

# eSport and the Human Body: foundations for a popular aesthetics

**Simon Ferrari**

Georgia Institute of Technology  
85 Fifth Street NW  
Atlanta, GA 30309  
678-231-7130  
chungking.espresso@gmail.com

## **ABSTRACT**

Notable philosophers of sport have rejected connections between videogames and sports throughout the past decade. This paper argues against an arbitrary identification of sporting activity with exhaustion and resistance. It reviews work in cognitive science and sociology that locates sporting potential in distributed cognition and team-based cooperation. Then it connects that work to an expanded discussion of the aesthetic issues raised by Henry Lowood's talk "Players Are Artists, too" at the Art History of Games Symposium. This introduction to the application of sports aesthetics to eSports revisits Lowood's major theoretical sources to expand upon the problems they raise for videogame performance. It argues that there are obstacles to the popular appreciation of eSporting aesthetics separate from the particular interests of archivists and expert spectators. And it suggests that different eSports present different sets of problems, producing multiple avenues for the advancement of aesthetic refinement in eSports broadcasts.

## **Keywords**

philosophy of sport, eSport, game design, aesthetics

## **INTRODUCTION**

Contemporary philosophy of sport goes to great lengths to police the borders of the family of things encompassed by the word "sport." Recent authors have explicitly sought to curtail a philosophical identification of sport and videogames. Even among the community of videogame enthusiasts, skepticism about the possibility of "eSport" (professional computer gaming, also referred to as "e-sport") runs rampant. While eSports obviously differ from traditional sports like *Basketball* and competitive mental games like *Chess* in a variety of ways, their philosophical similarities and divergences remain under-theorized. If eSport is sport, then what kind of sport might it be?

In a classic text on the philosophy of human movement, David Best admits a Wittgensteinian difficulty in defining "athletics" while nevertheless excluding certain platitudes and equivocations; specifically, he argues against a co-definition of sport, beauty, and rhythm (1979). Further, primarily mental activity (like competitive tabletop gaming) is completely severed from the domain of athletics. Much more directly, Steven Connor uses physical obstruction and exhaustion as a definitional line between "game" and "sport"; he targets *Chess* and videogames, claiming that they couldn't be sport because they are no different when played in person or over a network (2011, 16).

**Proceedings of DiGRA 2013: DeFragging Game Studies.**

© 2013 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

One answer to this common argument about physical exertion as a necessary condition of our definition of sport comes from the field of cognitive science. Jana Rambusch's work on play and cognition shows how we might argue that, despite all appearances, videogame-play is just as physically involving as a more clearly "athletic" activity. Notions of embodied and distributed cognition hold that mental activity is fundamentally corporeal, derived from basic sensorimotor phenomena, and reliant on interaction with media and our environment (Rambusch 2011). Similarly, David Sirlin's expert analysis of the training and tournament regimens of fighting gamers provides a firsthand account of how eSport requires intense dexterity and physical endurance (2005, 56-58).

Earlier attempts at aligning eSport with traditional definitions of sport have focused on the importance of training, the emphasis on elite team- and skill-based competition, and "body knowledge." (Witkowski 2009). While these are key shared points, this paper also exploits a blindspot in the philosophy of sport. In his discussions of our appreciation of sport, Hans Gumbrecht briefly explains that what we might call "tool-enhanced" sport causes problems for most philosophers of sport (2006, 173-174). As Witkowski and Gumbrecht have briefly explored, sports such as horse racing, Formula 1, and marksmanship defy easy family membership among games featuring the direct physical confrontation of human bodies (Witkowski 2009, 55).

But it is my argument that the major disconnect between videogames and sports isn't one of formal definitions, or any degree of athletic rigor on the part of players. Rather, this gap forms as through the collaboration of (1) an outmoded aesthetic of the human body at play that focuses on gross motor skill and (2) an underdeveloped broadcast infrastructure unsuited to the particularities of digital play. Many of the scholarly sources for the exploration of this problem—as well as a number of potential answers—come directly from Henry Lowood's talk at the 2010 Art History of Games symposium.

His "Players Are Artists, too" (2010, see References list for a video link) expands on a former position paper about what Lowood calls "community players"—gamers who play for an audience, whether for the purposes of expressive performance art or eSporting activity (2006, 1-2). Stepping through Lowood's discussion, here is his argument with respect to this subject:

- 1) the performance of players is an underdeveloped avenue for a discussion of games as art within the field of game studies, which focuses on authorship (3:50)
- 2) James Naismith and Michael Jordan, the designer and the most famous player of *Basketball* respectively, are game auteurs of two different kinds (5:35)
- 3) Hans Gumbrecht exposes the "epiphany of form" in an unexpected moment when athletes' bodies converge in team and space according to rules of play (8:15)
- 4) digital games support expressive play, and for Lowood this happens when a game is watched and interpreted by spectators (10:45)
- 5) David Best places a gap between goal-oriented and stylistic competitions (11:50)
- 6) "impressive play" is performance that fascinates, transcending concerns of winning and losing, structured by the personal expectations of spectators (17:05)

- 7) casual spectators appreciate the beauty of forms and plays, but only knowledgeable fans see inner beauty connecting intention and execution (36:18)
- 8) in eSport, beautiful play is (largely) only accessible to insiders (40:38)

This introductory research attempts to fill in the blanks left by Lowood, while expanding on examples of eSporting fascination and the problems they raise. Throughout the discussion, we will take cues from T.L. Taylor's and Todd Harper's prior work on the construction of a pro-gamer's identity (2010, 95-102) to explore the potentials for aesthetic appreciation of the human-machine hybrid that competes in electronic sport. When complete, this research will both help to bolster eSport's claim to a legitimate place in the philosophy of sport while enriching the broader understanding of tool enhancement.

## SPORTS AND E-SPORTS

In order keep the scope of this discussion manageable, I will exclusively be talking about those eSports that have achieved a large fan-base and an expert level of play. Other types of eSporting activities have proliferated rapidly over the last two decades—including speed-running communities, non-competitive LANs, amateur web streamers or YouTubers, and local efforts such as console gaming clubs—and each possesses its own quirks and community values that I will not attempt to speak to categorically in these pages. Brett Hutchins identifies the target domain (professional, broadcast eSports) as the intersection of “the computer games industry” and the televisual “mediasport” (2008, 853-854). As Hutchins explains, “e-Sport is born in and of media, which alters the parameters of competition” from models established by traditional sports (2008, 857).

To begin, what does it mean to utter the word “eSport”? It's certainly notable that we distinguish their unique materiality from “sports,” but the aspiration here is clear: We think that traditional sport and eSport are, or should be considered, somehow on the same level (Hutchins 2008, 863). These eSports cover the breadth of nearly every major videogame genre. They have international spectatorial followings, high-money tournaments, rules and ethics committees, and their own “Olympics” under the banner of the World Cyber Games (Rambusch 2011, 105). Yet the “-Sports” label is still questioned by many.

Coming out of the forums and community sites serving the gaming enthusiast community, one argument against the “eSport” designation is that these activities should instead be called “pro gaming,” because “videogames are just games, not sports.” This opinion's explosive potential was perhaps best illustrated when an unpaid *Destructoid* community blogger voiced it and drew the wrath of many eSports professionals down upon the site (Sterling 2011). More delicately, the fighting game community that predates wide use of the term eSport continues to maintain distance from the label. Reasons for this range from a sense of independent historical identity, insulting treatment at the hands of MLG organizers in 2005, a wariness of the influence of advertising influence, and a distaste for the outward aesthetic standards of gentlemanly sport (Groen 2013).

Philosophers of sport tend to solve such family membership disputes by laying out sets of necessary and sufficient conditions for definitional membership. They might do this to include or exclude certain practices, or to build that definition into a greater theoretical framework, or to find something essential that goes beyond the acknowledgement that sometimes you just need to wait for a large enough group of people to agree upon what a

word means. Instead of enforcing an *a priori* definition in this way, let's begin with a few practical observations about the kinds of games that people call sports:

- 1) their rules and spatial layouts demand a high level of performative play, typically developed through many years of testing, modification, and refinement
- 2) they have been around long enough to see the rise of expert practitioners with skills sufficient to reliably separate their play from that of casual players (Ericsson 1996, 10-13)
- 3) frameworks and career models exist for a child's introduction into the peculiarities of the game, matching them against others of similar skill and ability (Ericsson 1996, 19-24)
- 4) people want to watch others play these games, and they may go so far as to build their identities around famous players or teams (Crawford 2004, 38-51)
- 5) broadcast media relay data about these games to fans who cannot observe live play, and companies willingly sponsors players and teams because of this (Crawford 2004, 130-133), and
- 6) infrastructures exist for the fair treatment of players as laborers, for collective bargaining between owners and performers, or for ethics and rules negotiation.

It just so happens that eSports fit most of those conditions; however, ending there would be altogether too simple. Let's directly confront a few problems posed by other philosophers.

## THE LIMITS OF EXERTION AND EXHAUSTION

Steven Connor presents us with a definition of “sport” that, if accepted, might end this discussion forthwith: “a sport is a game involving physical exertion” (Connor 2011, 15). Connor specifically denies the essential importance of competition or the display of physical (or mental) prowess. His requirement of exertion, he holds, “distinguishes sports reliably from games, since games may be played virtually or abstractly” (Connor 2011, 15). Connor elevates corporeal involvement and fatigue over all other qualities of sporting, maintaining that *Chess* and virtual games participate in neither. Connor attempts to refute Roger Caillois's injunction that the ludic attitude persists across intellectual and physical games by invoking the embodied character of conflict: “the idea of contention always in some sense implicates the body” (2011, 17).

Connor gets sport wrong in two ways, one philosophical and one sociological. First, he doesn't fully understand the implications of the philosophy of mind that he draws from. He asserts, following Bachelard and de Biran, that our minds are embodied. From here he moves on to the contention that, as cognition must be embodied, the mind is “limited in place and time” and the body “is implicated in the very notions of resistance, aspiration and contention” (2011, 17-18). He does not follow the notion of embodied cognition through to its fullest conclusions and accept that all “mental games” must then have a crucial physical component (regardless of whether or not they exhaust us). Playing *Chess* in person might not be physically exhausting, but the body language of a human opponent across the table flavors the “pure” strategic focus of the game immensely.

Second, this emphasis on physical exertion and obstruction ignores the important social dimensions of sport. For instance, the game of *Tug of War* enjoyed a brief period of time as an Olympic sport. Yet despite its heavy emphasis on confrontational physical exertion, which would make it an epitome of sport in Connor's definition, the game eventually lost its broad popular interest and status as Olympic sport, perhaps because of a lack of "seriousness" (Eichberg 2010, 185). On the other side of the coin, during the 1970s in the United States it was far more common for the average citizen to consider *Chess* a sport than she probably would today. At the height of the Cold War, the game represented conflict between East and West in a pure, idealized form, and coverage of *Chess* in populist publications like *Sports Illustrated* were commonplace (such as Fischer 1962).

In competitive videogaming, the ability to translate bodily action (clicking, typing, and button-mashing) into virtual action is known as "mechanics." Mechanics need to be drilled in order to become routine—one can't reliably execute tactical decisions if one has to think about basic inputs. This drilling requires physical exertion, susceptible to the same diminishing returns over continuous effort that we observe in full-body activities; carpal-tunnel syndrome, "Nintendo thumb," and ocular fatigue are just a few of the occupational hazards of a pro-gamer. There is inarguably a base level of physical striving and training involved here, but the rote listing of these facts exposes the weakness of defining sport based upon an arbitrary threshold of being "physical enough."

What this brief discussion reveals, though, is that we probably do find this basic fact of bodily interaction as foundational to the idea of sport, even if we reject the importance of exhaustion and direct confrontation. One can perform a brief thought experiment on this point by asking, "Would I be impressed by high level videogame-play if a player's mental intentions were translated directly to virtual action?" Take this excerpt from *Neuromancer*, which popularized the idea of cyberspace as spatially navigable, as well as the figure of the "console cowboy" or "keyboard jockey" that journalists overuse in their celebration of professional gamers:

"Lemme take that a sec, Case..." The matrix blurred and phased as the Flatline executed an intricate series of jumps with a speed and accuracy that made Case wince with envy.

"Shit, Dixie..."

"Hey, boy, I was that good when I was alive. You ain't seen nothin'. No hands!" (Gibson 2000, 161)

Dixie Flatline is a dead man, an old cowboy who survived numerous complete neural shutdowns while cracking corporate-grade ICE (intrusion countermeasures electronics) only to succumb, in the end, to a bum ticker. He exists now only as a ROM construct, retaining his hacking skills and hokey personality. The above passage predicts my little thought experiment handily: It is important to Dixie that the protagonist Case, and the reader, understand that his living body could once perform at a keyboard with the same "speed and accuracy" displayed by his ghostly remainder.

It is unlikely that we will see neural game controllers of a requisite sensitivity for the current performative standards of eSport anytime soon; if some day we do, we might have reason to stretch our understanding of athletics even further than I plan on within the confines of this study. Emma Witkowski argues that the best way to teach someone to

appreciate an eSport is through firsthand phenomenological experience: Give her the controller and let her understand the skill involved, the translation of physical intention into virtual form, herself (2009, 55). Similarly, Lowood observes that most of the dedicated fans of eSports also avidly play the games they watch (2006, 12).

While many people have a basic level of familiarity with how it feels to play the popular sports of their respective cultures, even if only at a childhood level, it's almost always true that they are also able to appreciate sports that they haven't experienced firsthand. I've never played *Basketball* or *Cricket*, and this lack of personal sensorimotor experience only increases my fascination with those games. This leads us to the next possibility for the disconnect between eSport and sport, which is a problem of looking. When we watch a traditional sport, what is it that enthralls us? Is this same aesthetic fascination present in the habituated spectators of eSport? And does it even make sense to describe sporting activity as beautiful?

## PURPOSIVE AND AESTHETIC SPORTS

David Best wrote a famous distinction between purposive and aesthetic sport (1978, 103-104). Purposive sports reward player effort only after the scoring of a goal designated by an explicit ruleset; in aesthetic sports, a more refined subjective judgment must be made to rate a performance. Appealing to a common argument that beauty can never have an extrinsic purpose, he denies the possibility of the artistic valuation of sports that have defined goals or scoring systems (which are extrinsic purposes). In the case of sports like gymnastics and diving, he argues that “an aesthetic sport is one in which the purpose cannot be specified independently of the manner of achieving it” (Best 1978, 105). This follows the common understanding of grace as being a state in which no effort is wasted. And Best admits that some aesthetic appreciation of purposive sport becomes possible when players “reduce the gap between means and end” (1978, 107).

Lowood argues that the gravity-defying layups of Michael Jordan and Julius Erving exemplify this gap reduction (2010). He also rejects Best's separation of the artistic from the aesthetic, though he doesn't linger on his reasons for doing so. We could, however, imagine a number of possible disputes:

- 1) it is based on a century's-old idea of artistic creation that predates the explosion of what Arthur Danto calls “artistically relevant predicates,” or the expansion of the “artworld” via art theories and markets (1964, 582-584), or
- 2) it fails to account for theories of recording media's effect on liveness, or it neglects considering that a performance becomes reified when captured and archived (Auslander 2000, 5-7), or
- 3) the notion of sport as possessing a number of “unnecessary components” (a *Baseball* outfielder standing for long tracts of time, to take an extreme example) is a critical misunderstanding of the spectatorial *Gestalt*.

This brings us to Lowood's idea of impressive play, wherein we must become more specific in how we read the personal experiences of individual spectators. In much of the philosophy of sport and athleticism, our tendency to become transfixed by athletic beauty is foregrounded as an explanation for sport's popularity and importance to society. Hans Gumbrecht's *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* is an attempt to explain what fascinates us as spectators, finding aesthetic continuity from ancient to contemporary times. In a chapter

called “Fascinations,” Gumbrecht attempts a typology of spectatorial transfixion. Three of these are especially relevant to the current discussion: *bodies*, *suffering*, and *grace*.

In his discussion of bodily beauty's importance in sport, Gumbrecht describes athletic physical beauty as “a shape in which the development of each individual muscle does not spoil but rather enhances a difficult-to-define impression of harmony” (2006, 154). He focuses on bodybuilding in this section, in order to comment upon the ancient Greek obsession with the young male form. He also connects it to the modern-day gym experience, citing Judith Butler's thoughts on the matter: “body sculpting, according to Butler, has the potential of producing an infinity of new and beautifully hybrid forms that move bodies beyond traditional male-female types” (Gumbrecht 2006, 156). For Gumbrecht and Butler, the transformative power of physical training is something that fascinates spectators and drives the desire to become an athlete.

Suffering also has a long history in sporting events. Gumbrecht makes another trans-historical analogy here: “Like Roman gladiators, boxers will win the admiration and love of the crowd only if they have been in the dramatic situation of facing personal physical destruction” (2006, 159). He argues that gladiatorial combat wasn't about the fight *per se*. Rather, Gumbrecht's historical reading places gladiators in unfair matches so that the true contest would emerge, the face and carriage of a man accepting the will of the crowd at the moment of potential death: “All sports that feature a direct confrontation between two opponents [...] stage a scene where composure in the face of gestures of destruction is the high point of the production” (2006, 164).

Gumbrecht's conception of grace is derived from Heinrich von Kleist's “Ueber das Marionettentheater” (On String Puppet Theatre), a fictional dialogue about a ballet dancer who is transfixed by the movements of marionettes: “Grace, Kleist makes us understand, is a function of how distant a body and its movements appear to be from consciousness, subjectivity, and their expression” (2006, 168). In this formulation, grace is a disembodied or even dehumanized appreciation of physical action that cannot be immediately tied to cognitive intention. This could well be the easiest aesthetic bridge to eSport, where the player's body is fragmented and displaced—instead of being the camera's focus, it might occupy a tiny hypermediated picture-within-a-picture in the corner of a computer screen (if at all). But Gumbrecht rejects the application of his aesthetics to “computer simulation” (2006, 174). This conception of grace also stands opposed to the type of beautiful digital play celebrated by Lowood.

## **VIDEOGAMES AND THE HUMAN BODY**

Now, what do people see when they watch an eSports competition? We can take fighting games as an example, because these have the most recognizable real-world counterpart. If we appreciate the rippling pectoral muscles of Ryu in *Street Fighter III* (Capcom 1999), we're doing something quite different from admiring an actual, sculpted human body—we're appreciating the work of sprite artists, 3D modelers, or texture specialists. There is no distinction between the beauty of these bodies under the control of a professional player and that same beauty in the hands of a casual one.

Instead, let us focus on the bodies of professional gamers. One's first impulse might be to imagine the sallow faces of the gamer stereotype plugging away in the half-dark of his mother's basement. But this stereotype actually couldn't be further from the truth: Gamers don't actually look like that as a rule, and some of the South Korean *StarCraft* pros could have been heartthrob pop stars in another life. Nicholas Taylor focuses on videogaming

bodies in a discussion of gender inequality in the eSports; he notes that, while there are competitive female gamers, the rhetoric surrounding the definition of electronic skill couches it as “the exclusive domain of male bodies” (Taylor 2009). A concrete example of the active construction of the male eSporting body comes from Michael Kane, who describes the difficulty of building a *Counter-Strike* team that couples in-game skill and the right “look” for advertisers and sponsors (2008, 185-188).

Returning to the aesthetic disconnect, it isn't that these bodies aren't seen, whether they're beautiful or not—it's simply that they aren't displayed or used in the same ways as they are in traditional sport. It takes an odd sort to be fascinated simply by the darting hands and eyes of a professional gamer, and this is mostly what we see of them (Rambusch 2011, 45-46). We look at the screen instead of them. In many cases, these bodies occupy a stage, but they're sealed behind plexiglass and placed on either side of the true attraction, the massive projection of their battle (Rambusch 2011, 105-110). The kind of mechanical grace that Gumbrecht celebrates is certainly present in their faces, but the experience of viewing this is quite discomfiting at times—it can push the virtue of composure to robotic extremes.

Another problem with the bodies of pro-gamers is that, because they are not foregrounded or used in the same ways that they are in traditional sport, they aren't treated with the same sanctity. To take one example, consider performance-enhancing drugs, the scandals they create in the traditional sports, and the lengths to which standards committees will go to test the bodies of athletes for their use. In an interview with *Gameplayer* in 2008, Alex Walker—who served as the director of the World Cyber Games Australia tournament—noted the problem of recreational drug use among competitors. Walker asserted that “nobody has the budget to bring in any form of anti-doping agency,” despite the potential for abuse and performance enhancement (Burns 2008).

This should be a major concern, because performance enhancement in the case of traditional sport has the potential to render the historical record of achievement completely null. We simply can't compare a drug-enhanced body's performance to a normal one in, say, the pursuit of hitting the most home-runs in a season (Gumbrecht 2006, 148-149). Yet in the case of eSports, where mental acuity and attention are paramount, nobody questions the use of Ritalin or Adderall or even cocaine.

Now it's possible to argue that just because the beauty of bodies is important to the appreciation of traditional sport, this needn't be mirrored by eSport in order to make the latter beautiful in its own way. This is true, though I would assert that it gives us reasonable grounds for distinguishing strongly between the two. What's missing from this discussion of bodies that might be found to be beautiful still in the case of eSport? Gumbrecht actually provides some preliminary answers: the genius of a human interfacing naturally with a *tool*, the innovation of individual *plays*, and the ability to hone perfect *timing* (2006, 152).

## **AN AESTHETICS OF COUPLING**

The EVO tournament, hosted each year in Las Vegas, is one of the largest fighting game tournaments in the world. One peculiarity of the US's largest e-sports organization, Major League Gaming, is that it excludes fighting games from its roster. Thus, EVO operates relatively independently yet manages to draw an international crowd of competitors and spectators. In 2004 the US-born Justin Wong, took on one of Japan's fighting masters, Daigo “The Beast” Umehara, in a match of *Street Fighter III: Third Strike*. Although this

was only the semifinals, it was considered the strongest match-up of the tournament because of Wong's status as the greatest player of "America's" fighting game, *Marvel vs. Capcom 2*. And it is important to what followed that a majority of those in attendance were American. The most vocal spectators wanted Wong to win.

*Street Fighter* matches are played on a best of three rounds/best of three sets basis. The famous moment occurred during the clincher third round of the first set. Wong played as Chun Li, Daigo as Ken—both considered top-tier characters (though it is well-known that Umehara prefers player characters with the statistically best chance of winning, the cream of the top tier). In the first round, Umehara easily bested Wong with two-thirds of his health remaining, adding insult to injury by throwing a "taunt" command when he could have completed a combo for an even more decisive win. In the second round, the tables appeared to reverse: Wong nearly "perfected" (a win with full health) Umehara following a surprise ultra combo opener.

The third round appeared to be following the trend of the second. Wong took an early lead, then whittled Umehara down to a fraction of his health with another ultra combo. This left Wong with no "power"—the ability to execute another super or ultra combo—but he was clearly in an advantageous position despite Umehara's full power bar. What happened next was baffling. A spectator shouted, "Finish him Justin." As if on cue, Umehara forced Justin Wong into a corner and brought the American player down to half of his health. This fed Wong's power bar some, but not enough for an ultra. Then, Umehara lofted slow-moving fireballs in Wong's direction, which were easily countered for small power bonuses that eventually filled up his bar. At the decisive moment, Umehara had a sliver of health so miniscule as to be invisible on low-res screens.

Wong faked a few openers for a finishing move, then launched into his ultra combo. Chun's ultra is a flurry of high and low kicks, finishing with an extra-high kick into the air. If it hit-confirms (registers as a successful attack), its damage is massive, and it sends one's opponent lofting into the air. Wong didn't need the attack to fully hit-confirm; it would be possible, even if Umehara blocked, to "chip" (the damage that goes through a block) Umehara's fractional health bar into oblivion. And the combo's final kick into the air makes dodging difficult.

But instead of dodging or blocking, Umehara did the unthinkable. He countered each of Wong's flurried kicks in sequence. Countering is more difficult than blocking—it requires the player to tap forward at the instant of a hit confirmation with perfect timing—but it carries no chip damage penalty. Countering Wong's entire ultra required rhythmic forward tapping while alternating between high and low stances, an impressive feat of dexterity even within training conditions.

At the end, Umehara countered Chun's final high kick in mid-air (even more difficult than a grounded counter). Umehara then heavy-kicked downward and entered into his own ultra, decimating the remaining half of Wong's health. What's wonderful about watching this clip with background noise included is that one can hear the crowd begin to cheer for Wong as he enters his ultra. Then you hear the air being sucked out of the room as Daigo begins his elaborate counter. The crowd realizes exactly what's happening and breaks into an all-out roar. Umehara had been baiting Wong in order to humiliate him, punishment for the American who thought he could take on the Japanese at their own game.

Daigo's victory here is an ideal study in the potential for broadly readable aesthetic

appreciation of eSporting performance. Fighting games take place on single-screen stages, eliminating the need for trained in-game camera operators and the possibility of off-screen action. More so than any other type of competitive game, the bodies of players sit unimpeded among the spectators (because there is no hidden information requiring a soundproof booth). Fighting gamers highlight style and swagger, customizing their control pads (“sticks”) and exuding body english. As mentioned earlier in this discussion, these are some of the reasons that fighting game communities reject the “eSport” label.

In most eSports, the computers or game consoles that play host to a match fit a default standard, like the specifications of a stock car. Yet most competitions allow players to bring their own interfacing accessories: arcade sticks, keyboards, mice, and headphones. In the case of a fighting game, sticks and pad buttons can be tuned for sensitivity (as well as featuring different shapes of stick “gates” depending on how one prefers to execute basic movements). Often these accessories bear the insignias of a player's team sponsors, though for fighting games there are deeply-ingrained loyalties to specific brands of button mechanisms (Harper 2010, 98).

Daigo's handling of an arcade stick is a YouTube genre unto itself, a melding of human and tool that fascinates. While his style obviously varies over time and between different games, one can identify some stylistic regularities. Daigo holds the stick more tightly between his pinky and ring finger than most players do, and he uses his thumb to fling the stick away from his palm with a tiny flourish. Amateur practitioners marvel at his “plinking” skills, wherein one taps two buttons in rapid sequence to the split-second timing of an animation frame. He rests between individual button combos in a unique manner, pulling his hand back further than normal after a plink. Despite the opacity of exact timings and special attack inputs, our appreciation here benefits from the directness of stick control in contrast to the keyboards of many eSports.

Although Daigo's incredible counter of Chun Li's has been immortalized and somewhat diminished by its reification as an unlockable achievement in the XBOX360 port of *Third Strike*, its precise execution at a live event marks it as a famous example of what David Sirlin calls a “Planning” play-style (2005, 113). Daigo learned the rules of the game and practiced counters to optimal tactics. He probably could not have performed the exact timing of his counter-play without practicing it privately. Sirlin notes that “saving your good stuff” backfires “99 times out of 100,” but Daigo pulled it off with no room for error (2005, 114). Aesthetically, Sirlin actually prefers the opposite of the Planner-style, or what he labels “Adaptability,” which we'll have opportunity to explore in the next section. In general, the planning/adapting divide seems key in the difference between outwardly fascinating play and the type of hidden-beautiful play of Lowood's discourse.

## THE PROBLEM OF LEGIBILITY

Most eSports aren't as direct in their presentation, nor as open with their information, as fighting games. Look at Lowood's celebration of Grubby's tactical *Warcraft III* mastery in a match against WelcomeTo in the 2004 World Cyber Games (2006, 28-31): In the second match, Grubby was behind in the best-of-three against WelcomeTo. Both played Orcs, but WelcomeTo had purposefully selected a weaker second “hero” character, the Firelord, in order to display his dominance. Within the first seven minutes of the match, the two players' armies skirmished. WelcomeTo retreated to his base with a town portal, but his Farseer hero died a few seconds later. The crowd cheered for this victory, but, as Lowood notes, only a few experts knew what had happened:

By looking carefully at replays, we can translate these events, which transpired in perhaps 10 seconds, into player actions. Grubby's own Farseer hero had earlier in the game taken a "wand of lightning" from a gnoll assassin while "creeping," and it sat in his inventory. When WelcomeTo's activated the portal scroll, his Farseer was invincible, but Grubby instantly clicked on his wand (or hit a key selecting it), moused his cursor over WelcomeTo's second hero, a Firelord, then clicked the mouse to cast a lightning shield on him. This shield would now do damage over time to any unit standing next to the Firelord. As Grubby knew instinctively, WelcomeTo's heroes would land together in their base; instead of finding safety, the wounded Farseer died from standing next to his charged brother greenskin. (2006, 29)

Now, Lowood is specifically interested in this brilliant play as an archivist and a storyteller. He is arguing that, reconstructed on video sharing sites and web forums, the intricacies of this tactical maneuver by Grubby can be dissected and celebrated. The story sounds quite similar to a classic sports narrative: the "hubris" of the favored player, the ingenuity of the underdog, and an unlikely tactic at a high-stakes tournament (Lowood 2006, 30). But read this qualification from Lowood, immediately following the description of Grubby's play above:

A spectator cannot discern Grubby's mastery of the syntax and tactics of *Warcraft* from staring at a screen. A replay movie cannot tell anyone what Grubby was thinking as he worked out his strategy; if he clicked on the wrong unit or randomly cast the spell, everything would look the same. (2006, 29)

From the perspective of an archivist, this kind of problem can be solved through careful study and narrative construction. But it points to a glaring issue for eSport as-mass-media. In the case of televised sports, nobody wants to have a play explained to them in the form of an amateur narrative, over a web forum (with a low signal-to-noise ratio), days or weeks after it has taken place. One wants to see what is happening and what it means right now, and a good broadcast should be able to make this possible.

I've experienced this problem firsthand, spectating match one in the 2011 Blizzard Cup Group B tournament of *Starcraft II* (Blizzard 2010) between SlayerS\_MMA (Terran) and IM\_NesTea (Zerg). Fourteen minutes into the match, I watched a swarm of zerglings, ultralisks, and corrupters overtake and slaughter the Terran army. At the end of the sortie, NesTea had a massive supply lead (a larger army) and a clear path to his opponent's base. But the Zerg retreated, the Terran army resupplied, and MMA made a comeback (GOMTV 2011).

This retreat made no sense until the announcers apologized after the match. In its dying moment, MMA commanded a Terran ghost to sap the "energy" of the Zerg corrupters (a magic/tech unit)—this made an instant march into the Terran base too dangerous, causing the retreat and precipitating into eventual losses in later skirmishes. I wasn't watching this match in a crowded, confusing auditorium with South Korean casters shouting in my ears. I was watching a subscription-based sportscast narrated over in English by two former professional players (in 2011, a full seven years after the humble days of early broadcast eSport relayed firsthand by Lowood). It was as if a veteran football commentator had neglected to mention an interception that converted into a game-

winning touchdown.

Other problems with spectating strategy games abound—including the long, boring, and nearly identical build-up phases in the first few minutes of every match and the practice of “GGing” or surrendering when an eventual defeat becomes apparent to the professional player. In the case of fighting games, the main problem is that the intricacies of zoning, frame counting, and making combos can be difficult to discern, even when the entire field of the match is quite legible. Team-based FPSs, such as *Call of Duty*, suffer from limitations inherent in a first-person camera. Watching a match wherein eight of the ten players wield the same general-purpose rifle, it becomes difficult to tell who is being viewed or what is going on as the camera begins switching between players.

I appreciate Lowood's articulation of hidden beauty and the virtues of the expert spectator, but I can't help but feel that this is a major cause for the disputes about the connection between videogames and sport. The next important task of broadcasters and scholars is to articulate and develop frameworks for making the invisible visible for a wider audience. Some efforts have been made in this regard, but they haven't been adopted by official media sources. Fielding et al.'s computational camera operators have delivered on-the-ground embedded reportage from within the constraints of an *Unreal Tournament* NPC's body (2006). Hoobler et al. developed mini-map overlays to highlight firing lines, supporting fire, and close-quarters combat in matches of *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (2004). And David Storey has implemented a system for the recording and delivery of the more esoteric statistics related to a *Quake 3* player's performance (2005).

These problems could be fixed over time, but the primarily Internet-based viewing habits and advertising (which doesn't pay as well as televised ads) lead to a chronic underfunding of players and broadcast infrastructure. It's still up in the air whether or not professional gamers can hope for a career of longer than ten years, if salaries and tournament winnings will ever those of equal traditional sports, whether there will be well-paid opportunities in coaching and casting for all of them later, or if their expertise can ever match the rapid pace of videogame development. Further, despite the constant increases in the size of eSports spectatorship, it is unclear as of yet how these games will be able to broadly overcome their status as niche interests with a hard cap on growth.

## CONCLUSION

My goal with this brief introductory review was simply to expand upon Lowood's theoretical and anecdotal inspirations, connecting his discussion of sporting aesthetics to other scholarly sources on the broadening field of eSports studies. Every eSports presents different problems for broad aesthetic appreciation, derived from the peculiarities of their rulesets, play communities, and relation to the screen. The next phase of my research will attempt a full articulation of Gumbrecht's and Connor's aesthetic frameworks as applied to a single competitive multiplayer game, *League of Legends*. It is my hope that a combination of expressive sportswriting and interface prototyping can make performance within a complicated real-time strategy game legible to all, while serving as scaffolding for the training of eSports broadcast professionals.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work wouldn't be possible without the support of my advisor, Ian Bogost, who went so far as to develop entire courses in order to help me research and discuss the philosophy of sport. Special thanks to Henry Lowood for his speech at the 2010 Art History of Games Symposium, which was my first introduction to the study of eSports and the

launching pad for my dissertation research. And thank you to the noble (anonymous) soul who thoroughly reviewed this paper for DiGRA 2013, providing me with more useful feedback than I could have ever expected from a stranger; I couldn't include all of the changes requested, but it made this particular version of my argument all the stronger.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Auslander, P. (2000). Liveness, Mediatization, and Intermedial Performance." *Degrés: Revue de synthèse à orientation sémiologique*. No. 101, Spring 2000. Belgium, 1-12.
- Best, D. (1979). *Philosophy and Human Movement*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Blizzard Entertainment. (2003) *Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne*. [PC], Blizzard Entertainment. Irvine, California, USA.
- Blizzard Entertainment. (2010). *StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty*. [PC], Blizzard Entertainment. Irvine, California, USA.
- Burns, D. (2008). "Drugs and the Digital Olympics." *Gameplayer*, 4 August 2008, [http://replay.waybackmachine.org/20080912034322/http://www.gameplayer.com.au/gp\\_documents/080804drugsingames.aspxcatid=Features&Page=2](http://replay.waybackmachine.org/20080912034322/http://www.gameplayer.com.au/gp_documents/080804drugsingames.aspxcatid=Features&Page=2).
- Capcom. (1999). *Street Fighter III: Third Strike*. [Arcade machine], Capcom Co. Ltd. Osaka, Japan.
- Connor, S. (2011). *A Philosophy of Sport*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Crawford, G. (2004). *Consuming Sport: Fans, Sport, and Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Danto, A. (1964). "The Artworld." *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 61, Issue 19. American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Sixty-First Annual Meeting, 15 October 1964, 571-584.
- Eichberg, H. (2010). *Bodily Democracy: Towards a Philosophy of Sport for All*. London: Routledge.
- Ericsson, K.A. (1996). "The Acquisition of Expert Performance: An Introduction to Some Issues." In *The Road to Excellence: The Acquisition of Expert Performance in the Arts and Sciences, Sports and Games*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1-50.
- Fielding, D., Brian Logan, and Steve Benford. "Balancing the needs of players and spectators in agent-based commentary systems." *Autonomous Agents and Multiagent Systems 2006*, Hakodate, Japan, 996-998.
- Fischer, Bobby. (1962). "The Russians Have Fixed World Chess." *Sports Illustrated*, 20 August 1962. Archived online at <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1074080/>.
- Gibson, W. (2000). *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace Books.
- Gretech Online Movie Television. (2011). *GSL Blizzard Cup 2011, Group B Match 1* [WebTV broadcast], <http://www.gomtv.net/2011blizzardcup/vod/66695>.
- Groen, A. (2013). "Why the fighting game community hates the word eSports." *Penny Arcade Report*, 13 May 2013, <http://penny-arcade.com/report/article/why-the-fighting-game-community-hates-the-word-esports>.
- Gumbrecht, H. (2006). *In Praise of Athletic Beauty*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Harper, T. (2010). *The Art of War: Fighting Games, Performativity, and Social Play*. PhD Dissertation (Communications, Athens, OH: University of Ohio).
- Hoobler, N., Greg Humphreys, and Maneesh Agrawala. (2004). "Visualizing Competitive Behaviors in Multi-User Virtual Environments." *IEEE Visualization 2004*, Austin, Texas, 163-170.
- Hutchins, B. (2008). Signs of meta-change in second modernity: the growth of e-sport and the World Cyber Games. *New Media & Society*, Volume 10 (6), 851-869.
- Lowood, H. (2006). "Community Players: Gameplay as Public Performance and

- Cultural Artifact.” Symbolic Systems Forum, 9 March 2006.
- Lowood, H. (2010). “Players Are Artists, too.” Art History of Games Symposium, Atlanta, 5 February 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVnUDWhCEpE>.
- Kane, M. (2008). *Game Boys: Professional Videogaming’s Rise from the Basement to the Big Time*. London: Penguin Books.
- Rambusch, J. (2011). *Mind Games Extended: Understanding Gameplay as Situated Activity*. PhD Dissertation (Linköping Studies in Science and Technology).
- Sirlin, D. (2005). *Playing to Win: Becoming the Champion*. Raleigh, NC: Lulu.com.
- Sterling, J. (2011). “eSports defenders: The reason why eSports can't be sports.” Destructoid, 11 August 2011, <http://www.destructoid.com/esports-defenders-the-reason-why-esports-can-t-be-sports-208512.phtml>.
- Storey, D. (2005). “User Modelling in Computer Games – Performance Measurement in Quake 3 Arena.” *Proceedings of the Second Australian Conference on Interactive Entertainment*, Sydney, Australia, 175-178.
- Taylor, N. (2009). “Where the Women Are(n’t): Gender and a North American ‘Pro-gaming’ Scene.” In *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory: Proceedings of the 2009 Digital Games Research Association conference*, eds. Barry Atkins, Helen Kennedy, and Tanya Krzywinska. London.
- Taylor, T.L. (2011). *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Witkowski, E. (2009). “Probing the sportiness of eSports”, in J. Christophers and T. Scholz (eds.), *eSports yearbook 2009*. Norderstedt, Germany: Books on