How much esports should we watch?

Opinion

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by Eron Rauch

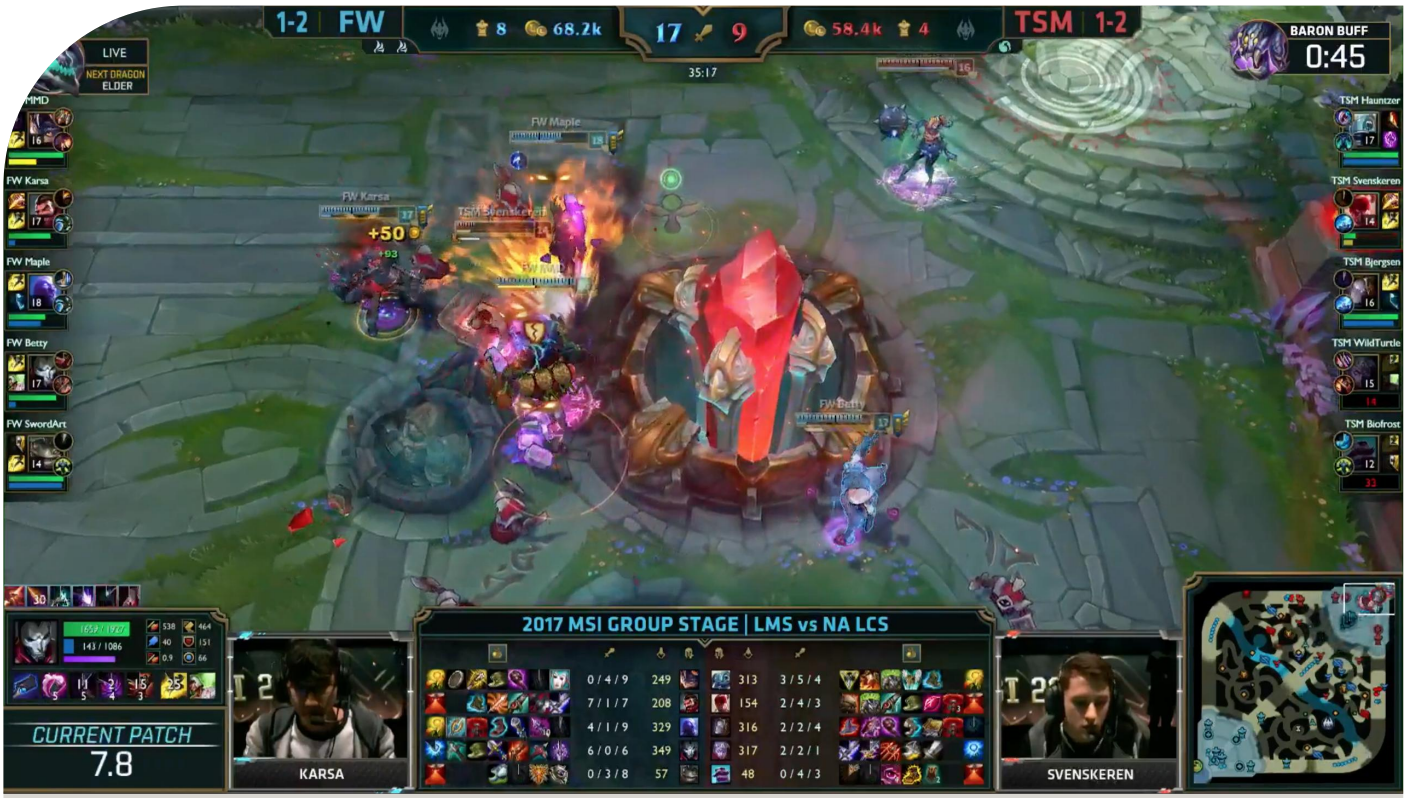
With gameplay videos and streams more popular than ever, how we manage our media diet becomes an important issue.

The other day, while skimming through VoDs for the recent *League of Legends* Mid-Season Invitational for 2017 (MSI), YouTube worked its typical seductive magic on me. Like an algorithmic Vanna White, the site waved me toward a new, high-profile *LoL* show about the success and failures of the tournament. Well, don't mind if I do waste a few minutes, or 40, or an hour and 40...

The show was pretty typical video podcast fare, with four folks in headphones ranting at each other: about Korean players trashing North America's performance; asking if fan favorite players were overhyped; and whether it was an exciting tournament or a bland flop. Other than the

pleasant surprise that the panel defied the typical testosterone pit of esports and had 50/50 split of men and women, there was one subtly shocking moment: the analyst for Riot casually admitted he hadn't really watched most of the games in the tournament. Another panelist, a journalist who was covering the event, also mentioned he didn't catch many of the games.

They both had reasonable excuses—the analyst was at a wedding and the reporter would, for obvious reasons, have a hard time interviewing players while they are in the midst of a match. Nonetheless, the four of them plowed through almost two hours of expert punditry about the tournament and other scene news.



ZOOM Two teams face off during the Mid-Season Invitational group stage.

Initially, I was kind of pissed off. This was a professional production by a large media brand watched by lots of fans of the most popular esport in the world. I mean, every other global *LoL* tournament took a hiatus so Riot could run this massive official tournament, so if you're going to get paid to talk about it, at least watch the damn games, right?

But as I got thinking about it further, I had to face the unsettling issue that I wasn't really sure what the "correct" number of games from MSI would have been The tournament featured 78 games by my count, which means even if you skipped everything ancillary except pre- and post-game, you would be look at nearly 80 hours of airtime to consume. And MSI's gauntlet was

paltry compared to other major esports tournaments like *DotA2*'s The International 2016 with its 278 games.

In this current explosion of esports video coverage, how is a fan to decide what is worthwhile to watch? Leaving aside the various fine-grained arguments about the positives and negatives of watching any given sporting match that I've covered before (like BIRGing, CORFing, and mirror neurons) at a macro-level, I'm not even sure if I've really ever thought it through myself. What would make for an ideal amount of esports watching?

To start, it's important to remember that there are a lot of ways and reasons to watch esports. SKT's research staff is assuredly watching VoDs of games from future rivals in a very different way than I do when I use those same games as background noise while I clean the house before a dinner party. (Hell, pretty much the only reason I even bother to host esports viewing parties anymore is as an excuse to make Josef Centeno's "super nachos".)

ZOOM Scene from the 2016 *League of Legends* World Championships. (Photo: Eron Rauch.)

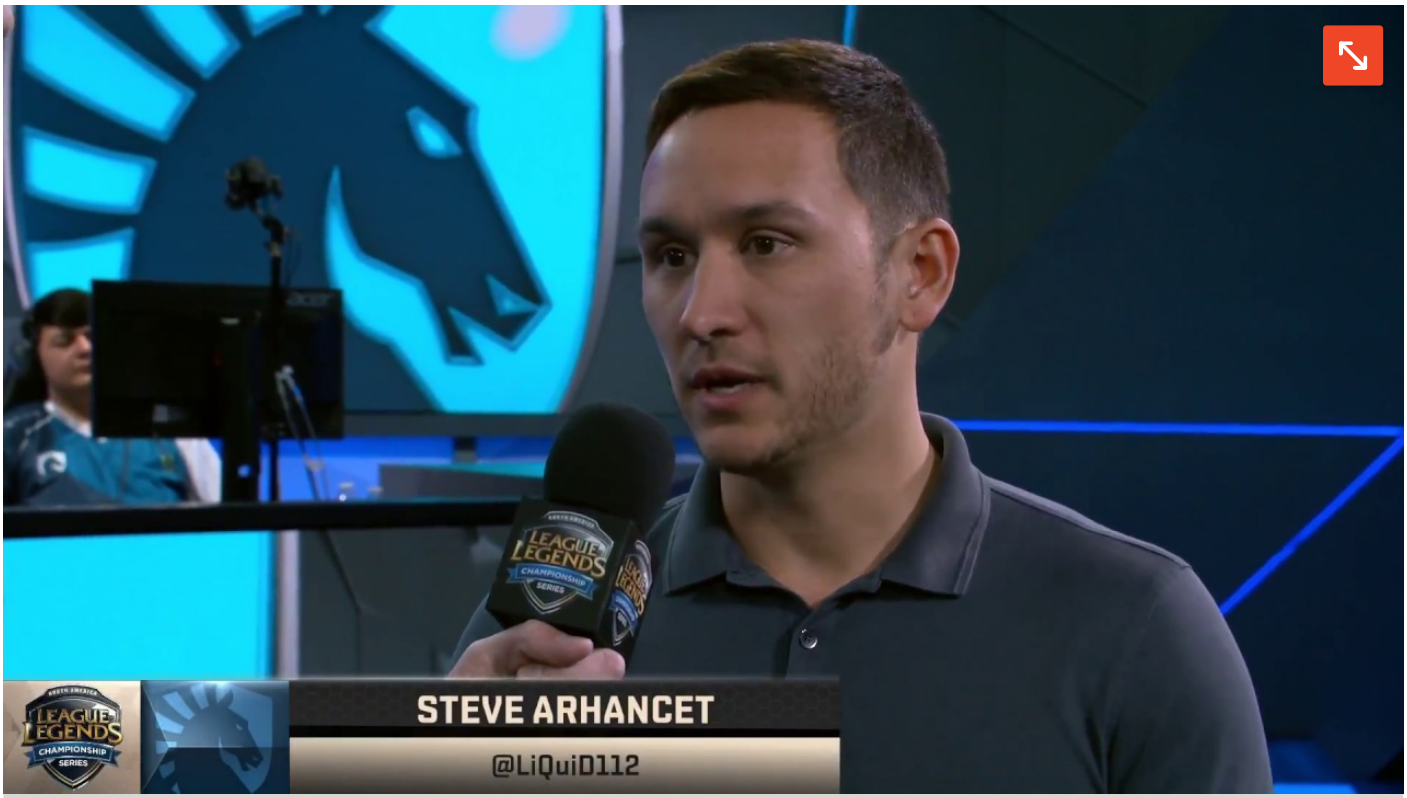
Maybe it would help to go back a bit in history to try to figure out how this tsunami of esports content came to be? My memory is fuzzy, but at some point in early 2013, Blizzard started their WCS regional system (inspired by *LoL*'s LCS system in 2012). The English language casters, Tasteless and Artosis, were talking about hot players and builds, and with the shock that comes from unexpected novelty, both realized that for the first time in the years they had been working together, they didn't know what match the other was talking about. The reason: neither had time

to watch all of the various WCS leagues' numerous weekly games. The was first time I ever heard someone complain about there being too many esports to watch.

Before that, almost all esports were played as isolated weekend tournaments. There would be brief flurries of activity around major Dreamhack or ESL events, with small online and local LAN tournaments filling the months between. You could easily rewatch every major match a dozen times between big events.

The exceptions were the Ongamenet Starleague and the KPGA Tour, two early professional *StarCraft* tournaments which started the whole esports-as-entertainment phenomenon in 2000 and 2002 respectively. They featured with laser light shows, cheesy rock music, and players dressed in sci-fi costumes. But these tournaments were only available as Korean-language cable television. Before streaming video sites, I think I might have seen two bootleg VHS copies of top games recorded from Korean TV and shipped overseas. These were cherished objects, eventually worn out from repeated plays, pauses, and rewinds from *StarCraft*-obsessed friends in America.

What a different a world we live in today: Riot has about 100-150 professional *League of Legends* games per week just within the five company-sponsored premier leagues, all available in VoDs on multiple platforms. Given there is only 168 hours in a week, that means all but the most sleep-deprived die-hard fan has to drastically triage their viewing schedule. And all of this makes no space for actually playing the game.



Team Liquid CEO Steve Arhancet interviewed on-camera during the LoL Championship Series.

If making way more content than your fans can ever hope to consume seems counterintuitive for the game companies, the recent interview on Rift Herald with Steve Arhancet, CEO of esport titan Team Liquid, sheds some light on the companies' motives. He states that franchise systems common in all other sports are happening so late in esports because Riot was, "more concerned about the actual product, the league itself and how far reaching and engaging that was." That is to say, Riot was foremost interested in trying to see how far it could grow its company's product's reach. Which makes sense, when Arhencet notes bluntly that, "when you grow something to a certain size, you want to find out how much that thing is worth."

For those of us who work with esports as a job, whether as a developer, player, broadcaster, or a member of the media, it is easy to mistakenly project our full-time relationship onto the ideal way to engage with esports. We all work with it 40+ hours a week, so the news reports' video feeds inevitably reflect that skewed relationship.

All through this, both game companies and media are trying to do their job, which is deliver eyeballs and ears to advertisers. As *Sports Illustrated* reports, outside of the games themselves, a huge percentage of the current valuation of the esports media market "comes from advertising and sponsorships—71% (or roughly $350 million), to be exact."

But if each aspect of the industry has its own reasons for producing a torrential outpouring of content, what are ordinary fans supposed to do to have a healthy relationship to the glut? As Kali Holloway observes, drawing from Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi's 2003 study on TV consumption, "viewers' vague learned sense that they will feel less relaxed if they stop viewing may be a significant factor in not turning the set off. Viewing begets more viewing."

Similarly, as Monica Carmaker and Jessica Sloan Kruger point out on *The Guardian*, "media influence and social acceptance of binge-watching were found to be significant predictors of self-reported binge watching." A 2008 Princeton study also concluded that, as summarized in *Psychology Today*, "the more 'controlling' the [media] clip—in other words, showing the viewer exactly what they're supposed to pay attention too—the more focused the audience."

What community is more enthusiastic about long sessions, with the very advertisements between games proclaiming the value of extra-supportive chairs and chemical-laden energy drinks? What media could possibly be more specifically targeted than watching thousands of HP numbers for the perfect frame to steal the ultimate prize in contemporary *LoL*, Barron Nashor, and set the audience aglow? Esports are perfectly tuned tuned to create closed, infinite loops like these, demanding your attention at every waking moment.

Moreover, we are constantly under external pressures to stay where we are, submerged in a never-ending stream of content like a digital River Lethe. Talking about quitting sports (and esports) fandom, or even scaling back a bit, is entirely taboo within communities that paint their faces and get team logo tattoos. We've twisted the meaning of the old saying "quitters never win."

ZOOM Top-ranked teams SK Telecom T1 (right) and G2 Esports face off in the 2017 MSI finals.

One of the only people to publicly discuss leaving sports fandom has been *The Atlantic* Senior Editor John Swansburg. He targets these new, digital, multivalent media empires which entice fans to over-consume as partially to blame for his burnout. "Please don't mistake me for some fuddy-duddy who longs for the days of reading box scores by the wood burning stove," he pleads, "these new ways of following sports have made it easier for a casual fan to slip into Big Fan territory."

I, too, have been quite public about watching a lot less esports lately. Which is why I rethought my initial reaction to that show I'd watched. As Swansburg pointed out, "There is also the issue of return on investment. The games are relentless, the experience of them too often ephemeral... For every historic game I've seen, there have been hundreds of uneventful ones I can tell you literally nothing about."

At MSI, of the many dozens more games I watched than the pro analyst, a month later, can I even remember one that stuck out? I sort of remember G2 beat SKT in one game, but no, I can't remember what happened aside from the G2 midlaner killed Faker a bunch. And by "a bunch" I mean like two or three times. Other than that, all I have are some hazy memories of a weekend indoors, and an echo of Thom Yorke's blistering accusation of the content-ification of the music industry: "What is this 'content' which you describe? Just filling of time and space with stuff, emotion, so you can sell it?"

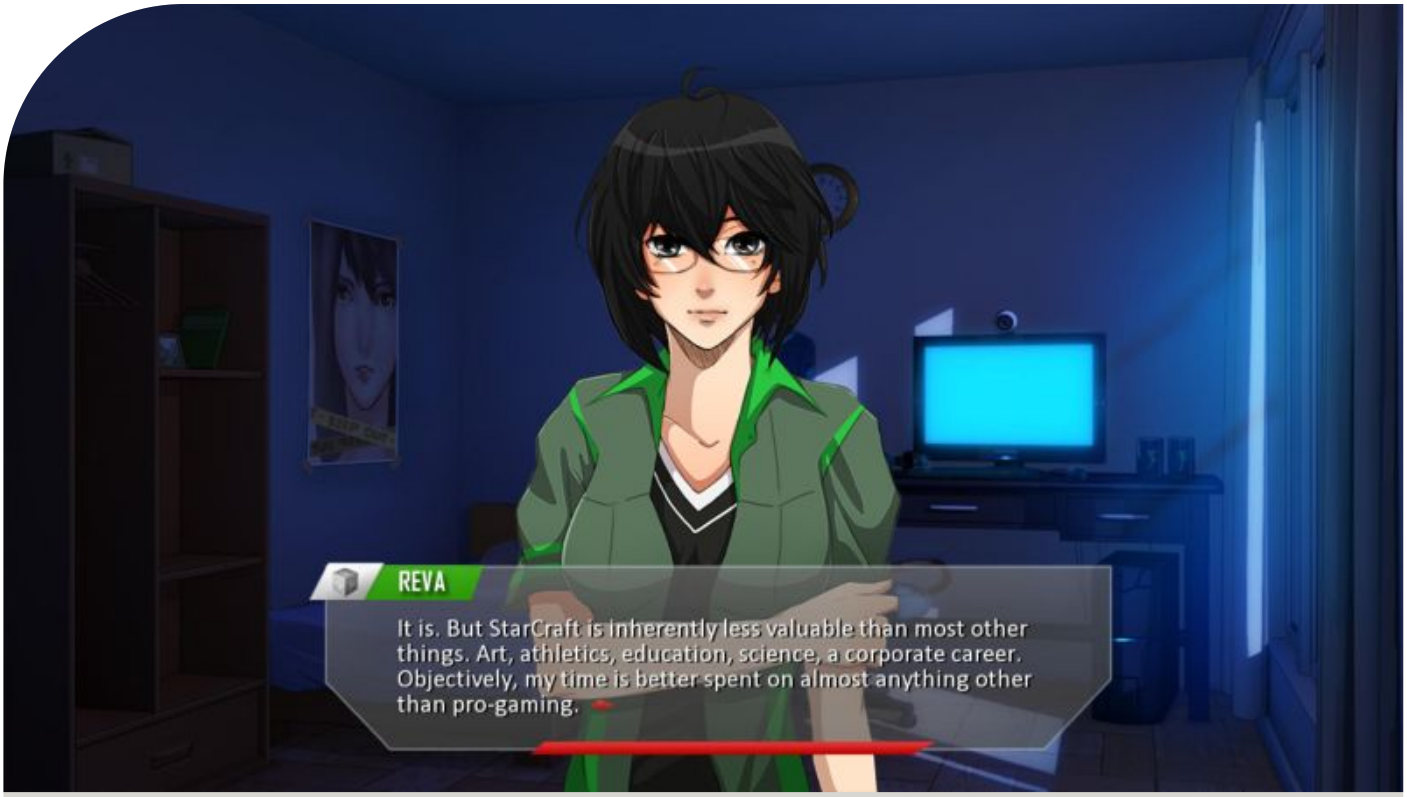
But there is a strange caveat when we criticize esports binging. Esports is fairly unique compared most sports, in that fans become viewers mostly through a contemporaneous relationship to playing the game. That is, most fans of esports start playing the game, then start watching pro play as part of their learning experience. You can see this clearly whenever a novel new strategy gets play in the LCS, you will see it spammed on the ladder that evening as all the fans give it a whirl. Wanting to see how the best played (and what I could steal from them) was why I started watching pro *LoL*. It was a very active sort of watching, with a pencil and notebook at my side.

ZOOM SKT midlaner Lee 'Faker' Sang-hyeok has been called the 'Michael Jordan' of *League of Legends*. (Photo: Riot.)

Part of esports' exponential growth is born of this practical relationship of viewing and playing. Recently, LCS broadcast have included position-specific streams, where fans can listen to seasoned pros discussing specifics practical details. It would be a bit like a baseball game that only showed the pitcher and had pitchers talking through the nuances of what was happening for other pitchers to learn from. And these kinds of targeted streams feel very different than binge watching a bunch of nearly indistinguishable games.

It reminds me of a recent article by author author Katrina Onstad, who on the subject of leisure and lasting contentment recounts some advice from sociologist Robert Stebbins: "The weekend goal should be 'eudaemonic' happiness, which is a sense of well-being that arises from meaningful, challenging activities that cause you to grow as a person. This means spending your weekend on a series of leisure activities that require the regular refinement of skills."

Of all the strange places to see this somewhat academic advice framed in a straightforward, this is the heart of the simply titled *StarCraft 2 Visual Novel*. The visual novel moves the player through a first-person account of a young, unfocused, character with the screen name of Mach trying to become a professional videogame player in Korea. One theme that comes up over and over against is this idea that challenging yourself, even if the outcome is failure, is the only way to live a life true to yourself.



ZOOM *StarCraft 2 Visual Novel* (SC2VN) tells the story of several young aspiring pro-players.

If you've read this far, you know that my goal here is not to try to convince you to stop watching esports. But doing research for this article, one of the simplest but most useful maxims I read regarding our relationship to watching media was the seemingly counterintuitive "Choose to watch TV!" Which makes more sense as they phrase it again as an action: "What do I *choose* to do for the next hour?"

As tournament season approaches, there will be more and more chances to slip under the waters and be passively carried away by the flow of content, thousands of hours of videos, streams, and commentary. But there will also be innumerable chances to have an active relationship with your hobby. I encourage you to challenge yourself in some new way while watching your esports of choice: if you cook, host a viewing party and make a new, tricky, dish to share with your friends; if you want to improve, pick top players in your position and create a schedule of their games to watch with a notebook at hand; or hone your broadcasting or writing skills by picking a couple specific topics and analyzing them. There are hundreds of games coming your way this week, and hundreds more the next. Fans always bag on developers to let them have more meaningful choices in their games—let's apply that same fervor to the way we watch esports.

Disclosure: ZAM and League of Legends *developer Riot share a corporate parent. Riot has no input on ZAM's editorial.*

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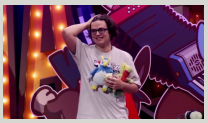

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