Metagaming in Competitive Hearthstone: Heroes of Warcraft

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INTRODUCTION

My research is concerned with the 'metagame' practices amongst competitive Hearthstone: Heroes of Warcraft[1] [Hearthstone] (Blizzard 2014) players, and seeks to explore the players' attitude and play styles performed at live tournaments in the United Kingdom (including Insomnia Gaming Festival and local Manchester tournaments). Observations from my completed Ph.D. (Law 2016) have suggested a strong sense of community and identity amongst competitive Hearthstone players surrounded with discussion and negotiation on the game that has been in a state of constant flux due to frequent updates to the core game - hence, it should be noted that rules and regulations at live tournaments were observed to be inconsistent. Although there are standardised tournament formats in Hearthstone, these have been subject to change, as well as other tournaments that have continued to test the skills and adaptability of players, and cater towards entertaining their live streamed audiences. Therefore, using the notion of 'metagaming' (Boluk and LeMieux 2017), my ongoing research seeks to explore the extent of players practical and critical engagement with 'metagame' practices that either conform or push the boundaries of competitive gaming in the twenty-first century.

The concept of 'metagaming' coined by Garfield (2000) has often been noted in many studies of competitive video games, which focuses on the players' use of out-of-game resources, strategic analysis, mechanical skill, and player reputation. Although Garfield's (2000) work focuses on a particular trading card game [TGC], 'Magic: The Gathering'[2] [Magic] (Garfield 1993); it shares some similarities and differences with the digital collectable card game [CCG], Hearthstone.

In relation to the 'metagame' of Hearthstone, the advancement of technology limits the physical mechanics of the card game when compared to Magic – however, there are instances of 'metagaming' in other forms that allows players to adopt their use of out-of-game resources, strategic preparations, peripheral game resources and reputation within a competitive environment. For instance, Garfield (2000) states that 'metagaming' can be divided into four parts: what a player brings to the game, what a player takes away from a game what happens between games, and what happens during the game other than the game itself.

To: Like most video games, it is common to bring strategic preparations and peripheral game resources, such as analysis of opponents (knowing which classes opponents play in Hearthstone), knowledge on play patterns (such as match-ups) and a note-pad and pen (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Hearthstone players note-taking during a tournament

Due to the nature of a turn-based game, there is often time for opponents to take notes during a game; this can include information from cards mulliganed, opponent cards played, cards remaining in your deck and much more - hence this can bring a significant impact on the game – however, it is important to highlight that note-taking is banned at some events (such as Dreamhack). In addition, player reputation involves the reputation of the player itself. It is important to highlight that player reputation mainly applied to those who attend regularly, in comparison to those who attend infrequently. For instance, after competing in several Hearthstone tournaments, the same 'gamer-tags' appearing in the bracket and 'familiar faces' build the reputation of a 'regular' Hearthstone player.

From: In Hearthstone tournaments and competitions, it is often for those who compete to take away some winning stakes, as well as experience from taking part and knowledge of other players play styles, tournament rules and regulations, and so forth.

Between: Depending the time between games, some Hearthstone players often 'scouted' on their next opponents, watching their game from over their shoulder, sometimes with pen and paper to take notes, and reflecting on strategy and planning for the next game.

During: The physical environment of play such as a noisy atmosphere, temperature of the room or good lighting can have an effect on the game amongst players playing in these situations – in particular, the internet – which has often caused disputes in Hearthstone tournaments from player disconnections and playing 'screen-shot wars' to claim wins from your potentially losing opponent before the disconnection.

'Metagaming' has generally been used to describe the (analogue) games interface with the contexts in which they are played, with discussions of 'metagaming' seeping into a broad range of competitive play communities (Abbott 2016; Masisak 2011). However, the domains of analogue gaming and digital play are increasingly bleeding into one another (see: Pokémon TCG Online (The Pokémon Company 2011) - code cards). Therefore, it may be useful to consider Boluk and LeMieux's (2017, p.68) notion of 'metagames'; in a broad range of practices, which surround game culture: '*metagaming encompasses everything which occurs 'about, within, around and even without games'*;

About: The use of characters from World of Warcraft (Blizzard 2004) in Hearthstone is a mimetic metagame *about* video games.

Within: The loopholes exploited when 'playing' or competing in Hearthstone are material metagames *within* video games.

Around: The psychologies of professional Hearthstone players and their audience's reactions during tournaments are metagames *around* video games.

Without: The espionage and economy both in and outside Hearthstone is a metagame of markets that operate *without* the video game itself.

This suggests an importance to consider 'metagames' being the true focus of play, and that games are simply tools or platforms used for the creation of 'metagames. For instance, Newman's (2008) notion of play *with* video games can involve various forms of socialisation, tuition, and social progression, that are often taken for granted (Crawford 2012). Similarly, the play practices amongst 'competitive' Hearthstone players involves more than just playing the game itself; '*we don't simply play games, but constantly (and unconsciously) make metagames*' (Boluk and LeMieux 2017, p.10). Therefore, with the rising popularity of esports, my on-going research seeks to explore the beyond the six general categories of 'metagames'; including '*status, money, socialisation, achievement, knowledge, and fantasy*' (Elias, Garfield, and Gutschera 2012, p.209-210) and broaden the range of practices which occurs '*about, within, around and even without games*' (Boluk and LeMieux 2017, p.68), which surround game culture.

BIOGRAPHY

Ying-Ying is a games studies lecturer in the School of Computing and Digital Technologies Department at Staffordshire University. Her current research and teaching focuses on video game culture, play theories, esports, communities and gender studies.

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ENDNOTES

1 Hearthstone is a 'free-to-play' online CCG, which is turn-based between two players, using constructed decks of thirty cards along with a selected hero with a unique 'hero power'. The standard tournament format involves at least three decks from different classes, conquest (a player must win one game with each of their three decks to win the match) and no sideboard. Despite the different tournament formats, Hearthstone has been considered to be less complex, and easier to access with a lower entry barrier, in comparison to Magic - hence, the game has been favourably reviewed by critics and proven successful for Blizzard. For instance, since the launch of Hearthstone, it has continued to grow as a Tier 1 esports game with more than 8 million monthly active users, over $5 million annual prize pool, and exceeding beyond 20 million monthly hours watched (The Esports Observer, 2018).

2 Magic is a TCG played by two or more players in various formats, which fall into two categories: constructed and limited. In constructed, players create decks from cards they own, usually sixty cards with no more than four of any given card – competing with a sixty card deck and fifteen card sideboard (allowing players to modify their deck) is usually the standard format in tournaments. In limited, it

involves players building a deck spontaneously out of a pool of random cards with a minimum deck size of 40 cards. Magic is played in person with printed cards, or using a deck of virtual cards through the internet-based Magic: The Gathering Online (Leaping Lizard Software 2002). In 2015, it was reported that Magic had 20 million players worldwide (Duffy 2015), in comparison to 50 million players playing Hearthstone (Frank 2016) – from December 2017, the closed beta for Magic: The Gathering Arena (Wizards of the Coast 2017) began with descriptions including 'Hearthstone-like sounds and visuals' (Mccoy 2017).