

eSports Skills are People Skills

Rune Kristian Lundedal Nielsen¹ and Thorkild Hanghøj²

¹IT University of Copenhagen, Denmark

²Aalborg University, Copenhagen, Denmark

rkl@itu.dk

thorkild@hum.aau.dk

DOI: 10.34190/GBL.19.041

Abstract: Esports is the fastest growing sports industry globally, and esports research is becoming more prevalent. However, there is a lack of research on what 21st century skills esports players develop. This study examines the experiences of nine young *CS:GO* players and their coach enrolled in an esports program at a sports college in the greater Copenhagen area. Through observation and group interviews we try to identify the pedagogical goals of the coach and how these are understood and experienced by the players. Based on Gee's notion of affinity space and Dialogical Self Theory, we explore how the players position themselves in relation to their esports activities as well as their perception of what it takes to be a competent player. The preliminary findings show that both the players and their coach emphasize healthy culture ('sund spilkultur') as a key aspect of the esports activities. Thus, players believe that being able to communicate well and in a respectful tone is a core competency on par with technical skills and understanding of the game. In summary, players report that their experience of better communication skills is an ongoing concern both inside and outside of the game. In addition, the players describe how their 'people skills' transfer to friends, family and school work as a result of esports training.

Keywords: Counter-Strike, esports, 21st century skills, communication, affinity space

1. Introduction

Esports is the fastest growing sports industry globally (Nagel and Sugishita 2016). To date, players have won more than \$70,000,000 playing *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO)* (Hidden Path Entertainment, 2012) and the five top earning players, to date, are all Danes (Anon n.d.). Unsurprisingly, *CS:GO* is popular in Danish esports from the amateur and grassroots level to the international elite. The explosive global growth in the esports industry is arguably a good indicator of the popularity of these games.

Serious academic interest in esports began over ten years ago, and the first PhD dissertations on the topic were published by Nick Taylor (2009), Todd Harper (2010) and Emma Witkowski (2012). However, esports research is still a relatively limited research area with many avenues of research still left open (Reitman et al. 2019). In this paper, we approach esports from a learning perspective and endeavour to begin to fill in one important gap in the research by asking: What 21st century skills do esports players develop with a particular focus on communicative competencies?

To this end, the present study examines the experiences of nine young *CS:GO* players enrolled in an esports program in the greater Copenhagen area. The players practice twice a week for three hours with two different coaches. Through observation and interviews we try to identify the pedagogical goals of the coaches and how these are understood and experienced by the players. In this process the notion of 'sund spilkultur' (healthy game culture) becomes a focal point. The term 'sund spilkultur' does not easily translate but may be understood as game culture that is non-toxic, wholesome and positive, where communicative practices and language play a key role.

2. The esports class

Training takes place in a computer lab at a school in a Copenhagen suburb, the lab features 16 gaming rigs. The computers are set up in three rows of five and the coach has a table at the front of the room. The players in the class are divided into three teams according to their level of skill and ambition. Teams are not fixed, though: players can rotate between teams. This is especially important because there are no substitution players on the teams. If one team member does not show up for practice the team cannot play unless someone new is rotated into the team.

The usual structure of a practice is this:

- Half an hour of warm-up (always physical, e.g. playing dodgeball);

- Practical information from the coach or discussion of strategy;
- Playing an online match, maybe followed by reflection and instruction from the coach;
- A short break where fruit and water are served; and
- Playing a second game, again maybe followed by instructions and reflections provided by the coach.

3. Theory

This paper draws its theoretical inspiration from the notion of affinity space (Gee 2005) and Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans, 2001, 2013) in order to describe how the esports players experience communicative aspects of their esports activities.

3.1 The esports class as an affinity space

Playing *CS:GO* may bridge physical and online arenas in many different ways - i.e. there is a significant difference between playing the game alone at home, playing together with teammates in the same physical location during an esports training session, and watching other people play during esports events in large arenas, or by streaming through Twitch channels. What binds these different game activities together is a shared interest in the game. Following the game researcher James Paul Gee (2005), playing *CS:GO* can be described as taking part in an *affinity space* as the players relate to each other because of a shared interest, goal and endeavor of the game and game-related activities.

Due to the complex nature of *CS:GO* and its related activities (forums, events, streaming services etc.), which both involve local contexts and global audiences, there exist several different affinity spaces around the game. Esports classes are being offered to Danish youth in various ways - e.g. as electives at public and private schools, as specializations at upper secondary schools, as electives aimed at special education, and as classes at sports colleges.

In this study, we will focus on the particular esports class in which we conducted observations and interviews. The esports class was offered at a sports college outside formal schooling. The players clearly had different skill levels as well as different ambitions. Thus, some players were very skilled *CS:GO* players looking for a way to optimize their game. Other players were less competent, but were driven more by a need to be a part of a common leisure activity after having tried other sports activities such as swimming or soccer. This brings us to Gee's second characteristic of affinity spaces, which he describes as places where "beginners and experts are not segregated, but accommodated in the same space. Beginners and experts, and everyone in-between, can get something different out of their participation in the space" (ibid.). As we will address in the analysis, this points to important aspects of the players' experience of being part of the esports class.

3.2 Dialogical Self Theory

In order to understand how the students' experienced communicative aspects of playing *CS:GO*, we will take inspiration from the theoretical perspective of Dialogical Self Theory (DST) (Hermans, 2001, 2013). The key claim of DST is that the self, or I, can be viewed as fluctuating between multiple I-positions as a person adapts to change. The self continually moves between different positions and imaginatively endows each position with a "voice," thereby establishing dialogical relations between them. These voices exchange information, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self with a hierarchy of I-positions (Hermans 2013). Seen from this perspective, the players that participate in the esports class may move between multiple I-positions in relation to the aims of the class, their experience of what it takes to be competent players, and how this translates to other contexts. As we shall return to in the analysis, the players repeatedly mention different aspects of their in-game communication as key factors to being able to improve their game play. In this way, we view the players' communicative competence from a dialogical perspective (Hanghøj 2011), which requires them to both understand and respond meaningfully within the dialogical context of *CS:GO* game play. Given the high in-game pressure on the players and the need for quick reactions, it is crucial for them to be capable of communicating quickly and meaningfully (Kiourti 2019). Being coached as a member of the esports class may thus provide the players with a "meta-position" (Hermans 2013), where they are able to reflect on their in-game performances through critical reflection but also to "delay immediate gratification and to postpone impulsive reactions" (p. 86).

4. Method

4.1 Observation

We observed three practices with the esports class in late summer of 2018 in order to get a sense of the space and to inform our interviews with the coach, Andrew, and the players.

4.2 Interviews

Andrew was interviewed separately, and two group interviews were conducted, one with six players from the first and second team and one with three players from the second and third team. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed through ‘theoretical thematic analysis’ as described by Braun & Clarke (2006). In contrast to a more inductive or data driven approach, our approach was driven by our analytic interest in the area of learning and 21st century skills. We therefore offer less of a rich description of the data in its entirety in favor of a more detailed analysis of select aspects of the data.

5. Thematic analysis of interview data

We coded the transcribed interviews and clustered the data into four central themes. We have chosen to label these four central themes: communication, healthy game culture, language, and development and growth. The following section will describe these central themes one by one.

5.1 Communication is the core mechanic

In digital game design the term ‘game mechanics’ is often used to describe what a game is about. The term refers to the verbs that describe what players do in the game and among these, the most important is often referred to as the ‘core mechanic’. *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO)* is classified as a First Person Shooter (FPS) game, since the verb or mechanic of shooting best describes it. The list of verbs that describe what players do in the game is long, since players are constantly running, crouching, hiding, jumping, sneaking, throwing etc., but shooting is the most salient verb because of how decisive it is perceived to be for the outcome of the game.

However, all of these verbs describe the game only at the most rudimentary level. As the players become more skillful, these actions become less important and ‘communication’ becomes paramount. One might say that as the players and teams move from novice to expert, from unstructured to structured play, the core mechanic shifts from shooting to communicating. In order to make sense of the praxis we observed during practice, and the answers we got during our interviews; it is crucial to understand that the core mechanic in the game is communication. Communication in all its forms runs like a red thread through all aspects of *CS:GO* practice at the sports college.

As Andrew explains it, *CS:GO* poses unique communicative challenges because of how the game is designed. In football everyone on the pitch is able to see where the ball is at any. In *CS:GO* each player can only see the world through the eyes of their avatar and therefore have very limited information. We might describe football as a game where information about the state of the game is always complete and fully transparent. *CS:GO*, on the other hand, is a game where each player has access to limited information about the game state and no one has complete information. In this situation communication becomes essential. The players perceive communication to be of such importance in esports that it is the first thing that Ron mentions when we ask: what differentiates esports from other sports? This contradicts the criticism that the players often hear from their peers participating in athletic sports: “There is no movement in it. All you do is sit at home eating chips and play” (p. 4). Simon, likewise, mentions the importance of team work and “having each other’s back” (p. 4) as the biggest difference between sports and esports. Dirk mentions that esports is a sedentary activity compared to other sports and notes that esports players are less admired for their prowess than people who participate in other sports.

When we ask the players what it takes to be good at esports, Fred promptly answers: “Good communication. Good aim.” Again, underscoring the need to communicate before everything else. Few people would presumably argue that *CS:GO* is a ‘communication game’ first and a ‘first person shooting game’ second. Nevertheless, this is what the players from all of the teams unanimously report when we tell them to name the one thing that is most important when playing *CS:GO*. Thus, the players clearly position themselves, not as

sedentary video game players undeserving of recognition, but as serious athletes who might actually be more deserving, and not less, because of the high demands that the game poses on them.

5.1.1 Communication makes all the difference

In line with the players' own descriptions of the centrality of communication, Andrew describes the biggest difference between the first, second and third teams as being not so much about skill as it is communication. In his perspective, the second team does not communicate as well as the first team and that is why they do not play at the same level. The challenge for the second team is to reflect on how they communicate. One way is to simply ask them: "How would you like to be talked to? Do you want to be called a bitch? No, thank you. I wouldn't like that. Okay, you'd like to be called by your name or your nick [in-game name], or something else. That's fine. You see, how it [swearing] doesn't help [he trails off]"

This perspective is seconded by Luke who laments the lack of continuity on the third team and how it affects communication and play style when people do not always show up for practice. Ron notes that the first team also had problems communicating last year, but that they have fixed their problems now and as a result communicate and play much better.

5.1.2 Skill transfer

The players believe that their practice of communication skills in *CS:GO* during training sessions transfers to other arenas of their lives, as the following exchange shows:

Rune: Are there any skills, not related to the game, that you feel are improved by doing esports?

Ron: I feel that communication with my friends is better. For example: before, I used to be like "Hey you! Fuck you!" You know, not literally, but you know. I could come across a little.. [he trails off]. I used to swear a lot. Now I don't swear as much. I've learned that you get a long easier if you just talk about it.

The other players shared this sentiment that communication skills from the game transfer into other areas of their lives. When asked what skills Harry believes his parents may have noticed he has gotten from esports, he is adamant that it is communication and interpersonal skills:

Harry: It used to be that I would never admit it if I was wrong. I didn't say I'm sorry. Now, when I'm wrong I admit it or I apologize afterwards. I was completely unable to do that before [he laughs]. I was all like: "You're not getting an apology from me!" (p. 25)

The primacy of communication skills in *CS:GO* leads us to the pedagogical approach that Andrew takes to esports practice at the sports college, which will be the focus of the next theme.

5.2 Healthy game culture

By far the most frequently occurring theme in the interviews with the players and the coach is the notion of 'sund spilkultur', which directly translated means 'healthy game culture'. For Andrew, healthy game culture is basically just another word for the pedagogical work that he puts into his esports praxis. In his perspective, esports is just the 'medium' (p. 13), the values behind 'healthy game culture' are the message.

Healthy game culture is a broad concept that covers physical, mental, social, and communicative aspects of what it means to have a healthy relationship to video games and other players in the game. Therefore, healthy game culture is as much about eating right, getting enough sleep and physical exercise; as it is about communication that is precise, respectful, and encouraging to teammates. In the words of Luke:

Rune: How do you understand healthy game culture?

Luke: It's when we speak properly to each other and also don't eat as much candy and stuff. Now, at practice, we mostly drink water and eat fruit.

The players clearly use the notion of healthy game culture to position esports as a proper sport. It may not be an athletic sport, but it still focuses on sportsmanship, team spirit, healthy eating, physical exercise etc., making it as much a sport as sailing or race car driving. According to Andrew, healthy game culture is also about fostering an environment in which learning can take place and where the roles of student and teacher are not predefined. In healthy game culture traditional roles can be reversed, and categories such as age and sex do not matter. This

description is very much aligned with the characteristics of Affinity Spaces as outlined by Gee (2005): in such spaces people from diverse backgrounds come together to pursue a common interest and, in such spaces, individual differences fade into the background and traditional hierarchies are leveled.

5.2.1 Threats to healthy game culture

When asked what the biggest pedagogical challenge is to fostering healthy game culture, Andrew replies: “It is actually the fact that the parents are absent” (p. 14). According to Andrew, the fact that most children play video games in their bedrooms “while the parents watch TV and drink coffee” in the living room (p. 15) is a major reason why unhealthy game culture develops. According to Andrew, the big difference between esports and traditional sports is that if children play football the parents show up for games and root on the sidelines and are engaged in myriad ways. But when children compete in esports they are alone in their rooms. They may be every bit as talented and the tournaments just as real, but they are alone. According to Andrew, when parents are absent and there is no support from adults in general, things “never” turn out very well. As Andrew sees it, the parents should have a huge role to play, which they are currently not fulfilling. However, in 25 years when most parents themselves will have grown up in a world with esports, this will be less challenging because parents will be better prepared to handle the situation.

Andrew’s concerns about video games is thus radically different from those that are most prominent in media and research, such as depictions of violence in games and their alleged addictiveness.

When asked what the biggest benefits of healthy game culture are, Andrew answers that it lies in acquiring the ability to understand each other without being able to see each other.

5.3 Language

According to the players, Andrew stresses how teamwork is important in the game and that a shared sense of community among the players is important outside of the game. This focus has caused the players to not “rage” at each other like they used to (p. 21). As Harry puts it:

Harry: Andrew, he doesn’t accept it if we are peck at each other over small stuff because it doesn’t make sense. It’s all about getting over it quickly.

On the one hand, the players believe that *CS:GO* skills are people skills, but at the same time they are aware that this goes against stereotypes that people hold. This is evident in the following excerpt. Larry is struggling to describe what skills he is learning through *CS:GO*, Simon gives him the word he is looking for, Dirk makes a comment that highlight the somewhat controversial nature of the statement:

Simon: Your people skills!

Larry: Exactly! My people skills!

Dirk: They are improved by playing computer [games]! [General laughter] I don’t know, it just sounds a little weird [general laughter].

In situations like this, it is clear that the players are aware that their perspectives on esports differ from the dominant discourse around games. Viewed through the lens of dialogical self theory (DST) we might say that the players are making sense of their own identity by taking on different I-positions. By assuming the position of the ‘other’, i.e. someone outside of esports, who may have a prejudiced view on digital games, Dirk is able to enter into a dialogue about what it means to be an esports player. This kind of dialogue is powerful, according to Hermans (2013), because it creates a constitutional link between self and society, thus creating a ‘self-society bridge’ (Hermans 2013:84) that acknowledges the extension of the self to the local and global environment. The result, according to Herman, is the emergence of a self in which different voices agree or disagree with each other, leading to unification or opposition, and are involved in relations of power and counterpower.

5.4 Development and growth as a person and as an esports athlete

The players talk about their development in two different, but connected, areas: how they grow as people and as e-athletes. A reoccurring theme in the data is the experience of a coach who focusses on the players’ development as players and as friends. Their play style and their communication. In DST terminology we might say that the players have several I-positions and voices available to them when we discuss esports practice and *CS:GO*.

During our interviews with the players they naturally assume what Herman (2013) calls ‘a meta-position’ in that they are no longer players who are in the game, only present in the moment, but are removed from it and can view it from a “helicopter view” (p. 86).

5.4.1 *Growth as an esports player*

Ron: Of course I want to go pro. It would be weird if I didn't, but [...] in the future, if I keep developing like I'm developing right now, then I feel like might be able to get to that level, but I'm not sure.

In the quote above, Ron rather explicitly describes how he is experiencing being in the process of significant development. He has been on the team for two years and despite being on the third team he clearly positions himself as a dedicated *CS:GO* player with ambitions of going pro. From the perspective of DST, we might argue that Ron is inhabiting two I-positions that are in conflict with each other. On the one hand, he sees himself as someone who has the potential of going pro, but on the other hand, he has not been able to make the first team despite having been enrolled in the esports class for a relative long time. These two contrasting positions are arguably reconciled by what Hermans (2013:85) calls a “third position”, a position that reconciles two conflicting ones and harnesses their power to its strengthening and development. In Ron's case we might call this position *the developing player*, someone who is aspiring to become a pro and is in the middle of a process.

The players are very explicit about how learning to communicate and self-regulate emotions are an integral part of becoming the best possible esports player.

The players also see the coach's role as one that is focused on the duality of helping them become better people and better players. In the words of Ron and Fred:

Ron: He [Andrew] wants to help us develop in order to be better at the game and to be better friends.

Fred: He wants to help us with our style of play and our communication. On the third team we are not very good at speaking nicely to each other, so he often says like: “Maybe try to be better at saying this and this. But say it like this and this instead.”

Through coaching, Andrew offers the players a meta-position from where to reflect on their play and their communication.

Like Ron, Luke also positions himself as an aspiring esports player. He says that he always plays seriously and is always “fully on”. Luke describes how he often plays on community servers at home. On these servers the language can be quite toxic and conflicts easily flare up, according to Luke these are opportunities for him to practice ignoring the toxic comments and to try to mitigate conflict when it arises.

5.4.2 *Growth as a person*

Throughout the interviews many of the players adopt an I-position and a voice as people and players that are going through a process that is almost therapeutic in nature. One salient narrative that often emerges is that of growth and change. They have had certain experiences in their lives that have made them who they are, and from there they are working to improve as players and as people. Luke gives voice to this experience in the most unequivocal way:

Luke: Yes, but that is also because I've had some, how do you say it, problems along the way in my life that have made me who I am.

Larry is on the first team and describes how the coach has made him a more ‘chill’ person:

Larry: He has developed me as an individual and made me more chill because I've been [...]

Harry: A screen-breaker?

Larry: Mildly aggressive when I played [general laughter]

Dirk: A keyboard warrior [general laughter]

In this quote we get a sense of how closely knitted the players on the first team are. Larry is talking about his struggle to learn to manage his temper. Larry is talking about something that might otherwise be a bit sensitive,

especially because his teammates have been on the receiving end of his previous outbursts, but Larry and the team are able to laugh and joke about it.

The way that the informants talk about esports, we almost get the impression that esports is therapeutic. This might be because psychological language and understandings are increasingly spreading beyond the realm of psychology, or it may be because the informants do indeed experience esports as a transformative force in their lives. The experience of esports practice as a therapeutic space is underscored by the way that the players view their coach, as someone who is trying to foster growth.

6. Conclusion

Contrary to our expectations, this case study of esports practice in an after-school program suggests that playing *CS:GO* well is less about technical skill and knowledge about the game; and more about being able to communicate effectively. According to the players we interviewed, technical skills such as ‘aim’ and a feel for the game (‘game sense’) are important, but communication is essential. The need to communicate also incentivizes the players to become proficient in English. However, good *CS:GO* communication is also about the words that are used (e.g. not swearing); whether the tone is one of encouragement and support; the emotional valence of what is said; knowing how online versus face-to-face communication differs; and the pitfalls that this difference entails. Being a good *CS:GO* player, however, is also about eating right, getting enough sleep and getting physical exercise.

All of the above qualities of a good esports player falls under the category of ‘sund spillkultur’ (healthy game culture), used by the coach to describe his pedagogy and his goals for the players. The fact that the notion of healthy game culture plays such an important role in this case study leads to the obvious conclusion that these qualities are not inherent to esports practice as such: here esports may just be the activity that acts as the medium for the message. Healthy game culture might easily transfer to any other team-based activity or sport.

We perceive the players’ belief in healthy game culture to be genuine, but one could reasonably argue that they might merely be parroting what their coach tells them. However, the many examples of players’ beliefs that ‘people skills’ honed in *CS:GO* practice also bleed into everyday life in school and home settings came across as genuine reflection based on real experience.

Our research suggests that esports players enrolled in an after-school esports class can experience significant learning that can transfer from digital game play and to other social and educational contexts with particular benefits for communicative competencies. Our research is exploratory and qualitative in nature and as such its findings are excellent candidates for further quantitative investigation.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of our respondents for taking time out of their practice sessions to talk to us for this project. We also owe Lars de Wildt and Jody Hotchkiss thanks for their help finalizing the manuscript.

Rune K. L. Nielsen has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s H2020 ERC-ADG program (grant agreement No 695528).

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