Challenges and Best Practices in Supporting Grassroots eSports Communities

Andrew J. Curley and Mark Nausha

Executive Summary—This thesis project intends to identify the challenges and best practices for video game developers and publishers working with grassroots eSports (“electronic sports”) communities. Competitive video gaming began several decades ago through independently run events, but the recent explosive growth of the eSports industry has caused a shift in attention by developers and publishers towards major professional events. Through a thorough literature review and interviews with experts in the eSports industry, the researcher seeks to identify methods in which developers can support grassroots communities and generate similar value to that of their professional counterparts.

Index Terms—competitive video games, eSports, grassroots event organization, community management

I. INTRODUCTION

ESPORTS and live streaming represent two of the most prominent rising trends in the gaming industry in recent years, constituting a new form of media with viewership numbers of certain events rivalling that of traditional sports broadcasts. Twitch.tv, the premiere live streaming platform for video games, is a massively influential eSports vehicle, with competition broadcasts attracting millions of viewers. As such, game developers and publishers have turned to eSports events as a marketing tool to generate brand loyalty, user acquisition and retention, and market advantages over their competitors [1]. This investment has subsequently created an eSports ecosystem of leagues, teams, sponsors, and platforms generating enough value to elevate competitive gaming past its grassroots origins and into the professional realm [1] [2].

As the global eSports market becomes increasingly crowded and competitive, grassroots communities represent not only a vital step towards elevating an eSports title to the professional tier, but also a source of valuable marketing and user retention in its own right. This thesis project serves as an exploration of that prospect. The researcher intends to utilize collegiate eSports organizations as well as the fighting game community (FGC), both prominent grassroots entities, as case studies. Through a comprehensive literature review followed by interviews with experts in various areas of the eSports value chain, the researcher seeks to identify the key risk points, challenges, and best practices for developers and publishers supporting the grassroots communities surrounding their titles. Finally, if time allows, the researcher intends to put this research into practice by organizing his own grassroots eSports event and reporting his findings.

II. RESEARCH REVIEW

Although the eSports industry has existed for many years, it has only recently emerged as an area of serious research. As such, a comprehensive body of literature is still forming. In the process of collecting resources to inform the methodology and content of this thesis, the researcher identified three subtopics: the current state of the eSports industry, the impact of livestreaming on eSports consumption, and a brief overview of grassroots eSports case studies. To collect these sources, the researcher consulted GDC Vault for expert conference proceedings and traditional search engines for emerging eSports studies, applying practical and methodological screening criteria to each in order to confirm their validity. In addition to the literature review, the researcher referenced prominent eSports titles from both the professional and grassroots scenes.

THE CURRENT STATE OF ESPORTS

Market researchers valued the eSports industry at $621 million in 2015 and project it to grow to over $1 billion by 2019 [2] [3]. Analysts at Newzoo eSports identified six rising trends contributing to this growth: 1) games as a service, 2) cross-screen entertainment, 3) creator & live streaming tools, 4) video platforms & communities, 5) creation & involvement among consumers, and 6) consumers entertaining other consumers [3]. As the list implies, the eSports market’s value chain is intricate and has many participants – publishers, teams, leagues, platforms, and brands – each contributing to the improvement of the overall user and audience experience [2].

Developers and publishers in particular have much to gain from investing heavily in eSports. For example, Valve Corporation hosts The International, the largest annual tournament for Dota 2 (developed and published by Valve itself) and leverages its Steam digital distribution platform to crowdfund the prize pool through in-game cosmetic purchase [4]. The most recent edition of The International awarded a total prize pool of $20,770,460, the highest in eSports history [4]. In addition to crowdfunding elements, the Steam platform allows Dota 2 players and fans to create and download custom

Andrew Curley is with SMU Guildhall, Plano, TX 75024 USA (email: ajcurley@smu.edu).
Mark Nausha is with SMU Guildhall, Plano, TX 75024 USA (email: mnausha@smu.edu).
content in the form of maps, alternate game mods, cosmetic items, etc., and players also have the ability to watch competitive games from within the game client [4]. Dota 2 merits study for this thesis for its unique community-driven features as well as its monetary success in the eSports market despite the fact that its greatest competitor, League of Legends, occupies 66% of the Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) genre marketplace [4] [5] [6].

According to a recent study by Newzoo eSports, the number of consumers worldwide that are aware of eSports is on track to surpass 1 billion in 2016, with 148 million classified as enthusiasts [7]. Though the eSports market is a relatively new area of research, the existing data on eSports viewer demographics is invaluable for developers and publishers. According to a SuperData Research report, the average annual income of regular eSports viewers is $76,000, with an average monthly budget of $200 for games, in-app purchases, and peripheral devices [2]. Furthermore, Newzoo analysts report that eSports enthusiasts are cross-platform spenders – 42% of regular eSports viewers downloaded a mobile game at least once per week in 2015 [3]. These consumer spending habits have directly led to the increase of brands and sponsors in the eSports ecosystem, which in turn supports the growth of leagues, teams, and events [1] [2] [8]. Interestingly, 40% of all eSports viewers do not actually play the games themselves, revealing a significant area of user conversion and retention for developers and publishers [8].

Another valuable Newzoo focus study is “eSports’ Share of Twitch Viewership & Top Genres,” published in April 2016 [9]. Twitch.tv currently stands as the most visited livestream platform for eSports content, with 475.5 million hours watched in Q3-4 2015 [2] [9]. Researchers broke this total content consumption pool down by genre, and MOBA titles constitute a strong majority with more than double viewership hours than its nearest competitor [9]. Notably, the fighting genre, supported by one of the largest and longest-running grassroots community, only constituted 4% of the total eSports content watched on Twitch, revealing both a significant problem space and potential market opportunity for developers, publishers, and leagues [9].

LIVESTREAM VIDEO AND ESPORTS

Since livestream video platforms such as Twitch.tv have emerged as the primary vehicles driving the growth of eSports, it is important to study the characteristics and potential of this medium. At the 2014 Game Developers Conference (GDC), data analyst Alex Leavitt gave a talk titled “TwitchPlayedPokemon: An Analysis of the Experimental Interactive Phenomenon,” and of the many topics he discusses within, of particular interest to this thesis is the data Leavitt collected on fan participation in the Twitch Plays Pokémon social experiment [10]. Through data collected in surveys, the two largest archetypes of participants in the game were “watch stream, input some commands” (59%) and “watch stream, don’t input commands” (19%), implying that Twitch Plays Pokémon is not so much a gameplay phenomenon as it is a viewership phenomenon [10]. Although the subject of this talk does not fall within the eSports platform, the principles discussed indicate a major trend in livestreaming that may likely impact grassroots events, especially with the advent of the “Stream First” initiative by Twitch to encourage developers to create games in a similar vein to Twitch Plays Pokémon [11].

Outside of this emerging field, the existing body of work on improving the eSports spectating experience relates to user interface (UI) design, such as the 2015 GDC talk “StarCraft II and GameHeart: Evolving eSports Interfaces with Modders” [12].
Following a postmortem of a Starcraft II UI mod by Ryan Schutter, MIT Game Lab data analyst Philip Tan breaks down the user experience of eSports spectators through the lens of traditional sports broadcasts, as well as televised StarCraft eSports events in South Korea, before concluding with five best practices: 1) balance aesthetics and compression, 2) illustrate invisible concepts of good play, 3) tell the story of the moment, 4) support unique individual commentator styles, and 5) build viewer excitement through timely delivery of information [12]. This talk is invaluable as a starting reference point for designing competitive games with spectators specifically in mind.

In a paper titled “What is eSports and why do people watch it?” by Juho Hamari and Max Sjöblom, researchers at the University of Tampere attempted to identify the motivating factors for spectating eSports, utilizing the Motivations Scale for Sport Consumption (MSSC), a widely accepted method for measuring sport spectator behaviors that identifies eight key motivations: 1) vicarious achievement, 2) acquisition of knowledge, 3) aesthetics, 4) drama, 5) escapism, 6) attractiveness of the athletes, 7) skill of the participants, and 8) social interaction [13]. The researchers collected 888 usable survey responses, and concluded that escapism, acquisition of knowledge, and the personas of the eSports athletes positively predicted spectating frequency [13]. Although further tests are required to confirm the validity of the MSSC outside a traditional sports reference frame, the overarching conclusions drawn through this data are valuable to guide the thesis research.

GRASSROOTS ESPORTS SUCCESSES

Despite the independent and often small-scale nature of the grassroots eSports movement, several entities within have achieved success and notoriety. For the purposes of this research review, the researcher intends to focus on the Evolution Championship Series, Tespa, and the Fireside Gathering program for Blizzard Entertainment’s collectable card game Hearthstone: Heroes of Warcraft [14] [15] [16].

The fighting game community is firmly entrenched in the grassroots side of competitive gaming, tracing its origins back to the arcade era [17]. In 2002, four fighting game enthusiasts launched the Evolution Championship Series without any outside capital or sponsorship, in the hopes of creating a centralized annual event for fighting game tournaments [14]. For fourteen years EVO has remained independent, awarding nearly $1 million in prize money over 133 individual tournaments [14]. Most of the titles showcased at the event are driven by the players and fans – for example, Super Smash Bros. Melee, originally released in 2001 and no longer supported by Nintendo, saw an 25% increase in player participation at EVO 2016 and a peak Twitch stream viewership of 219,000 people [18] [19]. Despite EVO’s success and the fighting game genre’s potential as a spectator sport, two major obstacles limit the fighting game from reaching the same exposure as MOBAs and first-person-shooters: 1) the development and publishing side of the most popular fighting game titles – notably the Street Fighter and Super Smash Bros. franchises – is based in Japan, and 2) the fighting game community is resistant to change due to its long history and practical necessity of conducting all competitive matches in person [17] [19] [20].

Tespa is a collegiate eSports organization supporting gaming clubs in North American universities by hosting events, forming partnerships with broadcasting platforms, and acquiring sponsorships for scholarships and other prizes [15]. To date, Tespa has over 150 chapters, with over 1200 schools competing in its tournaments and over $1 million in scholarship prizing awarded [15]. In recent years Tespa has grown its relationship with Blizzard Entertainment’s eSports division and played a pivotal role in promoting Blizzard’s MOBA Heroes of the Storm [21]. Thanks to Tespa, Heroes also occupies a very important place in eSports history: on April 26, 2015, during the game’s beta phase, EPSN2 broadcasted the grand finals of a collegiate tournament, bringing live eSports to a major American television network for the first time [21].

Blizzard Entertainment has supported eSports efforts longer than perhaps any other developer and publisher, with formal company-wide efforts beginning with the real-time strategy game StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty [22]. One such initiative is of particular interest to this thesis: the Fireside Gathering program for its collectable card game Hearthstone: Heroes of Warcraft [16]. Blizzard provides players with the means to host their own local Hearthstone tournaments, offering in-game cosmetic items as rewards for all participants, and more notably, awarding winners with points to go towards qualifying for regional tournaments [23]. Today Hearthstone consistently ranks in the top five titles on Twitch in terms of eSports content watched, due in part to Blizzard’s support of grassroots events [9] [24].
III. METHODOLOGY

As the Research Review suggests, the emerging eSports industry is a complicated and multifaceted system of actors, both on the professional stage and among the grassroots movements. This thesis is primarily concerned with the latter group and aims to identify the challenges they face through extensive research and expert interviews. The researcher plans to create a document describing best practices for developers and publishers using the qualitative data acquired through the research. Time permitting, the researcher intends to host his own grassroots eSports event in order to provide additional experiential data.

Before beginning the interview phase of the thesis, the researcher intends to collect additional resources for the literature review. Topics include (but are not limited to) key similarities and differences between grassroots and major events, how eSports leagues form and function, the relationships between developers, teams/players, and sponsors, and the dynamics of eSport event organization. These additional rounds of research are necessary to identifying a specific focus within the overarching topic as well as informing the researcher’s interview questions.

After concluding the literature review, the researcher begins interviewing experts representing various aspects of the eSports value chain: developers, publishers, leagues, teams, and sponsors. Though the specific interview questions are yet to be determined, they aim to identify the specific professional challenges facing each interviewee as it pertains to eSports audience retention, with special attention given to grassroots movements, if applicable. The researcher plans to conduct the interviews via email, phone, video call, or in person if possible. The research intends to record and transcribe all interviews, synthesizing them into a single comprehensive report.

Using the literature review and interview report, the research plans to create a single document detailing the key problem spaces and best practices for working with grassroots eSports from a developer perspective. If time permits, the researcher also plans to host his own grassroots eSports event, likely a *Hearthstone* Fireside Gathering, in conjunction with SMU Guildhall’s Extra Life charity livestream event in December 2016. The researcher intends to document the entire process share any relevant findings in the final thesis artifact document.

In summary, the final project deliverables are:

- A literature review on the key issues pertaining to eSports community management, with particular focus given to grassroots organizations and events.
- A document synthesizing a series of interviews with eSports experts regarding the challenges inherent to their work.
- A comprehensive report using the above two documents to identify the key problem spaces in supporting grassroots eSports communities and recommend best practices for addressing these issues.
- Time permitting, a brief report on a grassroots eSports event hosted by the researcher.
- Regular progress updates, both in written form and in person with the thesis advisor.

IV. CONCLUSION

The overarching goal of this thesis is to identify the key risks and best practices in supporting grassroots eSports communities from a developer and publisher perspective. To achieve this, the researcher plans to create a comprehensive literature review outlining the similarities and differences between grassroots and major events, how eSports leagues form and function, the relationships between developers, teams, and teams/players, among other topics. The researcher intends to use the literature review to guide questions for interviews with eSports industry experts, ultimately combining this with the literature review for a breadth and depth of research. If possible, the researcher aims to augment the final thesis document with findings from a personally-organized grassroots eSports event.

V. REFERENCES


