WELL PLAYED & WELL WATCHED: DOTA 2, SPECTATORSHIP, AND ESPORTS

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Introduction

Multiplayer and competitive games, such as Multiplayer Online Battle Arenas (MOBAs), require players to master complex systems, sophisticated mechanics, and collaborative play. In this paper, I outline *Dota 2*, a MOBA known for its steep learning curve and an extended commitment of its players toward mastery, to illustrate how play and *participatory spectatorship* are integral to not only mastery but also perseverance in learning to play a game. And yet, how might an investigation of *Dota 2* in its notable role as an "eSport" also necessitate a rethinking of what we consider relevant in understanding a game? How appropriate is the framing of a "game" for understanding this kind of social and technical space? How does a look at *Dota* 2 help to clarify the differences between "games" and "eSports" and

the potential implications of both? *Dota 2* presents a complexity that begs further study as a space for play and learning in the one of the most socially-negotiated and economically significant game genres. Here, I will discuss how the emergence of live streaming and the new framing of these games as "eSports" work in partnership with play, providing new opportunities for engagement with *Dota 2* and similar communities of media engagement.

Participatory Spectatorship

Participation in competitive games is highly specialized and demanding. Relevant membership within competitive gaming communities requires an understanding of complicated and nuanced discourse, expert execution of play, and high-level strategic understanding. This leads to the question: why do players continue to persevere and pursue expertise despite a harsh learning curve and competitive atmosphere? I posit that one factor is engagement with live streaming and eSports. While the term "participatory spectatorship" has a history in games, theatre, and invasion sports (Douglas, 2002; Jensen, 2011; Ludvigsen & Veerasawmy, 2010), here it represents *the active observation of a sport or spectacle in the pursuit knowledge though without requiring a recognized information need*. As such, the act of "watching" serves as a foundational element of participation and may simultaneously serve as entertainment, a means of social engagement, as well as provide opportunities for learning the game and community's discourse.

As with Squire (2011) and Gee (2003), games themselves provide the primary texts for analysis, with additional sites and channels that provide discussion and analysis of the game. Game streamers comprise a central population of digital and tabletop gamers. eSports represent an interesting and vital subset of streams that broadcast live professional gaming tournaments. *Dota 2* and its premier tournament, *The International Dota 2*

Championship, have an unquestionable influence on participation in the complex media spaces that surround play. Last year's international championship, *The International 4*, was the biggest event in the history of eSports. Sixteen teams from around the world competed for a prize pool of nearly 11 million US dollars. Over the course of the event, *The International 4* was streamed live to over 39 million viewers via Twitch.tv and traditional sports distribution channels, including ESPN.

From MOBAs to *Dota 2*

To begin, we need to situate ourselves in the relatively recent but eventful history of the MOBA. *Dota 2* is only one of many recent games in this genre, all of which originally spawned from the *Warcraft III* modification ("mod") titled *Defense of the Ancients* (*DOTA*). The mod was developed and released in 2003 using the "World Editor" of *Reign of Chaos*. *Warcraft III* is as a real-time strategy game in which play focused around the development of heroes supported by an army of units. The *DOTA* mod shifted the focus to the development of a single hero, and units became AI-controlled. *DOTA* laid the basic landscape for the MOBA genre, its real-time strategy, roleplaying, and combat characteristics, its signature map (based on the "Aeon of Strife" *StarCraft* map: see Figure 1), and series of objectives. Several authors maintained the specific scenario that evolved into *DOTA*, but the longest running developer, the anonymous "IceFrog," has maintained the project since 2005.

Dota 2 is often recognized as one of the most nuanced, competitive, and unforgiving games in the MOBA genre. Though all MOBAs originally evolved from *DOTA*, Valve Software, staying truest to the original formula, went so far as to hire IceFrog as lead designer. This is not a new model for Valve, who has developed mods like *Counter-Strike* and *Team Fortress* into successful videogame franchises of their own right, as well as crafted entire franchises by hiring the developers responsible

for productive game demos (e.g., the hiring of Kim Swift, based on *Narbacular Drop*, leading to *Portal*). In both instances, Valve purchased the intellectual property and hired the developers of the original modifications to lead the new franchises. While in the case of *DOTA* to *Dota 2*, there has been some degree of legal contention with Activision Blizzard over the appropriation of the name "DOTA" (hence Valve's subtle change of title away from the "DOTA" acronym to "Dota").

But, regardless of the game's production history, there is much to be learned from an investigation of its particular space in the gaming world at the moment and developing an understanding of its mechanics. *Dota 2* plays like the mash-up of a single-session, accelerated, massively multiplayer online role-playing game and a focused real-time strategy game in which players control just a single unit. During each match, players command a single hero, leveling up, acquiring skills, and buying increasingly powerful items. Two teams of five players — the Radiant and the Dire — square off in what Valve calls an "action real-time strategy game" or ARTS, shifting the framing of *Dota 2*'s genre even further from the "MOBA" acronym, to one of their own making.

As with many board games and tactical wargames, every match of *Dota 2* is played on a single, shared map. The map is divided into three lanes with a river running through the middle. Each lane has three defensive towers followed by a barracks that must fall sequentially. From the barracks, streams of AI-controlled "creeps" spawn every thirty seconds and march up or down the lanes. Next, enter player-controlled heroes. Heroes kill creeps, destroy towers, and clash with enemy heroes. The game ends only when one team pushes into the opponent's base and destroys a large central structure called the "Ancient."

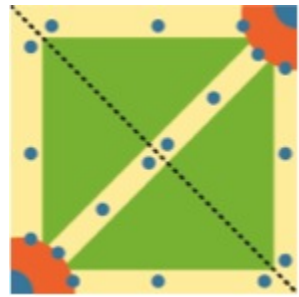

Figure 1. A depiction of the prototypical MOBA map.

This is *Dota 2* at its simplest — a game with a relatively direct team goal, albeit one that sits within a collection of complex systems that must be managed to achieve the goal. For some, it's a model "sport," in which the game's complex and balanced design ensures a level playing field and winning is based on execution, practical experience, and a hint of good fortune. "Well play" of Dota 2 is implicit in the nuanced details of the tactics employed by players and their related understanding of the game's multiple, interlocking systems. Yet, "well watched" relies on players' engagement with the game and its community as participatory spectators of an eSport.

eSports

I see the recent rise of the "eSport" – digital video games that are played professionally, with LAN tournaments, corporate sponsorships, and lucrative prize pools – in digital gaming communities as worthy of deeper investigation. While competitive games and even professional competitive gaming (Taylor, 2012) have been a staple of the digital gaming world for some time now (e.g., Quake, StarCraft), the emergence of the MOBA and the related rise of streaming services (e.g., Twitch.tv) have introduced these games to millions of new players. In 2014, *Dota 2* had a total prize pool of nearly 17 million US dollars. Moreover, the growth in popularity of eSports can be seen

through its rise as a form of public, internet-streamed performance — professional and amateur games from across the globe are streamed live on Valve's *Dota 2* interface or via online streaming services, such as Twitch.tv. Twitch (the premier gaming live streaming service) has reported that *Dota 2* viewership has seen an increase in minutes watch at a growth rate of 508% (Morris, 2013).

eSports are fashioned for excitement with casters delivering dramatic play-by-play paired with former professional players turned analysts and physical arenas filled with capacity crowds. Therefore, how appropriate is the framing of a "game" for understanding this kind of social and technical space? How does a look at *Dota 2* help to clarify the differences between "games" and "eSports" and the potential implications of both? So, then, if *Dota 2* represents an interesting case that necessitates some form participatory spectatorship in order to develop competency in the game, then there is clearly some form of learning in practice that occurs. However, what motivates one to learn in the contexts of this game? Why would one persist in a game that provides little explicit instruction, requires a great deal of individual and group participation in the game's systems, and can be brutally competitive? What motivates play of *Dota 2*? With this in mind, a characterization of the tools that mediate engagement with competitive games requires a deeper look at the structures of eSports.

Image 1. Day one of The International 4 in KeyArena, Seattle, WA

Dota 2 is not a single-player game, and is clearly designed for team-based competitive play as well as team-based competitive *professional* play. Unlike many other complex games, consideration of *Dota 2* as an eSport is significant in explaining the impetus for committed play and guiding performance within it. As Kow (2013) claims, studying learning with eSports raises a number of questions regarding the lived experiences of players, as well as the influence of a shared, competitive purpose on the learning practices within a game community. Considerations that should be made in regard to the shared, competitive purpose as laden with cultural and economic significance. And yet, sports are not simply rule systems, no more than digital games are simple programmed embodiments of these rule systems. *Dota 2* illustrates that even while we attempt to account for the practices of players by detailing the elements of the game, we still miss a major part of the picture. Understanding "well played" in *Dota 2* is in vain until we consider the motivational, economic, and social impact of the framing of *Dota 2* as a "sport."

The Noob Stream

Spectatorship through the venue of live streaming is as diverse as it is abundant. *The International 4's Newcomer's Stream* served to act as an introduction to the game. Aptly coined the "noob stream" (located at http://www.twitch.tv/dota2ti_noob), it catered to brand new (or relatively inexperienced) players with the explicit intent to be educational by teaching the mechanics of the game, terminology, strategies, and the culture of eSports. For instance, every *Dota 2* match begins with a "draft" where players select or ban heroes. During this time, the casters of the match are able to comment on individual heroes, their repertoire of skills, how well they pair with other heroes to set up for a particular strategy or which heroes are a professional player's "signature." Moreover, the casters take time to elucidate jargon, terminology, and abbreviations that would normally be delivered as assumed knowledge and without explanation. At first glance, *Dota 2* is quite difficult to follow and watching with the support of a Newcomer's Stream offers players a basic description of game mechanics but also a subtle introduction to the depth the game has to offer, serving to teach as well as introduce new players to *Dota 2* to the participatory culture (Jenkins, 2013; Jenkins, 2006) of eSports.

Image 2. Gameplay during The International 4

Though I may not be able to mimic the finely tuned reflexes of professional players, I was able to watch the stream and reflect on my comprehension of the game. Outside of high-stakes tournaments, professional players regularly stream public matches. Such streams offer an opportunity to watch elite players in action, as well as engage with the community of fans (or critics). Streaming offers multiple routes for spectators of varying skill level to engage with *Dota 2*. By identifying these channels, players can participate in strategic and technical expertise; as such, both novice and expert players turn to live streams and eSports as an outlet for entertainment and instruction. Streams and eSports provide an active and participatory alternative to seeking information aside from in-game play and out-of-game textual interactions. Yet, it seems that participatory spectatorship in these spaces does not require a recognized information need and the disseminators are not necessarily responding to a call of a specific problem or inquiry. Subsequent meta-commentary and "theorycrafting" (Choontanom & Nardi, 2012) are actively disseminated by spectators through participation in the affinity spaces of *Dota*

2, reflecting lessons learned and interpreted through watching competitive gameplay.

I would also argue that, for some players, the viewing of *Dota 2* streams presents opportunities for cognitive apprenticeship (Brown, Collins, & Newman, 1989) at a distance. For novice player watching a complex game, eSports brings game mechanics, technical skills, and expert strategies to the forefront, a level of perception that in other gaming situations may require hundreds – if not thousands – of hours of practical experience. In this form, *Dota 2* is modeled in real-time and in real-world (albeit digital) situations, allowing new players to observe *Dota 2* as spectators and later enact learned skills and practice in the form of play. Cognitive apprenticeship at a distance, in the form of participatory spectatorship, again reinforces that spectatorship and play are active processes in these media spaces, and that learning and cognition are situated in a particularly performative form of gameplay.

Much like other information spaces, it seems that streaming and spectatorship are innately participatory. Players watch professionals and other personalities for the pleasure of observing gameplay and as informal students of the game, managing the streams as information resources to both learn how to play and to be a part of a larger gaming enterprise. When "well watched," participatory spectatorship takes on a new form of play, acting as an alternative to what we typically consider gameplay. In this regard, spectatorship may serve at least three key roles: (1) to allow novice players to develop understandings of the game's systems and dynamics in a space free of consequence; (2) to spur on and foster further engagement with the game and discussions in affinity spaces; and (3) present opportunities for the mediated experience of a gaming stream to serve cognitive apprenticeship roles for new and expert players.

Conclusion

I have discussed only a provisional analysis of the affordances of *Dota 2*, the noob stream, and eSports as a means of illustrating the ways that participatory spectatorship may be consequential for enculturation into informal learning communities and for the collaborative play found within them. Spectatorship becomes overtly participatory as observations and interpretations are added to knowledge and later articulated in practice. Yet, as games are embodied forms of play, participatory spectatorship may also afford a sense of physical participation in a performance or hypothetical scenario. The present work does not investigate how spectators engage with live streams, nor does it interpret all the possible forms of participation surrounding *Dota 2* as an eSport. It is only the first step in understanding how participatory spectatorship serves participants as they move toward more central membership in a larger gaming enterprise.

Dota 2 is overtly intended to be more than just a "game," at least in the way that many tend to conceive of them. eSports such as *Dota 2* remind us that *why* people play games is still a relatively unexplored. We tend to focus on *how* players play games, ignoring that the context within which a game is presented to a player can be of consequence not just in leading them to the game experience, but also in driving their persistence toward learning the game. With difficult, complex, and complicated games such as *Dota 2*, I argue that its framing as an e-sport is integral in understanding how the game drives players and that the understanding of *Dota 2* can gain from further exploration in this area. Perhaps the play of games is not enough to sustain involvement and drive the persistence toward mastery, and I argue that we need to better understand the connections of tools, resources, and practices (including eSports spectatorship) that drive play, and therefore learning, in "the wilds" of performative play.

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