

PLAYING ACROSS MEDIA: EXPLORING TRANSTEXTUALITY IN COMPETITIVE GAMES AND ESPORTS

Ben Egliston

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to explore the synthesis of digital games and observatory media facilitated by eSports and the competitive play of games. Borrowing from Genette's work in the field of literary studies, as well as media and game studies research, I describe the crossmedia assemblage occurring in competitive games as transtextual. A particular focus is the quantitative analysis of play in Valve's Dota 2. Using publicly archived player statistics, I describe how the broadcast play of professionals has come to exist as a locus of game knowledge and an impetus for styles of play for many amateur players. I argue that players must negotiate both the traditional gamespace and the space of surrounding texts with which gameplay has become conflated. Conversely, I posit that transtextual systems are situationally reflexive, and amateur players can assert change in professional domains. In addition to the compositional analysis of the crossmedia videogame form, I explore the phenomenological implications of this assemblage, namely digital games' movement away from its common conceptualisation as leisure based activity.

Keywords

Games, eSports, Transtextuality, Intertextuality, Paratext

INTRODUCTION

The competitive play of digital games has come to represent a complex dialectic between texts, namely the game-proper and the surrounding array of observatory media. The growing pervasiveness of spectator platforms and observatory practice across the contemporary gaming landscape has been impactful in forcing a reformulation of what games as a medium fundamentally involve and demand. With spectator platforms such as Twitch.tv becoming increasingly prominent fixtures in competitive games, play and spectator practices have become intertwined and the magic circle (Huizinga 1955, 10) breached. Games are no longer solely the domain of players, privileging ludic impulses, but rather spaces which invite observers to experience the immersive and transformative potentialities of gameplay, enabling non-players to adopt the values of the game world.

Through an exploration of Valve's Dota 2 (2013), this paper will build on the burgeoning theoretical tradition that many contemporary games function as dually played and surveilled spaces. Situated amongst object oriented ontologies of games and digital media and literary theories of paratextuality and intertextuality, the current study maintains that the textual dialogism inherent in competitive games palpably influences the ways in which users interact with game systems. Using the aforementioned discourses, this work will provide a conceptual schema for thinking about the affective power of the texts and objects which surround games. Specifically, an augmented version of Genette's transtextuality is proposed, equipped in deconstructing digital texts and the ways in which their users employ them.

In addition to proposing typologies for the analysis of the

transmedia assemblage occurring in competitive games, this paper will investigate spectator media as a node of cultural production. It will explore how paratexts are developed and employed by professional and amateur groups of players (that is, practitioners of eSports and regular game-players). Drawing primarily from de Certeau's tactical and strategic framework for thinking about the governance of culture (1984), this paper examines the ways in which transtextual play configures imbalanced power relationships between amateur and professional game players (or, generally speaking, the consumers and producers of paratextual content respectively). It is argued that the broadcast play of professionals has come to exist as an affective and edifying text.

Lastly, this study presents a phenomenological reading of transtextuality. I contend that the transtextual nature of competitive gaming has made permeable the boundaries between play as leisure and play as labour, as amateur players become co-opted into professional play patterns via spectatorship.

In order to demonstrate the expected association between observatory media and gameplay, I conducted a quantitative content analysis of player data, archived publicly on web platforms Dotabuff, Dotamax and datDota. The analysis focused on the period June to August 2014 (covering one content patch and numerous broadcast, LAN [locally hosted] and online tournaments).

What is Dota 2?

Dota 2 is a Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) game developed by Valve and released in its first iteration on the personal computer in 2013. Dota 2 is a graphical and mechanical overhaul of the Warcraft III (2002) user modification Defence of the Ancients Allstars. Dota's gameplay represents an intersection of game genres, drawing from conventional tropes of the role-playing game (RPG) and the real-time-strategy (RTS).

Players choose from one of 108 unique characters, or Heroes, inspired by a fantasy aesthetic. Players are then able to specialise their hero choice based on their preferred metaphor for interaction; for example the Omniknight hero, for healing allies and protecting group-mates from harm. Each hero has at least four unique abilities, which can be honed in the order of the player's choosing, providing the player with the opportunity to occupy varied game roles. In order to increase one's proficiency with a skill, it must be leveled up. Levels are attained from killing enemy heroes (or being within proximity of an enemy hero kill) or through the defeat of non-player enemies on the map.

Like most conventional RPGs, the gameplay is centered around leveling and equipping a character. The game's item system is fuelled by a gold economy, another design fundamental of many RPGs. By slaying monsters, defeating enemy heroes in combat, and dismantling the defenses to the opponent's base, players are awarded gold. This gold amounts to items, which in turn facilitates the defeat of enemies. Where Dota's gameplay diverges from that of the traditional RPG is in its adversarial group-based play. Two teams of five players are pit against each other, tasked with the objective of destroying the opponent's base. As specific interactions exist between different heroes, skill specialisations and item builds, players must employ critical thinking and problem solving capabilities in real time, in order to overcome the enemy team. The scope and difficulty of the game have necessitated the production of texts laying out approaches to the game (observatory media fulfils this function).

Since its inception as a custom game modification in Warcraft III, Dota has grown to be immensely popular as both a played game and an observed spectacle (with reportedly over 2 million peak concurrent viewers at The International 2014 LAN tournament. [McWhertor 2014]). As such, Dota 2 is a considerably rich site for fieldwork into the transtextual nature of digital games.

Research significance

The contributions of this study are both theoretical and empirical. It represents a novel foray into eSports and crossmedia practice, identifying associations between observatory media and play, while also presenting approaches for the compositional analysis of games.

The idea that digital games are shaped by objects or texts external to the immediate gamespace has been part of the games criticism landscape for quite some time. Early works on transmedia intertextuality suggest games maintain strong, representational links with other media. Kinder's (1991) work postulates the videogame movie genre is indicative of transmedia interface. Game developers have since (more directly) encouraged a consideration of the assemblage of texts and objects through particular sequences and mechanics. Games such as Konami's *Metal Gear Solid* (1998) have been lauded by critics (Galloway 2006) for the inventive ways in which players are engaged through non-traditional, material elements.

The current study builds on these ideas, emphasising the play implications of the non-gamic, textual object. I make the contention that Dota's transtextual interface with spectator media is fundamental in understanding the game itself. This idea has been discussed, within the field of eSports, in brief by Taylor (2012). She posits that "through watching recorded sessions of pro matches they [amateurs] can analyse...moves and tactics" (2012, 236). Further, she contends that the spectatorship of professional play "helps build up future possible agency and lends itself to average gamers internally reconfiguring their own models of action" (2012, 237). Through spectator media, Taylor speculates that amateurs have the potential to become privy to a once sealed reliquary of rich strategic arcana, allowing them to compete in the amateur arena with aplomb. I aim to explore this interaction between games and texts in further detail. As both professional eSports and the amateur play of competitive

games continue to grow, it is important to establish and refine conceptual and practical frameworks for thinking about the textually networked nature of competitive games.

The significance of this study's outcomes are enhanced through a high degree of external validity, useful in understanding both the competitive gaming landscape as well as other eSports fixtures such as League of Legends and Counter Strike: Global Offensive (both of which retain high viewership on Twitch.tv (Twitchapps 2015)).

The literature to date suggests that the maturation of game studies as a discipline has shifted away from essentialist conceptualisations of games. Like Galloway's reading of Metal Gear Solid, Kinder's inquiry into the intertextuality of the movie game genre, or more recent forays into eSports, the current study views games as situated symbiotically amongst other media—reinforcing the idea that videogames are not “just games” (Swalwell & Wilson 2008, 2), signaling a shift from the fallacious notion of an immediate and diegetic play space.

A novel aspect of the current study is its divergence from the previous approaches to thinking about games as networks of texts and objects. Despite being focused on texts and objects, this present work places substantial emphasis on form, concerned with the analysis of the transtextual game form and its implications for gameplay. While many now consider ludological approaches to game criticism arcane and reductive, problematised by an obsession with the purity of the videogame form (Keogh 2014), the present study employs a framework which draws on some of the key tenets of ludology, representing a new kind of compositional analysis. Player interface with mechanics, and the way spectator media influences this interface, is the primary focus. Additionally, the texts surrounding Dota 2 are positioned as practically requisite tools, embedded so deeply within the culture of play that they function almost as a game mechanic. Through quantitative inquiry, this work offers novel

insight into the contemporary (competitive) game form, wherein paratexts are ostensibly a core component.

LITERATURE

Literature Amateurs and professionals

Much of this study is based on the interface between amateur and professional players, and as such it is important to precisely define these terms. In Suits' (1978) *The Grasshopper*, amateur and professional players are positioned as similar in their adherence to the game rule (in what he terms the 'lusory attitude'). Where professional players diverge from amateurs is in the 'extralusory' nature of their play. Within eSports, significant, often monetary goals are provided, which exist outside of the gamespace. Suits argues that professionals often 'use' games (as a means to an extralusory end) rather than situate them as objects of play (1978, 146). Amateur players are positioned as motivated by lusory, ingame goals. While the stakes of play are considerably higher for professionals (and the skill levels of the two groups variegated), amateur players should not be considered 'uncompetitive' (I speculate that many amateur players are employing the playstyles of professionals in order to compete within their own level of play).

Theoretically situating observatory practice

Despite being a defining characteristic of the current milieu of games, the interface between texts, objects and the play of digital games is a path of inquiry that is yet to be fully explored in game studies. As such, one of the challenges in this study was locating theoretical frameworks to situate this interface. Previous work in this area has invoked actor-network theory as the framework for examining the unboundedness of digital games, and exploring the association between games and their surrounding objects. Taylor (2009) poses the argument that play at LAN gaming events is refracted through the lens of the material. She

suggests play is influenced by objects (both corporeal and incorporeal) outside of the immediate gamespace. These range from the game system to the chairs on which the players sit (Taylor 2009). Taylor describes this networked space of digital and physical peripherals as an assemblage, a “complex matrix of actors” (2009, 6).

While examination of the physicality of play and spectator practices is beyond the scope of the present study, empirical work around materiality provides the conceptual groundwork for thinking about the intertextual, transmedia assemblage that is contemporary competitive gaming.

Looking beyond actor network theory and the physical aspects of play, to studies of literature and semiotics, I draw conceptual parallels between spectated gameplay as text and Genette’s notion of transtextuality. Specifically, drawing on Genette’s subtypes of transtextuality (1982), the spectatorship of digital games can be located at the crossroads of paratextuality and intertextuality.

Characterised as “a co-presence between two or more texts”, Genette’s formulation of intertextuality refers to “the literal presence of one text within another” (1982, 8). He provides the examples of quotation, “the explicit summoning up of a text that is both presented and distanced by quotation marks, is the most obvious example of this type of function” (1997, xviii). Other studies of intertextuality in literature make similar points. Worton and Still argue that intertextuality “cannot exist as a hermetic or self-sufficient whole, and so does not function as a closed system...” (1991, 1). Similarly, writing on intertextuality in print media, Foucault notes that “the frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network...The book is not simply the object that one holds in one’s hands...Its unity is variable and relative...” (1974, 23).

These ideas are consistent with the central thesis of this paper; games such as Dota 2 are not confined to the audiovisual plane that is the game space: they are presented and perceived as part of a larger structure. The networked system of strategies, tactics, spectator texts and platforms, and game systems are evidence of this very open and linked ecology of competitive gaming. While the primary text, in this case the game, is necessary in the production of additional texts, the structure of the primary text can too be influenced by surrounding texts.

The idea that objects and practices are networked, and functional based on this relationship, predicates a discussion of paratextuality. Genette conceptualises paratextuality as the relation between a text and its paratext (textual objects surrounding the primary body of the text). The key distinction between paratextuality and intertextuality lies in the fact that paratext, while outside the space of the text proper, functions as a rich node of textually didactic meaning. Paratexts exist to further shape and enhance our understanding of the text, framing and mediating our perception (1997, xviii). There is an inherent instructive practicality to paratexts. Essentially, paratextual objects are not only informed by a primary text, but also inform the ways in which texts are read or engaged.

In developing his paratextual framework, Genette proposes two subtypes of paratext, the epitext and peritext; liminal devices which describe paratexts within and outside of the main text respectively (1997). In this study, a discussion of paratext will be synonymous with *epitext* (this is not without precedent. Consalvo's (2007) work employs a similar approach).

As paratextuality is traditionally located in print media criticism, particular aspects of Genette's original formulation fall short in adequately plotting the interface between gameplay and observatory media. Namely, in his conceptualisation of epitexts, Genette argues that an object cannot be considered paratext "unless the author or one of his associates accepts responsibility for it" (1997, 9). While in Dota 2's case, Valve does, in some

instances, endorse official tournament streams (via Twitch), these do not account for the array of other didactic texts that inform play (often, tournament streams are also broadcast by third party commentary studios). Because Genette's conceptualisations of paratextuality and intertextuality do not translate directly to this research, this paper will consolidate the ideas of intertextuality and paratextuality. This conceptual augmentation is consistent with the approach adopted in previous studies of paratext. For example, Consalvo's work on paratext (and the paratextual games industry) uses the broad term of intertextuality to encompass epitexts and intertextuality (2007). In this way, Consalvo is able to explore an array of paratextual material, including writing, digital artwork, visual and audio design and new game design.

Along similar lines, McCracken (2013) encountered similar problems in directly mapping Genette's formulations onto her work examining paratexts in electronic literature. She notes that while Genette's concepts are effective tools for understanding digital literature, they require expansion to remain relevant. She argues that "New paratexts sometimes move beyond Genette's precise formulations but continue to function in the spirit of his analysis"(McCracken 2013, 106), suggesting that Genette's paratextual framework should be used as a guideline rather than a strict analytical lens.

While there is some consensus that the concept of paratextuality would benefit from expansion, intertextuality and paratextuality are nonetheless robust and malleable interdisciplinary frameworks for thinking about systems of texts. According to Consalvo, paratextuality functions as a useful theoretical framework for thinking about the networked system of "media products- 'communication and artifacts- emerging from game cultures, which frame the consumption of digital games."(Consalvo 2007, 8).

Considering the body of work on intertextuality and paratextuality, I have employed an appropriated concept of

transtextuality, developed to frame digital games. This framework will be used in demonstrating the networked assemblage of texts which have come to constitute the contemporary experience of competitive play.

In addition to identifying, and providing conceptual frameworks for the analysis of the complex multi-textual ecology of competitive games, this paper demonstrates that paratexts can profoundly influence ways in which players interact with game mechanics— existing as practical textual objects situated within the threshold of the primary text. In doing so, this work draws on game studies conceptualisations of paratextuality. Consalvo contends that gaming paratexts (walkthroughs, for instance) are central in the play of games. Paratexts “serve a specific role in gaming culture...they instruct a player in how to play, what to play and what is cool (and not) in the game world” (2007, 22). Similarly, Apperley (2010) argues that “the relationship between digital games and their paratexts is an example of how the convergent audience uses other media, especially the internet, to collaborate on, conduct and coordinate research” on play practice (2010, 125).

In providing a clear conceptual basis for positioning the textual assemblage that makes up competitive gaming (and identifying the influence on play exerted by paratexts) this paper is enabled to explore relationships between transtextuality, groups of players and play itself.

Tactical and strategic play

Overview

In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), de Certeau established a model of strategies and tactics, an important paradigm for thinking about the governance of culture. De Certeau presents the concepts of strategy and tactics as opposing ideas. Strategies, according to de Certeau, are set by the powerful and serve to manipulate power relationships (1984, 87). De Certeau explains

the concept of strategy using the example of the ordered city space. A city, and the routes available to individuals within it, are a strategy determined by a controlling body (de Certeau 1984). Strategies are fixed and rigid by nature. In contrast to strategies, tactics are concerned with the non-powerful; fluid adaptations to a strategically determined environment. Working with the example of a planned city space as strategy, de Certeau explains tactics as the individual's ability to create their own routes through the strategically ordered city space.

This paper draws on de Certeau's model of strategies and tactics to explain the movement of playstyles amongst groups, diffused through paratexts. Additionally, de Certeau's formulations of spatiality (as well as later conceptualisations of tactical and strategic media) will be used to position Dota's game design. A case is presented suggesting that crossmedia reading praxis is fundamental in understanding open-ended, player driven games like Dota.

The strategies and tactics of competitive games: Why competitive games demand transtextuality

Since its conception, de Certeau's model of strategies and tactics has been reconfigured by scholars (e.g., Manovich 2009) to function as a theoretical framework for contemporary media studies. Specifically, Manovich relates de Certeau's ideas directly to Web 2.0 media (2009). This idea of tactical and strategic media is useful in thinking about where Valve's game design is situated, and how this has enabled a transtextual interface. Manovich argues that the advent of Web 2.0 and the proliferation of related technologies represents a dramatic change in the relationship between strategies and tactics. He notes that the ability for users to configure content has radically shifted de Certeau's original formulation of tactics and strategy; "today strategies used by social media companies often look more like tactics...while tactics look like strategies..." (Manovich 2009, 218). The producer is now invested in the user exploring and manipulating

media. In the case of Dota 2, high level players produce strategies which are then disseminated via various channels and reconfigured as tactics by amateur players. In the instance of Dota 2, and other player-driven, online multiplayer games, developers create a game space which functions as a rough schematic for play, their design strategies informing the game at a broader, rule based level. While aspects of game design and maintenance, such as mechanical balance could be considered strategically postured, the design strategy in Dota 2 presumes a lesser degree of authorial control than that of more directed games. Valve's approach is, essentially, update and balance the game through major content patches.

A further way in which Dota's design strategy and its consequent transtextuality can be situated within de Certeau's work is with respect to the distinction between the navigation of spatial environments and the distinction between places and spaces (de Certeau, 1984, 117). A place, de Certeau purports, is "an instantaneous configuration of positions" (1984, 117), an environment that exists in a vacuum; theoretical and abstract. Conversely, space "exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables" – in essence, a "space is a practiced place" (1984, 117). De Certeau further clarifies the difference between places and spaces by providing the example of 'street walking'. "The street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers" (1984, 117). In this way, game environments are similarly defined by how they are navigated by players.

De Certeau maintains that these spaces are navigated using "maps" and "tours" (1984, 119). A map essentially describes a place ("The girls' room is next to the kitchen" [1984, 119]). By contrast, a tour directly forces its audience into the active navigation of a location. Tours are prescribed to space ("You turn right and come into the living room" [1984, 119]). Purportedly, directions are more commonly manifest in the form of tours, which provide the preliminary groundwork for maps. In the case

of player-driven digital games, space is created with the intention that it be mapped and defined by players. Through an interface with game mechanics, purveyors of paratextual media function as both cartographers and tour guides, responsible not only for charting possible ways to approach a game and its mechanics, but also guiding players through the gamespace. These tours (paratexts) are expected to function as strategies, to be reconfigured tactically by their users.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Overview

A quantitative methodological approach will be used to evaluate the interface between gameplay in professional and amateur Dota 2 games and surrounding observatory media. Specifically, quantitative content analysis will be used to conduct a systematic and objective analysis of various data sets. In the present study, data sets consist of published statistics on gameplay at both an amateur and professional level. In undertaking this analysis, I aim to establish trending playstyles in both amateur and professional player groups. Analyses will employ theory-based sampling (data sets explore distinct thematic areas), an approach advocated by Gunter (2012) in his methodological toolkit for quantitative research in media studies (Gunter 2012, 251).

Through an exploration of archived player data, I aim to establish an empirical basis for the proposed conceptual framework of transtextuality in eSports and digital games. Additionally, by describing patterns and trends in media portrayals, I aim to draw inferences about amateur-professional relations regarding the production and consumption of content. The primary variable of interest in this study is playstyle, or the ways in which players interact with the mechanics of the game. As described earlier in this paper, heroes have their own unique mechanical flavour, with vast gameplay differences and affordances, ultimately representing a particular playstyle. For

present purposes, playstyle will be operationalised as hero pickrates.

In documenting the interface between texts, players and gameplay, amateur playstyle trends will be compared to those of professional players. Professional play, due to its broadcast nature, was the most pragmatic way to index paratext. Consequently, professional, tournament gameplay becomes conflated with the idea of paratext (this being said, the idea that amateur play can function as paratextual is also discussed). Playstyle trends between groups are analysed over a given timeframe, observing whether broadcast play provokes changes in amateur play.

Data sources and sampling

The primary units of analysis will be logs of play, at both a professional and amateur level. Web based archival tools, datDota, Dotamax and Dotabuff were selected to facilitate a discussion of links between games and their surrounding texts. These archival tools harvest and aggregate data on both professional and amateur Dota games. Aside from being a useful research tool, these data platforms are also commonly utilised by players. Based on previously established, more relevant conceptualisations of paratext, these platforms can be considered paratextual. As paratexts, they represent a shared space of researchers and players. The research potential of paratextual material thus has interesting implications for exploring the idea of the player-researcher in game studies (reminiscent of Aarseth's work [2003], and much of contemporary games ethnography).

In terms of functionality as research tools, Dotabuff, datDota and Dotamax are a valuable resource for evaluating playstyles. Games, and the myriad player inputs which occur (item and skill build choices, for example) are parsed, and raw data consolidated and presented diagrammatically and proportionally.

In the present study, data was collected from the game's patch

6.81b iteration (spanning roughly the period June-August 2014). This period for data collection was specifically chosen with the aim of performing theory based sampling. The 6.81b landscape was a dense play period characterised by three major international LAN tournaments (ESL One Frankfurt, The Summit and The international 2014) as well as an array of smaller, online-hosted tournaments. It was expected that this play period would yield rich data on the interface between spectator practices and play, fitting within the conceptual framework of transtextuality. It should also be noted that these instances of professional, tournament play were broadcast publicly on Twitch.tv (as well as via the Dota game client).

Because playstyles are often subject to change following major content patches in which mechanics are overhauled and refined, it was important that data were sourced from the same iteration of game content (that is, patch 6.81b). In so doing, there could be reasonable confidence that archived gameplay was the product of a transtextual interaction rather than the product of a particular game design strategy (game tuning in the form of a patch). Within the given timeframe of patch 6.81b, maximum concurrent players online in Dota 2 peaked at 900,000 (Avenar 2014). However, it is acknowledged that professional players invariably constitute a smaller margin of the player base than amateurs. Although both professional and amateur players will be sampled, it was expected that amateur players would contribute the bulk of the data.

Previous work

The quantitative content analysis of gameplay logs has been used in prior fieldwork studies of digital games. For example, in the current author's previous work (Egliston 2013), log analysis was an integral part of the methodology in the exploration of game mechanics in Blizzard's World of Warcraft (2004). This study suggested that log analysis is a useful tool for understanding player engagement with game mechanics. Analysis of gameplay

logs will be used to investigate playstyle trend associations between amateur and broadcast professional play in the present study.

Data source limitations

The major limitation in working with the amateur data sets provided by Dotabuff and Dotamax lies in the opt-in nature of the data collection. The playerbase of Dota 2 is vast, and while these platforms only require one player to be opted in to gather data (players who have not opted in are represented as anonymous) they provide an incomplete representation of the playerbase. DatDota's collation of professional player data is also not without issue. While providing much more than Dotabuff and Dotamax in the way of statistical utility, the platform suffers from providing incomplete data sets (due to an inability to store data over long periods of time).

The present study is expected to yield quantitative data that will allow for the identification of associations between transtextuality and gameplay. While identifying trends between professional texts and amateur play is fundamental in highlighting a transtextual association, further research could productively apply *qualitative* approaches) to supplement quantitative data, and provide a more thorough explanation. How players use and reconfigure strategies could be explored thoroughly. Furthermore, qualitative approaches could bring to light issues of 'third hand' information dissemination. Player knowledge, gleaned from paratexts, could potentially be passed on to players in-game, allowing us model player knowledge (diffused in game) as paratextual, positioning the player as part of the transtextual assemblage.

A limitation related to the disparate sizes of the professional and amateur data sets is the level of detail available. Although the professional data sets were significantly larger, they provided less detail. This hindered an exploration of paratextual

reflexivity, namely my attempt to trace genealogies of playstyles amongst professional and amateur players.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results are first presented for Data sets I & II, followed by a discussion of the phenomenological implications of strategic play. Next, results are presented for Data set III along with a discussion of strategic reflexivity.

Data sets I & II: Transtextuality as strategically grounded interface, the labour of play and transtextual play

Results

To locate the relationship between spectator texts and gameplay, I examined hero pick rates of both amateur and professional groups of players during the period June-July 2014 (which, as noted previously, covered numerous major international tournaments). The first data set traces increases in pickrates of four heroes, popular during the 6.81b patch. Figure I suggests that the playstyles of both groups are closely linked. Considering the dense tournament landscape of June-July 2014 (which was, as noted previously, widely spectated), it would be within reason to speculate that amateur players adopted the strategies exhibited by professionals during these events. The patterns of play displayed in Figure I demonstrate remarkable similarities in strategies across both professional and amateur players. Heroes that are more widely used by professionals appear similarly popular amongst amateurs. Heroes Skywrath Mage and Razor were most favoured by both amateurs and professionals alike. Heroes Faceless Void and Shadow Shaman, while popular within the broader context of the game (13.58% and 9.20% amateur pickrates respectively), were the least picked out of this data set in both groups of players. However, while the data shown in Figure I indicates a striking association between amateur picks and broadcast professional play, the claim that picking trends

are mirrored due to transtextual networks cannot be confirmed without further qualitative follow-up.

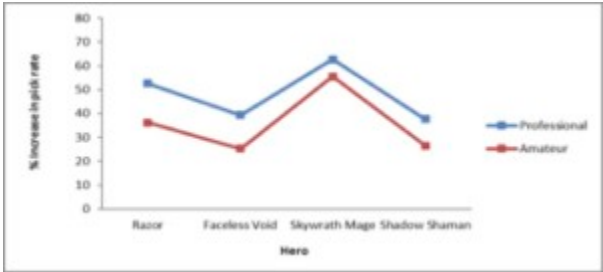


Figure I: Increases in professional and amateur hero pick rates, June-July 2014

Figure II presents pickrates of popular ‘pubstomp’ heroes in both amateur and professional contexts. Pubstomp heroes are those which are highly effective within public, or amateur, games. They often possess the ability to take advantage of the uncoordinated nature of amateur play, but are easily countered by a seasoned team of players. All heroes in this data set maintained a patch-wide amateur win rate of over 50% (placing within the top 30% of hero winrates).

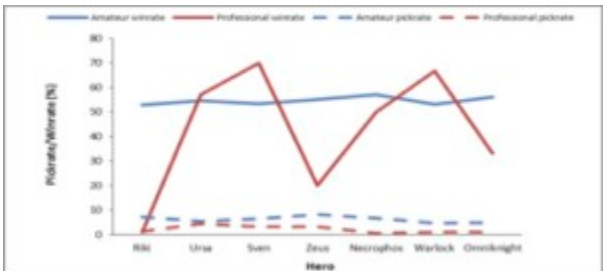


Figure II: Unpopular hero picks (with corresponding win rates) for professionals and amateurs, June-August 2014.

Figure II indicates that despite their efficacy in winning amateur games, many of these heroes proved ineffectual in winning at a professional level (or are simply played so little that their win rate

is not truly representative). Where it is logical (from a tactical standpoint) for professional players to abstain from drafting these types of heroes, the fact that they are relatively unplayed in amateur games, where these heroes are most suited, is telling.

While the first data set indicates a strong association between the gameplay of professionals in periods abundant with broadcast, tournament-level play, the second data set suggests that inverse associations also hold true. Heroes which have proven highly effective in amateur play in terms of win rate, are seemingly unpopular picks. While they do not mirror the professional pickrate, as was the case in the first data set, both amateur and hero pickrates for data set 2 are similarly low. This suggests that gameplay can be profoundly influenced not only by the representation of particular strategies, but also through the omission of playstyles from professional play and broadcast.

Discussion

Both data sets I & II present strong cases for the consideration of competitive games as transtextual. Additionally, they enable us to think about phenomenologies of the transtextual gamespace. Specifically, through an adherence to professional strategies, both data set I & II warrant a discussion of the prescriptive nature of paratexts and the functionalisation of amateur play through transtextual systems. Additionally, they position us to think about new forms of transtextual play. Through broadcast eSports, the professionalisation of play has seemingly been diffused to amateur players. As indicated through a reluctance to pick 'pubstomp' heroes, professional strategies are grounded in reliability and efficiency. While not directly referring to competitive gaming, Apperley and Jayemane's work aptly describes professional gaming (2012). They argue that the substantial demands that many contemporary games make on "attentiveness and cognition" are ultimately "more reminiscent of work than traditional play pursuits" (Apperley & Jayemane 2012, 12). Aside from the mechanical stresses of professional

play, the growingly monetised state of professional gaming strongly represents an intersection of gameplay and labour.

By adopting the strategies of professionals, however, amateurs are too co-opted into this gameplaying labour; strategies developed within the context of multimillion dollar tournaments (such as *The International 2014*) are deployed in completely new, (relatively) low-stakes contexts (see Figure I. Many of these heroes became popular amongst professionals and amateurs alike during *The International 2014*). Through the transtextual interface between digital games and observatory media, the ruthless efficiency and winning attitude associated with professional gaming is translated to amateur play. Despite the absence of extraludary goals, amateur players are functionalising their play in a way which mirrors the professional scene.

This functionalisation of amateur play (through an adherence to professional strategies) can be mapped almost directly to Adorno's conceptualisations of 'free time'. Adorno argues that practices of free time are "nothing more than a shadowy continuation of labour..." (1991, 194). Using the example of camping, Adorno signals a shift toward functionality within recreational activities. Camping, according to Adorno was characteristic of youth movements, protesting the "tedium and convention of bourgeois life" (1991, 190). This yearning for freedom has become "functionalised, extended and reproduced" (Adorno 1991, 190).

The amateur play of digital games, much like Adorno's conceptualisation of free time, have traditionally been seen to operate as a mode of expressive freedom (and sometimes escapism— see Caillois 1961, Kuchlich 2002. While amateur play can still be competitive, it is a relatively low-stakes pastime). However, through prescriptive paratexts and an adherence to set strategies, the ability to act autonomously is, in some instances, diminished. This begs the question, can this kind of amateur-yet-strategically-directed play be considered part of one's 'free time'? Adorno suggests that behaviour in one's own free time

is not always autonomous, and is only truly free time when determined by individuals who are free themselves. Not only has the transtextual nature of competitive gaming made boundaries between media permeable, but also boundaries of amateur and professional, and leisure and labour.

Data set II highlights how transtextuality in games can prove to be problematic insofar that they function as prescriptive texts. Where previous research into paratextuality has noted that that engagement with paratextual material enriches the game-based learning experience, often allowing for players to engage explicitly with ideas (Gee 2009, 11), this data indicates that paratexts have the potential for misuse, and have ultimately proven counterintuitive in their purpose (that is, the provision of playstyles and ideas which may aid in winning). While Consalvo noted that paratexts can “shape players’ expectations of what it means to play a game properly or improperly” (Consalvo 2007, 183), the spectator media surrounding Dota 2 seemingly has the potential to render play a derivative practice.

This then begs the question, if transtextual systems encourage an adherence to a set of texts do they diminish ‘gameness’ and the play impulse? Much of this impulse is ostensibly rooted in exploration. Established in early works on play (Caillois 1961) and reiterated throughout digital game studies, an essential part of games is the ability for the player to be creative within the framework provided by the game rules (Kuchlich 2002). Through tactical reconfiguration of strategies, transtextual systems force a reformulation of what constitutes both games and play. In recognising associations between gameplay and paratexts, we are enabled to add to the spectrum of practices that constitute play. Amateur players seemingly navigate both the gamespace and the broader landscape of paratexts, cultivating approaches to ingame scenarios. The transtextual play space is far from a sterile one, existing instead as fertile and pliant ground, germinating configurative play practice.

Taken together, both data sets I and II suggest that professional

players, through various broadcast mechanisms, set standards for play. Considering the tactical reflection of many of these play standards in amateur games, it is possible to model texts depicting professional play as strategic media. Strategies are seemingly constructed for use in professional play, disseminated as texts through streaming platforms, read by amateurs and tactically reconfigured for use in amateur games.

Data set III: Transtextuality and strategic reflexivity

Results

The third data set was taken from the LAN finals of The Summit 1, 2014, and the days immediately preceding and following. This data was particularly interesting in highlighting immediate associations between play and spectatorship, as well as in situating the dissemination of playstyles as reflexive practice. During the LAN finals of this tournament, player Arteezy made the unconventional choice (within the professional game) to use the Phantom Assassin hero. In patch 6.81b, this hero was typically unpopular amongst professional players (Dotateam 2014) as her playstyle unpredictable and inconsistent. This hero was used to great effect during The Summit's LAN final games, ultimately yielding a win Arteezy's team.

Despite questionable efficacy in the professional arena, amateur players had already been making use of this hero (10.78% patch pickrate). Where professional players expressed reluctance in drafting this hero due to unpredictability, amateur players embraced her (compare the low stakes nature of public games to professional play). Interestingly, despite already being a relatively popular amateur pick, the days following the LAN indicated that amateur players had increasingly favoured Phantom Assassin as a pick. Following the LAN finals there was an immediately noticeable increase in amateur pickrates of the Phantom Assassin hero (note that while the amateur pickrate increase may appear slight, it is derived from a much larger

player pool than the professional pickrates. Within the month of April 2015, Valve's Dota 2 interface reports that the game has been played by over 10 million unique players (Valve 2015). As previously noted, amateurs make up the bulk of this playerbase, and consequently even an increase as slight as that depicted in Figure III is significant.

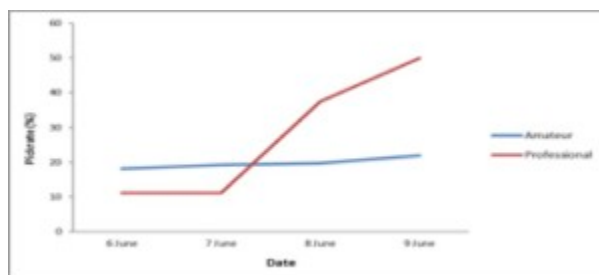


Figure III: Professional and amateur Phantom Assassin hero picks, June 6-9 2014

Discussion

This data set is significant not only in further establishing associations between spectator texts and playstyles, but also in highlighting that the dissemination of playstyles is reflexive. The relative popularity of the hero in amateur games prior to its professional use suggest that professionals may have drawn from amateur games, reconfiguring playstyles for high level play. Whether this was facilitated by observatory paratext (or through other paratexts, such as Dotabuff) is unknown. Interestingly, despite popularity before professional use, amateur pickrates increased following The Summit games. The playstyle is seemingly filtered back to amateurs.

This reflexivity suggests that the game is navigated and mapped dually by amateurs and professionals. The transtextual nature of Dota seemingly has potential to foster collaborative dialogues between players of vastly varied game proficiency (and

also suggests that amateur players are not docile content consumers).

This dialogue represents a shift from the top-down integration of information seen in Figures I and II. This can be modeled as a deviation of de Certeau's framework of cultural governance (1984). While the broadcast of high-end play has indicated a top-down effect with regard to the strategies of top players and teams, this particular case study suggests that playstyles can be fluidly adopted by players of any skill or competitive level. Thus, by taking advantage of (gameplay) opportunities, tactical players can reconfigure the strategies of the powerful. By actively forging practical approaches for play, certain amateurs are far more than pliable sycophants. In summary, gameplay tactics and playstyles are highly derivative but simultaneously reflexive. Broadcast gameplay functions as an important paratext, and has the capacity to directly influence the central character of play, even within professional domains.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the present study was to provide conceptual frameworks for the analysis of transmedia games practice, as well as establish associations between gameplay and observatory paratexts. Results indicated strong similarities between the playstyles of amateur and professional Dota 2 players during dense tournament play periods. While further qualitative follow up is needed in confirming results, this study has provided evidence that competitive games function as vast cultural artifacts, mapped by players and texts. Configurative and collaborative, the transtextuality belying eSports and competitive gaming has come to represent games as transgressive, crossmedia spaces.

Understanding competitive games and eSports as transtextual has forced reconsideration of primordial, essentialist perceptions of the videogame form. A game is more than the sum of its rules, mechanics, or audiovisual design. Consistent with

arguments made in previous studies (Taylor 2009, Kinder 1991), I suggest that we should move toward the consideration of digital games as transmedia objects. Within the scope of competitive gaming, I have argued that observatory media are effectively located within the purview of the game proper; their navigation by players representing a burgeoning form of play.

Furthermore, I have argued that thresholds between labour and leisure in play have effectively been blurred (as well as the distinction between amateur and professional play, with the strategies of professionals invoked in amateur games following their use on the eSports-field). Pertinent to practitioners and researchers of games alike, transtextual systems in competitive games and eSports have profoundly altered the experience of play and dismantled traditional formal and phenomenological understandings of games.

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