An Exploration of Mental Skills Among Competitive League of Legend Players

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ABSTRACT

ESports, also known as competitive video gaming, has seen tremendous growth over the past few years. Several studies have been conducted that examined the potential cognitive benefits of playing video games, but few have examined the psychosocial factors needed to perform at the highest level of competitive video gaming. In this study, the researchers aimed to identify specific mental obstacles players face and any mental techniques gamers already utilize by conducting a qualitative content analysis. Interviews with five high-level competitive League of Legend players were conducted to shed light on their experiences. The interviews resulted in two high order themes. Those high order themes were the following: techniques used to achieve optimal performance and obstacles encountered by competitive gamers. The data collected can be used by a wide population in both the performance psychology field and the eSports realm, more specifically, future mental skills consultants working with League of Legends players, gamers themselves, and academics who wish to serve, improve, or study those involved in an emerging performance domain.

KEYWORDS

eSports, League of Legend, Mental Challenges, Mental Skills, Optimal Performance, Performance Enhancement, Performance Psychology, Sport Psychology

INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The video game industry as a whole has been growing rapidly. Lately, the industry has seen a legitimate professional community arise. In fact, international competitions and six-figure contracts are no longer just a fantasy for video game players. Certain video games have become highly competitive performance domains offering fame and fortune comparable to traditional sports (e.g., football, basketball, soccer). Thus, more gamers are partaking in high-level competitions regularly and becoming competitive, professional video gamers. ESports is short for "electronic sports" and are defined by Morris (2013) as "organized video game competitions that pit world class players against each other for cash prizes" (Gamers Are Not Only Athletes, para. 2). ESports are commonly compared to traditional sports or physical sports (e.g., Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Ferrari, 2013; Jones, 1998; Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2012).

League of Legends is one of the most popular video games in the world and is played at a highly competitive level. In fact, on October 29th, 2016, two teams battled for the World Champions title and

a total prize pool of just over five million dollars (Howell, 2016). League of Legends is a five player versus five player (5v5) video game that is played on the computer. It is classified as a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game as opposed to games classified as first person shooters (FPS) or role playing games (RPG). MOBAs typically consist of two bases that serve as objectives and lanes that make up the battle grounds in between the bases. The objective in League of Legends is to take control of the opposing team's base and destroy their Nexus (a crystal). There are five roles that determine various factors of play, such as characters (referred to as champions) you can fight as, personal goals and objectives, and positioning on the map. The five roles are bot (short for bottom lane), jungle (an area between the bases), top (short for top lane), mid (short for middle lane), and support. Each role requires a different skill set to play at a competitive level. For example, some roles require players to deal a high amount of damage to the opposing team, whereas the support role is tasked with healing dying allies or boosting their team's abilities. Each player must execute their role in a coordinated effort to defeat the opposing team. Professional matches can last anywhere from 20 minutes to over an hour.

As of late, eSports teams are being housed together with coaches, managers, and strategists. Sponsors are investing more money and the crowds are growing thicker. With the level of competition rapidly increasing, it is only natural that there is a high demand for performance enhancement strategies. Companies like MMO Coach (https://www.mmocoach.com/) offer online one-on-one strategy and mechanics coaching to eSports players in various games, and Game Without Pain (http://gamewithoutpain.com/) offers nutrition, diet, and exercise programs designed for enhancing eSports players' training routines.

Despite the rising recognition of eSports performance enhancement techniques, performance psychology's effectiveness in eSports has yet to be studied. Sport and performance psychology is widely accepted as a method to improve the mental side of performance in many domains such as sport, dancing, acting, law, medicine, business, and high risk occupations (Hays, 2009). However, there is very little literature available on the mental side of competitive gaming.

Most of the literature has been focused on studying the effects of gaming either socially or cognitively, and studies were not designed to examine how to enhance performance. Additionally, the literature that does exist on gaming fails to differentiate competitive, video gamers, from casual or recreational gamers. This presents a large gap in the current understanding of high-level performance in eSports. To bridge the gap, the current researchers aimed to get an understanding of what competitive gamers experience mentally. Exploring the mental skills that competitive gamers possess and utilize is an important stepping stone to integrating sport and performance psychology effectively with this population.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relationship Between eSports and Traditional Sports

As eSports have developed, literature has been produced drawing comparisons between traditional sports and eSports (e.g., Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Ferrari, 2013; Jones, 1998; Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2012). Similarities in the two arenas may be an indication that sport and performance psychology can be applied to eSports. While there is debate about eSports being considered "traditional sports", previous studies have drawn clear parallels between traditional sports and eSports.

Ferrari (2013) proposed six conditions seen in traditional sports and argued that eSports fits them all. These six conditions are listed below:

1. Their rules and spatial layouts demand a high level of performative play, typically developed through many years of testing, modification, and refinement
2. They have been around long enough to see the rise of expert practitioners with skills sufficient to reliably separate their play from that of casual players (Ericsson 1996, 10-13)

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