The legacy of geeks, bros, and filthy casuals

Features

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If game publishers want to make *way more money* off esports, they might have to look to the huge (and lucrative) casual audiences that traditional esports culture currently ignores.

Everyone wants to know where the future of esports is headed. Companies are spending tens of millions of dollars to research this question while millions of hours of fan life are dedicated to the question every day. But while speculating about details like ESPN coverage, *Overwatch* character additions, *League of Legends* patch timings, and Adderall doping can be interesting, if you want to grasp the bigger picture of where esports might be in ten years (and why that future might be interesting even if you don't care about esports) you need to understand the past. Specifically, if you want to know how the rise of esports will change videogaming culture, you need to understand some very specific market forces which were set in motion long ago, and which are still churning along.

Let's start where I typically start: by saying something foolish and being corrected by someone smart. I was at a party about to launch into one of my patented rants about one of my current pet peeves. In this case, the obnoxious hardcore gamer genre tropes that seem to increasingly invade esports—like the ubiquity of anime-goth skins, bloated science fiction guns, and reward treadmills. But before I got more than a few sentences in, a game industry vet and systems designer by the name of Alec Austin pointed out something that was hidden in plain sight. He explained that the video game industry sees their market as a series of distinct groups, that those groups are hardly static, and that there is tension with how these groups are currently changing. Critically, at any given point the various sub-groups within the groups project cultural identities that might not match up with their actual market potential.

In general conversation, folks tend to throw around terms like "gamer", "hardcore", "casual," or even "fan" without much precision, even though those subcategories often have deep investments in their self-crafted identities. The industry is also constantly trying to create precise definitions for the way consumers interface with their products. These categories are always evolving, and with mobile and esports, the past few years have seen fairly radical shifts in the ways both the industry and players define marketing

groups. Of particular interest is the ongoing evolution of what came to be called the "midcore" market around 2012, but has existed for decades in various guises to delineate the spectrum of consumers between "hardcore" and "casual".

But the way current videogame industry in 2017 splits their audience into into hardcore, midcore, and casual markets obscures a couple of highly specific cultural strains that dominate the esports' past, and potentially its future. Specifically, because esports established itself long before the modern definition of "midcore" was a doodle with a question mark behind it on a marketing white board, there are two legacy subsets of hardcore and midcore audiences that continue to exert an outsized influence on the culture and market of esports: geek-lifestyers and bros.

ZOOM

See, when I said "hardcore gamer" at that party, I wasn't really talking about all of hardcore players, but more precisely about tropes rooted in geek-as-lifestyle culture. If you hop online and look at the crowd of an *League of Legends* LCS Worlds Finals game, Twitch chat during an *Overwatch* tournament, or even most video game websites, you'll see this subset everywhere arguing about obscure 8-bit games, spamming Kappas, talking about their love of pizza, and posting replies in fake Japanese. It's easy for outsiders to make the same sloppy mistake I did and assume these geek lifestylers make up a majority of hardcore videogame fans, and maybe even the video game market as a whole. They certainly act that way, and they're the most active on out current esports platforms.

4-Chan's community might be extreme and controversial, but because of its extremity it is a useful example of the specific culture of geek-lifestyle hardcores. They serve as a self-appointed judge, jury, and executioner of gamer identity (in 4-Chan's case: white, straight, male, geeky, libertarian, and ruthlessly ironic). They and their assorted less-odious ilk variously get video game tattoos, listen to 8-bit music, have subscriptions to CrunchyRoll, make tons of memes, have an specific attachment with the history of geek culture, generate tons of content on wikis, forums, and social media, and generally spend tons of time watching, playing, and engaging in other activities related to video games. Being a fan of video game and geek culture is their life's work.

But increasingly the industry sees this self-selected group as relatively small, especially in the terms that matter most to the business: there's not enough of them to regularly move units of games. The geek lifestylers might still determine what outsiders consider the video game vernacular, but they are too small in numbers and too specialized in taste to directly affect the market outside of specialized gamer-geek brands.

And besides, they were never the sole inventors of competitive gaming culture. There is a parallel historical precursor to esports: arcades. These places reeked of machismo and competition. They were places for skipping school, frame counting, underage drinking, and lining up coins to challenge the best. The precise moment this market for competitive games coalesces into what we might call "bros" is nebulous. Maybe it was the release of *Street Fighter 2* for the SNES. Maybe it was *Madden.* But certainly by the time every frat house had an X-Box and *Halo,* the bro market became the industry's most reliable way to sell millions of copies of pricey AAA titles.

The reason the high school and college bros became a key demographic was their consistency as consumers. They were a very large group with plenty of disposable income and free time that could be relied on to regularly buy copies of these serial franchise games. For our purposes, its also critical to note that the bro demographic really loves traditional sports. Watch any bumper for an esports tournament and you'd swear the bros are still the primary identity of people playing esports, complete with flat billed hats, yelling in slow motion, and innumerable first pumps.

When competitive gaming hit its stride in the 1990s, it was heyday of both fans and industry conflating "hardcore" with "geek-lifestyler" and what became the "midcore" with "bro". So it is unsurprising that esports was established as a hybrid of the two markets most invested: the inward-facing geek culture and masculine sports culture of bros. Let me reiterate that geek-lifestyle hardly represents even the range of the hardcore market, nor do bros represent a unity of midcore markets—but because of this historical conflation, the community and culture of esports continues to act as though these two groups are overwhelmingly the primary players and audiences for major esports.

But the historical third major group of the gaming market—a silent majority often derided as "filthy casuals"—is an unbelievably vast plurality. Think for a moment of every parent who buys their kid a stack of fighting or racing games, every high schooler who plays *Rock Band* with their friends, all the women (or queer community members, or people of color) who buy tons of games and merch but don't call themselves "gamers," the entirety of overseas markets outside of Korea, all the dads and moms who play *Hearthstone* after the kids go to bed, or everyone who messes around on a mobile game while waiting for the train. Combine all those and imagine the money that that amalgamation represents. Many of these "filthy casual" players, who as a group are orders of magnitude larger than the other two markets, would be considered hardcore or midcore by traditional videogame marketing, but in esports they are all too often excluded by the identity policing of geek-lifestylers and brutal culture of reliable bros.

There is only one major group that has the vast power to directly determine the future of esports: the investors and executives. Money is their game and money is how they keep score. The CEO of any publicly traded video game company like EA or Activision has a legal obligation to make their shareholders as much money as they can. Yes, these companies employ developers who are often passionate game fans, but for the CEOs and investors that determine which projects get made, video games are just the incidental facilitator for that process of turning capital into wealth for the investors. Most investors and executives in major video game related companies don't care what games they make or what audiences they target. They only care hitting a sweet spot where they make the most possible money with the least risks.

Over the past twenty or so years, the sure-fire way to achieve this revenue has been through micro-targeting reliable core audiences. But like any any other business, if a market saturates, or if a better opportunity presents itself, the investors and executives assuredly have no qualms about switching their focus to continue growth. When it comes to making a successful esport in the 2017, the scale is so vast, and the stakes so high—individual games can represent billions of dollars of yearly revenue—that only the most massive economic and social imperatives significantly impact the esports world.

Why then, am I placing so much emphasis on these two legacy groups which don't even represent a majority of their own demographic categories? To answer in a round-about fashion, *League of Legends* is a massive video game empire, raking in about $1.6 billion globally, but the National Football League is in another level of success altogether, estimated to reach $14 billion in revenue in 2017.

Not only do traditional sports make way more money, their social impact reaches into almost every facet of American culture. Major cities vie for stadiums, and generations families can share a beloved team. There just aren't enough people or dollars in these two legacy categories of lifestylers and bros combined to push esports to that level of economic and cultural influence. Which means that publishers, out to always grow, will have to target a broader audience.

Any game company that really wants to hit the big time will have to think about how they want to bring some significant subsection of "filthy casuals" to their game. and that has the potential to drastically change video game culture. But the current model assumes that a new esports game will create a product to bring in an initial user base from the current esports market. This means starting with a foundational culture defined by geek-lifestylers and bros, which is inherently hostile to many other groups of potential fans. If you really want to expand your audience, you'll need to somehow make a product, and a founding community, that isn't rooted in these insular legacy identities.

The difficulty of mining any specialized area of "filthy casuals" to refine them into midcore gamers (such as already-dedicated sports fans) is tricky, and so far, we've typically seen companies realize they have brought new players in by accident after the fact. Indeed, the dedicated "filthy casual" customer who had maybe never played a videogame before but got totally invested in *World of Warcraft* is a great example. Blizzard started to tailor the experience of the game around the edges to entice that silent but sizable market. But while they were doing that, they had already committed to creating ever-more difficult and specialized content like the Sunwell raid, which actively excluded this new audience.

But a company with enough resources to take more risks might be able to set up both the game and the community to attract these new types of players from the start, thus bypassing such a mono-focused reliance on the legacy groups. Yes, it would be risky, but it could also pay out massively. The unique strategy Blizzard used to make *Overwatch* a massive success make much more sense when you see it as a deliberate attempt to remap the historical categories of esports to a new, more modern market split.

At first glance it seems like a super-conservative game. It is a remake of a beloved gamer game (*Team Fortress 2*) with some anime goth skins and cyber-ninjas thrown in. Geek-lifestylers check. It has good-feeling shooting, tons of ways to show your skill, and a good core leveling loop. Bros check.

But this is Blizzard. They can't just ship a hundred thousand units. They need to make a half-billion dollars to really consider the game a success; ideally much more. So Blizzard does something that is historically rare: they throw in a bunch of things to that defy the geeks and counteract the bro-y-ness, such as having a highly diverse cast of characters, many of whom don't simply rely on twitch shooting to be effective. They also release it on console, not just PC. They announce city-specific teams with known traditional sport owners.

While not explicitly betting the farm on some dark matter demographic, all of these choices from Blizzard send subtle signals to various types of people from the historical casual category that they are welcome to help be a foundation for this game's future if they want.

Ten years ago, no industry-leading company would have looked at a AAA FPS esport launch and decided that annoying geek-lifestylers and bros in favor of courting an unknown subgroup of casual players was the best business decision. Indeed, looking at two of the historically major players in esports over the past decade, *Counter Strike* and *DOTA 2*, you see an overt attempt by the publisher, Valve, and communities to be brutally exclusive and deliberately elitist, to define themselves as pro-geek-bro and as explicitly anti-casual.

We've reached a tipping point where the money is so potentially lucrative outside of those two legacy sub-markets, and the walls between them and the rest of the potential audience so militarized, that publishers are basically forced into making choices between limited historical markets or expanded future markets. This, by its very nature, has the potential to change the esports culture. If radical enough, it could reshape how we define videogame fandom as a whole by bringing massive swells of new, more diverse fans into the dedicated cultural sphere. And because it will require developers change the products themselves, it could change what we see in games and how we interact with them.

How radical or conservative that change might be (or if it will happen at all) is basically up to the way that the investors and publishers decide to define and then gamble money on markets. One major flop could scare investors for years and convince them to close down the borders of the esports community to any type of person who isn't already inside. While successes like *Overwatch* stoke the desires of investors to see how they can reshape the foundations of the traditional markets. Which means reshaping products, and cultural identities, in their search to define and make new markets of that multifaceted group which has for far too long been dismissed as "filthy casual."

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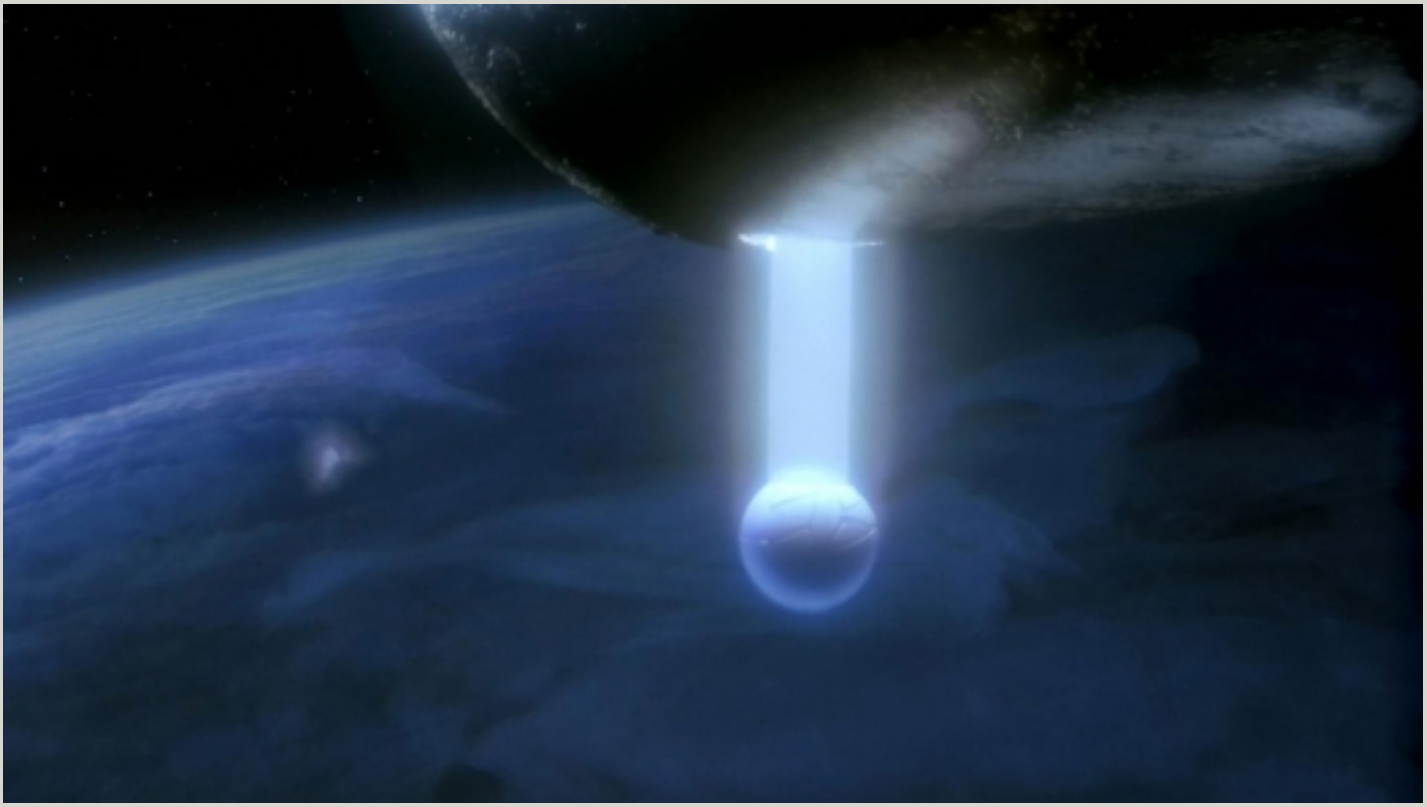

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