

The importance of communication in esports: an ethnographic interview with a Finnish
Counter-Strike: Global Offensive team

Alexi Oksala
Master's Thesis
English
Languages and Literature
Faculty of Humanities
University of Oulu
Spring 2022

Abstract

This thesis aimed to understand the views about communication from the perspective of esports players in the game *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*. The study reveals why communication is essential for esports athletes, how the players practically use it inside and outside of the game, and how team cohesion affects their performance.

Literature of esports was discussed to provide a framework for the study. The views of esports players have seldom been studied. Therefore, this research provides valuable insights into the players' and teams' points of view about the importance of communication and team cohesion in an esports team.

An ethnographic interview was chosen as the method of data collection. Topics of interest were thought of beforehand, and research questions were formed. The discussion was recorded, coded, and formed into distinct themes discussed.

The main findings of the recording were formed into themes. The themes concerned the holistic nature of coaching in the team, the importance of communication within and outside of the game, the significance of group dynamics, and the meaning of professionalism. The team uses a holistic coaching approach in the team to address all aspects of the life of esports athletes. Communication inside the game was important because efficient communication helps the team be more precise and concise in-game. With the help of, e.g., abbreviations, the team can save time by calling out opponents' positions. Communication outside of the game was important because giving feedback to each other is an essential and challenging skill to learn. However, its benefits are players' development, which is vital for growth in the esports scene. Team cohesion and player bonds were valued, and the main reason the team has stayed together for a long time is because of these factors. The players' thoughts of thorough preparations, the coach's knowledge, and the team's structured work ethic gave rise to a sense of professionalism.

Tiivistelmä

Tämän pro gradu -tutkielman tavoitteena oli ymmärtää kommunikaation merkitys e-urheilijoiden näkökulmasta pelissä *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*. Tutkimus pyrki selvittämään, miksi juuri kommunikaatio on tärkeä pelaamisen osa-alue e-urheilijoille, miten pelaajat kommunikoivat pelatessaan ja pelin ulkopuolella, sekä miten joukkueen yhtenäisyys vaikuttaa suoriutumiseen pelissä.

Tutkimuksessa hyödynnettiin e-urheilun kirjallisuutta, jotta saavutettaisiin kokonaisvaltaisempi ymmärrys aiheesta. E-urheilijoiden näkökulmia on harvoin tutkittu tieteellisessä kirjallisuudessa, jonka vuoksi tämä tutkimus tuo lisää tärkeää tietoa kommunikaation ja joukkueen yhtenäisyyden tärkeydestä pelaajien sekä joukkueen näkökulmasta. Metodina aineiston keruussa käytettiin etnografista haastattelua. Keskustelun aiheet mietittiin ennen keskustelua yhdessä pelaajien ja joukkueen valmentajan kanssa. Pelaajien, valmentajan ja minun välisen keskustelu äänitettiin. Äänityksen jälkeen dataa kuunneltiin ja siitä valikoitiin tutkimuksessa käytettävät osiot, jotka lopulta teemoiteltiin.

Päälöydökset datasta jaettiin viiteen eri teemaan. Teemat käsittelivät aiheittain seuraavia asioita: joukkueen kokonaisvaltainen valmennus, kommunikaation merkitys pelissä, kommunikaation merkitys pelin ulkopuolella, joukkueen yhtenäisyys sekä joukkueen ammattimaisuus. Joukkue korosti valmennuksen kokonaisvaltaisuutta; e-urheilijoiden elämien eri osa-alueet ja niiden tasapaino otettiin huomioon kokonaisuutena valmennuksessa. Pelaajat korostivat myös joukkueen kommunikaation merkitystä pelatessaan. Kommunikaation tuli pelaajien mielestä olla yksiselitteistä ja täsmällistä, jotta virheitä välttyttäisiin pelissä. Kommunikaation tärkeyttä myös pelin ulkopuolella painotettiin esimerkiksi palautteen annon osalta. Joukkueen toimivuuden edellytyksenä koettiin olevan yhtenäisyys pelaajien ja valmentajan kesken. Joukkueen ammattimaisuus ilmeni pelaajien huolellisella valmistautumisella harjoituksiin ja kilpailuihin, valmentajan ammattitaidolla ja pätevyydellä sekä joukkueen korkealla työmoraalilla pelaamisessa vaadittavien taitojen kehittymisen kannalta.

Table of contents

Abstract	2
Tiivistelmä	3
1. Introduction.....	5
2. Review of the literature.....	7
2.1. The definition of esports	7
2.2. Communication in esports.....	9
2.3. Team cohesion and team dynamics.....	11
3. Research materials and methodology	14
3.1. Research ethics and considerations	15
3.2. Ethnographic interview	16
3.3. Thematic analysis	18
4. Analysis.....	21
4.1. Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, description of the game and the in-game jargon.....	21
4.2. Theme #1: A holistic approach to coaching.....	23
4.3. Theme #2: The importance of communication within the game	26
4.4. Theme #3: The importance of communication outside of the game.....	31
4.5. Theme #4: The significance of group dynamics	34
4.6. Theme #5: The meaning of professionalism.....	38
5. Discussion	43
6. Conclusion	50
References	51

1. Introduction

This study will examine the importance of communication from the players' point of view in a semi-professional esports team. The groundwork has been laid in my Bachelor's thesis (Oksala, A. 2021), where the focus was on the requirements for seamless communication in a professional *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO)* team. The study I will be conducting adds a critical point of view to the field: the players' views of communication and communication's importance for succeeding in esports. There have not been publications of this type of standpoint regarding the matter. Therefore this study will be the first to analyze the players' point of view on communication. The research will be conducted through an ethnographic interview with the team in *Discord*, a free application for voice, text, and video chat (Discord.com). I aim to determine what aspects they think are essential in communicating with their CS:GO team. I will also ask questions about team cohesion, what kind of an environment is healthy for the team dynamic, and how they individually and as a group contribute to maintaining this dynamic.

Understanding the gaming world and esports is essential since it is a rising trend. According to Business Insider (2021), total esports viewership is estimated to rise from 454 million in 2019 to 646 million in 2023. On top of that, financial investments have risen with the increasing popularity of esports: "[t]he number of investments in esports doubled in 2018, going from 34 in 2017 to 68 in 2018, per Deloitte. That is reflected in the total dollars invested, too: Investments are up to \$4.5 billion in 2018 from just \$490 million the year before." (Business Insider, 2021). Therefore, more research of qualitative and quantitative studies in nature is needed in esports. However, most of the studies on esports focus on esports as a categorization, attempting to find a definition of esports and whether it could be defined as a sport, the appeal of esports consumption, and the physical, social and cognitive effects of esports and video games. Of course, there are many studies on esports, and the topics vary; however, a limited amount of studies are done on the players' point of view regarding the esports experience. Therefore, this study brings valuable information to the field of esports.

The semi-professional team that participated in the study is *Rounds.gg*. Rounds is a Finnish esports organization founded in March 2021 (Rounds.gg). They are a part of the Finnish Esports Federation (SEUL), an umbrella organization for Finnish competitive electronic gaming (SEUL.fi). The aims of Rounds.gg as an organization are to develop itself as an organization, an esports team continuously,

and in competitive gaming (Rounds.gg). In my study, we talked with five of the team's players: *Jope*, *RautaNauta*, *Kollo*, *m0n0xx*, and *Waltteri*, including the team's coach *FriSky*. The organization wished that the players' names and the team's name were to be included in the thesis.

The information was gathered through an ethnographic interview with the team and the coach in a one-hour Discord call, and the audio of that call was recorded. I used thematic analysis to distinguish the most relevant communication, team cohesion, and team dynamics themes. Because the data is limited in the esports research field, especially regarding the players' point of view in esports and communication, I will comment on my experiences as I have a lengthy history in competitive video gaming. With that, the study will aim to answer these research questions:

- 1) What does the team think about communication (specifically in esports)?
- 2) Why is it important for them to have effective communication with one another?
- 3) What aspects influence communication in their team?
- 4) How do they maintain the level of communication they currently have?
- 5) What can they do to improve their communication?

This paper will firstly discuss the literature revolving around esports. I will discuss the definition of esports, the communication in esports, team cohesion, and team dynamics, and how my study situates within the research field. I will specify how I gathered the data and how I will analyze it. Then, I will discuss research ethics, how consent was approved and why it is important to follow the guidelines of TENK.

Lastly, I will present the data analysis and attempt to answer the research questions, followed by a discussion and a conclusion.

2. Review of the literature

Esports has been a widely discussed topic for nearly two decades. Even in 2022, there were over 8000 articles that can be found when searching for "esports" in the library's database at the University of Oulu. However, my subject of interest is the communicational aspects of competitive gaming. Previous research has been done on esports and communication in a competitive setting. Therefore, it is a subject that I will review in this chapter as it forms a foundation of understanding around the subject of esports and communication.

This chapter will define esports and review previous research on communication in esports. However, since the literature on esports and communication is so scarce, I will also discuss previous research on the benefits of esports, the importance of individual performance in team-based video games, and how social cues and challenges affect individuals in a high-stress gaming environment. All this information will be tied to my research and where my study fits in the existing literature that has been done about esports.

2.1. The definition of esports

The definition of esports has been under substantial discussion in recent years because many do not consider esports as sports due to a lack of individual physical activity. However, there is a difference in definitions of sports and esports (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2018):

Esports is a form of sports where electronic systems facilitate the primary aspects of the sport; the input of players and teams, as well as the output of the eSports system, are mediated by human-computer interfaces. In more practical terms, eSports commonly refer to competitive (pro and amateur) video gaming that is often coordinated by different leagues, ladders, and tournaments, and where players customarily belong to teams or other "sporting" organizations which are sponsored by various business organizations. (p. 1)

The sports side of esports is, of course, related to the fact that it is competitive, where players or teams go against each other in tournaments that more prominent organizations sponsor, just like in

traditional sports. However, it needs to be considered that esports requires extensive coordination within the groups and being mentally sharp during high-stress situations. Tang (2016) stated that "esports also relies on teamwork that entails coordination, communication, and cohesion. Similarly, member attributes, motivation, and team processes are factors to be taken into consideration when discussing the characteristics of high-performing esports teams" (p.1). Professional esports teams have rigorous training routines, similar to the ones in traditional sports: "findings indicate that the average eSport player practices between 5.5 and up to 10 hours a day prior to competitions" (Difranco-Donoghue, Balentine, Schmidt, & Zwibel, 2019). Esports also has the characteristics of a sport: "According to Guttman's (2004) and Suits' (2007) characteristics that define an activity as sport, esports can be classed as a sport because it includes play (i.e., voluntary, intrinsically motivated activity), the events are organized and governed by rules, includes competition with the outcome of a winner and a loser, and comprises skill" (Bányai, Griffiths, Király, & Demetrovics, 2018, p. 3-4).

However, defining esports is not as simple as it seems. "Unlike traditional sports such as hockey, baseball, and soccer, eSports is an interconnection of multiple platforms. eSports, which is also synonymous with *gaming*, is computing, gaming, media, and a sports event all wrapped up into one (Jin, 2010). Consequently, defining eSports is equally difficult." (Jenny, Manning, Keiper & Olrich, 2017, p. 4) Some people might understand that esports is solely the act of playing video games at a competitive level. While that is true, esports is a multifaceted phenomenon and deserves a more profound definition. Esports is an activity, an event, and a community. It involves institutions that organize the event, a prize pool, competition, teamwork (or individual performance), viewers and spectators, sponsors and an extreme amount of skill from the players that are involved in the event. It is also crucial to understand that the prospect of becoming a successful esports athlete is extremely low. One great example is Kyle Giersdorf, also known as Bugha, who won \$3 million for winning the Fortnite World Cup when he was 16 years old. However, the catch is that Kyle won the tournament where over 40 million players participated in. Indeed, the chances of succeeding in esports are meager due to the large player base. Kulman discusses this topic in his article: "The prospects of becoming a successful professional gamer are quite low. Current estimates suggest that 1 out of 10,000 gamers will make it to the level of earning his primary income as a professional gamer, lower than the odds of becoming a professional football player, which are 1 out of every 4500." (Kulman, 2020). This fact adds to the definition of esports, as the players who make it into the more significant stages are incredibly talented people who have achieved near-complete game mastery.

I also want to highlight two more aspects that help people understand the variety of esports. Esports is a term used for hundreds of video games that can be played competitively: "Before deconstructing esports in delimitation to sports, two assumptions are made. First, esports is simply an umbrella term for over 400 titles that can be played competitively" (Besombes 2019). Titles refer to video games that can be played competitively. Usually, these games involve people playing against each other either as individuals or in teams. The complexity of esports and the variety of esports titles may rival traditional sports: "[t]here is a fundamental difference between playing *Counter-Strike* and *Hearthstone*, as there is a fundamental difference between playing football and archery" (Scholz, 2019, p. 1). Many games can be played at a competitive level, and the number is increasing year by year. Only a few games can attract millions of viewers when an esports event happens, but there are many options, just like in regular sports. It is like comparing football with swamp football, an actual sport practiced in Finland. However, just like in regular sports, one can participate in esports activities without being the very best of the best. There is an amateur level and even recreational esports scene with no prize pool for the players. Scholz (2019) discusses this in further detail in his article:

Second, esports is not only competitive gaming on a professional level but also an amateur level. This is an essential assumption for the discussion about the status of for-profit and non-profit in esports. Naturally, the professional level is for-profit, as this is the case in the majority of traditional sports. However, the amateur level is similar to many amateur teams in traditional sports. They meet up, play in a tournament or league, and have a good time. (Scholz, 2019, p. 1).

I can also speak from experience; I have played in an esports organization on an amateur level. There are a lot of amateur teams that want to climb the ranks or play competitively and for fun. It is also worth noting that there are teams on different levels ranging from relatively new teams to teams that have a chance to go professional.

2.2. Communication in esports

Communication is arguably one of the most critical aspects of competitive video gaming that involves team play. That being said, I think it is an exciting topic to study and discuss. However, as I mentioned

before, studies exclusively about communication in esports are scarce. Therefore, my study will bring valuable information to the field of esports and communication.

There are a few studies that study communication in esports. Lipovaya et al. (2018) present a qualitative study using structured and semi-structured with 74 esports players. The authors wished to provide a deeper understanding of esports and communication and create discussion around the topic. The study aimed to determine how work is coordinated in an esports team, how players communicate within the matches, and whether there are conflicting interests that can make the players compete against each other. This study is helpful to take a deeper look at because it is one of the only studies that closely resembles mine. It also discusses an essential factor in coordinating work in an esports team, which provides valuable information in understanding how esports teams work in the bigger picture.

Lipovaya et al. (2018) pointed out in their paper that there are game-specific differences in work coordination in teams; for example, if we look at *CS:GO*, the roles are divided into entry fragger, AWPPer (sniper rifle player), and lurker, for instance. These roles are specific to the game *CS:GO*, and each of them has a distinctive role to fill. Entry fragger's role is to make first contact with the opposing team. AWPers are players who play the sniper rifle, and lurkers gather information at different locations on the map, usually playing alone. These roles dictate how coordination is played out in the team, as before the game starts, you have a specific role and mission to accomplish as an individual.

The study also took a look at how professional players communicate in different games. The selected games were *CS:GO*, League of Legends (*LoL*), and Rainbow Six Siege (*R6*). While my study focuses on *why* communication is vital for esports teams, this study focuses on *how* esports teams communicate. In esports, the primary way of communicating is verbal. However, the study pointed out that *LoL* teams use non-verbal communication up to 25% of the time (Lipovaya et al. 2018). That is since *LoL* has an easy-to-use ping system, which is a system that every player has at their disposal, that can enable them to inform their team of various things, such as if they have seen an enemy player on a specific location in the map, they can share that information through a ping. Essentially, it enables players to share specific knowledge with their team effortlessly and fast. However, communication is almost exclusively verbal in games like *CS:GO* because pings are clunky and slow to use; therefore, professional teams opt to do their call-outs verbally.

However, the interesting point is that the study claimed the opposite regarding non-verbal communication:

[a]s stated by (Cheung et al. 2012), non-verbal communication is even more important in fast-paced collaborative games like FPSs (i.e., the games we analyzed). The quick and ad-hoc decision making of action games demands that players find ways to communicate faster than verbal communication (either voice or text), just like or even more so than for strategy games. (Lipovaya et al. 2018, p. 18).

This can only be applied when players are in the same room and can see each other. While it is true that players can opt out of using non-verbal messaging outside of the game, it can be a disturbance within the game. Lipovaya et al. (2018) confirmed this in their paper, saying that: "non-verbal communication methods improve the situational awareness of teams but can also interrupt a player's flow, disrupt their focus, or overload their attention" (p. 18). In a high-pressure situation where most players are in-game, all focus needs to be dedicated to aspects within the game, not outside of it. As Lipovaya et al. (2018) mentioned, any minor disturbances might be detrimental and lead to a loss of focus. This study was interesting to look at as it provides some insight into how players communicate within these esports titles, and it will be helpful going forward with my study.

2.3. Team cohesion and team dynamics

Team cohesion and team dynamics are essential aspects to consider when discussing communication in esports, and these factors significantly affect how teams perform and communicate when playing. That is why I will briefly discuss these aspects and studies that have been done around them in this chapter.

Macedo's and Falcão (2020) conducted an eleven-month ethnographic study about a professional team's competitive gameplay together. The study highlighted the importance of mutual goals between the players. Without these goals, the in-game actions' social and emotional value would lose their meaning (Macedo & Falcão 2020). Another essential thing for the team's success is the constant need

to improve oneself and engage in leisurely activities outside of esports to ensure a healthy team dynamic and success in gaming events. Indeed, with a healthy team dynamic and an environment that enables players to work together as a team, the team can find better success in esports, as Macedo & Falcão (2020) explain here:

A valid argument for understanding the dynamics set out in competitive games can be summed up in one sentence: being a successful pro-player, especially in peripheral scenarios like Belém, not only depends on mastery of game mechanics, but also on rules of the social game inherent in this agonistic environment in which it plays and the local community in which it finds itself (p.10).

The study pointed out a few key points relevant for this research: team cohesion is built inside and outside of the game and is something that the players need to improve actively (Macedo & Falcão 2020).

Tang's (2016) paper highlighted that esports players need to communicate with each other effectively within games, contrary to stereotypical depictions of gamers. More interestingly, collective intelligence is also a predictor of esports teams' success (Engel et al., 2017), meaning having in-depth in-game knowledge and mastery of the game's mechanics in esports. Personally, playing in above-average ranked games in *Valorant*, a first-person-shooter video game similar to *CS:GO*, communication with the team is much easier when everyone is on the same skill level. The other players are proficient enough to know the maps, joint strategies, call-outs, and how to operate as a team, not as individuals. Indeed, it would be an exciting study point to examine how players in ranked games can form a cohesive team within minutes after hearing each other for the first time. Of course, as Macedo and Falcão (2020) mentioned in their paper, having the same goal creates a sense of unity within a team, even if it means playing with total strangers.

Hanghøj's and Nielsen's (2019) paper examined nine young *CS:GO* players and their coach enrolled in an esports program at a sports university located in Copenhagen. They observed them playing the game and conducted group interviews about how to succeed in esports and be a good teammate. The players mentioned that when playing *CS:GO* professionally, the in-game mechanics are not necessarily the most critical thing in the game; instead, it is the communication and how you communicate with your team (Hanghøj & Nielsen. 2019). The players talked about "sund spilkultur,"

which roughly translates to a healthy (or friendly) playing culture, which means treating your teammates respectfully, not blaming or shouting at them in moments of distress, and encouraging them when they are feeling down (Hanghøj & Nielsen. 2019). These qualities all contribute to a healthy team dynamic and the ability to communicate effectively with one another in-game. Without the support of your teammates, making decisions and call-outs in-game would indeed be more challenging to do. However, I would argue that playing in an encouraging and trusting environment is less stressful and fun.

3. Research materials and methodology

This section will provide an overview of the research materials, research ethics, and the methodological approaches used in the research process. Details about how the study was conducted and how the data will be interpreted will be examined.

The research materials were acquired through a group discussion about topics related to communication. The audio was recorded with the program "Wondershare DemoCreator." This particular program was chosen over the rest because of its reliability, trustworthiness, ease of use, and the possibility to record the microphone and desktop audio simultaneously. The recorded audio clip was then analyzed, and the main points of interest that arose from the recording will be discussed in this thesis.

The group discussion followed the principles of an ethnographic interview. Themes, points of discussion, and questions are provided by myself to make it possible for the players' to have something to talk about. I also commented on the discussions and asked clarifying questions on complex topics to understand. However, the point of the discussion was not for me to interview the team; instead, I wanted the team to share their thoughts on the given topics in their own words without me affecting them. The point of the discussion was to make the environment as natural as possible for the participants; hence the recording happened in *Discord* rather than *Zoom* or *Teams*, for instance. *Discord* is used by the team and the players daily, making it a well-known environment for the players, and adding to the discussion's natural feeling. The participants and I included also engaged in informal talk, joking around and sharing funny stories to add to the natural setting of the discussion.

A significant factor to mention is that I will be using my 14 years of experience in the field of *First-Person-Shooter (FPS)* games in this study. I have played various games, including over 2000 hours of experience in *CS:GO*. I have also played in competitive teams and participated in tournaments; hence my knowledge and experience within the field will aid in understanding the study on a deeper level. I will be sharing my thoughts regarding the topics that arise from the data in conjunction with studies in communication in esports. Reasons for using my personal experience and knowledge are justifiable in this case, as previous research on the players' views of communication's importance in

esports has not been studied before. Therefore, explaining connections and phenomena that would not emerge from the data without my interpretations adds to the research's richness of the topic. However, I will be mindful of not twisting the meanings or ideas of the players through my eyes; instead, whenever I discuss from my point of view, it will be exclusively mentioned in the text.

3.1. Research ethics and considerations

The research was carried out according to The Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK) guidelines. Each of the participants filled out consent forms, and they were given proper explanations of the research they would be involved in. Personal data was gathered in the form of names, and the participants wanted their names to be used in the study. Specified questions about whether the participants wanted to be identifiable in the study were asked, and consent was given appropriately, as is seen in the consent forms.

The data was gathered as an audio recording of the participants. The recording was done by a third-party software called Wondershare DemoCreator. This particular program was used because of the possibility of recording my microphone simultaneously with the computer audio. The recording will be deleted after the research process. Documents involving the consent of the participants, including their personal information, are kept in a password-locked folder. Especially chapter 3.6. "Protecting privacy in research publications" (TENK, 2019) calls for a further explanation of this study.

The general principle is the protection of the privacy of people who have participated in the research and are mentioned in the publication. Decisions are to be made on a case-by-case basis taking freedom of expression into account. (TENK, 2019).

The participants (the players, the coach, and the organization) precisely wished to be identified in the study. Therefore, information about the organization and the use of the players' in-game nicknames is justified. Indeed, concerning this thesis, it is essential to note that the organization wanted to have its' name and the players' names published. Each of the members was given the consent form that stated clearly whether they wanted their name to be published in the thesis or not. Copyright needs to be respected by whoever participates in the research, as TENK (2019) guidelines instruct:

When evaluating whether to publish people's names, the copyright of people who have taken part in the research must be respected. In addition, with the consent of people who have provided information or been interviewed, a research publication may include their names and other background information when the research is based on, for example, personal interviews or oral history. (p.15)

The consent forms involved all of the essential information regarding the study, collection of information, how the information is stored, and how the information will be used in the study. Participants have been informed of their rights appropriately and understandably through their filled forms.

3.2. Ethnographic interview

The ethnographic interview is not a traditional interview, per se. The approach taken in this study resembles the thoughts of Skinner: "ethnography is not participant observation" (Skinner, 2012). Merely observing the participants of interest can only gather a little information; therefore, active participation in the process is needed; as was the case in this study: "[t]he reality of fieldwork is that we interview to find out what we do not and cannot know otherwise; to locate the knowledge people carry in their heads, their 'notions,' the beliefs and values driving their actions" (Leaf et al. 1983, pp. 71). Just as Leaf et al. (1983) explained, it would indeed be impossible to gather information about what people *think* about specific topics. Therefore further interventions need to be included, in this case, an ethnographic interview. For means of clarification, a quote of what an ethnographic interview, or a "conversational interview" is, Skinner (2012) explains it as so:

He [Burgess] distinguishes between the structured interview - often associated with survey research and generally involving a fixed set of questions with little to no control on the part of the respondent (Burgess 1993: 101) - and the unstructured (informal or semi-structured) interview which has more open-ended questions on themes, can involve probing or follow-on/supplementary questions relating to the answers, is conducted more as a conversation and is supposed to be more natural and egalitarian in the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. (Skinner, 2012, pp. 8).

Thus, commenting on the quote by Skinner (2012), the basis of using an ethnographic interview in this setting is justified because the players cannot bring out any information without the existence of questions and themes that are posed to them. Furthermore, it is critical to understand the differences between a "regular" interview, e.g., job interviews or interviews in a lab setting, and an ethnographic "interview," which acts more like a conversation with the participants in a much more natural setting. Indeed, the natural setting helps the participants engage themselves in the discussions more easily. Adding on to the definition, Skinner (2012) also emphasizes that the qualitative research interview (referred to as an ethnographic interview in this study) is a safe space for the interviewee, thus creating a platform where the participant can speak unencumbered. Creating a friendly, informal environment at the beginning of our conversation with the team was also one of my objectives: making the players feel relaxed and willing to open discussions with me and the others.

However, whenever there is a juxtaposition of an interviewer and an interviewee, even if it is an informal, discursive type of an interview, the interviewer has much power to manage the trajectory of the discussion and how the interviewees will respond. Indeed, words embody particular intentions and always have some assumptions (Skinner, 2020). Accordingly, I tried to formulate my questions as open-ended as possible and be aware of this position of power.

Several questions and themes were discussed in our conversation. To have an understanding of the type of questions that were used, they are listed here:

- 1) (After my introduction), please introduce yourselves; who are you, how long have you played on the team, and what role do you play (in-game)?
- 2) Could you explain how does one progress in the world of esports? How does one "get to the top"?
- 3) Do you guys also play outside of scrims (practice games against other teams) together?
- 4) How do you think your communication with one another has evolved in the past year? (From the establishment of the team).
- 5) What aspects of communication are important to you as an individual and as a team?
- 6) How do you maintain this level of communication with one another? Do you talk to each other outside of games? Do you have your own jokes as a team? (Note: these questions make assumptions, which will be considered in the final discussion and conclusions).

- 7) How do you think organizations and teams should consider the interaction between players?
- 8) What kind of team could succeed in esports (at the top level)? What kind of requirements does it require from the team and the individuals?

These questions and topics were then discussed and commented upon by myself, the players, and the coach.

3.3. Thematic analysis

To interpret the recorded data, the study will use a thematic analysis. One of the reasons the thematic analysis was chosen was its flexibility in coding and interpreting the data. Also, thematic analysis is well-fit for interpreting the chosen data. The study's primary goal is to find recurring or relevant themes that focus on the players' views of communication in *CS:GO*.

Thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research data will be organized and analyzed in rich detail, and more importantly, various aspects of the data will be interpreted in detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The identification process starts by listening to the recorded audio clip and making notes of recurring themes and topics. Afterward, these themes and topics will be narrowed down into categories and themes. Lastly, these themes will be analyzed and reported in the study.

A theme is a topic that is important in value and keeps recurring during the data set. However, a few things need to be considered. How much recurrence is needed for a data item to count as a theme, and how do we determine the cut-off for the prevalence? Braun and Clarke (2006) highlight the importance of being flexible in using thematic analysis and choosing themes highly dependent on the context of the study. Defining themes and choosing which ones are important or stand out also depends on the study. Larger contexts need to be taken into consideration. However, Braun & Clarke (2006) discuss the choice of themes as follows: "Furthermore, the 'keyness' of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures but rather on whether it captures something important

in relation to the overall research question” (p.7). Regarding the research at hand, I will focus more on the critical factors I discover from the data set regarding the research questions I have, which are:

- 1) What does the team think about communication (specifically in esports)?
- 2) Why is it important for them to have effective communication with one another?
- 3) What aspects influence communication in their team?
- 4) How do they maintain the level of communication they currently have?
- 5) What can they do to improve their communication?

The data set will be analyzed and interpreted in the data analysis section with these research questions in mind.

There are multiple ways to analyze a data set, and it largely depends on the data you have collected and the aims of one's study. This research will attempt to provide a rich and detailed explanation of the players' views of communication in esports. It is a practical approach because it provides much information on the topic. The topic has not been researched before, and therefore a rich and detailed analysis of the data is justified.

Furthermore, the epistemology of the research is to be thought of as well. The research epistemology guides how the data will be interpreted and conceptualized and how the researchers theorize the meaning of found data and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research at hand will use an essentialist way of interpreting the data because I want to theorize motivations and experiences straightforwardly. Practically, this means that the approach views meaning, experience, and language as a unidirectional relationship, meaning that language reflects and enables us to articulate meaning and experience (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This chapter will reveal how the thematic analysis will practically be done. The analysis will be divided into six phases:

- 1) Familiarization with the data

- 2) Generating initial codes
- 3) Searching for themes
- 4) Reviewing themes
- 5) Defining and naming themes
- 6) Producing the report

The research process involves much time spent familiarizing myself with the data at hand, which means that multiple listens to the recording are needed. At the same time, I will start generating initial codes, which are words or topics that keep recurring in the recording. Afterward, I will start searching for themes or larger entireties that make up a theme. Then, I will review themes and decide which ones are important in conjunction with the research questions, and these themes will be then defined and named for the research. Lastly, these themes, their definitions, why they were chosen, and their meanings will be produced as a report in the analysis.

These themes will be then divided in the analysis section, and each of them will be discussed in detail. An important point to consider is that since there is no previous research on the players' thoughts about communication, the discussions will be based on my experiences and knowledge regarding esports and *CS:GO*. However, it is more beneficial for me to give a larger context and in-depth data regarding the players' views in this research. These comments will be distinguished from the players' views to avoid misunderstanding that might happen if the interpretations were not distinguished from the players' discussions.

4. Analysis

This section will provide the most relevant themes that gained prevalence during the recording. The most relevant themes that I found during our discussion were:

- 1) A holistic approach to coaching
- 2) The importance of communication within the game
- 3) The importance of communication outside of the game
- 4) The significance of group dynamics
- 5) The meaning of professionalism

These topics will be divided into five sections, and they will be explained in more detail. Practical examples are used from the teams' players and their coach to exemplify the themes. Direct quotations from the recording are used in conjunction with me explaining what the players talked about on the topic of said quotation.

4.1. Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, description of the game and the in-game jargon

To fully understand the video game *CS:GO*, I will explain the game's main objectives and some of the in-game jargon that can be found in the analysis section.

CS:GO is a multiplayer first-person shooter game published in 2012. However, the roots of *Counter-Strike* go back to the year 2000, when the first version of the game was released. The concept of *CS:GO* is relatively straightforward: there are two opposing teams consisting of five players, the counter-terrorists and the terrorists. The counter-terrorists, also known as *CTs*, aim to defend the two bomb sites located on two different sides of the map. On the other hand, the terrorists, also known as the *Ts*, aim to get to one of these sites and plant a bomb that will detonate in 40 seconds. However, rounds can also be won by eliminating the entirety of the opposing team. The game is played in a 15-

round format, in which, reaching the middle of the game, teams will swap sides. For instance, when the scoreboard is 7-7, and you are playing as a CT, the next round will be played as a T.

The in-game lingo and jargon are diverse and substantial, so I will try to go through only the ones that matter in this analysis. When players talk about playing on a server, all their actions as their characters happen inside a server. Abbreviations, such as “cat” used instead of “catwalk” and “naatti” when talking about a high explosive grenade, and these are used to save time, as mentioned in discussion with the players as well. Also, during the discussion with the team, we talked about the players' roles. In the next segment, I will go through the roles of each of the players and explain what each of the roles' main jobs is.

Kollo talks about the importance of communication regarding his role. There are no specific roles you can pick, per se, but when playing in professional teams, players are assigned to a specific role, which affects the way they will play the game. *Kollo* is an entry fragger, meaning that his role is to get into the gunfights first and collect information about the enemies' positions that way. He is also responsible for creating space for his team to get into the specific area they are going towards. *Jope* is the lurk player, also known as an *anchor*. The lurk's task is to go to locations where their team is not, surprise and eliminate any players that might rotate from one location to another, and generally be sneaky and gather as much information as possible. *Mon0xx* called himself an “all-rounder,” meaning he is a flex player. Flex players take roles and responsibilities depending on the situation in the game.

RautaNauta is another lurk player on the counter-terrorist side, but on the terrorist side, he is a support player. Support's job is to follow the entry fragger and re-frag them, eliminating the opponent immediately after they have eliminated your teammate and providing them with the necessary utility. Utility encompasses everything the players can buy at the beginning of each round: grenades, weapons, and armor. The support players make the most use of the grenades, which are more specifically: flash bangs, molotov grenades, smoke grenades, and high explosive grenades. Support players provide their team with a helpful utility to assist them in taking control over specific locations and bomb sites. Then there are two roles left, the sniper –the AWP, and the in-game leader, usually referred to as *IGL*. Playing the AWP role is about using the one-shot sniper rifle, one of the most expensive guns in the game. Sniper players can also significantly impact the game, as they can play

from long range and take control of different map sections with their guns. In game leader, also referred to as an “IGL,” is the team’s “leader”; they orchestrate what tactics the team will execute and are responsible for deciding what to do during rounds.

4.2. Theme #1: A holistic approach to coaching

This section will discuss the holistic approach to coaching that we talked about during our discussion with the team. I chose it as one of the themes as it underlines how the team values the importance of holistic coaching. Holistic coaching, in this case, is exemplified by taking into account everything that can have an impact on the player's performance in-game. These include sleep, nutrition, mood, and even attitude. I will discuss these through examples of what the players said.

I started our conversation by introducing my research and whom I was, followed by introductions of all the players and the coach. *FriSky*, the coach, mentioned his history in Rounds.gg in the introduction, followed by saying how their approach towards coaching is holistic. I commented upon this, saying that I also had the feeling that the organization also focused on aspects outside of the game to improve the players' gameplay. This induced an exciting conversation in which *FriSky*, as seen in the quote (1) below, mentioned that in conjunction with their biophysics coach Markku, they try to improve the mechanical side of the players.

- (1) *FriSky (coach):* tuossa on ollut justiin Markku biofysiikkavalmentajana, niin ollaan pyritty miettimään miten saadaan niin kuin ... sanotaan tällasta mekaanista puolta paremmaks
Markku has been our biophysics coach, and we have been thinking about as to... how to improve the mechanical side of things

I believe the mechanical side, or mechanical skill, is something the players have at their disposal regardless of the game. These are, for instance, reaction time, processing speed, task switching, and the ability to aim and multitask. All of these mechanical skills are needed in *CS:GO* and are something that can be improved. However, in-game mechanics are only one part of the game and are primarily learned individually. Usually, players join a team with a hefty set of mechanical skills at their

disposal, meaning they already have high mastery of aiming and game knowledge. Each player's skills need to be adapted to the team's needs.

RautaNauta continued the discussion by adding to the holistic experience of playing competitively:

(2) *RautaNauta*: tiedostetaan se, että... vaikka se pelaaminen tapahtuu siellä serverillä, niin siinä on kuitenkin se ihminen joka sitä ukkoa serverillä liikuttaa... pitää olla tavallaan elämässä hommat kunnossa, niin ku unen ja syömisen ja sitte myös tavallaan omien fyysisten valmiuksen kannalta, että pystyy sit suorittamaan parhaalla mahdollisella tavalla siellä serverillä sitte

we acknowledge that ... even though gaming takes place in the server, it is the human being that moves the character in that server ... you kind of need to have things in order in your life, like sleeping, eating and even in your physical readiness in a way, so that you can perform at the best of your ability in the server

He mentioned that even though playing takes place on the server, it is nevertheless a human being moving the character in-game. All areas of life need to be in check to have the ability to perform at one's best, e.g., making sure one gets enough sleep and eats healthily and has the physical readiness to perform at one's best in-game. This means that eating a balanced diet, exercising regularly, and getting enough sleep every night are all factors that translate to performance in-game. Combined, these factors make a massive difference in how players can perform when trying to play at the best of their level. There are noticeable drops in performance when I have not slept the night properly before. I also have noticed that if there are a lot of other stress factors in my life, I tend to play poorly in-game. Gaming, especially at high levels, requires much attention, and if one's mind is somewhere else in the game, performance tends to drop. In the scientific literature, sleep deprivation has been studied as associated with longer reaction times and reduced decision-making ability (Taheri & Arabameri, 2012). Also, athletes have faster eye-to-hand reaction speeds than nonathletes (Meng Kuan et al., 2018). Therefore, these claims are understandable, and they are also essential to consider when talking about improving esports at a high level.

A holistic approach to coaching e-athletes is indeed growing in popularity among teams and organizations (see, e.g., Emara, Ng, Cruickshank, Kampert, Piuze, Schaffer & King (2020); Hong, (2022)). The overall well-being of e-athletes is growing in importance, as it is not uncommon for e-athletes to burn out (Smith, Sharpe, Arumham & Birch. 2022). Overall, when thinking about esports and competitive video gaming, the holistic well-being of each individual, both mental and physical, needs to be in check to have the ability to play at one's best.

To understand the importance of these factors, I can provide my experiences of things that affect my performance in-game. Even though I am not a professional gamer, I have much experience in individual competitive play in first-person-shooter games such as *CS:GO*, *Valorant* and *Overwatch*. One thing is explicitly a decider for me whether I will play anything for that day, and that is how well I have slept the previous night. Poor sleep affects my mechanical skill, but it also affects my mood. I tend to get irritated much more quickly, and if I play poorly, I lose focus and get desperate. Also, I usually make sure I have eaten because hunger affects my irritability. After I have these things in check, I warm up before I start playing. Warming up, in this case, means practicing my aiming in a game such as *Aim Lab*, which is a game that has different kinds of tasks that challenge specific areas of aiming capabilities. Aiming in itself is not only about pointing and clicking; one needs to know how to *track* (follow enemies with one's crosshair), *flick* (shoot from point A to point B reactively as fast as possible, without losing accuracy), *task-switch* (switching target from point A to point B to point C as smoothly as possible, without losing accuracy) and these aiming mechanics are combined with a game specific movement, which have their specific mechanics.

After warming up, I start playing the actual competitive matches. Communication is an essential part of these matches, and you can not decide what kind of team you match up with. Sometimes you get teammates that communicate well, and sometimes you get teammates that refuse to say anything. However, I find it important to communicate with my team even if they do not communicate back. It raises their awareness and sometimes prompts them to start communicating. In-game, one needs to preserve focus for the duration of the whole game, which can last up to an hour per game. It is easy to continue playing another game if you win, but dealing with losses is sometimes more complicated. I draw the line to two losses in a row, and that is when I stop playing. My mindset has been negatively affected by the two consequent losses too much, and therefore it is much wiser to either take a break or stop playing altogether.

I always record my competitive games, and I usually watch back the highlights of these games and note things I could improve on and things I succeeded in. This review process is something professional teams do all the time after their important games, and it is a powerful tool to learn what strategies work for a team and what does not work. Hopefully, this segment provided a deeper understanding of practical things that affect in-game performance.

4.3. Theme #2: The importance of communication within the game

Communication is one of the most important aspects of competitive video game titles, such as *CS:GO*. The game is very much dependent on the teams' performance, even though sometimes individuals can significantly impact the game's outcome. However, most of the time, teamwork wins games.

This theme sparked most discussion among players during different parts of the discussion. The quotes are taken out of context and do not converse with each other, but they highlight the theme of communication's importance in *CS:GO*. *Kollo*, a rifler and an entry fragger for the team, highlight the importance of giving out information when going out first into a bombsite or to a specific area:

- (3) *Kollo*: siinä teropuolella just, ainaki just jos kommunikaation puolest miettii nii se on tärkeätä just entryllä, et jos juoksee sinne sille, nii vaikka se kuolis siihe suoraa eikä sais mitää aikaseks ... nii siinä pitäis koittaa saada kumminki se info kavereille että missä vihut on ... kommunikaation pitää siinä olla tosi nopeaa ja selvää
- at least in the terrorist side, if we think about it concerning communication, it is important especially as an entry, if you run to the site, even though you die and get nothing done... that you should be able to get the information to your friends about where the enemies are... in those situations communication needs to be really fast and clear.*

The job of an entry fragger is literal; it is to go in first and make an entry frag (kill/elimination) for the team and gather information about everything they see. The information the entry fragger gathers impacts what the rest of the team will do behind the entry fragger. *Kollo* exemplified this by saying

that even if he dies and gets no frags, he still has the critical job of calling out the enemies' positions as fast and effectively as possible, enabling the team to look directly at the said positions and take action. Indeed, the entry fraggers role can either be the winning or losing factor for the team because it dictates how the team will react to the situation.

Waltteri, the team's in-game leader, said that learning the names of different positions and abbreviations has been an essential factor he talked about to his team:

(4) *Waltteri*: [tärkeää on] terävä kommunikaatio, eli lyhenteet ... se helpottaa sitä kommunikaatiota, et ei tuu ylimäärästä puhetta ja se on semmosta et kaikki tietää ja on valmiina siihen... asioita ei tarvis välttämättä toistaa, et kaikki kuulee sen... ihmiset ovat erilaisii, joillekki tarvii toistaa ja joillekki ei tarvi.

[it is important to have] precise (literally sharp) communication, as in abbreviations ... it helps communication, there won't be any redundant talk, and everyone knows and are ready for it... things should not always need to be repeated so that everyone hears it...people are different, some people need repetition, and some don't.

Abbreviations save time, as some of the call-outs for different positions can be lengthy and can be simplified. For instance, using the word *cat* for a common position in *de_dust2*, which is a map that can be played in *CS:GO*, called *catwalk*. Players use abbreviate nearly every lengthy word they can, as it makes communicating it that much faster and concise. It is also critically important that players know and have agreed to use the same terminology for all of their call-outs. Some spots have different abbreviations for them and can potentially be confusing. Here is a map of *de_dust2* and all of the names for different locations within the map:

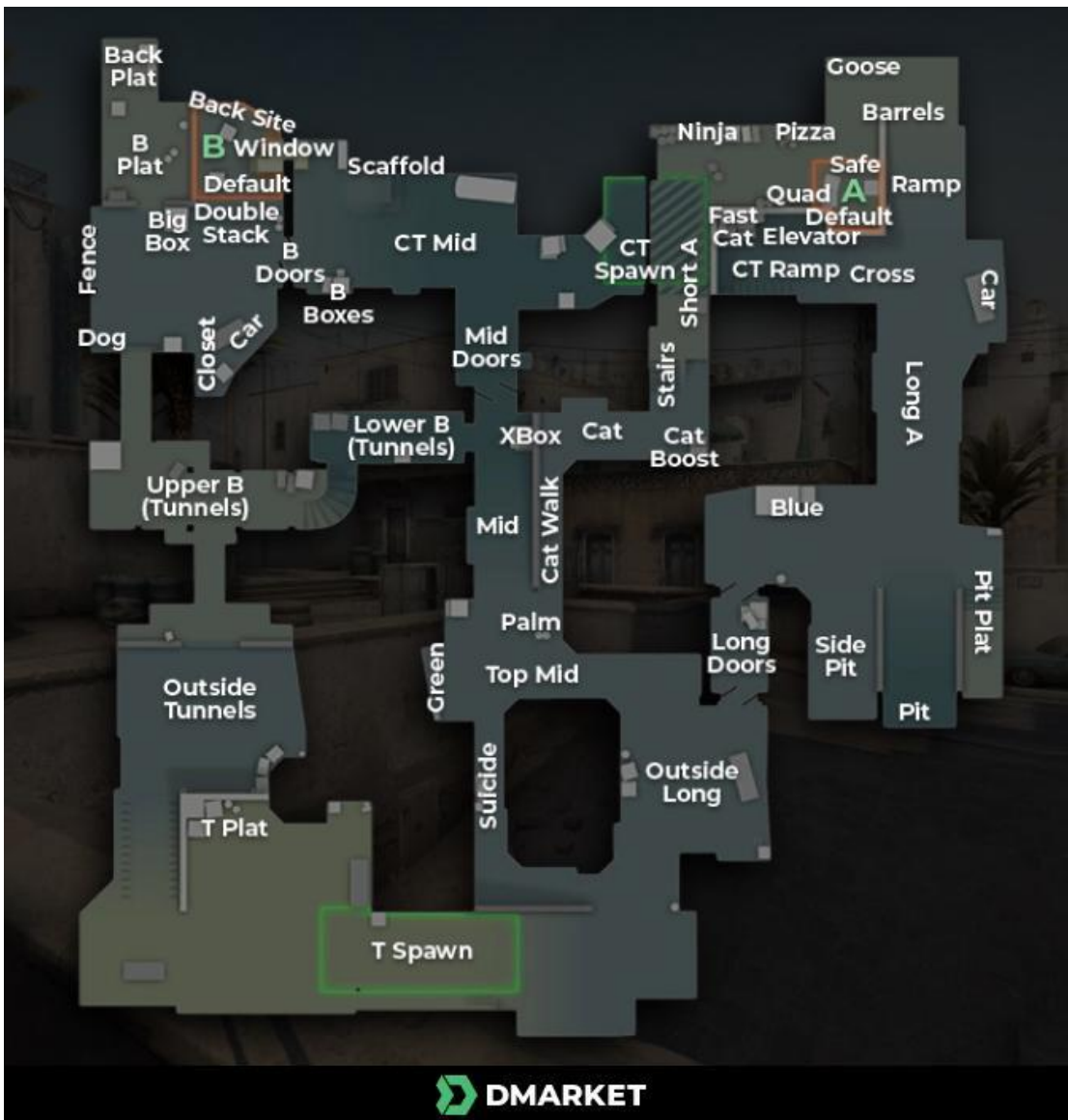


Figure 1. Map of de_dust2. <https://dmarket.com/blog/csgo-dust-2-callouts/> Retrieved 31.5.2022
©DMarket

There is much specificity to the names on the map because it helps pinpoint where the enemies could be. It would be wrong to say that someone is in *pit* if they are on the *side pit*. These are the English names for the map, and Finnish call-outs use many of the same ones used here, but we also have our names for different map sections. For example, *short A* is usually referred to as *mutka* ('bend'), and it is much more concise and tells us precisely where the enemy is.

RautaNauta added to Kollo's comment about the importance of communication by saying it must be unambiguous and precise even though it is fast:

(5) *RautaNauta*: ...vaikka se on nopeeta [kommunikointi] nii sen pitää olla aika yksiselitteistä, että siinä ko sanoo vähä väärin nii siinä voi mennä koko homma pahimmassa tapauksessa pieleen ku omat kattoo ihan väärään suuntaan, että se on aika tärkeä homma se *even though it is fast [communication], it needs to be unambiguous; if you say something a little off, in the worst case scenario, the whole situation can backfire because your teammates are looking in the wrong direction; that is why it is so important*

If you call out the wrong spot, the whole team will be looking in the wrong direction. The round could be ultimately lost because of it. For instance, if we take a look at the map of *de_dust2*: if you make a call when the team is pushing towards *A site* from *A short* that someone is in *goose*, when in fact they are in *ramp*, the team will all be expecting someone to be hiding there when they are approaching the site. However, when they come out to check if there is anyone there, the enemy has the upper hand and can shoot the person checking the spot in their back. Therefore, call-outs need to be as concise as possible, and if one makes an error on the call, it should be fixed as soon as possible.

Walteri also mentioned that communication needs to be precise, and preferably things should only need to be called out once. He went on to talk about the clarity of communication channels, saying that his brain would not work if all of the five players were talking at once. Instead, clear and concise communication is preferred, and the team aims to do it in their game. However, *RautaNauta* also continued to say that some things need to be repeated to “get the timings right.” During our discussions, he exemplified this by players calling out when they throw a flashbang, which blinds the enemies, every round so that the players who are supposed to push (to rush, move from point A to point B as fast as possible) after the flash goes out to know the timing:

Players also share an equal responsibility to communicate with the team. However, communication is situational as *RautaNauta* mentioned that the players that hold either side of the map, called the *flankers*, whose task is to gather information from locations where their team is not in, might be quiet 80% of the time:

(6) *RautaNauta*: Korostuu myös se mitä infoo annetaan sen roolin mukaan ... laitapelaaja saattaa olla hyvinkin hiljaa 80% ajasta, mutta jos se sanoo jotain niin se on tosi kriittistä tietoa, koska se on ainoa jolla on silmät sillä puolella karttaa, niin se on tosi semmosta kriittistä ja... sitä oppii erottelemaan ja priorisoimaan sitä dataa mikä on oikeesti tärkeää mitä sieltä kuuluu...

It also gets highlighted what information is given regarding the role you play ... the flank player could be silent 80% of the time, but when he says something, the information is very critical because he is the only one who has eyes on that side of the map; therefore it is critical ... and you learn to differentiate and prioritize the data that is actually important of what you hear....

However, the information is critical for the team whenever they communicate something relevant. It is also understandable that people are different. Some people tend to talk more, and some talk less; however, the Rounds players have agreed to share the responsibility of communicating and talking about the essential factors they see around the map.

Indeed, when I had the conversation with the players and the coach, I felt that they had talked about *how* to communicate as effectively as possible and *why* it is vital to be efficient in communication. These examples I shared from our discussions underline why communication needs to be efficient and as fast as possible. People who have never played *CS:GO* do not understand the game's pacing. *CS:GO* is fast-paced, mainly when either team executes a *rush* to a bombsite. When executing a rush, information about what each individual is doing, what they see, hear, or "*smell*" (having a feeling of enemies being somewhere) needs to be communicated back and forth within the team without being too excessive.

Furthermore, as we talked about communication, the notion of "too much communication" was brought up by the team. Too much communication could communicate things in too great a detail, and these communications could take space from critical information. Therefore, communication must be fast, efficient, unambiguous, and straightforward.

4.4. Theme #3: The importance of communication outside of the game

While communication within the game is essential, communication outside of it is as important or even more critical. The team has managed to develop protocols that assist them outside of the game, for instance, when reviewing their games:

(7) *RautaNauta*: ...miten tehokkaasti saadaan purettua jokin ottelu... ko siinäki voi päätyä semmoseen looppiin, että menee kolme tuntia yhden pelin läpikäymisessä kun sen pystyis vetämään 40 minuuttiin, se on aika paljon tehokkaampaa ko siihen saa semmoset protokollat tavallaan miten se homma hoidetaan.

how effectively we can dismantle a match ... it can end up in a type of a loop, where you spend three hours going through one match even though you could do it in 40 minutes, it is much more efficient when you get some types of protocols of how you are supposed to do it

As RautaNauta said, they could use three hours to analyze a game, but it could also be done in 40 minutes with the proper protocols. Match reviews, practice games, and strategies require communication between the team and the coach. Furthermore, these practices are time-consuming. The players only have a limited amount of time per day; therefore, the importance of time management is highlighted. If the team manages to save hours reviewing their matches, they can use these hours to either practice more in-game or dedicate them to recreational time. During our discussions, the players did mention that they like to spend time together outside of practice matches and other activities related to the team. I believe that stepping away from serious practice and dedicating time to just having fun with your team strengthens the bonds of the players. Indeed, the same thought could be seen in the paper by Macedo & Falcão (2020):

For most players, constant conversation through the activation of a communication network (numerous chat channels) is not only necessary to build coordination in the face of the diverse challenges posed by the competitive landscape (e.g. creating strategies and tactics, organizing comps, sharing information, marking leisure activities, among countless others), but it is the very basis from which subjects form and maintain, in part, both community and cultural norms of the team, as they build daily an atmosphere of brotherhood, relationships of solidarity, companionship, sociability, trust, and friendship. In short, they constitute everything that can be summed up by the word camaraderie – all the elements included by this term. (p.7)

Indeed, the team *Rounds* have created an atmosphere where they can work efficiently and spend leisure time with each other. It is vital to have both elements in check, the team needs to be professional enough to do the required work to improve, but it also needs to consider the team's well-being and the sense of friendship. Both of these variables should be in balance.

Indeed, the players have their dedicated communication servers for things related to “business” and, on the contrary, fun:

(8) *RautaNauta*: meillä on monta kanavaa missä meki jutellaan.. pari eri whatsappi ryhmää ja discordissa pari eri kanavaa ... jotku sellaisia kanavia jossa käsitellään pelkästään tärkeitä asioita (aikataulut), semmosia kanavia myös missä on mitä typerämpää huulenheittoa... tärkeää, että on alusta missä voi jutella rennosti ja heittää läppää.. tärkeää että ne on erillään, ettei homma mee solmuun ja pysyy järkevänä.

we have many different channels where we talk... a couple of Whatsapp -groups and a few different channels in Discord... some of these channels are ones where only important stuff, such as schedules, are discussed, and some channels are made for joking around... it is important that there is a platform where we can talk in a relaxed manner and joke around... but it is also important to have these channels separated so that things won't get tangled up and stay sensible.

RautaNauta commented that he finds it essential that the players have their own WhatsApp groups and Discord channels to joke around and have fun, separate from the more professional channels where they can handle things related to their organization and team. He emphasized that it helps to have them separated to avoid things getting “tangled” and for things to stay reasonable. Indeed, the team needs to have their channels dedicated to chatting and separate channels for things related to the organization. Having a platform where the team can discuss whatever they like creates a sense of unity.

It seems that the team values the organization, but at the same time, they want to create a healthy team dynamic by having dedicated channels of communication for the team. From a professional point of view, it is wise to delineate work from play. From the perspective of team dynamics, the

fourth theme, it is also important to create an environment where each individual feels comfortable and can play at their best.

Next, I will discuss the importance of giving and receiving feedback, as discussed by the team and the coach. In our discussions, *FriSky* talked about giving and receiving feedback. Feedback is one of the ways players can look at their gameplay critically, learn, and improve. However, giving and receiving feedback is not as easy as it sounds. *FriSky* exemplified this by saying that it is not about pointing the finger at one player, saying that he did something wrong (even if he did make an undesirable play); instead, it is about showing them what they could have done differently in that situation and being honest about the imperfection of their play:

- (9) *FriSky*: vaikka se palaute on tarkotettu just sulle, nii se ei oo henkilökohtaista, et sä oot paska tyyppi tai et sä teit väärin tossa... [palautteen anto] ei oo sellanen sormella osotus, se on yks semmonen tosi vaikee juttu, mikä pitää saada jokaisen ymmärtämään
even though the feedback is meant for you, it is not personal, as in you're a shitty guy or you did that thing wrong there...[feedback] is not about pointing a finger at somebody, it is one of those very difficult things, which everyone needs to understand.

Players need to be receptive to the feedback and have the mentality to improve. Of course, players need to be able to give feedback to each other as well, and as we discussed, *RautaNauta* underlined the importance of *how* you word your feedback is more important than the feedback itself. It is understandable that saying “you played that like an idiot” and “you could have tried to do it this way instead” have a completely different tones from one another. *FriSky* said they have improved on this topic as a team, both giving and receiving feedback. Furthermore, *RautaNauta* added that knowing your team through and through helps with giving feedback:

- (10) *RautaNauta*: kun oppii tuntemaan toisensa, nii opitaan et miten annetaan toisille palautetta pelissä...
when you get to know each other, you learn how to give feedback to others in the game...

When you get to know each other better in-game, you know how to give feedback to your teammates. Different people respond differently to feedback; some prefer it to be straightforward, and others prefer to be softer. Therefore, knowing your team through and through makes this process a lot easier. This statement also adds to the lingering fact of the importance of group dynamics and interpersonal relationships within the team are crucially important for the team to have the ability to improve. Indeed, just as *RautaNauta* said, knowing your teammates well can help you give feedback because you know how they like to be approached. Also, receiving feedback from teammates you know and trust is much easier than taking feedback from strangers or someone you dislike. So far, the prevalence of fluid communication is strongly related to the significance of group dynamics, mutual respect, and friendship between the players and the coach.

4.5. Theme #4: The significance of group dynamics

Another interesting theme that the players talked about was group dynamics and why it is important to have a relaxed, friendly, and fun environment for the team. The team has been playing together for a year, and their new in-game leader Walteri joined the team as a new player a little over a month ago. FriSky mentioned that it is extremely rare for a team to stay together as long as they have due to Finland's very high player turnover rate. *RautaNauta* continued to explain that they have been together for so long because they get along well, and the smallest adversities will not break their team and make them hate each other:

- (11) *RautaNauta*: yks syy miks ollaan oltu niin pitkään yhdessä on just se, että meidän pitää tulla toimeen keskenämme... ettei pienimmästä vastoinkäymisestä homma mee heti ihan pilalle ja kaikki vihaa toisiaan suurin piirtein sen jälkeen
one of the reasons why we have stayed together for so long is because we need to get along with each other... so that even if we face the smallest adversity, everything won't get ruined and everybody will end up hating each other...

Indeed, just as discussed in examples (7) and (8), the importance of team dynamics revolved around the sense of camaraderie the team has for one another. It seems to be a prevalent factor in why *Rounds* has stayed together as long as they have. During our discussion, I assumed that a team that is one year

old is a young one, but as *FriSky* mentioned, it is a rarity for a team to stay together for so long. The players' ability to get along with each other and the sense of friendship they have understandably is one of the most considerable contributions to staying as a team. *RautaNauta* continued to say that if they are annoyed at someone for some reason, it is essential, to be honest, and say why, being straightforward with it:

(12) *RautaNauta*: ...jos ärsyttää mitä toinen sanoo nii kertoo sen suoraan eikä jätä asioita hautomaan... nii hyvässä ko pahassa pitää käydä ne asiat läpi, koska jos ne kasaantuu nii jossaki vaiheessa räjähtää käsiin se homma ja sit se homma kaatuu sihe.

If you're annoyed by something that someone else has said, you should say it to them straight away and not leave things boiling up... the things need to be talked through for better or for worse, because if you let them pile up, then at some point things will explode, and then the whole thing will fall there.

If one lets problems get pent up inside, they will eventually explode at some point, which creates a lot more problems than initially were there. The players usually play in high-stress situations, which can cause the environment to get tense. Players will make mistakes or act in a manner that is not good for the team. When the team is built upon a solid foundation of mutual respect and trust, giving direct feedback will not crumble the team. It is better to be completely transparent and honest, and that is one way to get through any obstacles the team might face, either as individuals or as a group. However, building team cohesion is also about having fun together. Team dynamics and team cohesion builds upon knowing your teammates through and through. *RautaNauta* mentions in his quote that the members of *Rounds* have inside jokes, and they have played with each other long enough to understand that when someone says something, everyone knows what they are talking about:

(13) *RautaNauta*: alkaa tulla semmost inside läppää.. joku sanoo jonku jutu ja kaikki tietää täsmälleen mistä puhutaan... ja semmosii yhteisiä juttuja, nii se tuo sille ryhmälle posia ja hyvää ja sit se ilmapiiri pysyy semmosena kevyenä ja hyvänä ja sit se tuo semmosta balanssia siihen, et ei oo aina nii vakavaa.

we start having inside jokes... someone says something, and everyone knows exactly what they are talking about... and these types of shared things give the group positivity and

wellness, and then the atmosphere stays light and good. It brings that type of balance in that it isn't always so serious."

The team is on the same wavelength, enabling them to bond together and use that as their advantage to communicate with each other more impactfully. This bonding enables the players to play in a more relaxed manner and creates a balance for the players inside and outside of the game. In our discussions, we discussed how finding a balance between playing serious and having fun simultaneously needs to be found to have the optimal performance in-game. Indeed, the term "relaxedness" was talked about and how it affects the team's performance. In our discussion, *Waltteri* continued to talk about how the ability to stay relaxed while playing is the best state to be in if they think about succeeding competitively:

(14) *Waltteri*: Pelataan parhaiten, kun kaikki eivät oo ihan tosikkoja... kaikilla on se rentous siinä pelissä.. aivot on rentoja, nii silloin kommunikaatio ja kaikki ovat parhaillaan... ei oo silloin kauheet tärinät päällä ja kommunikoi liikaa...

We play the best when everyone isn't humorless...everyone has that relaxedness in their game... brains are relaxed, that is when communication and everything are at the best... you don't have crazy trembles going on, and overcommunicate...

Waltteri says that when the team is relaxed, there is no unnecessary communication that might otherwise be present if the players were uptight. This comment reminded me of the *flow* state, which is, as Csikszentmihalyi (2014) defined it:

Flow denotes the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement. It is the kind of feeling after which one nostalgically says: "that was fun," or "that was enjoyable." It is the state in which action follows upon action according to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part. We experience it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which we feel in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present, and future (p. 136-137).

We did not specifically talk about being in the flow state, but how the team talked about their optimal performance and how it was the highest when they had a balance between relaxedness and

competitiveness; reminded me of the flow state. Indeed, *RautaNauta* continued to add to the conversation by exemplifying the importance of having the ability to relax within games by saying that it enables players to shine and attempt to make plays on an individual level that might even be bold:

- (15) *RautaNauta*: yks iso syy miks se rentous on tärkeätä on silloin ku on rentoo ja hauskaa nii sillon porukka ei pelkää tehdä virheitä ja uskaltaa pelata rohkeemmin... mut sillon ku on semmonen hautajaismeininki ja kaikki on ihan tosissansa, ja sit tekee vaikka ite yksilötasolla jonku hienon pelityksen ja epäonnistut ... nii se voi olla et ei uskalla tehdä sitä ens kierroksella ko se meininki ei oo rentoo... sit ku kaikilla on hauskaa nii porukka uskaltaa oikeasti käyttää sitä pelitaitoonsa ja tehdä niitä pelityksiä sen mukaan mitä ne näkee siellä serverillä ja sitä kautta ihan suoraan parantaa sitä peliä, koska sit tulee luovempia ratkaisuja pelin sisällä
- one of the huge reasons relaxedness is important is that when you are relaxed and having fun, the group won't be afraid of making mistakes and dares to play more bravely... but if you have this type of funeral feeling, and everyone is all serious. You make a cool individual play and fail... then it could be that you won't dare to do it next round because the atmosphere is not relaxed... then when everyone is having fun, people actually dare to use their skills in-game and make those individual plays as they see fit in the server. It really improves the game because you make more innovative decisions in-game.*

However, suppose the team is not relaxed, and everyone is stressed and uptight. In that case, players are more prone to being afraid of making mistakes and therefore avoid making impactful individual plays due to the fear of failure. Indeed, players who can relax and play in an environment where they know the team is out there ultimately to have fun (even though they are trying to win), players can shine by playing creatively at times when it is needed. I do also believe that when the players go up against a team that is a little better than them, the importance of relaxedness comes to play. I believe that if the players acknowledge the fact that the other team is superior to them, it creates an environment where the players will possibly be afraid of making decisions that might seem to be radical. However, if the players find themselves relaxed and having fun, they can alter the flow state more quickly and perform better. *CS:GO* is a team game, and to have the ability to enter a state of flow, one needs to feel comfortable in the team, and I got the feeling that the players do feel that.

When I talked to the team and the coach, I felt they knew each other well. During the recording, the players and the coach were on the same page about the topics we discussed. Also, the team is participating in a boot camp in the future where they can all meet each other again and practice together. Each team member lives in different cities in Finland, and therefore coming together to meet each other does not happen every day. It did sound like it was something they were looking forward to because these boot camps are, to my understanding, arranged seldom. One of the topics we discussed was how organizations should consider players' communication inside and outside of games. *RautaNauta* said that organizing events where the players could see each other and hang out would be significant. The reason is that only then can the players see the people behind the voices and deepen their relationship with one another.

One of the critical concepts of this theme was relationships between players playing a significant part in creating the concept of a group dynamic. Without knowing your teammates personally, you lose an essential part of teamwork. Knowing your teammates enables you to give direct feedback so that the person can take it the best, communicate as optimally as possible, trust them in every situation, and ultimately work as a cohesive unit, like cogs in a machine. Lastly, the team has a higher risk of disbanding without a positive team environment, typical for esports teams worldwide. Therefore, investing time and effort to build a positive environment and team spirit is vital for success in esports.

4.6. Theme #5: The meaning of professionalism

Professionalism was a concept that did not come up in the conversation, but it was a term that I linked the coach's and players' views into. I asked how a team gets to the very top of esports, and all the players answered in unison that the only way to get there is to play a lot, and for years:

(16) *Waltteri*: [jos haluaa päästä e-urheilun huipulle, niin pitää] pelata todella paljon... se on niin paljon siitä kuinka paljon sä treenaat, kuinka oikein sä treenaat asioita, et sä pääset esille tasolle, se vaatii monta, monta, monta, monta tuntia...

[if you want to get to the top of esports, you need to] play a lot... it depends a lot on how much do you train, how correctly do you train those things so that you even get to that level, it requires many, many, many, many, many hours...

Indeed, *Waltteri* said that one has to play *CS:GO* constantly, and if they are unable to play, they need to think about it, and if they are asleep, dream about it. *Waltteri* added that you need to do ten times more work than the others to succeed. Esports is a very unforgiving sport, as it is improbable for players to get to the highest level unless they commit nearly all of their time to their game of choice, and the time is also used efficiently and smartly; by analyzing and reviewing gameplay, fixing mistakes, and errors, improving the mechanical skill and map knowledge, etc. However, the *Rounds* players are aware of the amount of work they have to put in, but they are determined to do it anyway. The level of commitment from the players translates to the theme of professionalism: they have a common goal, and they are all committed to working towards it. However, *Waltteri* also mentioned that it involves some luck to get to the top but acknowledges that their team has to work if they want to get to the bright lights:

(17) *Waltteri*: joskus se on tuurista kiinni ja joskus... tää on vähän niinku jääkiekko, harva sinne änäriin valitaan et.. pitää tehdä kymmenen kertaa enemmän duunia ko se toinen tekee. *sometimes it's about luck, and sometimes... this is like ice hockey, seldom do people get chosen to the NHL... you need to work ten times more than the others.*

Indeed, just as I discussed in chapter 2.1. the possibilities of succeeding in esports are low: only approximately 1 out of 10,000 players make it to the top of esports (Kulman, 2020). Therefore, the players need to be equipped with the strive to be the best they can be; otherwise, their efforts will fall short. This also ties into the notion of competitiveness. Each of the individuals in the team wants to win and be the best version of themselves. In the article by Lipovaya et al. (2020), a professional *CS:GO* player mentioned how winning as an individual is as important: “eSports is an intrinsically competitive modality — competition is part of success. The goal of a team is to win collectively. However, the goal of each athlete is to be the best individually, rising to the MVP list” (p. 20). MVP is an abbreviation for the most valuable player. For instance, in *CS:GO*, MVPs are players that have scored the most eliminations in the game. However, it is crucial to understand that some players can get more elimination than others due to different roles in *CS:GO*. Therefore, there are other statistics to evaluate players' impact on the game, such as the K/D -ratio, which is the kill to death ratio, the

amount of opening kills, the amount of utility damage done per round, and so on. Each year, hltv.org, a website for all things related to *CS:GO*, a top 20 player list is announced. It showcases the best of the best players worldwide and the statistics to back it up. We did not talk about the individual performance that much, but I am sure that most of the players have the desire to get closer to that ranking and even one day get involved in it; however, it requires a tremendous amount of work from both the team and each of the individuals to get there.

FriSky also mentioned an interesting concept of how a state of relaxation and efficiency can be achieved. He said the only way to be calm and relaxed in-game is by having an extensive background in the game. He mentioned that the more you play, the better you communicate because you have the resources to communicate:

(18) *FriSky*: Sitä parempi oot kommunikoiimaan mitä enemmän sä oot pelannu... mitä pidempään on pelannu, nii sitä enemmän sulla on mistä kommunikoida... sulla on enemmän resursseja mistä kommunkoida... oot pelannu pitkään, oot oppinu positioiden nimet, oot oppinu kaikennäköisiä juttuja... ne on resursseja mistä kommunkoit, niistä voi lähtee viilaamaan...

The more you have played, the better you are at communicating..., the longer you have played, the more you have to communicate off of... you have more resources to communicate from... you have played for a long time, you have learned the names of the positions, you have learned all kinds of things... those are the resources you communicate off of, and from there you can start honing...

The player who has an extensive background in the game knows the positions, the call-outs, the line-ups for smokes, flashes, and molotovs; they know the usual strategies used in maps and so on. Therefore, players need to play the game as much as possible and gain as much experience as possible to have that resource bank of information at their disposal. The information is then cultivated and shaped when joining a team, but a prerequisite is that the information must be there. A serious team is not a place where players have the chance to learn the fundamentals; instead, it is a place where players can focus on tuning in their teamwork, practicing together, reviewing their gameplay, and honing it to be the best version of themselves in the end.

A strong sense of professionalism also came from Waltteri's words when he explained that communication must remain the same, whether a practice game or a real one. He said that if players slack around in practice, it carries to the actual games:

(19) *Waltteri*: vaikka ollaan johdolla, nii koitetaan pitää kommunikaatio hyvänä... kommunikaatio on tärkeää pitää samana koko ajan, jos sä treeneissä yhtään slubaat kommunikaation kanssa, nii se on tuolla normi peleissä sitte...
even if we are on the lead, we need to keep good communication up... communication needs to be the same all the time; if you slack around in practice, you will bring it into actual games as well....

Indeed, *Waltteri* seemed to believe in "practice what you preach," He wanted the team to perform the same in actual matches as they do in their practice matches. We also discussed how having an online or a physical audience can impact one's performance. I have participated in one particular event that had some audience in it. It had a commentator commenting on the games. The first game I played was against a player who was way better than me, and I lost the game 0-5. However, I had a few more attempts to reclaim myself, so I continued to play against other players. I found myself completely immersed in the game after the first game I played and continued to win every game until the finals. The last game was against the player I played against first; our skill levels were too far apart, and he won 5-0 again. However, the main point is that audience can have a profound impact on how you play the game. I got even more focused because I knew I had people watching over me. However, I know many players who get incredibly nervous and shaky when playing in big tournaments, which is entirely understandable. Tying this into what *Waltteri* said, I think the team has a better chance of succeeding when they have done plenty of practice. When the players have the chance to play in a bigger tournament and get nervous, the hours they spend practicing are their safety net. Even if their performance is slightly impacted by external factors, such as the audience, they still know what they are to do in-game. Indeed, *FriSky* continued to add to *Waltteri's* comment about practicing what you preach and being prepared for games:

(20) *FriSky*: rentous tulee valmistautumisesta, saadaan parempaa itsetuntoa valmistautumalla ... hyvä yhteinen tekeminen, se tuo rauhallisuutta tekemiseen paljonkin

relaxedness comes from preparedness, we get better self-confidence by being well-prepared ... working together well, it brings a lot of calmness into the gaming

Being prepared can give you a sense of relief because you have practiced the strategies and know what you will be doing in-game. As *FriSky* said, it gives you confidence and peace of mind when you know everyone is on the same page and prepared for a match. This preparedness and relaxedness affect the team morale and dynamics, affecting individual performance. The players can tap into a flow state to play to the best of their ability because the environment they are playing in is challenging enough, but at the same time, it is comfortable and safe. The players know that they are free to do creative and bold plays when needed, without the team scrutinizing them for doing such plays. Indeed, I believe that communication, team dynamics, individual performance, and shared goals are interlinked and need to be in balance in a competitive team.

Overall, the players and the coach want to make sure that the team can perform at the best of their level. They include a holistic approach to coaching, taking all of the variables into consideration, such as sleep, nutrition, physical readiness, practice games, reviewing games, and making sure they communicate with each other efficiently. These factors all play an impactful role in shaping the team into a cohesive unit, where the players can have a platform to improve as individuals and as a team.

5. Discussion

This thesis aimed to determine what players think of communication in esports. The research materials were recorded from an ethnographic interview done with the organization *Rounds.gg* and its' players *Jope*, *Kollo*, *m0n0xx*, *RautaNauta*, *Waltteri*, and their coach *FriSky*. Discussions about various topics, such as the team itself, its goals, and what aspects of communication they think are important. Afterward, the recording was analyzed, and individual words, sentences, and utterances were coded. Common themes were created with these codes and narrowed down to the most relevant ones presented here in the analysis. After the analysis, these themes are discussed in conjunction with the research questions. This discussion aims to examine further the themes presented in the analysis in conjunction with literature on the field, on my own experiences, and give research ideas to think about in the future.

Next, I will discuss themes and their contents concerning the research questions I had before I conducted the ethnographic interview to shed some light on communication and team dynamics from the team's point of view.

The first research question was, "what does the team think about communication (specifically in esports)?" When I reviewed the themes and the notes I took from the interview, it became more evident that the team thinks communication is an essential part of their toolkit to perform in esports. The players underlined practical examples of why communication is valuable and must be concise, unambiguous, and instant. The role of the communication might vary depending on what role one is playing in *CS:GO*, but all of the players carry the same responsibility to communicate with each other whenever there is something that needs to be said. However, there can also be excessive communication, which can hinder the team's performance. For instance, when all five players are talking at once, it is hard to focus on the game and what each player is saying. That is why it is essential to be concise and not talk over each other to avoid confusion within the team.

The second research question was, "Why is it important for them to have effective communication with one another?" This question was not directly discussed with the team, but I can assume why it is crucial from the information that I have gathered. *CS:GO* relies heavily on teamwork. The game is

played in a five-versus-five format, where a player can only control one character at a time. The said character has a limited point of view. Think about a football field. If you are on the field, you can see its entirety. However, in *CS:GO*, the character's view is limited solely to 1/5th of the field. Therefore, all players need to work in unison to understand what happens in the entirety of the field. The only way to do that is through verbally communicating with each other. Without verbal communication, the players are stuck with only their point of view of the game. That is why constant communication with the players is essential; it provides them with information about what is happening, which affects the way they make decisions. For instance, if one of the players spots out that the enemy team has used plenty of *utility* (high-explosive grenades, smoke grenades, flashes, molotovs – that can only be bought in the first 20 seconds at the beginning of each round, meaning they are finite resources) the team can make an informed decision to rush that site together, knowing that the enemy team does not have that much utility in their disposal. Indeed, playing *CS:GO* is like playing a game of chess. The teams have to figure out what the enemy team is thinking about doing before they do it, and the only way to fluently carry out these moves is through efficient communication within the team is required.

The third research question was “What aspects influence communication in their team?”. The players quite directly mentioned this in their discussions, even though this was not the topic they were talking about. An environment where players feel relaxed influences how they make plays and communicate. A highly stressful and tense environment can cause problems in communication by players “over-communicating” due to nervousness, which harms the game, which I talked about above. Furthermore, a high-stress environment can cause the players to hesitate to do certain plays and influence how they talk to each other. Generally, from my own experience, high-stress situations can much easier cause *tilt* (a term used for players that become emotionally frustrated due to either themselves or the team performing poorly) amongst players, creating an unfavorable environment for the players. An environment that is filled with frustration affects communication directly. However, I will not conclude how *Rounds.gg* experiences these frustrating situations, as they did not themselves talk about situations like that.

Furthermore, things that affect communication are preparedness and experience. The team's coach, FriSky, underlined that being prepared affects how relaxed players are because they know their assignments as players and have practiced the things they want to execute in actual games. Also, without an extensive background in *CS:GO*, one can not have the resources available to use the teams' strategies. Many strategies involve common knowledge of the maps and the game, which can only

be obtained by thousands of hours of in-game playtime. That is why experience directly affects communication within teams as well.

The fourth research question was, “How do they maintain the current communication level?”. The players mentioned that they play together outside practice games and actual matches, just for fun. The importance of team cohesion and dynamics was highlighted by notions of having dedicated chatting platforms for both leisure and business. One of the main reasons the players have stayed together so long as a team is because they get along well as individuals. I believe that having a healthy and deep relationship with your teammates is one of the reasons why they can perform consistently in actual games and can therefore also upkeep their level of communication.

The fifth and last research question was “How can they improve their communication?” We did not have time to discuss their improvements, and therefore, I can not conclude anything on their behalf. However, in our discussions, we talked about giving and receiving feedback. The coach said that it is an aspect that they have improved on, even though it is a complex topic for many individuals since it is easy to take comments, critique, and feedback personally. Especially giving feedback to teammates can be challenging at times. It is undoubtedly an aspect that everyone can attempt to improve on; however, I will not assume that *Rounds.gg* should, as it was something we did not discuss.

One of the themes in the analysis was the concept of the team using a holistic approach to coaching their athletes. This approach makes sense because all the individual’s life sectors need to be considered, as each of them impacts how one performs in-game, especially sleep has effects on reaction time for e-athletes (see section 4.2. pp. 23-24). However, the eSports scene is young and is still in its infant phases. One of the problems, especially in coaching, is that there is no best way to do it. A new study by Sabtan et al. (2022) examined the current practices of eSports coaches in the field, and the coaches discussed the following problems in the field:

Currently, coaches try their best to help their teams win, with the methods used depending completely on what the team needs and they try their best to educate themselves through looking at other sports. They all agreed that there was no best practice for coaching, and that they are continuously trying to learn and improve without having a source for guidance. All the coaches expressed the need for a standard of coaching. Also, due to the lack of performance

measures in coaching, it was very difficult to know whether a coach was doing a good job (Sabtan, Cao & Paul. 2022, p. 8).

Indeed, having a tool that can measure players' performance would prove valuable for coaching. Also, more specific literature regarding optimal coaching practices is needed. On top of this, the coaches were worried about the gruesome schedules of the esports athletes; most of them consisted of playing 12 hours a day, every day (Sabtan et al. 2022). Playing for such long durations causes problems, especially in the wrist areas and the back, not forgetting how draining it is mentally to play for such long hours every day, resulting in many esports players retiring at the age of 25. Therefore, coaches need to be also aware of esports' health care risks, which is why a holistic healthcare system for esports is needed. One particular study that introduced Exergames: “[s]ingle or multiplayer games that are controlled by physically active body movements” (Martin-Niedecken & Schättin. 2020), could be one of the exciting variations for esports athletes because it gets them up and moving. At the same time, it trains their visuospatial skills, which are also needed in many esports titles.

However, key performance indicators used in business and other sports to determine change and performance (Greeff & Ghoshal. 2004) need further studies in the future in esports. Esports scenes and organizations could benefit from using KPIs (key performance indicators) as they contain statistical and quantifiable data that can be analyzed. It is a tool that could be used to track the performance of one's team in different sectors, such as quality of communication. Relying solely on experience provides its challenges, as it does not necessarily tell whether the team is making progress or not. All in all, I believe *Rounds.gg* is moving in the right direction by incorporating techniques that consider the holistic nature of gaming in esports.

The literature on esports athletes' perspectives of literally anything is incredibly scarce. The missing literature and views of esports athletes also affect the previously discussed topic about coaches not having data to form any golden standard for coaching e-athletes—researching and discussing topics that revolve around the needs of esports athletes and how they can practice most efficiently and effectively is critical. Indeed, practicing 8-10 hours a day, not including other sedentary time spent in front of the mobile phone or television (DiFrancisco-Donoghue, Werner, Douris & Zwibel. 2020), many can understand the harmful effects of being sedentary can have. The most common adverse health effects are: “behavioral problems, sleep abnormalities, digital eye fatigue, musculoskeletal injuries, metabolic disorders, and central obesity” (DiFrancisco et al., 2020, p. 1). Therefore solutions

that address the extreme amount of playtime esports athletes face, especially during tournament season, are crucial.

Further studies need to be done on the experiences of esports players on various topics, such as how they experience their training regimes, how they could be improved, and the optimal ways for them to train. Esports organizations are growing year by year, and the most earning team has made a net value of \$540 million. The top ten most valuable Esports companies are valued at up to \$3.5 billion, making a significant increase of 46% from the previous list done in December 2020 (Forbes.com). Therefore, money is not the issue for these large companies to invest in their players. Indeed, most top-tier players live in houses built explicitly for their teams to practice together. They are provided with food and drinks, and many of the facilities have a gym in them, enabling the players to exercise there. However, most of the world's teams do not earn much, or they do not earn anything at all for the first years of their career, which emphasizes the importance of having healthy, functional training routines and lifestyle habits.

More research regarding interventions to help e-athletes perform to the best of their ability within the game is needed. The players need structured coaching that is based on evidence-based information. Many coaches have to depend on scientific literature done in regular physical sports, which is problematic for e-athletes because their environment is very different. Esports players usually play secluded, and the only means of communication with their team is through their headsets and voices. Therefore, communication strategies need to be analyzed and thought of from a different perspective than in other sports where the players can see each other in real life. Indeed, *RautaNauta* did mention when I asked if there was anything that teams or organizations should consider when thinking of communication between the players; he said that arranging as many face-to-face meetings as possible would be helpful and valuable because it helps the team form deeper bonds with one another. Team chemistry can be good even without the players ever seeing each other; however, esports is not solely about making an impact. The teams face stressful environments often, and therefore to perform at their best, they need to have a supportive environment. As I mentioned above, esports is highly demanding for the e-athletes, with many of the players managing to play over 60 hours per week (Smith, Sharpe, Arumuham & Birch. 2022), and to aggravate the topic further, regular sports players have their off and on seasons, but many esports athletes play around the year. Indeed, burnout seems to be a recurring problem for e-athletes, leading to premature retirement (Smith et al. 2022), which is why it needs to be addressed, as it is a severe problem among e-athletes. Therefore, studies were done

on players and teams that have reported a high amount of success, content, and happiness in their team are needed as well because it is apparent that esports athletes are prone to multiple stressors, coming from both in-game activities and environmental stressors, such as intrapersonal conflicts and criticism from both the team and from the media (Smith, Birch & Bright. 2019) and various health problems as well.

This study provided an example of how to research and approach these topics—using qualitative methods to gather information on what factors constitute the whole concept of gaming as an esports professional. More studies are welcome and needed, as research is still new, and esports are expanding daily. The organization *Rounds* and their team have created a platform where the team can openly communicate with each other and, therefore, improve. More research on the impact organizations have on team performances would also be interesting, as that is another topic that has not been studied yet. My understanding is that the organization can largely dictate how the players will succeed in the first place, as they provide the team a coach, a professional viewpoint of approaching gaming, and even financial support in terms of equipment (gaming mice, monitors, computer parts). In the top tier teams, organizations provide “game houses,” where the players can either live or come in every day to practice with their team or hang out. Therefore, the impact organizations have on the players is tremendous. Since it has not been studied yet, I am sure that it might also work both ways; organizations pay the top players and demand how these individuals or teams need to practice and perform. Therefore, it can be an additional stressor, depending on the organization.

Using my previous example of the football field and the limited perspective of a player, the game *CS:GO* is built upon communication and teamwork. Hopefully, this study succeeded in showcasing how important it is to have the ability to communicate fluently both in-game and outside of the game. During the study, I used the word communication numerous times, but depending on the context, it means different things. Communication in-game is about using the in-game lingo and abbreviations to make concise, clear, and informative call-outs to your team, talking about strategies in-game, and executing them. However, communication outside of the game could be giving and receiving feedback from the other players and the coach, reviewing games, and making notes of what things worked and what did not. I believe it is essential to make these distinctions in future studies when talking about communication, to be specific, as to what environment the communication takes place, as it affects its nature, as I showed in the previous example. Continuing with the theme of

communication and team dynamics, I noticed that many other studies had been done looking at the player as an individual, but only a few studies have looked at team dynamics (see, e.g., Lipovaya et al. 2018; Macedo & Falcão. 2020; Nielsen & Hanghøj, 2019). While it is crucial to know and research the individuals and their views of the game, I believe it is also essential to incorporate both points of view into the research, both the players' point of view and the team's point of view. The individuals make up the team; however, as a group of individual players forms a team, they have to agree on a set of rules as to how they will play the game *as a team* and not as *individuals*; indeed, there is a distinction as to how people play competitive video games as individuals and as teams. In teams, players could put themselves in an unadvantageous situation if the team succeeds. The opposite is that more often if individuals play competitive alone, they try to involve themselves in situations that benefit them. I believe this type of behavior has something to do with the nature of high-tier players; they are competitive spirits and want to succeed in the game, just as I discussed in chapter 4.6. Therefore, it would also be interesting to see how players need to change their playstyles when joining a competitive team and what they think of these changes.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the meaning of communication through the scope of a semi-professional *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* team. The information was gathered through an ethnographic interview. Points of discussion about the team's formation, their roles, their ways of communication, how they maintain it and what aspects affect it, their aspirations, and practical examples of communication's importance in the game were discussed with the team and the coach. The discussion was then recorded, analyzed and five themes of interest were formed from the data: (1) a holistic approach to coaching, (2) the importance of communication within the game, (3) the importance of communication outside of the game (4) the significance of group dynamics and (5) the meaning of professionalism. These themes were discussed in conjunction with my knowledge of the game due to the unavailability of research in the field to gather information. Therefore, the study was explorative, and its' aim was to provide newfound information about the players' perspectives on the importance of communication in esports, especially in *CS:GO*. The main findings showed that the players value clear communication in-game to avoid excessive clutter in their speaking channels. Also, communication was a means of deconstructing games more efficiently during a review process; it was a means to use specific effective protocols that cut back the time needed to view a match. Team cohesion and the importance of the relationship between the players were underlined as well, and it was one of the primary reasons for the team staying together for over a year, which is, according to the coach, top class for a team to stay together that long due to the turnover rate of esports players in Finland. Lastly, the notion of professionalism was detectable through the players' views of practicing and engaging with the game professionally, both individually and as a team. The team's coach also provided a sense of professionalism by seemingly having vast game knowledge. During our discussions, the players trusted in his knowledge.

Overall, the thesis aimed to understand esports players' points of view regarding communication and things that affect it. Some considerations to note: the study was qualitative and focused on the valuable information these esports athletes have. These findings are not generalizable and do not indicate that everyone in esports thinks the same way. However, in this thesis, I tried to give a holistic understanding of esports at a general level and gather information about a topic that has not been studied before.

References

- Bányai, F., Griffiths, M. D., Király, O. & Demetrovics, Z. (2018). The psychology of esports: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 35(2), 351–365. doi:10.1007/s10899-018-9763-1
- Besombes, N. (2019). Esports & competitive games by genre. <https://medium.com/@nicolas.besombes/esports-competitive-games-by-genre-61fca9c6a8f>
Retrieved 31.5.2022.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Burgess, R. G. (1987). *In the field: An introduction to field research*. ([Repr.]). Allen & Unwin.
- BusinessInsider (2021). CHIF announces planned rebranding and name change to. <https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2022/04/04/2415872/0/en/CHIF-Announces-Planned-Rebranding-and-Name-Change-to-Championship-International-Fintech-Inc-as-Part-of-Esports-Business-Direction.html> Retrieved 18.5.2022.
- Cheung, V., Chang, Y.-L.B., & Scott, S.D. (2012). Communication channels and awareness cues in collocated collaborative time-critical gaming. *In Proceedings of the ACM 2012 conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work*. ACM. pp. 569–578.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2014). Play and Intrinsic Rewards. *In: Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology*. Springer, Dordrecht. https://doi-org.pc124152.oulu.fi:9443/10.1007/978-94-017-9088-8_10 pp. 135–153
- DiFrancisco-Donoghue, J., Balentine, J., Schmidt, G. & Zwibel, H. (2019). Managing the health of the eSport athlete: An integrated health management model. *BMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine*, 5(1), e000467. doi:10.1136/bmjsem-2018-000467

DiFrancisco-Donoghue, J., Werner, W. G., Douris, P. C. & Zwibel, H. (2020). Esports players, got muscle? Competitive video game players' physical activity, body fat, bone mineral content, and muscle mass in comparison to matched controls. *Journal of sport and health science*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jshs.2020.07.006>

Discord.com. (2022). <https://discord.com/> Retrieved 18.5.2022.

Emara, A. K., Ng, M. K., Cruickshank, J. A., Kampert, M. W., Piuze, N. S., Schaffer, J. L. & King, D. (2020). Gamer's health guide: Optimizing performance, recognizing hazards, and promoting wellness in esports. *Current sports medicine reports*, 19(12), 537-545. <https://doi.org/10.1249/JSR.0000000000000787>

Engel, D., Kim, Y. J., Lin, J. Y., McArthur, N., Malone, T. W., & Woolley, A. W. (2017). What makes a strong team? Using collective intelligence to predict team performance in League of Legends. *Proceeding of the ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing, USA*, 2316-2329. doi:10.1145/2998181.2998185

Freeman, G., and Wohn, D.Y. (2017). eSports as an emerging research context at CHI: Diverse perspectives on definitions. *In Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. ACM, New York, NY, USA. pp. 1601–1608. doi:10.1145/3027063.3053158.

Greeff, G. & Ghoshal, R. (2004). *Practical e-Manufacturing and Supply Chain Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1604/9780080473857>

Guttman, A. (2004). *From ritual to record: The nature of modern sports*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hamari, J. & Sjöblom, M. (2017). What is eSports and why do people watch it? *Internet Research*, 27(2), 211–232. doi:10.1108/intr-04-2016-0085

Hong, H. J. (to appear), eSports: The need for a structured support system for players. *European sport management quarterly*, ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print), 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2022.2028876>

Jenny, S. E., Manning, R. D., Keiper, M. C. & Olrich, T. W. (2017). Virtual(ly) athletes: Where eSports fit within the definition of "sport." *Quest (National Association for Kinesiology in Higher Education)*, 69(1), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2016.1144517>

Knight, B. (2022). The most valuable esports companies 2022. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brettknight/2022/05/06/the-most-valuable-esports-companies-2022/?sh=21fa88d7599f> Retrieved 26.5.2022.

Kohonen, I., Kuula, A. & Spoof, S. K. (2019). *Ihmiseen kohdistuvan tutkimuksen eettiset periaatteet ja ihmistieteiden eettinen ennakkoarviointi: Tutkimuseettisen neuvottelukunnan ohje 2019*. Tutkimuseettinen neuvottelukunta.

Kulman, R. (2020). LearningWorks for Kids. <https://learningworksforkids.com/2020/04/how-to-raise-a-professional-gamer-esports-is-more-than-playing-the-game/> Retrieved 18.5.2022.

Leaf, M. J., Holy, L. & Stuchlik, M. (1985). Actions, norms, and representations: Foundations of anthropological inquiry. *Contemporary Sociology*, 14(3), 404-406. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2071385>

Lipovaya, V., Lima, Y., Grillo, P., Barbosa, C. E., Souza, J. M., Duarte, F. (2018): Coordination, communication, and competition in eSports: A comparative analysis of teams in two action games. In *Proceedings of the 16th European Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work – Exploratory Papers, Reports of the European Society for Socially Embedded Technologies* (ISSN 2510-2591). doi:10.18420/ecscw2018_11

Macedo, T. & Falcão, T. (2020). Like a pro: Communication, camaraderie and group cohesion in the Amazonian esports scenario. *Entertainment computing*, 34, 100354. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.entcom.2020.100354>

Martin-Niedecken, A. L. & Schättin, A. (2020). Let the Body'n'Brain games begin: Toward innovative training approaches in eSports athletes. *Frontiers in psychology*, 11, 138. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00138>

Meng Kuan, Y., Atikah Zuhairi, N., Abd Manan, F., Feizal Knight, V., Omar, R., & Hj Omar, R. (2018). Visual reaction time and visual anticipation time between athletes and non-athletes. In *Malaysian Journal of Public Health Medicine* (Issue 1).

Nielsen, R. & Hanghøj, T. (2019). eSport skills are people skills. In L. Elbaek, G. Majgaard, A. Valente, & S. Khalid (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 13th European Conference on Game-Based Learning* (pp. 535-542). Academic Conferences and Publishing International. Proceedings of the European Conference on Games-based Learning <https://doi.org/10.34190/GBL.19.041>

Oksala, A. (2021). *Esports and the requirements for communication: Analyzing Counter-Strike: Global Offensive as a professional game*. University of Oulu.

Rounds.gg. (2022). <https://rounds.gg/about-us/> Retrieved 18.5.2022.

Sabtan, B., Cao, S. & Paul, N. (2022). Current practice and challenges in coaching Esports players: An interview study with league of legends professional team coaches. *Entertainment computing*, 42. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.entcom.2022.100481>

Skinner, J. (2012). *The interview: An ethnographic approach*. Berg.

Smith, M. J., Birch, P. D. & Bright, D. (2019). Identifying stressors and coping strategies of elite esports competitors. *International journal of gaming and computer-mediated simulations*, 11(2), 22-39. <https://doi.org/10.4018/IJGCMS.2019040102>

Smith, M., Sharpe, B., Arumham, A. & Birch, P. (2022). Examining the predictors of mental ill health in esports competitors. *Healthcare (Basel)*, 10(4), 626. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare10040626>

Suits, B. (2007). The elements of sport. *Ethics in Sport*, 2, 9–19.

Suomen Elektronisen Urheilun Liitto (SEUL). (2022). <https://seul.fi/in-english/> Retrieved 18.5.2022.

Taheri, M. & Arabameri, E. (2012). The effect of sleep deprivation on choice reaction time and anaerobic power of college student athletes. *Asian journal of sports medicine*, 3(1), 15-20. <https://doi.org/10.5812/asjasm.34719>

Tang, W. (2016, Jul 26). Understanding esports from the perspective of team dynamics. *The Sport Journal*. <http://thesportjournal.org/article/understanding-esports-from-the-perspective-of-team-dynamics/> Retrieved 28.5.2022