The next century: some thoughts on the future of esports

Features

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Sometimes, we forget how young esports are-- and how much they could change in the future.

My grandfather, Herman, was a Chicago Cubs fan his whole life. He'd watch their games in his living room when he could, often turning them off mid-game if the Cubs were winning because he was stressed they might throw the game away. He also listened to thousands of hours of games on portable AM radio over the decades while driving tractors in concentric loops through the fields, milking cows, or shoveling steaming silage for the animals to eat as the summer faded to fall. It was traditional in my family: he raised my uncles and my mom to be Cubs fans. His sadomasochistic hereditary support for Chicago's favorite losers was always expected of me as well.

Even though a handful of top esports have pushed into the public consciousness, compared to Herman's lifetime support of the Cubs, we are in the very earliest history of esports. One of the greatest difficulties about being a fan of esports at this moment of incredible mainstream success is to keep some perspective about just how young and how incomplete the scene still is. With the hyper-slick Olympics-like productions we now see from major events like *League of Legends* World Championships, it easy to

get lost in the hype and mistake the current ways we we watch, produce, and play esports as totally resolved and immutable. Yet these mega-spectacles are only three or four years removed from the rag-tag, DIY, amateur history of esports.

At turns cheering, swearing, and trying to write some clever words to make sense of all this newness, I occasionally find myself taking a breath to remember how Herman's fandom started in elementary school, when a relative brought him a souvenir mini-bat from the Cubs' loss in the World Series of 1929. For reference, 1929 precedes the earliest commercial television broadcasts in the United States by ten years, when Franklin Roosevelt's address from the 1939 World's Fair was broadcast. Esports have a long road ahead of them.

ZOOM The 1929 Cubs

While a few massive games groom themselves to look inevitable for mainstream acceptance, there are still numerous games and communities where you can get a glimpse of just how nascent the esports scene really is. Whether looking at a big-budget company trying desperately to position a new game in the upper tiers of esports, or an indie game subtly tinkering with the relationship between players and viewers, outside the A-list, the possible challenges and delights that will come in the future are on clear display. Unlike the role of fandom that is enshrined with my family's support of the Cubs—esports are still still highly malleable. Industry leaders don't necessarily have it all figured out: esports will change in the coming century and we can see this moment as a unique opportunity for us fans to be participants in the creation of our fandom. No matter how slick this new *DotA2* International might seem, the games, the rules, the infrastructure, the media, the fandom, are all in rapid flux. This esports fringe is where many of the slick, stuffy, and seamless practices of the games are absent, giving us a chance to look at the inner workings of this new sporting culture. The fringe is a place where we can peek at some of the challenges and complexities of what is assuredly going to be one of the next century's major sporting fandoms.

Consider the money involved, for instance. At sports bars around the country one common conversation topic are the increasingly massive sums of money involved in traditional sports. With billionaire owners, multi-million dollar player salaries, and billion-dollar sponsorship arrangements making news each day, it is only fair to guess that these complex issues will also accompany the growth of esports. But in comparing some of the history of traditional sports and the issues with how video games try to promote themselves as sports, it is clear esports have a uniquely strange relationship with money and advertising.

The newest game from Hi-Rez Studios, *Paladins*, shows just how thorny the relationship between esports and money is becoming. During the recent *Smite* championship tournament (an established esport game also from Hi-Rez), they also hosted $100,000 "Founder's Invitational" tournament for *Paladins*. All that money, enough to put the tournament in the upper tier of global esports attention, was for a game in closed beta testing. The audience was basically an auditorium of empty folding chairs. This was clearly a spectacle for online viewers—a long commercial in the form of a tournament.

While major companies like Riot try to present the game and the sport as if they are separate, amongst the ruthless crowd of companies trying to make the next game to be as successful as *League of Legends*, there is no attempt to hide the fact that tournaments and esport leagues are considered a major way to promote a new game. My grandfather's fandom was started by a tiny souvenir bat, and people watch the Superbowl to see the silly advertisements, but those impingements of money into sports seems quaint compared to the current esports scene, where the sport itself and the purchasable product are one and the same.

ZOOM This year's Dota 2 International

Rooting for the Chicago Cubs is attaching yourself to a place; or at least an idea of a place. Whether one is watching on TV or in person, the games are played between two teams anchored in specific cities or parts of cities. Few rivalries are as fierce as between teams like the Cubs and White Sox, which are from two very different socioeconomic neighborhoods in the same city. In 2016, New York fans still hold it against the Dodgers for moving to Los Angeles from Brooklyn in 1957!

Yet a vast majority of esports tournaments take place online with the competitors scattered at their desks throughout the world. The main hub for the broadcast located in a bedroom with green-screen background. Like the non-place of a hotel lobby bar, esports take place the fluorescent-lit international twilight hour of the internet. In the early *Heroes of the Storm* casts, only watched by a few hundred people, this hazy space was occasionally punctuated by a technical glitch or the family pet wandering through the studio. But without an attachment to place and time, can there even be a multi-generational history of fandom?

World of Tanks, which features large battles between teams using historical tanks from different countries, suggests that part of the future of esports might be tied directly to our past. When interviewed for the recent WGNLA Season 2 finals (the most important tournament in *World of Tanks*) many top competitors mentioned that what drew them in was an interest in the historical aspects of the game; particularly military history and an interest in the World Wars' technology. From a more fictional standpoint, some of *Mechwarrior Online*'s appeal seems to be in exploring the long lineage of the *Battletech* sci-fi universe. This narrative history loosely inflects everything from visual style to the different win-conditions to unit restrictions in the popular fan-run MRBC League.

While Major League Baseball is the organization that governs all teams competing in the World Series, there are two sub-organizations in baseball with slightly different rules for their respective teams, the National League and the American league. Without getting bogged down in that boondoggle of history, it is interesting that *Smite*, technically one of the larger esports, may have recently stumbled on a very unique difference between organizing traditional sports and esports by starting a second league

for its game called simply Console League. This is a separate tournament for people who play the game on a console instead of a PC. But Console League has far smaller prizes, less involvement of top teams, and exponentially less viewers than the main (PC) league. Other than *Call of Duty* and fighting games, there are almost no major console-based esports leagues, and nothing that resembles the massive success of *League of Legends* or *DotA2*.

Should we actually talk about esports as "desktop-PC-esports"? It seems as though desktop computers exude legitimacy for esports in a strange way that has thus far eluded console systems. But while I have no interest in stepping into the PC-master-race mud pit, it is worthwhile to ponder what this focus on PC-based games might mean for the future of esports player demographics. If graphics demands in high-end games continue to rise and if a passable gaming computer continues to cost more than $1,000, will esports remain primarily a pastime for middle- and upper-class audience? Will the incredible processing demands of potential virtual reality esports further the gap between PC esports and consoles?

Even as PC esports dominate the mainstream, much like the quiet revolution in game sales, the phone and tablet revolution has quietly been making forays into the world of esports. *Clash Royale* and *Vainglory* are both pushing the boundaries of professional competition for mobile devices. Unlike the digital card game *Hearthstone*, itself a wildly successful mobile esport (but still played on PC during tournaments), these games are not turn based, but trying to add elements of the real-time strategy genre into the mix. *Clash Royale* just held its first major tournament this April, with a 10,000-Euro top prize. But the future for these games are still uncertain since unlike grabbing your your sibling's mitt, finding a communal bat, and an empty street or lot, but the accumulation of micro transactions required to be a competitive *Clash Royale* player can cost well over $20,000.

Meanwhile, there has also been a tremendous boom in indie game esports. These indie esports exist in the media landscape in a much different way than bigger, monied competitions and tend to be played in local clubs or as part of online videos. For instance, many millions of people have watched games of *Towerfall: Ascension* (the forerunner of indie esports) played on YouTube. But the format for these competitions have typically been to bring in four internet celebrities/personalities/comedians as players to shoot each other with comic arrows for a couple hours while cracking jokes. There are at least three separate shows with this same format on YouTube, each with ratings that dwarf any actual competitive *Towerfall* tournament.

These reality-show flavored gaming shows, whether streamed or pre-recorded, have driven the popularity of platforms like Twitch and YouTube. But their success begs the question of how we will define the difference between entertainment and sports in the future. Under the helm of Chloe Lister, the IndieCade 2015 esports panel discussion brought up many of these questions directly. The speakers suggested that the line between "game" and "sport" seem to be blurring, especially in spaces like Twitch where amateurs and fans are simultaneously playing video games and performing for an interactive audience.

This trend is only likely to be more pronounced in future indie video games designed to specifically cater to this dual role of competitor and actor. Developers are increasingly savvy at building tools so this new player-performer can communicate with their audience from within the game. Rather than seeing these new hybrids of sport and performance as inferior or impure, they might better be seen as alternative ways to enjoy esports outside of the massive monolithic single-game spaces like *League of Legends* or *Counter Strike*.

Looking broadly at esports broadcasts and fandoms, we can identify one general trend that has also affected traditional sports: diversity of fans, players, and staff. There are some, but still very few women, people of color, and LGBT voices represented at all levels in the public face of esports. Even the small amount of diversity in indie esports highlights how much less diverse mainstream esports in America tend to be. They are still almost exclusively played, created, and commented on by males, most of whom are white and straight. As America grows more diverse, the demographic of baseball fans is shrinking to be primarily be men above retirement age. Women in traditional sports continue to be paid and promoted far less than their male counterparts. Can esports be the future century of sports if it fails to include the huge diversity of people who can, will, or want to play esports?

While we are cheering at our desks for our favorite teams to come out victorious in digital battle, it is important for to avoid mistaking these early iterations as anything close to maturity. Remember: the spry young gents from Cincinnati Red Stockings were the first openly professional baseball team, taking to the field with their handsomely groomed mustachios in 1869. My grandfather would become a fan of the sport some 60 years later, with the rabble-rousing medium of television revolutionizing

sports a decade after that. Moving forward another 90 years, the Cubs are back in the running to finally break their World Series curse. It is easy to celebrate the rumors that ESPN wants to broadcast *League of Legends*' Championship Series as a major success for video game fandom becoming mainstream. But MOBAs are only ten years old. We are young and have much to learn.

When you think esports creators and fans have it figured out, imagine another me, writing another version of this article about my great-grandfather's support of Cloud9 in 2160. We still have a great deal of work to do if we want to build an esports community that will continue to thrive through the next century.

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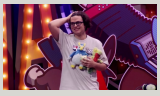

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