Sketches of Greatness: why do esports excite us so much?

Opinion

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Esports fan love recalling great plays by their favorite pro gamers, but what's the science behind it?

Shadows roil and a ninja brandishing a spiked gauntlet appears from nowhere directly beside a wounded mirror image of himself. Only distinguished by their red and blue health bars, they both disappear; reappear suddenly further away. Whirling metal flies and tears. One of the ninjas catches fire. They both disappear into the shadows again letting fly another round of blades. The ninja who was wounded at the start appears a fraction of a second later, sneaking into the nearby woods, while far away the tattered corpse of his assailant lies broken on the ground. The camera cuts to a closeup from the game to disbelieving face of Ryu, KT Bullets' midlaner, as the casters scream "What was that!?!?!"

It was 4AM Pacific Standard Time, and I leapt up from my chair, knocking it over. The cat sprinted for the door as I thrusted fists thrust over my head to celebrate Faker. There was screaming coming from my neighbors' kitchen in the next apartment building over: "FAAAAKKKERRR!!!! FAAAAAKKKKERRRR!!!!" I had never talked to them, and didn't even know they were fans of the game, but at that moment just before dawn we both simultaneously celebrated what we all knew was one of the truly great plays, and players, in the history of *League of Legends*.

Let's pause my late-night celebration dance for a moment. Esports fans, much to the inevitable eye-rolls of exasperation from their non-fan friends, constantly wax poetic about notable esports moments big and small. They describe them in loaded terms usually used to discuss the rise and fall of civilizations or masterpieces of art: greatest, best, classic, infamous, beautiful, tragic, amazing, and inevitably, epic. Certainly, that particular play by Faker (and that series as a whole) has been heralded with all of those hyperboles in the years since it happened. But what was going on that made this particular moment so meaningful to the countless fans who have watched it?

My question is two parts: First, why do so many people, myself included, find watching these great moments in sports so intensely meaningful? Second, are these "great" moments of moving digital characters around a virtual space just another generic part of sporting history, or is there a specific uniqueness to moments of esports greatness that can show us something the evolution of sports fandom in the information age?

Let's start by looking at one of main ways that researchers have historically made sense of our odd obsession with sports: as a search for stories. We do this even in abstracted games, since as Celia Pearce noted, "A good game, even one without an obvious 'storyline' (or metastory), while being played, will tend to follow something that resembles the emotional curve of a dramatic arc... To the spectator, this translates into a performative drama which the viewer experiences in the third person, but which also has an equal amount of dramatic impact."

ZOOM Ryu in the moment following Faker's dramatic play.

We can certainly see a classic dramatic arc in Faker's victory: At the smallest level, Zed vs. Zed is a matchup that rests on knife's edge, and by somehow winning that duel from a heavily disadvantaged start, Faker showed that his physical skill and nerve was light-years ahead of anyone else. The story gets more dramatic when you consider the world outside of the game: Ryu and Faker were rivals, inconclusively battling for months to lay claim to being the best player in the world. The chance to play the identical character against each other was the fairest way to settle the rivalry they would ever get. This story is even more impactful because the duel happened really late in the game, and Faker's unprecedented success directly led to his team winning the game. Which to top off the hype, was the deciding game in a best-of-5-series for the Korean Championship.

So yes, Faker's Zed play was a moment greatness because it tied together classic narratives of skill, rivalry, victory, and celebrity. But these patterns are rather universal. We could substitute almost any tense playoff moment in sporting history into these frameworks and get a fairly similar impact. So if we want to say something about "great" moments in esports specifically, we need to look at the problem from another angle.

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A second classic theory about why fans love great sporting moments like this one is called Basking in Reflected Glory, or BIRGing. It basically says that humans like to attach themselves to the successes of other people to boost their own self-esteem. The bigger the success of the person or group we cheer for, the better we feel about ourselves. BIRGing, and its opposite, CORFing (Cutting Off Reflected Failure, which is claiming not to have an investment in a team, which a regular part of the life of North American *LoL* fans) are a fairly uncontroversial, having been proven and re-proven in research studies since the 1970s.

While useful to explain all sorts of fans' emotional attachment to their favorite teams and players, BIRGing is a generalized, subjective theory that applies to more than just sports. It can be used to discuss everything from politics to branding to friendship. So while BIRGing makes those of us rooting for Faker feel better about ourselves when he wins, BIRGing also fails to clarify what makes this great moment in esports different than a home run in the 9th to win in a World Series.

A third major theory about why we respond to watching sports is that our bodies physically respond to watching other people. This happens because we all have these really curious things called mirror neurons. When we see someone doing something, mirror neurons make our brains react by firing a lesser amount of those same sorts of neurons that we would use to do that exact action. So when we watch sports, our brains are also playing along in a very real, physical way.

This stimulation happens even for sports we're not proficient at but which use common physical motions, since as Le Anne Schreiber extrapolates, "even if we have never played football, more of us have at least 'broadly congruent' experiences of running, tossing, catching, and evading the attack of large men who want to harm us." As she explains further, if you're an expert player, your body will even do incredibly weird things like subconsciously firing the neurons to correct for subtle fine motor mistakes you're seeing when you watch sports.

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Here, we're finally confronting something particular to esports. When I first recounted the duel between Faker and Ryu, I described what was being shown on the Twitch stream. My description was mostly drawn from the animated actions of two 3D models of ninjas spinning and throwing and striking each other on the steps of a glowing castle. That digital fantasy then abruptly cut to a video camera feed from the very real sweating face of the player with the screen name Ryu, sitting in front of a computer, wearing headphones, looking like he got his ass virtually kicked.

But when I watch this clip, am I mentally mirroring the pirouettes of the ninjas, or am I mirroring the motions on the keyboard and mouse (and perhaps even sitting at a desk)? Which begs the questions, are Ryu's mirror neurons firing in response to his characters moves on screen? After all, our mirror neurons must be firing when we play videogames, since one of the tells of a novice at first-person videogames is that they physically lean when their character peers around a corner.

I've been digging around forever, and I still can't find a straight answer about what your mirror neurons are doing when you watch a crouching man creep through a train yard and make a lucky shot made through a cloud of smoke intercut with footage of a player sitting at a keyboard pumping their fist (such as is common in streams of *Counter Strike: Global Offensive*). What is happening with our bodies when we see a Protoss Zealot walking along a floating space platform then footage of the player's

hands along with an APM count (in *StarCraft 2*)? Similarly, what gets mirrored when we watch the classic Daigo parry sequence, with a flurry of kicks met by a muscled arm, all with a picture-in-picture of people sitting in front of a TV in a beige conference room with chunky controllers on their laps (*Street Fighter*)?

This overlapping of digital and physical performances might even illuminate specific nuances of how narrative arc and BIRGing interact with esports. Normally, when we BIRG, we are doing so with a player or team. But in the case of watching Zed Vs Zed, we could ostensibly be a fan of Ryu, but still be BIRGing because we are a Zed main, and seeing Zed win makes us proud. Or it could get even more complex, like in the case of a videogame like *StarCraft* which has a massive backstory both in game and through other media. We could we both BIRG and be enthralled with an epic narrative arc of the Protoss, while watching a Protoss player perform a minuscule section of that grand tapestry—all while getting mirror neuron feedback from the charging legs of Zealots and the images of keys clattering under fingers.

This all creates a rich layering of sortswhere we have the possibility to engage with and evaluate greatness in an esport at multiple levels at once. If that sounds abstract, let's talk about physical sports for a bit. Let's say you're watching a really exciting football game between the Atlanta Falcons and the New York Jets. When you watch the screen, you're seeing a bunch of burly guys mashing each other into the fake grass while chasing a ball, not hybrid human-avians having their feathers ripped out by anthropomorphic aircraft. But in esports, watching virtual bird-people beat the crap out of an actual plane (Quinn Vs. Corki in *LoL* is that exact matchup) is pretty standard on Twitch, even as the stream cross-cuts to the players furiously clicking and screaming into a microphone. In this way, esports have a theatrical aspect that is like the story aspects of professional wrestling match mixed up with a meta-story of incredible physical and mental prowess.

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Yet, the reason we call moments of esports great isn't simply because of BIRGing, narrative arc, and mirror neurons. The fourth fundamental theory about why games are so meaningful is as Michael Stevens puts it, because "life is a game, but winning and losing are nebulous, so we invented simpler games to provide psychological rewards faster and more efficiently than life itself." We define those simpler games through arbitrary restrictions called rules. In many ways, one of the peaks of any sporting greatness is creativity within those rules.

When we talk about the greatest of the great in sports—those people and moments we call genius— researchers Treresa Lacerda and Stephan Mumford point out that we think so highly of them because "Their creativity, originality and innovation brings value to sport, sometimes simply in terms of beauty... and at other times in terms of more contemporary aesthetic categories." In his eloquent love letter to S*uper Smash Brothers Melee*, scholar and fanatic Captain Falcon main, Ian Danskin talks about how this applies to videogames and esports directly. The best *Melee* players push the game to new places, "interested not just in what the game wants to do, but what the game is capable of. It's akin to taking a game's rules and making a new game out of them. This makes *Smash* creative in a way that a more controlled fighting game generally isn't."

ZOOM Leffen (right) beats Mango at APEX 2014 (photo via rmpaul.com)

Danskin's insightful observation that creativity is some sort of freedom—the ability to make new rules from the game's basic rules —is something we often call metagame in esports. If "creativity" is a big part of how we define sporting greatness, then it makes sense that the most popular and lasting esports all exhibit a vast complexity in their rules that allows for an equally vast creativity to make new metagames. *DotA2*, *Counter Strike*, *StarCraft*, *League of Legends*, and *Smash Brothers* are all notorious for being simultaneously infinitesimally arcane and overwhelming complex. I'm willing to venture that complexity almost beyond human comprehension is a prerequisite for greatness in esports. Indeed, most great plays in esports, like Zed Vs. Zed, are notable precisely because they push to the very edges of the complexity that is possible for a human to accomplish when interfacing with a computer.

Which brings up the elephant in the room: the computer. You see, when we talk about rules and creativity as part of greatness in sports, we're talking the way athletes engage with arbitrary restrictions that make up the game. But even looking at simple game like solitaire, Michael Liebe points out, "the computer adaptation of the game transforms the theoretical restrictions into practical ones... Not even the surface on which the cards are laid out is a free choice." Videogame development expert Chris Deleon gets directly to the heart of the matter when he notes that in videogames: "What often get mislabeled as 'rules' are not rules at all, but

rather ways of referring to the constraints and possibilities of that artificial universe. the world 'rule,' in such a usage, is being used as a metaphor..."

If this sounds like a hyper-technical argument, here's an example of how this seemingly minute philosophical detail about rules and laws plays out in regards to what we call "great" in sports and esports. Let's talk for a moment about figure skating. You aren't allowed to do a backflip in professional figure skating, but many people consider Surya Bunaly's performance of that exact move to spite the judges at the 1988 Olympics to be a great moment in sporting history. But in a videogames, if there isn't a backflip option programmed into the game, you as a player can't do one. Simple as that. The whole reason backflips are outlawed is that falling during a backflip can be catastrophic for a figure skater, and the maneuver is incredibly risky. Which is why Bunaly's backflip was cheered as a massive middle-finger to judges many felt were underscoring her because of her race. Whatever Faker did to Ryu, it was very differently great than Bunaly's illegal backflip.

Here's another example of how this difference between rules in sports and esports ends up having massive practical value for discussing greatness in esports, especially in regards to creativity and genius: When a player like Bisu radically alters *StarCraft* history with a creative new build, like he did versus Savior at MSL 2007, what we really mean is that the creative player has discovered a flaw in all the other players' mental modeling of the laws of the game. In esports, the revolutionary player gets praise for having noticed a previously overlooked but pre-existing aspect of the game's code. But when Fosbury creates the Fosbury Flop, which revolutionizes the sport of high jumping, he isn't finding something in a footnote of the rulebook that lets him avoid physics and magically jump higher—he is seeing an absence of rules which he then fills with whatever he determines works better. At the most basic level, the first version of creativity subtracts from the remaining possibilities left in comprehending the laws of a videogame, while the later version of creativity adds new possibilities to perform the game.

That isn't to say that both aren't a form of greatness, but rather that we are valuing different things as great in each of them. If we really want to be able to define greatness in esports, we have to know what exactly makes Bisu's or Faker's play so amazing and meaningful, and that means trying to define exactly what they has achieved, to be able to clearly see what has happened, and to be able to describe it with precision. And the computer is a big part of that.

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After all, why would this be so strange? We judge classic moments in games of chance like poker, differently than in non-chance-based games like chess. We talk about great moments in a boxing match far different than than in hockey, which also often has fist fighting, but for a very different reason. We talk about the placing of Go pieces differently than curling, despite the fact they both use oval game pieces. We certainly treat greatness in technologically focused, but still physically intense, sports like car racing differently than sports that rely primarily on large muscle group movement like distance running, despite the shared oval track. So why should we keep pretending esports is the just another generic sport?

Indeed, whether it is the multifaceted narratives, the hybridized BIRGing (or CORFing in NA), confused mirror neurons, or the complexity of creativity in computerized games, what seems to come out of all my research and thinking is that esports are similar to sports, but also something subtly different. Esports are certainly part of the lineage of gaming and sporting culture, but they also have new and novel aspects. They are a hybrid of sport, game, and information technology usage. This isn't to say esports are lesser or greater than any of those things, but rather, they are an emerging new category that needs a new, precise, vocabulary to explain its most profound moments.

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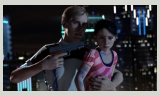

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