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RSM 105

5 May 2016

### Electronic Sports as Religion

The “sport” of video gaming has become widely integrated into popular culture as it grows exponentially. Electronic sports is defined as:

“competitive tournaments of videogames, especially among professional gamers”

(Dictionary.com). It has even grown so much that electronic sports, or “eSports” for short, and the communities surrounding them can be considered religious. The rituals, mythology, ethics, and social elements surrounding eSports contribute to it being considered religious. These are some of the “six dimensions of religion” as outlined by Ninian Smart in *Worldviews*. All these factors contribute to the consideration of an element of popular culture as a religion.

Furthermore, to be considered religious, a religion must be able to fit in some of the categories individually, according to Smart. eSports and the eSports community has grown to a point where it fits into these categories.

eSports is ritualistic. On a daily scale, teams practice and play games against other teams constantly. There is no break – it is a team members full time job to keep up with the skill of other players and constantly improve. On the side of the community, the fans watch livestreamed matches of their favorite team(s), bet on games, and play themselves daily. Monthly, there are tournaments for the different games. In April, May, June, and July there are tournaments for

DotA 2, Super Smash Brothers and multi-game tournaments (ESPN). Yearly, there are usually world championships for the different games, where the best players from each country are recruited to play for that team and compete against the world's best players for the championship title. As for life-cycle rituals, a player will usually only play for a limited amount of teams. The way this works is very similar to how contracts work in regular sports. Teams will buy a player, and contract them to play for their team. If another team wants that player while they are still contracted to the other team, they can contact the team the player is currently contracted to and work out a buyout deal. If both teams agree, the player is transferred to the team that bought them. In many cases, after a player reaches a top tier team, they will stay there for the majority of their career, until they fade into obsolescence. Take the example of the Swedish Counter-Strike player Patrik Lindberg. He has only played for three teams in his ten years playing professionally, and all of them are considered one of the best in their region: Fnatic, SK Gaming, and N.I.P, which is his current team of four years. (Wikipedia). He is unlikely to play for another tier-one team in his lifetime. eSports is ritualistic in daily, monthly, yearly, and life-cycle aspects.

eSports also showcases its religious elements in its mythology. Mythology is considered to be the stories about something's origin. The first ever video game tournament was held by gaming company Atari for the game Space Invaders in 1980; this "attracted more than ten thousand participants" (Edwards). This tournament is considered the birth of competitive gaming. In the 1990s, the world saw the rise of PC gaming as a competitive sport. A few weeks after the first-ever first person shooter (FPS) tournament, Red Annihilation, one of the first major

gaming leagues was founded, CPL. In the year following Red Annihilation, the Cyberathlete Professional League was already “offering \$15,000 in prize money” (Edwards). The 1990s also saw the introduction of real-time strategy games, such as StarCraft, that require planning and careful thought in order to win the game as opposed to the focus on twitch skills and inhuman reactions of shooter games such as Halo and Counter-Strike. Beginning in the 2000s to now, eSports has really grown on a massive scale. “Major League Gaming (MLG)” (Edwards) originated in 2002 and is now the largest league of its type. It houses all types of games from the Super Smash Brothers series to the battle-arena style of games like League of Legends. In fact, eSports has grown so massively in recent that popular game developer of games like Counter-Strike and DotA, Valve, has committed to pitching in one million dollars to the prize pool of all Counter-Strike: Global Offensive “major tournaments” (Valve). Currently, eSports games and tournaments can attract over 1.5 million consecutive viewers, and that number is still on the rise. In addition to its growth, the community of gaming creates stories about the games, the players, and the possible better future. There is much community-made content that is shared on social media platforms and popular forum networks. However, this is a small part of the small mythological aspect of eSports. eSports has come a long way since the beginning, and still has a long way to go. Professional gaming proves it is religious due to its mythology.

Part of what gives eSports the religiosity it has is the code of ethics many players follow and that the tournament organizers enforce. Whether it be rules against cheating, or other ethical issues like match-fixing, gaming organizations are very serious about the rules being followed. For example, the Electronic Sports League (ESL) has a whole rulebook dedicated to their

competitions and how teams will be “penalized” if they fail to follow the noted rules (ESL One Rulebook). While the rules for the tournaments are outlined in the guidebook, Valve Software is also unafraid to lay down the law in ethical showdowns. Popular Counter-Strike player Hovik Tovmassian, known throughout the community for his jumping kills, was found by an anti-cheat system to be cheating. In accordance with this, Valve banned his team, Titan, from participating in the upcoming tournament that they qualified for. Hovik “confessed to having used” cheats in-game, and went on to claim that the disqualification was justified (Titan). Another example of moral ambiguity in the Counter-Strike scene comes from 2015, where players from organization iBuyPower were proven and eventually confessed to match-fixing what should have been an “easy match against NetcodeGuides.com” (Lewis). When evidence of the match fix was sufficient enough to incriminate the players, Valve stepped in once again and indefinitely banned six players from participating in any Valve-sponsored tournaments. A final example comes this time from StarCraft 2, where player Mykhailo Gaida was disqualified from a tournament in 2015 after tweeting that he would “rape” his competition (Blanchard). Competitive eSports organizations show time and time again that they are unwilling to stand for unethical behavior in their leagues, and will rule against offenders with an unforgiving iron fist. eSports is religious because of its ethics.

The final dimension of religion that makes eSports religious is the social aspect of it all. Popular social network Reddit is home to many official and unofficial groups that post constant updates and chat boards about their favorite games and professional teams. More than 2.5 million users are “subscribed” to pages about major eSports games (Reddit). This is not

including the regular users of these pages that choose not to make a Reddit account to subscribe to them. In addition to these forums that people can use to communicate and socialize with other players of the same game, there is also a popular streaming service called Twitch that many gaming organizations use to broadcast their games to many viewers. Viewers can chat in the built-in chat function to talk about the game with each other. The channels for the aforementioned ESL organization have accumulated over 2.2 million followers; these followers are notified when the channels begin broadcasting (Twitch). The community that has gathered around the eSports phenomenon is massive, and is only growing. These communities, mainly made up of other players of the same games, are increasing exponentially as the popularity of the games increases as well. Even in some of the larger games, players can feel like they are a part of something bigger than them with a large amount of other people who are just as passionate about it. They get to experience it in a more immersive fashion than if these communities didn't exist. eSports is religious because of its social components.

All in all, eSports is a wildly successful business that can only get bigger. The bigger the system gets, the more aspects of religion can be found in it. The things that make eSports religious are the rituals, mythology, ethics, and social components of it.

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