CHAPTER 15.

CHEATING, CONSEQUENCE, AND PERFORMANCE IN PROFESSIONAL ESPORTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper works to categorize and understand the presence and punishment of cheating in the esports industry. Whether it is newly signed team players being suspended for past offenses, or professionals being caught match fixing or cheating mid-game, there are multiple patterns of behavior that can be analyzed through the lens of performance studies. The analysis draws from case studies across the spectrum of esports games and leagues, and incorporates the use of aimbots and account boosting, as well as more low-tech instances of cheating such as screen-looking and match fixing. In addition to discussing instances of player malfeasance, the paper also analyzes the performances of game companies as they attempt to limit and punish cheating. The give and take between these two groups is a rich field of embodiment and restored behaviors that gives rise to a performance of fairness necessary for the industry's long-term success.

Introduction

In June of 2018, Timo Kettunen, known by his gamer handle

"Taimou," posted a tweet exposing what he considered a flagrant example of cheating. The tweet contained a clip of live video stream from a player known as "Necros" (real name unknown) playing the team first-person shooter *Overwatch.* In the clip, Necros succeeds in not only dispatching two players, but almost instantly turning 180 degrees and hitting a third player, hovering several feet in the air, square in the chest. This clip fueled rampant speculation that Necros was cheating, using a special program known as an "aimbot" to quickly lock on to targets as they appear on the screen. The *Overwatch* Reddit community quickly sided with Taimou, as have other players and esports professionals (Asarch, 2018; Breslau, 2018). Necros has denied the accusations vehemently and, as of the writing of this paper, *Overwatch*'s creator Activision-Blizzard has not taken any punitive action against him (Asarch, 2018).

The Necros incident is one part of a much larger performance in the esports industry, playing out in real time across dozens of virtual arenas. The development of professional leagues for games such as *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO), League of Legends, Defense of the Ancients (DOTA) 2,* and *Overwatch* has coincided with a concerted effort by these games' parent companies to stamp out cheating in its many forms. This effort, as in other professional sports, and indeed in any competitive pastime, is a quixotic endeavor. What differs from other such attempts is the almost unlimited potential for cheating enabled by game mechanics and gamer culture. This paper tracks and analyzes various attempts at cheating in both professional and semi-professional esports, finding not only a shared aesthetic in not only the instances of cheating, but also in the attempts to curtail and punish these incidents. This analysis is concerned with two areas of interest. The first is the actual act of cheating in games. While this discussion is focused on the professional esports circuit, it is difficult to entirely separate that experience from the realm of amateur gaming and the cheating that occurs

on the non-professional level. That is because of the second layer of analysis: the corporate reaction and policing around incidents of cheating both in amateur and professional game play. These two elements are in constant conversation with each other, creating a performance that is as much about fairness as it is about risk and reward.

Performance and Cheating

The utilization of performance studies methodology is critical to this analysis. The act of playing video games is an exercise in embodiment. As players boot up their computers or consoles, their relationships to their digital avatars are governed by similar principles as those between an actor and a character. Players embody what Diana Taylor (2003) would call the repertoire; acts that carry specific meanings and are produced and reproduced as part of a cultural transmission (p. 20). Much of this transmission is ephemeral, but it is precisely that ephemerality that performance studies has been designed to analyze. By approaching the behaviors of both gamers and game companies as performances embodying some form of cultural transmission, valuable avenues of thought are opened up into the discussion of future action. As this paper progresses, these avenues will be developed to encompass how cheating alters the repertoire of actions available to players.

Most modern methods of cheating in video games generally involve some form of identifiable manipulations of the program. One of the most common of these manipulations are "aimbots." These are a subset of cheat programs that alter the code of the game itself, providing players who use them the ability to lock on to an opponent's avatar with a speed otherwise only possible through sheer luck (Consalvo, 2007, p.119). Viewers unfamiliar with the mechanics being manipulated may not be able to identify what is going on, but regular players of the game can identify the aesthetic differences created by the aimbot. Aimbots

are found in most games involving serious hand-eye coordination, such as *CS:GO* or *Overwatch*. They are fairly easy to find and download but are usually suspect enough for concerned parties to identify them.

Aimbots are often exploited in a games' amateur multiplayer servers, but there are incidents of them making their way to professional use. For example, on October 19, 2018, during a *Counter-Strike:Global Offensive* tournament match between Revolution and OpTic India, referees called a halt to the game after some unusual play from OpTic India's Nikhil Kumawat, a.k.a. 'Forsaken.' Video of the incident shows a referee examining Kumawat's computer for a few moments before Kumawat hurriedly attempts to delete a file before the referee's very eyes. Based on Kumawat's match performance and his subsequent actions, referees concluded that the file was an aimbot (Good, 2018). Forsaken's digital embodiment was influenced by the artificial enhancement of the bot, and it is this artificiality that creates the aesthetic of cheating. Part of the fun of online gaming is that every avatar represents another human being in all their imperfections. Practice does not inherently make perfect in gaming. A player like Necros, mentioned in above for his almost "perfect" reactions, may have racked up hundreds of hours honing his skills with a specific character, but his movements are still bound by his own reflexes and the reaction time in moving impulses from his hardware (mouse, keyboard) to the software (avatar). When these imperfections are seemingly removed, as was the case with both Necros and Kumawat, it gives the impression of playing against someone who could not possibly be as good as they are. For casual players, this transitions the game aesthetic from something enjoyable to something tedious, and it is thus to be avoided. For professional players, it transitions the experience from a fair contest between individuals to a contest of human against machine.

In addition to the use of aimbots and other programs, there are more low-tech ways for players to cheat, even at high levels of team play. In a 2012 tournament, members of the *League of Legends* professional team Azubu Frost were caught observing the spectator view of their game, allowing the team an obstructed view of their opponent's positioning (Hafer, 2012). More subtle types of cheating, such as match fixing, are not uncommon in professional esports. In 2015, a large scale match-fixing conspiracy was uncovered amongst the Korean *Starcraft* leagues. Some of the highest profile players in the country were implicated, and several were arrested, tried, and convicted for throwing games (Godfrey, 2018). Still perhaps the most unique methods of cheating in esports is known as "boosting." This is a type of permitted identity theft, where a particularly skilled player logs in to another player's account and poses as that player in order to boost their in-game rating. This is a widespread problem amongst the various leagues for *Overwatch*, where multiple members of the Overwatch League (OWL) have been found to have engaged in this behavior during their earlier careers (Overwatchleague.com, 2019). These alternative methods of cheating represent a fundamental violation to the ethics of a fair and balanced game environment, thereby altering the aesthetic value and experience of other players and viewers of the games.

For the study of performance, boosting perhaps provides one of the most intriguing case studies in this field, as the act itself has no ready analog comparison. Usain Bolt could not show up to a high school track meet and reasonably claim he was a student on the team, even if he had their jersey, ID number, or any other methods the school would use to track a student. However, just such a thing can occur in the virtual world. This act raises questions over not only the ethics of this act, but also what it means for the one-to-one relationship assumed between player and avatar. Boosting also represents a fundamental shift in the

economics of gameplay. To borrow a term from Mia Consalvo (2007), boosting disrupts the accumulation of "game capital," where players eager to improve their abilities, and thus their stature in the community, can take advantage of a loophole in their relationship to their digital body (p. 38). The digital performance that goes on between the players is linked to the assumption that everyone plays by the same rules, and that the game's mechanics are the final arbitrator of those rules. In adopting a digital embodiment that is not their own, boosters demonstrate the malleable nature of this performance.

Embodiment

At the core of these instances of cheating, there is an aesthetic of embodiment that marks them out. In the analog methods of cheating, this embodiment is found in actions as simple as looking up from a screen. A player's embodied actions are, if not predictable, very orthodox, and when a player deviates from them, it changes their performance. The same can be said for match throwing. As in other professional sports, the embodiment of the player changes when they are purposefully holding themselves back. The most interesting of these examples is in the digital embodiment altered by bots. Ian Bryce Jones refers to the relationship between avatar and player as a *dehiscent performance,* built on "(the) uneasy collaboration between human and machine" (Jones, 2016, p.89). The player's input into the game is not all that goes into digital embodiment; it must be read, understood, and translated into impulses through the game's software. This collaboration has a chance to burst open at any moment, leading to the avatar embodying an action unintended by the player. Jones sees this performance as a spectrum, with some games attempting to exploit this effect for comic benefit by giving the player *too* much control over their avatar. As mentioned earlier, the aimbots give an impression of perfection to the player's movements. By removing the possibility of player error, aimbots are intended to

to "sew up" this dehiscence, turning the player's inputs into an extension of the game's mechanics, rather than a cooperative partner. This sewing up is what creates the aesthetic that stands out as suspect amongst experienced players. This approach to the aesthetic of cheating can be applied to a wide variety of expected cheating encounters.

In addition to instances of alleged and definite cheating, this analysis lends itself to understanding situations where players have been cleared of cheating. In 2016, Se-yeon Kim, known by her gamer tag "Geguri," was accused of using an aimbot, first by an online user and then by several other competitive players during an *Overwatch* event. After several days of controversy, Geguri was recorded by a Korean gaming site while she played in sterile test conditions, proving that she, in fact, was not cheating (Ashcraft, 2016). Geguri's ordeal is certainly framed by the rampant sexism that exists in the gaming community at large, but the accusations leveled against her are very telling. Geguri's digital embodiment was so lacking in dehiscence that it began to mirror an artificial performance. While some performance traditions greatly value precision of movement and bodily control, professional gaming is not one of them. Though precision in performance is valued, too much precision leads to the suspicion of cheating. Geguri's skill seemingly proves that this performance is not so much a demonstrative fact, but rather an objective judgement from outside observers. The same could be said for the experience of Necros in 2018: his skill and performance has been called into question based on an outside judgement.

Policing Cheaters

Standing in conflict with those who cheat at these games are the companies who attempt to prevent and police cheaters. These efforts are largely focused on stopping pirated copies of games and regulating the game experiences of online communities.

Mia Consalvo points out that companies concern themselves with these incidents due to the financial concerns that they represent. If it becomes clear that a game that relies on online play can be corrupted or manipulated by cheaters, it could lead to a reduction of sales and the long term health of the game and its community (Consalvo, 2007, p. 129). To this end, companies use many methods to identify cheating and to punish it. In her analysis of these methods, Consalvo demonstrates that the categories and identifications of what is considered cheating are constantly being refined. The codification of these behaviors ties into the performance and behaviors associated with good play and bad play (Consalvo, 2007, p. 147). These reinforced behaviors are not limited to the experience of the gamer; they also indicate future reaction and performance by, for lack of a better term, the cheat police. When a certain behavior is banned or met with punitive action, it stands to reason that that same behavior should be met with the same reaction in every instance across games. In exploring further, this may be the case in the amateur world, but is not in the professional scene.

Punishments for being caught cheating vary greatly based on not only the offense, but also the league or even government handing down the sentence. Players found cheating in the amateur servers of these games, either casually or in competitive leagues, are given a lifetime ban on their game account. In the case of Nikhil Kumawat, his team, OpTic India, was immediately disqualified from the tournament. Shortly thereafter, the team terminated Kumawat's contract and dissolved, while the Esports Integrity Coalition handed him a five-year ban on playing any games sanctioned by the Coalition. It's worth noting that this was Kumawat's second offense for cheating using foreign code, and he had faced a lifetime ban (Chalk, 2018). The Azubu Forrest team were fined $30,000, around 20% of their winnings, for their violation. However, they were still allowed to continue in their tournament, based on the

evaluation from Riot games that the incident was not the deciding factor in Azubu's win (Hafer, 2012). For the Overwatch League, a Discipline Tracker was set up to record all infractions and punishments handed down to their players. Those found to have boosted before being signed to their teams were suspended for two games, but had otherwise no further repercussions. In South Korea, a 2018 law made the practice of boosting for profit illegal, with sentences ranging from fines the equivalent of $18,000 to up to two years in prison (Padilla, 2018). These reactions demonstrate a very real and very concerted effort to stomp down on the potential of cheating. The potential prospect of prison time is a strong motivator away from illicit or unethical behavior, particularly for something so mundane as being paid to log into someone else's account. These punishments all represent serious financial risks for those who engage in cheating, particularly at the higher levels of play.

These accounts of financial reports are linked to the aesthetic of cheating through the risks they represent to the parties involved. To better understand these risks within their context, it is useful to consider Ulrich Beck's risk calculus. In *World at Risk,* Beck (2007) proposes a series of definitions to establish who is responsible for risk and security in an increasingly industrialized and ecologically hazardous world. Beck's initial argument presupposes a "risk calculus" that emerges out of a desire to quantify and balance a capitalist concern for profit with the very real potential for catastrophic reaction to the search for that profit (Beck, 2007, p. 7). While Beck concerns himself with large scale human endeavors and the consequences (mass industrialization, nuclear catastrophe, impeding ecological collapse, etc.), this risk calculus can be applied to endeavors with much lower stakes, such as the game and gamble of investment as it relates to esports. Activision-Blizzard, Riot Games, and their fellow game companies are balancing the potential catastrophe of a market collapse with the possible

earnings that are represented not only by hooking large investors into their leagues but also the promotion of their games to an admiring audience. People that watch the Overwatch League will likely want to play *Overwatch* itself, and if they do already, may want to engage in the further in-game micro-transactions that continue to line Activision-Blizzard's pockets after the initial sale. Failure of these leagues would do the opposite: depress sales and drive away potential revenue. This is the knife edge that most large ventures teeter on, but for esports, there is the additional element of the players and the potential for player behavior to influence the success or failure of the leagues.

Within this push and pull between game companies, game consumers, and the financial backers of their leagues, there is a stage of performance. The professional players are as much responsible for the success of the league as the reverse, and if and when they are found cheating they throw the legitimacy of the venture into question. The same is true of amateur players found cheating, only instead they throw the legitimacy of the game itself into doubt. This creates the motivations and obstacles for the game companies to find and punish cheaters quickly, to demonstrate a commitment to fairness not only for the legions of "honest" players who represent day to day success for these companies, but also to the current and potential investors in their leagues. This is the performance that is sold, but as has been discussed within this essay, it is a dehiscent performance. The ruptures of the performance occur along the seams of identifying cheating and meting out some form of punishment. While that punishment seems quick and easy to dispense in the case of amateur gamers, professional gamers are a more complicated image. Some of these gamers, such as Forsaken or the Starcraft match fixers in Korea, have been made an example of for the benefit of the public. Others, such as the Azubu Forest team or the various players found to have boosted

before joining OWL, have received minor slaps on the wrist and were allowed to continue. Players accused of cheating, such as Geguri and Necros, have also been met with fractious responses, ranging from having to prove their skill to facing no punishment outside the court of public opinion. This range of reaction demonstrates that there is, as Consalvo reminds us, no single way to define cheating, despite what the appearance of "fairness" may suggest. Rather, there is only the performance of "fairness," enacted to demonstrate a legitimacy and reinforce the trust between company, consumer, and investor.

Further evidence of this performance may be found in the apparent lack of cheating in the Overwatch League. Rod Breslau, a long time esports journalist and reporter, tweeted on the notable absence of any incidents in OWL that match the brazenness of incidents from the CS:GO professional leagues (ironically, his tweet came only days before Forsaken's scandal). His argument is based on the stakes of the league: with so much money being offered up to players, the chances of no one actually cheating in any level of professional play in *Overwatch* is exceedingly low. Joe O'Brien (2018), reporting on Breslau's claims, highlights Activision-Blizzard's stringent equipment controls as a possible reason for this lack of high profile incidents of cheating. While the money at stake for players would prove a compelling reason to risk cheating on the public stage, Breslau's claims hold an unintended explanation as to why there have been no major cheating scandals. For the legitimacy of the league and the appearance of trust, the performance of fairness needs to be upheld even against the potential accusations that not everything can be fair. In a sense, Activision-Blizzard find themselves in the same situation as Necros: their performance of fairness is just too good to be true, but as long as they are not required to prove it, their word is all critics have to go on.

Conclusion

In articles, blogs, and forum posts commenting on the presence of cheating in esports, the authors lament the seemingly irrational attempts of these young e-athletes at trying to game the system. When they are caught, these players face either substantial fines, long suspensions, or both. This can potentially end the careers of these individuals, and even more severe punishments are forthcoming. These sorts of actions seem in some ways disproportionate to what is at worst an inconvenience for other players at the casual level. At the professional level, the rewards are substantial, but perhaps not so substantial as to merit adopting this "win at all costs" mentality that gives way to cheating. Perhaps then, the risk of cheating is not in the hands of the cheaters, but the cheated; the large game companies and the other players who stand on the verge of professional recognition. To return once again to the conflict between Necros and Taimou, it does not matter much whether or not Necros was engaged in cheating. What is at stake is here the potential to show that cheating is possible at high levels of play in *Overwatch*, a possibility that Taimou, now with as vested an interest in the long-term success of the OWL as Activision-Blizzard, cannot allow to pass without punishment.

Companies like Activision-Blizzard, Riot Games, and Valve likely do not believe they can stop all cheating within their games. It would go against the very foundations of their business. Even if they focused on completely eliminating cheating from their licensed professional leagues, it would be a feat never before equaled. Instead, these companies have seemingly focused on policing their games and leagues, handing out punishments if and when cheating is discovered. This focus is all part of the larger performance of the companies as a whole. When this performance is analyzed, it becomes clear to see that the ideal outcome is not really about fairness in gameplay.

Instead, it is the performance of fairness, and the subsequent trust that that builds, both with customers and with investors.

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