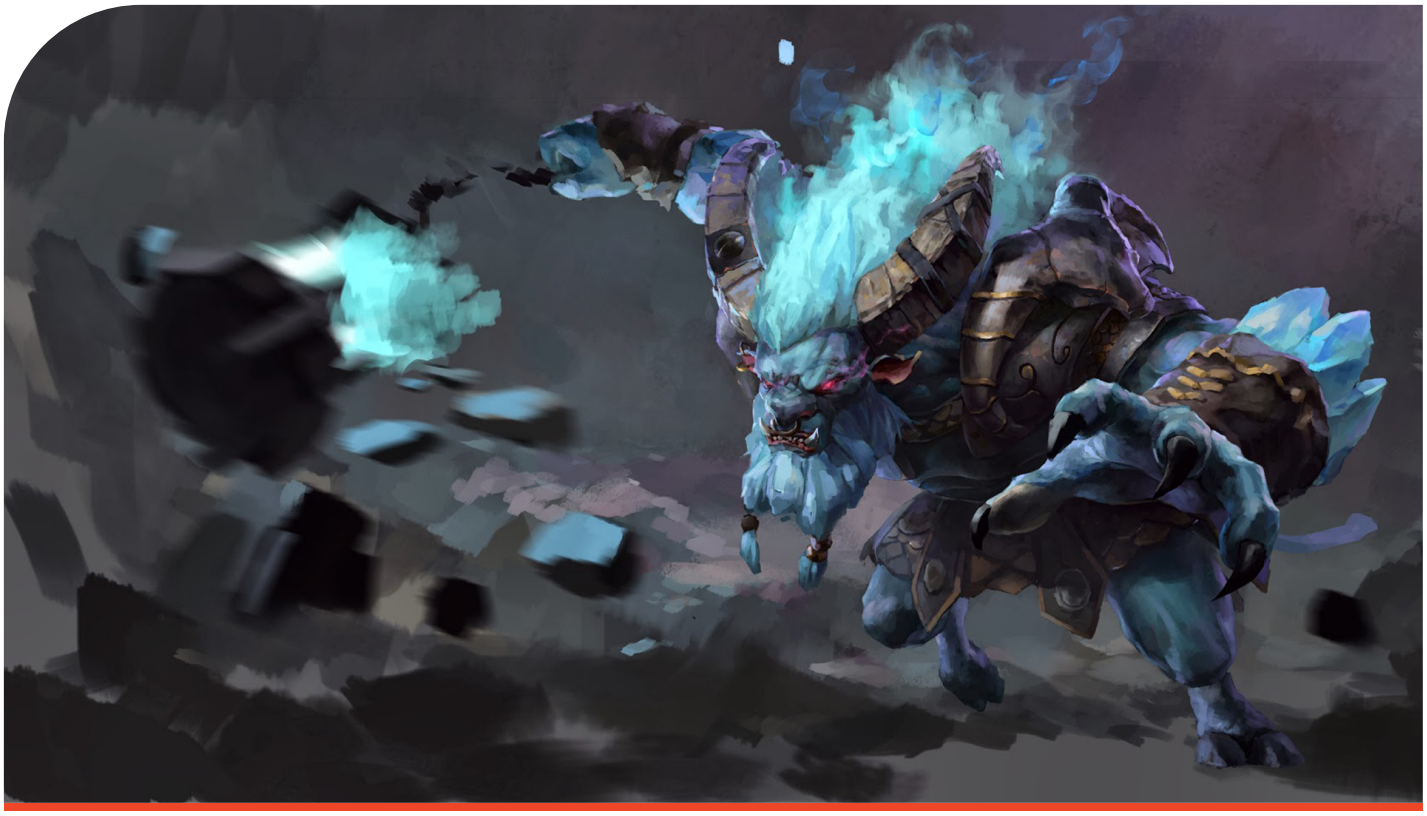

Spirit Breaker Bash: the controversial role of chance in esports

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by Eron Rauch

Why percentage-chance elements in competitive games are so controversial--and why designers keep including them.

"..."

"ggwp"

So goes one of the most infamous moments in the *DotA2*'s biggest tournament, The International 6. With $20,000,000 dollars on the line, players almost never break concentration to talk to the opposing team during games. But this play was so outrageous that the casters were sputtering, the opposing team was so exasperated they typed two salty dots in response, and even though the game was only minutes old, Twitch chat endlessly echoed "good game, well played," the typical sign off of a winning team.

What was this glorious, outlandish play? Newbee, a top Chinese team, was cruising along quite nicely, and their mid-laner was playing his tank-y Alchemist character super-safely. In fact, only moments before, the casters were praising his conservative decision to buy extra items to heal up if he were pressured. The other team, MVP Phoenix, has a notorious character named Spirit Breaker, who at this moment dashed relentlessly through the trees from halfway across the map, and attacked the Newbee mid-laner.

There is no real way that he should get anything from this assault, but Spirit Breaker is loved and loathed for one ability, "Greater Bash." Every time he attacks an opposing champion, he has a 17% random chance to "bash" the target, stunning and knocking them back, effectively disabling them from doing anything for a short while.

As Spirit Breaker's bellow ends, he swings at the Newbee player, and first attack bashes, sending the Alchemist flailing haplessly in the air. He can still escape to the safety of his tower, but just as he lands the second attack bashes, sending him in the air again, interrupting any chance of healing or defending himself. Just as he is coming down again, and things are looking grim but not impossible, the third consecutive attack bashes, locking the Newbee mid-laner yet again out of any ability to react or escape, securing MVP the kill on one of the most hardened targets on the map, and breaking the game open. Newbee surrendered at 21 minutes in, helping MVP Phoenix springboard to the upper bracket of the tournament, and eventually earn millions of dollars of prize money.

All spiraling from 17% x 17% x 17%, a one-in-two-hundred chance for that exact sequence of events.

".." indeed.

MVP Phoenix went on a deep run in one of the most competitive esports tournaments in the world, which clearly showed their overall talent and skill. Yet they chose to repeatedly work those odds with many more Spirit Breaker picks, some of which worked spectacularly, landing clutch bashes to stop teleports at critical junctures in the game, some which failed miserably and lead to countless ignoble deaths. Fate is a fickle mistress, as the saying goes.

Wherever it is found in modern competitive esports, random chance is pointedly controversial. TSM's *League of Legends* superstar DoubleLift has even especially vehement in his public arguments for the removal of all "RNGesus," as the community calls it. This includes even critical hits, DoubleLift citing a number of cases where the extra damage from these chance-based strikes have likely cost teams games in major tournaments. For the most part, Riot Games, maker of *League of Legends*, agrees, having already removed most other random chance abilities in their pursuit of what they term "counterplay." Counterplay, at its simplest, is a game design strategy that tries to make sure that any action done by one player can be meaningfully countered by a skillful choice of another action on the opposing side.

Gangplank's ultimate no longer does damage at random points within the circle.

Riot has removed chance in some the most fundamental parts of the game, such as entirely phasing out the "Dodge" statistic, which caused attacks to randomly miss, in the very early 1.0.0.132 series of patches patch to the game. They have also "normalized" very specific abilities like the pirate character, Gangplank's, ultimate ability, which fires a canon barrage at a large circle across the map. Previously the cannonballs crashed randomly in the targeted circle, so it would be possible for an enemy to walk through unscathed or to be absolutely crushed by a half dozen shots in an instant. In the current round of patches it was changed to do a standard amount of damage over its duration to all enemies in the circle.

Even within mainstream sports, Slate's Robert Weintraub has reported how players and owners are increasingly balking at using coin flips, what he dubs, "the cursed toss," to determine home field advantage, sides during overtime, and even draft choice order. He finishes with a prototypical American plea to self-determinism and individualism, that, "In all realms of life, there are some decisions that are just too important to leave up to the fates."

Yet numerous top game designers have argued passionately for the inclusion of the fates. In an article titled "Random Acts of Kindness" by *Magic: The Gathering*'s head designer Mark Rosewater proposes that randomness is a core virtue that makes games inherently more interesting. He makes the case that "a game needs the unknown. Randomness provides the unknown." In Rosewater's vision, randomness is useful for creating surprises, making players play the game differently each time, and creating space for players to react. He notes that even in seemingly chance-free games like chess or football, there are plenty of random variables that affect the match such as random seeding of opponents and weather.

Rosewater specifically claims that their testing has shown that "really what gamers hate is the appearance of randomness." Why then do major competitive esports games like *DotA2* persist in retaining a wide array of randomized abilities, spawn times, and statistics, and notably a character called Chaos Knight which is specifically built around the idea of being unpredictable?

A bullet spread example from CS:GO.

Even in the top tier of competitive first person shooter games, such as *Counterstrike: Go* and *Overwatch*, these games have specifically introduced randomization to add realism to the simulated bullet spread and recoil on weapons. Contrast this to Riot's rework of the Cannon Barrage ability, which removed all of the randomness that would very much be present in firing ancient canons at distant targets. Right here, you can start to see a glimmer of two very divergent visions for competitive video games.

If you look at Spirit Breaker's 17% chance to bash you realize that it is basically the same percentage as rolling a 6 on a 6-sided dice. Rolling dice to determine outcomes and getting critical hits for exceptional roles is quite common in pen-and-paper gaming. Role playing games like Dungeons and Dragons, war games like Warhammer 40K, or even the old family-fight simulator —I mean real-estate simulator, Monopoly, rely heavily on utilizing dice rolls and random cards to simulate their imaginary worlds. The pleasure is as much in watching the way these snow-globe miniature worlds play out as it is in winning.

Many classic video games are born directly of this lineage of chance-based simulation. Dungeons and Dragons is an ubiquitous influence of the whole genre of computer and console role playing games, directly leading to *Warcraft*, the *Warcraft* mod which would become *Defense of the Ancients*, its successor *DotA2*, and it's much-polished clone *League of Legends*.

The Yale online encyclopedia of human culture, *HRAF*, defines sports as, "games wherein outcomes depend primarily on physical skill." Especially in American culture, these two realms of the intellect and the physical are almost always portrayed as at war with each other. Nerd and jock. Scholar and athlete. Intellectual and manual labor. Skill and chance. Mind and body.

What makes Spirt Breaker's 17% bash, critical hits, and the other unholy riders in the host of random chance so contentious in esports, is this longstanding cultural tension between the simulated, the game, and the actual, the sport.

Esports require an inhuman amount of physical prowess, with top players pushing to the edge of human reaction times, and exhibiting astonishing focus and precision in front of tens of thousands of roaring spectators. Yet these video games are also profoundly rendered simulations: of scenes of elves slaying orcs amidst burning trees straight out of Tolkien; of sneaky security officers outwitting terrorists in far flung cities changing every few minutes; of interstellar battles on asteroids between far-future human technology and alien insectoid invaders; of a talking ape punching their way through a robot factory with their time-traveling British friend.

While the stereotypical cultural story in America might suggest that sports fans and games fans exist in perennial conflict, they are not quite as far afield as it seems. From baseball cards to fantasy sports, traditional sports have always had a fetish for alternate history and what-if questions. Video games have always rewarded physical mastery as much intellectual completeness. For better and worse, sports and esports are inherently a dance between opposites: play and violence; luck and skill; dominance and respect; strategy and performance; and between the perception that what matters most is our induvidual skill and the joy of watching a fated story play out.

Here, in esport's internal argument about chance, it seems that we are witnessing a fracture in our perhaps all-inclusive categories of "video games" and "esports." These overly-simplistic containers are no longer adequate to hold the complexities of this new digital culture. It is a modest suggestion, but even though so many video games share an aesthetic, share an installation method, and share the devices we use to interface with them, perhaps we need to stop trying to force homogeneity on these realms. To deny simulation is to deny the mind. To deny sport is to deny the body. The future requires both.

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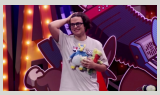

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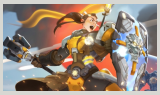

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