We should pay more attention to esports losers

Opinion

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by Eron Rauch

Esports are glorious tragedy machines. Very often, stories about imperfect, unsuccessful players are a lot more exciting.

Our society exalts winners for their hard work and banishes everyone else—the losers—saying, "no one remembers second place." Heaven help you if you're third or lower. This fixation on the lone victor is especially true in the stories that we tell about the young contestants who are gladiators in the digital coliseums of esports. But if we take a broader look at the media coverage of these increasingly-popular events, this trend of hyper-focusing on stories about heroic victories ignores many of the most potentially compelling and relevant parts of esports competitions.

The very infrastructure of popular esports such as *League of Legends* and *DOTA 2* is set up to produce the a singular winning team and vast swaths of "failures." Teams battle through leagues and tournaments, then the best of those teams attend the League World Championship and The International respectively. These events, discussed in the pages of the *New York Times* and on-air with ESPN, are each watched globally by tens of millions of people. They all also have one trophy; one winner. A recent *StarCraft 2* tournament, the ancestor of all modern esports, took this fixation on winning so far that the event featured $100,000 as the top prize, with every other player trudging home through customs with their battered keyboards and exactly zero dollars. The pressure to win first place is so high that even second place finishes, which often also come with many millions of dollars of prize money, have caused teams to explode with mass firings and even led to the complete dissolution of organizations.

The fundamental fact is that all sports competitions are erected on a foundation of failure. Even the best players inevitably make mistakes. Even the best coaches continuously play ambiguous odds and guess at probabilities. Every tiny misstep usually leads to catastrophic failure. Additionally, it is often events outside of the competition, far beyond the control of the competitors which determine the outcome of high-stakes events. Whether it is massive tragedy, such as the death of a beloved owner that emotionally devastates a team right before a major tournament; or something banal, such as a delayed plane flight leaving a player with only a couple hours to sleep in a hotel lobby prior to a match, these stories are just as integral to esports as any victory lap. Indeed, failure is a major facet of every amateur player's experience with competitive games if simply because matchmaking systems actively work to make sure everyone's win and loss ratio is close to fifty-fifty! Esports competitions, whether in a grand stadium or at our Ikea desk, are tragedy machines.

But what might we do with this surpass of tragic stories? Even though the coverage of esports tends to be obsessed with the victor, long-time fans of these events have a secret: slickly produced events that fixate on the winner aren't very interesting. In fact, perfect victors often produce the most unbearably boring games to watch. The official Korean *LoL* broadcasters DoA and MonteCristo regularly take this boredom-of-perfection as their target for ridicule as games slowly wind to their inevitable, bland, conclusion. If the most perfect wins are often considered to be the most boring, games which are chaotic, scrappy, and imperfect are conversely discussed amongst fans as some of the most exciting and charming to watch. By focusing on rigid perfectionism, many modern events even ignore the very history of esports, which grew for decades through sheer amateur passion and raw DIY spirit. These early esports broadcasts were filled with technical imperfections and wacky personalities, and resembled late night public access television far more than any modern Olympics opening ceremony.

Contrary to the dismissive saying that "no one remembers second place," in the recent *DotA2* International, one of the most compelling and remembered stories is actually about a team who only managed to tie for seventh and eighth place. Unlike most other esports where they dominate, Korea has almost no presence in *DOTA 2*. MVP is a team that fields two small squads, the awkwardly named HOT6ix and their sister team, Phoenix. They have limited practice space, very little staff, and no local professional league. Compare this to some of the European and Chinese teams where players can have dozens of teams wooing them with offers of million-dollar salaries and a bevy of support staff, personal trainers, and coaches. Yet, MVP Phoenix, a team of relative unknowns, managed to squeak out messy, heated victories against a number of higher profile teams at the beginning of the tournament. Filled with mistakes and risky gambles that sometimes backfired, Phoenix's matches were intensely exciting and had plenty of content that the audience could relate to both emotionally and technically.

But what is perhaps most amazing is that even as the crowd cheered, everyone knew Phoenix's run was invariably going to end in failure at the hands of one of the mega-teams filled with virtuosos. While initially lauded simply for their unexpected victories, something far more interesting was building as the fans discussed Phoenix. Rather than simply tracking the winner of the match and leaving Phoenix as ashy road kill, the *DOTA 2* community fixated on this story, retelling over and over the story of a team that lost badly. It was clear that in the eyes of the fans, these unprofessional misfits, more than newly-minted millionaires, captured the true spirit of esports. Even though they didn't win, Phoenix broke the rigid way that people typically talked about the tournament, and expanded the field of view past the lone peak of the victor, to include all of the breathtakingly vast and diverse vista of stories that constituted the whole of the event.

Far from being an abstract concern, the continued focus on only the sterile stories of esports tournaments' winners is perhaps one of the greatest threats to their continued growth. The problem of producing compelling narratives has been particularly prominent in recent *LoL* Worlds finals. This tournament remains the most watched esports event in the world, but for the last three years it has featured disappointingly bland one-sided series. Yes, there were some spectacular highlight plays that boggle the mind with their virtuosity. But if the various viewing parties I've attended are representative, aside from a highlight supercut of those three-or-so minutes of footage with dubstep blasting behind it, the most interesting part of the remaining three hours and fifty-seven minutes of the broadcast was the time we spent eating nachos and sharing cat photos on Instagram.

In terms of real numbers, the viewership for *LoL* exploded rapidly until 2013 where 32 million people watched Korean powerhouse SK Telecom crush China's Royal Club in a lopsided match. But despite a massive surge in popularity of the game itself, viewership for the pinnacle match

dropped almost 20% in 2014, when Royal lost in another blow-out to a newly formed Korean superstar team, Samsung White. 2015's World Championship finals match, where SK Telecom once again trounced their opposition, had just above 2013 levels at 36 million viewers. This stagnation is particularly noteworthy when you consider that during this same time span, an ever-growing audience has started tuning in to the rag-tag, raucous romp that is the video game streaming site Twitch. Filled with broadcasts riddled with glitches, self-mocking jokes, failures, mistakes, and a giddy lack of perfection, Twitch casts often closely resemble the primal days of esports. For comparison, the ludicrously imperfect and hilariously infamous DIY experiment "Twitch Plays *Pokemon*" netted around 36 million views in 2014.

Many of our culture's favorite sports stories, from the old standby "Casey at the Bat" to more modern movies such as *Money Ball* or *League of Their Own*, end with the main protagonist failing to win. Though it seems counterintuitive to tell stories about competitions that don't focus on the winner, as David Wong over at *Cracked* pointed out one of the main reasons that the current bevy of superhero films are so often forgettable is that they have very little narrative tension because the heroes ridiculously superior to the villains. Michael Moorcock, writer of the Elric books and a perennial favorite of video games fans, put this sentiment another way when he argued for writers to feature more flawed protagonists: "You're appealing to a fallible reader, giving them a fallible central character to identify with." As esports professionalize and as ever-more people watch video game broadcasts, learning to tell a wide diversity of stories, such as tragedy and comedy, are critical to esports' continued growth, maturation, and relevance. After all if you're anything like me, sitting on a couch in a stucco apartment eating a frozen pizza after a long day at work, you most certainly have more in common with the imperfect.

Top image: Helena Kristiansson.

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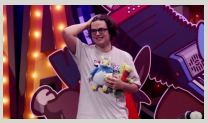

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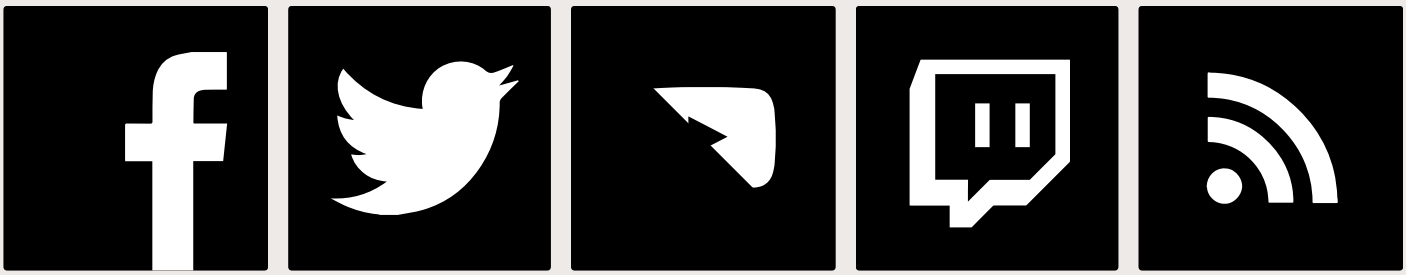

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