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Good Game Well Played: An Esports Documentary

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GOOD GAME WELL PLAYED: AN ESPORTS DOCUMENTARY

Gabriella Clare Devia-Allen

24 Pages

This film explores the operations and cultural practices of the esports community with an emphasis on Twitch as the dominant community platform. Explored sub-communities include Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, Duelyst, and League of Legends. A focus on Duelyst allows us to explore the characteristics of an accessible esports culture while also referencing League of Legends and Counter-Strike: Global Offensive offers an objective look at two of the industry's most developed esports scenes. This documentary tracks the production of broadcast content, the lifestyles of professional players, and the narratives of the industry's most involved employees. In doing so, the research draws conclusions concerning esports culture, communication behaviors, and a comparison to traditional sports. The film includes expert interviews with industry professionals from both production and competitor viewpoints.

KEYWORDS: esports; gaming; broadcast; Twitch; communication; culture

GOOD GAME WELL PLAYED: AN ESPORTS DOCUMENTARY

GABRIELLA CLARE DEVIA-ALLEN

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Fulfillment of the Requirements
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GOOD GAME WELL PLAYED: AN ESPORTS DOCUMENTARY

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G.C.D.A.

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CHAPTER I: SUMMARY

Referring to organized competitive gaming, the term “esports” first began meaning something in the late 90s (Schmidt & Schreffler, 2015; Wagner, 2006). Since then, the industry has evolved into a powerful means of entertainment, revenue, and cultural growth. After all, the 2014 League of Legends World Championship alone pulled more unique viewers than the National Basketball Association Finals Game Seven and World Series (Gafford, 2014; Volner, 2015; Dorsey, 2014). Despite the rapid growth of this industry and its ability to attract powerful investors such as actor and former athlete Rick Fox, few scholars have researched this field.

Beyond a global community of dedicated gamers, esports survives on a foundation of organizations dedicating time, energy, and money into the competitive entertainment platform. In League of Legends, for instance, Riot Games has built headquarters across the globe in order to produce professional broadcast content specifically geared toward North American and European audiences. Team Liquid, a North American League of Legends team, crammed over eight people into a four-bedroom, downtown Los Angeles apartment to hone their craft. Origin, a European League of Legends team, poured a fortune into a mansion equipped with a pool and personal gym for their players (Jacobs, 2015). Alternative organizations with limited funds endure solely virtual communication methods such as Skype and Discord with goals equal to the industry’s moneymakers.

Initial Gaming, a versatile gaming company with which the researchers have direct access, serves as a hybrid esports organization producing both broadcast content and tournament-winning gamers. This documentary will follow the activities and practices of Initial Gaming throughout the fall competitive season spanning from August to December. The interpersonal relationships—both virtual and real—and cultural practices within this organization will become

definable through the testimonies of participants. Showcasing these testimonies will not only enlighten audiences ignorant to the esports industry; it will provide a blueprint to esports enthusiasts searching for an analytical approach to esports organization norms.

CHAPTER II: TREATMENT

Initial Gaming is an esports organization involved in games such as Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (a first-person shooter), Duelyst (a collectible card game), and League of Legends (a multiplayer online battle arena). Since merging with Serpenti Esports, Initial has acquired semi-professional teams in CS:GO and Duelyst; they also host the largest semi-professional League of Legends circuit—right below the League of Legends Challenger scene in terms of competitiveness—and founded the first official Duelyst league with twice as many Duelyst World Circuit points—the currency with which players can earn a spot in the Duelyst World Championship—as any other tournament. This documentary will explore the administrative, production, and player roles within the organization. Because one of our research party members is involved in Initial Gaming, this documentary will include voice over material and remain transparent about that member’s personal involvement.

Introduction of Main Characters

Across the board, we will conduct several interviews to ensure even surveillance across the organization. Members under administrative, production, and player roles will introduce themselves through interviews to demonstrate the hierarchal structure within the organization. One participant from each category will serve as a protagonist. As it stands, Michael “Gramps” Torres will represent administration, Bil “Jump” Carter will represent production, and a player selected by accessibility will represent the competitive end. Interview segments and clips from TwitchCon will serve as narrative devices to introduce the esports industry and Twitch.tv to the audience as well. Interviews with Twitch Community Managers Brittany and Samantha Brown as well as former LCS coach Kublai “Kubz” Barlas will serve as expert perspectives.

This segment will also introduce the Initial Championship League and Duelyst Pro League. The Initial Championship League (ICL) is a competitive League of Legends forum through which semi-professional teams compete for a \$3,000 prize pool and community recognition. Several teams compete over multiple seasons. The Duelyst Pro League (DPL) is Initial's latest esports endeavor. Duelyst, a tactical card game in which players defeat the enemy general by playing cards on a virtual board, has recently sprung into the esports scene. The DPL serves as the first official long-term league in which players qualify before fighting for a \$1,000 prize pool and Duelyst World Circuit qualification points.

ICL and DPL Processes

After Initial members and general ICL/DPL concepts have been introduced, the documentary will follow the construction of an ICL and DPL broadcast. This includes preproduction, production, and postproduction portions. Preproduction includes broadcast copy review, sound checks, and preparatory conversations among production crew. The audience will both hear and view the conversations through audio and full screen graphics representing texts from Discord, Skype, and additional communication programs. Interviews with production crew members and voice over will provide additional commentary, elaborating upon this process. Production will consist of clips from the broadcast itself. This includes analyst desk, caster desk, and gaming segments. Competitors from the ICL/DPL will be interviewed to provide an inside perspective from those participating rather than solely those producing the events. Postproduction will include the breakdown of the events, resuming the interviews and voice over commentary enacted during preproduction. "ICL and DPL Processes" will be the longest portion of the documentary, especially since it will include the narrative arcs of the protagonists through this process.

League of Legends World Championship Semifinals

This serves as the climax of the documentary. In October, six Initial members will be meeting each other in person for the first time in New York City after long-term collaboration. The removal of the virtual veil itself will provide an emotional backdrop for one of the largest events in esports history. Here, I will acquire in-person interviews with all three Initial Gaming owners. The League of Legends World Championship backdrop also enables a comparative analysis between Initial Gaming events and esports events produced at the highest caliber of professional play and production (in this case, by Riot Games).

What the Future Holds

The documentary will end with a reflective look on the Initial Gaming experience and a predictive look into future events. For example, the disseverment of esports organizations is quite common due to the harsh nature of the work and freshness of the industry. The fact that Initial Gaming has persevered will be a topic of interest. Hopping among organizations is common for esports personnel as well. Whether it is because of lack of confidence in the organization or emerging opportunities, members tend to float from group to group. With this in mind, participants will be asked where they see themselves going in the industry not just as part of Initial but as members of the larger community.

CHAPTER III: FUNDING

Most documentary-making expenses consist of equipment purchases, travel costs, and lodging. In addition to equipment previously provided by School of Communication faculty members, required equipment will be purchased for this project. These purchases will be maintained under personal possession for future use. A home desktop computer, already equipped with Premiere Pro editing software, will be used for preproduction, production, and postproduction purposes. Total equipment expenses are as follows:

DSLR Camera: \$400 - \$800

DSLR Camera Lenses: \$100 - \$300

Portable Digital Recorder: \$50

SD Card(s): $\$40 \times 2 = \80

Tripod(s): $\$24 \times 2 = \48

Tripod adapter: \$8

Condenser Microphone: \$130

Rode Lavalier Microphone: \$80

Rode Shotgun Microphone: \$150

Lighting Kit: \$52

A DSLR camera, tripod, condenser microphone, and lighting kit have already been obtained. The remaining items still require purchase.

This documentary necessitates a minimum of two out-of-state trips. The first event, TwitchCon, takes place September 29 through October 3 in San Diego, California. The second event, League of Legends World Championship Semifinals, takes place October 19 through October 24 in New York, New York. Both serve as unique opportunities for expert interviews,

participant interviews, and on-site research. These trips will require a combination of air travel, road travel, and lodging. Additional trips across varying distances may be required. Projected travel and lodging expenses are as follows:

Air fare: \$550

Gas: \$400

Lodging: \$700

Event Tickets: \$500

Colleagues, friends, and family will be approached for potential opportunities to minimize costs. This support may emerge as lodging offers or direct funding. Event tickets have been previously purchased to ensure availability.

Most footage will be personally shot to minimize archival costs. Public databases with free services and royalty-free music will be utilized. An extended effort will be made to cut costs where possible.

CHAPTER IV: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The esports industry incorporates a multitude of driving forces including “an interesting mix of easy access, passive content-consummation, active interaction, and community-based content-generation” (Scholz, 2012, p. 2). To approach our review of literature concerning esports organizations with structure, we will examine esports while using League of Legends as a representative lens; define Twitch as the industry’s primary broadcasting forum; determine common community topics and social climates; as well as explore organizational norms and characteristics.

What are Esports?

First introduced in the late nineties, electronic sports, known commonly as esports, refer to organized competitive gaming (Schmidt & Schreffler, 2015; Wagner, 2006). Today, countries across the globe recognize esports as a professional practice, conducting tournaments in a manner similar to traditional sporting events (Stein & Scholz, 2014). Statistically, esports have begun challenging traditional sports, pulling over 27 million viewers for their 2014 League of Legends World Championship (Gafford, 2014). In comparison, the 2014 NBA Finals Game Seven pulled 18 million viewers, and the 2014 World Series pulled 23.5 million viewers (Dorsey, 2014; Volner, 2015). While traditional sporting events mostly draw viewers from the United States, esports offer a global appeal. Twitch, an online broadcast and socialization platform, serves as the main medium through which esports organizations broadcast their tournaments (Kaytoue, Silva, Cerf, Meira, & Raïssi, 2012).

Riot Games League of Legends Championship Series

League of Legends, a PC video game developed by Riot Games, holds the crown for popularity. The Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) features a five-versus-five format in

which the first team to destroy the enemy's base wins. The game supports 67 million players every month, 27 million players every day, and over 7.5 million concurrent players during daily peak times (Riot Games, 2016; Tassi, 2014). The monthly player total represents approximately 1% of the world's population. The League of Legends Championship Series (LCS) features seasonal competitions in both North America (NA) and Europe (EU). The World Championship held at the end of the year allows professional teams across the globe to compete for the international title. The World Championship garners a wealth of users for Twitch.tv, YouTube, and participating organizations. Some major sponsors include Coke, Intel, and Nissan (Gaudiosi, 2014).

Several small-scale organizations mimic the LCS framework. Some enthusiasts host Local Area Network (LAN) events in which gamers can gather and compete for regional titles (Jansz & Martens, 2005). Twitch is also riddled with organizations that host tournaments with cash—both real and virtual—prizes often sponsored directly by Riot Games (Twitch, 2016). Such events have become an integral part of gaming-accessible cultures not only as means of entertainment but as opportunities for professional ambitions (Ji, 2010; Kim & Thomas, 2015; Taylor, 2012). As research on professional gaming expands, the validity of esports as a legitimate, respectable sporting adventure responds accordingly, with support and enthusiasm (Witkowski, 2012).

League of Legends illustrates a vibrant evolution. As the most popular game on Twitch, The League of Legends Championship series perfectly exemplifies interdependence between game developers and the Twitch platform when it comes to the sustainability of the esports industry. Therefore, this literature review requires an exploration of Twitch itself.

What is Twitch?

As described by the Official Blog (2015), Twitch, or Twitch.tv, is the “world’s leading social video platform and community for gamers” (para. 1). The website implements an interactive setup, allowing broadcasters—anyone with the ability to produce video at a variety of quality levels—to stream gaming-related content live while engaging audience members through the online chat. Twitch users range from casual viewers to Twitch Partners—broadcasters who have achieved professional status and gain revenue through follower channel subscriptions, advertisements, and sponsorship.

The Making of Twitch

In 2007, Justin Kan and Emmitt Shear launched JustinTV, a website allowing anyone to broadcast gaming-related content. While the platform was innovative, the quality was...underwhelming. Entrepreneur and streaming enthusiast Marcus “djWHEAT” Graham teamed with Kan and Shear to transform JustinTV into a company with a future. Twitch CEO Shear and Twitch Creator djWHEAT used the power behind JustinTV to launch Twitch in June 2011. By 2014, JustinTV was rebranded as “Twitch Interactive”; however, with Twitch’s popularity escalating quickly, management shut down the secondary site. They believed a sole focus on Twitch would prove more beneficial than the management of two entities. Considering that own3d.tv, Twitch’s only competitor, shut down in 2013, Twitch was set to rule the stage of live gaming (Cook, 2014).

On August 25, 2014, Shear announced the latest financial move through Twitch’s public blog:

Today, I’m pleased to announce we’ve been acquired by Amazon. We chose Amazon because they believe in our community, they share our values and long-term vision, and

they want to help us get there faster. We're keeping most everything the same: our office, our employees, our brand, and most importantly our independence. But with Amazon's support we'll have the resources to bring you an even better Twitch. (para 4)

While Amazon currently owns the platform, Twitch employees still consider the company extremely independent and a dominating force within the gaming industry.

Among gamers, Twitch is a universal language, a communication platform accessed by all. That being said, Twitch is expanding beyond its "gamer geek" identity. The broadcasting platform powers through the ranks of entertainment, accomplishing feats even outside its original niche. At 1.8%, Twitch ranks fourth in United States peak internet traffic, beating heavy-hitters like Hulu and Facebook (Fitzgerald & Wakabayashi, 2014). Twitch also accounts for over 40% of all live-streamed internet content (Kim, 2014).

At TwitchCon 2015, the first official convention celebrating the Twitch community, Shear relayed annual statistics during the Keynote Speech. During peak hours, Twitch retains 2.1 million viewers. The site supports 1.7 million broadcasters, 12,297 of which are partnered. The broadcasters generated 7.5 billion minutes of content. Over 40 different organizations used Twitch to raise \$15 million for charity within a year. Most of these numbers reported in September 2015 doubled the 2014 statistics, setting the platform on a continuously positive growth trajectory (Shear, 2015).

Because of Twitch's accessibility, broadcasters vary from professional players to casual consumers and stream a variety of games. Last year, 127,497 individual games were identified on the platform (Deng, Curadrado, Tyson, & Uhlig, 2015). However, most viewership falls under a handful of game titles. The Twitch.tv front page always features the top twelve streamed games. Of course, these titles change frequently throughout the day depending on new title

releases, esports events, live broadcaster game preferences, and viewer traffic; however, longitudinally, League of Legends is hands-down the most popular game streamed on Twitch (Twitch, 2016). League of Legends, a multiplayer game, is heavily rooted in professional esports, holds airtime on multiple streaming platforms worldwide, and fosters one of the most iconic consumer communities in all of gaming.

The esports industry prides itself on community interactivity. Whether referring to the in-game “all chat” or the Twitch stream chatroom, community members have developed a unique communication style complete with social norms and cultural expectations. Comprehending current community themes holds equal importance to the exploration of industry structure.

Community Behaviors

Twitch, in a sense, represents a “meta” community. The broadcasters set the tones for their respective channels. Their game choices draw a very specific viewer base. Preconceived notions regarding both the general broadcasting industry and Twitch norms set the standard for communication and interaction. Through the research presented below, gender and communication toxicity emerged as common themes within community climate discussion in both gaming and Twitch-specific communities.

Women in Broadcast Journalism

As discussed in previous sections, Twitch secures its identity as a respectable source of streamed entertainment (Fitzgerald & Wakabayashi, 2014). Few can predict a decline in Twitch popularity, especially considering its ranking as fourth largest traffic generator in United States internet and consistent 8% growth rate (Zhang & Liu, 2015). Of course, while experts consider streamed media a modern development, the platform resembles traditional broadcasting. A significant portion of viewership traffic stems from professional esports events including Riot

Games' LCS (Deng, Curadrado, Tyson, & Uhlig, 2015; Twitch, 2016). Understanding gender-based discussions on Twitch demands a review of literature concerning traditional broadcast journalism.

Historically speaking, the male population dominates the broadcast journalism environment (Hardin & Shain, 2005). Consequently, research on the subject is quite extensive. The underrepresentation of women often leaves this marginalized group feeling invisible within the media workplace (Miller & Miller, 1995). As women fall to the wayside, women's issues follow suit. Males statistically hold higher positions of power in newsrooms, thus dictating the reporting agenda. Individuals who do not understand certain topics in reality are more likely to ignore those very issues in the workplace, a trend that directly impacts the integrity of a media entity (Ross, 2001). Essentially, if male journalists are less pressured to address women's issues due to female invisibility, those same issues will dissipate from any journalistic representation.

Aside from male-female tension in the workplace, women struggle with their identities as both females and journalists, often viewing the two identifications as unharmonious (Hardin & Shain, 2006). In turn, women sometimes adopt hegemonic values and accept their marginal status rather than risk "rocking the boat," rejecting opportunities to collaborate and enact change (Hardin & Shain, 2005). In some cases, women even accept menial assignments distributed through sexist language due to feelings of invisibility (Miller & Miller, 1995). The numerical representation of women in broadcast journalism may be rising, but women are still, more often than not, caving into the pressure of conformity and adherence to journalistic norms. Because Twitch is the latest form of broadcasting and a haven for esports events, preconceived notions concerning the treatment of women within the industry most likely bleed into the gaming community.

The League of Legends In-Game Climate

League of Legends is notorious for communication toxicity...perhaps more so than most gaming communities (Alklid, 2015; Farrington & Muesch, 2015; Kou & Nordi, 2011). While some players seek the game as an opportunity for socialization and likeminded expression, many players exploit the anonymity as an opportunity for harassment—both sexual and generalized—and negative outbursts (Ducheneaut, Moore, & Nickell, 2007; Kou & Nordi, 2011). To combat toxicity, Riot Games grants players the power to report fellow “summoners” for inappropriate behavior (Shores, Swanenburg, Kraut, & Riedl, 2014). The reporting player can choose from a variety of categories and add a description to justify the submission. On a daily basis, Riot Games employees sift through thousands of player complaints (Kou & Nardi, 2007). After observing both League of Legends and Twitch interactions, one can only assume that toxicity generated within the game phases between internal and external gaming communications including Twitch and esports environments.

Despite popular belief, female gamers outnumber males when it comes to PC gaming (Chalk, 2014). Due to personal profile practices, one can hardly decipher how these numbers translate to League of Legends. However, considering the fact that League of Legends is the most popular PC game in the world, one can safely assume that the generalized gamer statistics translate to this isolated community (Tassi, 2014). Nonetheless, sexist language is prevalent in the League of Legends community regardless of anonymity. When players do find out a fellow summoner is female, sexist language escalates exponentially (Alklid, 2015; Farrington & Muesch, 2015; Kou & Nordi, 2011). In LCS, women are severely underrepresented. Eefje “Sjokz” Depoortere remains the only professional female broadcaster as the European tournament host. The first female professional player, Remi, did not appear until 2016 and left

the scene after a few months, citing anxiety and self-esteem issues as the justification for departure (Riot Games, 2016).

With toxicity dished from casual players on a daily basis, who knows how many females and underrepresented groups alike lurk under the veil of anonymity simply to avoid harassment. Esports organizations offer a unique environment, removing anonymity as a possible protective measure. Each organization houses a multitude of public and private figures whose identities are known, at the very least, to one another. Consequently, current literature fails to address how these toxic communication practices translate to esports organizations on an individual basis.

Twitch Communication and Gender

As Twitch becomes a grand distributor of media among the masses, cultural impact must be taken under consideration. Amongst other divisive topics, female representation is a prevalent topic among Twitch users. Generally speaking, the Twitch community believes the female broadcaster falls under one of two categories: either a sexually exploited “cam girl” or a professional woman fighting against viewers’ misogynistic expectations. Of course, these stereotypical labels vary depending on the viewer. Perhaps she is either a sexually liberated gamer girl or a conservative casual player; or a real chick just milking her attractive years or a naïve female avoiding what it takes to be successful. Regardless, these topics, pervasive in any Twitch chat room, rarely appear in research. Mainstream journalists have just begun scraping the surface of the discussion, merely posing questions about the legitimacy of the female Twitch broadcaster (Withers, 2015). Some research has addressed the impact gender has on Twitch viewership. Regardless of gender representation within the general gaming community, males are five times more likely than females to use Twitch while female broadcaster chatrooms are more susceptible to sexist behavior than male broadcaster chatrooms (Alklid, 2015; Farrington &

Muesch, 2015). However, most of this research was conducted by undergraduate students. Even more so, researchers rarely address these cultural dynamics within organizations extending beyond the live broadcasts. Do males and females face the same labels in competitive esports venues outside of Twitch chatrooms? Considering the fact that female PC gamers actually outnumber male gamers, diversity within esports organizations is predicted to increase, making an understanding of current organizational environments paramount (Chalk, 2014).

Esports Organization Norms

In South Korea, esports professionals have achieved celebrity status, serving as staples in regional popular culture. The cultural phenomenon draws attention from a widespread audience. Participants in these online gaming communities strive for a chance to earn a spot in an elite esports crew. Regardless of evidence suggesting the contrary, “in the US such a career [in esports] is still considered frivolous, despite the fact that video gaming now dominates the entertainment industry and there are hundreds of millions of players worldwide” (Kim & Thomas, 2015, p. 185). While this Korean archetype has yet to be completely mirrored in Western culture, esports organizations across the globe adopt these cultural practices (Jin, 2010). Esports organizations sport major versatility when it comes to structure. Are they virtually controlled or run solely by local personnel? Do they invest in teams or individual players? Several factors contribute to the unique environment fostered by every esports organization out there. A few key aspects worth discussing are cultural integration, social expectations, and virtual environments.

Cultural Integration

While esports organizations hold their own set of norms due to industry characteristics, they face the same challenges and practices as an organization. Cultural and personality diversity

affects the well-being of both the group and the individuals involved. Extraversion, neuroticism, and self-esteem are common characteristics influencing the subjective well-being of group members (Diener, Shigehiro, & Lucas, 2003). The integration of multiple personalities and cultural practices impacts interpersonal relationships, leadership styles, and group effectiveness (Anderson, 1983). Because esports such as League of Legends and StarCraft II are globally-tracked venues, it is no surprise the organizations behind the entertainment reflect the same diversity (Schmidt & Schreffler, 2015; Scholz, 2012).

Social Expectations

Additionally, some believe the gaming community offers unique social opportunities. After all, “social proximity and familiarity...foster both online bridging and bonding social capital” (Trepte, Reinecke, & Juechems, 2012, p. 832). The social bonds formulated in a gaming environment are incomparable to alternative circumstances. This characteristic of gaming is bound to influence the social structure of an official gaming organization. Because gaming involves both fantasy and reality behavioral practices, participants must negotiate identities within a team-based environment, demonstrating a cultural, linguistic, sociological, and psychological impact of both in-game and out-of-game choices (Williams, Winkler, & Hendricks, 2006). Consequently, in-game leadership is countered by out-of-game controlling positions. The social etiquette practiced by team leaders while gaming, particularly in games like League of Legends, often transfers to the real world (Jang & Ryu, 2010).

Virtual Environments

Whereas most major organizations require players to live within the same vicinity (Jacobs, 2015), a virtual element still plays a vital role within esports. Whether they have yet to acquire the funds for a gaming house or they simply want to expand personnel based on talent

rather than proximity, esports organizations are often forced to construct rules and regulations bounded not by national borders but by Internet norms and expectations (Nuangjumnong, 2014, 2015). This alternative reality leads some to classify online gaming communities as “third places,” or social settings separate from the home and workplace (Steinkuehler, 2005), though determining whether or not these environments qualify as “third places” requires more research. The balance of virtual identities, connections, and regulations all factor within the industry (Trepte, Reinecke, & Jeuchems, 2012; Williams, Winkler, & Hendricks, 2006).

The Bottom Line

Mass media has recognized the power esports hold as an entertainment platform. Researchers in fields such as business and computer technology have begun exploring the inner workings and marketable influences of the organizations behind the industry. Communication scholars have previously analyzed gaming communities and general virtual communication techniques. When it comes to the esports organizations on top of which this community is built, however, the research is nearly nonexistent. Communicators and business professionals alike must begin linking organizational norms to the dominant culture. We know what gaming is. We know what esports means. We know little about the groups running the show. As a start to understanding esports culture and addressing common communication climates associated with gaming, we pose the following research questions:

- RQ1: What is esports culture as described by the community’s inhabitants?
- RQ2: What communication behaviors has this culture adopted?
- RQ3: How does the production, distribution, and analysis of esports compare to that of traditional esports?

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