**The Games, the Audience** **and the Performance**

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**Introduction**

In present day, many individuals across the world play video games. Video games attract players for a variety of reasons, which can range from entertainment purposes to gratifying needs, to playing for the purpose of becoming a top gamer (Olson, Kutner, & Warner, 2008; Fernandez-Vara, 2009). In recent years, organizers and video game companies began hosting competitive gaming tournaments, which in turn have helped propel the formation of eSports. These tournaments draw the attention of live, as well as broadcasted audiences who spectate gaming matches among professional gamers (Wagner, 2006, p. 1). Professional gamers are drawn towards competitive tournaments for the purpose of passion, winning cash prizes, and/or gaining other rewards. With the rise of eSports, it is apparent that the dynamics of the video game industry is changing. This change is positive and demonstrates that there is value and substance in studying video games and eSports as a form of performance. Moreover, this paper will present a background to eSports, a brief overview of the StarCraft II franchise, and demonstrate how eSports and Blizzard Entertainment’s StarCraft II: Heart of the Swarm Major League Gaming (MLG) grand finals at Dallas presents video games as an area that should be studied as a performative medium. In analyzing aspects of eSports and the Dallas tournament grand finals, this paper will demonstrate how eSports successfully integrate players as both performers and spectators, while incorporating the importance of live audiences and commentators to the performance as a whole.

**Background to eSports**

What is unique to eSports is that video games, which are commonly played alone or with a small group of friends, come to be something that are viewed and enjoyed by audiences in the thousands (MLG, 2013e, 0:01:00-0:02:00). Moreover, to define the phenomenon of organized competitive game play, the Online Gamers Association began terming these competitions as “electronic sports” (eSports) in the late nineties (Wagner, 2006, p. 1). Wagner (2006) defines eSports as, “an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies” (p. 3). It is evident that eSports borrows from the format of televised sports in regards to the presentation of players, audience members and commentators. Moreover, eSports borrows from the word “sport”, with the addition of “electronic” as a prefix. In the traditional sporting world, athletes meet at tournaments to physically compete against one another while commentators narrate their actions and audiences spectate (in person or through television and online formats) (Duncan & Brummett, 1987, p. 169). Similarly, professional gamers will meet at offline tournaments, where commentators narrate the actions of players, and audiences (viewing online or in person) spectate matches during eSports tournaments. In contrast to traditional sports, the eSports athlete is a professional gamer who, during competitive play, uses a computer, keyboard and mouse in addition to his/her body to maneuver the technology. With eSports, players are both interactors (commanding actions through a mouse and keyboard), and audiences of a performance, as players must decipher commands in a video game and interact suitably (Fernandez-Vara, 2009, p. 6).

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In regards to the audience, the audience completes the performance of an eSports match by actively viewing, as well as understanding and internalizing the mechanics of a game (Fernandez-Vara, 2009, p. 7). Building on the importance of audiences, Richard Schechner states that if there is no one available to make sense of an action, then there is no performance (Fernandez-Vara, 2009, p. 2). Schechner’s statement holds true because, for example, if an audience were to become detached from viewing a StarCraft II match, then there would be no performance, as there would be no audience (live or broadcasted) to make sense of the gaming performance. On the other hand, a commentator also spectates a match, but with the purpose of informing audience members who may or may not be familiar with the game, as well as informing those who might have missed an in-game occurrence. Wilshire (1990) states that audiences are a group of observers and judges (p. 170). One can see how eSports commentators act as observers in watching, but also as judges, as they choose what to report on and what in-game occurrences can be overlooked. All together, professional gamers, audience members, and commentators present a dynamic understanding to eSports as a performative medium. In this aspect, professional gamers can be seen as performers and spectators, while live audiences and commentators are important to the dynamics of the performance as a whole.

**The StarCraft II Franchise**

With the release of Blizzard Entertainment’s StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty in 2010, the eSports world was redefined (Kuhn, 2010). Wings of Liberty was successful in giving the StarCraft II franchise the sensation it desired, as it drew in many players worldwide. The genre of StarCraft II is real-time strategy (RTS), and games within this genre possess a higher learning curve due to tactical considerations and can be ranked as more difficult to play over other genres such as fighting, multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBA), first- person shooters and sporting games (Clipse, 2013). Overall, StarCraft II can be played in various ways – from 1v1 matches to team matches and custom games. Players can play as one of three races: Zerg, Terran or Protoss. Each race has its own specifics and players must choose how they play, what characters they build, what strategies they choose, how to counteract their enemies and when to engage combat. In terms of competitive play, players compete in 1v1 matchups but can select any race of their choosing. The game is relatively balanced with units across all races being of equal strength, but it is ultimately up to professional gamers as to how they play the game.

**MLG Dallas:  Where Professional Gamers, Audiences and Commentators Collide**

The expansion follow up to Wings of Liberty, Heart of the Swarm, was released to the public on March 12, 2013. To kick off the 2013 MLG Pro Circuit, Major League Gaming (MLG) hosted a tournament using the new expansion at the Dallas Convention Center in Dallas, Texas from March 15-17, 2013 and invited players to compete for $75,000 in cash prizes (Camber, 2013; RTS Guru, 2013). The set-up of the venue consisted of a lifted stage with two soundproof booths located on opposite sides of the stage for competing gamers to occupy when battling one another. In addition, three projection screens were raised behind the stage for the audience to view. The screens were important to the event because if they were absent, the live audience would not have been able to spectate the performance with the level of engagement a live performance would allow them. Lastly, a commentator’s desk fully equipped with computers, microphones and other equipment was placed to the side of the main stage. Tickets were sold at $6.00 for venue spectators and the tournament was broadcasted for free on the MLG website for online spectators (MLG Pro Shop, 2013). In regards to the spectator demographic, a record number of audience members (in the thousands) attended the event, and over 130,000 viewers watched the online broadcast (MLG, 2013e, 0:01:00-0:02:00). This reach shows that audiences watch eSports tournaments for the sake of entertainment, while simultaneously gaining a better understanding of StarCraft II and professional play. Lastly, the Dallas tournament consisted of 32 professional gamers, but only two advanced to the grand finals.

In the MLG Dallas grand finals, the two professional gamers who advanced to this round included StarTale’s Lee "Life" Seung Hyun (team red, race: Zerg) and KT Rolster’s Lee "Flash" Young Ho (team blue, race: Terran) (MLG, 2013a, 0:02:30-0:04:48). In regards to player uniforms, Life was dressed in all black, bearing sponsors on his sweater such as Red Bull and StarTale. On the other hand, Flash was dressed in black pants and a white shirt with the KT Rolster logo located on the front of his jersey. In addition to the players, two commentators were present for the grand finals. These commentators were Sean “Day[9]” Plott and Marcus “djWHEAT” Graham (MLG, 2013a, 0:05:11-0:05:30). The job of the commentators consisted of narrating events occurring in the matchups between Life and Flash, while giving their input as to what may happen as the games unfold. Day[9] and djWHEAT were dressed in suits, much like the commentators of sporting matches. The professional attire of both the players and commentators displayed that eSports events draw parallels to traditional sports events, with no details overlooked.

Finally, the audience is important to the performance overall as their presence validates the aura of eSports as a performance. Walter Benjamin (1973) states that artwork, in this case performances, take on an ‘aura’ that can only be experienced in the unique existence of a place where an artwork (performance) takes place (p. 214). In defining the importance of experiencing the Dallas tournament in person, Day[9] stated that, “Fan dreams come true not from casting replays, but from seeing game play of players in person” (MLG, 2013e, 0:02:00-0:03:00), giving weight to the theory of aura as important to the wholeness of a performance. Live audiences are important to eSports tournaments because without them, a tournament would be incomplete and lack the aura they have come to associate with.

**Competing to Win**

In order to win the Dallas tournament, Life and Flash had to play a Best of 7 series. However, only six games were played as Life reached a 4-2 win, which crowned him as the winner of MLG Dallas. The prize money for the first placed winner was $25,000 from the $75,000 cash pool (Camber, 2013; RTS Guru, 2013). In his commentary during the opening of Life vs. Flash, Day[9] stated that, “They are not playing for just the money, they are playing because they want to be the best of the best” (MLG 2013a, 0:02:00-0:02:11). Straight away, participation for monetary gain challenges Caillois (1961) statement that “a characteristic of play creates no wealth or good” (p. 21). It is apparent that while Life and Flash are competing to be the best, monetary incentives are still a driving factor to gaming professionally.

In addition, competing for a monetary gain also challenges one of Schechner’s basic qualities of performance. Schechner states that of his five different types of activities that he constitutes as performance (play, games, sports, theatre, and ritual), a performance should not produce “money or other goods that can be useful outside of it” (Fernandez-Vara, 2009, Schechner, 1966). It is apparent that eSports challenges this rigid notion posed by Schechner, as what players do in a video game heavily affects their monetary gain or loss. As professional gamers, Life and Flash must conduct their game play at the highest strategic level possible in order to receive the maximum amount of monetary return. The rise of eSports shows the potential for Schechner to redefine activities that constitute as performance (to include eSports) as well as extend his definitions of the basic qualities of performance to include aspects of eSports.

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Furthermore, the performance of a player is negotiated between predisposed game play behaviour, as well as elements of improvisation. To join the ranks of worldwide top players, Life and Flash on average play 40 StarCraft II matches a day (MLG, 2013c, 0:03:00-0:03:07). In playing multiple games, each player is able to create numerous strategies, which can then be applied during competitive matches. In the Dallas finals, Life and Flash approached the start of each game with a strategy in mind. However, in game three, when Life noticed Flash using a counter strategy, Life improvised and switched to a different strategy to counter Flash (MLG, 2013c, 0:03:07-0:05:45). This example shows how connected professional gamers are as players and spectators. In playing the game, Life and Flash select options to meet certain goals, but remain embodied, as it is their physical self that puts motions into action, thus showing how players are spectators as well.

Moreover, during the Life vs. Flash series, the live audience expressed a wide range of emotions through the use of their voice, facial expressions and clapping (MLG, 2013d, 0:01:24-0:04:55). These cues from the audience, as well as ongoing commentary from Day[9] and djWHEAT, are important to the performance as a whole because it allows broadcasted audiences the chance to understand the emotion of a performance as it happens within its performative space. Audiences have the capability to transform spaces, as well as provide a two-way feedback loop while match is in effect. If the live audience and commentators were absent, then competitive matches would have no emotional attraction to its performance.

**The Trophy Gaze**

It is also important to analyze how an eSports broadcast borrows from televised traditional sports broadcasts. In traditional sports, pleasurable views of a trophy are often incorporated into the broadcast. Similarly, at the start and end of every matchup in the Dallas grand final, the camera focused on the winning trophy, panning in the camera from a top down, or bottom up approach (MLG, 2013b, 0:00:00-0:00:15). Made entirely out of glass, the trophy reflected beams of light, asking audiences to view it with awe. The trophy is positioned in a frame of wanting to be desired. It is apparent that the trophy is symbolic of an ultimate achievement in professional gaming, and therefore displayed in a desirable manner for the purpose of highlighting this achievement.

At the end of game six when Life defeated Flash, he was given the trophy. Hoisting it above his head, the audience cheered and stood up to congratulate him on his victory (MLG, 2013f, 0:21:08-0:23:10). To show his approval and happiness for his victory, Life kissed the trophy numerous times.

**Conclusion**

The eSports world is experiencing growth. This growth is visible through new expansions to preexisting games, the addition of new titles in various gaming genres, the addition of more competitive tournaments and more. In regards to the academic world of performance studies, the study of eSports tournaments as a performative medium should be included.

It is apparent that audiences gather (in person and online) for the purpose of viewing professional gamers compete in tournaments, which in turn demonstrates how video games are becoming an area of a performative medium. In analyzing video games as a performance, one must consider players as both performers and spectators, as well as consider the importance of live audiences and commentators to the performance as a whole.

The Major League Gaming grand finals in Dallas displayed how one may consider performers (the professional gamers), audiences, and commentators as important contributors towards studying eSports and video games as a form of performance. In analyzing the grand final matches between Life and Flash, the importance of each of these elements was highlighted. Although viewing video games and competitive eSports matches is a new concept to performance studies academia, it is only a matter of time before the rise of eSports launches this promising avenue into everyday performance studies. As a constantly evolving academic field, it will be interesting to see how eSports integrate in the years to come.

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