Fired in a blog post: The End of Heroes of the Storm Esports

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Extended Abstract

Mere days before Christmas 2018 Blizzard Entertainment informed the community that they would cease producing the competitive esports league of their game *Heroes of the Storm* (Blizzard Entertainment; 2015) (hereafter HotS). This announcement caught many in the community by surprise and effectively "fired" hundreds of competitive players, casters, couches, and team managers that had been expecting the continuation of the league and the stable income it provided to the scene. As a direct consequence esports teams around the world disbanded their HotS rosters including players that had just fought their way the open division and an event called "The gauntlet" to earn a spot in this league. This decision by Blizzard to withdraw their support for HotS esports and to communicate it this way without giving the people impacted by this an earlier warning was heavily criticized by the community. However, this case does open up the possibility to critically examine the interaction of esports as an entertainment commodity and marketing campaign with esport as competitive and community-organized sports.

This research project asks: In what ways does the production of esports as a commodity interact with its role as sports and participatory culture?

The project is based on the intersection of critical media studies and core game studies research about esports. It uses the work of Prax (2015; 2016; 2018) which already draws on the framework of political participation which highlights the power position of participants (Arnstein, 1969; Carpentier, 2011, 2016a, 2016b; Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013) and uses them to analyze digital games. Player culture is here understood as a creative and productive in its own right. (Pearce, 2006; Pearce, Boellstorff, & Nardi, 2011).

Game studies also already has incorporated classical political economy perspectives from critical media studies and sociology with a focus on immaterial labour, playbour, and precarity (Banks & Deuze, 2009; De Peuter, 2011; Fuchs, 2010; Kücklich, 2005; Postigo, 2016) which will be useful in discussing the political economy of the growing phenomenon of esports. (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017) Based on this existing and proven framework this project will take the next step to include recent work on the business models of social media and platform capitalism (Chouinard, 2017; Deng, Cuadrado, Tyson, & Uhlig, 2015; Srnicek, 2016).

The qualitative investigation will utilize open-structure interviewing (Hayes 2000) with different actors in the HotS esports scene. The interviewees range from esports professionals like former professional players, coaches, team managers, and casters to members of the amateur community like players who attempted to break into the pro

scene and community organizers. The split between amateurs and professionals will allow for a comparison between these two areas of competitive play. Such interviews make it possible to capture in-depth perspectives and world views of the stakeholders (Cote and Raz 2015). The interview data will feed an inductive thematic analysis (Ryan and Bernard 2003) as well as a second deductive step with a thematic qualitative coding (Braun *et al.* 2012) where over-arching analytical categories drawn from the data will be combined with relevant theory from the theoretical framework (Bryman 2003; Ryan and Bernard 2003). The researcher has already conducted seven interviews, each lasting between 90 and 180 minutes, with a focus on the comparison between the highly commodified version of professional HotS produced by Blizzard and the grass-roots and amateur version of competitive HotS that continues to exist in the community. A second focus is on how the different members of the community experienced the cancellation of the league both in a material and emotional sense and how this experience has impacted their conceptualization of esports. The informants are former (prospective) professional players, team managers, and even board members of the biggest European and Norther American amateur leagues in HotS.

Preliminary results suggest that while professional esports produced by Blizzard has been a central part of the community, an inspiration to rally around and to aspire to, it had also limited the possibility of HotS esports to grow organically. The void that has left by the cancellation of the league is already being filled by a player-organized competitive league that has grown out of a collaboration of previously existing amateur leagues in Europe and North America. While this league cannot (as of now) provide anywhere near enough funds to support professional play it does offer community casters, streaming, and book-keeping of results with semi-professional production value. The way in which this community rallies around their shared enthusiasm for competition and for their game foregrounds the question weather a production company is needed at all for esports and suggests that there is a possibility for a different political economy of esports that is closer to the participatory culture of analog sports. This death of a professional esport as advertisement and PR might just be the birth of amateur esport as competition and participatory culture.

Further relevant areas of analysis suggested by the data so far are the survivor-bias of the discourse of making it into professional esports, the importance of trust of the community for game producers, and the way pro players consider the precarity of their profession or fail to do so.

Keywords
esports, political economy, participatory culture, professional gaming, amateur competition, competitive gaming, gaming community,

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