



Get Wrecked: why esports injuries matter

Opinion

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by [Eron Rauch](#)

As esports occupy a growing segment of the entertainment world, we're going to have to start looking seriously at the toll these games take on their players.



Have you ever accidentally smashed your hand in a door before? If, like me, you've done this, think back to the moment after it happened, and how the pulsing pain seemed to come from inside of your body. Later, when your hand was swollen, think of all the aching joints, muscles, and bones jostling for space when you tried to grab something and your hand wouldn't close correctly. That is what carpal tunnel can feel like on a bad day. I should know, since I and millions of people have been dealing with it and all manner of other chronic hand and wrist injuries, including top esports players.

Just a small selection from recent times include: Hai from Cloud9's *League of Legends* team; Fear from EG's *DotA2* team; Guardian and olofmeister from Fanatic and Na'Vi respectively in *Counterstrike: Global Offensive*; and a whole slew of top *StarCraft 2* pros, including MVP, MMA, Scarlett, Taega, Flash, and TLO. In recent years we've increasingly seen these and others of the worlds' best players missing long stretches of their peak periods as players, and even forced into early retirement because of carpal tunnel, tendonitis, and other repetitive stress injuries.

Hand and wrist injuries are hardly the only type of physical injuries videogame players can suffer. On [Tonic](#), they spoke with chiropractor and videogame fan Adam Fields about one of the other common physical problems faced by regular players of videogames: posture.

"Fields, like many other console players, describes himself as a forward-sitting gamer—where you lean in and and focus intently... 'There are times I'm playing an immersive game, like *The Witcher 3*, and I'll think, 'I need to get up and stretch. I've been playing too much'—I don't want to be one of those guys who can't do the things they want to do when they get old."

Think about that statement: Even as a medical professional trained to be aware of the risks and combat them, Fields is worried about the effects of his body's natural inclinations sitting on the couch playing videogames.

Yet, there is a real tendency to treat videogames like they are separate from the world and the experiences we have with them as separate from our bodies. You can see this in the videogame media, subculture, and industry as they constantly obsess over things like: flow, achievements, representation, realistic graphics, fantasy, uncanny valley, escapism, online forum drama, subtweets, and blog arguments about narrative versus play. But these inflamed nerves, surgery scars, misshapen spines, and the many millions of dollars of ruined esports careers, are a poignant reminder that the act of playing videogames exists in a deep and complicated interrelationship with the world and our bodies.



Retired *StarCraft* player Lee Young Ho (Flash), seen following surgery in 2011. (Photo: dailyesports.com.)

Even I find it easy to get caught up in the conversations about videogames that pretend our minds mystically interact with the pure code of videogames in some magical digital place outside of space and time. This tendency amongst the videogame community was on clear display in so much of the recent Ian Bogost spat, which felt like it often came down to debating the relative merits emulating the experience of watching serial television series versus a fetish for reading the rules of bygone board games. But the pain of inflamed nerves that scream at every click and keystroke, reminds us that even when play as cybernetic cowboys, type hateful comments on forums, or buy virtual currency, we do so as part of the world. The ever-seductive buzzwords like virtual, digital, away, fiction, meme, imagination, lulz, open-world, skin, avatar, or world building, all come up short when the sizzling hole left in the television by a Wiimote serves a curt reminder that our experiences with videogames happens in and assuredly impact the world.

Now as players, we intuitively know that we don't leave our world behind when we play a game, since we've all had to close the blinds on our windows to fix some glare. We understand that our bodies are very much involved in playing videogames when we hit R1 instead of R2 because its winter and our hands are cold. We've all learned we can't escape our social circumstances when

we play games after getting hyped and shouting out, “Rein’s shield is down, push push!!,” at 2AM only to have our pajama-clad roommate bang on our door and yell, “I have to be up early for work so shut the hell up!”

But aside from when we’re icing a wrist in between games, or reading a sad farewell tweet from a favorite player, why is it so easy to assume that everything important about videogames happens in digital place far removed from our bodies? When we drive home from the store with our shrink-wrapped game about swashbuckling-ninja action on the high seas, why is it so hard to picture of that that same game we’re holding was part of massive inventory roiling across the seas in a salt-crusted ship the size of the stadiums we watch esports in now? Even when we load a videogame and get the message “Finding Server” (and inevitably blame lag), why is it so tricky to imagine that the precious metals used to make the servers’ circuits were mined out of the earth by colossal machines and dusty miners toiling in the dark thousands of feet below? Why, once the game loads and we start to smash keys and buttons furiously, do we forget our monitors, mice, and GPUs are manufactured by people wearing itchy clean-suits, and who probably play videogames on their phones during lunch break?



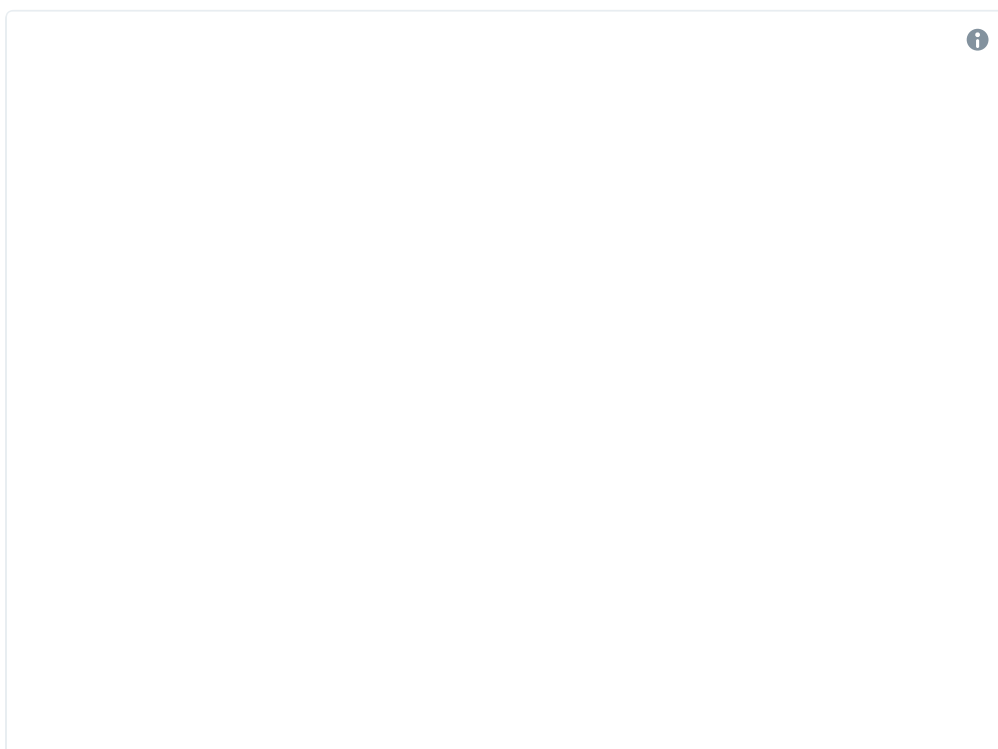
Part of this split from our bodies is clearly historical. There is a long tradition in the West of splitting mind and body, equating those two sides with ideal and imperfect respectively. This philosophy can be found in Adam and Eve’s fall from grace, in Plato’s world of forms that are inevitably corrupted when they become part of the world, and in Descartes’ declaration “I think

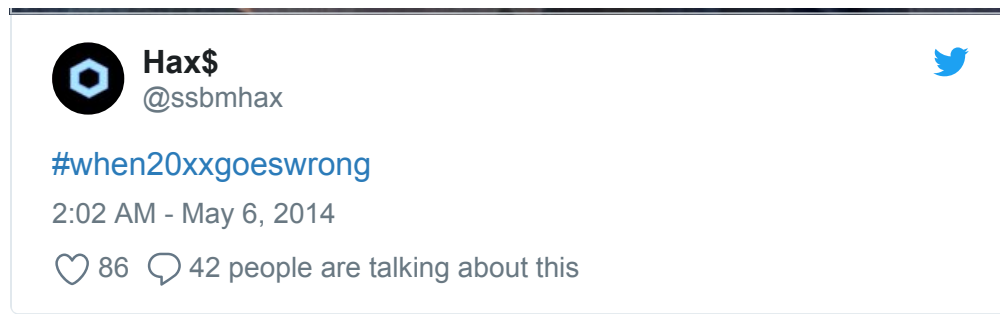
therefore I am.” In Western philosophy the individual mind is a place of purity and wonder, and the actual physical embodiment of the world is corrupted and imperfect.

The specific kinds of injuries tell a hidden story about the intentions buried deep within each game.

However, there is another, more contemporary dimension to this fixation on the internal and mental aspects of videogames. If you look at the innumerable injuries sustained by top stars in every sport you would be correct to conclude that injuries are just a passive part of any high-level athletics pushing to the edge of our human capacities. But If we look at the kinds of injuries that happen to basketball players, who tear up their knees and ankles, versus baseball pitchers, who destroy their shoulders, we can see that there are direct links between the kinds of injuries players of a sport sustain and the game they are playing. Each parameter, rule, and technology of a game leaves specific kinds of marks on the human bodies that play it, and videogames are no exception.

But the specific kinds of injuries tell a hidden story about the intentions buried deep within each game. At the most extreme example, it is hard not to wince while watching two helmeted behemoths slam together and get a concussion, the game stopped for a stretcher for the third or fourth time in a single game of American football. Indeed, combating concussions and brain injuries has become a huge battle in football, with politicians and celebrities weighing in regularly. But this physical carnage has to be viewed in the historical light that in its early days people regularly died during college football play.





This is disturbing, but unsurprising given that American football was developed as a way to prove the toughness of children to their Civil War veteran parents who had experienced untold bodily horrors. What then might the specific injuries common to videogames tell us about the history of how they came to be mistakenly viewed as primary happening in our minds, free from the rest of the world?

Of course children don't use esports to prove that they are tough enough to take over the family business from their war-scarred parents. But if we look at the specific physical damage caused by esports and by playing videogames, we can quickly see we are talking about injuries that are the same as those of the modern office. Carpal tunnel, RSI, eye strain, posture problems, and the like are injuries common to both the people who spend all day in a cubicle typing and clicking to populate spreadsheets cells as office work, and those videogame players that use the data from those same spreadsheets to perform as an esports.

The clear link between the office worker and the videogame player is that both "intellectual" labor and "electronic" sport end up defining the specialness as coming from their mental, not the physical, work. Whether it is lionizing Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg as geeks-done-right, or hyping esports as the future of sports, we also are tacitly reiterating the myth beloved by geeks that that mind-work is better than, and incompatible with, physical work. The matter is compounded even further by the way that the professional spaces in videogame fandom outside of making games, such as writing, video production, and cultural studies, are the products of the university and media, other places that just as much take pride in their status as intellectual labor.



 ZOOM

Professional LoL team SKT following their 2016 world championship win. (Photo: [Riot.](#))

We can see this push to associate esports with cutting edge digital technology in the continued dominance of Korea in many top esports. From the very beginning of esports' rise from small LAN events to global popularity, the Korean government and business leaders have used esports as a symbol of their country's future-forward transition from lower-tier manufacturing to a rising star in the first world technology market. There should be no surprise the top teams in Korean esports are mostly funded by telecommunications companies.

This insistent push to prioritize the intellectual, the visionary, the disruptor, the creative, the digital, the venture investor, and ultimately the ideal over the real, has a major flaw that we've seen [played out repeatedly](#). This version of intellectual idealism imagines the world as completely abstracted and disembodied, which can be a very seductive proposition because it imagines that everyone is free to think whatever they want and that everyone will be judged simply by their ideas alone. But again and again we see just how few people are truly free to inhabit this magical realm of pure thought, whether it is through the almost complete lack of people of color and women startup CEOs in tech, or the equally conspicuous lack of professional people of color and women in American esports.

It is easy to forget about the specifics of having a body when you are young, rich, well-educated, healthy... [It] isn't as easy for everyone else.

To put a fine point on it, it is easy to forget about the specifics of having a body when you are young, rich, well-educated, healthy, white, straight and male living in a penthouse in San Francisco. But that ability to forget that your head is more than a container for your brain, and that head rests on a neck, which is part of your living, breathing, body, isn't as easy for everyone else—people who don't have those qualities that tech tends to assume are the American default.

A clear example of just who is and isn't allowed to conveniently ignore their bodies in favor of abstract ideals is highlighted by [Omari Akil's](#) chilling account of the possible implications of forgetting he has a specific body, which is in a specific place, time, and culture, while while walking circles while playing the ubiquitous *Pokemon Go* when he "...started combining the complexity of being Black in America with the real world proposal of wandering and exploration that is designed into the gameplay of *Pokemon Go*, there was only one conclusion. I might die if I keep playing."



League of Legends 2016 World Championships. (Photo: Eron Rauch.)

When as a community we hyper-focus on some idealized, purely mental relationship with videogames (whatever fashionable academic or technical form it might be claimed from one

week to the next) we inevitably end suppressing the very thing that give our experiences with videogames impact and meaning.

By ignoring context, by ignoring the specifics of each player and their bodies, by pretending videogames don't exist as part of the world, we are ultimately actually claiming that videogames don't matter. That is, the old cliché, "It's just a game," implies that videogames don't change the world, that the world doesn't influence videogames, and ultimately that players of videogames are impotent to act on the "rest" world since nothing they do or experience with games "matters," to highlight both definitions of the world.

Esports injuries don't solve anything, nor are they badges of honor.

Esports injuries don't solve anything, nor are they badges of honor, but these physical marks are a frank reminder that you can't just split our experiences with videogames into an idealized pixelated heaven far above the world, and our passive bodies somewhere in the mud down below. Videogames, their ideas, their code, their hardware, their players, their fans, their critics, all exist in the world, are shaped by it, and shape it in return. Being part of the world gives games potency, but also implies that videogames and their players have a responsibility to the world because they have the power to change it.

Take a moment and look at your mousepad (or your trackpad, or touch screen). See if it has "Made in..." sticker on it. Picture what that place looks like. Now put the pad back down and click your left mouse button and feel the slightly strain on the bottom of your forearm. Feel for the muscles on the top of your hand as you release the button. Drag your mouse across it and feel the friction. Feel for those flat spots used slightly more that are a tiny bit more glossy. Look at the dirt at the edges. Feel if one of you mouse feet is dragging a tiny bit more. Feel where the mouse buttons are worn flat, and try to imagine what the original finish felt like. You too shape the world with videogames and are in turn shaped by them.

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Disclosure: League of Legends developer Riot and Zam share a corporate parent. Riot has no control over our editorial and was not involved in any way with the direction of this article.

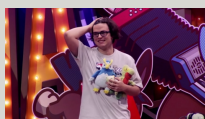
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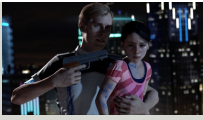
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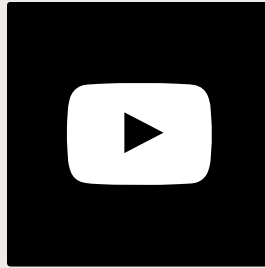
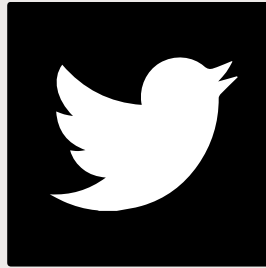
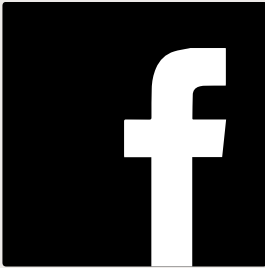
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