Analysis of The State of The Esports Player in Society

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized
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Introduction

In 2013, the United States Congress officially recognized individuals who competitively play video games as professional athletes (Tassi, 2013). These competitive video games are referred to as "esports", and the individuals "esports players.". Along with this designation as athletes came the opportunity for international esports players to receive P-1 Visas for travelling athletes, opening the door for many players from Europe and Asia to compete. However, despite this legislation, esports players are very often denied access to P-1 Visas on the grounds that whatever competition they are travelling to is not a real athletic event. Certain workarounds have been found for this problem. It has been suggested that a P-3 visa for artists and entertainers taking part in culturally significant events may be more appropriate (Brannon, 2018), and travelling esports players are rarely denied a B-1 visa for temporary business visits, but each of these laces sometimes unreasonable constraints on the players and the events (Kline, 2019). This all begs the question, should esports players be seen as athletes? If it is so much easier to designate them as entertainers or business people in the visa office, it could be that their function is more similar to an entertainer than an athlete. Visas are not the only area of the law that would be affected by the answer to that question. For example, in the United States, whether esports players are entitled to a minimum wage from the organizations that employ them or whether they are able to unionize will vary from state to state, and is often dependent on contentions rising from the uncertainty of their athletic status (Seck et al.). It is clear that the image of the esports player is still being actively shaped by societal influences in the United States and globally.

Research Question and Methods

The question this research paper seeks to answer is "What is the role of the esports player and how should they be regarded in our society?" To answer this question, this paper primarily employs two research methods: Documentary Research and Discourse Analysis. Documentary Research is a necessary utility for any research paper because so much of the information available to researchers is stored in documentary form. Since much of the information required to address the research question is contained in documents and other textual resources, this precise methodology of establishing each document as a viable source is invaluable. Discourse Analysis is another important tool to address this research question. The role of the player in the esports industry is a topic that is often discussed in publications in an editorial rather than an academic capacity. As a result, it will often be necessary to apply Discourse Analysis to get an accurate representation of the issues. These methods will be used to apply the social construction of technology framework to the problem.

Background

In a sense, esports have existed for as long as videogames have. One of the first video games ever made, 1958's "Tennis for Two" was the first to allow two players to compete against each other and is thought of by many to be "the birth of esports." (Larch, 2019) As the technology and popularity of video games developed over the following decades, esports remained an activity for amateurs. The first official esports tournament took place in 2000 in South Korea, around the same time that the term "esports" was coined ('What Is eSports?', 2016). The 2000s are also when global tournaments with large prize pools on the order of millions of dollars start to be seen, such as 2007s "Championship Gaming Series" (Larch, 2019).

Today, as the popularity of esports has increased exponentially, so to have the prize pools, culminating in 2019s Dota 2 tournament "The International 2019" with an overall prize pool exceeding $34 Million, and the Fortnite World Cup with a prize pool exceeding $15 Million (Largest Overall Prize Pools in Esports, 2020). A consequence of this is that earnings in esports tend to be very top heavy. One of the issues plaguing the industry is the fact that most of the money in esports is earned by the few top performers in each game, while smaller teams and individuals struggle to make ends meet while still being required to put in the same number of hours as a full time job, and oftentimes more, to stay competitive. Many organizations remedy this by offering players contract salaries and bonuses per competition (O'Connell, 2019). But this is not always the case. For every team that treats their players well, organizations such as Team Paradigm paid their players a $1 monthly salary, while others never paid their players at all (Parris, 2018).

In terms of its status as a sport, the Olympic Committee has cited the same concerns that many people have, that a "sport" must demonstrate physical activity similar to that displayed in traditional sports in order to be considered. Furthermore, the committee has ruled out games that involve the killing of other players as ever being considered true sports as the violent act of killing goes against the "civilized expression" valued by the Olympics (GameCentral, 2018). Other esports, however, such as those based on real sports like FIFA titles, may have a chance, and while they have been ruled out for the 2024 Olympics have not been ruled out entirely ('Esports: International Olympic Committee says further study needed over Olympic bid', 2018).

STS Framework

Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) is the primary STS framework that will be used to examine the role of esports players. SCOT was first described by Trevor Pinch and Wiebe Bijker in their 1984 article "The Social Construction of Facts and Artefacts: Or How the Sociology of Science and the Sociology of Technology Might Benefit Each Other." SCOT as proposed by Pinch and Bijker includes four major components: interpretive flexibility, which is the principle that a technology or artefact can take on different final forms depending on the social context of its formation; relevant social groups, which defines the social groups with different internal definitions of the technology or artefact that contribute to its development; closure and stabilization, the moment when all relevant social groups agree that an artefact has reached an acceptable form and development ceases; and wider context, which examines how the development of the artefact fits into the grander scheme (Klein & Kleinman, 2002).

SCOT is used as a "research heuristic" helping researchers conduct more meaningful analysis of historical and developing artefacts. One of the main benefits of SCOT is that it makes no initial assumptions about whether an artefact and the related issues should be regarded as technological or societal, which is useful in a world where the distinction is often unclear (Smelster, 2001). Indeed, social construction can give us a way to suss an understanding out of the seemingly insurmountably complex webs of relationships surrounding an artefact.

According to Klein and Kleinman, major criticisms of SCOT city the inability of the framework to distinguish groups based on relative power, which makes certain questions difficult to answer with this methodology. Pinch and Bijker recommend that the framework can

be improved by considering the structure of different groups and of the systems involved in the development of the artefact in question, which remedies some of the issues of SCOT.

Despite its limitations, SCOT is a suitable framework for this topic because esports itself can be considered an artefact in development, which has not yet reached closure and stabilization, so there could be a great deal revealed through an analysis of the relevant social groups and their interacting structures. Importantly, using SCOT could result in a better idea of the best ways to address the needs of esports players and the industry.

Results and Discussion

It is clear that the role of esports players is not yet certain. It could be said that the very profession of "esports player" is an artefact whose development has not yet reached closure. It can, however, be said that society is headed towards a resolution where esports players will be considered similar to, but distinct from traditional athletes, and that this designation will vary depending on the esport in question.

Relevant Social Groups

In order to apply the Social Construction of Technology framework, it is important to first identify the relevant social groups shaping the development of the artefact in question. For the development of the profession of esports player, the following are relevant social groups: Professional Esports Players, Games Producers, Esports Organizations, and Spectators. The form and function of the esports player will develop over time according to the sometimes conflicting desires of these groups.

Professional Esports Players

The first and most obvious social group associated with the development of the esports player are those individuals who are or are seeking to become professional esports players. This is a demographic that has experienced massive growth in the last decade. For example, as shown in *Figure 1*, the number of professional esports players in the Nordic countries more than tripled between 2011 and 2016, reaching a high in 2016 of 54 professional esports players per million inhabitants in Sweden.
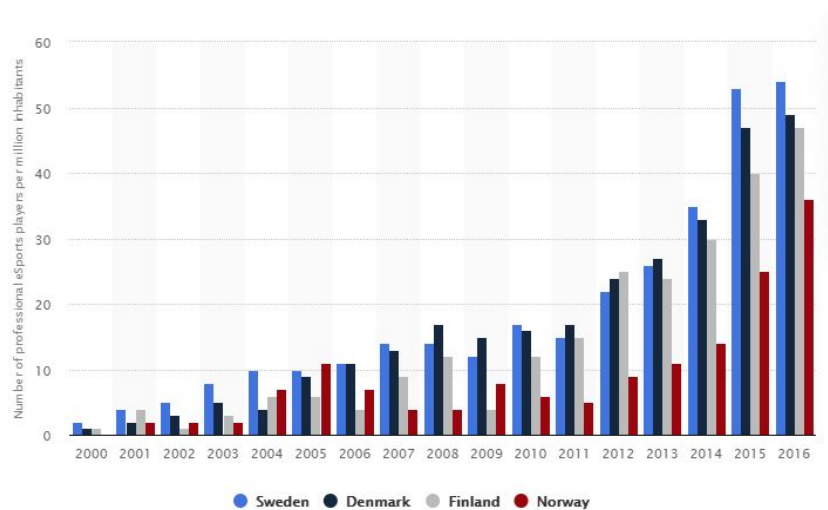

Figure 1: Number of esports players per million inhabitants in four countries (Unibet, & Business Insider, 2017).

This growth in the number of professionals mirrors the growth of the esports industry in the same time frame, from a 130 million dollar industry in 2011 to a 490 million dollar industry in 2016 (Yahoo, 2019). If this trend continues and the growth of esports professionals follows the projected growth of the industry as a whole, then there will be a significant number of people who can be designated as professional esports players, not just in these four countries but around

the world.

The interests of the esports players, in general, are simple. They want to be able to play their chosen game at the highest competitive level, and make a living. Of course each individual will have their own personal motivations, but every person who aspires to become a professional esport player will share those goals. So long as they can make a living playing their chosen game or games competitively, the artefact will be considered complete from their perspective. Unfortunately there are several problems that often impede this dream, ranging from uncooperative organizations to the problem of an insufficient pipeline to get new talent into the scene (Patin, 2019).

Games Producers

Esports players could not exist without the esport itself, thus another obvious social group relevant to the construction of the esports player as an artefact is those who produce the games that become esports. Uniquely from traditional sports, the object of the esport is owned by a legal entity. Nobody in the world owns or can own the rights to baseball or golf, but every game that becomes an esport is the intellectual property of some company. This has implications, because most of these entities are businesses that have a vested interest in leveraging this intellectual property and turning it into profits. Often, whether to create publicity or to sell merchandise, this profit making will lead to direct involvement with and even management of the esports scene around their games. The extent and manner in which this is manifested, and the relationship between the company that produces the game and the esports players is different from case to case.

A good model of a heavily managed, some might even say engineered, esport is Blizzard Entertainment's *Overwatch*. The *Overwatch League* (OWL) was founded by Blizzard Entertainment in 2017, presumably with the goal of creating popularity for their game by promoting it in the esports community. This places major restrictions on who is able to participate in the league as a professional player, as there is a mandated maximum of 20 teams, however these few players are each guaranteed a minimum $50,000 salary (Blizzard Entertainment, 2017). Additionally, the players are held to a strict code of conduct both on and off the stage (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019). In some ways this system is reminiscent of the American league systems for traditional sports, with each team acting as a "club", but in a much more restricted way.

A much more hands-on approach from the game owner is exemplified by Valve Corporation's handling of *Dota 2*. The *Dota 2 Pro Circuit*, which is Valve Corporation's version of a league is nothing more than a series of tournaments leading up to a yearly championship (Utama, 2019). With regards to how they treat players, they most often stay out of it. Who plays on what teams, how much they are paid, and what protections they receive is left between the players, teams, and third party tournament organizers. Many players who were not lucky enough to be recruited by top organizations have suffered without the oversight of the corporation.

Up until recently, this open, very laissez faire model, was the standard for esports, but more and more companies are starting to take a hands on approach, similar to Blizzard Entertainment'. Riot Games has recently announced their intent to create several new titles, with explicit intent to develop an esports league around each (Krell, 2019). This trend towards a less wild system will increase the stability that an esports player can expect from the field.

Esports Organizations

For the purpose of this research paper, the term Esports Organization is defined as an organization that owns and sponsors competitive esports teams. Well established organizations such as Team Liquid, Fnatic, and Invictus Gaming make frequent appearances in top tournaments. These organizations and similar ones either create or acquire teams to compete under their banner. They are distinct from sponsors in that they manage the players and teams, rather than simply using them as a platform to create publicity. Unlike, say, an independent team of players, an esports organization is a business with a bottom line. The goal of the organization is not to win tournaments, it is to produce revenue, but the success of their teams often facilitates this.

The relationship between the organization and the players will vary from organization to organization. Many organizations, such as those listed previously, will pay their players a salary in addition to winnings earned from tournament performances. In a statement by Jonathan Pan, CEO of Team Elemental, he announces that the players on his team will each receive an average salary of $61,500 plus bonuses (Pan, 2016). However many players are not so lucky, and less reputable organizations have been known to take advantage of their players. For example, Team Immunity in 2015 initiated a scandal by not compensating their players anything at all (Thursten, 2015). Or in 2016 when the players for the Dota 2 team of Wings Gaming stopped receiving their salaries shortly after winning a major tournament, and then came into conflict with Chinese mega-organization ACE (Association for Chinese Esports) when they split from the label. In America at least, it would also be difficult for players to attempt to form a collective bargaining body to negotiate with organizations like the players association that exist in many American

sports leagues because in most states esports players would not qualify as "employees" (Seck et al., 2018).

Spectators

Esports are primarily spectator sports, and much of the money in the industry is made from advertisements and merchandise sales (Maloney, 2020). This means that the esports spectators, the audience of the sport, also play an important role in shaping the esports player. In 2019 alone, there were nearly 1 billion reported viewers of esports, an amount totalling nearly 29% of all internet users worldwide and a 50% increase since only 2018 (Kemp, 2019). Most of this demographic is between 15 years and 30 years of age, and between 60% and 85% male, erring towards the higher end (Alford, Bundy, and Liggit, 2015). Esports fans exist all around the globe with significant communities in North and South America and Europe, but esports are particularly popular in Asia.

Despite the obvious differences between the two media, the motivations of esports spectators are largely similar to spectators of traditional sports (Pizzo, 2017). Indeed, if *The International* annual Dota 2 tournament can be taken as an example, the attitude and atmosphere among fans attending the event is positively indistinguishable from and at times even more energetic than a traditional tournament event (Garland, 2016). Wiid describes eight motivations for sports spectators in his 2015 paper "Sport Fan Motivation: Are You Going To The Game?". Of those eight, the ones that most affect the development of the esports player are eustress, which is the thrill of witnessing competition, and self-esteem, which is to say that individuals feel good when "their team" performs. Spectators want to see spectacular contests of skill and precision. They want to follow the successes and failures of their favorite teams and players. The

fanaticism shown by many esports fans rivals that of traditional sports fans. The fans want to see close games and to love and hate star players; in this regard, esports players can be very similar to celebrity athletes in traditional sports leagues.

Beyond that, the spectators merely seek to be entertained and to see the highest level of performance in a specific game. The players, in this regard, could be considered mere entertainers or performers. And indeed several esports, for example *Fortnite*, facilitate this view, being far less about the competitive aspect than about putting on a performance for the viewing audience (Smith, 2019).

Limitations

This research paper is constrained by several limitations. In order to keep the scope manageable, the discussion was restricted to only the *most* relevant social groups. Several potentially relevant social groups were excluded from the discussion. Prominent among these are such groups as Tournament Organizer, Talent which includes esports casters and hosts, Esports Journalists, and Sponsors such as Nvidia and Redbull. Analysis of these and even others would have provided additional insight into the issues. Another unavoidable limitation affecting this research is the time constraint, as only a few months were available to research followed by a few weeks to write.

Recommendations

There are several issues and perspectives not accounted for here that could serve as an interesting basis for future research. Among them would be the gender bias in esports. Over 95% of professional esports players are male, but among esports spectators, the percentage of males drop to between 60% and 85%. Research into the origin of this bias, and the difference between

players and spectators, could be revealing. Additionally, the management of esports varies hugely from country to country, and with specifically huge differences between the East (China, Korea, etc.) and the West (Europe, the Americas, etc.). Research focusing on these differences and how that impacts players could be insightful. Perhaps even directly interviewing players who have played in both regions.

Conclusion

The findings of this research are that the development of the profession of esports player has not reached closure. That is to say, the role of the esports player is not clearly defined yet. As they currently exist esports players can be defined on a spectrum where, depending on the game they play and the capacity in which they compete, they can be either more like a performer, or more like a professional athlete. As more robust systems are developed, delineation will become easier to define. In summary esports players can be thought of as similar to traditional athletes, but it would be a mistake not to recognize the abundant and meaningful distinctions.

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