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# EXPLORING TILT IN ESPORTS

JUSTIN FALWELL

34 Pages

In esports communities, "tilt" is a commonly used term that tends to describe a phenomenon generally associated with intense frustration and a subsequent deterioration in performance. Despite its common usage, to date, there has been surprisingly little exploration into the phenomenon within esports. Through semi-structured, phenomenologically-based interviews with four collegiate esports athletes, the present study aimed to explore player perceptions of the fundamental experiences of tilt. The abridged IPA revealed several insights into various aspects of tilt including common triggers, manifestations of, and responses to the phenomenon. Findings from this study may be used as the groundwork for future studies regarding tilt and esports athletes.

**KEYWORDS:** Tilt; Esports; Emotion Regulation; Performance

EXPLORING TILT IN ESPORTS

JUSTIN FALWELL

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

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# EXPLORING TILT IN ESPORTS

JUSTIN FALWELL

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J. F.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Esports as an industry is one of the newer and fastest growing within the world of sport, worth a projected 1.38 billion U.S. dollars in 2022 (Gough, 2022). With the industry growing and an increase in the number of organizations and programs entering the esports space, sport psychology practitioners and professionals alike have increased opportunity to work with a new population of competitors in their pursuit of optimal performance. However, while esports competitors face similar issues to athletes in more traditional sports, they also have some seemingly unique challenges due to the nature of esports competitions. “Tilt” is a prime example of such a challenge, as it is a concept that almost exclusively exists within esports communities that sport and exercise psychology professionals and practitioners must understand if they wish to more effectively work with clients in esports.

### **Tilt History**

The term tilt is believed to have originated in pinball arcades, where when players would get frustrated, they would physically tilt the machines in a fit of rage (Wu et al., 2021). The term has since been adopted by the poker community, where much of the available research into the phenomenon has taken place, and eventually various esports communities (Browne, 1989; Wu et al., 2021). Due to the more colloquial nature of the term, there is not really a formalized definition of the term and individual understandings of the term vary a bit from person to person. Generally, tilt is used to describe an emotional state players get into that tends to be characterized by feelings of frustration and a subsequent deterioration in performance (Wu et al., 2021).

The emotion-performance relationship is one that has been long examined within the world of sport psychology. Lazarus (2000), in one of the more influential examinations of the

topic, introduced his cognitive-motivational-relational theory (CMRT) of emotion as it applies to sport performance. Lazarus' CMRT argues that emotion and stress should be considered as the same topic; when examining emotions and how they influence performance, it is crucial to consider them as discrete categories, identifying their most important and distinct characteristics, as well as their triggers and consequences, rather than simply grouping so called positive and negatively toned emotions together as opposite sides of a coin (Lazarus, 2000). Lazarus (2000) also highlights the importance of considering an individual's personal appraisal of a situation, whether they perceive something as a threat, harm, challenge, or benefit. Each individual will perceive a certain situation differently based on their biases, coping ability, and how a given situation may affect them. And that appraisal of a certain situation will determine how that individual will go about managing the situation as well as their emotional response to that situation (Lazarus, 2000). The individual appraisal is crucial to understanding the emotion-performance relationship in sport.

### **Tilt in Poker**

As mentioned previously, most of the extant research looking specifically into tilt has been conducted with a focus on poker. The findings within the poker sphere have generally corroborated the general usage of the term in esports and gaming communities (Palomäki et al., 2013, 2014; Laakasuo et al., 2015). In the world of poker, tilt has been examined as far back as 1989 where after the observation and interviewing of gamblers both in-action and post-play, Browne (1989) described being on tilt as a loss of emotional control that causes a gambler's play to deteriorate. Browne felt that in gambling, tilt could be broken down into three phases: encountering a tilt-inducing situation, an internal emotional struggle to maintain control, and the deterioration of a player's game should they be unable to maintain control (Browne, 1989). Later

studies of tilt in poker players have looked at various aspects of the phenomenon including common triggers of tilt, emotions and behaviors most associated with tilt, the aftermath of being on tilt, and individual susceptibility to tilt.

In a study by Palomäki and colleagues (2013), the research team used narrative and thematic analysis to examine the emotional processes poker players undergo when tilting. Participants in this study reported that their tilting was often set off by dissociative feelings such as disbelief after a notable monetary loss. This then led to feelings of indignation at the perceived unjustness of their monetary loss and the adoption of “chasing behavior” in an attempt to regain what they had lost and “restore a fair balance” to their wins and losses, usually resulting in continued losses thanks to suboptimal play. In the aftermath of tilting, participants reported feelings of regret and disappointment in themselves, as well as experiences with depression and/or anxiety. Notably in this as well as in other studies of tilt in poker, such as Palomäki et al. (2014) more experienced players seemed to be less prone to tilting and have a more levelheaded attitude when it came to experiencing “bad luck” or losses in general. This is not to say that experienced players are immune to tilting at all, but perhaps seem less likely to tilt due to their more “mature” understanding of the ebbs and flows of the game (Palomäki et al., 2013, 2014).

That study by Palomäki and colleagues (2014) focused on examining both a player’s sensitivity to losses and the severity of their tilt and how a player’s level of poker experience influenced both. Through an online questionnaire of Finnish poker players, their results indicated that players with more poker experience reported to perceive themselves as tilting less severely than more inexperienced players, players with higher sensitivity to losses tend to tilt more severely, and that more experienced players report themselves as having a lower sensitivity to losses. Interestingly however, they also found that despite the perceptions of the more

experienced players as having a lower tilt severity, greater levels of poker experience were actually associated with a higher severity of tilt. The research team goes on to comment that the seemingly inconsistent finding could be explained by arguing that experienced players are less likely to tilt in single instances, but more likely to tilt over the long run. If it can be assumed that possessing a greater level of experience means that those players are more inundated with experiencing tilt-inducing events, than less experienced players, the argument may hold water.

One final study of tilt in poker to highlight is that of Laakasuo and colleagues (2015) which explored the effect of social and emotional factors on the decision-making ability of poker players. Poker, being a game of skill, requires effective decision making to be successful, and across the tilt related poker research the deterioration in play is often understood to manifest as a breakdown in that ability (Browne, 1989; Palomäki et al., 2013, 2014). Using simulated game situations, the study tested the decision-making accuracy of players after being primed with either an anger-inducing story or an emotionally neutral story prior to testing and either being “watched” by a pair of virtual eyeballs or facing a blank screen during the test itself. The results indicated that the decision-making accuracy of the participants was negatively affected by the anger-priming story, but only when paired with the virtual watching eyes. The research team interpreted this to indicate that social factors seem to have a significant moderating effect on the influence of emotions on performance, and thus the likelihood to tilt (Laakasuo et al., 2015).

### **Tilt in Traditional Sport**

More traditional sport psychology has not yet incorporated tilt into the vocabulary of research, but there have been several forays into topics that are quite similar or related to tilt. In a study examining the relationships between the perceived emotions of competitive golfers and their performance for example, it was found that performance outcomes often drove emotions

and coping reactions in golfers, and that the higher the skill level of the player, the more resilient they were against the influence of negative emotions on their performance (Lundkvist et al., 2021). Notably, the study found that the measures of performance-induced emotions were overall stronger than the participants' emotion-induced performances. Meaning that within-persons, an individual's poor performance was more likely to lead to subsequent negative affect than an individual's negative affect was to lead to a subsequent poor performance. Though a negative affect did tend to lead to a subsequent negative performance, the initial negative affect was most often the result of a previous negative performance making it difficult to determine whether the subsequent negative performance was actually caused by the negative affect of the participants (Lundkvist et al., 2021).

A study by Sève et al. (2007) also explored the performance-induced emotions experienced during competition in high-level table tennis athletes. Using recorded footage of high-stakes matches, the researchers used stimulated recall techniques when interviewing the athletes to track the emotions and in-game situations experienced by the athletes throughout the match. The results of the study showed evidence that performance has an effect on the experienced emotions of athletes during competition, with better performance outcomes resulting in more positive emotions experienced and poorer performances leading to more negative emotions experienced. This study was not, however, able to parse out the effect of those experienced emotions on subsequent performance.

Additional inquiries in the realm of traditional sport also touch on concepts related to or reminiscent of tilt such as the exploration of the ways in which partner performance in doubles racquet sports affects experienced emotions of players by Deck et al. (2021). Deck and colleagues found that after reading vignettes depicting differing scenarios of partner

performance, participants in situations where their partner was performing poorly would score higher in measures of anger and anxiety, while participants that had a partner performing well would score higher in measures of happiness and excitement. While these findings are somewhat intuitive, it is important to note that not only did participants with poor performing partners score higher on measures of anger and anxiety, but they also believed that the poor performance scenario would have a negative impact on their own performance as well, suggesting a bi-directional relationship between performance and emotions experienced, which is consistent with the colloquial understanding of tilt as it stands.

### **Tilt in Esports**

Research on tilt in esports thus far has been less robust than what has been conducted in reference to poker. Given the relative newness of esports as a relevant topic for research, this is somewhat understandable. Studies that have investigated the psychological aspects of esports have generally touched on tilt, even if tilt was not the explicit focus of the study. In a study by Smith et al. (2019) for example, interviews with elite esports competitors were used in order to examine the most common stressors and coping mechanisms used by esports athletes. Tilt and the idea of tilting was explicitly talked about by one of the participants when discussing the ways in which losing repeatedly created a notable stressor for themselves and their teammates to overcome during competition (Smith et al., 2019). Tilt was also cited as a major obstacle to overcome in a study examining the mental skills and techniques used by competitive League of Legends players by Himmelstein and colleagues (2017), and the overcoming of tilt was seen by the participants of the study as key to performing at a high level.

One study that has looked specifically at tilt within esports was conducted by Wu et al. (2021), where the researchers surveyed 95 high school League of Legends players on their

definitions, triggers of, and responses to tilt as well as the players perceptions of its malleability. The survey was conducted as part of a longer and more wide-ranging research topic and only included four questions related to tilt specifically. Three questions were open response concerning tilt definitions, triggers, and responses to tilt, with the fourth question being a simple “yes/no/I don’t know” on the player perceptions of their ability to change their susceptibility to tilt. The research team found that players primarily associated tilt with negative emotions such as anger and frustration. Notably the players in this study hinted at a deterioration in performance as being associated with their conceptions of tilt but did not explicitly state that as a component of tilt in their minds. The most frequent response to the question regarding triggers of tilt was “other players” and within that category, a player’s own teammates seemed to be the most common source of tilt for the players surveyed. Other triggers mentioned included poor personal performance and losing in general.

Player responses to tilt were grouped into four categories: exit, positive, negative, and “lump”, with the most common responses falling into the “exit” category (Wu et al., 2021). “Exit” responses included actions such as stopping play for a short or long period of time in order to prevent exposure to the tilting situation. “Positive” responses, such as trying to maintain a positive attitude, were the next most common followed by “negative” responses, such as yelling and physical outbursts of emotion. “Lump” style responses made up the last category of common responses to tilt where, rather than lashing out or attempting to focus on the controllables of a situation, players will instead just continue to endure the situation and “take their lumps.” The majority of players surveyed felt that they had the ability to change how easily they get tilted, and those players who did were more likely to respond to tilt in positive ways when compared to those who felt their tilt was fixed in place.

The present study looks to build upon and extend the ideas and concepts explored in the study by Wu et al. (2021) by conducting in-depth and thorough interviews with esports athletes with an aim at distilling the fundamental nature of tilt as a phenomenon. Using an empirically based phenomenological approach to the research process, this study explores the meaning of tilt in esports and the essence of the human experiences of tilt for collegiate esports athletes.

Phenomenology is a research philosophy that involves attempting to break down a process or event to its fundamental nature as experienced by those living through it. In distilling a phenomenon down to its fundamental components, researchers are able to more comprehensively understand the essence of the phenomenon and develop definitions that more completely capture what goes into an experience (Sparkes & Smith, 2013).

By using interviews with esports athletes the present study aims to more comprehensively establish what constitutes tilt and how it is experienced by individuals in the moment. The greater level of depth and level of inquiry afforded by the use of interviews will allow the present study to specifically examine the components that make up the tilt process including personal definitions, antecedents, and specific effects of the phenomenon, as well as coping strategies used by individuals when faced with tilt. Additionally, the present study will attempt to examine potential differences based upon the surrounding context of the tilting situation, such as with organized versus casual play, or the how the specific source of the tilt affects an individual's response. The complexity of tilt as a phenomenon warrants a fuller and more nuanced understanding of what tilt is and how it is experienced from the perspective of elite members of esports communities. In uncovering that depth, the present study seeks to set the groundwork for future exploration into tilt that will allow for development and implementation of effective strategies to combat the phenomenon among athletes.



## CHAPTER II: METHODS

### Methods

#### Participants

The participants involved in this study were four varsity-level collegiate esports athletes at state-funded midwestern university. All four participants were male, ages ranging from 18-25 ( $M=21.5$ ,  $SD=2.89$ ), and two to seven years of experience in their main esports at what the participants considered to be a “good, competitive level” ( $M=4.88$ ,  $SD=2.10$ ). The primary esports played by the participants were Overwatch (participants 1 & 4), Valorant (participant 2), and Rocket League (participant 3).

#### Procedure

Following approval of the study from the university’s institutional review board, each participant was contacted by the researcher directly for recruitment to participate in the study. Once each participant formally agreed to participate, the researcher and the participant worked together to schedule a convenient time for an interview. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online via Discord, a popular chat application among members of gaming communities. The interviews lasted between 22 and 33 minutes in length ( $M=26:47$ ,  $SD=5:24$ ) and were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis by the researcher.

The interview guide used was developed by the researcher and followed a basic structure of first collecting basic background information from each participant including their age, primary esports, and level of competitive experience before asking the participants to describe their experiences with tilt. Over the course of the interview, each participant was asked to: 1) describe their personal definition of tilt as they understand it, 2) talk about noticeable signs or warnings that they or someone else they are playing with might be experiencing tilt including

both physical and mental cues as well as gameplay changes, 3) discuss common situations and events that will often trigger tilt in themselves and others, 4) highlight effective strategies used by themselves and others to mitigate the effects of tilt during competition, and 5) reflect on their personal susceptibility to and severity of tilt and how that has changed over time as they have gathered more experience in their esport of choice. Upon answering questions about a specific topic, the interviewer would either probe further asking for a more detailed explanation or paraphrase and repeat back the information presented by the participant to ensure clarity of meaning. The order in which each topic was presented to each participant varied depending on the flow of the conversation, and additional follow-up questions were presented to the participants when they would introduce a relevant topic outside of the five primary questions, such as with participant 4's mention of a "long-term" variation of tilt.

Once transcribed, the participants were given the opportunity to review the transcription in order to ensure that their responses accurately reflected their thoughts and views on tilt. After participant approval was obtained, the interviews were analyzed by the researcher utilizing an abridged form of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), grouping similar responses and themes from each interview in an attempt to create a complete picture of the phenomenon that is tilt. The researcher examined each transcript highlighting relevant responses to each topic regarding tilt. Highlighted responses that were similar across participants were then pulled and placed into overall themes based on the topic being responded to as well as the content of the responses. Through drawing on the principles of IPA, the researcher attempts to center the subjective experiences of the participants as they recount their encounters with tilt whilst being able to contextualize and draw meaning from the accounts of the participants (Sparkes & Smith, 2013).

## CHAPTER III: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results and Discussion

#### Defining Tilt

When asked to describe what comes to mind when thinking about tilt, the participants all keyed in heavily to the emotional aspect of the phenomenon. In line with previous inquiries into the nature of tilt and its colloquial perception, each of the participants specifically mentioned feelings of anger and frustration. “It’s a feeling very much centered around frustration” (P3). Interestingly, only two of the participants, (P2 & 4) specifically mentioned a deterioration in performance when asked about their initial thoughts on tilt, though both of the other participants made reference to that aspect of tilt later on in their respective interviews. “...tilt is when you’re so angry that you let it affect your gameplay and your communication to your teammates... where your frustration gets in the way of your performance” (P2).

Participant 4 had a somewhat unique response to the question, not mentioning specific emotions, but instead focusing on an overall “bad day mentally” that negatively effects one’s gameplay from a holistic standpoint, including communication with teammates, micro mistakes, and overall decision-making ability. While participant 1’s response was on the surface the most vague and nonspecific, their personal conception of tilt most falls in line with Lazarus’ CMRT of emotion (2000), citing tilt as something that is “more than just anger” but also encompasses stress and anxiety while being both individualistic and situation dependent.

“...tilt as a whole is more like what you feel after you analyze a situation and your own interpretation... you can put multiple people in the same situation, but some will tilt and some will not despite them being in the same situation... that’s just entirely based off of the individual’s perception...” (P1).

Every one of the participants' individual definitions and perceptions of tilt were roughly in line with both each other and the general understanding of tilt as it is discussed in esports circles (Wu et al., 2021; Himmelstein et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2019). Importantly, the participants discussed their perceptions of the phenomenon as a negative to their goals of high performance, highlighting the importance of understanding and addressing tilt when attempting to perform at one's best.

Tilt as a whole seems to be a phenomenon that can manifest in a wide range of possibilities that are quite individual to both the person experiencing tilt and the context of the situation, they may find themselves in. Several participants shared that they felt that not only does each individual react to potentially tilting situations differently, but that even within themselves they may react to a particular situation in different ways depending on the day.

“...tilt as a whole is more like what you feel after you analyze a situation and your own interpretation, I guess. Because I feel like you can put multiple people in the same situation, but some will tilt, and some will not despite them being in the same situation. I feel like that's entirely just based off of the individual's perception and stuff like that.”

(P1)

“It's very individual and person to person with what triggers tilt, but it's all kind of similar in how we feel. Basically, when gamers experience tilt, they're upset, something didn't go their way, they lost or whatever... For some gamers it varies from game to game, some games will tilt players, and some won't... But it's game to game and situation to situation.” (P3)

While broad categories of how individuals respond to tilt can be formed, it is important to keep this idea of tilt being a highly individualized and context-dependent phenomenon in mind when

considering how a particular individual may or may not react to a potential tilt trigger. It is possible that there may be some personality and personal mentality factors that go into play when examining how individuals respond to tilt.

### *Signs of Tilt*

When asked to describe some of the ways in which the participants would notice tilt setting in, both in themselves and others, a common refrain was an increased level of general annoyance and poor decision-making. Participant 4 described it as “becoming out of character from who you normally are.” This change in behavior from one’s normal self was also talked about by participants 2 and 3 as a notable sign of tilt in themselves.

“I notice I will talk and think less about what I’m doing and just kind of do what I feel like, even if it’s maybe the smartest thing or the best thing. Just because like maybe I want to go take a fight against somebody that is really not favorable for me, but I’m doing it because I’m tilted.” (P2)

“I’ve noticed that when we’re up, things intense, we’re doing well, things are getting tight, my comms are just on fire, I’m talking a lot. But if it’s like we’re down bad, it’s pretty quiet on my end for sure... then my actual in-game performance... it’s noticeable. I might make more mistakes, just be less engaged and make a mental error rather than a mechanical, physical error.” (P3)

Given the nature of most esports, the breakdown in decision-making ability often is the manifestation of a decreased level of performance. “Your gameplay is your decision-making most of the time...” (P4).

Participant 3 also mentioned their general playstyle changing when they find themselves experiencing tilt, but the manner of the change being dependent on the source of the tilt. When

tilted due to the actions of the other team, participant 3 talked about becoming more aggressive in game, trying to go for more bumps and demolitions (Rocket League term referring to using your car to hit and destroy your opponent's car to disrupt their play or remove them from the playing field for a brief period of time) as opposed to playing the ball as normal. But when the tilt came from more of a sense of frustration at themselves, their teammates or the general situation, participant 3 stated that they notice themselves become more withdrawn, just going through the motions, and waiting for the game to be over.

The dichotomy of aggressive versus passive tilt responses was something that participant 1 also made note of in their response.

“... because people tilt in different ways. So, like, [teammate], his in-game name is [redacted], he'll just basically not talk for the entire rest of the two hour block. He'll just not say anything, he won't talk to anyone... He'll just troll, he'll like go off the map a couple times. But then I think there's an opposite end of the spectrum. We have [different teammate], his actual name is [redacted], and he'll just straight up argue with my other teammates and just get into arguments and stuff like that and get really heated sometimes.” (P1)

Participant 3's mentioning of experiencing different responses to different sources of tilt offers an idea for a reason behind the differing tilt responses, but pinning down the genuine causes of an aggressive or more passive tilt response is likely to be more complicated and down to individual factors of the person and situation at hand. The relative frequency of each type of response was not explicitly mentioned by any of the participants, however the more aggressive response seemed to most often be exhibited by other people, possibly due to standing out more in the minds of the participants.

In contrast to the rest of the participants, participant 4 felt that tilt is not something that is easy to notice during play, particularly in oneself. When asked why they felt that way, the nature of their game (Overwatch) was cited as being too hectic and fast-paced for them to be able to take time to think and reflect on how they are thinking and behaving. This is particularly notable due to the fact that participant 1, who also plays Overwatch, did not indicate that they had any issues noticing themselves tilting during play. One possible explanation for this difference could be simply due to how each individual interprets the situation.

When discussing noticing tilt in others, there were two most common signs: a high level of combativeness toward others in the game, and poor general performance. Especially when discussing those that they may encounter in online, solo-queue play, the amount of anger and combativeness displayed by others was a huge clue that someone might be tilted. Solo-queue is a term in esports communities that is used to describe playing the game online with random teammates and opposing players via the game's matchmaking system as opposed to playing in an organized environment with regular teammates. Solo-queue can be thought of as analogous to playing pick-up in more traditional sports. Participant 3 describes the combativeness and hostility presented by those encountered playing solo-queue as a mindset in most players that refuses to take accountability for their performance, a "it's everyone's fault but mine" mentality. All four participants spoke of random teammates having a tendency to attack others for their mistakes or give up on trying to win at the slightest set back. "...you can never control your random teammate... you gotta walk on eggshells with people online." (P4).

Poor general performance was seen as the other major sign of tilt in others, particularly when discussing noticing tilt in their typical teammates on their respective esports teams as opposed to "randoms" when playing online. Because they play with their regular teammates on a

consistent basis, the participants have a more complete understanding of what to expect out of their teammates in terms of performance, which makes the difference in performance level more noticeable. With random teammates that are encountered in an online, solo-queue environment, it is more difficult to tell if the poor performance is the result of tilt or if the player is just bad.

### **Tilt Triggers**

As for what causes tilt to occur in people, the participants provided a wide range of possible triggers, from personal performance to teammate attitudes to out-of-game stressors. Across the spectrum of answers, three general themes or categories appear to emerge. Tilt is the result of: 1) A perceived lack of influence or control over outcomes, 2) a failure to meet expectations, or 3) a negative environment surrounding the situation.

#### ***Lack of Influence/Control***

A perceived lack of influence and control over the outcomes of the game was a theme that showed across a variety of participant responses. One of the most common triggers in this theme was poor teammate performance. Every one of the participants in this study primarily play a team-based esport, and as such are reliant upon others to be successful. When others on an individual's team are not performing well, that can start to set off tilt in the individual as they feel that the outcome of the game is being taken from their hands.

“And you kind of just feel helpless sometimes, and you just see like decision making that's questionable and you're just wondering like “why are they in this game? Why are they playing the way that they are?” and it just kind of snowballs from there.” (P1)

In Deck et al.'s (2021) study examining the impact of partner performance on emotions in doubles racquet sports, this idea of poor teammate performance causing increased frustration and reduced performance reminiscent of tilt was also present. Though notably, where Deck et al.



(2021) found that level of experience with one's partner had insignificant bearing on an individual's reaction to their partner's performance, the participants here claimed a noticeable difference in their likelihood to tilt when in a solo-queue environment versus when in their typical team.

“it's harder to have a conversation with players you're not familiar with. But when it comes to team stuff, it's easier to control the tilt, just because you know these players you're playing with, you know everyone and it's very easy to be open and honest with each other... you can have more open and honest conversations with people. Especially if you're sitting next to each other, it's a different experience tilt-wise. But when you're online with randoms, it's hard to have a conversation and people can antagonize each other more easily.” (P4)

This sentiment was echoed by participant 2 when discussing differences they notice between the solo-queue and team environment.

“...because I have trust in my teammates, I know what they're capable of, I'm not going to get mad at somebody as long as they're trying their hardest and putting forth the effort even if I see them make a bad play. In ranked I'd maybe be like 'oh god, this is my teammate, are you kidding me?' but in a scrim environment, that thought doesn't even cross my mind. It's like 'okay that's fine, next round' basically. So, I definitely tilt a lot less in a team environment...” (P2)

In a solo-queue environment, the participants expressed feeling less able to positively engage with their teammates and exert some beneficial influence on a poor situation, than when interacting with their normal teammates due to a lack of familiarity and rapport. When in a solo-queue environment, teammates are randomly assigned each time based on who is looking to play

at that particular time. Getting someone who is playing poorly on one's team rather than the enemy team reduces one's chances of victory through no fault of one's own. In an established team environment, the participants expressed that they felt they had agency in helping the situation by being able to talk to their teammates and help manage the situation and their tilt. The randomized nature of solo-queue removes most of the agency the players feel they have in these situations to help and leads to greater frustration.

While teammates are the primary source of frustration and tilt for situations where the participants don't feel in control, there were some other situations that also fall into this overall theme. Technical issues such as lag or bugs in the game, as well as quirks of the game design were also cited as triggers of tilt for the participants.

“...things that are more tilting are like dying when it feels out of your control. So, things like shotguns in Valorant can be really frustrating to deal with because it's a precise shooter, but that kind of defies that precision aspect.” (P2)

### ***Failure to Meet Expectations***

When discussing tilt triggers that could be classified as a result of failing to meet expectations, poor personal performance was the single most common example cited by each of the participants. When players fail to perform to a standard that they set for themselves, that can lead to intense frustration and very easily snowball into a negative tilt spiral where because a player is playing poorly, they get frustrated and angry at themselves. As participant 1, said it “Because I hold really high standards for myself and when I don't meet those standards, I'd say I definitely do get upset. I try to be really critical of myself so that I can keep doing well.” Due to that frustration, the player starts to play more recklessly and exhibit chasing behavior and poorer decision making, which leads to them continuing to play poorly and possibly even worse than

they had been previously. That cycle can easily spiral out of control and is the primary danger of tilt for competitors. It is important to keep in mind however, that due to the cyclical nature of that spiral it is difficult to determine how much an individual's poor personal performance is the cause or the symptom of tilt in a given situation.

Notably, personal performance was particularly highlighted as a tilt trigger when participants referred to situations that exist within their established team environment, more so than when playing online with random teammates.

"...in that team environment, I feel like that's where I get tilted at myself more because, like I said, it's a team game and we're all playing our part and for matches and stuff like that, I feel like I'm really conscious of my part I'm playing and how well I'm doing it. So, I tend to focus more on that..." (P1)

"...when we're scrimmaging, the main thing that causes tilt for me is like; I call a strat(egy), it doesn't work, I call a strat, it doesn't work and we're just losing lots of rounds and it feels like I'm responsible because I'm the one calling things a lot of the time. And so, in a team environment, it's mainly just the round differential, and at least how close the rounds are. Sometimes you can lose a lot of rounds, but they'll at least be close, but if you're just losing rounds and it's not close, it really is discouraging." (P2)

"In a competitive aspect, like if I'm in a college match, I'd say personal performance can tilt me. If I'm just having a bad game, I'm missing a lot of shots, then I can just kind of get down on myself, a little tilted like 'Damn, this game isn't going well. We could be up if I didn't miss that there.'" (P3)

Given that the participants also indicated that other people were much more likely to trigger instances of tilt when playing with random teammates online, it would make sense that

having familiarity with one's teammates would lead to less tilt as a result of others and a greater proportion of tilt instances would come from other sources such as personal performance.

Additionally, as the participants are involved in esports competition at a relatively high level, they are likely to have increased standards for themselves in regard to their performance, and when they fail to meet them, that can be frustrating as it works to hinder an individual's perception of themselves as a good and competent player.

While poor personal performance was the primary source of tilt for our participants that fell under the category of failing to meet expectations, it was not the only one. One such alternative trigger that can be categorized as a failure to meet expectations is game related issues such as matchmaking in solo-queue. At the level of experience and skill that the participants possess, they have developed certain ideas on what to expect out of a typical match they are involved in. At such high skill levels, players start to experience much longer queue times when trying to find a match online due to the relatively small amount of other players at their level when compared to lower levels of play. With these long queue times, it is expected that when a player does find a game, it will consist of players that are both, similar to every other player in the game in terms of skill, and that the players involved will be trying to win so as not to waste everyone's time. That expectation is not always met unfortunately and that can be intensely frustrating to players who only have a limited time to play and want to get the most out of their practice time.

“...especially at higher elos, the queue times are higher, so the value per game is much, much higher. Because as a tank player, I'm spending at least eight to nine minutes in queue... So everyone's time is valuable, so it's very easy to go on tilt when you see

someone else is either throwing or they just don't belong there. And your time is just not being valued, and that can put you on tilt." (P4)

### *Negative Environment*

The final broad category of tilt triggers discussed were triggers related to a negative environment surrounding the potentially tilting situation. Triggers that fell into this category included things such as out of game distractions and the tilt status of others in the game.

Out of game distractions were cited by the participants as not necessarily a trigger of tilt themselves in-game, but certainly have an effect on how susceptible an individual is to tilting on a particular day. As participant 1 described, "...like maybe something happened in real life and you're trying to your job, you're trying to hop on for events and matches for the program, but it's hard, you know, because it seeps in." Participant 4 shared similar thoughts when discussing the way tilt manifests for them.

"I think if you're having a bad day, that's obviously going to go into your gameplay a lot of the time. Sometimes, you can have a bad day, but you get into game and you're playing well so you don't tilt off that. But if you just hop on and you start off on the wrong step- and the problem is if you have a bad game, it's hard to have a good game after that, so if you have a few consecutive bad games, you can just keep getting worse and worse." (P4)

The threat of "bad mental" and how it affects one's individual and team performance was something that participant 4 was particularly keyed into, mentioning that they never even attempt to participate with the game in an "official/competitive" capacity if they feel they're having a bad day.

“If I’m having a bad day, generally I don’t I don’t come into the game with a bad mental ever. I don’t touch the game, unless it’s like an official scrim or something. You never come into an official (match) or scrim tilted, because you can very easily keep a bad day away from your scrims and officials with your team.” (P4)

The other source of tilt that falls under the negative environment category is the general attitude and mental state of those around an individual, mostly teammates. One of the major takeaways from the interviews with the participants was the idea that tilt is contagious and can easily spread from one individual to the rest of an entire team if not managed properly.

Participant 3 highlighted this when talking about how they notice themselves experiencing tilt within their normal team environment.

“And there’s times where I get frustrated with my teammates, but I never ever show that I’m frustrated with my teammates, like internally I am, but I will make sure that it’s not obvious or apparent. Because I don’t want to ruin it for them too or bring them down with me.” (P3)

The concept of not wanting to “bring them down with me” implicitly states that letting one’s tilt be shown and made apparent to one’s teammates is dangerous and puts everyone at risk of tilting alongside the original tilt victim. Rather than hinting at the phenomenon, participant 2 explicitly stated this concept when discussing tilting situations. “...when you’re playing with other people tilting, that makes it easier for yourself to tilt. So, not hearing other people complain about stuff just kind of keeps everyone’s mojo a lot better.” (P2) Participant 2 further reiterated this concept toward the end of their interview when giving advice on a strategy for managing tilt.

“I’ve loaded into a ranked game and immediately been able to tell that somebody’s tilted from the first round just by the way that they’re talking. And just hearing that tone in

their voice is just frustrating to hear when just joining a match. So, I'd say try not to re-queue when you're tilted, just take a 15-minute break and come back. Because not only are you going to have a poor experience, but you're also making it a poor experience for everyone else." (P2)

## **Managing Tilt**

Having talked about the most common triggers and effects of tilt, the participants were then asked to describe strategies or techniques that they use or have noticed other people using to help to manage tilt after it has set in. Most of the most common responses to this question involved modifying the situation in some way, whether it be by pausing during a scrim (mage) (organized practice game vs another established esports team), swapping games or one's role, or simply stepping away from the computer for a period of time.

"In scrimms, we can always just take a pause. We can pause and talk for a little bit. Figure out what's going wrong, and just kind of reset our mentals and like "okay let's do this, let's change this" whatever it is. And then for matches, you typically just get one pause per game or sometimes one pause per half. So, that's just one minute you have to just talk as much as you can, get everything out there and just reset and move forward. So I think that's the best way to reset tilt." (P2)

"It depends on the situation, but usually I just switch games. Like if I'm getting tilted playing ranked in Rocket League, I might switch over to Smite, or Valorant, or FIFA or whatever. Just kind of get a fresh situation, get something new in." (P3)

"Sometimes I'll get up from my seat and just walk around, I'll take a breather outside and get some air. If I'm at home, I'll go see my dog or something. Just things to take my mind off of what causing the tilt..." (P1)

In all of these strategies, the primary goal is to adjust the environment around them to mitigate one's exposure to the tilting situation ideally long enough to reset their mindset and move past the issue. During the actual competition, however, it can be difficult to effectively put these strategies into practice. The only version of these strategies that is even somewhat viable during esports competition is taking a brief pause or taking a brief breather outside between games in a best-of-x series, and both are limited in the immediate help they can provide. Pauses, effectively time-outs in more traditional sport, if they are allowed in a particular esports competition can allow an individual and their team a brief reprieve from the tilting situation. But are often not long enough to allow a tilted individual to fully calm down and reset, though they do provide some relief. Taking a walk or a breather between games allows for time to be less of an issue as breaks between games are often longer than the single minute or so that is had in a pause during competition. However, it does so at the cost of being able to address the issue more immediately and often means that one's team is in a position to where they need to comeback to win the series, because they were not able to handle the tilt during the game and likely lost at least in part due to that.

“But once you're on tilt, in-game it's very, very hard to notice it or control it. Because when you're on tilt, especially in Overwatch, it's very hard that you have time to asses the situation. Because there's no long respawn timers, the max respawn timer you'll have is like 10-12 seconds, and even then, you're looking at the entire map, you're trying to think about the game and it's hard to step back and analyze “oh, I'm tilted and I need to manage myself or I need to help manage a teammate, or comms are pretty down.” Like you just can't do that in Overwatch specifically. It's a 10-15 minute game. It's quick, everything needs to be done and if you don't focus on your gameplay it will snowball



massively. And so that's why I think it's difficult to manage tilt in-game, but I think after the game, it's easier to do." (P4)

When looking to manage their own tilt in the midst of competition, a popular strategy cited was to on the things within their control and accepting things as they are in the moment. As participant 1 put it, "I feel like a lot of the time, you can get tilted at something you can't really do much about, but you do have other things in your control that can make the situation better." Participant 2 echoed that sentiment when discussing how they combat their own performance-based tilt.

"When I'm not performing mechanically, like I'm missing shots, I have an off day, I always think that even in ranked, as long as someone's communicating, trying, using their utility, and trying to be a good teammate even if they're missing shots, it doesn't matter to me. So, I try to take that, like if I'm not hitting shots right now, I'll be a good supportive teammate, I'll communicate well. If I do all the other aspects well, even if I miss my shots, hopefully my teammates can capitalize off of my support to them... I really don't care about my own stats as long as I feel like I'm having impact. You can have impact without kills. You can have impact just by supporting utility or giving important callouts, and so there's a lot more to it than just be able to aim and shoot." (P2)

By focusing on the things that one can control and accepting that one's performance is not necessarily going to be at its maximum level in every game, it can help to mitigate the effects of tilt on the overall performance. While this technique does not prevent or extinguish an individual's tilt, it can prevent the tilt from snowballing on itself by preventing the individual from engaging in chasing behavior that often exacerbates negative performance and frustration involved in a tilt scenario.

Talking things out with teammates was another popular response on how best to handle tilt during competition, particularly so when playing with the participant's established teams. As mentioned previously, the increased level of trust and belief in an individual's regular teammates makes trying to have a conversation about issues that arise in-game to be seen as a more viable option for players.

“it's harder to have a conversation with players you're not familiar with. But when it comes to team stuff, it's easier to control the tilt, just because you know these players you're playing with, you know everyone and it's very easy to be open and honest with each other.” (P4)

When the individuals in a team have trust in each other to be able to talk about the issues that are occurring in-game without immediately flying off the handle and becoming hostile, players can take a more direct, problem-focused approach to fixing the tilt. Keeping a positive attitude and being able to talk through the struggles during a pause or slight break in the action of a game was something the participants felt could be very helpful in mitigating the impact of tilt on their gameplay moving forward.

“...for matches when people get tilted, I think people realize that- so I guess my strategy is just to not actually take a pause in the game, like a timeout, but just to talk in the pre-round say 'okay everyone take a breath, we're good, let's just do xyz and we'll go from there.' Something like that. I think the way you say things is often times a lot more important than what you're actually saying. Just trying to keep that positive mindset going.” (P2)

In situations where the participants are not in their regular team environment and are just playing with randoms online, the “talk it out” approach seems to be less favorable, but still useful if the

team is able to maintain a positive attitude and avoid giving up due to tilt. In a ranked or solo-queue environment, a much more common tactic is to just give up on the “lost cause” of a teammate that is tilted and cannot be talked down by muting them and just waiting for the game to be over.

“For a ranked environment, I’ll always start just be like ‘oh, we’re all good, let’s do this and just try and strategize and move on from the last round it doesn’t matter anymore.’ If we need to learn from it, sure, but how things went, even if it was poor we just move forward. And I always try to keep it lighthearted. And for me personally, if I feel like somebody is just not getting it, I’ll just mute them just to save myself the hassle. Because I don’t want it to make me play worse. So, if they’re really that tilted and obnoxious, I’ll just mute them or at least put them at a low volume to kind of just make sure I can stay performing as I should.” (P2)

### **Esports Experience and Tilt**

Every one of the participants said that they felt that, while they do still experience tilt, they have noticed that they are both less likely to tilt overall and more capable of properly managing their tilt if it does set in, as they have become more and more experienced in their respective esports.

“I would definitely say that I might be at a stage where I have more experience, so I might be just more used to it, so I tilt less frequently because I’m just kind more used to it. So, I would say I’m more used to it and it affects me less, and affects me less frequently.” (P3)

Several participants also noted that the level of importance they put on a particular game or competition was a notable factor in their overall likelihood to experience tilt in a given game.

Participant 1 hinted at this concept when talking about how they notice themselves as less likely to tilt than in the past.

“I think over the years, as I got (to be) a better player, I’d say... I’ve grown a lot as a player. And so ranked now, I just see as practice, it doesn’t really matter to me as much as it did a couple years ago.” (P1)

Participant 3 echoed these sentiments when discussing tilt in a general sense.

“Like whether it’s a game you don’t really care about, it’s a fun game, you don’t really get tilted. You’ll get tilted at a game you care about. But it’s game to game and situation to situation.” (P3)

Comments such as these suggest that as an individual gains experience in an activity and are exposed to situations repeatedly, each individual potentially tilting event becomes more mundane and seen as just a part of the experience, allowing players to be better able to brush past things without necessarily being tilted. The thoughts shared by the participants regarding how their experience has affected their tilt resiliency also backs up findings in previous studies, such as those by Palomäki et al. (2013, 2014) which found that experienced poker players were less likely to tilt when compared to their counterparts with less experience. The study focused on the impact of partner performance on emotions in doubles racquet sports by Deck et al., (2021) found similar results where an individual’s experience within the sport was a greater determinant of their likelihood to tilt based on their partner’s performance than their experience with their specific partner.

### **Long-Term Tilt**

While tilt is generally seen and thought of as an acute state an individual may find themselves experiencing, participant 4 shared a unique perspective when describing and instance

of tilt they experienced that they claimed lasted for two months straight. When asked to elaborate on how they defined long-term tilt as opposed to the more traditionally thought of acute tilt scenario, the participant described it as “playing ranked mindlessly” and lacking a goal or overall motivation to play with intention.

“Because it’s never easy to pull out of a long-term tilt alone, so you need that motivation, you need something to go for otherwise you could log on everyday and play, but you won’t improve or learn anything. Every little thing will set you off and it’s just not a good thing... short term tilt is mostly related to in-game stuff. In that game, in that match, in that session, it’s pretty limited to that. Long-term I think it comes down to who you are as a player, where you are in terms of skill level, where you want to be, if you’re solo grinding ranked, if you’re playing ranked for ranked sake, if you’re on a team, I think long-term tilt matters that way because if you’re just playing ranked mindlessly day in, day out, it becomes one giant blob of games that don’t really matter and you’re not doing anything with it. You’re just racking up the games and it is what it is.” (P4)

They then went on to say that due to the mindless nature of one’s play when experiencing long-term tilt and the dangers of just falling into a routine of poor play, it becomes difficult to even realize it is going on in the first place. On this point, participant 4 also generally felt it was difficult to recognize their own tilt while they play, citing the fast-paced nature of their particular esports, Overwatch. Participant 4 spoke about needing to completely step away from the game in order to recognize and combat their particular brand of tilt both for the typically thought of short-term variety and what they deemed to be long-term tilt.

“When I go through it, the rest of my gaming session, the rest of my day will be affected by tilt, and so I kind of need to stop for the entire day, like I need to shut down my PC

and stop for the rest of the day to get out of short-term tilt. Whereas other people can just stop themselves for like 10 minutes and get back on and mentally reset. So I think everyone goes through it differently, and how they can stop it because some people will just go off-role or play other games, for me I need to just not play. I need to be off my PC to stop the tilt.” (P4)

“One of the easiest ways to get out of long-term tilt is to just take a break from the game. And that’s why so many people do take a break from the game. Because you need to build a new habit, and you can’t do that if you’re still in your own habits.” (P4)

Given the way participant 4 describes their idea of a long-term form of tilt, it raises a possibility of tilt being linked to burnout. Burnout for athletes has been conceptualized to involve three dimensions including emotional and physical exhaustion, sport devaluation, and reduced sport accomplishment (Elkund & DeFreese, 2020). Now with esports, physical exhaustion is not necessarily a relevant concern to the point that it might be with a traditional sport athlete, but mental exhaustion, sport devaluation, and reduced performance are all certainly concerns to be aware of. Participant 4’s description of how they conceptualize long-term tilt, it is possible that burnout may be a more accurate representation of what they were experiencing.

## CHAPTER IV: LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The present study was designed to explore the phenomenon that is known as tilt as it is fundamentally experienced by esports athletes. The findings from this study will lay the groundwork for future inquiries into the nature of tilt and help to direct effective strategies toward managing tilt in athletes.

This study adds to the literature on the topic of tilt focusing on the perspectives of seasoned, elite-level esports participants and the ways in which they have experienced tilt over their time in esports. The notable differences that exist in tilt when participating in an organized team environment versus when playing in solo-queue with random teammates in particular shed light on the various ways tilt can manifest and from what sources tilt is most likely to arise. The contagious nature of tilt as described by the participants in this study highlights the importance of the social context of a situation in an individual's ability to regulate their emotions and maintain performance in the heat of competition.

Further inquiries into the phenomenon may more closely target how those different surrounding situations, such as organized vs ranked play or practices vs official matches, affect an individual's tilt threshold and responses to tilt. Additional measurable data on potential moderating factors for tilt such as basic psychological need satisfaction/thwarting, motivation, perfectionism, or an individual's mental toughness would further help in understanding the underlying factors that may lead to a particular individual's tilt responses. Additionally, participant 4's discussion on what they called "long-term tilt" and its possible links to athlete burnout could also be a valuable avenue for further understanding of tilt.

Due to both time constraints and difficulties in the successful recruitment of participants, the present study is left lacking in terms of the depth of the data available. If future projects are

to return to the subject, the perspectives of additional participants, including perhaps those that are involved in more individualized esports, would strengthen the available data and allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon that is tilt.



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