Designing for competition - how have eSports influenced game design?

Videogames have been played competitively since their inception, but things have come a long way from young friends battling each other in arcades. With the rise of streaming services such as Twitch.tv and the growing popularity of Let’s Plays (videos documenting a playthrough of a videogame with commentary from the player), eSports are now watched by millions of viewers around the world (Hadzinsky, 2014), which has created an obvious financial incentive for sponsors and broadcasters. Any game played as an eSport immediately gains free, wide-reaching publicity and is likely to have a higher player retention because eSports have achievements, community and regular updates (Blumental, 2013). All this means publishers and developers can also gain from their game becoming an eSport. Does that entice them to change their game design though?

By examining the most played and watched eSports certain design patterns emerge. While the genres of the most popular eSports vary they are all highly competitive, require high skill levels and have short matches. In fact the top three most watched games on twitch (Cerrato, 2015) average around 40 minutes for a competitive match, a relatively short amount of time for both a sport and a videogame. Recent trends also suggest team-based modes are preferred to single-player (Olsen, 2015). They also have increased developer support and interaction with the community so they may change the game design based on their feedback. Any developer that wishes their game to benefit from eSport is likely to include these design ideas, so it will appeal more to eSport players and fans.

Changing a game’s design to appeal to eSport fans may have unexpected consequences. In the case of EVE Online \*\*\*, the game was never intended to become an eSport but the game promotes player autonomy and the community organised its own events. As their popularity grew, viewers began to suffer from in-game behaviour such as bribery. The developers stepped in to restrict player behaviour and make the games fairer, and as such make the tournaments more enjoyable to watch. However, reducing this player freedom did not have the desired effect as both players and viewers reacted badly to the loss of freedom and found it made the eSport less interesting (Carter & Gibbs, 2013).

EVE Online is not the only game to have its design changed to appeal to spectators. At a basic level, the game may have a spectator mode, so anyone watching can view the match using a separate in-game camera, but may change the gameplay to appeal to viewers. For example, the game may be made less complicated as it allows new viewers to follow the game easier. There are many reasons someone would want to watch someone else playing a videogame (Smith et al., 2013) and these provide opportunities for the developer to appeal to viewers. If they do though, it may have a negative impact on the player experience, which in turn may reduce the number of players and hinder the game becoming an eSport. At a more advanced level, designers must consider how the game will influence the game’s community and how they wish the community to grow, as the community will be made up of both players and spectators. For example, the more competitive a game is the more aggressive players are likely to act (Adachi & Willoughby, 2011), which may lead to a toxic environment. This is particularly important to eSports as they are naturally competitive.

There are ethical issues with eSports (Hollist, 2015) that developers will have to address in the future. The world’s top players across the eSport ecosystem must play for dangerously long periods of time every day to maintain their skill level, raising serious health concerns. It is difficult to combat this out of game, as even if there were safeguards in place to restrict the time these players can play there is no way of restricting anyone else. This would mean “amateur” gamers would soon overtake these players because they of their extra practice time, and replace the current professionals. Professional players also have very short careers as by the time they reach their mid-twenties their reaction times have slowed enough to have a significant impact on their play. This may leave them unprepared for what will be the majority of their life. The only way to combat these issues is through the game design itself, which has the potential to completely change the way eSports are designed.

Even if a game is developed without the intention of it becoming an eSport, there is a high chance that eSports will still influence the design as players begin to expect certain design choices and get comfortable with the high-skill nature of eSports. A simple way of increasing the challenge of a game is to increase the speed at which it is played. If players become accustomed to this speed, in a first-person shooter for example, they will find it easier to play a slower paced game that was not intended to be played competitively, or even multiplayer, and may become bored as they are no longer challenged and in flow (Przybylski et al., 2010). To change the game so these players will enjoy it, it may also drive away new or older players who struggle with the difficulty.

ESports have had a significant impact on game design over the past few years. Their economic impact on the videogame industry has left developers scrambling to take advantage, and have found themselves designing with eSports in mind. Whether this influence will continue is unknown however, as eSports have their own design faults that must also be dealt with in time. Though if the challenges currently facing eSports are overcome, the sheer popularity of eSports means they will continue to effect game design for years to come.

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