Competitive and Professional Gaming: Discussing Potential Benefits of Scientific Study

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ABSTRACT

Competitive and professional gaming, in which video game players participate in tournaments, offers numerous opportunities for much-needed research and enhanced knowledge about digital technology. To date, competitive gaming has received scant scientific attention, even though it may foster the development of adaptive skills or, in other instances, carry adverse consequences. Examining the lifestyles and successes of competitive gamers can increase our knowledge of gaming and yield useful information about extreme or excessive involvement in digital technology. Studying the most successful competitive gamers, who appear to develop exceptional skills, could be highly beneficial. Suggestions for research are provided.

Keywords: Competitive, Digital Technology, Expertise, Online Gaming, Starcraft

INTRODUCTION

Professional and competitive gamers might share much in common with top professional chess players. They might be characterized as those who show dedication to mastering a difficult set of skills and freely teaching these skills to others; demonstrate persistence, discipline, and intelligence; perform with extraordinary competence under intense pressure and scrutiny; work cooperatively with fellow workers or teammates; and achieve a high level of financial success (Reeves, Brown, & Laurier, 2009). These positive qualities often characterize successful professional competitive gamers.

In contrast to the extensive literature on professional chess players, however, competitive gaming has not been widely researched or recognized in the scientific and professional literature on video games. Thus, this paper will argue that the area could prove to be a fruitful area of future study. Although a paper such as this would prefer to anchor descriptions and hypotheses with established scientific evidence,
scientific research is often lacking, and in large part motivates the current call for research in this paper. Consequently, much of this paper is opinion-based as there is little research. Currently, the gaming studies field primarily depends on scientific studies in closely related or allied areas while also drawing to an extent (with considerable caution) from less rigorous sources than peer-reviewed articles (e.g., statistics available from websites, and the personal observations of one of the authors with first-hand experience in this area). Although the nature and combination of these sources often call for tentative conclusions and positions, it will be argued that they provide a strong basis for arguing the merits of initiating research in this area.

As the name suggests, competitive gaming comprises players who regularly compete in tournaments organized and run by the gaming community, often for large monetary gains. Secondary benefits include the recognition and admiration of other gaming community members. Such tournaments are now often run by companies that host the events at large convention centers in major cities (e.g., New York City, Los Angeles, Seoul, etc.). According to Electronic Games Magazine (1982), tournaments have been organized since the 1980s, beginning as far back as games played on the Atari console (the first home gaming system), which ran competitive tournaments as soon as the games were released in the United States. Despite three decades of worldwide growth in competitive gaming, little investigation has catalogued these activities. One recent study explored a computer game called Counter-Strike, noting that it had over three million players and an annual prize of $150,000 (U.S.) (Reeves et al., 2009). However, these numbers likely pale in comparison to games such as Starcraft or Starcraft 2. Similarly, although studies are lacking, studies have noted that competitive games now use Internet radio coverage with play-by-play commentaries, large-screen televised projections of game footage, sizeable live audiences, and cash prizes in the hundreds of thousands of dollars (e.g., Hutchins, 2008).

Competitive tournaments feature a wide variety of games. According to Jake Kulinsky (personal communication, 2012), an MLG (Major League Gaming) Tournament Official, games typically attracting the largest audiences and prize money are real-time strategy games, such as Starcraft 2 and League of Legends. Many games played competitively appear to demonstrate high levels of sophistication in strategizing, planning, multi-tasking, and timing to master, as has been indicated by studies on games like Counter-Strike (Reeves et al., 2009). As with other competitive games, professional gamers must develop a wide set of skills (e.g., rapid reflexes, refined hand-eye coordination, and fluid game control) to excel in professional circles.

Starcraft and Starcraft 2, which emphasize strategy and are among the most popular competitive games in the Major League Gaming circuit, have certain parallels to a blitz (i.e., very fast) game of chess. The games involve building an army to defeat an opponent’s army by gathering resources with “harvester” units. Each offensive unit has various strengths and weaknesses, and a player must attempt to predict which units their opponent is building in order to defeat them. A player also must decide among various courses of action contingent on their resources and in response to their opponent’s behavior. Emphasis is placed on rapid decision-making; spending even a second without issuing a command or building a unit could mean a loss to a skilled opponent. Furthermore, the game can be played simultaneously with multiple players, allowing for cooperative team play.

Having briefly overviewed some of the key themes and skills involved in competitive gaming, those in and outside of the gaming studies field may wonder how scientific research on the profession can contribute to our knowledge of the positive and negative effects of digital technology. This paper therefore elaborates five key reasons why competitive gaming merits...
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