Virtual Rivalries? Mapping the Intersection of National Identity and Gaming Culture in the Pacific Region

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Introduction: Identity Formation in Electronically Mediated Contexts[1]

Since the widespread rollout of broadband internet availability in the early 2000s, the increased usage of networked communications technologies has generated a great deal of speculation and scholarship regarding potential social, political, economic, and cultural changes. Such changes emerge from the massively increased capacity for groups and individuals to communicate with each other outside and alongside of pre-existing (or 'legacy') forms of mediate communication. As the underlying infrastructure of communication changes (e.g. the ascendancy of smartphones), the behaviors and practices of communication change as well; commenting, retweeting, upvoting, liking, and sharing have become fundamental actions within the communications landscape structures by social media applications. Such changes in both technologies and cultural practices are commonly referred to as a shift from a mass-mediated public sphere to a networked public sphere.[2]

This change from mass-mediated to networked forms of communication is not simply a shift in technological applications (i.e. from television to internet), but also of different sets of organizing principles. Mass-mediated communications processes generally reflect 'top-down' processes through which similar messages are sent by a limited number of information producers to a mass (and presumably homogeneous) audience.[3] Within this process, subject positions are relatively static: those in the audience function as consumers with little to no

[1] Author's note: This paper is a partial component of a broader work exploring relationships between contemporary political theory and forms of online communication and sociability. Developing this larger work entails a variety of conceptual and methodological challenges, some of which will be partially addressed in this paper and conference presentation.
[2] Yochai Benkler, *The wealth of networks : how social production transforms markets and freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). 10-13.
[3] Castells, *The rise of the network society*, 359.

interaction with those who produce communicative content (e.g. members of the media system).[4] Networked communications, on the other hand, structure much more open and dynamic relationships, in which the subjective positions of 'producer' and 'consumer' are far less clearly defined.

While the existence of such a shift is fairly unambiguous, its overall significance is the subject of great consideration within nearly all fields of the humanities and social sciences. One realm in which the significance of emerging forms of cultural interaction can be examined is that of online multiplayer gaming, or 'gaming culture.'

Determination of an appropriate conceptualization of 'gaming culture' represents an academic feat unto itself.[5] Regarding 'culture,' this project proceeds from a generic sociological-practice oriented approach wherein the primary objects of study and analysis are actual observed behaviors of agents within a particular social space. The social space of 'gaming culture' represents a rich, complex, and densely-layered matrix of multiple interests, identities, and activities; before looking specifically at the potential significance of nationalism within gaming culture, some discussion of the structure of the broader social space of gaming culture is necessary.

Commodities and Communities

Understood very broadly, the social space of gaming culture can be seen as existing at the intersection of the commercial actors and institutions within the gaming entertainment

[4] Thompson refers to this as "mediated quasi-interaction" See Thompson, *The Media and Modernity : A Social Theory of the Media*, 81–83.
[5] For a representative examination of various approaches to conceptualizing video game culture, see Shaw, "What Is Video Game Culture?"

industry and the communities of users which emerge from the diffuse base of gaming consumers. Competition amongst game developers and publishers for their share of the 109B USD (2017 estimate) global gaming market necessarily requires a fairly intense commitment to meeting the demands of gaming consumers.[6] Increasingly, such demands involve providing users with expressive and creative dimensions to gaming experiences; rather than being purely solitary in nature, contemporary games become social activities through a variety of mechanisms (e.g. online multiplayer gameplay, integrated chat / discussion, streaming of gameplay, spectatorship and commentary).

Not surprisingly, these commercial and expressive interests do not always align, making gaming culture a site of potential contestation. Using Yochai Benkler's terminology, the commercial modality of the gaming industry involves firm-based production and protection of intellectual properties, while the user/community modality of the gaming industry desires social production with a more permissive approach to intellectual properties.[7] One example of such conflict occurred in April 2015 when American video game development firm Valve Corporation experienced a massive backlash from its customers after making changes to its popular game distribution platform Steam and its game development utility, the Steam Workshop. Originally launched in 2011, the Steam Workshop is described by Valve as "a central hub of player-created content and tools to publish, organize, and download that content into your games."[8] Through Steam Workshop, individuals could create various modifications (i.e. mods) to Workshop-enabled games and share them with other players on Steam; mods ranged in complexity from

[6] "The Global Games Market 2017 | Per Region & Segment."
[7] Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, 10–13.
[8] "About Steam Workshop."

adjustments in graphics (e.g. the color and texture of water) to the addition of entirely new quests or objectives.

Modding proved to be extremely popular among Steam users, creating both economic and cultural/symbolic connections between Valve and the Steam user community. For most games, mods and modding tools were offered to game owners through Steam at no additional cost. Steam Workshop thus generated a mutually beneficial economic relationship; users benefitted by extending the replay value of previously purchased games, while Valve enjoyed an ever increasing share of the gaming market and a highly loyal user base. Perhaps more importantly, the creation of a free (and minimally regulated or limited) marketplace for mods signified an authentic connection to the user community. By refusing to place limits on the creativity of the user community and denying the use of mods as a mechanism for extracting additional profits, Steam Workshop represented an intense symbolic relationship between Valve and their users – one which has effectively served to legitimate Valve's dominance of the digital gaming market.[9]

This symbolic relationship, however, was temporarily strained in 2015, with the announcement that Valve would integrate a payment system to the Steam Workshop, beginning with Bethesda Software's highly popular game, *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. Creators of mods would have the ability to sell their modifications, or continue to offer them for free; specific prices for mods would be set by developers, with revenues divided between the mod developers, Valve, and Bethesda (the owner of *Skyrim*'s intellectual properties). Both Bethesda and Valve

[9] While exact sales figures are not available, many estimates place Valve's share of the downloaded games market near 70%. Chiang, "The Master of Online Mayhem."

presented this change as a means of improving the user community by rewarding individual users for their creative labors.[10] [11]

Skyrim fans (as well as the broader Steam community), however, reacted to these changes in a negative and highly vocal manner. Across a variety of social networking and gaming-oriented news sites, Steam users debated the various problems posed by the paid mod system; in less than 24 hours after the announced changes, 34,000 users signed a petition created on change.org calling for Valve to remove the paid content option.[12]

Steam users expressed a range of objections to the paid mod system, many of which contained some suggestion of inconsistency between with the norms of the community. In particular, the market logic of the paid mod system was perceived as a violation of the logic of sharing and reciprocity that had emerged within the modding community.[13]

The intensity of such negative reactions was readily noticed by executives at Valve and Bethesda; the removal of the paid mod system was announced on April 27, just four days after its introduction. In statements regarding this abrupt change of policy, executives validated the concerns of angry users and reiterated their good intentions regarding improvements to the Steam community.[14] [15]

This is not to suggest, however, that the entirety of gaming culture prioritizes community and reciprocity; rather, as a subset of a more broadly conceptualized 'internet culture,' the social space of gaming culture is vulnerable to the same pathologies of networked communication as

[10] "Skyrim Mods."
[11] "Steam Workshop Now Supporting Paid Creations."
[12] Chalk, "Petition against paid mods on Steam draws 34,000 signatures in a day - PC Gamer."
[13] "Valve."
[14] Kroll, "Removing Payment."
[15] "MODs and Steam • /R/Gaming."

nearly all other forms of online interaction. However, as discussed in the following section, the social space of gaming culture displays a variety of unique characteristics than may serve to improve the overall quality of online communications.

Pathologies of Online Communication

One common criticism of electronically mediated communication is that it is decoupled from basic norms of civility, and that online communications are rife with racism, sexism, and forms of extremism and hate speech. While political discussions need not necessarily be polite, the larger tendency towards incivility has potential negative consequences for the content of public communication, general health of civic values, as well as the political system itself.

Civility can be understood as a generalized respect for others. In his seminal works on civil society, Edward Shils identifies incivility as a problem of dignity – more specifically, a failure to recognize and respect the dignity of others in the face of differing views. Through civility, individuals are inclined to place limitations on their own self-interested actions and to seek co-existence with their political antagonists.

Civility may be maintained by the use, threat, or fear of sanctions (e.g. social exclusion, physical coercion); in asynchronous and anonymous communications environments, however, such sanctions are difficult to enact. Nearly all applications of networked communication (e.g. message boards, blogs, comment systems) allow participants to interact anonymously or via pseudonymous online identities (i.e. screen names). This lack of fixed identity (along the frequently asynchronous nature of online communication) removes the immediacy and accountability from communicative actions. Within the context of gaming, however, such issues

may be partially ameliorated by mechanisms which create fixed identities and incentivize users to maintain the integrity of these identities by following specific discursive rules.

Perhaps more importantly, online communications environments tend towards the replication of extremist viewpoints. Competition between websites and among individual communicative participants makes sensationalism and extremism a valuable strategy for gaining attention and visibility in an otherwise densely populated and undifferentiated field.[16] Any form of networked communication thus comes with a risk of being used as a mechanism for the spread of extremist ideas as well as the formation and mobilization of extremist political groups.[17] [18]

A more common result, however, is that online communications fail to generate and/or mobilize communities at all. Early studies of online activities, such as Howard Rheingold's The Virtual Community, emphasized the potential for individuals to develop meaningful relationships within online communities based around shared norms and interests.[19] However, instead of finding support for civic renewal through virtual communities, many scholars argue that online communities are politically benign at best, and cause damage to the social transmission of civic skills at worst.

Voluntarily selected online communities yield few of the benefits traditionally associated with conventional (i.e. offline) communities, according to Galston. First, individuals in online communities possess no incentive for long-term cooperative behavior. Rather, when individuals, are dissatisfied with a specific online community or grouping in which they participate, there is

[16] Buchstein, "Bytes that bite," 258.
[17] Morozov, *The net delusion*, 257.
[18] Gerstenfeld, Grant, and Chiang, "Hate online."
[19] Rheingold, *The Virtual Community : Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*.

more incentive to leave and select a different community than to stay within the community and attempt reform. Using Hirschman's theoretical concepts of organizational behavior, Galston notes that the low barriers to entry and exit in online communities favor strategies of exit (changing communities) rather than voice (attempting reform); this significance of this shift is that online communities are unlikely to foster participatory political agency and civic socialization.[20]

Second, online communities are often based on mutual interests, rather than any random geographic factors. One immediate consequence of this is that they lack the fixity of geographic communities and have an inherently temporary nature. Perhaps more importantly, "they neither foster mutual obligation nor lay the basis for sacrifice."[21] As members in online communities have little non-instrumental connection to one another, members are unlikely to derive any benefits of socialization.

Again, the social space of gaming culture demonstrates a few distinct advantages over more broadly conceived online communication through the existence of a shared institutional structure. In his analysis of internet communication and the normative requirements of public communication, Bohman concludes that shared institutional structures, within which individuals can mutually recognize a capacity to make claims upon each other, is necessary for the development of communicative norms.[22] Cammaerts and Van Audenhove similarly argue that institutional contexts which define norms of communicative accountability are necessary for

[20] Galston, "The Impact of the Internet on Civic Life: An Early Assessment," 65.
[21] Ibid., 73.
[22] Bohman, "Expanding Dialogue: The Internet, the Public Sphere and Prospects for Transnational Democracy," 152–53.

meaningful conceptions of citizenship.[23] As regards gaming culture, games and game platforms themselves represent a shared institutional structure through which norms of accountability and reciprocity can be upheld. For example, in 2016, the Steam gaming platform banned (on average) 140,000 users per month for attempts to utilize cheating mechanisms in Steam-based games.[24] Such threats of losing user privileges, however effective, only serve as a form of negative feedback for the reinforcement of social norms. The shared institutional structures created by games may also allow for the formation of online and offline communities, in which individual users gain positive forms of social support. According to Trepte *et al*, membership in clans within online games serves as a means of accumulating social capital and developing strong offline social ties with other clan members.[25] The existence of such institutional structures, as discussed in the following section, may thus have a significant impact on the practices demonstrated by agents within the realm of online gaming.

The Institutionalization of Gaming

To better understand the role of institutional structures within the social space of gaming culture, greater differentiation between games and gaming activities is useful. As previously mentioned, this project utilizes a practice-oriented approach for understanding gaming culture; as such, variations on gaming practices are highly relevant. At the most basic level, the practice of 'online gaming' is assumed to involve a game or gaming framework wherein 1) gameplay involves electronically mediated interactions between multiple agents, and 2) certain sets of

[23] Cammaerts and Audenhove, "Online Political Debate, Unbounded Citizenship, and the Problematic Nature of a Transnational Public Sphere."
[24] https://steamdb.info/stats/bans/
[25] Trepte, Reinecke, and Juechems, "The Social Side of Gaming."

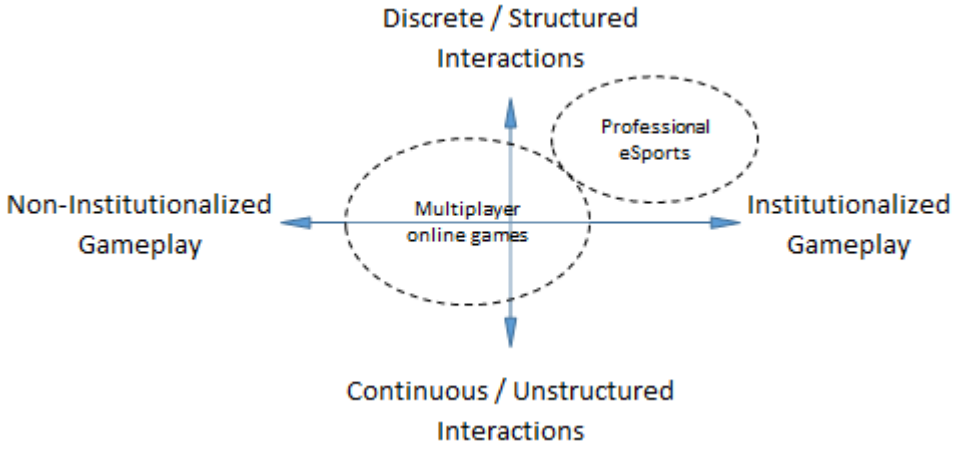
rules or practices are embedded within the gameplay mechanisms themselves (i.e. some practices are *internal* to the game).

The activities and practices of agents within any specific game will be highly structured by the nature of interactions between agents, as determined by that game's gameplay mechanisms. Games may be structured so that interactions between agents are open-ended and *continuous*; within such a game structure, interactions represent the pure volition of individual agents. Agents simply come and go as they please, and to the extent that more structured activities emerge, they do so organically from the actions of the agents themselves. 'Virtual world' games, such as Second Life, are fairly representative of games with such continuous interaction structures. Alternatively, games may involve *discrete* or structured interactions between agents, wherein specific parameters of interactions or gameplay scenarios are determined prior to gameplay. Competitive matches between players or teams of players naturally involve such discrete interaction structures, nearly always alongside specific objectives, goals, or other parameters for 'winning' matches. Between such ideal types, multiple hybrid games exist, wherein agents are able to engage in either open-ended or structured interactions; MMORPGs involving 'quests' or 'campaigns' would exist within this middle ground. Given the increased likelihood of competitive gameplay scenarios and/or goal-oriented collaborative efforts amongst individual agents, institutional structures (e.g. teams, clans, or gaming leagues) are inherently more functional for games involving discrete or structured gameplay interactions.

A second consideration of practices within the social space of gaming culture involves the *external institutionalization* of interactions between agents. As stated previously, all games are assumed to possess their own internal mechanisms which make certain practices possible;

the existence of 'rules' within games is effectively unremarkable. Far more interesting, however, are the emergence of institutional structures external to the game itself, which structure the real-world practices of gaming agents. The ideal type of such institutional structure is the professional league, wherein membership and adherence to specific league rules is required of agents and interactions occur within the confines of 'official' matches. Less institutionalized variations exist in the form of recreational or amateur leagues, as well as gaming clans – both of which are likely to use rules to structure behaviors, albeit with less intensity and rigidity. These two characteristics may be combined to create a rudimentary two-dimensional space in which differentiations between games (and the practices of agents) is clarified (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Gameplay Interactions and Institutions



The variety of gameplay mechanisms within multiplayer online games does not readily facilitate generalizations regarding gaming practices. However, within the subsection of internally structured and externally institutionalized gameplay (as typified by professional, competitive eSports), stronger inferences can be made regarding the significance of various practices of agents within this space. More specifically, the practices of agents within discrete, institutionalized gaming contexts (i.e. those of professional eSports tournaments) are likely to

represent some form of strategic behavior, oriented towards goals structured by the internal rules of the game or by the external institutional structures. The following section further explores the relationship between institutional structures and practices within the social space of gaming culture through the lens of nationalism and national identity.

National Identity and Online Gaming

As previously discussed, the general lack of institutional structures within networked communications facilitate various forms of incivilities (e.g. racism, sexism, etc.). Multiplayer gaming interactions are no exception, sometimes in spite of developer attempts to structure safe player interactions. On recent example involves the mobile game *Pokémon Go* – a game in which very little interactions between individual players were possible in its earliest versions. Due to anticipated strain on the network resources of its developer, Niantic Inc., the mobile app for Pokémon Go was released on a staggered regional schedule, with the first releases in Australia, New Zealand, and United States in July 2016. Within a few short weeks, the game had attracted a great deal of media attention and gained a massive user base, creating significant anticipation for upcoming regional launches. Mobile gamers in China, however, were excluded from the release schedule, as the Google mapping services on which the game is dependent were blocked by state regulation.[26] Early versions of the app, however, could effectively be 'tricked' into placing users in different locations through the use of software to modify the GPS readings of mobile devices, allowing for Chinese gamers to play Pokémon Go and interact with other players in any location where the game was available. Within a few days of Pokémon Go's

[26] Hanson, "China Doesn't Go For 'Pokémon GO.'"

launch in Japan, Chinese mobile gamers utilizing such GPS spoofing techniques were completing the game's objective of temporarily establishing a presence at 'Pokémon Gyms' located in Japan. Some Chinese mobile gamers utilized this opportunity to harass Japanese mobile gamers by using nationalistic phrases (e.g. *Long live China!*) within the in-game text fields used for character and creature nicknames.[27]

This example, while anecdotal, demonstrates one significant characteristic of nationalism (and other forms of incivility) within structured online interactions – for a sufficiently large percent of gamers, the existence of internal mechanisms to prevent incivilities during player interactions effectively represents a *challenge* to find ways around them. To the extent that such a desire to continuously test and push the boundaries of mechanisms which structure gameplay interactions is a widely held, some base level of incivility can thus be considered inevitable. If this assumption is correct, however, interactions invoking nationalism (and other forms of incivility) may not be reflective of any actual malicious intent; instead, finding ways of injecting incivility into structured interactions may be motivated by a sense of accomplishment and a desire to subvert the constrains placed on player interactions by game designers.

Within institutionalized gaming contexts, such as that of competitive eSports, the motivations for various practices are in no small part defined by the nature of the structuring institutions themselves. As previously discussed, the social space of online gaming is structured by the commercial interests of game developers and publishers; structuring institutions within the eSports realm emerge from such private interests, rather than from any collective

[27] "Why Chinese Gamers Are 'ruining' Pokemon Go in Japan"; "#CatchEmAll."

mechanisms of public interest (e.g. national governmental bodies).[28] There are no real eSports equivalents to national Olympic teams, as there are no equivalents to national Olympic committees. The commercial imperatives of the global gaming market suggest a kind of cosmopolitan meritocratic competition, wherein talented players can be found anywhere regardless of national origin. Given the uneven distribution of computer resources and skills across the globe (i.e. the digital divides), reliance on national / governmental structures to facilitate competition would serve to artificially limit the potential for expansion into new markets. In this regard, the institutional structures of eSports appear to render national identities (and the promotion of nationalist sentiments) as of decreased relevance.

Simultaneously, however, the institutionalization of eSports competitions, and the desire for the increased legitimacy of eSports as a competitive enterprise, has made the involvement of state apparatuses more necessary. One such example involves the granting of U.S. P-1 Visas, which allow non-citizens to participate in international athletic events within the territorial United States of America. In July 2013, the first such Visa was awarded to an eSports participant for a tournament organized by U.S. game developer Riot Games.[29] However, as the number of games with competitive tournaments has increased, there has been inconsistent recognition of eSports players as athletes in both the U.S. and EU.[30] One of the more significant hurdles to the legal status of eSports players is the cosmopolitan nature of the eSports realm itself; the relative lack of national eSports teams and associations may feed doubts that eSports are internationally recognized competitive events (one requirement for P-1 Visas in the U.S.). For traditional

[28] Hollist, "Time to Be Grown-Ups about Video Gaming."
[29] Tassi, "The U.S. Now Recognizes eSports Players As Professional Athletes."
[30] Dillon, "An eSports Attorney Reviews The Visa Issues In eSports."

athletes, membership in a national team may be used as evidence for 'non-immigrant intent' – another U.S. P-1 Visa requirement demonstrating an intent to return to one's home country rather than attempting to obtain permanent status.[31]

Efforts to increase the legitimacy of eSports and reach legal and cultural parity with conventional sports may also involve utilizing the symbolic resources of the state. In recognition of both the cultural and economic significance of the eSports industry, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen held public meetings with Taiwanese eSports teams on multiple occasions in 2016 and 2017.[32] Such public recognitions are undoubtedly intended to mobilize some degree of national pride, and may be particularly significant in contexts where more institutional forms of recognition (e.g. formation of national teams) may not be possible.

Finally, as the popularity of eSports as well as the number of competitive games and teams increase, eSports consumers are increasingly likely to fall back on national identity as a mental shortcut for determining which teams to support. The relative complexity of eSports games makes appreciation of team skill an unlikely basis for creating affinity among more casual spectators. Similarly, the relatively short careers of competitive eSports players make the long-term formation of team allegiances less likely to occur. To the extent that nationality represents an easy mechanism to create and mobilize an eSports fan base from casual spectators, tournament organizers possess an economic incentive to encourage nationalist sentiments.

[31] New, "Immigration In Esports."
[32] "Taiwanese President Encouraged LMS Teams"; "President of Taiwan Meets Flash Wolves After IEM Victory."

Conclusion

The overall significance of national identity and nationalist sentiments within online gaming (and eSports more specifically) is difficult to ascertain at this point, as the eSports industry continues to grow and evolve. As I have suggested in this paper, national/governmental institutions have only marginal relevance for the culture and practices of eSports. Instead the realm of eSports is highly structured by global commercial institutions (e.g. game developers, game publishers, tournament organizers) which have inconsistent and seemingly contradictory interests regarding national identities. While the general cultural practices of eSports support more cosmopolitan or post-national identities, the institutionalization of eSports is partially dependent upon both the legal and symbolic resources of states, which are more readily provided in the presence of national affinities. Similarly, the as the eSports viewer community expands, the influx of casual viewers may create both cultural and institutional shifts towards the prioritization of national identities and affinities over more complex forms of affinity.

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