The Divide between E-sport and Playing Games in China

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ABSTRACT

The presentation will argue that rise of the E-sport has led to persistent transformations of gaming and media, which is crowding out other legitimate forms of gaming from the public perception and media discourses. First, it will briefly describe the growth of E-sport as media and entertainment phenomenon (Jin 2010; Taylor, TL, Seo, 2013). This spectacle is created through the stylization of e-sport events themselves and equally important through secondary texts (Szablewicz, 2015). Secondly, the talk will argue that media, old and new, become stakeholders in the narrative as they create the stories of unprecedented growth in terms of profit and viewer numbers. E-sport becomes the only acceptable type of gaming. The third section will draw on ethnographic data collected from 2013 to 2015 in China and demonstrate how the discourses on E-sport and their divergence from gaming impact the rhythms of play in the everyday life of the "youxi wanjia 游戏玩家" (video game player) as well as the "dianjin xuanshou 电竞选手" (E-sport Contestant). The vocabulary of E-sport titles has penetrated everyday language and the word 'gaming' or 'playing games' have been replaced. As videogame culture becomes marginalized, principals of obligation and professionalism devour 'play' beyond the point of mere 'contamination' (Caillois, 2001). As a result, video game players, who enjoy a variety of different games, are distancing themselves from the proponents of e-sport.

Keywords

E-sport, China, Play, Game Culture

FROM SMALL BEGINNINGS

Early research into e-sports attempted to produce accurate description of the phenomenon itself. Key concerns were definition of e-sports, its relationship to sport as well as its relationship to games and play. e-sport started out as a niche activity of a small group of highly dedicated players with an performance oriented way of playing. Wagner (2006) argues that e-sport has two distinct historical trajectories. In west *Counter-Strike* has been the most popular game, while in the east and most notably South Korea, *Starcraft* is responsible for the rise in popularity of e-sports. Over time, this approach to video game

play received more traction and emergence of *League of Legends* has led to a convergence of eastern and western competitive gaming scene with other media institutions.

THE E-SPORT/MEDIA COMPLEX: HOW MAINSTREAM MEDIA REPRESENT ESPORTS IN CHINA

E-sport has become a complex new media entertainment industry (Taylor, 2012) and now includes a variety of stake holders with different interconnected functions. Jin (2010) sees e-sport participants are the basic worker in this industry. Their play-labor is institutionalized into leagues or tournaments, which are distributed via television or online live streaming platforms. The audience then consumes this e-sport experience (Seo, 2013). The maintenance of this cycle of production, distribution and consumption requires continuous interest in essentially rather similar play performances. This is achieved partly through stylization and presentation of the e-sport events themselves but also through secondary discourses about e-sports and its events. Insider as well as mainstream media outlets present e-sport competitions as spectacles of ever-increasing proportions in terms of viewer numbers, sponsorships and prize money. By writing a brief but sensationalized articles, the online edition of newspapers generate clicks and ad revenue. In the center of most of these stories is China, its huge population and economic potential. For example, headlines read "China (And Asia) Are Driving A Booming Global ESports Market (Forbes, 2016)." Even more invested into the e-sport narrative of unprecedented economic growth and possibilities are actors such as marketing firms, market research firms or conference organizers, which produce "reports" or organize conferences with participation fees of thousands of dollars. The E-sport events themselves follow in their format and presentation that of traditional sport events. For example, in the *League of Legends* World Championship, teams represent geographic regions (North America, Europe) or individual countries (China, South Korea). Riot's production team tells narratives of rivalry between Teams (CLG vs. TSM) and regions (NA vs. EU, CN vs KR) to give the competition social meanings beyond play. Szablewicz (2015) argues that this perspective is particular useful when analyzing e-sports and gaming in China.

EVERYDAY DISCOURSE OF ESPORTS

Szablewicz (2010;2015) has written about how Esports has become the exclusive vehicle to justify activity of gaming. For Szablewicz, it is the media spectacle (such as the much glorified and publicized E-sports events) that is masking the contradictions of various official discourses. To extend this observation, I argue that this vehicle of justification is by no means merely rhetorical – in other words, it is not simply a performance for/of the authorities (which include both the political and commercial authorities) in order to make (at least, a selected few) videogames acceptable for the mainstream. The language of E-sports is now embedded in everyday discourses around and even beyond videogames. It is almost mundane to use the vocabulary originated from games like League of Legends outside the context of the game. For example, "da ye" (打野) usually means jungling (farming computer controlled neutral creeps for gold instead of staying in the lane against human players) in League of Legends but the word has used and abused so much that it has been applied in different contexts. Now the word can refer to actual hunting in the wild or simply going to the wild. Moreover, in-game lore such as the fictional state "demacia" in League of Legends is now a catchphrase used even outside the promotion of the game itself. Young schoolchildren who either never played the game or rarely played the game are also very immersed in the lore of the game because the knowledge of the

game is considered "cool" among schoolchildren today. I have observed cases where people used terms like "double kill", "triple kill", "quadra kill", and "penta kill" to make commentaries about scenes in movies. It is considered funny (at least for some, while annoying for others) to utilize Esports vocabulary elsewhere. One interesting aspect about these re-appropriation of videogame (in particular esports games) terminology is that sometimes some terms are used outside the context of E-sports/games and by people who are not familiar with E-sports nor videogames in general. In my recent interview of a member of an elderly rollerskating club, this 50 year old woman repetitively used the word "shua" (刷) to refer to the activity of going through a certain distance on rollerskate. The original meaning of word is brushing or scrubbing. The word is then often used in contexts of videogames and esports to convey a certain of repetitiveness of actions- such as "shua bin" (刷兵, literally killing creeps [repetitively] for gold in games like Dota and League of Legends). The word becomes very commonly used since its earlier videogame context. However, I cannot confirm the exact genealogy of usage neither the exact correlation between the Esports context and the traditional sports context. The term could migrate from a sports to the videogames context or it could be other way round- the popularity of esports and penetration of these words into everyday life have made the term popular even among elderly rollerskaters. At least, according to several rollerskaters, they didn't use the term until recently years and they were not sure about the exact origin and thought it was fashionable to use "internet terminology". These examples point to the ubiquity of the language of esports games in everyday lives of not only gamers who obsessively play the game but also the young and old who barely play or even know about the game. Even though it is true the younger generation of gamers are overwhelmingly using E-sports as a sort of "rhetorical" (in the sense they are not so genuine about E-sports but simply need a justification to play more games) defense against the stigmatization, the official discourse of E-sports is not merely a spectacle. To a certain degree, it is not exaggerating to argue that official politics and media spectacles are indoctrinating ordinary young gamers of a dualistic understanding of videogames and E-sports- that is, E-sports is not (video)games. But in everyday language, we can see another side of story- where people learn certain words out of their original context and nonetheless appropriate them for their own contexts. They are largely indifferent to videogame cultures or only passionate on a superficial level. These everyday uses are largely outside the control of official narratives. These instances do represent the penetration of gaming language into the status of everyday language but they are not direct products of the E-sports-media complex; the emergence of these words in other contexts is rather spontaneous. They are by no means subverting the official discourse on Esports but they are definitely divergent from the narratives of the spectacle.

DISTINCTION WORK OF VIDEOGAME "SUB"CULTURES
Within China, many game critics are worried about the overwhelming discourse of Esports discourse will damage the diversity of videogame cultures – due to the dualism of Esports and videogames, there is even less discursive space for videogame in itself and for itself without framing it toward E-sports. There are quite a few articles (for example, http://mrgamer.net/articles/8) criticizing the bubble of E-sports in China. This voice is from the more intellectual wing of game critics, writer and editors of various publications. However, according to many interviewed informants in the past few years, many are aware that the dualism is a false construction and they simply do not care as long as they can still play games they want to play. "Most people will only play League of Legends, Dota 2 and Blizzard games and that's fine. I can also play what I want", a person posted on the forum that focusing on games on Steam. There are many Steam users in China

who ventured beyond the popular CS: GO and Dota 2 and enjoyed the diversity of games (especially obscure and artsy indie games) the platform has to offer. Some interviewees are annoyed to talk too much about League of Legends but they do not want to resist the mainstream discursively. It is not difficult to have your own small forum where you can enjoy the atmosphere of like minded people and share your discontents of the general climate of the gaming culture. There is no point to set up a counter-narrative against the mainstream openly if their online space is not under threats. However, in order to construct a distinction of taste (in videogames) among the members of the group, mainstream games like League of Legends are obliquely referred as grotesque pastimes of the ignorant who lack the capacity to appreciate a diversity of games. This sense of superiority is likely a byproduct of the mainstream discourse of E-sports.

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