

eSports as Evolution: Shifting Social Values in Sport

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Abstract. Tracing the history of sports as linked to practice and evaluation of socially, economically, or politically valuable skills this position paper analyzes eSports in the same context. It proposes that the rise of eSports is partly a product of society's increased reliance and appreciation of information technology work. It uses historical entertainment and leisure patterns as illustrative examples for why the increased attention to eSports is not merely the product of increased marketing, but instead an extension of a pattern recurring in sports and leisure. This pattern is a close link between the skills practiced in games and the extent to which society is oriented to value those activities.

This paper does not aim to offer a definitive guide to how such leisure rises and falls, but instead offers another in the myriad of perspectives on why play piques spectator interest. This brief perspective is informed by core principles in evolutionary psychology biology, and communication.. It hints at a potential alignment between sapiosexual preference and play leisure when compared to mid-20th century leisure and spectating. This brief perspective is informed by core principles in evolutionary psychology, and hints at a potential shift toward sapiosexual preference.

Keywords: eSports, evolutionary psychology, fitness, social value, skill preference

1 Introduction

As early as the Greek Olympics, the relationship between sport and real-world skills has been evident. The first Olympics are widely understood as an opportunity for ancient Greek communities to evaluate various practical skills such as weapons throwing (e.g., Javelin) and message relay (e.g., Marathon) [1]. As has become the standard in the design and implementation of many sports, the sport provides an opportunity to demonstrate ability within the safe confines of play.

Fundamentally, play is a way to practice and experiment with skills valuable in the real world [2]. Wrestlers, boxers, martial artists, capoeira dancers, fencers and other sports are a safe way to practice the skills of fighting, without the risk of dying. Such sport offers the benefit of war "war minus the shooting" [3]. If sport is safe war, the end of play is determined by that moment when the safety of play is destroyed. It's the moment when someone gets hurt irreparably. When the blood drawn exceeds the

comfort of play. Which is why so many sports have formal rules that outline the start and end of play while also facilitating a safe environment for play. The literal bounds, or territory of play, allow safe distance between spectator, referee, and players. The rules themselves invalidate unsafe interaction, creating fouls (e.g. European football, basketball, or American football) or penalty (e.g., wrestling), flags (e.g., fencing) for dangerous acts.

Of course, of practicing real world survival skills is at the heart of all play across the animal kingdom [4]. Much like humanity is somewhat unique in structuring play into games, it is equally unique in structuring play into sport. Sport not only offers the benefit of play and the structure of games, but it also holds a special place in culture, identity and community [5].

What then does the growth of eSports mean in this context? How do the practiced skills and experimentation in competitive game playing matter? This writing aims to offer perspective on these questions and why such shifts may be evident. It seeks to draw a connection between the appeal of spectating competitive games, the desirability of those skills in the societies that champion them, and the increasing social value for the kinds of problem solving that such games require. The work uses a myriad of historical scholarship on the anthropological, psychological and societal value of sport and play toward a single aim. The aim is to illustrate useful observations about how past sport illustrate prior social values and how contemporary eSports illuminates a shift toward digitally augmented, analytical problem solving. This pattern is a close link between the skills practiced in games and the extent to which society is oriented to value those activities and what they communicate to their audience.

2 Contest and Spectating

Among the many things that have historically made sport unique is its relationship to real world contest and spectatorship. That is, whether considering the Greek Olympics or the Mayan ball games, sport may be practiced without audience, but its climax is part of a spectated event. As emphasized in the history of sport, it is not enough to run a marathon or beat a team, if others aren't watching. This is perhaps a product of the practical function of sport. Sport is often about proving superiority or efficacy. This is true not only of physical dominance in fighting sports, but also of physical agility in sports like gymnastics. In short, the contest means nothing if there are no witnesses, also known as spectators, to note the performance.

From this perspective it's useful to interpret sport play as performance. It is a demonstration among the populous to show abilities. It is an opportunity to widely demonstrate ability in something that the audience cares about. The goal is typically demonstrated superiority, in much the way the Caillois incorporated *agôn* (aka competition) in his formal definition of play [6].

Which is why of course, the reason that sports themselves are evaluated not only by the number of people that play them, but by the number of people that watch them. There is for example the obvious financial and sociological metrics that emphasize audience size and popularity as an index of the value of the sport. Lots of spectators

means lots of potential buyers of tickets and it also means additional cultural currency. The logic is obvious, if more people watch it, then it must be valued. If it is popular, it is arguably important.

These characteristics are part of the rise and fall of a variety of historical sports. While volleyball persists, Hoover-ball [7] remains a niche experience with a scant audience and athletes. The one is considered part of an important corpus of sport, the other a footnote, despite their relative similarity.

From these perspectives eSports offers both affirmation and contradiction. The size of eSports audiences is an indication of some of its value in society. Lots of players, and even more spectators, means, by prior patterns that it is important. In the least audience size indicates some financial if not cultural value. Accordingly, the fact that people want to see the skill being performed, not just practiced as it might be on a Twitch stream, indicates that it's more aligned with sport. It helps add credence to the notion high skill performance in video games is of value to its spectators.

The same could be said of knitting or baking or other socially relevant play that is not necessarily identified as sport. But the classification of these activities as sport, or not sport, is likely more a product of gender bias and assumptions about such play [8] than their proximity to the historical precedent of play and its athleticism [9]. Simply, if competitive knitting were associated with the dominance of other readily identified sport and not subject to outdated gender dynamics, the practice of knitting might just as easily have become a sport. Knitting is one of many fine motor skill leisure activities that can become competitive, like game-playing.

But the key question remains – why have eSports become so popular now? The history of competitive digital games is more than 20 years old [10], but the contemporary environment seems to provide the most supportive environment for its growth [11]. Likewise, why has the activity of directing digital representations (aka eSports) become privy to the benefits of sport classification? This paper aims not to cover the gender-rich discrimination that likely effects the growth of eSports (in comparison to other hobby activities), but instead adds perspective on the relationship between gendered desirability and evolutionary selection as it relates to eSports. This may also help explain the continued gender biases and sexism that exist within the eSports community as well.

In short, the paper aims to explore the following research question - if most sports are to be understood as practice for real world skills to which society has recognized some version of evolutionary benefit, then how does eSports fit into the evolution of such values?

3 Biological Evolution and Sports

The simplest anecdotes of the relationship between quality performance in a sport and evolutionary selection are easily offered through the desirability of high performing athletes and their sexual attractiveness. Whether it's the deft athletic movements of Serena Williams on the tennis court or the performance of Brazil's Pele on the soccer field, there is an obvious relationship between the skills demonstrated by an athlete and attraction. This is of course related to the notion that play is practice and sport a way

of demonstrating alpha behavior, safely. The beta performers do not die, they simply lose.

This plays out in the cliché of jocks and geeks, popularized in media. In mid-20th century world, the football quarterback wins the adoration of the women who watch him play. He is strong, he is confident, he is good at catching a ball. They become a desirable mate, at least in the simple dynamics and social hierarchies of mid-20th century US high schools. A person who can drive a car like no other, demonstrates not only physical agility, but mastery of the machine. Hence a race car driver is an athlete, not merely an adept technician.

But historical sports prior to the industrial revolution were more closely linked to the skills they demonstrated. Much like a biathlon, which demonstrates the ability to survive in cold climates through hunting, earlier sports held as linear a relationship as their Greek Olympic predecessors.

So, what does an eSports athlete offer? Why are those skills desirable and appreciated now? Is a contemporary audience seeking to know who is best at casting spells or shooting virtual guns? Just as being a quarterback was, at best, an analogy for handling resources, the fictions of eSports are far less important to their value than the skills that are demonstrated. In the eSport genre, multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) these skills are versions of critical thinking and fast response. In fighting games, they are mastery of complex systems and dynamics. The appeal of eSports is not the subject, it is the action. Just as the notion of kicking a ball into a goal has little direct association with evolutionary need (assuming most people are able to use their hands), the attraction to such sport is in the way the problems are solved. Ball sports are not about the ball, they are about the action taken with the ball. Esports evolve that relationship, moving the ball from a novel, distinct toy to an extremely complex, digital toy bound by a much more complex system.

This is an evolutionary perspective that emphasizes the biological perspective of mate selection. Formally, this is framed through evolutionary psychology, which attributes sexual selection to natural selection [12]. As described by evolutionary psychology, in biological terms, it is common for the sex that is selected from a variety of potential mates to spend energy demonstrating their viability and pursue optimal use of these energies [13]. Historically, for the human race, as in the animal world, that's been a combination of characteristics that assure any offspring produced with the partner are likely to succeed. These characteristics might include physical fitness [14], mental aptitudes [15] and emotional characteristics [16].

The simplest evidence of this is demonstrated in social peacocking, where people emphasize the characteristics that are most likely to attract mates. Mate selection, especially in the contemporary, is a complex subject of study requiring an interdisciplinary perspective [17]. However, in beginning to interpret any phenomena a first step is taking an individual perspective to lay foundation for further analysis.

What's being emphasized in eSports may be key to understanding the rise of eSports and the sports that will follow. Esports are not about the fictions they present, but the actions they represent. The ability to exploit artificial intelligence systems, to work with limited resources to solve complex problems, to show mental prowess, in real time, over others who are supposed to be equally adept. Esports is an opportunity, to the

communities that understand it, to demonstrate abilities and propensities that may ultimately be attractive to others in biological terms.

This may be particularly important to a population that feels burdened by the world of automated tests and vestigial employment [18]. Where the young adult fictions of its generation are about tests concocted by parents, in *The Maze Runner* [19] and *The Hunger Games* [20]. Success in eSports represents success against a system designed to beat you. It's success in tests far outside of the real-world stresses of real-world standardized tests. It's a demonstration of strength, in systems established if not fully designed by prior generations. It is representative of strength where strength is needed most by its audience – strength of mind.

Such an interpretation of eSports assumes some direct and obvious relationship between the acts performed in the game and their real-world benefit. It assumes that eSports performance is as linear as the activities of the first Greek Olympics. Some sports do offer extremely evident relationships to the skill being practiced. The United States sport of NASCAR racing, for example, is a direct result of alcohol prohibition in the country. Drivers were auditioning to smuggle illegal alcohol throughout the country [21]. Similar histories exist for other racing, like cigarette boat racing to smuggle drugs and other contraband onto the US coast [22]. But, smuggling in itself is unlikely to have a direct and obvious relationship to the mate fitness evaluations that evolutionary biologists might emphasize. Instead, it is attributed to resource fitness (smuggling can yield high profits) and risk-taking which others site as having some evolutionary benefit [23].

What's more interesting and challenging is noting the relationship between the growth of specific sports that seem not to be practicing a specific skill applicable to a social, political or economic need. To understand this alternate perspective on the relationship between evolution and eSports its useful to think about social value.

4 Inherent Social Values and Projected Identity

Sometimes the mythos around a sport clouds inherent social values within the culture that created the sport and projected values as described by those who observe the sport. One of the best examples of this is bull fighting. The sport origin is born from the practiced needs of herding cattle [24], but the ascribed history emphasizes the machismo of such an through the growth of some popular fiction [25].

This tension of social values helps explain one of the many reasons that eSports has grown in its prominence. Esports is not merely about the shift in social value for the kinds of work in human computer interactions, it's also a product of the projected values on the population to which it is ascribed. If eSports is a geek culture sport, geek culture needed a sport to which it was ascribed. If eSports is a generation sport, that generation needed a sport of its own to which participants in other communities could ascribe it.

This kind of placemaking, or community building both from external and internal forces is not a new concept. Baudrillard describes this pattern in national identities, recognizing that the sense of a cultural self is as shaped both by the historical realities and those attributes to which others have ascribed it [26]. In short, the reality of eSports rise is part of the simulacra. Just as bullfighting becomes the affirmation of a Latino

machismo culture, eSports becomes the affirmation of the geek culture of the young contemporary culture. The fact that its risks and experience are part of an elaborate simulacra is only further affirmation of Baudrillard's desert of the real. Or in the argument made in this paper, it is the cherry on the dessert of eSports reality.

This is an easy contrast with prior cultural identities. Just as the sport of kings, polo, is an affirmation of high culture or basketball is an urban sport, eSports is developing its own identities. Admittedly these identities remain regional and national [27], as eSports conforms to the pattern of supporting one's home team. But the regional identity is the subset of the wider cultural identities of eSports.

This identity is still forming but a few obvious patterns do present themselves. They include the obvious association with the global geek or tech culture, but there is also a clear regional bifurcation. Esports spectatorship, sense of community and identity vary by cultural factors in Australia [27], Asia [28] Europe [29], and more. This is likely a product of the cultural expectations of sport, where the history of football (aka Soccer), American football and basketball permeate expectations of the sport experience. Particularly how the sport experience is felt by onlookers, audience, and fans

But some of this identity is assumed by its community, not merely emergent or projected. Just as surfer and skateboard identities are offered to teens as fashionable apparel, people can assume these identities and even purchase the signs and symbols of them. This is where the current moment is so interesting. In stark contrast to prior sport's rise in the 20th century, eSports demonstrate a willingness to assume a formerly undesirable cultural identity. It is a further embrace of geekdom. Athletes in eSports are not the biggest, the strongest, the lithest (in terms of large motor skills). They do not have the physical attributes that in millennia passed seemed to signify the most desirable mates. They are not athletes of the body, as much as they are athletes of the mind. They are worth watching less for what they can do with their bodies, but more for what they can do with their minds (and a few fast twitch fine motor skills).

This is one of the evolutionary oddities of this rise. Where games like chess have a long history of wide spectatorship, this spectatorship did not have the kind of cultural identity embrace that eSports have enjoyed. The same can be said of other mind-championing games, like poker. While it can be argued that there were stadium size audiences of events like the USSR-USA radio chess match and other cold-war era matches [30], these events carried a heavy reliance on national identity. Beyond that obvious distinct, the more fascinating divergence is in audience opportunity to identity. Spectators of the world's most meaningful chess matches in the 20th century did not ascribe themselves to the culture of chess. They did not seek and purchase identity through it, collecting chess jerseys and otherwise aligning their social identities to the sport, not just the nation (or other entity) it represents.

This is where the evolution of eSports becomes an exceptionally interesting case study. It's perhaps contemporary evidence of a social value toward geek culture.

5 Conclusions

One of the fundamental questions that plagued the advent of eSports was the question – is it a sport or not. The most common claim against it as a sport is its relatively limited

athleticism. It simply isn't physical enough, in the eyes of those who want not to call it a sport, to be a sport. This is where an evolutionary eye finds a novel observation. What if sport were moved not from a value of physical athleticism, but instead toward mental athleticism? What if the value that so many sports champion moved toward mental agility?

This might be an indication of a kind of evolutionary shift, where the challenges of the contemporary world are not about manipulations of the physical worlds, but instead challenges of the mind. It is an environment in which the physical barriers of moving through space, are made more trivial by machine and computer assist (e.g., ubiquitous satellite navigation, drive-by-wire vehicle control, low-cost airfare, etc.), by nearly autonomous vehicles and a future that assumes more robotic assist.

The future of eSports might then be an indication of a future for general society. One that shies from the physical acumen that were once the foundation of desirability, toward one that celebrates the singular advantage the human species has over the industrial world it's built and the animal kingdom's diversity. That advantage is its mental capacity. It's ability to improve, subvert, or outperform each other in the fictional computer spaces it has optimized.

Perhaps it's an indication of world that moves away from its history, toward sapiosexual reproduction – favoring the problem solving of quick and creative minds, over the solutions created through muscle and agility. Or perhaps it's a mere illusion, agreed upon by its supporters to affirm that which gives them advantage in the world.

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