

Examining the Cultures of Discipline in Overwatch and League of Legends Esports

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INTRODUCTION

In this presentation we focus on the disciplinary cultures of professional esports. By examining the cases and practices of punishing professional esports players, teams and their staff in *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009) and *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016) esports leagues, we study the ways how the game developers control and discipline their esports leagues and players. Through the analysis we ask what roles disciplinary actions like suspensions, bans and fines play in the esports scenes, and what other functions than discipline and control do they have.

We approach discipline from Foucaultian perspective where discipline is understood as power to regulate the behaviour of individuals within social bodies (Foucault 1977:2012). Examining this in the context of esports is important due to greatly unequal distribution of power (Karhulahti 2017) within esports ecosystems.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Our study continues the research done into player's working conditions and rights. It has largely been established by previous research that esports players have limited legal and practical rights (Patel 2020). This is due to multiple factors, including the lack of player unions (Patel 2020) and overall lack of governance in esports (Scholz 2019).

The esports regimes chosen into analysis, League of Legends (LoL) professional leagues around the world and Overwatch League (OWL), are and have been among the most prominent and popular esports games. The developers of the games, Riot Games and Blizzard Entertainment, also oversee, organize and control the professional leagues of their respective games by themselves instead of taking a more hands of approach. This gives the companies immense power and abilities to control the competitive scenes of their games. According to Tobias Scholz, the two games are prime examples of the development company regulating the esports scene (Scholz, 2019, 55). The two companies were also chosen as they do have some differences in their approach to regulating esports. While in both cases the companies have chosen to try to franchise the top competitive leagues of the games as a means of "control[ing] and steer[ing] the game and everything around the game the way they want it" (Scholz, 2019, 55), Riot Games's approach "could be seen as being quite balanced concerning regulation, while the Overwatch League (OWL) is overregulated" (Scholz, 2019, 55).

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DATA AND METHODS

Our research is based on two distinct sets of data: a quantitative data consisting of all of the disciplinary cases we could find in the professional LoL leagues and OWL ; and four qualitative case studies of specific disciplinary cases in the two professional scenes.

Quantitative data and analysis

We use multiple methods to collect and analyse our data. With League of Legends esports, our quantitative data comes from three sources:

- (1) <https://lol.fandom.com> – a fansite collecting and up keeping various League of Legends related information including a listing of various competitive rulings issued by Riot Games since 2012 (Lol.fandom)
- (2) EMEA Penalty Tracker – updated by Riot Games, includes penalties and rulings issued in Europe, Middle East and Africa (Riot Games, a)
- (3) League of Legends Global Suspension Database - updated by Riot Games, includes current and expired suspension on LoL esports leagues globally (Riot Games, b)

Unfortunately similar databases and trackers are not available for the Overwatch League. Thus, in order to collect this dataset, we utilized extensively the subreddit [r/competitiveoverwatch](https://www.reddit.com/r/competitiveoverwatch) where fans have often gathered lists of fines and suspensions that Overwatch League players and coaches have gotten. We used the search words “fine”, “discipline”, and “suspension” to find the relevant posts.

After collection, the quantitative data was cleaned of duplicate cases, and disciplinary actions that concerned non-professional leagues, tournaments and teams. The quantitative analysis focuses on giving an overview of the disciplinary scene and utilizes descriptive statistics. Overall, the LoL quantitative dataset consists of 466 cases and OWL dataset of 19 cases.

Qualitative data and analysis

Our qualitative analysis focuses on four cases, two from each esports, and specifically the reactions that the fanbase had on the cases. Each case consists of the ruling issued by the game developer and the fan discussions in the respective subreddits of the two esports scenes. The cases were selected on the basis of the wide discussion they gave rise to and on the similarity of the offences in each esports. From both esports we analyzed cases players having made obscene gesture in camera and cases of players having boosted (ranked up in exchange for money) other players’ accounts

The analysis is conducted by utilizing Atlas.ti software to conduct thematic analysis (Guest et al. 2012), content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon 2005), and close reading. While doing the analysis we strived to remain sensitive to the cultural and geographical differences of the titles and various regions they are played in.

In addition to the quantitative and qualitative datasets, we use the various competition and tournament rules and other documents available on the two esports scenes. Riot Games has published their competitive rules for most (if not all) of their professional leagues online. However, Blizzard only publishes a summary of the competitive rules for Overwatch league. Thus, we had to use a rulebook from 2018 that was leaked by esports journalist Richard Lewis (Lewis, 2018), whilst remaining aware of the possibility that some rules might have changed

FINDINGS

Based on our preliminary analysis, we argue that in both esports disciplinary practices function to highlight the acceptably kind of player subjectivity and to create a particular kind of image of esports. Our analysis also highlights the lack of agency of the players that has been noted also in previous research.

It is clear that Riot Games uses disciplinary actions more often and with more transparency than Blizzard. When the differences in the rulesets of the esports are taken into accord, where Blizzard Entertainment stresses more protective measures of their image while Riot focuses more on protecting the competitive integrity of the game, it is clear that the two developers use (public) disciplining for different purposes. Riot Games protects the fairness and smooth running of the tournaments more, while Blizzard protects the image of Overwatch League as fair competition.

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