

**THE RELATION OF PLAY, FAN CULTURE AND  
SPORTS EXPERIENCE IN THE VIDEO GAME  
DESTINY**

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses how playing the video game *Destiny*, a massively multiplayer online (MMO) first-person shooter (FPS) with role playing elements, fosters sports-like engagement and fan cultures around the game. Similar to other video games in the MMO genre, one of *Destiny's* key elements are interaction loops designed to keep players collecting scarce resources and waiting for specific hard-to-get loot drops. Another key element is cooperative play of up to six players. This combination has led to a strong community both in and around the game. Using a series of four case studies, this article outlines how playing an MMO and FPS interplays with sports experiences and fan culture around a game. The case studies are reflected on in the context of game and media studies literature. The following links between play, fan culture and sports are identified: the Meta, where players gather and analyze data to optimize gameplay strategies; the magnification of exploits and cheating as a consequence of social exchange; social behavior in and around the game caught between optimizing progress and socializing; the convergence of multiple media channels blurring the line between active and passive game consumption; also leading to a hybridization of play, permeating real life; sports-like narratives and experiences; and competitive behavior that bears analogy to sports.

KEYWORDS

play, fan studies, sports video games, media convergence, hybridization of play, massively multiplayer online games (MMOs)

## INTRODUCTION

This article discusses how the design of the video game *Destiny*, a massively multiplayer online (MMO) first-person shooter (FPS) with role playing elements, impacts prolonged community engagement and fan cultures associated with the game, and how playing *Destiny* includes sports-like performance and experiences. Just like sports, we have started to consume games across a range of media channels encompassing online media, discussion forums, streaming and social communities. In this article I argue that a game like *Destiny*, although it is not a sports video game, contains aspects of sporting regarding the player experience and the fan cultures forming around the game. Playing games often contains facets of sports such as competition, fandom or mentoring – regardless of game genre. This article is an exploration of how my playing of *Destiny* triggered experiences similar to sporting and to sports fan experiences. Rather than a structural analysis of the game, the article discusses what kinds of meaningful sports and fan experiences can be found in the game.

I start this article with the prerequisite of expressing my subjective involvement with the presented research. At that time, I was an almost hardcore *Destiny* player, having logged 1,821 hours<sup>1</sup> of *Destiny* on Xbox One from 2014 through 2016. I put those hours in despite having (and not neglecting) a full-time professional life in academics and being a husband and father. It cost me a lot of sleep though. This perspective on the game is critical to the methodology used, where an auto-ethnographical approach is used to present an in-depth analysis of the relation between play, sports experiences and fan culture in the video game *Destiny*. I appreciate how video gaming can connect to real-life sports fan experiences, and how games can provide us with sports-like aspects such as competition, cooperation,

1. As of Aug 29th 2016; logged with the official Xbox App for iOS.

training and tactics. I have always been interested in how games can elicit emotions and behaviors which correspond to what I understand as a sporting mindset in games – heightened concentration and performance as a consequence of taking an activity more “serious”, while still maintaining the game frame, which enables explorative play without fear of failure. In terms of physical sports, I can relate to a sporting mindset, first from having played competitive basketball and later from doing CrossFit and tracking stats and body metrics. In the digital space, I have organized and partaken in Pro Evolution Soccer tournaments for more than 15 years. From an academic perspective, I have looked at ways in which Pro Evolution Soccer is a simulation of the real sport of football (Kayali & Purgathofer, 2008) and at how basketball video games interact with other media in deepening and extending fan experiences and sports narratives (Kayali, 2013). Crawford et al. (2018, p. 1) discuss how gaming experiences often also manifest by being narrated and states that “gamers often narrate their encounters with video games as they would any other experience, such as winning the Champions League in Football Manager becomes recounted by gamers like any other achievement.” Narratives have also been identified as important parts of sports video game experiences, basketball games in particular, in earlier works by Azzopardi (2015) and myself (Kayali, 2013). Crawford et al. take these views further by suggesting that any narrative stemming from a game can be shared and experienced in this sports-like manner. Also, playing a game can be a sports-like experience without an actual sport as theme of that particular game, or as Consalvo et al. (2013, p. 3) put it: “[.] even if a video game does not itself simulate a physical sport, the act of playing a game and competing seriously might constitute a sport for some people”. I share this feeling in my approach, not only towards sports video games, but also towards *Destiny* or more recently *Dark Souls 3* and *Bloodborne*. Poole (2000, p.8) also shares this perspective and states that “the closest thing to sport in video games is not

necessarily a sports game. Reflexes, speedy pattern recognition, spatial imagination – these are what video games demand.” Bogost (2015) further argues that sports video games, just like sports, escape narrow definitions and that they could be understood as adaptations of a sport to be played as a video game. Transferring this definition to players, I would argue that video games can also provide adaptations of sports-like experiences to players. These perspectives underline the sports lens I use for looking at *Destiny*, which includes media convergence, narrative, gameplay, cooperation, and competition.

Due to technical advances and the maturation of games as a medium, video games have become more integrated with players’ real lives (Crawford, 2012), in MMO games often to a point where the border between game and real life becomes blurry (Castronova, 2008). Also the reception of sports has changed as people check scores on devices on the go and sports events are streamed to mobile phones. Both, following a sport and playing video games, has gotten more immediate and also more related to each other over the last few years, as both games and sports have established a host of different, mostly digital, media channels that converge (Jenkins, 2006) and interact with one another. I described above how basketball can be followed through a wide range of media channels, including TV, games, and online sources (Kayali, 2013). My experience of *Destiny* was shaped through a similarly wide range of media channels: the game itself, Xbox live voice chat, matchmaking websites, online forums, Reddit, Twitch, Youtube, and fan sites. Video games, just like modern sports (Brookey & Oates, 2014), have blurred boundaries, with the game itself, its broadcasting and the discourse around it all having become parts of the fan experience. Nascimento et al. (2014) further found “a malleability between active and passive roles of users in live streams meaning that there is no traditional line between active (playing) and passive (watching a stream)”. For me, reading strategy guides

during work breaks for example would feel like an engagement similar to playing the game in the evening, and even an extension thereof.

Nansen and Apperley (2014) look at the hybridization of games, in particular interfaces between games and the real world. They cite *Destiny*'s time schedules as an example of games interfacing with real-time structures. E.g. the game resets its daily and weekly missions (which can be done once a day/week for special rewards) at 1 a.m. PT. Another example of hybridization they give, is the use of "paratexts" like cheats, exploits, and walkthroughs. In *Destiny*, this aspect is amplified by the strong online community around the game on [bungie.net](http://www.bungie.net)<sup>2</sup> and on Reddit. In her book about cheating in video games, Consalvo (2009a) regards these behaviors as part of a wider circle of player interaction with video games. Pearce (2011) explores emergent fan cultures in virtual worlds and also discusses their actions as "actions by players that do not coincide with the intentions of the game's designers". The line between cheating and players organizing themselves to optimize how a game is played is blurry. Using *World of Warcraft* as an example, Paul (2011) argues that player community efforts which generate and disseminate theoretical insights into a game on a meta level have changed how games are played and how game developers design them. When playing *Destiny*, I engaged with the community in finding and using exploits and explored the fine line between cheating and optimization myself.

*Destiny* falls into both the MMO and the FPS genres, combining the action of a futuristic shooter with role-playing elements like quests, loot, and raids. In *Destiny*, players take the role of guardians, which protect future Earth from the forces of darkness. Gaming website Kotaku also described *Destiny* as "a video game in which players travel the galaxy recreating the

2. <http://www.bungie.net> [last accessed May 30th 2019]

myth of Sisyphus” (Schreier, 2015). The quote refers to one of Destiny’s design paradigms, the grind. Grinding means to repeat an activity, while waiting for a specific loot drop. Similar to other video games in the MMO genre, Destiny is built around interaction loops designed to keep players collecting scarce resources and waiting for specific hard-to-get loot drops. Rauch (2016) bluntly calls this interplay the “workification of games” – as an opposite pole to gamification, meaning gameplay takes on aspects of everyday (work) routine. Sports also include routine, in particular in training. That way, my playing Destiny not only replicated the competitive and glorious aspects of sports experiences but also bore analogy to the tedious and repetitive aspects of training and slowly improving.

Destiny is built around cooperative play of up to six players. The combination of hard-to-reach goals and collaboration has led to a strong community associated with the game. In an interview with gamesradar magazine, engineering lead Luke Timmins (2015, pp. 43–45) said “Destiny is about [collecting] Exotics? No! That stuff’s an excuse for you to play with your friends!”. Yee (2006) identified achievement, social behavior and immersion as the three overarching motivations for play in online games. I have played Destiny in various social constellations – alone, with random online people, via online communities and with a regular group of friends. Playing with my friends not only happened online, but we sometimes also met and played on multiple screens with multiple Xboxes. Building on these different social settings, I explore a series of case studies with the goal of outlining how playing an MMO and FPS interplays with aspects of sports, the formation of an online community and fan culture for a game.

## METHODS AND RESULTS

Subsequently, I will present and analyze a series of four different case studies incorporating a game design and a fan culture

perspective. The cases were selected to present the broadest possible range of aspects of the game Destiny. The cases are exploratory and reflective. The method is based on auto-ethnographic approaches to studying virtual worlds (Boellstorff, 2012); playing research (Aarseth, 2003) in the sense of actively playing a game to study it; and more formal game analysis approaches where games are analyzed with regard to their areas of context, game overview and formal elements (Fernández-Vara, 2014). Throughout the analysis I follow Clifford Geertz's (1994) approach of *thick descriptions*, meaning that my own experience during the respective cases is presented alongside an interpretation that takes fan culture and sports gaming into consideration. One case study also includes a qualitative analysis of Reddit user comments: a thematic analysis is used to build clusters of topics (Adams et al., 2008, Braun & Clarke, 2006) discussed in these comments.

#### CASE STUDY 1: FLAWLESS RAIDER ACHIEVEMENT

The Flawless Raider achievement is considered the hardest-to-get achievement in Destiny. Only 7% of Destiny players have unlocked this achievement (tracked on the site [trueachievements.com](http://trueachievements.com)<sup>3</sup>, which specializes in tracking Xbox platform achievements). The task is to “*Complete a Raid without anyone in your fireteam dying*”. To understand the degree of difficulty, it is important to know that raids are the trickiest end-game activity in Destiny, designed to be tackled cooperatively by six players. On normal difficulty, players who die can be revived by other players. Only if the whole team dies, do they have to restart the section they are in. The Flawless Raider achievement is voided for the whole team if any player dies at any point of the raid, and you have to start the raid from scratch. I chose the *Crota's End* raid for obtaining this achievement, where a full run without any retries lasts for a little less than one hour.

3. <http://www.trueachievements.com/a189963/flawless-raider-achievement.htm> [last accessed May 30th 2019]



My own experience trying to obtain that achievement showed that it is very tough with a full team of six players, as this setup provides too many individual possibilities of failure, uncontrollable in a full run. After research on the Destiny Reddit<sup>4</sup> it became apparent that many expert players had found ways of completing the raid on their own (i.e. without a team). After several weeks of practice, studying tactics on Reddit and YouTube, and engaging in what Destiny players call “The Meta”, I was able to consistently solo the raid, but not without dying at least once during the later, quite overwhelming, parts. “Meta-game” denotes the use of forums and Reddit for researching the best weapons and configurations for a certain task and thus optimizing your progress through the game. The meta-game is exemplified by projects such as Reddit user *Mercules904*'s massive breakdown of weapon stats<sup>5</sup> in a public Google spreadsheet that includes lots of data that is not available in the game but is either self-measured or pulled from the official API (application program interface). “It’s great that we have such a big Reddit community, but one of our goals has been to make it so the game doesn’t require Reddit to play, or enjoy it.” said Destiny game director Chris Barrat (2016, p. 65), talking about the then upcoming *Rise of Iron* expansion.

In order to overcome the difficulty of the later parts and reduce the risk of coordinating too many players, a friend and I decided to go for the achievement as a team of two. After some weeks of training and failed attempts we completed the achievement, as evidenced by a Twitch stream recording of our final attempt<sup>6</sup>. We completed the four parts of the raid: The Abyss, a section I soloed with the Hunter character class, who can stay invisible for most parts with the optimal configuration of perks and equipment; The Bridge, a section where cheating is needed because more

4. <http://reddit.com/r/DestinyTheGame/> [last accessed May 30th 2019]

5. [https://www.reddit.com/r/DestinyTheGame/comments/4fops1/mercules\\_massive\\_breakdown\\_weapon\\_stats/](https://www.reddit.com/r/DestinyTheGame/comments/4fops1/mercules_massive_breakdown_weapon_stats/) [last accessed May 30th 2019]

6. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQomyhOzb9M> [last accessed May 30th 2019]

than two players are required to stand on different plates which (after some time) activate a bridge that can be crossed. The cheat, or “cheese” as Destiny players call these kinds of tactics, involves crossing the gap without building the bridge but by using sword slashes in the air to float across; the third section, Ir Yût, the Deathsinger, is a rather straightforward time critical challenge comparably easy for two players; in the last section we defeated the boss Crota – one of us was shooting at him to bring him to his knees (again using highly optimized timing and equipment as this is designed to be done by five players) and the other one striking him with a sword. We both consider completing this challenge one of our fondest gaming memories, amplified by the fact that we did it cooperatively as a team.

Securing this achievement can be interpreted as sports-like behavior on many levels: it included research, leading to tactical planning and then to training, both alone and as a team; from a fan behavior perspective it meant engaging with the community to gather all the necessary information and also returning something by streaming and thus sharing the experience; furthermore, and probably most importantly, reaching the goal provided satisfaction in a social setting just like winning as a sports team, and an emotionally charged narrative of overcoming highly challenging obstacles together. A clear sporting mindset was involved here, both for us as a team and individually. With this mindset we focussed on the achievement, which was an equivalent to winning in sports. Engaging in that sporting mindset meant to take preparation, strategy, and execution seriously, which means the activity as a whole can be framed more as sporting than as play.



Figure 1. Watching my teammate cross the Bridge section by slashing with his sword in mid-air.

## CASE STUDY 2: TWITCH STREAM CARRY – TRIALS OF OSIRIS COMPETITIVE MULTIPLAYER

Trials of Osiris is a weekly PvP game mode in Destiny's Crucible multiplayer environment set on a fixed multiplayer map. Teams of three engage in elimination matches. When all three players are dead at the same time (revives are possible), a team is eliminated and the other team is awarded a point. The first team to reach five points wins the match. The highest goal of Trials of Osiris and Destiny's pinnacle of PvP success is achieving a so-called *Flawless Run*. This means winning nine consecutive matches without losing. There are three consumables that can be used to ease this requirement to seven wins while losing once is allowed. After a flawless run, the team is allowed to go to the *Lighthouse*, a special social space with unique rewards. I have yet to experience this.

I have played Trials with a couple of friends, but we were never near good enough to get enough consecutive wins. I have become

a better PvP player over my time with Destiny (increasing my kill/death ratio from an initial 0.6 to close to 1.0), but despite putting in a lot of time I have never been really good at competitive multiplayer. Destiny also does not provide matchmaking for difficult end-game activities like Trials of Osiris, because the intention of the developers is that you should play these with a team of players you can communicate and coordinate with over voice chat. I have thus used online “Looking for Group” (LFG) matchmaking websites like [destinylfg.com](http://destinylfg.com)<sup>7</sup> and [destinylfg.net](http://destinylfg.net)<sup>8</sup> to find players to join me. The problem is that players there are either very casual, or they are elitist and look up your PvP stats on sites like [destinytrialsreport.com](http://destinytrialsreport.com)<sup>9</sup> to check if you are good enough. While looking for players on these sites, I noticed that some players offer to take you on a flawless run for money (mostly for something like 10–20\$); some good players also offer this for free. Playing that way is called a *Carry*, where a better player helps a bad player reach the Lighthouse.<sup>10</sup>

7. <http://www.destinylfg.com> [last accessed May 30th 2019]

8. <http://www.destinylfg.net> [last accessed May 30th 2019]

9. <http://destinytrialsreport.com/> [last accessed May 30th 2019]

10. <https://www.twitch.tv/realcraftyy> [last accessed May 30th 2019]

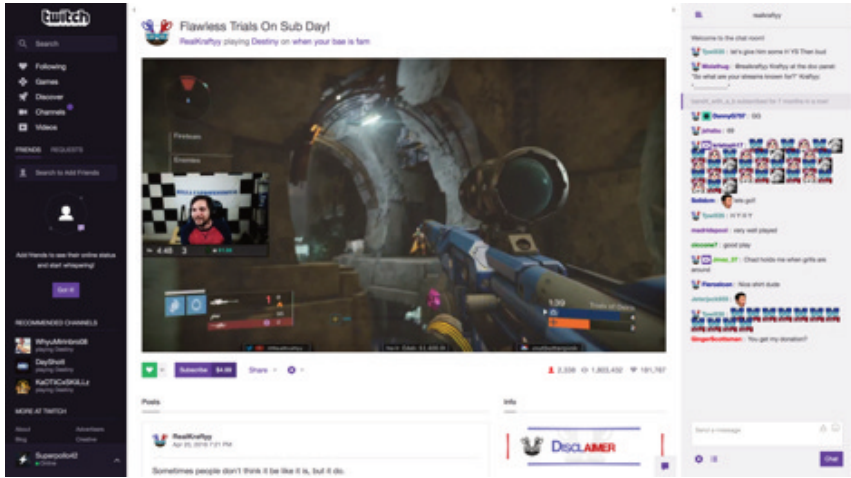


Figure 2. Twitch streamer RealKrafty streaming Trials of Osiris

Carrying players to the Lighthouse was also one of the most popular Destiny activities shown on Twitch at that time. To increase the follower count of their Twitch accounts, some Twitch streamers were also advertising *Carries* to the Lighthouse on Looking for Group websites. Some used a raffle system to choose one or two of their followers for a run. I have been lucky and won such a raffle. The streamer tried to do a so called *Double Carry*, meaning he alone needed to compensate for two lesser-skilled players, as opposed to the variant in which two good players would carry just one bad player. Initially this worked really well. Due to the streamer's high skills in controlling the map and putting the opposing team under pressure, we also experienced much more success in duels with other players than we normally did on our own. Trials matchmaking always tries to match teams with similar win counts. This means that with each point you gain, the matches are supposed to get more difficult. After having won seven games in a row we could not win the final two victories needed to go to the Lighthouse.

Engaging in this run felt sports-like in different ways: first, being

on the stream with a really good player meant a (still extremely rare) chance to succeed, thus increasing the importance of the moment and the pressure of playing well significantly – just like in a high-stakes sports competition; second, I played in front of a larger audience (~500 spectators) than ever before or after. Although people were watching the stream of the professional streamer and not mine, they also saw me through his eyes and judged my skills (or lack thereof); third, this live sports and fan experience was further emphasized by hearing the streamer respond to viewers' comments over voice chat, which we used to also coordinate play. Playing felt a bit like actually standing on the pitch during an important sports game. This feeling, emphasized by having an audience, is what made the sporting mindset prevalent in this case study.

### CASE STUDY 3: SHERPA RUN – KING'S FALL RAID

As already outlined in the previous example of the Flawless Raider achievement, raids in *Destiny* are high-difficulty end-game activities designed to be played by six players cooperatively. The King's Fall raid is a raid added together with the large Taken King expansion in Fall 2015. In its design, Bungie learned from the many exploits and cheats discovered in the previous Crota's End raid, and six players are really a necessity to play the raid this time. I usually raid with groups from the aforementioned Looking for Group websites and also with more organized groups from the100.io<sup>11</sup>, where you can make plans with people for a set time. But at that time we also had a clan of five friends playing together occasionally. While I had quite some experience with the raid already, my friends did not and mostly their levels were also lower than mine. We tried to complete the raid with a couple of persons from an LFG site but after around seven hours had to quit during the second to last section. Because finding opportunities to all raid together was hard, we

11. <https://www.the100.io/> [last accessed May 30th 2019]

then decided to find a so-called sherpa for our next run. Sherpas are experienced players looking to help others with Destiny's hardest challenges and can be found by posting on the Destiny Sherpa Reddit<sup>12</sup>. The idea of sherpa-ing is to guide players through a particular challenge, helping them improve rather than simply carrying them through it. There is a separate subreddit for Crucible (PvP) Sherpas expect players to be eager to learn and willing to listen<sup>13</sup>. The sherpa we had followed that mentality. Playing with him immediately felt like playing with a tourist guide, who points out interesting details about each place you visit. From the outset, he made clear that he would not carry us, instead leaving the difficult roles to us. He patiently played through the raid with us, explaining all the mechanics and thus made playing with him very comfortable and at the same time entertaining for us. The King's Fall raid's final boss, Oryx, has the most complicated mechanics and requires one player to be a "Relic Runner". Encouraged by the Sherpa Run, one of my friends who had never done this before volunteered.

The relic runner has to jump over a series of platforms in a time-critical sequence and with distorted vision (see figure 3), while the other players have to stand by and defend four pedestals. On the last platform, the runner collects a relic used to slam on a particular enemy. This leads to a sequence of actions enabling players to deal damage to the boss Oryx. My friend did a really good job at this, but the last boss fight took more time than expected due to real-world circumstances. While we were all located in Europe, our sherpa lived in the South-East USA where heavy storms cut his electricity several times. He needed to reconnect every time, and while we waited for his game to load we had time to chat and bond with him a bit.

12. <https://www.reddit.com/r/DestinySherpa/> [last accessed May 30th 2019]

13. [https://www.reddit.com/r/CrucibleSherpa/comments/3rmos4/how\\_to\\_be\\_a\\_sherpa\\_and\\_get\\_the\\_most\\_of\\_your\\_time/](https://www.reddit.com/r/CrucibleSherpa/comments/3rmos4/how_to_be_a_sherpa_and_get_the_most_of_your_time/) [last accessed May 30th 2019]



*Figure 3. The perspective of the relic runner shortly before collecting the relic on the last platform.*

Engaging in this run demonstrated both mentoring and being mentored, as found in sports. The best analogies here might be climbing or hiking. I had the pleasure of being both mentored by the sherpa we found, and mentoring my friends and teammates who had less experience. Playing also led to a strong bond, as often present in team sports, forged between us and the sherpa as we overcame nagging technical difficulties to still complete the run. In addition, through this run I learned about forming planned and ad-hoc groups for gaming – something that might one day become as common as booking sports courses. Similar to case study 1, there was a shared sporting mindset present in the team as a whole. This sporting mindset was accentuated by the shared, hard-to-achieve goal, the adversities we faced together and the structure of the team, which had a clear leader.

#### CASE STUDY 4: GEAR GRIND

With the release of the Rise of Iron expansion approaching in Fall 2016, I decided to embark on a nostalgic journey. Over the two years I had been playing Destiny, I had collected many



different armor sets from different activities like raids. A full armor set consist of boots, a chest piece, gauntlets, a helmet, and a decorative class item. In most cases, a specific shader that colors the armor set is also included. Raid armor drops in certain parts of the raid and often only on hard difficulty levels, for example only the final raid boss drops raid helmets. The gear in Destiny's first raid, Vault of Glass (see figure 4), was infamously hard to get. Drops were completely random with very low probability of getting a specific piece. This prompted the "Forever 29" meme, denoting players stuck at level 29 (30 was the level cap back then) because all raid armor pieces were needed to reach max level at that time. In later expansions the drops got more predictable and rewards like a special shader were added when you completed a full armor set. Destiny also experimented with micro-transactions, the Desolate armor set (see figure 4) being an example. Some activities (like the raids) have a lockout, meaning you can only get rewards once a week per character. Others can be repeated infinitely, the Grasp of Malok pulse rifle being an example. As opposed to grinding for cosmetic items like the Desolate amor set, the Grasp of Malok holds actual gameplay relevance. In the Meta it is considered one of the best primary weapons for PvP. With an insanely low drop rate, players meet up to grind for it for hours, repeating the same activity over and over.



Figure 4. The Vault of Glass raid armor set (left) and the Desolate armor set (right).

I posted a total of 18 pictures of different armor sets with different shaders to the Destiny Reddit in a post headlined “Destiny Nostalgia! Many different pics of armor sets from Y1 and Y2 with different shaders.”<sup>14</sup>. From the comments I received, I learned that there also is a Destiny Fashion subreddit<sup>15</sup>, so I cross-posted there as well. The fashion subreddit has a smaller audience and the post was very popular there, remaining on the front page for three days. Overall this felt highly rewarding, because of the nostalgia aspect and the community feedback. The original post received 21 comments and the Destiny Fashion post received nine. The linked image gallery was viewed 2,574 times. A thematic analysis of the 30 comments resulted in:

- 12 instances of positive feedback on the images. Notably there was no negative feedback.

14. [https://www.reddit.com/r/DestinyTheGame/comments/51nyz9/destiny\\_nostalgia\\_many\\_different\\_pics\\_of\\_armor/](https://www.reddit.com/r/DestinyTheGame/comments/51nyz9/destiny_nostalgia_many_different_pics_of_armor/) [last accessed May 30th 2019]

15. <https://www.reddit.com/r/DestinyFashion/> [last accessed May 30th 2019]

- 6 nostalgic comments. These were expectable, given the title of the post and its timing.
- 6 personal suggestions for me or other players. These mostly revolved around different gear sets and how to get specific pieces.
- 4 complaints about Destiny. These comments reflect the mood on the Destiny Reddit at that time, when people were mostly waiting for new content.
- 4 game-related suggestions and expert knowledge. These comments mostly were from commenters talking about possible features they wished for in the game.
- 3 mentions of socializing. These commenters were actively looking for other players to play with, in order to get some of the gear shown in my gallery.

On a fan level this was an exceptional experience. I have never had a reddit post with nearly as many upvotes nor have I ever engaged with such a specialized community as one revolving around fashion in a video game. Engaging with that community also meant immersing myself in the topics they were interested in, proper presentation of content and responding to comments. It provided me with unique insight into a smaller but very dedicated group of fans who managed to gather around one very specific and isolated aspect of a game with a lot of dedication. The sporting mindset had a different meaning here than in the other three case studies. While the first three case studies described a sporting mindset comparable to the one of athletes, this case study described an attitude similar to the engagement and mindset of sports fans.

## DISCUSSION

The above presented comparative analysis through a sporting and fan-culture lens of the four case studies resulted in the following thematic clusters: the Meta, cheating, in-game social

structures, social structures around the game, hybridization and media convergence, narratives and experience, and competitive sports-like behavior.

## **The Meta**

The case studies presented different community efforts on a meta-game level. Players publish analytics of gear, provide recommendations and guides for optimizing progression through the game and datamine the game's API to gather as much meta information as possible. These community efforts are mostly made visible on Reddit but also through dedicated websites and mobile apps. For game design, this means that loopholes in the design will be relentlessly exposed and exploited, especially in high-difficulty game modes like raids, and that balancing is very important. While Paul (2011) states that the game design of World of Warcraft is impacted by players' "theory-crafting", in games like Destiny, especially in competitive game modes, game design has to adapt to the Meta to ensure a fair environment. The use of gear needs to stay differentiated although there will be constant updates about what the optimal equipment configuration is at a given time. The meta is quite similar to what analytics have contributed to sports: a game's constant evolution based on data. While a sporting mindset of professional basketball players includes to only take shots with high scoring probability based on analytics, the sporting mindset in Destiny means to use the weapons, gear, and configurations established as the meta.

## **Cheating**

As the Flawless Raider case study has illustrated, there is a fine line between community-based strategizing (as discussed above) and actual cheating. In the case of the particular case study, exploiting holes in the game's design facilitated an interesting and very rewarding challenge. Also, both the Meta and cheating

are important subjects around which the Destiny community gathers. Some parts of cheating can also be seen as a logical extension of the players' optimization efforts within a game's set of rules. Just as sports optimize their strategies using complex analytics, a game's community will eventually outline all opportunities to improve not explicitly restricted by the game. As is the case with the Meta, cheating puts even more pressure on game design to either avoid loopholes or to quickly close them once they are known. Destiny became infamous because of several exploits that were not shut down quickly enough by the developers. One of them is the loot cave as documented by Nansen and Apperley (2014); in order to get loot in the most efficient manner, players would stand at the same spot for hours, shooting into a cave where enemies were constantly spawning. Exploits like this one are harmful to a game, because in an MMO where progress often is slow, they devalue time and effort spent with regular activities. Conversely, difficulty and slow progress prompt players to look for and circulate exploits and cheats. Cheating is more prevalent in games than in sports, but a comparison can be drawn by athletes in soccer or basketball, who explore the fine line between what constitutes a foul, and what doesn't – both as the one committing a foul and the one receiving (and potentially exaggerating) physical contact.

### **In-game Socializing**

In the two raid examples, for the protagonists Destiny has become more than just a game to play with friends. In fact, it evolved to a place for meeting and hanging out. Destiny and other MMOs share the ability to be hubs for social behavior. Raids in particular have the potential to bring people together due to their design which focuses on social mechanics and the cooperative play needed to tackle the hard end-game content. In the raids, Destiny's design also uses difficulty as a way to increase the need for cooperation and online discussion. Harder end-game activities do not offer automatic matchmaking, prompting

people to find partner players by themselves and to use voice chat. Following Yee (2006), especially the combination of a sense of achievement (due to tackling hard content) and social factors (doing it together) further attachment to the game. There are two types of socializing in *Destiny*, which are similar to sports and which are relevant to a sporting mindset: the formation of ad-hoc groups, and mentoring.

### **Socializing around the Game**

The motivations to socialize around the game are much more diverse. The case studies have shown that there is a lot of activity around *Destiny* on Twitch, YouTube, and Reddit. In a manner similar to sports fans also actively engaging in that same sport, players gather to exchange knowledge on a meta level (Paul, 2011); playing the game itself while also watching others play and discussing theory has blurred the lines of the traditional distinction between active and passive media consumption (Nascimento et al., 2014). Lots of services exist to connect players outside of the game, catering to different motivations of players looking to play together with others: e.g. scheduled sessions to complete a specific activity, looking for guidance, showing off skills or in-game fashion, or looking to have a good time playing casually. This has created a whole ecosystem of websites and mobile applications helping players maximize gains from their playing time on the one hand, and facilitating social interaction and staying in touch with the game away from the console on the other hand. Microsoft has even started to integrate a “Looking for Group” feature into Xbox One’s operating system.

### **Media Convergence**

In the sense of Henry Jenkins’ (2006) definition of media convergence as “the flow of content across multiple media platforms”, the above examples also illustrate how games have moved from being restricted to the living room to spreading

across multiple media and platforms. Game design has to consider media convergence by providing an API which allows the above mentioned external services to interface with the game. The case studies illustrated some of these services in the areas of matchmaking, gear management, socializing, stats tracking and the Meta. Further game design has to consider that contemporary games are not only played but also watched by an increasing number of people.

### **Hybridisation**

With media convergence also comes a hybridization of how we play games like *Destiny*. Above, I discussed the convergence of active and passive play. Similarly the case studies illustrated a series of concepts related to the workification of games (Rauch, 2016) – e.g. strong task-orientation, multiple currencies, randomness – showing the blurred intersection of gameplay and real life. These changes are not restricted to *Destiny* and MMOs and have prompted game scholars to critically reflect the magic circle concept (e.g. Consalvo, 2009b) which describes gameplay as separate from real life regarding time and space. The discussion points on Socializing around the Game, Media Convergence, and Hybridization all relate to the sporting mindset of fans rather than athletes, as described in case study 4.

### **Narratives and Experience**

The case studies show that playing *Destiny* can also create narratives, which can be retold and which are similar to (success) stories experienced in sports and sports video games (Kayali, 2013, Azzopardi, 2015). Following Crawford et al. (2018), these narratives constitute an essential part of the experience of a sports video game. Similarly, in *Destiny* such stories form an important part of the fan communities around the game, just like they do for real sports fan communities.

## **Competitive sports-like behavior**

Lastly, playing *Destiny* can feel like engaging in sports competitively. The case study on the *Trials*' PvP mode showed that emotions similar to those in real sports can also be experienced in a video game, especially when playing in front of an audience. These aspects of *Destiny* can be understood as adaptations of a sport to a video game (Bogost, 2015). Competitive behavior and thus an important part of a sporting mindset also manifests itself through studying tactics (outside of the game) and training (in-game).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This article spans a variety of aspects, bridging characteristics of playing an MMO game with considerations of fan behavior, sports experiences, and community engagement. Using a series of four case studies, I have illustrated that experiences within the first-person shooter and MMO *Destiny* can range from devising tactics for very hard activities done only by a small fraction of players, to cooperative and competitive play with friends and online acquaintances, to posting images of rare gear on a subreddit dedicated to *Destiny* fashion. I reflected on the four case studies in the context of game and media studies literature. Building on this reflection, areas suitable for describing the intersection of playing the game with fan and sports experiences and a sporting mindset are identified: the Meta, where players gather and analyze data to optimize gameplay strategies; the magnification of exploits and cheating as a consequence of social exchange; social behavior in and around the game caught between optimizing progress and socializing; the convergence of multiple media channels blurring the line between active and passive game consumption; also leading to a hybridization of play, permeating real life; sports-like narratives and experiences; and competitive behavior that bears analogy to sports. This article used an exploratory approach to identify these aspects.



Future studies have to deepen these insights by observing and evaluating gameplay and social interaction with a larger number of players.

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## IMAGE CREDITS

All images are screenshots taken by the author.