Esports Viewer Perspectives on Cheating in Competition

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INTRODUCTION
Competitive digital gaming or "esports" has grown in recent years into a major global media industry. Contests at the highest levels frequently involve millions of dollars in prize money, and spectatorship numbers in six or even seven figures. Given these opportunities for financial success and public visibility, resourceful and unscrupulous players have found various ways - technical, biological, and strategic - to get around the intended rules of play, and thus cheat in esports competitions. Despite high-profile cases there has been little academic analysis of esports cheating, and no analysis of date of how esports *viewers* respond to cheating behaviours in the teams, players and competitions they spectate. Although cheating as a concept has been thoroughly conceptually interrogated by game studies (Parker, 2007; Consalvo, 2009; Carter *et al*, 2015; etc), the impacts of cheating on esports have seemingly yet to be explored beyond just four publications (Holden et al, 2017; Abarbanel & Johnson, 2018; Irwin & Naweed, 2018; Yun, 2019), with viewers only rarely integrated into the analysis (Abarbanel & Johnson, 2018). As such, our goal in this article is to examine the perceptions among esports viewers of the different sorts of cheating possible in esports and competitive gaming more broadly, and to understand how esports viewers frame cheating with regard to their own play experiences, their perceptions of esports, and their understandings of what transgressive behaviour in a gaming context might entail. Cheating in esports is arguably the "highest stakes" arena in which digital game cheating can take place, with effects not just on the integrity of play and experiences of participants but potentially on careers, incomes and game lifespans; equally, long-term viewer retention (which requires a fair game) will be essential for the phenomenon's future, regulation, and potential growth. As such, understanding what esports viewers think about cheating is essential for understanding the long-term viability - or perhaps lack thereof - of esports as a spectator sport.

We begin by relating our methodology, involving the analysis of qualitative responses in a survey of over one thousand esports fans regarding their perspectives on cheating. The Esports Integrity Coalition (ESIC) distributed the survey via SurveyMonkey in May and June of 2017. This distribution included their member organizations' mailing lists (such as Dreamhack, a major esports tournament and competition organization), social media channels, articles in esports-focused news outlets (such as via descriptor Esports Insider), and broader esports discussion communities (such as relevant forums

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on Reddit). Survey participants provided their opinions on their perceived level of appropriate punishment for different means of cheating, such as hacks/ hacks/cheats/software, doping, match-fixing, and bribery. Participants also assessed punishment levels for different qualifying factors, such as varied competition (such as amateur/professional competition status) and age levels (such as under/over 18). The authors were granted access to a raw dataset (with identifiers removed) from ESIC; this secondary data was deemed excluded by the [university deidentified for review] ethics board. In total, we therefore had access to 1,370 qualitative responses from the survey data. We cleaned the data set to remove missing and irrelevant data (this included cursing, completion of the form with "n/a", and so forth), resulting in a final set of 1,321 unique responses. This gave us access to an unusually comprehensive database of qualitative responses about esports cheating, which were then subjected to a thematic content analysis. This process led to a number of themes, which then informed our primary routes of analysis – the differences between perceptions of "cheating to win" (where the cheat enhances a team or player's potential to secure victory) and "cheating to lose" (where the cheat involves a more complex ecosystem of actors through which profit might be made, or advancement secured, if a match is thrown), and how esports viewers discursively position these different forms of in-game infraction, and their acceptability in competitive play.

Thus, with this established, we then move into our discussion. We first consider what esports viewers have to say about "cheating to win", showing that they have a low tolerance for cheating to win practices, which we argue can be explained at least in part through their own experiences with online cheating (in esports games and elsewhere). With most players experiencing this sort of cheating in ordinary online matches – where cheating to lose lacks incentives – they display strong emotional responses to players being "cheated out of a win". Our following consideration of "cheating to lose", meanwhile, demonstrates that viewers are much more accommodating and even sympathetic to such behaviours, especially when framed as a strategic choice. Viewers understand the contextual demands of esports tournaments to some extent, but also seemingly lack complete understandings of this ecosystem. By comparing them, we highlight comparative comments about appropriate relative punishments, as well as highlighting intriguing naivete on the part of some viewers regarding the wider esports ecosystem(s) all cheating inevitably takes place within. We then delve into more detail about certain kinds of cheating, specifically examining what viewers have to say about match-fixing and bribery (where players emphasise the importance of considering contexts and player careers) and what they show us about spectators' conceptions of fair play and the esports career path. In these latter points we see that spectators are often sympathetic to cheaters and understand something of what an esports career entails, but rarely understand the wider potential impacts of seemingly "isolated" cheating events. As such, in this paper we show a complex range of views which rank different forms of cheating, display varying levels of understanding of the esports ecosystem, and understand cheating as often more a matter of rule breaking than ethical transgression. We conclude that esports viewers' perspectives are heavily informed by their own play and the opacity of certain elements of professionalised esports. Understanding the perspectives of esports viewers is vital for assessing the long-term cultural viability of the practice, while also highlighting a greater need for educational initiatives to inform fans about the esports ecosystem, and we propose this paper as a first step in this direction.

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