

The game of watching games: gamifying and monetising esports spectatorship

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Keywords

esports, spectatorship, gamification, Twitch, streaming

INTRODUCTION

As esports has rapidly grown, so too has its viewership. Beyond consumers of esports content, esports spectators often perform valuable labour for esports organisers (T.L. Taylor, 2012). Although research has identified ways that spectators at the site of play generate value for broadcast esports (Szablewicz 2015; N.T. Taylor 2016), we know little of how online audiences are used by esports broadcasters to add value to their content. Research into online live streaming and the relationship between streamers and their audiences demonstrates the value that viewers can generate (Siutila 2019). In this paper we observe how remote audiences generate value for esports organisations through their spectatorship. Focusing on Blizzard Entertainment's *Overwatch League (OWL)*, we observe how the spectating experience has been gamified to generate monetary value. Literature often focuses on employees as the subject of gamification; how business may employ game design elements into work activities to motivate employee performance, as well as the ethics and morality of such methods (Kim 2018). In this paper we extend this notion towards esports audiences.

Audiences have long been the subject of commodification. In the classic example under Smythe's audience commodity theory (Fuchs 2015), the labour of television audiences' ability to "pay attention" is sold to advertisers, producing value for television networks. Other research has identified different ways that audience labour is harnessed. In the context of esports, Szablewicz (2015) describes how physical audience presence was manipulated at a Chinese esports tournament, playing an integral role in the production of spectacle in the event's mediated broadcast. This was done to the extent of having a physical audience only present in the stadium during the opening and closing ceremonies. N.T. Taylor (2016) echoes the notion of the esports audience as spectacle. Looking at two esports events in 2008 and 2012, he describes changes in how organisers "audience" spectators. Spectators at the 2008 event were treated additionally as participants, their labour being their competitive play as co-players which produced the event's content for online viewers. In 2012, spectators were demarcated from professional players, with the spectators' visual presence being harnessed in the portrayal of the event's spectacle for remote viewers.

Fans spectating *OWL* on Twitch generate value in a more direct manner. Spectators can "cheer" for their favourite team using Twitch's propriety currency, "bits", which can be purchased in a minimum increment of 100 for USD \$1.40. "Cheering" using bits takes the form of special ostentatious messages in the Twitch chat that express

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2020

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support for the purchaser's team of choice. Spending greater amounts of bits creates more bombastic messages, transforming a regular cheer into a "megacheer". The expenditure of bits on cheering is also tracked and used to unlock a range of achievements, exclusive Twitch chat emotes, and virtual cosmetic goods in the user's linked *Overwatch* (2016) account. These achievements are tiered so that the greater expenditure of bits unlock further rewards, with progress towards these achievements being prominently presented on the Twitch viewer interface. Users also gain a tiered badge next to their names in the Twitch chat denoting the number of bits they have spent cheering. Existing research indicates that the collecting of badges is an effective incentive stemming from their recognition from other participants (Grant and Betts 2013)

A sense of competition is fostered between fans using cheering to quantify support. Prominently featured in the Twitch interface are leaderboards showcasing fans who have spent the greatest number of bits on cheers and the teams that have received the greatest amount of cheers. Here, fans are not only motivated to express support as individual fans, but also as a part of a greater collective team effort. The pressure of collective contribution is heightened through community challenges (Huber and Hilly 2015), where the combined cheers of each fan contribute to the accomplishment of communal achievements, unlocking virtual goods for every participant.

Ultimately, *OWL* demonstrates how the work of expressing one's fandom and support for their favoured team can be harnessed and directed to generate value. Blizzard and Twitch employ the widely used "points, badges and leaderboards" triad to track, quantify and competitively rank expressions of support (Werbach and Hunter 2012). Although engagement with the gamified system is voluntary, it devalues other displays of support. Cheers feature more prominently in the Twitch chat than conventional expressions of support and contribute to a quantified measure of one's fandom. For a spectator's identity as a fan to be recognised and conveyed to others, the cheer system offers a highly visible and officially sanctioned outlet. Consequently, the acquisition of badges and achievements from spending bits on cheers constitutes another resource from which spectators and fans can accrue gaming capital (Consalvo 2007). In turn, Blizzard and Twitch benefit from the sales of bits, foster fan engagement with *OWL* and develop a sense of connectedness through progress towards collective goals.

BIO

David Cumming is a PhD candidate in the Interaction Design Lab at the School of Computing and Information Systems, the University of Melbourne. His PhD research focuses on the spectatorship of esports and the factors influencing esports consumption. He comes from a media studies and journalism background, having previously studied at Curtin University.

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