularity and significance in the context of international sport. Media representations didactically reinforce social relationships and hierarchies, indicating what kind of associations are relevant to the larger organizational or value structure of the group (Rojek, 2010). Depictions of *CS:GO* as a global sport in EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts invoked attachments to national affiliation, dramatizing the ambitions of global audiences to see their country prevail. In both leagues, casters attributed prestige to players and teams from nations that have existed in the professional CS scene for many years. They disparaged players and teams from countries who were new to the professional scene (see examples in *Transnational Rhetoric* theme). Europeans (especially Swedes and Danes) were praised as savvy *CS* veterans, since Europe is widely considered to be the homeland of competitive *Counter-Strike*. North Americans, on the contrary, were considered newcomers to the professional *CS* esports scene, and were frequently criticized for their unsuccessful tactics, strategies, and playstyles.

EPL and ELEAGUE illustrate how to successfully incorporate sponsors into broadcasts, selling audiences a particular vision of *CS:GO* as a site of legitimate international sport-like competition. Technology and lifestyle brands are displayed as partners in both league broadcasts via discourses and images, which is discussed in greater detail in the *Sponsorship/Advertisement* theme. Lifestyle sponsors such as Arby's, Mountain Dew, and Dominos provided a lifestyle link that encourage other potential sponsors and investors to make connections with esports. Technology sponsors such as Intel, DirectX, iBuyPower, and Xfinity represent ties to technology, which encourage technology sponsors to invest in esports. Since the inaugural season of EPL in 2015 and ELEAGUE in 2016, the prominence of lifestyle and technology brands in both leagues has increased. This trend reflects predictions by Seo (2016) who posited that branding will increase along with the overall popularity of gaming among publics. By season ten of EPL in 2019 numerous sponsorships were regularly displayed throughout league broadcasts and were even built-in to particular pre- and post-game segments. The normalization of recurring sponsorship displays and discourses reflect a trend have grown to expect from traditional sportscasts.

Publics tend to believe that competition is a necessary component in sports (Bonta, 1997). All sporting activities consist of some form of competition, whether they are interactive or non-interactive. Esports are no exception to this rule. Additionally, Gratton and Taylor (2000) proposed that the general acceptance by media or sports agencies is appropriate criterion for an activity to be considered a sport. The authors suggested that television coverage of an activity by a sports broadcaster or a news publication are indicators that an activity is considered a sport.

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This section highlighted various ways in which EPL and ELEAGUE legitimize professional *CS:GO* as a global sport. These findings place this dissertation in conversation with other studies that consider esports representations and sports. Most notably, a recent study published in *Games and Culture* by Turtiainen et al. (2020) compared the FPS esport *Overwatch* to professional soccer in the context of broadcast representations. The authors highlighted nationalism as a strong element emphasized throughout broadcasts, and concluded that esports performances, including players, casters, referees, and audiences, represent the legitimation of gaming as a spectator sport. Turtiainen et al. (2020) use the term "sportification" to discuss elements of esports broadcasts that present matches in ways familiar to traditional sportscasts. Many of the topics discussed by the authors overlap with findings from this dissertation including *Sport Legitimation, Jock Representation, Transnational Rhetoric, Audience Participation, Gameplay Reporting, Developing Narrative,* and *Skilled Expertise*.

Because this dissertation is significantly lengthier than the journal article written by Turtiainen et al. (2020), it allows for richer description of themes, with numerous examples, and in-depth explanations. Moreover, I identify themes that were not mentioned by Turtiainen et al. (2020) such as *Educational Moment*, *Sponsorship/Advertisement*, and *Transactional Dynamism*. These themes provide unique insight toward esports' representation as sport.

Professional esports leagues, as media properties, "formulate a public imagination of what it could and should be, who it is and is not for, and who should and should not be there" (Taylor, 2018, p. 196). Below I consider EPL and ELEAGUE's representation of gamers in league broadcasts.

RQ2

Research question two asked, "How have professional *CS:GO* esports broadcasts shaped audience understanding of gamers?" Esports culture is intrinsically linked with identity processes. The social context of professional *CS:GO* esports competitions make a specific kind of collective identity possible – gamers. In the same way gaming and esports are gaining popularity, gamers have become an emerging social category in contemporary society (Shaw, 2012). The gamer identity is the bedrock of the professionalization of gaming (Taylor, 2012), and interweaves throughout player, coach, caster, observer, and fan practices.

Esports media play a significant role in the (re)construction of culture and identities through representation (Allen, 1992). Professional esports broadcasts offer a space where individuals learn about gamers. They generate representations of gamers through discourses and images, which convince the public of their validity. Symbols, gamer jargon, and intertextual references permeate EPL and ELEAGUE broadcast content. As illustrated in *Geek Representation* and *Jock Representation* themes, the actors that make leagues possible (players, coaches, casters, etc.) are routinely captured performing as gamers in EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts. Through repeated exposure to gamer representations, EPL and ELEAGUE audiences come to understand the cultural identity of gamers.

In collective memory, symbolic media such as EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts build the structure for cultural communication and serve as a means to build both community and identity. Professional *CS:GO* league broadcasts provide discourses and

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images to tell the story of players, teams, leagues, and tournaments. One's perceptions and interpretations of EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts, including gamer representations, are a result of the synergy between individual and collective memory (Hirst & Manier, 2008). Individuals cannot develop their memories without particular social contexts, which for professional *CS:GO* enthusiasts, were league broadcasts.

Discourses and representations in EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts represent gamers in two interrelated fashions. First, EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts represent gamers as geeks by correlating aspects of gamers' cultural identity with video game and internet culture. Second, EPL and ELEAGUE depict gamers as cyberathletes by highlighting aspects of gamers' cultural identity that are associated with sports. The intersecting representations of gamers as both geeks and jocks work to debunk certain gamer stereotypes, while reinforcing others.

Gamers as Geeks

Gamers are represented as geeks in EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts, framing the cultural identity of gamers as closely tied to who they are in the *CS:GO* community, and within the gameworld (referenced exclusively by their gamer tag). The cultural identity of gamers is most salient in the context of gaming and competitive esports (Seo, 2016). EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts display and discuss gamers in particular ways, connecting the cultural identity of gamers to geeks.

EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts depict *CS:GO* community members as geeks via in-person displays, in-game displays, and discourses tying gamers to technology. Both broadcasts provide a space whereby individuals learn what it means to be a gamer. These

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broadcasts display gamers as young, mostly White males, who are short and tall, skinny and chubby, fit and not. Players, coaches, casters, observers, referees, and audience members wear particular clothing that demarcate them as *CS:GO* esports community members. The gamer identity is becoming more mainstream (Taylor, 2012). In EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts, players, coaches, and fans were displayed wearing trendy clothing, some sporting tattoos, wearing backwards hats, street pants (jeans, shorts), and random assortments of shoes. Wearing civilian, non-sport clothing directly contradicts esports as framed solely as sports. Instead, it reinforces the notion that gamers subscribe to popular culture and game community norms.

EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts displayed players as both directly and indirectly tied to technology. The majority of shots captured gamers sitting in padded computer chairs, slouched over with their neck bent and face inches away from a large computer monitor. This serves the purpose of directly connecting gamers to technology. Moreover, players were displayed wearing jerseys in league broadcasts, that were covered in technology sponsors (see *Sponsorship/Advertisement* theme). The prevalence of technology sponsors on player uniforms indirectly reinforce our understanding of *CS:GO* players as geeks with extensive knowledge and ties to technology.

EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts placed significant importance on technical proficiency in comprehending the relationship between digital technologies and esports actors in league broadcasts. Understanding technology, including and especially computer technology, is expected of *CS:GO* community members. To be technically proficient is to harness a network of skills, competencies, and understandings concerning technology use (Shaw, 2010).

At the heart of gamer identity, and specifically professional esports identity, exists geek masculinity (Taylor, 2012). Geek masculinity involves technical mastery over technology and a breadth of knowledge about a particular game. Technical proficiency exists at the heart of EPL and ELEAGUE's depictions of gamers as geeks. Gamers harness skills, competencies, and understandings that involve technology. Gamer identities among esports actors are displayed in their knowledge and expert technology use (Reeves et al., 2009). In EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts, players', coaches', and casters' ability to customize and manage user interfaces, troubleshoot technical problems involving hardware and software, and speak confidently about technical matters with game and esports culture portray them as geeks.

In-game displays and caster discourses reinforce audiences' understanding of gamers as geeks by referencing them exclusively by their gamer tag. As illustrated in the *Geek Representation* theme, all esports actors are referred to by their unique gamer tags in place of their real name in esports contexts. Additionally, discussions of players' roles on their team sometimes involved trolling behavior. Fnatic player JW, for example, is known for his quick reflexes and precise aiming, but also his sneakiness, which is a skill that few players possess. JW routinely sneaks behind his opponents, killing them from behind, and sometimes even doing so with a knife. Because JW records so many knife kills in professional matches, he has acquired the reputation of a troll.

Trolling behavior involves intentionally deviating from the idealized playstyle by which the majority of *CS:GO* players subscribe (Aarseth, 2014), and is closely tied to geek masculinity. Acts of bullying, intimidating, and poking fun at others is a recurring theme in *CS:GO* culture. In EPL and ELEAGUE, players and casters routinely troll

others. Some players, such as JW, are specifically known for their trolling tactics like knifing opponents and trash talking. Other players across both leagues perform trolling behaviors less frequently. Casters in both leagues engage in trolling behavior, often aimed at other casters, but sometimes at players and teams. In ELEAGUE season one, for example, casters welcomed a retired ex *CS 1.6* professional player to the broadcast booth and introduced him as "one of Counter-Strike's founding fathers," and stated that they broke him out of a retirement home to have him on the broadcast. In addition to the casters' trolling comments, a full screen graphic of a face-in-hole meme of the host wheeling Sir Scoots out of a retirement home was displayed. The prevalence of trolling behaviors captured in both league broadcasts showcase gamers as masculine geeks.

Gamers as Cyberathletes

EPL and ELEAGUE represented gamers as transnational competitors within a symbolic order prioritizing values connected to traditional sport, presenting a vision of *CS:GO* players as professional cyberathletes. In contrast to *Geek Representation*, one's *Jock Representation* is tied to who they are in the competitive game or sport context (professional *CS:GO* esports players, casters, fans) and when performing sports/games. These representations were tied to team identity (such as Cloud9), and role within the team (i.e. AWPer, IGL, etc.).

The image of the athlete is far removed from that of the "marginalized nerd identity" formerly linked to video games (Kendall, 2011, p. 505). Both EPL and ELEAGUE promoted this substitution by highlighting physical elements of the game discussed in the literature review (mouse movement, keyboard manipulation,

communication, and in-person reactions to in-game stimuli), reinforced with caster discourses that call attention to athletic qualities of gameplay while performing affects normally associated with exciting traditional sport competition.

EPL and ELEAGUE visually frame gamers as "cyberathletes" in league broadcasts by capturing player, coach, caster, and fan performances. Player performances display intense concentration, keyboard and mouse manipulation, voice communication, and game awareness during competitive matches. Moreover, players captured reacting emotionally to in-game stimuli (celebrating success, and upset/angry in defeat) also reinforces audience understanding of the game as a rich sensory experience demanding layers of physical action.

In addition to capturing player performances, EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts emphasized players' and teams' strenuous training activities both individually and as a whole, frequent international travel, and demanding match schedules to frame players as professional cyberathletes. They displayed and discussed players' individual training regimens, and the frequency with which players work together with their teammates to practice and compete in official matches, highlighting particular skills as mandatory components of professional play.

EPL and ELEAGUE emphasized that esport players must have exceptional hand-eye coordination, quick reaction speed, and immense focus. Through discourses of players' playstyle, mindset, decision-making, precision aim and reaction speed, and audio awareness, casters placed importance on skilled expertise. In doing so, these broadcasts teach audiences what particular skills are valued, and which are not in professional *CS:GO* esports contexts. By highlighting gamers as harnessing skills that are prevalent in

traditional sports, viewers may comprehend professional *CS:GO* players as cyber athletes.

As illustrated in the *Skilled Expertise* theme, certain values and characteristics paint players, coaches, and teams as jocks. In EPL and ELEAGUE player experiences were narrativized as tales of training, sacrifice, overcoming adversity, and the pursuit of greatness. In gameplay reports, casters highlighted players' values like sportsmanship, and characteristics such as passion for esports, consistency in match performances, fearlessness in competition, and focus throughout matches.

Being recognized as best player in the world is considered a top aspiration among players based on testimonies and caster discourses in EPL and ELEAGUE. Players also stress the importance of teamwork in *CS:GO*. They aspire to become league and Major tournament champions, and to win trophies. To accomplish that, they understand the importance of each team member's role, especially leadership enacted by the coach and IGL.

As skilled experts, each CS player has their own unique playstyle. Some players, like Finnish sniper Allu, are known for their long range accuracy and maneuverability with the AWP. Others, such as American entry-fragger Stewie2k, are known for their erratic movement and aggressive pushes. Players like Astralis' Gla1ve are classified as in-game leaders (IGLs), who are less known for their impressive aiming skills, and more for their masterful tactics and strategies.

In EPL and ELEAGUE, players were praised for their ability not only to aim but to out-think their opponents. This is consistent for individual players and coordinated team strategies. Players routinely showcase their aiming skills in shootouts with enemies.

Teams execute coordinated strategies, trying to out-smart opponents by carefully

coordinating player positions and timing utility use. The unique skillset of precise aiming

and dynamic decision-making is what separates *CS:GO* community members from

others.

Gamers Disproving and Upholding Stereotypes

Gamer stereotypes are evolving within our increasingly digital society (Kowert et

al., 2012). In the recent past, video game players were reluctant to identify as "gamers."

In contemporary society, due to the ubiquity of video game playing, gamer stereotypes

have largely been challenged, eroding many beliefs that gamers are idle, asocial,

unattractive, and unpopular (Shaw, 2010). The power of stereotypes is that they help

shape individuals' social realities through communication and especially in the media.

Media representations provide a space in which presentations of identity including

race, nationality, and gender, work together in reproducing dominant stereotypes, or put

them into question (Kellner, 2010). Gamer stereotypes are circulated by EPL and

ELEAGUE through gamer representations and caster discourses in league broadcasts. By

identifying and understanding stereotypes that have formed around gamers, we may

better understand individuals' attitudes toward gamers in contemporary society.

One form of stereotype that is significant in cultural identity research is cognitive

stereotypes (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). The cognitive perspective posits that stereotypes are

"conceptualized as cognitive structures located within individual minds. They exist as

sets of cognitive associations between categories and traits (e.g., gamers are unpopular)

that, once learned, are relatively fixed and become automatically involved in processing

information about people when social category information is activated" (Kowert et al., 2012, p. 2). From this perspective, stereotypes may be seen as internal sets of associations that individuals hold about gamers.

Within popular culture and news stories, various characterizations of gamers have emerged. In years prior to 2012, the gamer stereotype has been depicted in print media, television, and web-based content as overwhelmingly negative. Together, media portrayals and news reports have presented images of gamers as socially anxious, mentally stunted, and physically unhealthy (Kowert et al., 2012). These representations of gamers serve the function of bolstering existing stereotypes disseminated through popular media have given rise to shared cognitive associations about gamers being unpopular, unattractive, and socially incompetent.

By consuming EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts, individuals obtain particular skillsets and knowledge, allowing them to decode gamer representations and better understand the cultural identity of gamers. Once relatively niche, the social category of "gamers," including the individuals that play and watch others playing esports, significantly influences popular culture today, penetrating leisure, work, and social networks (Giddens, 1991; Shaw, 2010). As illustrated in the *Geek Representation* theme and corresponding discussion above, EPL and ELEAGUE represent gamers as tied to both game culture and mainstream popular culture norms. At the same time, league broadcasts represent gamers as cyberathletes (see *Jock Representation* theme). Together, these representations work to dispel certain gamer stereotypes, while reinforcing others. Below I discuss how stereotypes are circulated in EPL and ELEAGUE, which include

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distinguishing in-groups from out-groups, and suggesting social inequalities between groups (Kowert et al., 2012).

Caster discourses work in concert with broadcast displays of players, coaches, casters, and fans to acknowledge and disprove certain gamer stereotypes. By explicitly and implicitly acknowledging gamer stereotypes and refuting them, broadcasts inoculated the audience, socially influencing them to understand gamers as "cool" geeks (tied to popular culture – see *Game Culture* theme) and cyberathletes.

To inoculate audiences, EPL and ELEAGUE directly address gamer stereotypes in league broadcasts. EPL and ELEAGUE acknowledge gamer stereotypes such as gamers being isolated and unpopular with discourses and images in league broadcasts. In both leagues, professional *CS:GO* players are treated as popular celebrities. They are framed as cyber superstar athletes with immense fanbases (see *Jock Representation* and *Skilled Expertise* themes). Glorifying players as skilled professionals, and "best in the world," casters highlight players' popularity, professionalism, and celebrity status within the *CS:GO* community.

Moreover, caster discourses and broadcast images debunk the stereotypes of gamers as fat and lazy with in-person player displays and direct acknowledgements (see *Jock Representation* theme). In EPL season one, casters acknowledged the overweight gamer stereotype stating "Cloud9 trying to dispel the myth that all gamers are big fat nerds… Just keeping those tank tops on. FREAKAZOID just flexing there" as Cloud9 players wearing tank tops were shown with athletic physiques celebrating a match victory. Additionally, when displaying a fan's tweet in season one of ELEAGUE, casters discussed the image of a fan watching the broadcast stating, "Wow. Eating some

Dominos. Yes! That's perfect… Just need a bag of Doritos and can of Mountain Dew and we're set. Hahaha! All the stereotypes." These examples illustrate how both EPL and ELEAGUE use humor to acknowledge and deflect stereotypes of gamers as overweight and unpopular.

EPL and ELEAGUE broadcast representations of gamers were limited in a few respects. Both leagues represent *CS* as an all-male, predominantly white activity via player displays that hardly ever incorporate black and brown bodies. This is in line with previous research regarding gamers as "primarily young, heterosexual, white/Anglo and male" (Shaw, 2012, p. 39). Race is largely unmarked in EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts and operates similarly to the way whiteness dominates within America (Shaw, 2012). This is likely because *Counter-Strike* as a professional esport can be traced back historically and culturally to Europe (considered to be the homeland of competitive *CS*) and the Americas (where *CS* was developed).

Although many countries were represented in EPL and ELEAGUE competitions, hundreds more were unable to participate due to economic, political, social, and technological constraints. The *Transnational Rhetoric* theme is relevant here, as nationality plays a significant role in the framing of *CS* culture and identity. In EPL and ELEAGUE (except EPL season ten) there were not teams of Asian players, despite the early adoption and booming popularity of esports in countries like South Korea and China. Admittedly, with EPL expanding each year to include more teams from Asia, Australia, and Eastern European regions, future studies may explore their representations in league broadcasts.

Similar to race, class in the professional *CS:GO* esports scene is largely unmarked in broadcast representations. The expenses needed to participate in esports, rising from amateur "onliner" to professional player, include technical hardware and software totaling thousands of dollars, and involve international travel expenses and tournament fees. As such, the expenses required to become involved in *CS:GO* esports in any capacity creates a measure of exclusivity in who can participate. Access to and participation in professional *CS* privileges and reinforces upper-middle and upper-class values, which define the esports scene. This results in a pool of individuals with significant resources and access to high speed internet capabilities.

Gender and heteronormativity are also relevant in EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts. There are no female players (or teams) represented in EPL and ELEAGUE. Broadcast talent in both leagues, however, do include female casters, interviewers, and behind-the-scenes employees. Although there are no rules that prevent women from competing in these leagues, the absence of female players, coaches, and teams are not mentioned in EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts. Thus, they are rendered invisible, and "othered." It is unclear whether this is due to bias or lack of skill compared to their male counterparts, however, the absence of women in EPL and ELEAGUE bolster understandings of gamers as overwhelmingly male. The invisibility of female players in both league broadcasts also work to rationalize and legitimate social inequalities between male and female esports players.

Finally, professional *CS:GO* is tied with youth culture. EPL and ELEAGUE emphasized age as an important factor in league broadcasts. Young players are spoken of with optimism. Their mistakes are downplayed and their triumphs are celebrated to a

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greater extent than other players. Older individuals who remain in the *CS:GO* esports scene are disparaged. In the professional scene, to be "old" is to be in your late twenties or thirties. Older players are often teased and trolled about nearing retirement. Casters criticize them as slow, lacking the instantaneous decision-making, crosshair placement, and reflexes expected in pro play.

Esports broadcasts are crucial for how audiences learn about gamers, who they are, and how to be one. EPL and ELEAGUE represent gamers as geeks and cyberathletes through particular discourses and images. These portrayals serve the social function of debunking certain outdated gamer stereotypes. At the same time, they offer audiences a limited worldview that supports a dominant social, cultural, and global ideology.

Esports media play a vital role in the construction of the "other" by the manner in which they represent and frame discourses about gamers (Sarisakaloğlu, 2020). EPL and ELEAGUE construct cultural, social, and economic boundaries for the out-group as "other" by rendering female and non-white players as scarcely represented or completely invisible. By representing esports as a young, mostly white, all-male activity, EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts reinforce existing gamer stereotypes, which results in significant repercussions for gamers writ large. If esports leagues continue to represent and celebrate gamers as an exclusive category in broadcasts, that understanding of gamers will spread throughout online gaming communities, and digital esports spaces (Twitch and YouTube streams, esports conversations on social media) and go unquestioned in esports broadcasts.

Limitations and Future Research

Professional *CS:GO* is an area rich with material, especially for considerations of culture, identity, and representations in media, providing far more material than one can cover in a single dissertation. I focused on the recent surge in professional *CS:GO* esports popularity occurring between 2015 and 2019 and restricted my scope to include two prominent leagues – ESL Pro League and ELEAGUE, which represent the longest standing CS:GO league worldwide, and the first ever (successful) North American *CS:GO* league respectively. Together these leagues shape esports culture and gamer identities in a number of ways discussed above.

As of 2020, ESL has broadcasted twelve seasons of professional *CS:GO*, while TBS broadcasted two. Both ESL and TBS broadcasted major international *CS:GO* tournaments, and continue to promote the industry by expanding into various esports titles representing several distinct genres. Together, ESL and TBS represent the birthplace for esports, the place where individuals discovered a whole new form of competition involving their cherished leisure activity.

As a textual analysis, this dissertation exists as one of many possible interpretations of publicly available data in the form of professional esports league broadcasts. As such, several limitations should be acknowledged in interpreting the findings of this study. First, the sample of professional *CS:GO* league broadcasts encompassed only two professional *CS:GO* leagues and so various others remain un-investigated (e.g. BLAST Premier League, DreamHack Open, CS Summit). From the two leagues, only five total seasons were viewed, making the information gathered isolated to a limited sample not applicable to all professional *CS:GO* league and tournament

broadcasts. Additionally, *CS:GO* is only one of several FPS games that are played

professionally. Other professional FPS esports include *Overwatch*, *Call of Duty*, *Halo*,

and *PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUND*. Scholars tend to agree that information

gathered from small sample sizes tend to be atypical. For future research, it is important

to gain perspective from other *CS:GO* leagues, and other FPS esports.

Next, while the study was conducted to highlight American esports through

ELEAGUE representations, the process of selecting league broadcasts could have been

done differently. Instead of only comparing ELEAGUE to ESL Pro League, additional

leagues may be investigated. This could result in a greater wealth of data, by

encompassing a larger pool of league broadcasts. Also, by only viewing ELEAGUE and

EPL league broadcasts, higher stakes major tournaments consisting of the same high

profile teams and similar broadcast talent remain unexplored. Future studies could widen

the scope of data by exploring other leagues and Major tournaments.

With regard to classification of league discourses and images, the process of

creating recognizable categories of broadcast themes is only relevant to the extent that

they apply to the sample used. The twelve themes were specifically created to encompass

all broadcasts viewed from ELEAGUE seasons one and two, and EPL seasons one, four,

and ten. In future studies, an approach could be taken using a sample of all EPL seasons

to see longitudinal changes.

Communication scholars should continue to investigate professional esports

broadcasts because they illustrate a unique underexplored culture and community built

around a new communication technology. As gamers, individuals begin in the wide

community of the gameworld and communicate with others in that world while playing

the game. After becoming acclimated to the game, players often join smaller communities and become connected to others who play in the same servers, or use the same voice communication channel (e.g. Discord). Some players eventually join competitive teams that exclusively play together, communicating via in-game text-based chat, voice chat on Discord, and even connecting on social media. These modes of communication sometimes result in social relationships, which is fascinating because it began through the commonality of playing a video game together. The possibilities for exploration are nearly limitless. With communities increasingly moving online, it is important that we continue to research phenomena such as esports to highlight unique aspects.

Utilizing the *Audience Participation* theme, future esports studies should explore the behavior and communication of esport fans during the game day experience. As Newbury (2017) suggested, esports fans are now adopting practices, in terms of behavior and communication, that do not fit neatly into the category of popular culture fandom or sport fandom. As esport fans simultaneously experience professional match broadcasts from player, caster, and fan perspectives, they are quite unique. By investigating esport fan behavior and communication with players, casters, and other esports-related organizations, researchers may better understand this increasingly popular community. How are esport fans using social media and Twitch chat to express their identity as fans? What reactions do esports fans have to the messages they send and receive?

Another significant consideration for future research involves audience construction. If esports broadcast audiences are limited to competitive esports players and those who already consume esports content online, they may be too niche to go

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mainstream. If, however, the already-existing community of players and fans played no prominent role in the idealized representations of the addressed audience, devoted fans may be alienated and the broader set of viewers could not become hardcore fans by being addressed as such. This notion may lead scholars to explore the ways in which esports organizations are constructing audiences. Additionally, future research should explore how esports broadcasts are working to attract populations that historically have been neglected, such as women, older adults, and individuals from countries that do not have tier one professional teams that compete in esports competitions.

Branding provides a mechanism by which esports audiences are constituted (Fletcher, 2015). The esports industry is increasingly being recognized and studied as a business with emerging management and marketing potential (Hallmann & Giel, 2018). The character of the constructed audience for esports leagues and tournaments are partially shaped by market imperatives, which introduce a basic tension between the need for the audience to be as large as possible, and for it to be a novel and authentic expression of the subcultures from which its discourses were drawn. Future research may use *Transactional Dynamism* and *Sponsorship/Advertisement* themes to investigate esports from strategic communication, public relations, and reputation management perspectives, highlighting the challenges and successes that esport organizations are facing. What public relation strategies are used in professional esports leagues? How do esports organizations include sponsors, product placement, and brands in league broadcasts?

Given the growth of esports worldwide, *Transactional Dynamism* and *Transnational Rhetoric* themes may provide useful in examining professional esport

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teams from an organizational communication perspective. Future research may investigate the meta-cultural change currently taking place in the *CS:GO* esports scene, whereby teams are not exclusively constructed of players from one nation, but instead involve multinational rosters. Unlike the early years of professional esports whereby teams were largely comprised of players from the same country, esport organizations today are largely made up of top talent from various nations. This cultural shift reflects the contemporary climate among organizations whereby individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds are integrating with one another and achieving success. To what extend is this pattern of multinational rosters occurring in other esports? And with what effect?

Unlike other professional esports, *CS:GO* places a great emphasis on teamwork and communication. *CS:GO* is unique in this way, as all five players and their coach must work together every round for the duration of a match, and cannot rely solely on single players' abilities. Future studies may call upon the *Skilled Expertise* theme to explore team communication in professional *CS:GO*, and compare teams with multinational rosters to those with players of the same nationality.

Finally, although the *Developing Narrative* theme was used to explain how professional CS:GO esport leagues organize content in familiar ways for audiences, it may also be used to answer other significant questions. How do esport organizations use storytelling practices and the creation of narratives to frame esports actors and practices? How are narratives used to characterize professional various esports participants (players, coaches, casters, audience), teams, leagues, and major tournaments? Finally, what is the impact of media broadcasts on the evolution of esports narratives?

Conclusion

Identities and cultures are made and remade through communication (Grossberg, 2010). To understand the relationship between a particular culture and communication, one must consider individuals' or groups' works and practices (Williams, 1983). Images and representations in media broadcasts exist as significant objects of knowledge used to understand how cultures work (Grano, 2016). These broadcasts provide a space in which representations of gamers and esports culture work to reproduce particular objects of knowledge, cultural experiences, and stereotypes. By highlighting specific intrinsic and extrinsic implications that EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts hold about gamers and the esports culture, we have a better understanding of how esports broadcasts help shape individuals' social realities through communication.

Esports as a cultural experience reflects particular rituals, values, understandings and narratives through shared experiences and objects of knowledge. Media representations of esports culture and gamer identity generate meanings that have complex cultural resonance. In the collective memory, symbolic media such as EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts build the structure for cultural communication and serve as a means to build both community and identity. Using professional *CS:GO* broadcasts as a window into how esports culture and identity are produced and negotiated, this dissertation bridged understandings of key communication concepts like identity, influence, and culture with the phenomenon of esports. By highlighting specific intrinsic and extrinsic implications that EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts hold about esports culture

and the gamer identity, understanding improves of how esports broadcasts help shape individuals' social realities through communication.

EPL and ELEAGUE broadcasts frame esports culture as global in nature, encompassing players and teams from across the world. Using traditional sport metaphors and comparisons, as well as sportscast style match coverage, EPL and ELEAGUE frame professional *CS:GO* as a global sport. At the same time, both leagues emphasize technicity and utilize gamer jargon to frame professional *CS:GO* as intrinsically tied to game culture. They use narratives and images to illustrate gamers as simultaneously geeks and jocks, highlighting players' traditional sport backgrounds while also describing them as "natural gamers" who can pick up any video game and dominate. These representations result in understanding professional *CS:GO* as something new, similar to sport, but situated within audiences' favorite pastime – video games.

EPL and ELEAGUE viewers identify not only with the game, but with other viewers who consume esports media, as well as the teams and players in league broadcasts who represent geographical regions, age groups, and play styles. In the *CS:GO* community, like-minded game individuals who might otherwise have differential status in society become equals. Those who share the experience of following professional *CS:GO* establish strong bonds. *CS:GO* culture and the rites of passage within it exist in a dialectical relationship in which individuals can shape and influence each other. Individuals and groups can, through such communication, both form and perceive themselves. Through broadcasts like EPL and ELEAGUE, *CS:GO* culture itself becomes a communal space whereby community members bond with one another amid mutually understood rules and norms, developing and exploring their gamer identities.

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Overall, this dissertation highlights the exploration of a cultural phenomenon through media broadcasts and advertisements. Through the confluence of these modes of communication, the creating and development of identities and cultures is highlighted through specific cultural experiences and objects of knowledge concerning esports culture, gamer identity, and the esport community writ large.

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