Expertise in Professional Overwatch Play

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ABSTRACT

eSports is a rapidly growing phenomenon in competitive gaming. Expertise is an interesting topic to study in relation to eSports, as eSports athletes are considered among the most highly-skilled players of their particular games. Examining expertise not only advances the understanding of what skills compose professional play but enables a deeper study of learning in games; before learning processes are studied, it is important to detail what learning these processes should produce. This study examines expertise through the application of thematic analysis to a series of interviews with professional players of the eSports game, Overwatch. The goal of this study is to identify which skills are perceived to be important to professional-level play by professional players. Two overarching themes were identified, game sense and mechanics. A number of sub-themes were identified as important, including survival, anticipation / prediction, communication, thoughtfulness, aim, ability usage, movement and positioning, and team-based mechanical synergies.

KEYWORDS

Esports, Expertise, Game Sense, Games, Learning, Overwatch, Professional, Skills, Video Games
INTRODUCTION

An expert is a person with above average ability, talent, or knowledge (Kirschner & Williams, 2013). The study of experts is not a new phenomenon and has received strong attention from the literature. However substantially less focus has been given to the study of expertise in games and research on expertise in esports is still in its infancy. This is problematic as expertise is domain-specific (Murphy & Alexander, 2002); while a professional football or American soccer player must be able to precisely control a ball with her foot and maintain an intense level of stamina, a professional basketball player would be penalized for foot control, and a professional chess player has little use for the type of physical stamina used in the aforementioned sports. Similarly, with esports, each game has different goals, rules, and affordances, in different settings, and with different control schemes. Players need to become proficient with manipulating the controlling mechanisms to react to specific timing structures in games (Egliston, 2007). Expert game players must master complex skills that work in synchrony with the game’s mechanics (Thompson, Blair, Chen, & Henrey, 2013; Horn, Cooper, & Deterding, 2017). As researchers study the composition of expertise within a particular sport, they gain an understanding of the aspects which need to be mastered in order to be considered an expert. Once understood, these aspects enable the study of the processes required to develop that expertise, and also allow for cross-game and cross-domain study of the aspects and processes to better situate esports and players within the greater body of expertise research.

While much work remains, expertise research in gaming has progressed substantially since Sudnow’s (1983) Pilgrims in the Microworld, an anecdote chronicling the author’s journey from novice gamer to competent player in the Atari game, Breakout. Other early gaming expertise research examined expertise in video games, focusing on how video game-based expertise transfers to non-game-based tasks. For instance, both Sims & Mayer (2002) and Greenfield, Brannon, & Lohr (1994) examined how spatial ability in games translated to spatial ability outside of games.

Esports expertise research picked up in the late 2000s. Jakobsson, Pargman & Rambusch (2007) conducted interviews with professional Counter-Strike: Source players at the 2007 World Cyber Games. Although the article focused primarily on the transition from novice to professional player, it mentioned expertise within its analysis, citing the importance of team communication and adaptation to the enemy, and described the importance of both physical and mental aspects of game mastery.

Reeves, Brown, & Laurier (2009) also examined expertise in Counter-Strike: Source by proposing and analyzing two gameplay vignettes. The authors argued the importance of considering the player experience, and presented a set of features of expertise in Counter-Strike players, as a result of their vignette analyses. The authors recommended examining how these features remain or differ across expertise in other FPS games, or games of other genres.

Donaldson (2015) theorized about expertise in the Multiplayer Online Battle Arena esports game, League of Legends. This research provided an in-depth examination of