

Book Review:

This Is Esports (And How to Spell It): An Insider's Guide to the World of Pro Gaming

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This Is Esports (And How to Spell It): An Insider's Guide to the World of Pro Gaming
Paul 'Redeye' Chaloner and Benjamin Sillis © 2020 by Bloomsbury Sport
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This Is Esports (And How to Spell It): An Insider's Guide to the World of Pro Gaming provides an insightful glimpse into esports, a phenomenon that has become one of the most fascinating and compelling mediums for entertainment. The book sheds a light on the workings of the esports industry and illustrates the role of players, teams, game publishers and the broader esports community in contributing to the development of the industry. The book offers a comprehensive analysis of the growth of competitive gaming into a billion-dollar business and sets the readers on a quest to understand why millions of people around the globe are transforming the act of watching other people play video games into a spectacle.

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The book is written by Paul ‘Redeye’ Chaloner and Benjamin Sillis. Paul Chaloner is a highly sought after esports broadcaster who has covered an array of tournaments around the world and he has been active in the esports industry for close to two decades (Wolf, 2016). He has developed a reputation as one of the biggest names in professional video game broadcasting over the years, even long before the word “esports” was coined as an official term (Mejia, 2020). His longevity in the esports industry is a result of his meticulous research ahead of time for each game, and his sincere appreciation for esports participants and events. Benjamin Sillis is a technology writer who has specialized on video games for several years. His writing focuses on the most recent developments in the esports industry (e.g., Sillis, 2021).

The book is fundamentally composed of two major intertwined parts. Part One consists of seven chapters in which the authors aim to provide an overview of esports industry and expand on a multifaceted history of competitive video gaming. By proffering an overview of the history of esports industry, the authors highlight the state of esports industry a few decades ago and explicate the factors that contributed to its recent popularization. Part Two also consists of seven chapters and the authors highlight some of the issues of concern in the contemporary esports industry. By focusing on the issues of concern, the authors communicate to the readers that esports industry is not just about video games, but it also consists of other constituents (such as players, game publishers) that have the capacity to influence the industry’s current state of affairs. Hence, by structuring the book into two interconnected parts, the authors ensure that the arguments are constructed in a reasonable manner and that there is a logical flow of ideas. In so doing, the authors attract readers with diverse backgrounds who can seamlessly follow the contents presented in the book.

The book stands out when compared to other books written on esports because of the comprehensive nature of contents included in the book. Other books fail to provide a holistic viewpoint of the esports industry. For instance, the book titled *Good Luck Have Fun: The Rise of eSports* written by Roland Li (2017) covers the history of esports from its humble beginnings to the multi-million-dollar tournaments of today. However, the author does not portray an engaging storyline and the book fails to address some of the pressing issues that grip the esports industry in the contemporary times.

In comparison, Chaloner and Sillis (2020) expose the readers to a variety of topics on esports and provide an in-depth description on each of the topics covered in the present book, indicating the focus on not only the breadth but also on the depth of the topics. Further, by weaving personal anecdotes, the authors convey the contents in an engaging manner. Collectively, the book lays a foundation to provide insights to readers on the finer intricacies involved in the esports industry and infuse a degree of admiration for this spectacular world of esports.

CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE BOOK

Part One Review

In the initial chapters of Part One, the authors explain that the term esports applies to competitive video gaming and it is an overarching concept that encompasses distinct genres of video games that appeal to people because of their ability to elicit “elation, heartbreak and tears” (Chaloner & Sillis, 2020, p. 15). Further, the authors address the issue of how to spell the word “esports”. There has been a longstanding debate regarding the composition of word “esports” (Howard, 2019). Authors opine that the phenomenon of competitive video gaming should be referred to as “esports”, and not the Camel casing variant (i.e. eSports) because “it sends people with good intentions off down tragic paths” (Chaloner & Sillis, 2020, p. 21). The Associated Press expressed a concurring stance in 2017, arguing that according to market developments and popular practice, the appropriate spelling is “esports” (Pacetti-Donelson, 2019).

After the brief introduction to esports, the authors present a story of the emergence of esports from arcade games to a fiercely competitive video gaming industry. One of the strengths of the book

is that the authors present a detailed discussion on the embryonic juncture for esports when a brand named as Atari was created by Nolan Bushnell to host the first arcade competition named as “Space Invaders Championship” in 1980 (Chaloner & Sillis, 2020, p. 25). Soon, several technological enhancements metamorphosed the competitive gaming landscape and made the computer the main vehicle for virtually all potential esports. The authors also present the first success story of esports when Dennis ‘Thresh’ Fong, a teenager from California, won several esports events in a span of two years and secured substantial endorsement deals and contracts from gaming magazines. As an exemplar, organizations such as Hasbro and Earthlink began providing valuable endorsement deals and consultancy offers to Fong (Karlin, 2017). The authors assert, “he brought professionalism needed to kick-start esports” (Chaloner & Sillis, 2020, p. 42). Fong’s case illuminated the immense potential present in the esports industry and set a harbinger that contributed to the emergence of professional gaming. The success achieved by Fong set a realization that playing esports video games might be a meaningful career pursuit.

The book then transitions into explication of the role of distinct video games and leagues in transforming esports into a genuinely global phenomenon. The authors lend support to their assertion regarding the esports industry’s growing emphasis on attracting a global audience by highlighting the example of Cyberathlete Professional League (CPL) World Tour. The emphasis on capturing a global audience was financially advantageous as “overall prize money given away in esports events annually almost tripled between 2004 and 2007, from \$2.8 million to \$7.8 million” (Chaloner & Sillis, 2020, p. 55). Shortly afterwards, the esports industry received another boost with the rise of Twitch (Popper, 2013). The authors portray a comprehensive description of how the idea of Twitch was conceived and how it became a ubiquitous platform for video gamers.

Further, the book presents the ups and downs faced by video games such as StarCraft2 and the League of Legends. These games act as good examples to provide insights on the teetering nature of video games and its effects on the gaming community. By presenting the examples of StarCraft2 and League of Legends, the underlying theme which the authors wanted to highlight was the importance of esports modding. The phenomenon of modding refers to the creative process through which the gamers bring about a modification to certain features of the esports video games (Hilvoorde & Pot, 2016). The authors specify that “to take off as an esports, a game had to pass through the modding community, be played endlessly by thousands and found to have a high skill ceiling and agreed upon rules that allowed for balanced play” (Chaloner & Sillis, 2020, p. 107). Thus, modders often develop a unique working collaboration with game developers. By highlighting the importance of modders in esports, the authors address a very important constituency in esports.

Part Two Review

The initial chapters of the Part Two of the book delve into the lives of esports participants and their training pursuits. Especially, the emphasis of the story is on delineating the value of team houses in esports. By presenting an in-depth information about the value of team houses in esports, the authors take the readers “on a journey inside the lives of esports’ biggest stars” (Chaloner & Sillis, 2020, p. 9).

Further, the authors also present some of the pressing concerns surrounding esports industry, including (1) gender representation, (2) player salaries, (3) cheating allegations and (4) retirement in esports.

Gender Representation

The authors specify that women participants “are almost entirely absent at the elite level” despite the absence of an official gender-based distinction at most big esports tournaments (Chaloner & Sillis, 2020, p. 188). Given that women play video games, including those that routinely make it into esports competitions, they appear to encounter significant obstacles to participation and inclusion as well as immense pressure and abuse (Holden et al., 2020). T.L. Taylor, professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, states that the harassments “range from low-level stereotypes and assumptions about

aptitude or interest to overt and sustained harassment when they enter more public-facing domains” (Chaloner & Sillis, 2020, pp. 197-198). The authors attract readers’ attention to the prevailing problems of diversity and inclusion in esports tournaments so as to promote a critical dialogue about the issues affecting women’s participation in esports and set the stage to promote more inclusive structures of involvement in esports.

Player Salaries

The authors draw readers’ attention towards the issue of income disparity prevailing in the esports industry. The topic of player salaries is highly relevant in this day and age because the esports business can thrive only if participants receive an equitable monetary compensation for participating in esports tournaments. The authors note that “approximately 21,000 gamers entered esports tournament in 2018” and their “median take-home” pay was \$678 (Chaloner & Sillis, 2020, p. 177). The authors propose that the money can be equitably distributed among various tiers of esports participants by “shrinking prize pools and increasing salaries” (Chaloner & Sillis, 2020, p. 187). In so doing, the authors emphasize the creation of a proper pay structure in the esports industry.

Cheating Allegations

The authors highlight some of the illegal practices prevailing in esports industry. Specifically, the authors draw attention towards cheating in games by usage of illegal software; accusations of match-fixing; skin gambling and esports betting; and ingestion of stimulants such as Adderall and Ritalin by esports participants. Of particular importance to esports practitioners and researchers has been the topic of skin gambling (Martinelli, 2017). Skin gambling refers to the gambling on esports match results using virtual game products, such as weapon “skins”, which can be bought or sold using real money (Holden et al., 2017). While alluding to skin gambling, the authors mention that once Valve (publishers of CS: GO) developed weapon skins, skin gambling “turned out to be a great way to circumvent strict American laws on online gambling” (Chaloner & Sillis, 2020, p.166). Thus, by highlighting the illegal practices occurring in esports industry, the authors inform the readers about the negative aspects of esports. This is a particularly crucial issue for a young video gamer to understand before committing to pursue esports as a professional career track to avoid encountering professional conflicts in the future.

Retirement in Esports

The authors explore the topic of retirement in esports. The authors refer to a study which indicates that as age of players increase, “response times between looking at the screen and carrying out a responding action (looking-doing latency) on average began to increase past the age of 24” (Chaloner & Sillis, 2020, p. 214). The weakening reflexes with a growing age may allow younger players additional time and a considerable leverage in making decisions and executing commands. Consequently, the performance of esports players starts to decline and they tend to officially retire in their mid-20s (Shanley, 2019). By delving into the issue of retirement in esports, the authors highlight the importance of meticulous planning for a career in esports industry and appraise the readers about the physical elements (such as fine motor responses) involved in playing esports video games.

CONCLUSION

The authors present a compelling and well-written account of esports. The book provides rich illustrations and descriptions to unravel the complicated and evolving phenomena of esports. The authors share personal anecdotes to enhance the reflexivity of the text. Particularly, the authors show rather than tell the reader about the functioning of the esports industry by weaving personal experiences and connections in esports industry to illuminate the reader’s understanding of the phenomenon of

esports. Moreover, the book eloquently articulates some of the critical issues in the esports industry. The authors provide an in-depth account of the various issues in esports by doing thorough research which makes the perceptions of story reasonable and appropriate. While acknowledging these merits, one aspect of esports that remains underexplored in the book is the effect of violence in video games on anti-social behaviors. The violent content embedded in certain genres of video games has been of concern to numerous academics, policymakers, and game publishers (Ferguson & Colwell, 2017). The authors could have illuminated this issue by sharing their personal experiences as former video game players and as esports writers and broadcasters. Another shortcoming of the book is that it underexplores the issues of racism and homophobia in esports. Geddes (2020) mentions that a lot of teams who participate in online games have unmoderated racist and homophobic team names. The authors could have emphasized on the issue of racism and homophobia as well as provided a list of action steps that can potentially be undertaken to combat the toxicity that grips the esports industry.

Overall, I believe that the book is a success because the authors present an engaging storyline by proffering a compelling and well-researched evidence. Some of the critical aspects of the contemporary esports industry that are highlighted by the authors in the book would interest the academic audience. Particularly, the academic audience can incorporate diverse theoretical and methodological viewpoints to conduct a deeper introspection of the critical issues presented in the book. For example, by reading and understanding the issues of gender representation highlighted in the book, researchers can investigate the role of gender norms in constructing a structure and legitimacy of identities of female esports players. To conclude, this book should be read by all esports players, practitioners, academics, and game publishers to increase the conscious understanding of the ways in which the esports industry operates.

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