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Game Design for eSports

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ESports provide a new way for game developers to make video games. In 2014, *Dota 2* eSports international tournament had a prize pool of \$10, 923, 980 [1]. The 2014 eSports world championships for *League of Legends* drew over 11 million unique spectators through internet streaming with each of those averaging over an hour of viewing time [1]. This attention and prestige gives game developers a different option to approach making video games. FPS and MOBA games capitalized on becoming eSports titles by using a “system” which applies to any video game. Some of the qualities for this “system” include, how exciting the game is to watch and comprehend, how quickly understandable and retainable the game is to players, and the size of the skill gap. ESports games have a unique formula for creating a compelling spectacle that applies to all video game development.

ESports games allow spectators and players to understand what is happening during the game. The information players and spectators need to see varies from game to game. Dustin Browder, game designer for *Starcraft 2*, describes how eSports games are watch-able [2]. ESports games must be quickly understandable by both players and spectators [2]. Players and spectators need to have the same understanding of what is going on. This understanding draws a connection for the spectators to learn the game from watching the players. Spectators enjoy seeing professional players perform because the gameplay may be unachievable by themselves. Spectators reveal in the awe of mastery and desire to learn more about video games. Ryan Scott, game designer for *League of Legends*, says that good competitive games follow the same visual hierarchy guidelines that a good broadcast-able game contains [3]. Visual hierarchy implies that spectators notice the most important things on screen first. These visuals are clear, concise, and convey important information to players and spectators. Video game art that appears on the screen, as a whole, at any point during the game must follow the six principles of visual

hierarchy; page scanning patterns, size, space and texture, typeface weight and pairing, color and tint, and direction are the six principles [4]. Following these principles allows games to convey the content to players and spectators. This is especially important for spectators, considering when spectators go to see an eSports event live, spectators usually watch a large screen from a distance. Adding a single spectator camera to the game that enables spectators to see the gameplay from the players' perspective or see the game from a birds eye view is the easiest way to present the game to spectators.

When spectators can understand what is happening near the same level of the players, then the spectators can get excited about a competitive eSports game. The competitive teamplay between the different teams in an eSports event compels an electrifying audience. Vice president of design at Riot Games, studio that created *League of Legends*, Tom Cadwell notes how teamplay is essential to have an exciting multiplayer experience [5]. When designing *League of Legends*, Cadwell reinforced teamplay based on the mechanics required by the game. *League of Legends* has different roles players must choose in order to compete as a team such as Support, Mage, Tank, Jungler, etc. The ability for spectators to identify that an action or outcome required the entire team and not just one individual is stimulating. Similarly, *Call of Duty* has roles players must choose by selecting particular perks and guns. To compete, a team must come up with a team strategy to counter the other team. Spectators can identify these roles and see how they affect the game. The roles players choose in eSports games also provide a connection to spectators. Spectators can learn more about how to play better by watching particular professional gamers that use the same loadout as the spectator. For example, a spectator may play a support role when they play casually at home. When spectators see how a professional

gamer plays a support role at an eSports event, this gives the spectator knowledge that applies to their own role. For eSports games, teamplay must be a key aspect to the game.

Games with simple, understandable mechanics that are easy to learn but hard to master serve as the best eSports titles. Simplicity is important when designing for an eSports game. Games like the *Halo* series, *Counter Strike: Global Offensive*, *League of Legends*, *Starcraft II*, *Dota II*, and *Call of Duty* all have simplicity, yet provide extreme depth in terms of gameplay. The depth in gameplay is the number of choices a player can make at a given time, which affects the outcome of something. For example, in *Call of Duty*, a player shot by another player and is hurt may choose to run away, take cover, shoot back, jump, etc. in a variety of ways. Players may choose to run a little left, right, or strafe; the list goes on. These are all simple actions that have minute choices. The minute decisions players make, separates professional gamers from the average gamers. The minute decisions lead to “mini-outcomes” which lead to an overall outcome on the game. Anybody can play an eSports game, but it takes a skilled player to play at the professional eSports level. The learning curve once a player gets to a high level of competition is extremely high. Games that use basic mechanics over complex mechanics allow spectators to compartmentalize information. It is important for the players and spectators to be able to compartmentalize information in their brain to make a gameplay decision or to understand what is happening on screen. When spectators are able to hold the important information, it is easier for them to get excited about what they are watching.

The skill gap for an eSports game needs to be noticeably large for players. For *Starcraft II*, Browder suggests that allowing the player to have complete control of all units and the ability to tell the units exactly what the player wants, allows for skill [2]. The skill gap is highly visible because the good players are micromanaging many different things while actually only doing a

few different types of actions. Spectators enjoy watching the in-game micromanaging professional players do because the spectators are able to learn about what is important in the game to the professional players. Spectators learn to appreciate both mental and tactile skill in professional players. Rather than creating games upon accessibility, Scott thinks the games need to build upon having deep mastery because players want to overcome big challenges [3]. If a game is able to have deep mastery, then the next thing developers need to do is to teach the game in a fun, rewarding way. Cadwell believes that counterplay needs to be nuanced, skilled, and interesting to the player [5]. Counterplay is a players' response to an opponents' actions. The more visible the counterplay is to the players and spectators, the more exciting it is to see the skill gap in the players. The skill gap is deeply important for eSports games because the spectators need a reason to watch the professional gamers over the average gamer.

All eSports games must be watch-able. Understanding what is happening on screen without too much external interpretation is key for an eSports game. Secondly, simplicity is important for designing a highly competitive eSports title. Having a few simple mechanics that provide great depth and decision making, provide interesting situations and uncertainties that is fun to watch and play. Lastly, the skill gap needs to be large. Players and spectators need to be able to see what separates a great player from an average player; otherwise, it would not be entertaining. All video game developers must consider these aspects when developing a competitive multiplayer title intended for eSports.

References

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