Forms of self-reflexivity in team hero shooters and beyond

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INTRODUCTION

In all endeavors or practices where individuals strive to improve, there will be a form of self-reflexivity directed towards their own practice. When computer gamers engage self-reflexively towards their own gameplay, they bring to conscious awareness practices that have already been naturalized, which have become "techniques of the body" (Mauss 1973), occurring without prompting (see: (Parisi 2011, Pias 2011, Keogh 2018, Kirkpatrick 2012). A great deal of labour may needed to 'unlearn' them and relearn them anew differently (Toner 2017), calling for dedicated practice.

This study investigates the self-reflexivity that players display towards their own play in team hero shooter games. We consider whether, as a mode of attention directed to the self, it can be understood to be a practice that cultivates a relationship to self (Foucault 2001) or "technology of the self" (DeNora 1999, Foucault 1988) that has applicability beyond the immediate context of playing well in a specific game.

This applicability or transposability is key, as is a potentially changed relation to self. It goes beyond fields of discussion that have explored capacitation through gaming as discrete competences that are acquired. The gaming literacy (Zimmerman 2009, Gee 2003) literature, for example, has been light on how a player's relation to themselves may be transformed through practicing self-reflexivity. The same applied to perspectives informed by neuroscientific findings (Bavelier, Bediou, and Green 2018,

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Green and Bavelier 2012) as well as to discussions of gaming skill: neither Sudnow (1993 [1978]) and Dreyfus (2004), in their influential accounts of skill progression, dwelt on how this may affect practices in other spheres.

Team hero shooter games, like *Marvel Rivals* (NetEase Games, 2024), occupy a noteworthy position with regard to player self-reflexivity. On the one hand, they are notorious for their toxicity, often initiated when players single out teammates for having not played well or in accordance with their expectations (the Rivals community frequently discusses this issue). In this way, blame for the failure of the team as a whole is assigned to an external scapegoat. What recedes into the background when this occurs is a dwelling upon how one's own poor plays contributed to the failure. On the other hand, as many players are invested in climbing the competitive ladder, they actively search for ways to improve their own play, which means finding areas to problematize. Can players, for example, come to better recognize when they 'tilt' following a loss and come to work on an understanding of their own emotional dispositions?

This study will conduct a survey (*n=50*) amongst players of team hero-shooter games (Nov 25 – Jan 26). From the survey respondents, (*n=10*) who have the most total number of hours in this genre will be invited to participate in semi-structured interviews (Feb 26 – Apr 26). These will be done using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2014) to capture the experience of the participants. The gameplay-elicited interviews (Graham 2025), using gameplay recordings, will feature interviewees recalling specific moments of gameplay and techniques of self-reflexivity. Participants will be asked whether they believe any of the competences that they have learned from their extended play, including their capacity to self-reflect on their play, is transposable to other contexts. In particular, they will be questioned on possible shifts in their self-understanding. We will then conduct a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021) of the data (May 26).

If consciousness has always been exteriorized (Stiegler 1998) into its material technical supports, then form of self-reflexivity may be highly specific depending on the technical artefacts and techniques employed. It may thus be difficult to apply outside of that techno-social context or "field" (Thomson 2008). Video recordings, HUDs, coaching, etc, are all ways in which players bring practices to awareness. Players may see the information obtained from these are *only* informing the specific practice in question, with limited transposability to non-game contexts. If so, this study will nevertheless lead to insights about how players use technologies to illuminate their gameplay.

There may, however, be certain 'mental' techniques learned and applied across differing contexts. Competitive gaming may teach a generalized "brutal self analysis" (Karhulahti 2020, 153), as well as emotional self-awareness, particularly how one responds to various situations. As Kasparov (2008, 11) declared, "It's not enough to be talented. It's not enough to work hard …You must also become intimately aware of the methods you use to reach your decisions." Brock (2021) has discussed *Dota 2* (Valve, 2013) professional player Jenkins' strategies for emotional regulation, becoming 'un-tilt-able'. Gallwey's (1997) hugely successful *The Inner Game of Tennis* teaches the mindset of how to "let go" and how to play so as to invite (not force) being in "the zone", echoing insights from *Zen in the Art of Archery* (Herrigel 2004 [1953]). His taxonomy of parts of the self holds that performance is hampered if "Self 1" and

"Self 2" are at odds. He went on to write a series of 'inner game' books in other areas, believing in the applicability of the same principles.

We aim to shed light on both the specifics of how players use technologies to illuminate their gameplay in team hero shooter games as well as the prospect for there to be a more generalized self-reflexivity acquired through this, potentially understood as a "technology of the self" (DeNora 1999, Foucault 1988) or as an "agency" that is acquired (Nguyen 2020).

In addition, we aim to review the relevance of the wider reflexivity literature to this area – how it may be complicated or extended through a study of player self-reflexivity. Bourdieu (1990, 108), for example, has contended that reflexivity *only* emerges "in situations of crisis which disrupt the immediate adjustment of habitus to field", a position that does not account for the abundance of crises in gameplay despite his use of games as metaphors for understanding social patterns and order. Noble and Watkins (2003) have argued that there are various levels of awareness – reflection, attention and practical sense, in analytic and synthetic modes – that are mobilized in the development of bodily capacities and their sedimentation into habitus. Archer (2007) has distinguished between four "modes of reflexivity": "communicative", "autonomous", "meta", and "fractured". These categories can be reviewed in the thematic analysis. Developments in technologies and forms of communication have been tied to transformations in reflexivity and identity (Adams 2006); reflexivity now is arguably intertwined with habitus (Bourdieu 1990 [1980]) rather than unsettling it, incorporated into the reproduction of structures rather than transcending them (Adkins 2004, Sweetman 2003). We aim to explore how our data on gameplay self-reflexivity may speak to the wider transformations that have been theorized.

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