

Tilt in Esports: Understanding the Phenomenon in New Digital Contexts

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past half-decade a surge in the prominence of psychological training and wellbeing has transformed the landscape of competitive esports (Bányai et al. 2019), but one prominent factor has received hardly any research attention despite being a widely acknowledged problem in esports: “tilt”. The concept of tilt has been defined in unrelated contexts (such as problem gambling) as a state of mental or emotional confusion and frustration which causes a player to adopt a suboptimal strategy (Browne 1989), usually resulting in over-aggressive play (specifically in poker, e.g., Palomäki et al. 2014). Despite widespread use of the term in the esports community, the tilt phenomenon actually arose outside of the realm of video games, and over the last three decades research surrounding tilt has primarily focussed on poker and Texas Hold'em (Browne 1989; Meyer et al. 2013; Palomäki 2013; Palomäki et al. 2014). Tilt may well be a construct universal to both gambling and esports, and although some research on tilt in esports is taking place, researchers have yet to clearly define tilt itself using empirical data. Further, the rapid growth of the esports industry has sparked demand from coaches and sports psychologists for research that expands knowledge on psychological factors in gaming, especially the application of performance-orientated improvements for competitive gamers. Therefore, we used a qualitative approach to better understand the construct of tilt and how it manifests in esports, including generating the first clear definition of tilt as it applies to this context. We adopted a phenomenological approach (Bliss 2016) and interviewed six experts in the field of esports, including a coach, an esports consultant, professional and semi-professional athletes, recruited across four countries (Australia, the USA, Finland, and China). Thematic analysis of interview data (Braun and Clarke 2006) enabled us to extract key themes regarding the construct of tilt in esports, including important facets like: conceptual differences from anger; how one's propensity to tilt

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may be influenced by personal characteristics; and tilt-inducing scenarios. A synthesis of these interview data enabled us to establish a clear definition of tilt as it appears in esports; a term that is so commonly used by players and yet poorly understood empirically. These new understandings serve an important role in emerging esports research, which to date has viewed tilt primarily through the same lens as poker, a vastly different game and social context. Key differences from the current (gambling-centric) definition of tilt suggest that tilt in esports moves away from concepts like loss-chasing (Browne 1989), and more toward the moral component of unfairness or injustice that underlie esports contexts. We propose that in esports indignation and frustration are specifically tied to the state of tilt itself, not just its aetiological trigger; these emotions are a constituent part of tilt, just as anger is a core component. Prior to our study, research has neglected to explore the overlap or differences between tilt and anger, and further, emotion in general has only recently been explored in esports contexts (Behnke et al. 2020; Kou and Gui 2020), with these prominent researchers calling for a better understanding of how emotions operate in esports. In addition, although problem gambling and esports environments both include potential for ‘griefing’, unlike poker the primary tilt-inducing actions of other players are not always intentional. Although it is considered common knowledge within the esports community that both allied and opponent behaviour can be a source of tilt (Himmelstein et al. 2021; Kou and Gui 2020), our study marks the first time that teammates are officially recognised in an empirically-established tilt definition. In fact, a recent survey even suggests that esports players are more likely to tilt because of teammates than opponents (Wu et al. 2021), and together this suggests that the social elements specific to esports (and how the context differs dramatically from other games) are only just starting to be explored. In conclusion, our findings provide the first definition of tilt bespoke to esports and answers the recent call for more context-specific athlete-orientated research, marking an important conceptual foundation for this emerging research area. There is clear demand for performance improvements in competitive gaming, but psychological research has not kept pace with the meteoric rise of the industry. Nascent research on tilt suggests that it is important because tilt compromises peak performance, but until now there has been no clear definition of the phenomenon itself. Our new understandings of the tilt construct demonstrate that tilt goes beyond just ‘anger’ and emerging empirical studies cannot simply rely on appropriating knowledge from vastly different contexts like poker and problem gambling research. Our new esports tilt definition lays the foundation for the nascent esports research field in their continual pursuit of Evidence-Based Practice, as coaches and sports psychologists search for new ways to improve athlete performance and wellbeing in the highly competitive world of esports.

BIO

Dr Sarven McLinton is the Director of UniSA HIGHER, the Healthy Inclusive Gaming, Hobby & Esports Research group. His research primarily revolves around occupational health and safety of esports players who must make a living in precarious employment and need to manage both psychological and physical risks of injury without the aid of formalised OHS supports.

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