Playing with(out) Power: Negotiated conventions of high performance networked play practices

Emma Witkowski
RMIT University
School of Media & Communication
124 La Trobe St, Melbourne, VIC 3001, Australia
+ 61 3 9925 4756
emma.witkowski@rmit.edu.au

James Manning
RMIT University
School of Media & Communication
124 La Trobe St, Melbourne, VIC 3001, Australia
+ 61 3 9925 2739
james.manning@rmit.edu.au

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we explore how videogame ownership and notions of co-creation in videogames intersect with "high performance play" practices. From speedrunning communities to esports leagues, expert play cultures offer rich examples to consider the ongoing negotiations on the conventions of play itself, made through assemblages of creative forces, from performances (on and off screen, by players and spectators), ownership/governance (of the game, of third-party organisations and products), and through the expression of player rights. Via two cases, we look at how two veteran franchises (*Counter-Strike* and *Super Mario*) have engaged with the moving foundations and expressions of co-creation practices made by those engaged in high performance careers of play, specifically speedrunner GrandPOOBear and Counter-Strike esports Major tournament players, teams, and leagues.

Keywords

esports, speedrunning, livestreaming, player rights, high performance, Valve, Nintendo

INTRODUCTION

"We maintain that, as players, we have the right to determine where we can and cannot compete."

#playerrights is an ongoing dialogue within high performance communities of play. The above quote draws from an open letter penned to the Professional Esports[1] Association (PEA) by *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (CS:GO) players of professional teams Cloud9, Counter Logic Gaming, Immortals, Team Liquid, and Team SoloMid (Smith 2016). Their call for #playerrights (a hashtag used by players on Twitter in 2016) reflects the enduring activity and struggle players of videogames have with those who code or determine the rules of play. Those rules stretch from IP issues on player performance

ownership rights to contract agreements, and the shifting rules of play itself. Far from a new development in game cultures, players have regularly claimed and maintained their right to frame "their game" (see Koster 2000); where their game actively contributes to the mainstream practice, maintenance and framing of the game in question, feeding its experiential ecosystem. Referring to massively multiplayer online games as ecosystems, not as simply off-the-shelf software, TL Taylor calls this activity *co-creation*, where play is made "between a game company, technologies, and users" (Taylor 2012, 160; Taylor 2006).

In this paper, we explore how videogame ownership and notions of co-creation in videogames intersect with Pro/Am[2] "high performance play" practices (Lowood 2006; Witkowski 2012). These are not hobbies to those engaging in their specified ecosystems of expert practice, but rather careers involving financial, social, entrepreneurial, and political stakes. Drawing on paradigmatic cases, cases which offer general characteristics and relationships within the high performance ecosystem in question (Flyvbjerg 2006, 232), we incorporate semi-structured player and esports management interviews, participant observation, ad-hoc talk with participants, public esports participants/academic panels, and secondary documents. We explore controversies in high performance speedrunning communities and CS:GO professional esports. Expert play cultures offer rich examples where players are deeply aware of their expert playing value and social force. We consider the ongoing negotiations on the conventions of high performance play itself, made through assemblages of creative actions. These include performances (on and off screen, by players and spectators), ownership/governance (of the game, of third-party organisations and products), and the expressions of player rights. Specifically, via two cases, we look at how two veteran franchises—Valve Corporation's *Counter-Strike* and Nintendo's *Super Mario*—have engaged with the moving foundations and expressions of co-creation practices made by those engaged in high performance careers of play.

In our first case study, we look at livestreamer and speedrunner David "GrandPOOBear" Hunt and his negotiations with Nintendo. Recognising speedrunning as a form of high performance play, we highlight some of the vagaries and uncertainties GrandPOOBear as a publicly recognisable figure faced during his negotiations with Nintendo over his co-created content, mapped against the long-history of Nintendo regulating player behaviour. The second case focuses on the actions of the esports CS:GO pro-player/teams ongoing work in negotiating both for player rights and the social rules of major tournament play he discussed as "coaching rules". Both #playerrights and the coaching ruling emphasize ongoing negotiations in high performance play between users, industry, and technologies in framing the top level of play.

As a practice, high performance play involves "…the circularity of cooperation and competition that the [co-creator] actors are involved in to maintain excellence in their game, and the importance of new media savvy to leverage one's status as a high performance player. Hooking into high performance play is by no means simply moving up some established [in-game] levels; it is rather a complex configuration of practices" (Witkowski 2012, 17). The following case studies of high performance players/teams presents the situated, embodied, and material engagements of players working within a dynamic suite of actors involved in the co-creation of their particular world of career play. Just as Flyvberg reminds us, "context-dependent knowledge and experience are at the very heart of expert activity" (2006, 222).

By drawing on the actions of high performance play, this exploration centres on the everyday articulations of the body-teche practices of co-delivered performances. Players historicity and the translations they make during play (between systems, organisations, technologies, communities and players), in the process towards continued expertise, is where players make their play, their careers, and their lifeworld within this high performance practice. As "exemplars of play" (Hemphill 2005), the performances these players deliver influence other players (see Banks 2004),[3] game designers, as well as the development of third-party technologies; high performance play, it would seem, can also mean to play with power. As thorny examples of how specific involvements in high performance games/game cultures, these case studies highlight the layered and situated actions involved in high performance co-creative negotiations.

GRANDPOOBEAR VS. SUPER MARIO

In this section, we introduce GrandPOOBear, a prominent "variety streamer" whose high performance play owes as much to Nintendo and its *Super Mario* franchise as it does to the practices and protocols associated with speedrunning and ROM-hacking communities. As a relative newcomer to the speedrunning scene, GrandPOOBear received his major break as a streamer when CarlSagan42 and PangaeaPanga, two of the more popular streamers of Mario content at the time, cross-promoted GrandPOOBear to their followers. GrandPOOBear's career calcified during his streaming of *Super Mario Maker* (SMM), Nintendo's most recent release into their long-running Mario franchise. SMM is a level-making toolkit where players can create, share online, download and play user-created levels based upon the various affordances and thematics associated with the 30-year long history of 2D Mario games.

This case highlights the additional and layered complexities facing players attempting to transition their hobbyist pursuit (speedrunning) into a career through the professionalisation of their practice via livestreams. Although individual speedrunners may only attract relatively small audiences, additional exposure (and monetisation opportunities) increase the likelihood for publishers and other third-parties to interfere with—if not also try to lay claim to—a player's performance, especially when profit or brand identity are involved.[4] No more so is this evident than when a streamer's career hinges upon playing with one of the largest, global gaming corporation's longest-running franchises.

GrandPOOBear owes as much of his career to Nintendo and their Mario games as it does the speedrunning and Mario Maker[5] communities he is, and continues to be, involved with and contribute to.[6] One of GrandPOOBear's many contributions has been the co-development of makersofmario.com, a community-run website that enables SMM players to collate, host, and coordinate their own competitive races. This, in part, led to GrandPOOBear becoming co-host on a SMM speedrunning competition entitled 'Mario Maker Mondays'. The success of their first series secured the organisers a sponsorship deal with Twitch (a prominent video streaming provider) that led to the grand-finale of the second series airing live during Twitch's annual convention at TwitchCon 2016.

Through sponsorship deals and livestreaming events such as these, speedrunning as a form of high performance play has moved from relative obscurity to centre stage being more popular than ever. These events rely not only upon financial support and infrastructure of organisations such as Twitch, but also draw upon the goodwill, coordination, experience, and expertise of an enthusiast group of unofficial "Mario-makers" known for their gaming prowess and long-standing contributions to an

illegitimate form of making Mario games.[7] It is during the early developments of speedrunning that such communities and practices began to emerge.

Players as performers

Speedrunning is a practice where players compete to outperform each other by navigating through a game as quickly as possible. A form of "high-performance gameplay" established by a set of highly-skilled players and programmers whose approaches to playing videogames push videogaming-systems to their limits and beyond (Lowood 2006, 38). Once a hobbyist pursuit, speedrunning now draws mainstream public attention through high-profile charity events such as *Awesome Games Done Quick* raising millions of dollars each year. Despite its humble beginnings as a relatively niche and obscure practice, speedrunning has been granted a new lease of life via its proliferation within the livestreaming ecosystem. This is not surprising, as Lowood describes, speedrunning prefigures the emergence of videogame spectatorship and with it the notion of "player as a performer" is born (2008, 172-3).

Speedrunning practices coalesce during the innovations in technology, networked play, and gaming cultures associated with the emergence of the first-person shooter (FPS) genre, most notably id Software's successive releases in the *DOOM* franchise during the mid-to-late 1990s (Lowood 2008, 169-70). Competing in these high-octane, highly-competitive, multiplayer games required exceptional skill and practice. Enthusiasts cultivated expertise through the formation of player networks or, as Lowood puts it; "[c]ompetition led to community; networked death match led to networks of players" (2008, 171). Recordings of gameplay in the form of demos became a relatively prosaic means to cultivate and develop player skill and expertise.

Rather than recording from the monitor itself or the video signal sent to it, demo files comprise of a set of instructions recorded from player inputs during each frame of gameplay creating a relatively small file-size in comparison to video capture allowing them to be easily distributed amongst players. Demos became the means to clearly demonstrate and distribute player skill and virtuosity.[8] Throughout this system star players emerged, promoted via the wide proliferation of these gameplay performances as displays of expertise. Early attempts at collating such demos were highly successful at promoting these activities to a wider player-base securing growth within the community (Lowood 2008, 173). Ratification processes helped organise these collections (later, to amalgamate into speeddemosarchive.com) establishing a set of conventions which, in turn, regulated play and filtered content ("Speed Demo Archives"). In other words, these demos prefigured the style of play that became known as speedrunning.

Makers of Mario

Upon release, in typical Nintendo family-oriented fashion, one of the most celebrated features of SMM was its "open-to-all" approach and deliberate low-barrier to access. Yet this aspect also received major criticism. The easy-to-use interface enabled a swathe of poorly designed levels to proliferate throughout 'Course World', the built-in online sharing portal, the only requirement being that creators must first complete their levels before uploading. Likewise, many users focused on attempts to upload the hardest level possible—thereby demonstrating their gaming prowess—following in the footsteps of 'Kaizo Mario' and its derisive game design techniques.[9] These super-difficult levels, coupled with the plethora of poorly implemented ones, turned what was designed as an approachable Mario game into a hardcore—often frustrating—gaming experience. Initially, with no built-in tools available to filter-out such creations, many creators

resolved to using other third-party solutions to moderate and collate them.[10]

These early frustrations were partly addressed through consequent software patches released by Nintendo and, significantly, by adding an official SMM website called 'Super Mario Maker Bookmark' ("tcrf.net"). With it came recognition of the many ways players were playing and competing (which became especially relevant to speedrunners) adding 'First Clear' and 'World Record' categories to each level's listing, both in-game and on the accompanying website. Further, the ability for users to search what had become a burgeoning dossier of user-created levels choosing to filter courses by type and/or by difficulty. Unfortunately, however, Nintendo was also filtering levels by permanently removing them from their servers.

Many news sources reported on the lack of clarity surrounding Nintendo's criteria which simply stated levels may be removed due to "low popularity" (see, for example, Baseel 2015). Many players felt they had lost their levels unjustly, whilst others devised ways to game the popular vote (Kuchera 2015). Nintendo later released an additional statement in an attempt to add clarity, yet their continued vagueness and perceived unwillingness to engage with their players' concerns more directly served only to exacerbate things further (Klepek 2016b). Whilst deeply frustrating for those whose creations had been deleted, somewhat surprisingly it appears Nintendo were also removing levels that were deemed to be *too* popular.

On 21 March 2016, GrandPOOBear tweeted that all his SMM levels had been deleted from his profile and his progress reset.[11] It was as though GrandPOOBear as a Mario maker, alongside all of his creations, no longer existed.

In personal conversation with GrandPOOBear, he revealed that one month prior to his tweet whilst he was livestreaming, someone had informed him the level code for one of his more popular levels was no longer working. Continuing to broadcast, GrandPOOBear thought it would be "fun" to call Nintendo Customer Service ensuring whomever he spoke with was fully aware of the fact they were "on stream", being broadcast on his Twitch channel to a few hundred followers. The conversations remained light-hearted, the Nintendo representatives amicable, some even tuning in to watch the livestream taking place. One week later, whilst GrandPOOBear was on stream, he received a call back from Nintendo who were delighted to inform him that his level will be reinstated. This, however, was not to be. In an apparent redact, one month later, all his levels had been deleted and his progress reset.

Reports at time stated GrandPOOBear felt he had been targeted: that by being a recognisable publicly-facing figure known for speaking out against Nintendo's policies (or lack thereof) he had become an easy target for Nintendo to make an example of (Klepek 2016a). Such a story aligns with other, commonly reported accounts of Nintendo's despotic approach to protecting their public image (for a recent example, see Alexandra 2016). As with any company, Nintendo are well within their rights to protect their intellectual property, yet here such an ironhanded response appears unwarranted given the nature of the materials they are seeking to protect. Certainly, what is interesting in GrandPOOBear's case is that the whole premise of SMM is one based on co-creation which, as Banks and Humphreys rightly acknowledge, requires us to rethink our terms of engagement given the "emerging hybrid relations that cut across the commercial and non-commercial social networks and markets." (2008, 402). SMM is designed to encourage players to remix Mario – to create and share their own Mario creations from the Mario

materials supplied using Nintendo approved tools. As such, the apparent redaction by Nintendo—GrandPOOBear being told his level would be reinstated only for his entire profile to be wiped—does not bode well for those playing by Nintendo's rules. On the one hand, Nintendo may appear responsive to its audience by providing incremental updates, patches, and by adding new features. On the other, they appear unwilling—if not ill-equipped—to engage with the particulars of co-creation, even when co-creation lies at the heart of the player experience they are trying to promote.

"Now you're playing with power"[12]

Nintendo has a long and well-documented history regarding its approach to maintaining brand and identity – at least in relation to its North American subsidiary *Nintendo of America*. Writing about the "quasi-monopolistic control" Nintendo accrued over the North American videogaming marketplace during the mid-to-late 1980s, Kline and colleagues note; "[t]he creation of the Nintendo brand represented the conjunction of innovative technology, a carefully structured system of game design, development, and licensing, and an enormously sophisticated marketing and intelligence apparatus" (Kline et al. 2003, 109-25). Central to the success of this operation were *Nintendo Power*, Nintendo's official gaming magazine, and *Nintendo Power Line*, its accompanying telephone hotline (120). Not only did they provide players with an inside track to Nintendo products, they also gathered important information regarding the changing tastes of gamers (120-1). As Sheff acknowledges, Nintendo employees, known as game counsellors, "did more than provide a customer service […] they further bonded players to the company." (1999, 183).

This adhesion was palpable; reaffirming Nintendo's marketplace position whilst cultivating a brand loyalty amongst its devoted fans. As such, this prototypical "brand community" (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) also ritualised players' behaviours, interests, and traditions. As Consalvo suggests, in a similar vein to lifestyle magazines, gaming magazines proffered to reflect the interests of their readership whilst, at the same time, cultivating what those needs and interests were (2007, 22). For Consalvo, *Nintendo Power* went to great lengths to imbricate its readership into the unfolding narratives of Nintendo, enabling insider-knowledge to be aggregated and disseminated in the form of, what Consalvo calls, "gaming capital" (2007, 3-5). Many sections of *Nintendo Power* purported to feature user-submitted content in the form of polaroid snapshots of highscore tables or tips and tricks submitted by the players themselves for example.

Exactly how much influence players had over what made it to print is of less importance than Nintendo projecting an image of inclusion. As Consalvo notes, whether the 'Secret Agents' in the 'Classified Information' section depicted actual players or not is less significant than maintaining the perception players could aspire to be recognised as such (2007, 29-30). Similarly, Kücklich suggests it is in the interest of game developers to maintain the impression that players are the co-creators of content whereas, in reality, such a position only serves to "disguise the power structures within which the [... co-creative] community operates" (Kücklich 2005). In contrast, however, Banks and Humphreys argue against framing the player as an always already "duped labouring subject" (2008, 412). Such a position renders the player unaccountable which misunderstands the mutually beneficial "dynamic co-evolutionary interrelationships", ongoing power negotiations that take place across the messy "hybrid configurations […] of the commercial and non-commercial, markets and non-markets, the proprietary and non-proprietary" (406).

As previously noted, GrandPOOBear felt that his speaking out against Nintendo's outmoded policies regarding online governance and content creation had left him vulnerable – an easy target to be made an example of as a prominent community figure; "'[t]his hurts […] my standing in the community, [...and] that's the economy we live in as streamers.'" (GrandPOOBear as quoted in Klepek 2016a). However, GrandPOOBear attests he has maintained a productive dialogue with many of the Nintendo representatives he had spoken with at the time; some becoming regular viewers on his stream (personal communication 2017). GrandPOOBear feels Nintendo see value in what he does by retweeting many of his clips attracting more viewers to his feed. GrandPOOBear has also learnt that after he had contacted customer services, Nintendo had waited until he was "on stream" before they decided to call back. As far as Nintendo were concerned, they wanted to reveal on camera the good news story that they were able to reinstate his level. Early in 2017, a Nintendo representative reached out to GrandPOOBear to offer a fuller explanation. As GrandPOOBear retells it, the moderation system built into SMM was simply "not ready for popular streamers". GrandPOOBear's streams had attracted more attention (and hence more reports from disingenuous players) than his SMM profile suggested it should. This mismatch triggered the automated system to disable his account. Once reinstated (although too late to save his content), because he had made the whole affair public, Nintendo were unwilling to offer further explanation as "they [Nintendo] don't do anything publicly".

GrandPOOBear now believes he was not victimised yet still bemoans the lack of transparency offered to him at the time. The apparent miscommunication and vagueness not only frustrating but also potentially damaging to his public persona and standing in his community. Since the incident, both parties appear to have benefited from establishing an ongoing relationship, yet the continued power imbalance renders GrandPOOBear at a distinct disadvantage. GrandPOOBear speaks to the open dialogue he is able to have with Twitch celebrating their hands-on approach. As GrandPOOBear says, Twitch wants as many full-time streamers as possible; "If I do well, Twitch does well." He wants Nintendo to adopt something similar; a more player-responsive approach to their co-creators. He sees his advocacy, "love for Mario" and virtuoso performances as having much to offer, but fears Nintendo will continue to keep their players at arm's distance. He expresses concern over Nintendo's YouTube affiliated program—the 'Nintendo Creators Program'—an opt-in scheme which grants permission for YouTubers to use Nintendo-copyrighted materials in exchange for a cut of the advertising revenue which, according to GrandPOOBear, is like "giving away your rights" as a streamer. As others have noted, such a program appears more interested in "molding YouTube coverage to their [Nintendo's] benefit" (Hernandez 2015) over providing a tenable solution moving forward.[13]

How Nintendo decides to continue to manage its brand—and how much influence GrandPOOBear and his community of followers, fellow speedrunners and affiliates have in shaping their combined futures—remains to be seen.

This case study begins to articulate some of the layers of interplay between network career high performance players and other stakeholders. It is not simply the case that individuals operate in the shadow of larger corporations, rather that each transaction provides opportunity for a series of negotiations to take place. Continuing in the context of high performance livestreaming, we now shift focus from co-creation as the production of in-game assets towards the co-creative acts of player-made performances and their many interactors. The 'sporting' lingo of high performance play is embraced in

videogame vernacular – from speedrunners to esports. With dominant institutions of play flexing their rights to and over player-made performances, perhaps traditional sports can lend some insight into player power.

CS:GO, PLAYER RIGHTS, AND HIGH PERFORMANCE ESPORTS PRACTICES

During the 2011 National Basketball League (NBA) lock-out, league representatives as well as owners and players took an extended period to negotiate the terms of the new collective bargaining agreement. It did not go smoothly or quickly. In all, the lock-out took 161-days and ended in a shortened NBA season. During those five-months, the infrastructures supporting players were made visible as they filed antitrust lawsuits[14] and took their personal brands and play to other international leagues. As high performance players, with careers as creatively skilled playmakers, the lock-out highlights how the rights of players were actioned on one of the most dominant and traditional media sports leagues.[15] The juiciest NBA lock-out moment, and perhaps the most revealing for the current state of high performance esports practices, was about power relations, not economic value. The reporting goes that during negotiations, league commissioner David Stern pointed his finger at all-star player Dwayne Wade while talking at him. Wade (then a two-time NBA champion, and Olympic gold medalist) retorted, "Don't point your finger at me. I'm a grown man" (Zirin 2011).

The lock-out reveals the work of infrastructures which lend support to player rights. Such an account allows us to consider some of the player-industry structures and dynamics currently percolating in esports. Beyond collectively organising their gaming capital— such as sharing expertise and game knowledge—players leveraged their playing power by taking their NBA championship rings, solid statistics, and performances to other leagues and career opportunities. Established players showed their brand awareness, their wages could buffer the short-term pay loss, and "grown", more experienced representatives, like Wade, stepped out in support of their community. The lock-out revealed playing power to include a range of institutional and community actions, where player rights—such as career sustainability and fair pay for performance—could be buoyed by community knowledge and supportive socio-technical infrastructures.

Speaking at length on his own experiences within the top echelons of esport practice, former CS:GO Renegades captain and ELeague[16] player Chad "Spunj" Burchill offers a contrasting picture on the socio-structural networks supporting players. He runs through issues including wage inconsistency ("we never actually got paid on time [from Renegades] once, over a 12-month period"), poor work conditions (five-months of living and training like a "Korean gaming robot"[17]), and expresses the nuanced physiological trauma of everyday participation in a high performance esports practice. Perhaps most informative throughout his interview was the constancy of juvenescence he talked about as he maneuvered through these structures, with little mentorship from within (Lewis 2016).

In this light, Wade's position, his maturity and opportunity to exert playing power, and Spunj's—as a worn-and-torn former CS:GO player whose systemic frustrations compelled him in part to leave the pro esports scene (by 26-years of age)—prompt a compelling question for the state of esports practices. Fans and consumers (spectator/community), player-performers, leagues, teams/sponsors/platforms[18] and game developers feed this co-creative practice concomitantly. But how do these pillars simultaneously support or subvert playing power as networked practices?

Independent practitioners like GrandPOOBear highlight a specific configuration of actors involved in his, and his surrounding community's, struggle for player rights and a sustainable career within a high performance play practice. Esports players from top level FPS games grapple for player rights within a media sports framework,[19] where multiple stakeholders vie for agency over a part of the game experience. Beyond developers, this is mostly third-party organisers including tournament leagues, franchise teams, and national associations all looking to secure a sustainable model for their version of high performance practice. Players involved in an expert career are present in some, if not all, of these stakeholder systems, and the everyday pressures alongside of (intermittent) discord between varying stakeholder support and goals is often hard-felt.

When significant patches are delivered just prior to tournaments, some major leagues have found that player/league dialogue has benefits and value for all – towards creating the best play for the players and the spectators. Some leagues have talked to players about which update to play when an expertise-altering software update is scheduled the week before the tournament. Other leagues have been less forthcoming about maintaining expert play, driving players to grassroots methods of collective action. #playerrights[20] represents a recent struggle between players and third-party organisations, surfacing the entangled stakeholders involved and the everyday nudging of players' tenuous hold on a sustainable player career.

#playerrights

The 2016 announcement of a new North American esports league (PEA), was the focus of #playerrights – a collective letter followed by the hashtag expressing player dissatisfaction with the new league. Franchise CS:GO teams were already season regulars on the reputable, established and well watched international tournament, the ESL Pro League. On hearing that their teams would join the new league (as stipulated in contracts), followed by a series of misleading information and unfulfilled "player-first" promises, key team members organised their concerns in a collective letter,[21] voicing their frustrations as a forfeiture of "player rights". Players with offered seats on the PEA board, but despite promises of "empowerment" by the league, these were merely performative seats at the table. Players saw their representation on strategic decisions scuttled with committee voting structures established prior to their participation.[22] Promises of organisational transparency were also not met.[23] As suggested in the letter, there was an uneasy sense of being used and not included in what was pitched as a players-first league" (Smith 2016). Such growing pains in new sports leagues are not uncommon. And CS's durability as a mainstream esport is critical in this regard: institutional and community knowledge is publicly documented and readily available regarding the development of CS pro-leagues. The short-lived Championship Gaming Series (CGS), for example, brought big money to esports and made structural changes that were celebrated (such as player and team manager contracts) but also begrudged. As the effect of the big league left large parts of the expert CS community in disarray (and some pre-emptively retired) as Pro/Am (grassroot) tournament after tournament closed in the wake of the CGS (see Taylor 2016 for an excellent case study on the CGS).

The PEA set-out to be different, it was being launched by Jason Lake and Jason Katz, long-term insiders who had already weathered the lessons of the CGS and high performance CS more broadly.[24] However the league model looked toward traditional sports models of exclusive participation, which didn't fit how players saw their unstainable and spatio-temporally disperse playing careers. As the players made clear, the

stakes had changed. Expert careers, as GrandPOOBear demonstrates, move beyond the tournament performance and are made in the seams between game, expert player-entertainer, livestream, and brand.[25]

Talking through the paradoxes of infrastructure, Susan Leigh Star conveys that even slight alterations can impinge on the flow of a practice for users, even when modifications are justified improvements for better social-technical outcomes (1999). Small changes are regularly made to single sites of high performance CS:GO practices. As a networked practice, multiple alterations (tournament rule changes, new season timeliness, changed team-lineups) can have an exceptional impact for those on the playing field. The articulation work done by players is burdensome, and impinges on their ability to sustain an expert career. As the players collectively make clear: "In a profession where so much of your income depends on your performance and brand exposure, being able to choose where you play is vital" (Smith 2016). Many of these encounters sit on the different orientations to brands – player as brand, team as brand, game as brand. With each brand weaved into the other, each with its own layers of fan/market, economic, and player-producer power. The networks of high performance practices are as such increasingly difficult to disentangle, and players are often left to fight for a healthy practice across all sites that touch their practice. Each tiny battle lands in the hands of the least experienced, adding to the difficulty of player labour in a high performance networked practice.[26] Not having "fully grown" (and distributed) player representatives is a core characteristic of #playerrights, and it also presents an argument for why coaches matter.

Coaches matter
Esports are increasingly complex networked practices where property rights such as authorship of virtual play, the ownership of broadcast performances, and player/league sustainability issues plague participants. As a co-creative involvement, the Valve coaching ruling is a compelling turn. It demonstrates how intense the work of players has become in managing their own brand and negotiating with key stakeholders. But the ruling also highlights what developer-led cultural management of "preferred performance" means for expert player careers.

In short, the coaching ruling was an announcement by Valve on new rules for (Valve sponsored) CS:GO major events, stating that coaches would no longer be allowed to communicate during play with their teams.[27] Major tournaments (those offering over 250,000 USD in prize money) are the premier CS:GO events, and Valve sponsors the bulk of them. Majors are culturally relevant to CS:GO bringing together the most prolific teams in high performance play and highly visible – watched by millions around the globe. The coaching ruling impacts on how expert play is made and as a major tournament team administrator informed one of the authors; "Valve have talked to pros about taking away coaches for some time, and to my knowledge no one has said it was a good idea".

In CS:GO, direct player-developer exchanges are regular affairs. These relationships are displayed and documented fully in marketing-narratives, where Valve invites championship-winning teams to their offices to test out new in-game weapons. But they're also expressed in Major league players' tweeted expressions of surprise about newly released designs: "I thought you were joking about this pistol when we discussed it @csgo :(".[28] The direct relationship between Valve and CS:GO esports players is both marketing strategy (we listen to players), but also demonstrates co-creative practice. As

clearly involved participants in the high performance culture of CS:GO, player/team dissatisfaction on the coaching ruling stages them as active advisors on play itself. Yet, ultimately, players are not able to harness playing power (independently, or through existing infrastructures) to push back constructively on the tournament rules for the good of the expert game writ large. Valve's process and final decision wasted player time ignoring player/team cultural expertise. Though just as importantly, the decision damaged the fitness of career sustainability for players in favour of maintaining the corporate orientation to the main product – the "packaged" game itself.[29]

In 2012, TL Taylor speculated on tricky issues to come in esports, forecasting that "One can thus imagine scenarios in which a game company, exerting IP rights, precludes a tournament from using particular rule sets or mods that may override their software because *they fear it corrupts the intended spirit of the game* (and brand)" (171, emphasis our own). Valve's commentary on their change to the coaching rule stated; "We were always open with them [teams] about our opinion that distributing the work of 5 […] across 6 people was not in line with our goals, [...] teams were further investing in coaching in a way that was contrary to the goals of the Majors." The Valve decision builds on Taylor's esports brand-management imaginary: though Valve doesn't just preclude third-party tournament rule sets, instead the company directs the "spirit" by sponsoring the Major tournaments themselves.[30] Valve's investment into CS:GO esports bought them the right to shape the socially coded rules of expertise from above, richly layered on top of the system software. With such a powerful point of control, Valve nudges their "intended" game goals through the manipulation of the architectures of participation itself. By banning the work of coaches as a processual part of the game action, Valve forcibly removes an organic culture of expert practice. Two issues underpin the stakes of the processual coach (active throughout play, not when play is halted and off-screen), as a supported and central actor in CS:GO high performance practices; "fully grown" player-career representatives, and the rights to public performance.

The use and dynamics of coaching are rapidly shifting in esports: "[…] in general, there is no robust model of coaching in esports […]. While a *Counter-Strike* crew typically will have someone who is either formally or informally the captain […] there is rarely a consistent coach who acts, and mediates, between the owner and the players. Sometimes you find teams taking on coaches during boot camps or intensive practice sessions but they are rarely kept over the course of running an international circuit of events" (Taylor 2012, 150).[31] The importance of the coaching role in this regard is significant. A cultural shift has taken place between 2012-2016, where pro-teams have embraced the full-time coach as a fully participating team entity, paid and professionalised.[32]

Valve and franchise teams alike express that the coach changes how the moment-to-moment play is delivered tactically as a performance (players can offload duties, and specialised in-game leaders—a specific expert player role—are made redundant).[33] But coaches also alter the landscape of professional practice. Coaches are mostly former elite level players. They carry with them embodied knowledge on professionalism, teamwork, other players, and can advocate on career sustainability. The coach is a valuable role for many players looking to develop an esports career as they transition from player to sports administration while also giving back to the next cohort of players as a mentor and representative to take on upper management/league issues. Coaches like Danny "Zonic" Sørensen (from the Danish CS:GO team Astralis) are long-term performers, and have embodied histories of player relations with Valve and third-party industries. As coach, he acts as a significant link between "green" and youthful players and industry

actors. Zonic's own trajectory highlights how good coaches are a robust fulcrum between players and management, who provide better support to future generations of young players as they transition into a mysterious and specialised career.[34] The coach is the lubricant for making "big" esports more sustainable.[35] But the role perhaps also serves a more abstract function to an incoming dispute that is brewing. The coaching role changes arguments surrounding performance property rights in esports and what is public sports performance. Drawing on Dan Burk's work on esports law (2013), the coaching ruling prompts the question of where the (processual coached) esports performance lies in this co-creative process.

By reaching into the construction of player performances, the tournament rules of play, Valve's reach extends beyond its standard audio-visual code to the socio-material scaffolding of performance itself. Exploring game developers' negotiations on IP rights, Taylor states; "There is a constant dance between wanting to assert property rights around these products—managing and often containing their actual use—and recognizing the limits of doing so" (2012, 166). When Valve states "the current participation of coaches in the game is not compatible with our goals", we might do well flip the attention to players and career sustainability in order to recognize the limits—and other implications involved—in Valve's game-consumer orientation regarding public-facing events.

The impact of the coach as a co-creative actor is significant here. The work of the coach highlights a performance made by a key team member shaping on-screen play, while having no hands-on-machine moments during the action itself. In other words, the coach isn't captured or manipulating the software. The coach is a shadow on the in-game movements, an integral part of the performance bridging local broadcast and in-game action. The performance of the coach is enacted and expressed by the team *in totalis*. And as a documented performance, captured by traditional broadcasting and mechanisms of expertise (cameras, commentators, and wages acknowledging their value as experts), the performance exists outside of the contracts governing on-screen play.

Looking at FPS's as "co-creative media", Sue Morris (2005) offers the following point of consideration: "[...] neither developers nor player-creators can be solely responsible for production of the final assemblage regarded as "the game", it requires the input of both" (8). Prior to the Valve coaching rule, high performance CS:GO coaching practices were involved in the processual production of the assemblage of play – from moment-to-moment tactics to how the (fast-paced decision making of) in-game economy was run. As a non-playing performer, the coach complicates everything regarding where and how the performance and authorship/ownership of those performances start and end when they are made outside of the contracts of service.[36] The doors have been closed for now by Valve on processual coaching. But the actions of the processual coach might be a case that pushes expert-level CS:GO into the domain of a public sports performance, one that lies beyond the game code, and that potentially breaches strong ties to property ownership contracts on public esports performances. As the coaching ruling and #playerrights highlight, there are increasingly tricky territorial matters involved for young players who have settled on a professional (youth) career within the domain of competitive gaming.[37]

CONCLUSION
These two cases, bridging player rights and high performance co-creation practices, offer sensitivity to the issues and depth of complexity that players are struggling with on an everyday basis in the making of their networked career. Nintendo/GrandPOOBear and CS:GO esports participants bring context-dependent knowledge of virtuoso experts,

offering nuanced, historic descriptions of career involvement in high performance practice and key points of consideration on how players manage, fade, and struggle within these powerful networked worlds of play. Perhaps most notable in these cases is the importance of community knowledge holders and—as veteran NBA player Dwayne Wade reminds us—the presence of other "fully grown" career-players to support the intense efforts of youth in professionalised play. There are key points of difference between speedrunners and CS:GO esports players infrastructures: from formalized career opportunities, layers of management, player maturity, community size, and cash-flow points, to name a few. And, as such, opportunities to cultivate a career in high performance play have significantly different infrastructures (from game/community cultures, to region, to saturated and accessible competitive networks), that translate expert play towards different hooks and holds on playing power.

The notion of co-creation in high performance practices complicates notions of player rights and public performance. But co-creation also renders visible the paradoxes of infrastructure, where the weight of change is loaded onto the players themselves. When multiple alterations to core sites and systems of play are simultaneously at work (league rule changes, livestreaming platform changes, contractual changes), the "[…] articulation work performed invisibly by the user" (Star 1999, 386-87) is where the unseen translation work is done. This behind-the-scenes work is manifold and burdensome, and currently necessary to maintain an expert performance as well as a sustainable career. These concrete cases generate things to think with, orienting us to the ongoing plight of players in imaging new worlds through play; they are productive exemplars on the making of what is a networked career.

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ENDNOTES
[1] Esports refers to competitive computer game practices that are centred on formally organised Pro/Am tournaments.

[2] Events involving both professionals and amateurs in the practice.

[3] In his ethnographic exploration of an Australian game development company, Banks (2004) discusses the feedback loop with a CEO between game developers, the playing community, and what they refer to as "hard-core online gamers". Hard-core gamers, he notes, are important to the game; they are the "opinion leaders" and they have an influence that is felt through their pervasive presence online (24). See also Bank and Humphrey's 2008.

[4] For a detailed discussion of the legal rights surrounding players' performances in terms of ownership, copyright, rights of publicity, and neighbouring rights, see Burk (2013).

[5] Whilst there is no official Mario Maker community as such, here we understand it as a grassroots community consisting of distributed players (although predominantly North American) whose shared interests revolve around playing *Super Mario Maker* (Nintendo 2015) on Nintendo's Wii U console.

[6] GrandPOOBear speaking at a player/industry panel discussion at RMIT University, Melbourne

Australia hosted by Emma Witkowski and James Manning on 7 December 2016. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwZrVtVWcQc.

[7] Prior to the release of SMM, "Mario-making" has a long, albeit illegitimate, history developed through the subculture of cartridge hacks and emulated modifications of *Super Mario* games. These practices developed alongside and in conjunction with speedrunning (and tool-assisted superplays or TAS videos) also notable as highly-skilled pursuits devoted to pushing the limits of both videogame play and videogames as a technology (for an overview, see Newman (2008, 140-3); for a detailed account, see Altice (2015, 289-324)).

[8] For a similar take on twingalaxies.com, see Taylor (2012).

[9] See, for example, Hernandez (2015b). For an account of Kaizo Mario ROM hacks of *Super Mario World* (Nintendo 1990 [1991, 1992]) and 'abusive game design', see Sicart and Wilson (2010).

[10] Additional to the makersofmario.com website already noted, see, for example, the SMM subreddit (/r/MarioMaker/) whose members continue to organise weekly themed competitions.

[11] https://twitter.com/GrandPOOBear/status/711955852639375361

[12] "Now you're playing with power" was Nintendo of America's advertising slogan circa 1985/6 (Koch 2016).

[13] See also the tumultuous events leading up to this partnership being struck: Nintendo's assertion over claims to YouTube advertising revenue (Plunkett 2013); the legalities and implications involved (Lastowka 2013); and their apparent about-turn on the matter (Totilo 2013). For further and insightful commentary on Let's Plays and fair use legislation, see Ligman (2013).

[14] See http://www.espn.com.au/nba/story/_/id/7266615/nba-lockout-players-consolidate-antitrust-fight-minnesota.

[15] Perhaps the players strongest use of their "playing power" was demonstrated by not playing at all, as the economic loss for each team franchise (as well as the host cities where taxpayers have contributed to the mega-stadiums where play occurs) grew daily.

[16] Launched in 2016, the ELeague is a professional CS:GO esports league formed for traditional TV broadcast (on North American cable channel TBS).

[17] The regional aspects and infrastructures on the professionalisation of play are an underdeveloped area of study and key area of contention regarding global standards in esports.

[18] Danish team Astralis offer a compelling singular model in esports that tackles issues of player rights/voice, and sustainability head on by way of a player co-owned franchise structure: see "Astralis: To The Stars - Episode 1" at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8xTAMI4vhs.

[19] Media sports rest on profit maximisation from media investments such as broadcast rights and top-tier sponsorships for the sport to exist in its form (see Maguire et al. 2002, 52–5).

[20] The #playerrights hashtag was activated in 2016 for a short time by a handful CS:GO players in order to express their frustration at the ongoing disenfranchisement of career players by specific third party organisations.

[21] Delivered through an established (and somewhat polemical) CS:GO community member and chosen player representative, Scott "SirScoots" Smith.

[22] A simple majority vote of a 7-person committee would decide outcomes: players only represented a minority of three seats.

[23] With players receiving information late or not at all regarding changes to the league.

[24] See Kane (2005) for an introduction to Jason Lake's early work as CS team owner of Complexity gaming (and CGS team manager). Jason Katz, a lawyer, was the VP of global marketing for the CGS (See Taylor 2016, 141).

[25] Like GrandPOOBear, many top CS players have a stable career in livestreaming, and their independent brand is deeply woven into livestream (Twitch), major tournament representation, team brand, and the game itself. For example, Jarosław "pashaBiceps" Jarząbkowski (from Virtus.pro) claims his career wages from his team contract, livestream donations and ad-revenue, and Valve sticker purchases (virtual vanity stickers fans can place on their in-game weapon).

[26] While player labour, or "playbour" is a well discussed topic (see, for example, Kücklich 2005), the paid tacit and explicit work of esports players does not align neatly with notions of playbour.

[27] The synchronous coaching being altered to the following: "During a match, the coach may only communicate with the players during warmup, half-time, or during one of four 30 second timeouts that the coach or player can call" available at http://blog.counter-strike.net/index.php/coaching.

[28] The newly patched weapon started a disputed player/community/developer discussion, see http://www.polygon.com/2015/12/9/9880304/counter-strike-go-r8-revolver-controversy.

[29] As a business, this is not a surprising move; but as an expert sports culture, it's a thorny stance on expert player participation and cultures of high performance practice from traditional sports to esports.

[30] Valve has sponsored CS:GO Major tournaments prior to the coaching ruling, since 2013.

[31] Team esports cost more money to maintain. Adding an additional performer into the everyday pay-run is not an option for many start-up franchises, or wanted by others.

[32] In limiting the actions that a coach can perform (limited to out of the process of play, and into halted time periods like half-time and time-outs), the franchise team "investment" in a coach is a less-necessary endeavour when they can get a "two-for-one" bargain by opting for an in-game team leader instead (see Lewis 2016 on this issue).

[33] This is a notable positive outcome of the coaching ban. That team oriented player expertise is valued in-game leaders, making for more diverse player roles on the team.

[34] Zonic's player history was key in his appointment to the coaching position, as emphasised in Questionmark's (now Astralis) public announcement of the hire: http://www.twitlonger.com/show/n_1so51g0.

[35] This is certainly an area to follow alongside of growth in female CS:GO leagues, where in-game leaders are cultivated along the lines of the Valve coaching ban, bringing other kinds of expertise to these players as they develop their capacity in leadership and communication for a continued esports career.

³⁶ As Burk, citing Tyler Ochoa, reminds us, when the Terms of Service are used as the defence on IP rights as a contractual agreement between player and developer, public policy can void the contractual "question of ownership" (2013, 965).

³⁷ And there are certainly opposing meanings within the homegrown community leaders – see https://www.reddit.com/r/Cloud9/comments/5joodb/jack_this_is_not_okay_the_players_should_al ways/dbi0eb4/

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