

**Inside the Huddle:  
The Phenomenology and Sociology of Team Play in  
Networked Computer Games**

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## Abstract

As any sports sociologist would say, sports are contested terrains. They are dynamic in practice and historically specific: They are shaped by institutions, politics, and local standards as well as formed throughout everyday actions by the range of performers on any given playing field. But what of computer games? What does it mean when these types of games are suggested to be “found” securely in the software? What and where else is the game in action? And how are these games oriented by the many things engaged in their configuration? Taking a qualitative approach, this study explores such concerns looking at the players, organizations, and technologies involved in producing networked team play from the sites *World of Warcraft* Arena tournament high performance competitions.

Throughout three years of multi-sited fieldwork, this study has probed at how networked team play is lived and produced, asking: What are the practices of networked team play(ers)? How are such practices shaping team play culture(s)? And how do those involved make sense of their engagements? The exploration draws on events which took place between 2008 and 2012 using qualitative research, including ad-hoc and in-depth interviews with players, administrators, organizers and spectators, as well as observations and field notes. I take the perspective of phenomenological sociology coupled with a decidedly Actor-network theory approach, which assists in exploring the connections and translations made between embodiment, game cultures, and the associations between designers, software and technologies. From this exploration, the players emphasize that the game extends beyond the packaged product, and the product of their high performance team work relates to more than hand-eye coordination and time spent in front of the machine. Though more importantly, networked team play is rendered by players as a

sensuous and intimate engagement; this is an engagement that is described by nuanced connections between the pressures of many things at play, humans and nonhumans, which co-construct the experience. This research ultimately conveys that experiences produced in high performance networked team play come from an attunement and reflection of the many things in action, emphasizing that the active meaning-making of players makes them principal “designers” of their gaming engagements.

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## {Chapter 1}

### Introduction

The earliest sensation of my body flushing with adrenalin during computer game play was in a spirited *Counter-Strike* LAN (local area network) match played amongst friends. Eight of us decided to unwind after basketball training late one evening; *Counter-Strike* was our go to LAN game. The adrenalin produced in the confines of that net café was sweet, just like I remembered it from championship games that came down to the wire – ball in your hands; team in focused motion; 3, 2, 1, action. Ever since that night, a gut feeling remained with me: The sensations and sociality that come with team sports and networked computer games have vibrant connections worth exploring. Being in-the-zone with deep focus, the adrenalin rush, experiencing the simultaneous pleasures of my own game as being a part of the team, the emergence of unexpected leaders, botched strategies and brilliant tactics (or vice versa), feeling the game with practiced/unpractised bodies and peripherals/equipment, seeing things before they happen, failing miserably, the incredible intimacy with the tools of the game, and the heady, lingering feeling of *togetherness*. As a package, these things felt instantly familiar despite the shrouding of monitors, processors, and keyboards. It was an experience made between bodies and things that pulsed out some of the same beats and

rhythms of team sports.

For several decades sports sociologists, starting back in 1955 with Gregory Stone's *American Sports: Play and Display*, have been exploring how we take on, negotiate, and produce organized competitive games. They have asked what it means to participate together, illuminating our fascinations in and with team sports, and have added to an understanding of the situations and engagements with sports in societies more broadly. But sociology alone doesn't get me any closer to an understanding of the *sensuousness* of bodies (de Garis, 1999); that is, a feel for the touch made of and between the many people and things engaged in the game. Though reaching an understanding of that touch by getting athletes to articulate on their body practice is tricky business (B. Wheaton, personal communication, May 27, 2010). In his work on tacit knowledge, Michael Polanyi (1966) explains that we might be able to describe what it is that we do, but we are desperately challenged when talking about how what we do gets done. Everyday body performances, even for high performance athletes, might only be vaguely grasped; without some focused digging into embodiment, the lived experiences of bodies in their particular action (our way of being in the world) remain unclear in value and quality to those who do not experience those actions directly. A push from within sports studies has however played into an increase in phenomenological accounts, though with careful consideration of the materiality of sporting practise (See Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2007). As suggested by Allen-Collinson and Hockey (2011), a phenomenologically toned sociology assists in getting to the "here and now of lived sporting experience, whilst simultaneously acknowledging the structural and cultural location of bodily presence" (p. 331).

This qualitative inquiry of high performance teams explores the practices of people, as well as things at work in creating the experience(s) of networked team play. And it is through these

diverse connections and configurations of play that I can talk about the happenings and orientations of particular game cultures and the practices of high performance players. Though, in order to get to the finely-detailed arrangements of modern team practices alongside of material-semiotic connections, I approach the field with another lens – that of Actor-network theory (ANT). An ANT approach pushes beyond the actions of humans on the scene of play, and at its most basic, it reminds the researcher of the orienting pressures of the many other things—technologies, discourses, and invisible connections—that are “at work” in shaping the field. And it is from such experiences of pressure of and between designers, players, and systems, that my position must be stressed: The system alone is not the game. I would be sidelining the important work of these LAT players, the long term players on the scene and collaborators of this text, if I didn’t say so from the start. Their experiences, orientations, movements, and meaning making “from within” is also the game. Players do much more than just “work the data”, and systems do other unpredictable things other than “deliver the software”. In this sense, the game in play can be rendered as an “authorless” thing; something oriented over time by designers, players, discourses, and technologies (McFee, 2002; Morris, 2003).<sup>1</sup>

The fieldwork looks at the sites and practices of high performance teams playing *World of Warcraft (WoW) Arena Tournament* in location-based (LAT) settings.<sup>2</sup> From four years of multi-sited qualitative fieldwork, I explore how networked team play is experienced and produced, starting from these broad questions:

- What are the practices of networked team play(ers)?
- How are the practices of the network engaged in shaping team play culture(s)?
- And how do those involved make sense of their engagements?

Entering the research field with such questions allows the players to craft their own accounts

which speak to that first hunch I felt between sports and games. With such a broad investigation, the players' sensations, configurations, and relations of networked team play fill in the details – the processes of meanings made in high performance networked team play.

An on-the-ground account of *togetherness* emerges from the participants' discussions and engagements in their leisure. And it is the perception of togetherness which turns out to be a key hook in the study, as it offers a way of thinking in terms of how humans and nonhumans are finely engaged in creating high performance networked team play together. As such, this text proceeds with microscopic detail, but also attends to the macro question on the legitimacy of high performance and "sporting" practices with computer games.

Aside of the importance of the tools of sports and games, and the recognisable "sporting" sensations players express in their networked team play, perhaps the strongest argument for looking towards sports studies is that they challenge, as well as reinforce, the structures of these organized sporting-esque activities in compelling ways. In this light, it is interesting to note that sports sociologists inform of the cultural practices of particular sporting enclaves as "subsumed by instrumental rationalism, with technical efficiency and result achievement prioritized over subjective immersion in experimental play" (Giulianotti, 2005, p. 42). Modern sports have a hundred year history as highly gendered terrains (Theberge, 2000; J. Hine, 2006, Vertinsky, Jette & Hoffman, 2009; Messner, 2007).<sup>3</sup> High performance sports participation is normatively maintained as a highly valued *serious leisure* pursuit (Stebbins, 2007), despite the many consequences and controversies that come with the disciplined body in competition (Kretchmar, 1994; Pierce, 2012).

We need to be questioning if and how organized networked team play is brewing similar traditional sporting cultures where instrumental rationalism trumps experimental play. With many organized gaming tournaments based on pro media sports models (such as the NFL or NASCAR),

we need to ask how these new competitive play formats resist and reinforce notions of hegemonic sporting masculinities. And players' bodies need to be considered as central to the exploration in order to gain a nuanced understanding of the experiences of networked team games as gendered and highly technological practices. Despite the enduring gap between sports and game studies research, there are certainly resonating moments to consider between these two fields of study, and two practices of high performance play. Perhaps by turning towards the developments and growing traditions in high performance networked team play as a sporting-esque derivative we may also be better situated to consider the state of organized sports in society.

By examining how and what it means to play with the networked team, where the end result is produced not only via bodies, but across cables and chips, online and off, and in intricate webs of connections, we gain a rigorous account of this arrangement of modern leisure as shaped, lived, and made meaningful by those who embrace it (Latour, 2004; Law, 2009; T.L. Taylor, 2009a).

### **A socio-material approach**

In order to explore the lived experience and materiality of networked team play, I approach the field with a sociology that employs insights and orientations from phenomenology alongside of ANT.<sup>4</sup> Taking this approach was an effort to be in sensuous contact with the manifold experiences, sensations, relationships, and actions of both the humans and nonhumans involved in producing the experiences of this activity. Though theoretically, these two ways of knowing are— traditionally seen—at odds on the grounds of phenomenological accounts of intentionality being positioned as a wholly human realization. Intentionality proposes an orientation of meaning, that consciousness is always directed towards something. However, looking to phenomenological sociology accounts of sports, we can see more room and certainly an acknowledgement of nonhumans playing into

the social fabric of experience.

Working with an autoethnographical approach in their explorations of athletic participation, Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson and John Hockey bring to life the modalities and textures from sporting technologies; from the hardness of cricket-pitches to the varied experiences of environmental pressures (the evenness of a running surface or the touch of the equipment at hand) which attune sporting bodies during their actions (2007, 2009, 2011). Such work widens the experience, meaning, and certainly the actors involved in the production of the sport or in this computer game. Considering the situation of intentional machines, Dourish (2004), in his valuable discussion of embodied interactions, argues, “computation is an intentional phenomenon; what matters about it is that it refers to things” (p. 137). In this manner – I refer to both the bodies and technologies, for as Dourish suggests, these are “the things that matter”.

As a companion to this way of seeing the field, ANT is engaged as a forceful approach in considering reciprocal relationships between those things that matter – artifacts and social groups (MacKenzie & Wajcman 1999, p. 22). As ANT has “...insisted on the performative character of relations and the objects constituted in those relations” (Law, 1999, p. 7). In this research fieldwork, technologies were observed and are voiced as shaping play on a daily basis, and more provocatively, players were “working alongside of” technologies as a dynamic part of the actions i.e. through tactics created to accommodate for lag, or the acknowledgment of the tools of play as shaping their body habitus itself.<sup>5</sup> In this way, these simultaneous workings of multiple technologies on the playing field were duly noted and given a reality. As Latour (2005) writes,

...in order to form part of a network, an actor must be brought to bear on other actors, so they must be brought together. Moreover, they must be brought together so as to work together, which may mean changing the ways in which they act. By being moved and changed, interests are translated in both place and form. In this way, actors are made to act; as originally defined, the actors of ANT are *actants*, things *made to act*. p. 82

With its stress on the socio-material, the work of *actants* in the formation of the social, the sensuous translations that occur in practice, and the work of many things which in their circulation make the action, ANT—accompanied by phenomenological sociology considerations—is well-suited to exploring the granular web of practices which is networked team play in action.<sup>6</sup> While Latour insists on “actants” in order to rid the word “actor” of any sense of anthropomorphism (Latour, 2004, p. 75), I, choose to employ the term “actors” broadly in this text, while giving full recognition to the nonhumans pressuring and performing on the field of play.

John Law emphasizes throughout his work with ANT, that we are not disconnected (2004, 2009). In this study, networked team players engage themselves as embodied actors who work intimately with the complex multi-modal work made between (many) humans and nonhumans in order to excel in their practice. In terms of “connections”, this research speaks of the phenomenon of high performance play as something that does not reside in “formal essences”. And as suggested by Allen-Collinson and Hockey (2011), if there is indeed to be a search for essences, then let’s dig in and explore those foundations of experience for particular cultures, subcultures, social groups and even individuals in order to grasp a fuller version of the recognizable phenomenon of the game. For what’s really at stake in doing so? Only richer accounts - as the many actors involved perform what is the “real” game during play.

With the theoretical bricks laid out, it is perhaps time to chart out some of the other conceptual work that has been considered along the research endeavour. In the subsequent press forward, I reflect on how we might move beyond sports versus computer games.

### **Beyond games versus sports**

At a time when sports, politics, and society were (once again) coming together at the 1968

Olympics—where the black gloved fists of sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos were raised on the podium in a poignant salute to human rights—Harry Edwards was imploring for the necessity of his dissertation to a Cornell study committee: The theme - sociology of sport (Edwards, 1973, 2009). Edwards recalls arguing for the project's approval with a very pragmatic, blatant point. He asked, how can we believe that a dyad or triad are worthy of sociological analysis, and then not attend to the sociological inquiry of sport when every year 100 million people sit down and watch the Super Bowl? The project was approved, and Edwards' dissertation went on to be published in 1973 as one of the earlier integrated works on the sociology of sport. The floodgates for research on sports and society were rather unceremoniously opened which, at present date, offers no less than four decades of rigorous scholarship.

Sports sociologies and histories offer insight into the nuances of the practices and institutionalisation of these various competitive leisure (and often times work) activities. Child labour issues surrounding sports are explored in Vamplew's (2008) study of caddying in British golf clubs in the 1900s. The distribution of modern sports via the British colonies can be read in urban Australia's embrace of football and the consequent codification of the rules in 1859 by the Melbourne Football Club, a club which still exists today. We are offered some regard on the structural underpinnings on which women and minority ethnic groups participation (and marginalisation) in sports have been institutionalised (such as the efforts in creating and maintaining sex segregated sports), but also some of the dynamic changes and resistant as well as reproductive *agency* in the involvement of women and minorities in competitive, achievement oriented, and physically demanding sports (Messner & Dworkin, 2002; Hargreaves, 1994; Vertinsky et al., 2009).<sup>7</sup> Amateurism and professionalism are fleshed out as class discussions, none more prevalent than the British boxing scene where (upper class) gentlemen boxed for leisure and



(lower class) professionals fought for pay (Anderson, 2001). Post World War I histories document a rise in organized team sports in the English (boys) educational system. Sports being institutionalized at an early age as a conduit to the development of moral fibre, hierarchies, leadership abilities, and to the discipline of young men in preparation for the nation's defence; hence forth, team sports were frequently and uncritically charted as character building and as a sound site for developing a highly rewarded form of sporting masculinity.

The combined strength of these inquiries is in their diversity – where the nuances of the situated events or activities (as historically positioned) are charted out and made visible with regard to their configurations (structure, agency, society, et cetera). As a rhetorical tool, 100 million spectators of sport is an easy to grasp and well-built argument for a sociological inquiry of sports. However, so are the voices of the few who play: Participants' embodied performances speak to the situated practices of their temporal activity. Despite whether the game culture is framed as unique, niche, or popular - the grit and experience of the play itself matters. As Rojek (2000) comments: Leisure is a reflection of culture and in these various involvements, there is an expression of cultural change. The diversity of how participation and agency is exercised in such "sporting" leisure spaces, and the fascinations that come with the practice of play itself, are leveraging points for continued inquiry.

From the launch of the modern Olympics in 1896 (run by the International Olympic Committee or "IOC"), it took more than half a decade before sports were taken as an important site of study. And, despite computer games taking form roughly the same time that Edwards launched his career, there is a suspicious dearth in reflection on computer games as tied to "sporting-esque", socio-material, and organized fields of play. "Game studies" was launched in 2001, and it is first now, a decade on, that associations between sports *and* computer games and

the structures and connections between them are being made.<sup>8</sup>

E-sports tournaments are expanding into modern media sports events, computer game players engage with games as their serious and competitive leisure pursuit, and conversely, traditional sports are finding value in gaming practices (such as NFL teams simulating plays on video games or the number-crunching of gymnastics routines for best possible scores).<sup>9</sup> With such compelling ties, perhaps a middle ground is in need where “games research” encapsulates the collective inquiries of not only sports and computer games, but also of other gaming landscapes (such as LARPs, board games, and folk games); in broader connections we may well be provoked towards improved and more nuanced understandings of the rich domain of games.

In the context of this study, high performance networked teams and traditional sports both call for an awareness of the processes and practices of connected bodies and technologies, systems and organizations, cultures and discourses which in association produce these valued leisure activities.

Just one fruitful association between such sports and computer games, where productive associations in research and experience can be explored, is in a consideration of the technologies engaged in play.

## **Technologies of sports and games**

In moving beyond sports versus computer games, one might ask: What does the digital playing field represent? Is the digital an “essence” of computer game play? How do players experience this playing field?

Grant Tavinor (2009) argues that a “visual digital medium” is an ontological necessity in the definition of a video game as an object. Tavinor’s (2009) full definition reads as follows, “X is a

videogame if it is an artefact in a visual digital medium, is intended as an object of entertainment, and is intended to provide such entertainment through the employment of one or both of the following modes of engagement: rule and objective gameplay or interactive fiction” (p. 26).

His definition makes generous room for the wealth of video games already available, stretching from ludic-centric to narrative rich games. Though there are two points here worth considering; (1) formalism sidelines video games from their other rich associations, historical changes, and phenomenological sociology “essences” (where essences are established dynamically, and in reference to a culture, social grouping, or even the experience of an individual – See Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2011. p. 333).<sup>10</sup> And (2), the media-based condition works to centralize the technology as always already above the players’ experience of the game, where the action is constituted by many other things beyond the software or computer.

A growing handful of scholars point to the troubles of centralizing the medium in terms of defining the (played) game. Miguel Sicart (2011) argues that designers who support a “systems-centered game ontology” are on decidedly shaky ground – shook up, as it were, by the creative, uncontrollable, and unpredictable actions of players. He states, “...the meaning of a game cannot be reduced to its rules, nor to the behaviors derived from the rules, since play will be a process of appropriation of those rules, a dialogue between the system and the player” (para. 3). Douglas Wilson (2011) tackles a similar argument though with a design mantra that “deputizes the players” – where the “essence” of the game is deliberately handed over to the player (para. 5). It works as a playful statement that reminds players that the system delivered is “theirs”, as a malleable and personal thing to play. T.L. Taylor (2009a) looks to the wealth of things, the *inter-relation* of actors involved in creating the given game play moment. From her ethnographic research in massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), she finds the game is an *assemblage of play*; where play is

constituted through a variety of agents; human, nonhuman, social and institutional, which make up the action and game experience. Such contemporary stances, which mark out computer games as *of* and *between* the many things that make up play echo discussions from traditional sports. In particular, in their considerations of the (interpretative) labour of technologies and the role of the player on the “formal” game (Cherry, 1973; Loland, 2002; D’Agostino, 1981; McFee, 2004; Arnold, 1979, 2003).

When computer games are played “as sports”, the relational ontology between sports and computer games is not found essentially in the visual digital medium, but rather it is in the extensive socio-material practice of play across (and with) rich technological playing fields. This is echoed in Hutchins (2008) work on the relationships between e-sports, media and communication, in which he finds the need for a change in syntax, suggesting that “It is necessary to think in terms of sport as media (material integration) instead of sport and media (Structural interrelation)” (p. 862). Taking a broader stance on the forms and import of technologies involved in sports, Ted Butryn (2002) offers a five part classification of sporting technologies, two parts of which stand out as significant to this discussion on material integration - *landscape technologies* and *implement technologies*.<sup>11</sup>

Landscape technologies are those technologies which “form the sporting environments in which athletes compete” (p. 112). Sporting environments stretch broadly in their formation from artificial or well manicured grass and folding roof systems, to white paint marks and uneven asphalt on schoolyard basketball courts. Very simply put, it is a particular field in play.

Implement technologies are demarcated as the “instruments and pieces of equipment which are used during the event, and which are generally constituent parts of the contests in which they appear” (p. 112). These include things that are kicked or hurled, or technologies like bowling

balls, running shoes (or in Paralympic athletics, this might be extended to prosthetics) or tennis racquets. Technologies that are, in other words, a part of the basic packaging of a sport. In that any played game wouldn't have been the same game without them.



Figure 1: Elite level sprinter and double amputee athlete Oscar Pistorius exchanging his everyday prosthetics for his hi-tech (Cheetah Flex-foot) sprinter prosthetics. (Image: "Oscar2", n.d.)

Butryn's categories start to disentangle computer games as distinctive on the merits of their (here and now) technology,<sup>12</sup> though something else might be said regarding the high status on the "visual medium".

In speaking of the dominance of the visual over all other senses, architect and architectural theorist Juhani Pallasmaa (2005) maps out the hegemony of the visual. He draws to our attention the troubles of such a hierarchy of the senses, maintaining, "There is no doubt that our technological culture has ordered and separated the senses even more distinctly. Vision and hearing are now the privileged sociable senses, whereas the other three are considered as archaic sensory remnants with a merely private function, and they are usually suppressed by the code of culture" (p. 16). Such privileging could be called quite commonplace in computer game studies. In

her emphasis of the unique importance of the visual medium of computer games, Nardi (2010) offers a description: “Video games afford rich stimulation to visual sensibilities while at the same time developing complex spaces of performance with opportunities for mastery and active participation” (p. 52). Thinking from the context of high performance competitive games more broadly, I get hitched on passages that excessively praise the visual digital medium of computer games. Not because computer games aren’t amazingly complex entertainment materials, which offer other (or reconfigured) ways of playing games together. It is rather in how the visual experience is situated as being somehow “more than” other sensuous configurations of ludic experiences of play. Seen in the positioning of other existing material game spaces as less stimulating, such as when sites of sports, basketball courts and bowling alleys, are reported as being “visual(ly) austere and uniform” (Nardi, 2010, p. 52).<sup>13</sup> One quirk of such a technological pecking order, which places computer games as the “richer” cousin to a “poorer” sporting material architecture, is that other material spaces of games production are rendered lifeless. This utterly provokes my body memory of high performance sports as played on sensuous and “personal” landscape technologies.<sup>14</sup>

The (original) Stanford basketball stadium – Maples Pavilion, one of over perhaps 40 different basketball stadiums I have played in (no wait, it’s way more than that), had flooring that actually had a pulse. The feel of the floorboards flowed through you as you played alongside of the cheering spectators and the reverberations from the 10-players bounding up and down the floor. The last time I played there the stadium was filled with over 6,000 fans slathered in cardinal, bellowing in appreciation of their top ranked team. And even though I got concussed that night (by a colossal player wearing a plastic face mask who delivered a critical hit to my skull), it was an awesome experience: Nothing like anything else, and certainly far from austere or uniform.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting “work” of those “uniform” floorboards was recognized when they were torn out of the stadium. The springy feel was causing injury to players, the result of the “missed stair effect” in which a player left the floor at a different level than when they landed (the springy floor creating the different levels in conjunction with the body pushing off of the ground)(“Maples Pavilion”, n.d.). Mundane or uniform technologies are found to be “full of personality” for those who in fact use them.

Seeing, and the visual, is entrenched as the foremost “Western” sense (Pallasmaa, 2005). As the Maples Pavillion experience shows, there is more than the seeing in the creation and experience of any game.<sup>16</sup> Certainly computer games deliver outstanding visual fields of play, though the visual is only a part of the object as experienced. As such, touch, sound, and the interplay (between bodies and technologies) or texture there-of are also key components in the sensation of the (more than visual) field of play. While a video or computer game might intimate a visual digital medium as one of its core characteristics, we cannot play *Arena Tournament* without touching that field of play. Phenomenologically speaking, “Sight and touch are able to communicate with each other, to provide confirmations (or contradictions) of each other, because they are the senses of one and the same subject operating simultaneously, within one and the same world” (Grosz, 1994. p. 99). Lag exemplifies how the visual digital medium is also a felt field of play (Dourish, 2004). Paraphrasing a high performance LAT player – my touch gives texture to lag, I feel it before I see it.

In terms of the field of play itself, we can draw on notions of architecture and space to tone down the significance of a digitally manifested divide. As Emmison and Smith note, “Environments are not simply places where we see things in a passive way. They are also locations where we must look in active ways” (cited in Allen-Collinson, 2007, p. 121). A NASCAR driver, for example, doesn’t

demarcate between her body, an awareness of the tires on track, and the visual displays of either the tarmac road stretching out before her or the digital gauges at her fingertips.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, playing in a visual digital medium does not entail “looking twice” to actively see what is real and what is virtual (Allen-Collinson, 2007, p. 121). High performance players don’t talk or perform this way. For them, it is one location, one field of play completed by an assemblage of things necessary for the game to exist as such (T.L. Taylor, 2009a). To exist, there is an interplay of rich associations and translations made between the things, sensations, discourses, systems, and people as historically situated in creating the experienced game or sport “real”. And such an interplay of high performance action is always already produced with “actants” (those things which act) be they prosthetic limbs, scoped rifles, player-characters, or good ping (Latour, 2004). In the following, let us embrace other things beyond the visual digital medium, as there are compelling details made across the variously assembled *landscape technologies* on which high performance team play is produced (Butryn, 2002).

## **Structure of the dissertation**

There are seven chapters to this dissertation:

**Chapter one** has tied together how the field was entered, introduces the theoretical underpinnings, and offers an introduction on what sports sociology brings to the study. The discussion in this chapter turns towards some preliminary considerations of the computer game as a sporting activity, and the state of high performance play in these players’ actions and experiences.

**Chapter two** engages with the approaches and methods used throughout this exploration, renders a description of the fieldsites, and presents an overview on LAT gameplay.

**Chapters’ three to six** dig into the practices and arrangements of LATs. I explore the



following key themes;

- **Hooking into expert play.** This theme explores the entrance into high performance play, the circularity of cooperation and competition that the actors are involved in to maintain excellence in their game, and the importance of new media savvy to leverage ones status as a high performance player. Hooking into high performance play is by no means simply moving up some established levels; it is rather a complex configuration of practices.
- **Intimate bodies & nuances of excellence.** Team synergy is a key word for LAT players, and this theme moves as close to the inter-embodiment, intercorporeality and interplay of teams working towards such a fine tuned understanding of themselves, teammates, opponents, software, connectivity, peripheral technologies and the spaces of play. Key expressions in such intimate high performance play include: Haptic engagements, composure, the creation of space through movement interplay, and team synergy.
- **Gender performance at high performance events:** The players and event organizers visited in this study are nearly entirely comprised of young white men. LAN event spaces have undergone a sportisation process, which endorses a specific flavour of hegemonic sporting masculinity. LATs however were found to be an outsider on the larger high performance (e-sports) scenes, and in that position, compelling actions of both resistant and complicit agency were performed by the players on scene. The few women who were present made a profound impact on the local culture, as both complicit actors in the maintenance of the broader hegemonic sporting masculinity of high performance game cultures, but also as

resistant and visible actors in their performances as expert players.

- **Re-personalising high performance play:** This final discussion chapter looks at how LAT players are engaged in finely tuning the game as their own. Players buffering against the LAT scene more broadly work to “re-personalise” their high performance play by a variety of fascinating actions. Such as interpreting the game rules (written and coded) with a collective consideration of the(ir) spirit of play, bringing lag into their play as a tactical piece of their “playbook”, and shaking-up the current notion of expert play as toned solely by an instrumental formula. By taking on a “high performance imagination”, players and teams work with personal preferences and practices as overriding “best-on-paper” set-ups. In ending this look at LAT players, a final significant action by the community itself is covered: Players turn themselves into organizers, and make their own “field of play”, where they arrange, stream, officiate, and manage a high performance tournament in order to provide the community with a continuous flourishing system of “their kind of” high performance play - made by the players, for the players.

**Chapter seven** closes this research with concluding remarks on how the scene has moved since this research, commenting on; serious leisure and youth voices, gender performances and distributable teams, the re-personalisation of play and granular accounts of practice as well as implication for games/sports research, and future directions for study.

## {Chapter 2}

### Method assemblage

The start of a long-term qualitative research project always looks so deceptively neat in print. Ethnography of team X. Fieldwork at sites Y and Z. Timelines as stated to be wrapped up in July. The practice, as anyone that has embarked on such an exploration will tell you, is somewhat different. Though the expedition itself—the journey for a purpose into “the wild”—is the process: a process by which the researcher gains a sense of the on-site footholds from which to lift off from and an on-the-ground sensitivity of the places, things, and people of the exploration. Perhaps the best place to start with here is “home base” – how I got here, and a small acknowledgment of my researcher position. A confessional of my researcher position is essential on several levels. The researcher’s position and experience tones how the scene is taken in; it plays into the questions which are asked (and chosen to be pursued), and clearly, as the main writer of the final text, the researcher is implicated in the meaning-making via the production of the manuscript (Haraway, 1991). What the researcher brings to the exploration matters. She is never invisible in her research encounters. Haraway (1991) argues that researchers must discover themselves in their explorations and have “accountable positioning”. Throughout this study there were a handful of

occasions where I got stuck in the mud so to speak. This included in working through my own researcher positionality (and what it brought to this study); a consideration of how computer games could be framed as sporting practices (how was engagement at the PC, or at LAN events anything like involvement on a football field, or play at the Olympics?); and the frustrations or “failings” encountered through the fieldwork. I have chosen to use confessional writing at times throughout the text in order to demystify some of these researcher turns (Van Maanen, 2011), as well as make texts more “locatable” as partial and situated, and where the researcher is clearly present via the embodied knowledge’s made apparent through “webs of connections” (Haraway 1991).

### **Arriving at high performance networked team play**

I am a middle aged, white, Australian woman about to enter field sites that are almost entirely filled by young men.<sup>18</sup> But there is more to my personal story and research positionality than that (just as there is more to the young men of this study).

Within game studies, one doesn’t have to look too hard to find researchers that are long-time *gamers* or *fan-boys* in one form or another. My favourite spottings so far include: An Activision patch jacket from ones childhood, a pearl-board necklace in the shape of a Nintendo GameBoy, as well as the many epic tales of dragon-slaying embarked on by (most often) fathers and sons.

My background isn’t steeped in persistent computer game playing per se. Growing up, there was a Commodore 64 in the living room corner, just as there were board games stuffed into the closet. The local milk shop had the arcade game *Paperboy*, and during my tween years, a good deal of time was spent at the Hellenic club (for Friday night meals and socializing), with the

evening always ending in being passed handfuls of silver coins (Australian 10 and 20 cent pieces) to play *Centipede* and *Space Invaders* (though avoiding *Asteroids*), whilst our parents chatted uninterrupted with friends. These sorts of games were played every once in a while – nothing too excessive, just a part of the fabric of 1980’s youth culture. My background in high performance gameplay (long-term, competitive, and organized) is however intense: Made through sports, which, on the contrary, have been both a daily pastime and serious business since birth.

For me, basketball has been a lifelong pursuit - starting with my closest relatives, all of whom played. My mum was my first coach, and my aunt taught me many “textbook lessons” during elite level games. Best remembered was a (rocket of a) pass into the back of my head when I lost sight of the ball (keeping your eye on the ball at all times is just one of many tiny details that move players closer towards team excellence in the sport).<sup>19</sup> Twenty years, and many basketballs to the head later, I now sit with a rich and personal history with the sport: I have moved through a career from a casual to serious and finally international pro player (though now casual again). Playing as a bench warmer, as a starter, and as a last string player are all familiar roles.<sup>20</sup> I have been a trial player (attempting to get picked for the next level team), and I have filled the “star” role - at times being praised in the local media and being congratulated via institutional awards and through coach(es) laudations. Though at other times I have been on the receiving end of various “mistreatments” by (several) coaches, media, players, and certainly spectators (the UCLA band were particularly well versed in a special form of trash-talking spectatorship).

I have coached men, women, girls, and boys at the elite and casual-leisure levels. And I’ve played administrative roles including sitting on coach selection committees and player disciplinary boards. Penning pro-team statistics is neither unfamiliar work, nor is marking up an almost always accurate official score-sheet (quick paced games making the mark-up a difficult task). I have

performed in the unlauded role as a referee (one of the most nerve-racking and intensive jobs in the world. Even at the level of pee-wee basketball); and I have been suspended by officials for “bad behaviour” having retaliated to a fist coming at my face (not a shining moment in any player’s career). I have experienced fans rushing the court following championship game wins in three different countries, which also tells of my situation as a migrant player.

The hollow sound of a bad bounce off the rim on a last second (would-be game winning) shot is familiar, though I have also managed to hear a few glorious “swishes” at the buzzer, both self-made and teammate produced. I have been called teammate on at least ten different (club) teams. I have endured the effects of sponsored shoes (blisters, rolled ankles, general ugliness), hard hitting passes (a total rupture of the thumb leaving me useless with a can opener), and an inconceivable amount of “suicides”, “defensive slides”, and “close-out drills” (which may have had a say in my two major reconstructive knee surgeries).

I did a onetime stint as televised colour commentator and have been broadcast on national television. I have been called too old for elite play (as well as too young), have had to “defend” my sexuality (tied to my identity as an elite sportswoman), and have experienced being side-lined from pick-up-play on others’ religious beliefs tied to my gender. I’m still a spectator and a fan. And to my dismay, my very first pair of playing shoes, a canvas version of Larry Bird’s Converse Weapons, has recently been launched again on the street shoe market as “retro”.

A bucket list highlighting my basketball career is certainly not a thick description; though the work it does do here is one of a vista. Firstly, it displays a panorama of my positionality. And secondly, it maps out the extent of associations, emotions, frameworks, relations, personalities, pressures, equipment, and so on that lie within any understanding of high performance play. Any account of this level of organized, long term, high performance team play should have such

interwoven connections in mind – for they all are the “in the game”.

I have been asked on several occasions on what this personal experience brings to or means for the research. Certainly, as a sensitising lens, it tones how I see the field. Though throughout the fieldwork, and in a process of sense-making, my “best guesses from afar” were untangled through the talk and actions of others, where LAT players, game histories, tools of play, and organizational stake-holders challenged my assumptions and worked to produce the key ideas through a *shared system of knowledge* (Webster, 2008, p. 74). Furthering the collective nature of reflexivity as a mundane practice between people, Law (2004) suggests that, “...objectivity, in the way Haraway redefines it [as partial perspectives], is possible if we acknowledge and take responsibility both for our necessary situatedness, and for the recognition that we are located in and produced by sets of partial connections” (p. 69). Viewing reflexivity as such, in terms of partial connections and shared systems of knowledge, assists in understanding reflexivity as the collective production of (multiple) truths. For example, moving into the sites of high performance computer gaming competitions as a former team athlete produced certain kinds of collective understandings, and in very specific ways. Where I may have looked the outsider at LANs, I managed to forge connections with the players on the feel and pressures of technologies in play, the tacit practices of teamwork, how to scout opponents, and the “troubles” with officials and rules. My background as an experienced event competitor (albeit from somewhere else) gave me a point of reference that made the scene both simultaneously familiar to me, as well as working to make the conversational nodes recognizable to “locals” on the LAN scenes.<sup>21</sup> In the end, we produced an understanding of this state of play together.

While my background in elite level team sports had a certain ease to it which transported to high performance networked team play, the field itself was far more treacherous terrain to

travel. The path of the expedition in this research project was felt iteratively in the field where methods, tools, approaches, and the field itself were found along the way. And there was much iteration as dictated by the field. Progress raiding? (I failed miserably); constructivist grounded theory? (Didn't get me close to all those bodies and things in play);<sup>22</sup> admission into a world-first guild as a non-playing member? (High demands of me from the guild leader to produce website content, followed by him suddenly not responding to my messages);<sup>23</sup> cultural probes to capture immediate and simultaneous responses to networked team play? (No-one sent back the—expensive and time consuming—cultural-probe packages.) Over time, appropriate and accessible field sites were located or emerged with an eye on getting nearest to the field and people/things that produced team play. Howard Becker said that “There are no recipes for ways of doing social research” (1996, p. 70). This is in every way an example of that.

### **Getting inside the huddle**

I had some trouble getting inside the huddle of networked teams. If you've ever seen the film “Kitchen Stories” (Hamer, 2003) you'll have an idea of the struggles of getting into a scene. (Standing atop a rickety ladder and desperately banging on a locked window while the “subject” watches from the other side seems all too familiar.) I started out myself not up a ladder, but rather knocking on doors in *WoW*. I was guild hunting at the time for a PvE “progress raiding guild” – my other original field-site.<sup>24</sup> Progress raiding is the dedicated and continual effort to defeat the game content (the environment); it is the end-game, it calls for the work of larger teams, and it is played by “dragon slayers” (that's what the PvP'ers called raiding guilds or PvE'ers at any rate). So I was attempting, among other things, to be a dragon slayer or, better said, to be a part of a dragon slaying guild. I managed to play on no less than four progress raiding guilds during the term of this



research<sup>25</sup> – one of which was a main field site for just over a year until they brutally disbanded while I was hanging out with LAT players in a different “region” (both online and off).

The “original” plan was to bring together a rich description of the end-game/high performance practices of both (small) PvP and (large) PvE teams in *WoW*.<sup>26</sup> I had a whole section mapping out the significance of looking at multiple sites and configurations of team play, though this is now irrelevant). Except for that as small teams, *Arena Tournament* players are always attached to larger guilds. “Madner”, for example, was on a world-first guild – he thus slayed dragons (first!), but also created custom add-ons and managed to fine-tune his skills in PvP as a franchise LAT player. “Biggie” was a former (dedicated) end-game progress raider, but he shifted his focus to *Arenas* when the seasonal tournament went live. All LAT players’ in fact raided the latest PvE content to ensure that their practicing field was the same as their playing field.<sup>27</sup> What was originally going to be an account of two team arrangements of play (ethnography of large PvE teams and qualitative research with small PvP/LAT teams) was tapered down to one case. This wasn’t the result of a shortage of fieldwork or features to consider in the everyday work of the progress raiding guilds I was affiliated (on the contrary – what seems like endless data has been “heroically” played in and collected in my fieldnotes). But rather, what happened was the LAT players, the burgeoning scene, and the “uncharted territory” became too rich of a site not to dive in head-first, never to return the same again.

It was all a little surprising how easy it was to “get in” with LAT teams (keeping in mind, I had been ignored or pushed down the ladder for nearly two years by various PvE guilds by now). I was readying to head off to the University of Southern California for a research stay abroad (located close to no less than four already announced location-based tournaments which would be held between September - November, 2010), when my supervisor suggested she put me in touch

with some of her North American pro gaming “contacts”. Apparently, she was all the good impression I needed, as the two email introductions paved a smooth path between me and the high performance LAT teams. Having the team managers then initiate contact with their players (and legitimizing the research project) was a major “foot in the door” so to speak. Contact with the players was immediate (emails followed by Skype interviews), and those first few players I talked to seemed to explode with details of their practice. The minutiae was fascinating: Blizzard designers contacted them they said; no-one was on a salaried contract; top players earned a steady wage from 3<sup>rd</sup> party instructional video sites; faster reaction times were experienced at LANs; back-packs were used as seat “lifts” to find the right playing height; there were a hundred different challenges that were linked to the universal software system in its use for a competitive tournament (I can only tell it true – I was airborne after these first few moments with LAT players after having run the dragon slayer gauntlet).<sup>28</sup>

At the time of this study a small pocket of research had started forming on the practices of high performance team play at LANs (Rambusch, Jakobsson & Pargman, 2007; N. Taylor, 2009; T.L. Taylor, 2012; T.L. Taylor & E. Witkowski, 2010), with very little on *Arena* PvP or LATs. Having such a rich case to plummet into (well facilitated by the smoothness of site access) narrowed my research plan. And in this move, two years of (attempting to) slay dragons (and do research) with large PvE guilds was kissed goodbye.

This made me suddenly anxious; I was agitated about the now askew facet of my “playing researcher” position. With my PvE focused guilds, we had been focused on conquering the game content, not each other. Thus my PvP engagements up till now had primarily been “for fun” - grouping up with guild members in *Warsong Gulch*, and duelling outside of *Orgrimmar* (and not very well to be honest). My player versus player body was not a trained one. Questions plagued me:

Was I “qualified” to speak *to* and (more importantly) *about* high performance *Arena* players if I had never stepped, as it were, “into the ring”? What was my level 85 PvE geared Restoration Shaman going to bring to the table in terms of rapport with 3v3 PvP high performance tournaments? How would this aspect of my gameplay “elsewhere” assist in understanding their field? This specific part of the game wasn’t learned by body, where customs and cultures were experienced through the participation in the “locals” everyday life. This had (somewhat clumsily) become something else. A qualitative endeavour where I was not close to the very specific form of gameplay I was researching.<sup>29</sup>

Firsthand experience of gameplay is recognized as a base requirement in game studies research (Aarseth, 2003). And as a researcher looking at the sensuous interplay of the socio-material practices of play, having immediate experience on the field “in play” is just prudent (especially on a playing field where it might be hard as an observer to grasp hold of the pressures of play, and the meanings created, via the work of many bodies and machines). I was starting to worry that I would need a “do over” and have to start my erudition in *WoW* from scratch as a PvP’er (which was a fairly daunting thought having struggled to “make it” to the end-game in PvE) – but thankfully, a little liberation occurred on how to “play research”.

### **Playing research**

In Christine Hine’s (2005) work on virtual methods, she reflects that “In the moments of innovation and anxiety which surround the research methods there are opportunities for reflexivity” (p. 9). Reflecting on Aarseth’s text on game analysis (2003), my position as a player varied from “light play” (with PvP), to “repeated play” (with PvE progress raiding guilds and pick-up-group affiliated team play in *WoW*). Aarseth’s final two levels of play, “expert play” or “innovative play” were

certainly not met in my experience of the 3v3 PvP game.<sup>30</sup> And these were by all means the level of players who I was studying. Aarseth goes on to say,

If we comment on games or use games in our cultural and aesthetic analysis, we should play those games, to such an extent that the weight we put on our examples at least match the strata we reach in our play (p.7).

Where I agree with “playing research” more broadly, I have some hesitations on being “on equal terms” to the level of play which one speaks to. As such, I have drawn upon another “researcher as player” position, one of the *sensuous* researcher (de Garis, 1999).

Working with the notion of sensuousness, de Garis (1999) draws on his experience as a former professional wrestler who for a period of time was observed in his athletic practice by (another) ethnographer. From his long term experience (and evaluation of himself outside of it through another text), some other ways of thinking about “playing research” come to light. de Garis doesn’t categorize tiered levels of expertise required, but rather he emphasizes a different stance: That getting into the ring need not entail “getting in the ring” (p. 72). That is, the researcher doesn’t require “equal” playing experience as the object of study.<sup>31</sup>

What de Garis emphasizes in his experience was that a sensuous understanding of wrestling was something that the ethnographer (Sharon Mazur - a non-wrestler) at the scene did not acquire, and ultimately it lessened her study. Her position was one that read the scene entirely from outside of the ring. de Garis is less concerned here with Haraway’s “god-trick” (where generalizable claims on knowledge are made; “seeing everything from nowhere”, without accounting for the position of the researcher – See Haraway, 1991, p. 189), but rather he is concerned with something that I might call *senseless*, where researchers who take a sidelined position, especially in play, miss the language of the senses which are involved in the shaping the game.<sup>32</sup> As tied to the Merleau-Ponty (1964) notion of *intercorporeality*, de Garis (1999) pushes for

an attendance to the corporeal experience of the researcher, where the researcher requires a feel of the action involved on the field(site). From his position as a former athlete he explains how a researcher's perception is enhanced by an awareness of the subtleties complicating the activity under observation. When bodies and technologies are on stage, subtle cues such as touch, hesitation, intimacy, or the unseen pressure points engaged in the moment of the activity are significant pieces of the experience that are accessible to the research/researcher. By bringing the researcher (in this case, Mazur) into a training session, de Garis argues that it would have padded out her sensory understanding of the site. That is, developing the body knowledge of what Geertz would note as being able to sense the difference between a wink and a blink (1973, p. 6).

Despite a general dissatisfaction in not having immersed myself fully in the field of PvP teams, my long-term play with end-game PvE had many clear connections to various sensuous practices and everyday experiences of LAT participants. For example, experiencing the loss of practiced touch with tools from going "offline" over summer vacation; encountering new patches and getting acquainted with them (remapping the keyboard, seeing how new abilities "work" with and against others); handling lag during key moments of play; watching technologies go "wild" (such as seeing a keyboard key fly off my laptop without warning during a heated battle); witnessing the action of the game unfurl which calls for sharp attention to timing, field position, line-of-sight opportunities, and "other actors" performances; stomaching the frustration of not performing well individually and collectively as a team; feeling adrenalin take-over, and not being able to do anything about it. These were a part of the feel of play, which reminded me that any small amount of touch and feel "in the ring" would be of worth. In other words, one needn't "become" a full-blown actor (a skilled wrestler/NASCAR driver/high performance gamer), but through experiencing some of the same methods of, for example, haptic engagement, movement

interplay, or inter-embodiments, the researcher can tap into the recognizable “by body” layers of actions going on between players, the peripherals in the ring, and its surrounding pressures; ultimately offering a more sensuous account or more fittingly, a less “senseless” position. Accordingly, my researcher position is one that gets close to the “strata of play” which I am talking about, without actually getting to the same level. In my own assemblage of experience—long-term PvE and end-game play in *WoW* and high performance sports—I have established, and accounted for, a researcher position which connects to the game and players of this research via an *awareness of the various subtle actors complicating the activity*. As cultural researchers we all have different hooks, different “enabling practices” that get to different layers of the grit of practice, and these should be embraced and accounted for rather “put out of action” in games research.

There is one final word to be mentioned regarding researcher, field, and positionality. Having a different level of “expertise” (where mine see-sawed between an “expert member” in high performance team play to a one of a “general field participant” as a player of *WoW* PvE) must be bore in mind in terms of how shared systems of knowledge are generated between researchers and the collaborators in the field. For example, in his exploration of the *Evolution* fighting (video) game tournament scene, Todd Harper (2010) explains that he needed to “convey a sense of uncertainty” (p. 63) during his interviews with players in order to keep his own gamer and “in the know” orientation under cover. My position, however, was literally the opposite. I communicated that I understood the pressures of play, the feel of competition, the testing of teamwork, the challenges with technologies (and officials). Conveying a sense of *certainty* of the field, albeit through a mix of high performance sports play and *WoW* experience more broadly, was what got the players and I to the grit of how networked high performance team play is experienced. Though gender and age are certainly at work in my researcher position, and the visual presence of a

mature woman on the scene was perhaps perplexing enough for players not to be threatened in such expressive and sensitive conversations. I was marked as an outsider, though once conversation hit, we found connections in a shared sensitivity towards the intimate details, the twists and turns of team games that make all the difference. For some reason this juxtaposition (of woman, practised teammate, mature, and other) worked at live events, as I was taken as a non-threatening and interested (though “just visiting”) local on the scene to whom the experiences of team play could be shared with.<sup>33</sup> In this research, I found that it was a combination of open (rather than guarded) connections that worked to push at our understandings, and got us digging deeper into the fine-distinctions on what it means to be inside the huddle of networked team play.

With my own partial connections to the field forefronted, and with an idea of which direction I am taking us, it is perhaps time to chart out where I actually went – to the high performance practices of LAT 3v3 (PvP) teams.

## **Field outline**

The field sites of this research include several different organized location-based *World of Warcraft Arena Tournaments* (LATs) in North America and Europe. As well as an online high performance tournament organized and officiated by LAT players. The core players and teams who I observed (as documented frequently in my fieldnotes) include 45 regular players (of which 28 were consistent across the various LAT scenes).<sup>34</sup> These players were mostly young (from 16 – 27 years of age), white, North American men, with nine players represented from Western Europe and one from Australia. Three Asian American and five South Korean men also participated in this research. One Asian American woman is represented. The players spanned over 20 different teams, that is, teams made up of different player constellations as well as sponsor affiliations. The tournaments

took place between 2008 and 2012.<sup>35</sup>



Figure 2: The field of (under pseudonym) LAT player/collaborators and how they are associated as “distributable teammates”, that is, playing across different teams during seasons of play – See key below for details.





Figure 3: Key for the field of LAT player/collaborators.

Of the players who spoke at length to me about their high performance practice (between half an hour to two hours per interview, of which several players were returned to for further discussion), there are 18 key collaborators. Though, many shorter discussions with the other regular players on the scene also fill out my fieldnotes. Two sponsors talked to at length during the tournaments about their role, and offered a commercial and organizational perspective on the scene. Two administrators offered me their thoughts on the tournament scenes and also contributed to a more faceted understanding of the workings of these diversely organized sites of competition.

But most of the interviews and conversations came from on-scene interactions, ranging from me leaning over the chair to ask a quick question of a player spectating in the crowd,<sup>36</sup> to “hanging-out” and chatting during two-hour-long games. All of the time I spent on the LAT scenes

could be called hanging-out. Mulling around the scene, sitting and conversing with clusters of players, taking videos, making voice recorded notes, talking to teams post-game, doing ad-hoc interviews on things that cropped up along the way (in a one hour snippet, several conversation jumped from lag to ping-fix, from sponsorships to the gendering of 3<sup>rd</sup> party content, from technology issues to sensuous bodies and technologies as teams in play) and so on. This resonates with Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) who note that, “Ethnographers collect materials relevant to members’ meanings by focusing not on members’ decontextualised talk but on naturally occurring, situated interaction in which local meanings are created and sustained” (p. 140). Taking this approach, I became sensitive to the practices involved in making team life “work”, and I was privy to seeing how people “grapple with uncertainty and confusion, how meanings emerge through talk and collective action, and how understandings and interpretations change over time” (Emerson et.al, 1995, p. 4). Besides the on-scene research, I also contacted key players for additional interviews. One of these two-hour-long semi-formal interviews preceded the first live-tournament (via Skype), another was held as a post-tournament follow-up (face to face), and the final key interview held away from the scene was with the co-organizers of the player initiated tournament (The NAOs) which was conducted across a private message channel (where I was tagged as “Emma\_Researcher”) on an *Arena* dedicated website – in this way, all the co-organizers could follow the questions and commentary in a private setting (T.L. Taylor, 1999; Rutter & Smith, 2005).

For the live-tournaments I developed a semi-formal interview sheet that opened up questions on the body in high performance play (How does lag feel? Tell me about your biggest technological/play controversy? How do you go about learning other player’s movements?). It was lightly followed during the first conversations and as the player/collaborators shared their experiences it slowly dematerialized as questions arose fluidly as the conversational fabric was

extended and adjusted with each discussion. During the live tournaments the exchanges seemed to be endless, as all of my (many) recording devices were filled up before a day's end.

Apart from the LAT players and "locals" (administrators and sponsors), I also interviewed and had continued focused conversations with one player-shoutcaster. All photographic images and videos from these events are my own (unless stated otherwise), and were taken on-site alongside of the fieldnotes and other documenting methods. They are used as sensuous notes in the analysis of the fieldwork.

The coding and memoing of field notes, interviews, and the larger body of "information" was sustained throughout the research in order to keep up a conversation between the layers of data, the collaborators, and the significance of certain themes that emerged as significant or controversial over time. As Emersen et al. (1995) note, the researcher "is indeed interested in categories, but less as a way to sort through data than as a way to name, distinguish, and identify the conceptual import and significance of particular observations" (p. 151). The development of the themes of this research have thus been produced alongside of conversations and contributions of the collaborators (participants in the study were included collaboratively as knowledge holders from my first conversations with the individuals or groups), making the endeavour an iterative process, both in terms of methodological approach and through its analysis.

In terms of the voices missing in this research, Blizzard Entertainment (the game developer and main administrator of LATs) itself is one of them. I made repeated attempts to get in touch with Blizzard Entertainment representatives, though I was ultimately unsuccessful in gaining access to any insiders. Consequently, Blizzard as a double-faceted institution (game developer and LAT administrator) has been drawn in via secondary sources or by connections through players and administrators - where conversations with LAT actors are used (interviews with those in direct

contact with Blizzard), as well as the wealth of secondary general sources such as interviews, game development panel field notes from BlizzCon, and “blue posts”, which combined speak lightly of some facets of Blizzard as a major actor on the scene.<sup>37</sup> The following table zooms in one step closer to my work within the field of play – location-based *Arena Tournaments*.

**Fieldwork: Location-based Arena Tournaments, World of Warcraft**

**World of Warcraft Blizzard European Invitational (WWI) – 2008**

To avoid any confusion, I need to restate that the Blizzard tournaments that started online and moved to location-based settings (“*Arena Pass Tournament*” or TRs) were only observed in the aforementioned site of play. Live-realm online ladder play in “*Arena Tournament*” is not a field site. Neither are the regular rounds of the TRs).

Observations

- Attended the two-day game convention and hung out at the event. This was my first introduction to LATs, and it was an overwhelming experience where I felt as though I didn’t know where to look to see the scene in action – there was simply too much happening. Though I have fieldnotes which tell that I “ooh-ed” and “ahh-ed” at the finals when health bars spiked up and down, so I had some sense of “where to look” (though, perhaps it was just the other spectators who “showed me” how to act?). This was also the only event where players weren’t accessible before, during (the stages were fairly closed off), and after the game as the VIP area was used. (I did not obtain any player interviews at this event, mostly due to this event spacing constraint). Interestingly, this has changed over time with players now hanging out in the crowd, and generally being extremely accessible, perhaps choosing to distance themselves from the “pageantry” of the event (See Chapter 5).



**WWI 2008:** South Korean team getting “camera ready” with a make-up assistant for the live streamed grand finals.



**DHW 2009:** Local winners looking a little surprised to have won. DHW was the only tournament that still had a feel of “coincidence” to the high performance teams playing (an open tournament with a few invited teams). At every other tournament there were regular faces, franchise t-shirts, and certainly more “routine” to those in attendance.

- Photo/video documentation. The images and videos I documented at this event made me realize I needed a good quality camera if I wanted to document this scene which was too dark, and too “quick” for my current bargain model.
- Fieldnotes were taken as written documents and as recorded notes.
- With assistance from *WoW* PvP bloggers, I found out long after this event that this tournament was a major “turning point” for *WoW* in terms of International high performance play. The South Korean team in the image dominated the tournament, only dropping one match, marking a “revival” for the international high performance scene.<sup>38</sup>

### DreamHack Winter (DHW) – 2009

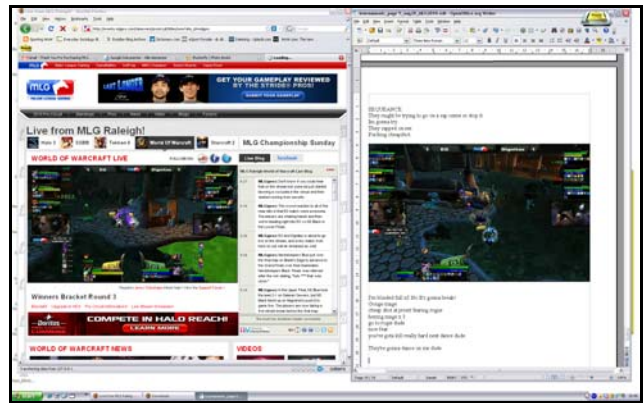
#### Observations

- Photo/video documentation of both early rounds on the main floor of DreamHack and attendance at the grand finals at the DreamExtreme Arena. (See T.L. Taylor & E. Witkowski, 2010).
- Fieldnotes were taken and written up each morning. (As a mega-LAN, DreamHack is “live” 24/7, and I found myself in bed around 2-3 AM each morning. Forum discussions and online videos of gameplay extend this work.
- DHW was the only tournament I followed they did not to have any “regulars” on the scene. This may very well reflect the costs/benefits involved in sending teams to Sweden.

### Major League Gaming (MLG) live-streamed event, Raleigh - 2010

#### Observations

- Followed the two-day live-stream of the Raleigh tournament. This was my first entry into the MLG “flavour” – and their interpretation of pro/am e-sports. I watched the entire weekend of play from my bedroom floor, taking notes and screen-shots, while following the main *Arena* website for commentary (including from players at the event, as I observed at the Washington D.C. event, players would post comments immediately following a



**MLG Raleigh live-stream 2010:** A screen shot of my UI as I observe the live streamed event - watching the games & live-blog (left), while taking notes and capturing images (right).



**MLG D.C. 2010:** Preparing for the focused intensity needed for high performance play. A cacophony of personal peripherals followed this player; a matte-black keyboard (with no type on it at all), a keyboard frame (out of shot), his iPhone (music), a special mouse pad (not that of the team he is playing with, but rather from another high profile Asian-based e-sports franchise), and his aerodynamic mouse – the only one I saw.



**MLG D.C. 2010:** Mid-game tactics talk – discussing what small

match). It was a rather untraditional observation, but nonetheless a live-event which unfolded across multiple channels. In fact, the live-stream brought great closeness to the teams at work by the choice of the MLG to live-stream the in-game team audio (so viewers could hear the real-time communications that went with a team's performance). This aspect introduced me to the player lingo, intimate moments of talk dealing with failure, and trash-talking. It felt like eavesdropping in that the players were themselves not at all accustomed to censoring themselves on this new technology in play.

#### Interviews

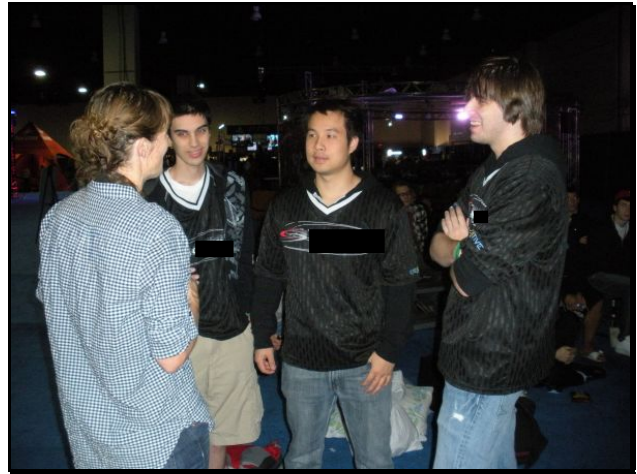
- A two-hour interview with one of the top LAT players was conducted after this event. The player's lucid commentary provided further toning prior to entering the "live event" at Washington D.C. I am grateful for this player's engagement and friendliness, for not only did he attune me to his field of play, but he also introduced me to the field when I entered at the following event.

#### **Major League Gaming (MLG) live event, Washington D.C. – 2010**

##### Observations

- In mafia terms "I was made" on the scene as soon as I walked over and shook the hand of the well-known player I had interviewed just weeks before.
- This was a three-day tournament, and having a hotel right next door made for ease of downloading from and recharging my overused recording devices.
- Figuring out the tone of a LAN is truly difficult. Prior to this event (my first MLG), I had attended DHW and WWI which had less of a media sports identity. Moving in to the MLG I struggled "putting together an outfit", that didn't position me too much as an outsider. This effort was, probably as to be expected, to no avail. As one of the first people to approach me, a videographer working for a franchise team streaming the event, asked "You don't look like the usual person who comes to this event, what are you doing here?"

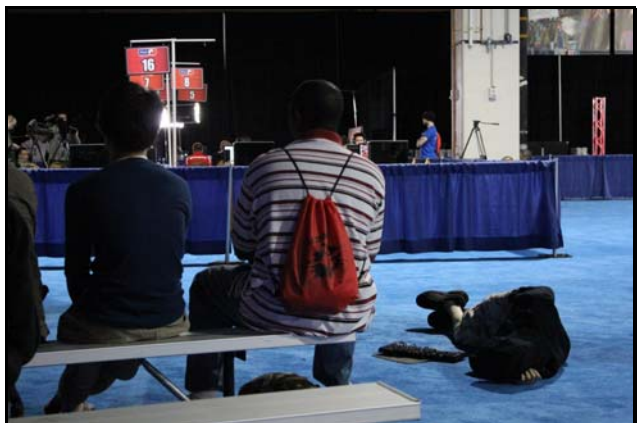
changes might work to their advantage.



**MLG D.C. 2010:** Less than a day on the scene, and already I've been "made". This image appeared on a franchise e-sports website as I interviewed a team post-win.



**MLG D.C. 2010:** Spectatorship – the sound reverberating back in the room from the big screen "makes it almost epic", says one of the players.



**MLG D.C. 2010:** A LAT player catching some between-game rest

- I purchased a good quality camera just prior to this event, which made all the difference to how the scene was recorded and analysed – the photos and videos offered a look back to the place I was standing to see the other details of play. When I downloaded and looked over the images after returning to my hotel room, I caught more details than I managed to get down in my own notes. The videos and images became another set of eyes and ears on the scene, as they at times filled in moments when I was apparently “not seeing” or overloaded by the sights and sounds of the event.<sup>39</sup>

- This was my first meeting with the players, sponsors, bloggers, officials, and organizer’s. And it cannot be understated that as a “visiting” local, I was experienced as a sudden part of the scene. One administrator told me on Facebook that he had mentioned my presence to his contacts at Blizzard – as someone doing “interesting stuff”. The few women on the scene, a blogger and a former player nodded in my direction – perhaps appreciating the sight of another “other”. And the manager of a franchise team even posted an image of me interviewing his players on their e-sports website. I was altogether involved despite only having “been there” less than a day.

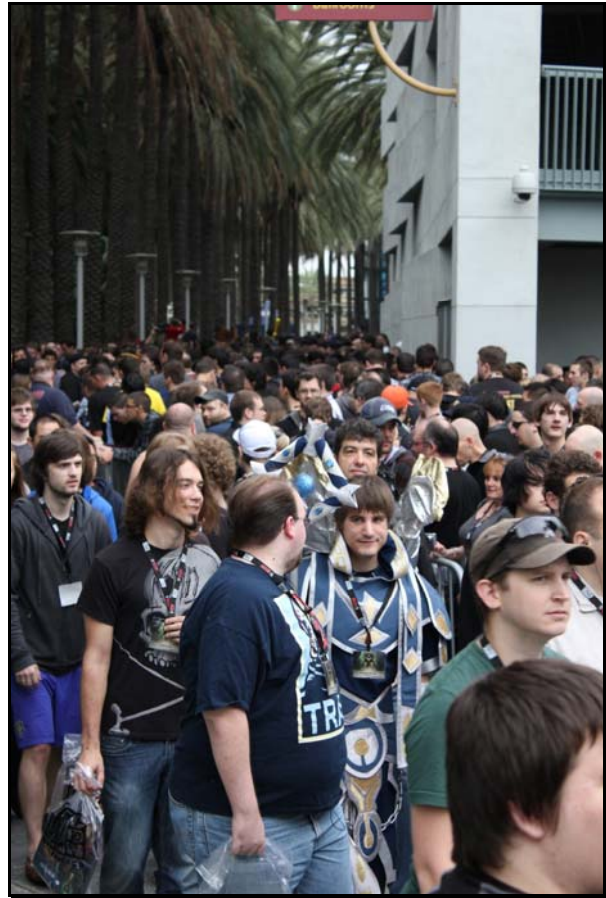
- I also followed the secondary sources affiliated to this live event, especially the websites that players posted to immediately after play.

#### Interviews

- The semi-formal interviews carried out on this scene include approximately 24 long (30+ minutes) interviews and a dozen more short commentaries between myself and players, sponsors, media representatives and administrators (from a couple of minutes to 20 minute conversations).

- In one early interview with a sponsor (running an *Arena* instructional video service site), he told me (a week before Blizzard announced it) that the final tournament of the year, the MLG Dallas finals (which I had already booked my tickets and hotel to) was cancelled. What is essentially gossiping is an amazing way to get some of the texture of and “insider information” on the scene.

in the spectator area; keyboard and mouse pad close by his side.



**BlizzCon 2010:** Waiting for doors to open (and a view from my vantage point as I look for a guy with a sign who has my ticket!)



**BlizzCon 2010:** Fandom. A panda-painted fan documents the highest prized “trophy loot” – the championship series *Arena* Tournament rings (which rivalled those of sports rings).

**BlizzCon finals (including European and North American regional finals) – 2009 & 2010**

BlizzCon is a convention held by Blizzard Entertainment that showcases their franchise games. Since 2008, BlizzCon has held the championship series of the *Arena Pass Tournament* (where online qualifiers were the official route to an invitation to the finals).

Observations

- In 2009 I purchased the BlizzCon live-stream, and documented the finals with fieldnotes and screen-shots
- In 2010 I observed the ramp up to the finals (which I would be attending) via the live-stream. Each of these regional qualifiers provided a BlizzCon finalist.
- From Fieldnotes, June 3, 2010: “(at 3.58AM)...with two minutes to go I start refreshing, at 4AM on the dot the button for purchase reveals itself and with that second I am in the cue. I turn to my second computer and punch the “Buy tickets” button again. I am number 12703 in cue on the first computer and 15985 on the second. *Piss.*”<sup>40</sup> I knew the chances for me attending BlizzCon (for a reasonable price) was slim. I had been in contact with Blizzard in an attempt to get a press pass (as researcher), but that had also been declined on the grounds of ticket shortage (otherwise read as, bigger fish had applied for press passes). In a crazy twist of fate, while interviewing a world-first raider online, I mentioned that I hadn’t managed to snag a ticket, when he said “you can buy one off of me”. He had split up with his partner who was now less interested in attending the convention with him. I PayPal’ed him the US\$150 dollars immediately. On the day, I met up with him outside with the xxx strong crowd and snagged my lanyard – entering BlizzCon 2010 as “Crystal”. I couldn’t have been more fortunate.
- Observations at BlizzCon were incredibly different to both WWI and the MLG. As I was “known” by most of the front three rows at the event, observations were immediately mixed with



**BlizzCon 2010:** The main stage at BlizzCon 2010



**BlizzCon 2010:** Hanging-out in the front with the competitors and other LAT regulars who came to the tournament as spectators or to fulfil contracts by working at sponsor booths.



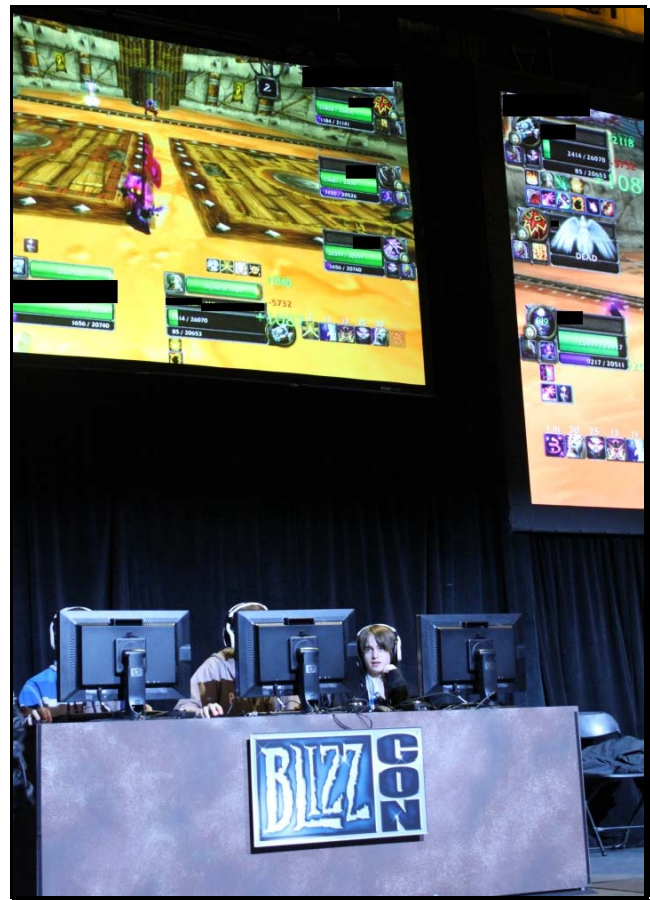
**BlizzCon 2010:** The stress of high performance play setting in.



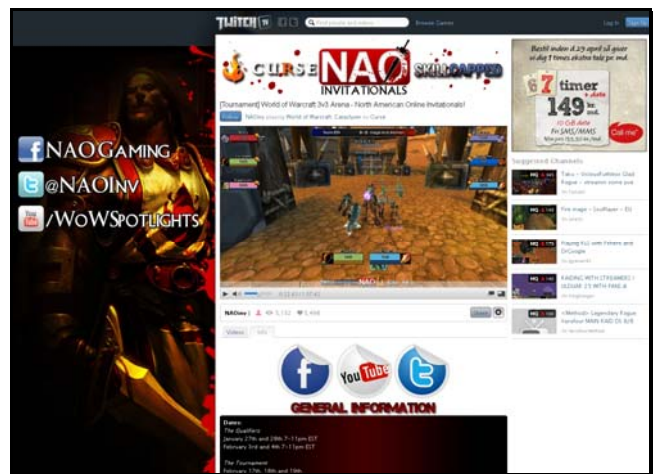
conversations. The space was fairly accessible, where I could stand on the side of the scene and jostle for room with “official” photographers (which only became a “real” fight for space in the final game). The closeness to the stage brought a lot of details – I could see players doing the ping fix and observe the players trying to focus amidst technical problems. I became aware of the sudden absence of the side-line officials (during the championship match), and generally I could hear a lot more of the trash-talking and pressures of play as read in body language.

### Interviews

- All interviews and fieldnotes were recorded digitally and transcribed immediately after the event. The interviews were all informal (no semi-formal interview guide at all), and ranged from sitting next to players for an entire match and talking about the details of play, to random introductions made by me to entourage and spectators, getting their input on the tournament. The most compelling details in the interviews came from a meshing of live-action (and shoutcaster commentary) which was discussed “in the making” with the LAT (player) spectators I was seated beside, and then followed up by talking to the players post-game. As I mentioned, the event setting itself, my “made” position as a familiar face, being able to “hang-out”, and that the players stayed to watch (rather than using the VIP area) led to this fieldwork being “loaded with detail”. (I still feel so very lucky to have gotten that ticket!)
- My photos and videos from this event have played a substantial documenting as well as “off-loading” role in this research. Numerous details have been “found” in the images, and from the videos I have captured some intense moments where the bodies under pressure speak for themselves in the tension of backs, frantic movements, and moments where players don’t inhale as they deeply focus on a critical play.
- With the sizeable uproar that followed this event (see Chapter 6), I followed the official forums after this event for community and player reactions.



**BlizzCon 2010:** A dead player (represented by angel on UI and player with hands off of mouse and keyboard) just waiting for his teammates to make something happen.



**NAO '11-'12:** The NAO's delivered via Twitch.tv as a spectatable, live-tournament – organized and run by LAT players.

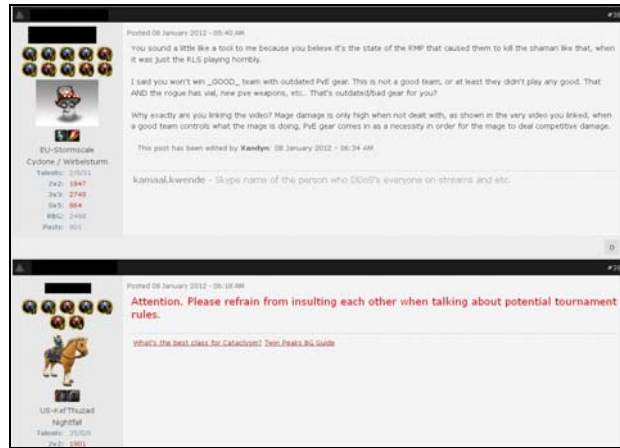
- Two weeks after this tournament, I met up with one of the second-place winners (one of the players I had already had many conversations with) for a semi-formal (2½ hour) interview to talk about the experience of BlizzCon and the sensuousness of LAT play.

**North American Online Invitational (NAO), 2011 - 2012**

- Followed the finals series held on Twitch.TV – taking fieldnotes and screen-shots.
- The players participating in the online tournament were many of the same faces that I followed and interviewed from the 2010 MLG and BlizzCon events.
- I interviewed the co-organizers of the event after their first tournament as well as followed the discussion on the main *Arena* forums where NAO rules and information was being posted/commented on.

**Additional *Arena* texts**

- LAT players use and are spread over multiple social media and *Arena* related websites. I have kept up with players and happenings from the following areas: *Arena*-specific website forums, personal YouTube channels, *Arena* podcasts, franchise e-sports sites, instructional video gaming sites, power-rating sites, add-on sites, Twitch.TV, player and franchise twitter feeds, as well as Facebook personal contacts and groups.



**NAO '11-'12:** An NAO participant, LAT player, and content manager (on the main *Arena* website) working to keep the tone civil regarding the rule choices of the NAO organizers'. (The spherical icons on the left denote the seasonal “Gladiator titles” (see endnote #60) awarded to the player – through these icons, these two players are easily recognizable as long-term and high level players).

*Informed consent*

The study was conducted with the informed consent of the participants. I obtained consent verbally, as I asked whether the participants would consider sharing their experiences on networked team play for a PhD research project (with articles and the dissertation published). All the participants of this study who I approached were keen to share their knowledge.

One particular experience was very revealing in terms of what the “interviewees” read

from me, my talk, and the noticeable things which I carried. With a mini-voice recorder in hand, I explained the research project to a team of three players who had just won their first match at a LAN. On wrapping up a richly detailed 45-minute interview, one of the players asked if I wouldn't mind if he gave a "shout-out" to his sponsors, to which he immediately proceeded to acknowledge various IT-companies with me standing there with an astonished look on my face (after which I had to re-state what this interview was for and gain consent again in a retroactive, though unintended, fashion). After this clarification blunder, several on-site methods of introduction were altered, and seemed to help make the interview context more visible. Offering a business card while clarifying the project helped to tone and focus the (fatigued) interviewee/collaborators to what the "atypical" interview was for and about (as several people on the scene noted, I was the first researcher looking at their play, and they were just in the habit of reeling off answers to game-site related bloggers).<sup>41</sup> The main tool, the mini voice recorder, was a key performer on the scene itself, and in hindsight I would consider covering the device with a visible logo of the research institution for future interviews in such on-the-go locations to have a visible and unobtrusive marker of the interview/interviewer's form and circumstance.<sup>42</sup>

The players, teams, franchises, and sponsors that participated in this study have all been placed under pseudonym (unless stated otherwise).

### *On working face to face*

While I chose LAN play at the outset for the opportunity to see and hear teams working together, it still had its limitations. I recall being stunned that I could not get close to the *Arena* players at the first Blizzard event I attended (WWI, 2008), at this time the players' were roped off in restricted areas and given the "star-treatment" (which has been toned down over the years). Though access

at the major events changes shape (T.L. Taylor, 2009b, 2012), at one event only playing players got access to the stage, at other events you could literally breath down players necks and see the sweat on their brow forming throughout play<sup>43</sup>.



Figure 4: Breathing down necks at the MLG and getting a close look at UI layouts, communication and the player's perspective.

A further point from the events and live-stream is the UI. As a spectator you see the game through a standardized spectator-client, which during 2010 was altered across three consecutive tournaments. As one of the player's told me "they're useless". As an experienced player, he said that all he could take in from the spectator client was the health and mana bars - as the presentation of the game was impossible to follow in that the spectator UI doesn't convey all the necessary information – i.e. targeting pets, buffs etc. (the little things that matter) to make the

overall visual worthwhile. Where being on the scene certainly offered the grit of the lived experience and closeness of experience expressed through post game interviews, I would be quick to add that there are certainly some limitations (some foreseen, some unexpected) that went along with documenting the games. However, it was in the live-events that I saw “technologies speak their case”. All of the little break-downs, reactions, and regulations (many of the things that players don’t notice, or don’t think to tell of in off-site or decontextualised interviews) were made visible on the live-scene. The major controversies acted out by the tools of play were documented as a direct result of “being there”.



Figure 5: Pre game warm-up? Three head officials and the e-sports tournament co-ordinator looking at a problematic machine assigned to a player moments before game-start; players try to stay focused using very different strategies.

### *Securing rapport*

From the first step onto a scene of play, this research has engaged with a standpoint of (participant) collaboration. While I certainly had some hunches and a “horizon of expectations” (both theoretical and practical, though both of which went under critical evaluation as soon as I entered into the field – see Piggott 2010), the flow of the conversations and handling of my early interpretations were done so with others (many key participants became long-term contacts and engaged critically with my questions and reflection). I gave them the lead, asking what concerns they deemed as central and encouraged dialogue after interviews.<sup>44</sup> Several participants got involved in pushing back at my reflections, and a few engaged in tackling the “trickier details” together through longer deliberations (such as perceiving how experience and movement map out for a team when individual switches are made in offense and defence). I can only hope that the one comment of an *Arena* player (who I was seated beside and chatting with for a good part of the BlizzCon 2010 finals) affirms that my collaborative and “sporting approach” was appreciated and recognized as someone trying to engage with an understanding of their leisure practice. Discussing a move we watched on stage, and how it is felt as a team under pressure, he said “Man, no one has ever asked us that. And I’ve been on the scene for two years – you just get it”. I at least attempt to “get it” through familiar associations existing in the shape and feel of high performance team play.

### **The form of high performance teams**

Decentring the machine and software as the focal point of computer games is one move I make in this research, and it is leveraged specifically from the situation of the *high performance* team.<sup>45</sup> High performance teams draw in a network of expressions that, to some extent, speak to their

practice. These include the designations of “experts” or those who express an effort towards “excellence” or “mastery” in their game (Chambliss, 1989; Chen, 2010; Rambusch, Jakobsson & Pargman, 2007; T.L. Taylor, 2006a; Giddings & Kennedy, 2008), “committed”<sup>46</sup> or “dedicated” players (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004),<sup>47</sup> “power gamers” (T.L. Taylor, 2006a), or competitive players who engage in “deliberate practice” (Smith in Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2011),<sup>48</sup> as well as the notion of player “careers” (Ball, 1976) in which the qualities of *serious leisure* are accessible (Stebbins, 1982, 2007).<sup>49</sup> In this last concept of player engagement, serious leisure speaks to the positive gains of long term participation. Stebbins (2007) outlines six qualities:

- the need to *persevere*: Managing failure and experiencing the positive sensations of “sticking with it”
- the discovery of a *leisure “career”*: Where levels of expertise are discovered along with stages of development
- *significant personal effort*: Such as specialized knowledge, training, skill and or experience)
- the *durable benefits* that come from participation: I.e. feelings of accomplishment, an enhanced self-image, or belongingness
- the *unique ethos* that is developed around the situated instances of the practice: The shares attitudes, goals, and the development of community spirit
- the *strong identification* with the serious leisure pursuit: Where a distinct identity is developed there, as orientated by the previous five qualities of serious leisure (pp. 12 - 13).

Where the aforementioned terms slice into player practices in significant ways, they are done so with specific meanings and orientations established in the players’ performances. Thus, I am using the term “high performance” to justly designate how these players do *their* play. For example, “experts”, as a way of describing the competency of LAT players, is found to be too thin - not

allowing for the fine but significant nuances within expert LAT participation found between expert and virtuoso, tactical or body composure expertise. “Competition” is another term steeped in traditional understandings of achievement oriented computer games and sports – though the broad “sporting” understanding of the term leaves little room for cooperation *within* competition, and the intimate sociability of the game even at the high performance level where contracts and prize money are on the line (de Castell & Jenson, 2008; Arnold, 2003).



Figure 6: A player (from the opposing team) lends a hand in doing a registry (ping) fix on the BlizzCon tournament computer belonging to his up’n’coming opponent. The players’ regularly take over some of the jobs of “the tech team” at various tournaments.

Following the work of sports phenomenologist’s (Arnold, 1979; Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2011), three specific formulations of practice are looked at in this research on high performance teams:



(1), intercorporeality, (2) inter-embodiment, and (3) interplay.<sup>50</sup>

- 1) **Intercorporeality** is the action a team creates together. In this study, I use intercorporeality as related to a single team in play, where it is described as a body in practice being experienced by others, but also by “ourselves” (Sokolowski, 2000. p. 154). In this sense, intercorporeality refers to the intimate experiences of the performing teams.
- 2) **Inter-embodiment** involves a consideration of other teams’ bodies, or better said, recognizing, negotiating, and orienting oneself and the team toward the togetherness and intercorporeality of other players and other teams during play (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2011, p. 342). It is also thinking in terms of *reversibility* (or *chiasm*; Merleau-Ponty, 1968), where as a body we touch and are touched, see and are seen in our actions (most visible in interactions with others).<sup>51</sup> This might be best explained when teams create complex pressures such as the reversibility of actions between a football player and her defender, but also between an entire team working offensively against the intercorporeality of the multiple defenders labouring against them. Thinking of inter-embodiments extends the phenomenological approach to the entire field of players.
- 3) **Interplay** is the labour of and between opponents, technologies, and the lattice work of things or “auxiliaries” (as Merleau-Ponty calls a blind man’s cane) in flux together. Interplay is the parent category – drawing together all the things which act on and formulate networked team play. When I talk of interplay from the players’ perspective, it is however often framed just on one or two specific things which can be articulated clearly in their interplay (i.e. team-play as touched by keyboard choices, or tactics

made along the feel of lag as tied to how human adjudicators interpret the written tournament rules).<sup>52</sup>

This framework has most importantly brought some of the feel and impressions of nonhumans at play in both their most felt and obvious pressures (such as lag), to their less obvious forces on play (such as when opponents' "/roll" for the less "glitchy" side of the tournament stage).<sup>53</sup> And while technologies are never "absent" from the game (as might be read in the parts referring to intercorporeality and inter-embodiments), by bracketing them momentarily this framework assists in getting to the significant associations made in high performance practice, where players acknowledge what, how, and when certain configurations of bodies and technologies are accounted for in their impact on and realized in contribution towards play. What these three categories of high performance play work to describe are the various ways in which the social and the material are hard at work in making up the lived game moments.

High performance players bring two important elements to this study: (1) a history of situated and material engagement with the game, peripherals, and tournament scene, and (2) embodied practice as a high performance teammate, where play at the top level has been sustained.

In this regard, players' long-term commitment or affiliation with the game brings a history of play that speaks towards how top level performances are achieved, while also speaking to serious leisure, by describing how networked team play has become a significant part of their everyday life. From a phenomenological perspective, the player histories themselves tend to be quite rich, as long term players are often well travelled in the assemblage of things and positions that make up their team game.

In exerting to harness articulations on technologies and multiple bodies in play, I looked to

those players who have the most experience and body practice with the thing in question. Notably, long term players had also been through the multiple iterations of the game in play. I found that they could talk sensuously about how lag used to feel, or how a mouse or the experience of a LAN space has changed. In this regard, I found that hooking up with players as collaborators in the research was a strong way to navigate the changing landscape in order to bring perspectives and experiences that include *translations* (as generating traceable associations – Latour, 2005, p. 108) between players, the game, and its web of relations as over time. At LATs, such translations between *mediators*, where mediators are seen to “transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry” (Latour, 2005, p. 39), are made visible by the players when they speak of the impressions left by the field of play. This might include how experienced LAT players prepare for tournaments where hairdryers are taken to events along with thick hoodies to assist in keeping them warm – as the coolness of past event spaces led to frozen stiff fingers, the body parts which needs to be able to fly across the keyboard. Or in controversial moments, such as when the written and coded rules of the game are rendered as personal (best seen in match protests) and are tacitly rendered in local interpretations via frameworks of sportpersonship, “social unions” of play, and even of how the regular officials of particular scenes will most likely read the action.

As performers with a high performance gaming chronology, these players have fascinating stories to tell about how team play actually gets done, stifled, modified, and at times leveraged by the many things involved in the game over time. These players have one last foundation in common that invades the collective experience; they have all been a part of the *sportisation* process (most of the players being involved from the introduction of *Arenas* in 2007 to early breakdowns of tournaments in 2010) of *WoW* PvP in which commercial e-sports businesses—such as

tournament organisers, Blizzard Entertainment (via their “e-sports” division), and e-sports team franchises worked to package *Arena Tournament* into the structure and production of an organized and recognizable “sport” (Maguire, Jarvie, Mansfield & Bradley, 2002). This particular process is noteworthy, as it is a part of the condition upon which players and teams make their play, as well their reactions to/against the institutionalisation of their (high performance) serious leisure activity.



Figure 7: Lights, cameras, action! The sportisation of *Arena Tournament*.

My grounds for drawing exclusively on high performance players lies with articulation of body practices and the intercorporeality, inter-embodiments, and interplay of their performances. Their historicity and experiences of the translations made in play, made of both humans and nonhumans, gets to the grit of the action, and speaks to how their play is made. High performance players and

communities are targeted as meaning-makers, innovators, and certainly as local experts, their assessments and practices filter down in various ways, adding flavour to the field and broader communities of *Arena* play (Banks, 2004).<sup>54</sup> And as such “exemplars of play” (Hemphill, 2005), they touch not only other players, but also designers and 3<sup>rd</sup> party technologies as well.<sup>55</sup> Though, by taking high performance players as the main collaborators of the study is by no means setting their experiences as the “standard” or idealization of play, something to be set above casual, inexperienced, or short-term players nor to be seen as some “pure” form of play.

The contribution of this research is the first-handed closeness (an attunement) to the relationships involved and experiences created during networked team-play of and between lived experiences/systems regardless of the variation in the “...quality and accessibility of the research in different sites” (Marcus, 1995, p. 100). It is the richness of associations, translations, and relationships that offers up “good fieldwork” as it were. Had I any holes to fill or opportunities that I wish I could go back on, certainly. Though many, I experienced, were far out of my control. Those that I could have done something about and deserve future consideration include the practice of players on online realms (TR’s and live-realms) in order to harness additional women’s voices, as well as flush out the legwork done to get to the top level (breaking through the glass ceiling). Though, that said, I can’t emphasize enough what being able to hang out and see the players in action has brought to the details of this study. It is a more classic moment of Goffmanian face-to-face action – and certainly that has been accounted for here as “game changing”. Nevertheless, I would advocate “being there” – by over the shoulder methods or hanging out at team meet-ups to experience some of the closeness and nuance of this particular format of play. Certainly, I would also have liked to have participated as more as a player in the live-realms and “hung-out” with a top level PvP guild to be an observer to the details of the everyday work of high performance team

practice. Lastly, a follow up study on the embodiment and interplay of teammates who are less documented in game studies would be complementary to this work (knowing now “where to look”), that is, the play of inexperienced participants to team play more broadly and how they perform in terms of finding their (sensuous) field of play. For as philosopher Graeme McFee (2004) reminds us about sports; they are played in many contexts and they are “all the sport” (p. 41).

### **Moving towards high performance tournaments**

To start a journey into LAT play, an opening remark must be allotted to the head-to-head arrangement of competition; this is PvP—that is player(s) versus player(s)—team play. The *Arena* PvP System is focused on one team’s ability to “obliterate the other team” on *instanced* fields of play (that is, controlled environments locked off from non-participants) (“*Arena* PvP System”, n.d.). The LAT players I follow are steadily engaged in the “*Arena Pass Tournament*” (TRs),<sup>56</sup> a pay-to-play organized 3v3 ladder competition which is a part of the extended *WoW* package. Entering the TRs requires the purchase of an *Arena* Pass at the season’s start (US\$20). Payment takes place via a *WoW* game holder’s Battle.net account (Blizzard Entertainment’s centralized service system, which is incorporated directly into the game). Players compete on regional tournament realms (separate from live realms) where three level-capped characters can be created.<sup>57</sup> On entering the TR’s, players have full access to all classes and races as well as gear, enchants, gems, and pets. This makes for an “evenly geared playing field”, as the gear is uniformly available to all without the live-realm issue of having to have spent the time “slaying dragons” (progress raiding) to get the desired items.

At the TR season end, final ladder positions are posted and top ranked teams receive various dividends of play including in-game titles, pets, bragging rights, and lastly and most

desirably, an invitation to the Blizzard location-based regional finals (another step in the direction of the high prize of competing at BlizzCon).<sup>58</sup> BlizzCon is produced as a location – based tournament (LAT); it is a live-streamed event which is spectated by many fans, other elite teams, and e-sports franchise owners. For many players, BlizzCon is (as one collaborator put it) the “goal” of high performance *Arena Tournament* players (though this is, of course, not the only truth out there – many players do not turn up to LANs despite of their advanced playing skills due to a variety of reasons such as time, cost, anonymity, the no add-ons rule, and other life duties such as school or work).<sup>59</sup>



Figure 8: View of the BlizzCon 2010 Arena stage from the last row of (fully filled) spectator seating (the players and shoutcasters are seated just below the three mega-screens at the very back of the room).

Besides engaging in TR competition, LAT players are also involved in the seasonal (2v2, 3v3, and 5v5) live-realm tournaments where the most coveted of dividends here include in-game “prizes” such as playing well enough to attain the prestigious “Gladiator” achievement” and “Rank 1” titles.<sup>60</sup> Though 3<sup>rd</sup> party status markers are also gained from high performance play in these tournaments.<sup>61</sup> All the players that collaborate in this research have achieved at least one of these “dividends”, with many having achieved all of these high performance perks and achievements. Despite the significance of ladder rankings, costs, achievement titles, and wins/loses – these things don’t say much of what actually goes on in these complex situations of high performance networked team play.

### **Situated in LAT play**

Gameplay from the position of location-based *Arena Tournaments* is a fairly particular experience that differentiates from seasonal “online” TR’s as well as live-realm play. While the game is being delivered by the same organizer (Blizzard is involved in all of the subsidiary tournaments beyond BlizzCon such as the former DreamHack and MLG tournaments and the recently erected WoW slot - representing e-sports in MMOGs - in the World Cyber Games tournament), the subtle disparities are notable. LATs are played on tournament PC’s and monitors, where all computers are hooked up to the same Internet provider (providing a “more” equivalent field of play than say, when Australian players and North American players are competing on a Seattle based server). Personal keyboards, mice, and headsets are all required to be brought to tournaments, where the first thing that players do when they are admitted into the tournament area is “move in”. Their personal technologies get plugged in, and they set their computer/account with a personal configuration file and map the keys to specific in-game actions in a way that their fingers are practiced in moving



across their keyboard. On turning up to a LAT, players are allotted a certain amount of time to prepare their characters – this can be anything from a whole day to a strict two-hour time limit. For LAT players who typically have between 2 – 4 talent *specs*<sup>62</sup> (i.e. either one or two characters each with two specs), setting up these characters takes around two-to-three hours at an easy pace, though the allotted time doesn't account for the nervousness of having done something wrong. As several players tell me, this in itself is a point of extreme pressure, as getting all the microscopic detail just right is essential in terms of the win/loss. (I see how this impacts on players at the MLG tournament as they go over and over their set-ups with intense focus.) An incorrectly mapped key (which can happen from a simple typo) can kill off the hours of body practice. Fingers need to be able to instantly locate keys and execute correctly. During a game, there is very little time for what seems to be “simple adjustments” (changing the key mapping in the interface menu) – though in fact, it would be easier to stop a game of basketball when one's poorly tied shoelace comes undone than to get a break in the LAT game to fix such similar “technological blunders”.



Figure 9: Three hours before start; players are already hard at work transferring their configuration files, altering key mappings, changing the unit frames (UI set-up), and choosing the all-important character hairstyles.

LAT participants are only allowed to use the interface personalization options that come with the packaged software – that means, no add-ons (this tournament choice has played in to the urban legends surrounding why some top online players don't choose to compete at LANs being based on some lack of "skill" to adapt to playing without add-ons).<sup>63</sup> The game calls on position specialization – where a healer, damage dealer, or a tank/melee can be combined in "comps" (compositions such as a Rogue/Mage/Priest) to go up against another team of three players on the field. Another interesting twist to the LAT is the absence of many class choices (which bring with them practiced class specific buffs) – at one of the MLG tournaments only one of each class was available to choose from; for instance, one female dwarf priest, one male night elf druid, one male

human warrior et cetera. The players had to re-calculate on the fly the more optimal class choices in conjunction with their team comps, adding to the pressure and the “brought to the stage” practice of play.<sup>64</sup>

Rules around teams at 3v3 LATs have been extended in some tournaments (MLG) to offer room for a fourth player, where substitutions can occur at specific times throughout the game. The addition of the fourth player has interesting tactical uses, but also poses some tense dilemmas surrounding team chemistry, team success, and individual practice.<sup>65</sup>

The winning conditions at LATs work with a tournament structure that is based on either a round-robin or double elimination tournament – i.e. the format of BlizzCon and qualifiers in 2010 was double elimination, best of three out of five in the regular rounds (and best of 11 in the finals).



Figure 10: (Left) Between game action – a four player team (at the MLG) takes a step away from their machines to talk about strategies and tactics for the next match of the series. (Right) Double elimination tournament; “only” four wins can get a team to the finals in the upper bracket. One loss and you move to the lower bracket where it is “do-or-die”, one more loss and you’re out.

The winning conditions are on the face of it quite simple: In order to win, a three player team needs to eliminate all the members of the opposing team (shown by a health bar being depleted to zero), or outlast the opposition until the 20-minute mark is reached. The rules are diverse here

(regarding time) from tournament to tournament, but the second winning condition has generally been based on “damage done” (at major tournaments), that is the total amount of team damage dealt to the opposition, as calculated by the software.

Speaking briefly of the actual team game “in play”; players try to take certain positions on the game map (there are five maps in all). They talk pre-game about opening moves, though with the knowledge that a strategy is always already contingent on the opposite teams every decision. They use the material on the field to veil themselves by line-of-sighting (LOSing) the agile rivals.<sup>66</sup> If there is a weak player on the field, they’ve spotted them instantly, often before the *gates* even open.<sup>67</sup> Cunning is used as players “joke” and “switch up” trying to shape the game action in their teams favour.<sup>68</sup> They communicate how they’re fairing, when to go into enemy territory and at what time a teammate should just run for it. They trust their teammates: They depend on them deeply. In direct contrast to PvE play - there are no “bosses” to break-down.<sup>69</sup> There are no bases or flags to protect (other familiar PvP mechanics). And for these high performance teams, the notion of a purely “pre-choreographed” and assured win is rejected – in other words, no victory is assured.

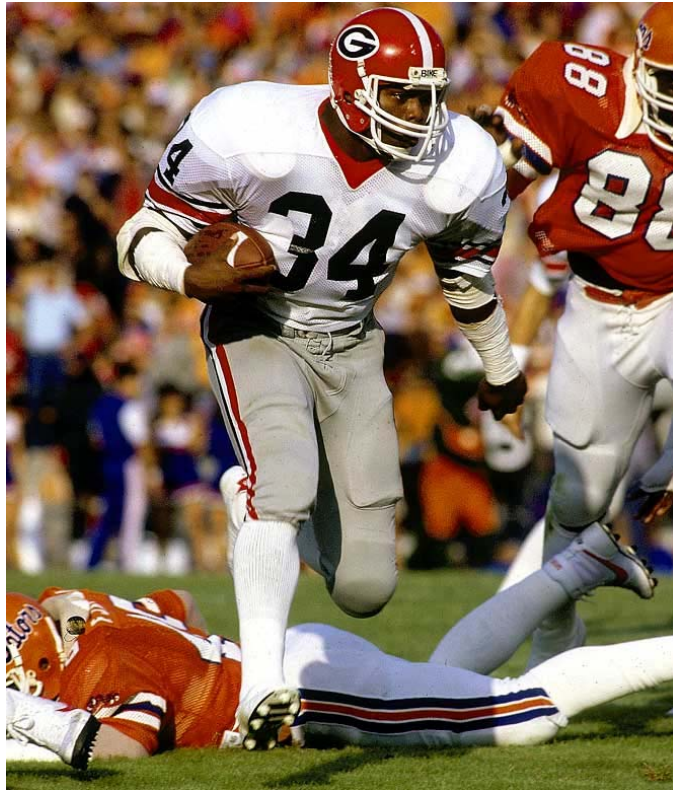


Figure 11: Former NFL (and University of Georgia) player Hershel Walker. As the Sports Illustrated headline exclaims “he jukeed the free safety off his feet” – exactly what *Arena* players are attempting to do, make the other players’ perform movements to their demise off of a misread (juke) of their embodied actions. (Photograph by John Iacono/Sports Illustrated)

## {Chapter 3}

### Hooking into expert play: Chums & competitive circles

Within game studies there is a growing body of research exploring high performance networked team play which offers detailed (mainly sociological) accounts of collective player engagements with computers, software, and the peripherals of play (Chen, 2009; N. Taylor, 2009; T.L. Taylor, 2006a, 2009a, 2009b, 2012; Nardi, 2010; Steinkuehler, 2006). The subsequent chapters contribute to this growing area with rigorous detail, by delving deeply into one particular high performance scene - *World of Warcraft* location-based *Arena Tournaments*.

LAT practices convey a certain degree of messiness. Players establish their excellence online, and bring performances to offline event spaces with teams. Events (multi-disciplinary e-sports tournaments) are hosted by a range of different actors, for a different range of purposes. Teams, tournaments, technologies, players, and software are regularly reshuffled and deal new hands to play with. It's a tiny gaming scene by comparison to other high performance scene "relics" (*Counter-Strike, Halo*), though just as rich in its complex connections.

Probing at the theme of high performance teams in MMOG research reveals a wildly diverse spectrum of experiences and practices from highly coordinated 40-player raids to the teamwork of small community oriented pick-up-groups for PvP battlegrounds and PvE instances (to

name but a few: Chen, 2009; Eklund & Johansson, 2010; M. Jakobsson & T.L. Taylor, 2003; Myers, 2010; Nardi, 2010; Paul & Philpott, 2009; T.L. Taylor, 2006b, 2009a). Genre and context are two often flagged variables to consider in game studies research (T.L. Taylor, 2006b); adding to those forefronted considerations I append that team size works as a decisive actor, and in intricate ways, across the broader panorama of team practice. Significant experiences are teased out in the following which find that numbers do matter. As such, I critically consider three-player LAT teams performing as deeply intimate groups.

The “findings” of this research reside in its granularity. Very broadly, the coming chapters speak to four areas; 1) the intimate work of hooking into high performance play, where competition and cooperation exist side-by-side, and allies and opponents rupture traditional organized team structures of play by participating across distributable teams and pushing for *flourishing systems* of play (Arnold, 2003). 2) The nuanced communication and movement practices of high performance teams. Where teams perform with a delicate synergy; an interplay made between humans and nonhumans which works to disrupt the rhetoric of formulaic high performance play. 3) The resistant and complicit gender performances of LAT players in the media sports landscape of high performance gaming LANs. And lastly, 4) Player and team performances that move beyond instrumentality; where the game is attuned and re-personalised to the way the players want their expert field of play to be.

This work holds tightly to the notion of *sensuousness* (de Garis, 1999) throughout, in order to get the nuanced renderings of experience. And with that, the first place to start is with the incredible intercorporeal bodies of high performance teams.

## Incredible intercorporeal bodies

Watching LAT teams in action, one might quickly come to the conclusion that it is playing with one's own team that is the main draw for continued participation in team PvP; those players who one develops and achieves alongside of on a daily basis. This is certainly a part of players' long-term commitment and engagement with LATs as well as *Arena Tournament* more broadly. Though, it is the opportunity to meet up and compete with talented opponents that is emphasized again and again as extremely valuable. The high performance community, while full of rivalries, is voiced as deeply gratifying on the merits of the "game" that others bring. There is a joy in playing against skilled others. Pleasure in playing against dedicated, thinking, practiced, and moving oppositional groups which come in all shapes and sizes, accents and temperaments.

Popsie, a *franchise*<sup>70</sup> affiliated and veteran player of four years, speaks to me at length about the quickness of players in their actions and decision making made in concert on the field. He emphasizes that it is "you" (your team) who can do "the incredible". He talks about the skilfulness of his team as a situationally corresponding unit. In Nick Crossley's (1995) work emphasizing Goffman's contribution to *body techniques* (how we know, learn, adapt, and apply the body situationally) and *intercorporeality*, he writes that,

Body techniques are executed in accordance with the others who populate the (intermundane) space of their exercise and the visible (because embodied) intentions, etc. of those others. In this sense we can say that the exercise of body techniques, in actual concrete situations, is dependent upon an intercorporeal nexus: i.e. it is articulated with the behavior [sic] of others. (p. 146)

As Popsie alludes and Crossley helps to pronounce, intercorporeality is one of the high pleasures of PvP play: Manoeuvring alongside of and thinking in relation to others actions as well as intentions. Popsie not only enjoys the use and feel of his skilled and practiced body in PvP play, but more so he expresses great satisfaction in being part of, and in opposition to, other skilled and practiced and



“incredible” intercorporeal bodies in play.



Figure 12: A tense moment between teams as the player closest in the image has stopped breathing while he focuses on wearing the opponent down (top left). On screen, the health bar of the opponent has nearly run out and finally the team gets a player down (visualized by an angel over the on screen character icon). The tense player shifts from focused intensity to released energy.

Reiterating this feeling, former LAT player Heroe expresses the depth of her intercorporeality,

Yeah, I mean when Hitch and I started playing together I was 15 and he was 16 and we started competing like when I was 17 or 18. So me and him, we just knew what to do, like how to help each other when each other was in trouble. Sometimes when we play we don't even use vent (voice communication program "Ventrillo") because there's just no point.

Throughout our conversations, *Arena* players acutely conveyed that high performance PvP play with others is directly *intimate*. Individual players, teams, and technologies take up positions immediately alongside of and also directly opposite from one another.<sup>71</sup> The intercorporeal

pleasures as well as tensions evoked in nearing a winning or losing state are shared by all actors in each moment and breath on the playing field. In sports, such intimacy is often evoked in player accounts on the pleasures and pains of team play (Russell & Branch, 1979; Bird, Johnson & Macmullan, 2009). Though, such *inter-embodiments*—the corporeal play between teams—are usually only considered or researched in terms of one’s own side (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2011). Similarly and certainly not surprisingly given the involvement of such research endeavours, this same “oversight” exists in game studies, with the exception of a handful of researchers who have made recent efforts to move beyond “one-sided” descriptions of bodies/teams in play (See Lowood, 2010a; D. Wilson, 2012).

In the memoirs of former NBA player Bill Russell (Russell & Branch, 1979), he speaks to such intimate performances made between teams as they unfolded during a championship series game. He recalls, “We were on fire, intimidating, making shots, running the break, and the Lakers just couldn't score. As much as I wanted to win that championship, I remember being disappointed that the Lakers were not playing better. We were playing well enough to attain that special level, but we couldn't do it without them” (p. 155-158). Intimacy is found in the touching or *sensuousness* of embodied, practiced bodies participating in the game space for the same purpose (de Garis, 1999), though as I will return to later, intimacy connects far beyond the play itself.

When LAT players talk of feeling the others, the gaps, and the tensions created between teams, such pressures necessitate a commitment to their exploration. One of the star players on the scene, Zeke, offers a comprehensive account of how he gets close to the entire field of play;

When you're playing at the highest level, well, you can't really just have one strategy. You can't go in and say “let's kill this guy” because the players know who's the best target, so that player will be playing extra defensively, against certain setups. So you have to make your decisions based on where the other team is; what abilities they've used ... knowing where the other team is and knowing where your team is dictates where you can go

because you don't want to get too far away from your team, you don't want to get split up, but you also want to choose your targets based on where they are. You're basically trying to absorb as much information as possible and make your decisions based on that on the fly. You know what cool downs they're used, what things they still have available, so you can predict what they can do in reaction to what you're going to do. And you just try to force them into a situation that they don't want to be in ... It's all about getting to that moment I guess.

These are the inter-embodiments of PvP team play which are of significance; that is, the players' recognition of the importance of the opponents performance.<sup>72</sup>

In both Russell's disappointment and Zeke's flurried acknowledgement of the various orientations being made by the teams in action together, they both convey that the key to creating good games and for drawing pleasure from the play itself is found in togetherness. It is compelling to hear that a top athlete like Russell "misses" the intrinsic pleasures of the game, and "wishes" better play upon his opponents. It speaks to another attitude and insight to what expert team play can be (DeKoven, 1978). These are the considerations which make the play and the experience all the more intimate. These are the nuances of expertise that are experienced in high performance LAT teams, and unlike Russell, who was perhaps alone at the time in his recognition of the inter-embodied pleasures to be taken from "excellent competition", the North American community that I followed had many different voices expressing this clarity of "inter-teamness". Though before getting to such a state of play, first they must hook into expert circles.

### *Making it to the top*

Before teams get to the level of togetherness and excellence that I will talk to as components of high performance play, they have to "make it": Individually as quality *Arena* players, but also jointly - finding the "right" people to play well with collectively. Recognizable sociological and other game related variables are in play, such as; age, geographic location (time zones as a huge deterrent for organizing practice sessions), social class (playing a AAA MMOG is a costly endeavour), gender, in-

game class commitments tied to patch changes (“Druids are undesirable this season”), and player ethnicity. Who gets access to LATs, which players, and to what top level teams, is waylaid by the intersectionality of such markers which impinge on full access to the top level of play.<sup>73</sup> But even prior this, players have to get to the top level game so to speak. Before “becoming” high performance *Arena* players, many talked of their former gaming habits and histories in other networked gaming opportunities. They weren’t travelling to *WoW* or *Arenas* from other MMOGs (most LAT competitors were just entering their teens when *WoW* was released). However, it wasn’t unusual to have played other Blizzard games (such as real-time strategy game *Warcraft*) against a neighbourhood friend or brother as a tween. These connections, between friends and product, were often voiced as being the catalyst for the move over to *WoW*.

Besides these acquaintances, sports also arose as a powerful connection in continued play; expressed by players through their experience of similar and enjoyable sensations in play, as well as through recognizable organizational frameworks, which bolstered their increasing involvement in the direction of a serious leisure pursuit (Stebbins, 2007). Alongside of players mounting interest, one other notable situation moved them towards higher levels of play – access to competitive circles of PvP players.<sup>74</sup>

Zeke was one of the more vocal players tying sports and the joys of competitive circles to his improved and dedicated play. He recalls that he “fell into” PvP, but certain hooks kept him going:

I think a lot of it is competitive nature. In high school I played a lot of sports and stuff. This was just kind of a carry on from that, I’ve always been competitive, I guess I only want to be good at something that I’m doing, otherwise I’d rather not bother. If I’m gonna play, I’ll want to win. But it’s also who you surround yourself with – if you surround yourself with other people that are competitive, you feed off of each other. Like you beat them one day, then they figure out something to beat you so you have to go back and figure something else out to beat that, and you know it just means that you’re both getting better and better, because you don’t want to lose. By being in that type of competitive surrounding, you can’t help just getting better and better.

For Zeke, his capacity to improve with (and over) others, and the joys taken from such progress, was a clear influence on his continued play. His move towards expert levels of competition and virtuoso competency was notably bolstered by recognition from *Arena* bloggers (who were following his progress) who Zeke notes were “hyping him up” on popular 3rd party game related websites. With a reputation (something that all players talk of as a major channel for moving up levels and staying at the top) and *high online ranking* preceding him, he transferred to “*BattleGroup 9*” (a realm where top players convened), and connected to an equally strong team.<sup>75</sup>

A slightly different story is mapped out by Heroe. Waylaid with mono (glandular fever), Heroe was introduced to the game via her boyfriend to help pass the time, and to share in a leisure activity. Having a “chum”, some local and friendly competition, facilitated her play in a very specific way (Fine, 1987, p. 9); the chum wasn’t a “helping hand” or knowledge provider, but rather a source of inspiration, drive, and trust. At 15-years of age, Heroe didn’t (at the time) compare the experience of *Arena* play to sports, though she found the experience of play intoxicating, saying that her competitive spirit was ignited and fostered through her ability to improve in her own style (*not* following the advice of theorycrafters such as found at the website “elitistjerks”).<sup>76</sup> Heroe found her own enjoyable way forward, starting with the local competition resource found in the chum, and moving onwards with the rewards of improved skill, individual wins, and (when *The Burning Crusade* expansion came out packaged with *Arenas*) realm recognized status. In this shift from “recreational” player to “practiced expert”, Heroe emphasizes that her move to the high status *BattleGroup* (US Tychondrius during season 3 and 4) was the tipping point for her towards a higher level of performance; an expert circle of competition to “play her into” top form. The pathways into expert *Arena* play have manifold personal touches, though it is the pleasure of mastery at the individual level (that is developed as “personal”) which is recalled most often, and it

is intimately tied to the necessity of having a circle of competitive others.

For Heroe, Zeke, and the majority of the North American *Arena* LAT players, breaking through the glass ceiling to high performance teams and individual expertise has a similar history. Their “levelling up” happened prior to the release of the expansion pack (*The Burning Crusade*, 2007), which packaged this new format of officially recorded (via ladders) team PvP play.<sup>77</sup> Though a second pathway is highlighted here: At the time of release, Heroe and Zeke were already individually practiced experts (in duelling 1v1) and were ready to engage with the nuances (towards excellence) in high performance team play. As Heroe noted in a later interview, they had kept up with the spontaneous changes to *WoW* and were tuned in to how the game mechanics were set, and how they played out on the field. Popsie notes on gaming expertise in contrast to sports, that the time of entry to the top level of play is everything:

Like if you start playing *WoW* now and try and get in the pro scene, I’ll guarantee you that you’ll never make it. A lot of us are thinking, you know, we have to just keep playing non-stop if we want to stay in the game. Even people that have quit for a while and have come back, they never come back fully, the way they used to be. So there’s that risk of not being able to come back like before, and there’s that risk that if you do try to go pro with another game or something like *StarCraft2*, that you’d have to start now before it gets bigger.

The faces on the North American LAT scene have been fairly consistent: The majority of players are “seasoned veterans” with four to six years of deliberate practice under their belt. When I asked Popsie the question contrasting “veterans” and “expertise” in traditional sports to *Arena* (noting that for a sports veteran, “expertise” for most top athletes arises after a good decade of intensive practice), he pondered thoughtfully for a moment. For him and his chums, the veteran who has been there since “day one” is the more likely candidate for expert play. Because, he suggests, embodied play of this specific networked team game has a different temporality to it. The rules, tactics, and “shifts in the game” are rapidly changing. Having “been there”, being steeped in a high

performance habitus is, in his eyes, unique as contrasted to say football or basketball (where by comparison, rules and tactics changes—while they do happen—are slow).<sup>78</sup> Though, I might suggest that the “rise to the top” is also strongly supported by networks formed over the several years of play alongside of the practice of rules (in play) and tactics as a body habitus. In any case, commitment and motivation for continued play are confronted by a myriad of personal and standardised particulars which all play into the entrance and experience of the competitive (expert) circle of play.

### **Access and expertise**

Getting to the top level of play has involved *Arena* players in engagements other than simply honing their rotations. Sharpening class relevant skills and movements involved figuring out how to beat individual classes via duels, followed by finding equally practiced teammates and doing the training to work ones way up through the online ranks (talked of by players not as “hours used” but rather “perfect practice”). Though, for the larger part, *Arena* players gained access to the best teams not only based on their expertise at a specific class, but mobility was often activated through expertise combined to new media savvy. Players spoke of the self promotional work outside of the game that aided in their upward mobility: Recording game footage and minimally overlaying it with tactical voiceovers then placed on YouTube, winning a duelling tournament organized by a prominent blogger, participating on *Arena* specific forums as a knowledgeable poster, making extravagantly produced gaming movies for Warcraftmovies.com (using a video editing program and adding music, effects, and text), or attaining a spot as a regular blogger on one of the major *Arena* community pages are just some examples of the extracurricular busy work that experts have engaged in during their rise to the top.



Figure 13: PvP video “produced” by a LAT player, complete with gameplay, smoky fade-outs, personalised logo, edited footage, and a “sweet soundtrack” that take place in the tightly edited 17-minute production where the player is the highlighted product.

Gaining exposure and access to the best teams speaks clearly to class and geographical location issues, such as teams financing or having to lay-out the money (to be later reimbursed or “won back” through prize-winnings) to make their own way to major national tournaments to gain the public identification (as well as a live streamed ingress) to the scene (For some compelling work on the practices and general unpleasanties surrounding e-sports sponsorships see T.L. Taylor, 2012). For many of the top players looking to get to the next level, their skill in video creation, website content management (and consistency of content delivery), writing/blogging, and financial capital to attend a LAN (as a last resort) was a necessary complement to their expertise in *Arena*. Making it into a LAT quality team highlights that expert play is, in most cases, padded by proficiency and consistency in producing additional media products.



## Recruitment and retention

Moving through the ranks eventually calls for finding other highly skilled players. In this small team game, with such high stakes for participation, one might expect a quickly shifting landscape of short-lived memberships, where teams are always in flux as players are discarded for the next big thing such as players specializing in the latest (theorycrafted) class build, or an emergent and well-promoted player. The top *Arena* players I talked to told a quite different story. They tended to work on expanding their “local” playable network, rather than leaving players (such as *nerfed* classes) behind for good. High performance players were less likely to hop from one team to another, slightly improved one. Rather, they made themselves more connected as teammates. Friends who started on teams together would often remain together as a part of a larger guild that the experts join (despite both character/class or actual “main” team changes), filling out other roles that facilitate individual play while also boosting LAT experts needs (such as filling out the raid roster in order to play and simultaneously assist a LAT player get a needed—for practice—high resilience piece of PvE gear). Like a top level tennis player draws on a number of others to help make their play “skilled” (trusted friends for company, other often lesser known players for doubles play, practice partners, strength and fitness coaches etc.), *Arena* players often rely on earlier companions and teammates to leverage their play, but also to remain on the “accessible players scene” as well. *Arena* experts move in a space where continual and functional gaming relationships (playing and social) are maintained across levels of play (expert, casual, serious), making their experience less top-down hierarchically distinct. As contrasted against elite sporting-esque structures of teams in practice (Chambliss, 1989), this manoeuvrability between levels is quite compelling. Elite sports structures typically section off between different levels of players/teams

through training times, coach access, tournament locations, etc., making contact between different levels of players strictly hierarchical. *Arena* players, whilst still involved in socially evident hierarchical formations (i.e. deciding that a poor performance at LAT is not worth offering a player a second chance is a general stance taken by North American LAT players), have the structural advantage (or looseness through the culture of no-coaching) to engage in horizontal (cross level) play. Such different playing level relationships can be maintained on a daily basis, as aided by the structure of *WoW* – via the multiple ways PvP team play can be done (*Arena Pass Tournament* multi-team option,<sup>79</sup> playing with different online teams via *Arena* team charters, playing instant queue scrimmages for unranked matches, multiple team affiliation and so on).<sup>80</sup> This is important stuff; what might read like “just some guys playing together” is actually more pointedly framed as players who establish intimate relationships through conversations and competitive play on a regular basis. Distributable teammates is a core part of the togetherness experienced, which hits on the intense and motivating sociability of serious leisure, critical for the development of a flourishing system of play.

Browsing through the North American *WoW* Armory, some top players are found on multiple teams, often with alleged rivalries:<sup>81</sup> Muttley (from franchise Team Triple-Bind) tops the 3v3 US rankings on a team with a player recognizable from Sumo-Pro, another regular franchise team playing on the MLG tour (“*WoW* Armory”, n.d.). He raids the “Dragon Soul” PvE instance, and he is affiliated with the big PvP guild Look at Me, a guild that includes at least nine other LAT players who are affiliated with seven different (sponsored or franchise) LAT teams (See Figure 2- which maps out the connections and teams affiliated between this high performance group of players).

Playing as distributable teammates however also makes the process of team building in

*Arena* a compelling one, characterised paradoxically by both openness and exclusivity. The top-level of play is highly insular where (mostly male) players recommend or sponsor other (known) top players to the best teams. This positions young white men as the power holders to improved play primarily through acquaintance networks – reverberating decisively of the bonds that are made in the (men’s) locker room and as otherwise suggested in writing on upward mobility in sports (See Curry, 2000; Hoffman, 2011; Walker & Bopp, 2011). T.L. Taylor (2012) adds a sharp point to this process, finding that “[t]he male pro players on the circuit, including captains who help build rosters, are accountable for the small everyday ways they perpetuate sexist systems” (p. 128). In this light, LAT high performance teams might be drawn into the everyday gendered exclusionary practices, as the homogeneity of high performance teams has not transformed noticeably to include more than nominal “others”.

Turning to the openness of LATs, a rather unique process of gaining expertise is employed. Experience is gained and skills are sharpened on an everyday basis not just against one another as static teams (i.e. Lakers versus Celtics), but expertise is also honed with other “rival” high performance players playing on one’s team (i.e. differing classes, positioning and timings). In this arrangement, players shape their gameplay and expertise with help from both sides of the field, as a teammate and an opponent (i.e. Lakers versus Celtics is one game, and a Lakers/Celtics team playing against a Knicks/Suns team is another game on the same day). This is a key strength of the distribution (which doesn’t “just” happen during off-season or friendly pick up matches), where there is a option of playing on a regular basis with multiple teams at the top level and doing so purposefully, i.e. not “just” for fun.

This experience is leveraged by players’ choices to organize themselves in this way (as “best” competition seeking players) and certainly is fostered through the community atmosphere

that the core group of regular experts have built at LATs.<sup>82</sup> Of course, there is another side to this story. Players can also be brutally dropped from teams, mocked openly, and engage in verbal brawls like scorned siblings. These are however the less common moments (in the LAT community) that just seemed to travel more fluidly through pervasive digital media as regurgitated “exhilarating” stories.

Recruitment for *Arena* teams changes once a team or even a single player gains a reputation. In Mikael Jakobsson and T.L. Taylor’s (2003) work highlighting the central role of social interaction in *EverQuest* (EQ), and followed up in T.L. Taylor’s work on EQ power gamers (2006a), reputation is highlighted as a pertinent part of entrance into high level guilds. It is compelling to read the distinctions in how reputation is read by a large MMOG guild doing PvE raids as compared to a small MMOG *Arena* PvP team (and small community comparatively). For EQ players looking to move into high level raiding guilds, a reputation is formed around several things, including: gear check lists, a “sponsor” to vouch for a player’s worth, family and real-life friends (given some leeway on entry requirements), and a guild assessed trial period evaluating class skill and personality of the new participant.

At the top level of *Arena*, reputation has a similar feel in the recruitment phase in terms of social recommendations, though the other aspects touching on reputation diverge significantly in their application. One would be pushed to find real-life friendships and family members offered an “easy in” to high level *Arena* teams (though access into general guild participation would be seen as a norm). Testing the player’s character rests on the team values, philosophy, and own personalities in play. The top North American teams at the time of the study often looked for camaraderie in their recruit choices, while for various European teams (notably those which were international in their line-up) lasting friendships were less of a concern. *Online Arena Tournament*

achievements (such as Gladiator titles or high ladder positions) outrank gear checks, as players are recruited and deemed reputable based on prior performances. In other words, no well geared but eager apprentices have a shot at recruitment. *Class* and *spec* are initial priorities in recruitment, conscripting for a balanced team.

Recruit trials are intensive, and often high level tryouts are required i.e. trialling against the very best teams (even at live tournaments) in order to determine how the new player performs under pressure in direct relation to the teammates under the demands of LAN play. It is an immensely risky, but necessary, endeavour for the recruiting team, as live tournaments prove to be overwhelming for many top level online players (Sirlin, 2006).<sup>83</sup> Reputation thus isn't enough and does not determine the recruitment or retention of top players. Even the best Affliction Warlock on *BattleGroup 9* has to find harmony and a sense of inter-embodiment with the two other teammates.

While good synergy is a crucial part of the recruitment process that cannot be encapsulated by reputation, the other core disparity between small team and large team recruitment for top level play relates to the notion of "the bench". LAT players have room for one bench player. That is, only one alternative.<sup>84</sup> Less than half of the teams chose to use a bench player, and those that did bring a four-player line-up to tournaments rarely employed the bench-player directly in the live-game.<sup>85</sup>

For LAT teams, a player's recruitment is as tightly associated to the intimate team needs of the triad at play as it is to a stalwart reputation and the statistical evidence of performances past. Building a small team of experts is accordingly not as simple as pulling together two other locals to make a 3v3 line-up. There is a wholly intimate side to the development and maintenance of high performance teams.



Figure 14: A rare case of the fourth player being directly active during the game. The three-player team is extended here as the fourth player coaches them (player in black hoodie seated next to player on far left) by commentating into the seated player's microphone. Eight eyes are better than six.<sup>86</sup>

In the following, Team Triple-Bind share how they got their first pre-LAT team together as well as explain how things changed drastically after a reputation was gained. Building for their first LAT team, Triple-Bind was brought together through such iterative methods as constant duelling (where a player's failure through a rare loss was the signal of a prospective teammate) tied to scanning players' streamed *Arena* videos (reminding me of the recruiter/recruitee process of the NCAAs where "highlight reels" are posted for potential recruiters). Eventually one player was (scanned by the above methods then) selected for his play-style quality and personality as fitted to the two co-founding members. Triple-Bind's original constellation lasted a year and a half. Though when Popsie (the dual class "star" player of the team) was approached by a franchise manager to

build a team to represent them, this process changed, and dramatically so:

A manager met with me and asked me to meet up on IRC, so I went to his IRC channel and he's like "Look I want you to make a team. I've talked to all the pro players about you and your team, and I want you, and maybe Latei, maybe Freckles. You pick who you want and make a team." And that's, well, I just said I want to keep my team as it is right now. Because I'm of the opinion that you can always get better, no matter who you've got as long as you have the chemistry and you have people that are willing to work with you. I think that team can always go somewhere. So I never wanted to cut anyone, I wanted there to be like loyalty, and teamwork and friendship. I thought that was the best way to get a team to the top. But, it actually wasn't. So eventually, Freckles quit and we got Dirker. The way we got Dirker also was kind of random, but not really though. We sort of just asked around who's good, and like really that's not that many people, at that point where we were good enough to get whoever we wanted sort of, so we just used our reputation to get someone else who's really good. Who had gotten *Rank One* before. So that's pretty much the story.

During this experience of transitioning upwards to expert play, Popsie and Latei went through a tough decision. Recruitment and franchise affiliation brought with it accountability of performance. Even the franchise manager who was less involved in the nuances of *WoW Arena* was clued in that Freckles wasn't a "top tier" player (through his connections and talk with other franchise players). Popsie and Latei's experience of recruitment brings out a salient issue that most expert *Arena* teams are familiar with; the dilemma of fulfilling the coach/manager role from within. The dual role-taking dilemma snags on the lifestyle of the distributable player. *Arena* experts are likely to continue to play together online, and in other team affiliations, with the "released" player.<sup>87</sup> Freckles, who felt the pressure of personal failure, quit on his own accord. Though, had a less intimate coach been taking the decision, Freckles would almost certainly have been released when the franchise contacted Popsie. The key point on these particular constellations of independently organized teams moving up to high performance LAT play is that camaraderie matters. This is certainly reflected in the detached manner that is presented when an existing team takes on a new player.

Hanging out at the MLG, I watched New Recruit's (Team Nosh-Up's trialling player) body

language. He was jittery, standing apart from his two teammates, often oriented in a stiff face-off in an “me-against-them” scenario in team discussions, rather than intimately huddled. When being interviewed as a team, New Recruit’s hesitant remarks (eyes darting to the other two players checking for reactions to his comments) spoke to the situation. The aloof atmosphere was a defensive mechanism for the team.<sup>88</sup> Not getting too close during this critical time was a method employed by the existing players to cope with being both team managers and team players, a tricky balance for those who remain closely tied and distributable across the expert community. A compelling example on the institutionalisation of expert players, and the effect of the structures of mobility on recruitment and dismissal practices from players’ perspectives, is spoken to in Donald Ball’s (1976) research on failure in sports. While Ball’s research is prior to the “big money” game that now shrouds college sports (especially the state of college football), his structural examples, though outdated, are nonetheless illustrative here of the effects such institutionalised arrangements have on mobility, player interactions and developed practices.

Ball reflects on the backdrop for entrance into the two professional sports of baseball and football – noting that a football player’s entry point to professional play (in 1970’s America) was through college participation, where-as baseball players did not use the college system as a staple for entrance (having established minor leagues). What Ball notes is that “the costs of failure are lower for the professional football player” (p. 725). Players that didn’t make the cut to the final football team were “cooled-out” that is still taken care of as a chum, as opposed to the harsh “shut-out” of the baseball player who, in failure, was forgotten or disregarded all together. Ball suggests that by going through the process of football professionalism, these persons gained other structures of or resources for support and alternatives via, for example, alumni contacts, training schemes, media connections. As in the example of football, the cooling-out model is common in



*Arena* recruiting. The process of professionalization (which in *Arena* plays out without the big money contracts) increases players' "opportunity pool" with a number of attractive options. Ball goes on to say that, "[i]t will be easier to accept cooling-out and easier to cool-out others in those situations where the structure of alternatives is least bleak" (p. 736). However, the structure of support for the failing *Arena* recruit is a double-edged sword. Much like the imagined football players alternatives, for top *Arena* players the opportunity pool includes a continued community for high performance play, fairly regular work via the submission of instructional videos or power-playing others up to Gladiator titles. Other opportunities come in the form of blogging, podcasting or taking up a position as a games site media representative, adjudicating, and in the case of a select few, shoutcasting. Most importantly, very little (if any) alteration comes to these players' everyday online play.<sup>89</sup> The outlook is not bleak for these players. However, as many long-term LAT players note, a failed performance at LAT is read as a death sentence for future LAT play. Very few teams are willing to offer a trial to someone that has already failed once, even if it was at their very first LAN (a fascinating cultural point, as most of the LAT players recall their first tournament as one filled with emotions and that they slowly adapted to LAT play over time). As detailed, the business of putting together a top team is by no means an easy one. This last example from my fieldwork illustrates what is perhaps the most harrowing transition for many players; that is, the pressure of being the "new kid on the block" and performing well at one's first LAN/LAT.



Figure 15: Player turned shoutcaster takes the microphone and centre placement on the BlizzCon stage.

### **First time LANs and becoming a LAT player**

At the LAT, the “fresh meat” on the scene are distinctly outsiders. Everything sets them apart, clothing (one new player to the MLG scene chooses to subtly bear a sombrero), body language (distancing themselves with arms folded – contrasted against the “locals” who mingle about and hug one another), and placement (their playing table always seemed to be in the least desirable part of the room – where spectators could get close). It’s a palpable feeling of uncomfortableness and understandably so. Atlas, a 25-year-old veteran tournament player who languidly tells me that LATs are like “home court” follows on by saying, “...you really don’t get too many chances to prove yourself. Like if you don’t do good off the bat, it’s really hard to continue going.” The gauntlet into

LATs is cut-throat. Often, a player's first LAT will be her last.

The excitement of location-based or local area network tournament play is voiced in various player interviews, from *Counter-Strike* (CS) LANers to Donkey Kong locally situated players, as something vastly different, more intense, and often, a whole other game (M. Kane, 2008; Gordon, 2007). Former top Street Fighter player Dave Sirlin (2006) points to the substance of the LAN tournament with an emphasis on how new players are brought into a whole other practice of play. He speaks of comprehending the local tournament rules, being able to manage unfamiliar customs, getting a feel for the more defensive and conservative tempo of LAN play, and not being phased by ranking protocols or format choices (is it double elimination or round robin?<sup>90</sup>) which tend to seed wildcards and newcomers against the best of the best (pp. 101-103). Sirlin signals that the LAN as an actor brings out a better understanding of what preparation entails for this level of competitive participation; long term practice for winning (not "just for fun"), knowing the meta-game (what comps are going to be played at the tournament, what can counter it?), and knowing how to deal with face to face intimidation.

*Arena Tournament* players offered a wealth of other quirks recalled from their first LATs, building on these comparable renderings of tournament play. A player called Charged, speaking to the staged set up, is still fazed by the spotlights that beam down on him at LATs. Dewey speaks to the LAT server set-up for play as deeply problematic, as often a tournament server only provides limited race options, making small but familiar (body practice) differences in the practiced way of play. Lane can be seen fussing over a fluffy white mascot-esque pillow at every tournament, propping him up into a better seating position and providing a familiar feel to the small of his back. The literal coolness of the play space is what Plasma finds taxing, the worst experience of this was a tournament played atop of an ice rink, though every tournament brings a temperature with it

that is strangely foreign.

For many veteran LAT players, the strangeness of the tournament space (each space has its quirks despite their outward appearance of sameness and non-place) is now manageable. Practice has attuned regular players to the general potentialities of the scene. The computers are lagging? Players will casually grab the admins and suggest a *ping fix* (which they administer themselves).<sup>91</sup> A rule change disallows the PS/2 connector keyboard at the event? Players borrow the equipment from other teams and try to adapt. The tournament suddenly is altered to be played on an earlier patch? No big deal, just a part of the ever shifting experience that is LAT play. Being able to manage such changes is at the veteran end of practice.



Figure 16: Working the LAN space. Double mouse-matting so the sponsor is “represented” (though the favourite mouse surface is on top); a big white pillow is a regular on the scene; and keyboard frames are often used for the same sense of space and feel of surface as at home.

Certainly, some veterans are better or worse than others at dealing with the various changes, and many are still affected by the specific parts of the landscape of play despite their frequent performances at LATs. Though the multiplicity of things to manage perhaps speaks to how the first time LAT player reacts bodily. Atlas recalls his first LAT as follows:

Well, the first event it was just adrenalin. I would shake, but I couldn't control it. Like I wasn't nervous, but I couldn't control it. I mean I tried my best but it was pretty much uncontrollable at that point, like I was playing fine, but like my body was just like going crazy. Like I couldn't get myself to like calm down, I was just so excited so. I mean it's just like any

other sport, we get like an adrenalin rush, you could play really good but your body is just crazy at that time. You know, I can't really explain it. What happened (laughs), it just happened. But now, no nerves really at all, we've played on so many stages at so many places, so it's just, it's all normal now.

The body taking over is a widespread experience of first time LAT players. The pressures of performance are certainly felt differently by first timers as opposed to the practiced body in and around play. As an example of such, during Rookie's first LAT where he performed frantically I could hear Atlas working to counter-act the new player's anxiety by taking on a calmer, more poised tone of voice in his in-game communication. The switch from "normal" to "attentive and definite" communication was unmistakable; and done to placate the first time LAT player. Atlas displayed how "normal" or "at home" he felt at LATs through this surplus of composure. Being able to play expertly while also being attuned to other players projected sensations (in this case - fretfulness) and take action upon them is far from a "rookie" skill. It was a performance of embodied LAT expertise with the team in mind.

Looping back to the notion of competitive circles that hone ones expert play, the LAT itself can be brought in as an entity acting on that circle. As Zeke explains,

I think for a lot of people doing LANs, online play has lost its appeal – like it's not as exciting, you do it because you need to practice but I think that in terms of comparing it, it's hard to even put them in the same category ... Honestly for me, I play a lot better when I'm on LAN, because I'm super into it and focused, and I think that *the pressure kind of makes me play better, because I find that I have faster reactions when I'm playing on LAN...* There's some people who are fantastic online then they go to events and they never win games, it's the nerves. It's way, way, different obviously. Like with sports – playing in front of a crowd versus like just practicing you're free throws in the driveway.

The tournament, the set-up, the general layeredness which make up the experience—live-streamed, lights, crowds, entourages, sectioned-off spaces, shoutcasters, patches, sponsorships, prize-money, other recognizable teams from other disciplines, and so on—change Zeke's play in such a way that he is able to recognize his own play as something different.<sup>92</sup>

Such *focused intensity* (Gumbrecht, 2006) is what top athletes are trained to manage and this practiced skill is certainly recognized as a part of the performance of sporting excellence (Chambliss, 1989). Managing the sensations of the sporting landscape is part and parcel of the expert player/elite athlete performance (Butryn, 2002). Though augmented skills through playing in multiple LAT locations with their numerous pressures is only one part of “being made” on the scene, the other part relates to becoming an all of a sudden visible body to the broader PvP community.

One specific corollary to continued LAT play is managing the front-stage player identity. Online e-sports communities more broadly are entangled with a culture of flaming (M. Kane, 2008, p. 94); teams and personalities can be targeted not only on forums, but harassment can also occur in-game via easy access to players via nicknames connected to guilds and realms (who can then be tracked down and contacted directly in the game). Such familiarity tied to the culture of flaming has seemingly brought the desire to thwart such attacks to these players through body regulation. For many players, preparing for a live streamed, highly documented (and viewed) LAT tournament now includes a fitness regime on top of increased in-game training. Increased gym time (to help bolster muscle definition) was for several players a very real pressure of the LAT, engaging them in an interesting twist on complicit hegemonic masculinity, something which I will return to again later.

The teams that did make it to LATs, those who are situated as regulars on the scene, get to move beyond the jolting bodily experiences of beginners. They move on to hone their craft individually and intimately with their teams towards excellence.

## {Chapter 4}

### Intimate bodies & the nuances of excellence

*Arena* teams are represented in the game by the bodies and labours of three specific social actors. During every high performance game, all three members are held accountable: They are all in the play. There is little room to hide or relax on the playing field (nor off of it) involving the interplay of three. The most minuscule mistake by a healer, for example, can mean the end of a game.<sup>93</sup> As an intimate team, one player talks of the challenges found in the three player line-up, noting that sometimes the small team “doesn’t have enough play” in the short-stacked line-up to find ways around the opponent (referring to how there is no “easy substitution”—such as in basketball—to cater for the play met on the field).<sup>94</sup> Certainly, there are some size specific pressures found in the three player line-up to keep in mind in their creation of good games. Though, good games also need to be acknowledged through the work of the other nonhuman actors’ performing on the field (Latour, 2005). And as such, the following takes account of the material-semiotic relationships of high performance networked teams.

#### **Team synergy and nuanced communication**

As any sports player knows, team chemistry—working together for a common goal—is something

far more intense and intimate than just “working together” or something as intangible as “spontaneous coordination” (Mandelbaum, 2004, p. 205). Team chemistry is a powerful idea in sports: All team members know they should have it, and coaches attempt to create it (through recruitment) or coax it in one way or another out of the group. LAT players don’t talk of team chemistry. They have their own term to refer to the ability of a group to thrive together - *synergy*. What synergy highlights so well on a networked field of play is the gelling together and deep perception of three core areas in action, which includes (though by no means is this list exhaustive),

- **Personal attributes** including player personality, habits, rotations, technology preferences (and availability). How players maintain composure under pressure, their ability to adapt to landscape environment (event space) changes. As well as their movement style(s), sportspersonship, superstitions, and geographic location, etc.
- **Team practices** such as strategy and tactics, communication practices, training times, recruitment routines, leadership philosophy, team goal-setting, etc.
- **Gaming landscapes** include, for example, available class abilities/game mechanics, patch changes, *Arena Tournament* realm season,<sup>95</sup> LAT server consistency, rule changes (local, coded, adjudicated), LAT event layout, on-site spirit of play, etc.

The synergy of a team is found through play. It is felt out by the members of the team as a “lived-object” or living-thing, though it is also something that gets orientated by the local situatedness or assemblage of the field of play (T.L. Taylor, 2009a; Ahmed, 2006; Suchman, 1987). T.L. Taylor’s *assemblage of play* (2009a) is an important hook to team synergy, as it fastens onto accounts of small teams moment-to-moment plays which are voiced with a keen eye on the situated action and the local affordances which get incorporated into the team performance (Norman, 2002).<sup>96</sup> Lag, room temperature, blood-sugar level (and access to on-hand calories), hairdryers, pillows, bigger monitors (than used at home), newly sponsored technologies and even jet-lag all play into the outcome of games, and more specifically, into the relations of players trying to find themselves



as synergistic teams.

As such, positioning *Arena* players as simply expert data-crunchers is a diluted narrative.

The variety of occupations and fine-tuning with the nonhumans in action, which go into making a team “work”, is what makes these bodies in practice fascinating and authentic as creative and embodied performances (Lowood, 2010b; Gumbrecht, 2006; McFee, 2004; Butryn, 2002).

Perhaps one of the most mundane parts of play which taps into some of the interconnected parts of team synergy is communication. During matches, most *Arena* teams communicate using a VoIP.<sup>97</sup> In an address to a major online *Arena* community, a high performance “profile” player articulated how to communicate well, both verbally and via embodied movement, during play:

...it’s a delicate and intricate synergy where everyone follows each other. In melee/caster/healer the caster cannot always be on the target the melee wants to go on due to positioning, so the caster must be vocal about who he can/cannot pressure and who he can CC [crowd control], because who he can CC will also dictate who the target should be (NickyEU, 2011).

The synergy comes from being able to take quick (and consistent) cognitive and intercorporeal leaps with others; being able to break away from what the individual player sees as the best possible tactic and being “in on” the bigger picture (not just watching it open up). Synergy means delicately and collectively seeing, moving, and communicating as “us”, while simultaneously generating a collective awareness (and performing that perception consistently) in regard to “them”.

Talking about how communication and synergy are brought together through cultures of play, Team Triple-Bind tells me about a vital change to their communication strategy. The team’s healer, Popsie, explains what it means for gameplay and for post-game reflection:

I don’t know if you’ve watched Cillian’s team play, but their communication is amazing, I love what they do and I try to copy that and it worked really well and I loved it. Cillian sort of has this stream of consciousness approach where he’ll just say whatever he’s thinking non-stop. This allows the team to sort of keep up with it and just be doing what needs to be

done that will synergize with what he's doing, right. And I tried that approach, and it's so much better because not only does it help your team keep up with what you're doing, but after the game is over and talking about what happened you have a reference point. So you say, remember I said I was doing this and you did this. Well what used to happen for us was like; I don't really remember what happened! Maybe I messed up? You know it became a lot easier to pinpoint that and point a portion of blame on who it should be apportioned to.

Perhaps the most intriguing part of Popsie's account is the choice to copy-cat this tiny adjustment as spotted in another player and his team at work. The incorporation of the practice emphasizes how slight differences in expertise are sensed by other skilful players (which alter the action and experience significantly), incorporated into practice and, in these LAT cases, are mediated via live-streams to the spectating public, becoming a part of the communication toolkit of high performance play. The toning and tweaking made by Popsie and his team didn't stop there,

So, this is what we've learned to do. Put emotion in your voice when it's important. I used to have this problem where I would just say everything in this robot voice, and they would have no clue when I was dying, you have to put the exact amount of emotion in your voice that means what it means, you know, like if you're almost dead you have to make sure that they get that emotion in your voice. We actually probably listen more to the emotion than the content of the words. Coz it's easier to pick up on that instantly. I didn't think of that until recently, and that was a problem for me, I remember that.

These minute qualitative improvements are a vital part of the packaging which distinguishes the experts at play. Looking at excellence in elite swimmers, David Chambliss (1989) finds that it is precisely such small qualitative changes in training routines that assist in moving an athlete closer towards excellence (understood here as moving up a level, or executing outstandingly). He summarizes,

*Excellence is mundane.* Superlative performance is really a confluence of dozens of small skills or activities, each one learned or stumbled upon, which have been carefully drilled into habit and then are fitted together in a synthesized whole. There is nothing extraordinary or superhuman in any one of those actions; only the fact that they are done consistently and correctly, and all together, produce excellence. (Original emphasis. p. 13)

Piecing together such minute qualitative changes for improved team synergy is demonstrated in high performance players. But more importantly for expert *Arena* participants, this work is done

with an eye on the team as a whole.



Figure 17: (Left) Experts closely watching other experts in action from a rarely accessible over-the-shoulder view. (Right) Emotions being conveyed by several members of the four-player team.

In terms of the value of good communication, it is significant to name one specific technological change that spread across the high performance *Arena* community in their domestic play and practice. *Arena* players, at the top level of play, shifted in droves from Ventrillo to Skype.<sup>98</sup> Ventrillo is a commonly used 3<sup>rd</sup> party technology in raid and guild communiqué. Its value in big teams is in its capacity to handle cross channel voice communication with multiple users. Though for *Arena* play, its handling of cross channel communication was less impressive. Ventrillo was lag-fraught during *Arena* play; and as one player swore to me, Skype had a huge impact on actually making the gameplay smoother.<sup>99</sup> Consalvo (2009) highlights how the online “noise” of lag disrupts the temporality of the game experience for different players – where simultaneous events are as a result practised to different timings. An *Arena* team that experiences even slight shifts in temporality, visually or communicatively, can spell disaster in a game where split second “all-in” moves are a standard tactic.<sup>100</sup> Skype, with significantly less online “noise” than Ventrillo, decreased the overall experience of lag by providing teams with more consistent communication. As spectators or more casual players, we perhaps see or feel the game changing effects of lag

rather than recognized debilitating play in the noise of the audio. But for competitors, the audio and its lag play a decisive role in game outcomes. The more efficient technology assisted greatly in making the practice field feel a little more like the playing field; just another small step towards practicing for not only excellence but also improved synergy. Such mundane adjustments on the playing field start to chart out how high performance team play is in part a process of tightening the peripherals of play as much as tightening the synergy of players.<sup>101</sup>

Another aspect of communication vital to a team's synergy is the positioning of the embodied characters on screen. This feature of team synergy is well highlighted in a couple of very close to break-down experiences of veteran franchise Team Nosh-Up who had just seen the retirement of a long-term member and was in the process of trialling new recruits (at major live-streamed tournaments). Having followed the same teams and players over several tournaments, I observed and talked to Team Nosh-Up throughout their trialling of numerous different recruits. The following example of a recruit in action is noteworthy, as it is also an example of a fatal performance that would sever this particular player's prospects with the immediate team, as well as his likelihood of any future LAT involvement. In this recruit's performance, his actions are markedly counter-productive to the team as a synergistic unit. This snippet of voice-communication reveals what happens when team synergy is not found. The transcript begins half way through a two-minute long match with Team Nosh-Up's latest trial recruit "Rookie" in play.<sup>102</sup>

Transcribed in-game voice communication	Explanation of situated play
<b>Plasma</b> (spec <sup>103</sup> : Protection Warrior): I Shock Frosted. Oh no I didn't, I Bashed	Confusion by this player who switches between two classes: Enhancement Shaman (main class/spec) and Protection Warrior (alternate class/spec). In this play he calls the Shaman spell "Shock Frost", either from thinking "as a Shaman" or from hitting the same key that maps both the Shaman "Shock Frost" spell and the Warrior ability "Shield Bash"
<b>Atlas</b> (spec: Marksman Hunter): Poly	Defensive call: This player has been hit by opposing Mage's Polymorph (crowd control <sup>104</sup> ) spell
<b>Plasma</b> : I'm trinketing	Action call: This player is using timed trinkets for extra offensive/defensive buffs <sup>105</sup>
<b>Rookie</b> (spec: Holy Paladin): Bubble	Action call: This player is using the major defensive cool-down spell "Divine Shield" to stop all damage on him
<b>Plasma</b> : They're stacked on me	Defensive tactic call: Opposing offense is targeted on this player
<b>Atlas</b> : Get out of there dude!	Call for movement: Urgency
<b>Plasma</b> : I Blocked	Action call: This player used the defensive ability "Shield Block", with a cool-down of one-minute
<b>Atlas</b> : Silencing on Priest here	Action call: This player is going to use a spell "Silencing Shot" which will stop the opposing target, the Priest, from casting spells for three seconds
<b>Rookie</b> : I'm Tanking him baby!	Offensive tactic call: This player has chosen to occupy an opponent and absorb some damage going out to the team. (And he is doing so gleefully)
<b>Atlas</b> : No no no no NO!	Team leader (Atlas) trying to stop Rookie from attacking the target (considering the team's overall situation - many cool-downs blown and in a precarious position)
<b>Rookie</b> : I'm gonna ... (incoherent) ... Kidney!	Action call: This player attacks the opposing Mage and then receives a "Kidney Shot", a stun ability delivered by the opposing Rogue
<b>Atlas</b> : I got silence on the Mage though. Bring him on you – No Cleanse!	Tactic: Team leader voices irritation in Rookie not seeing the silence spell on the Mage who Rookie went and attacked (and who was not the main target for the team). Team leader also voices an unspoken action after the fact – his "Silencing Shot" on the opposing Mage. Team leader calls for Rookie to use "Cleanse" – which would remove an offensive magic spell off of one of his teammates
<b>Plasma</b> : Come on, come on!	Motivation; Urgency

<b>Rookie:</b> Let's go!	Motivation
<b>Atlas:</b> Block Block, NO NO!	Action call: Calling to Plasma to use his "Shield Block" cool-down (which was already used and not available). The team leader screaming "NO, NO!" was a reaction to watching Plasma's health bar rapidly descend then turn into the image of an angel – the mark of a departed player
<i>(Plasma dies, team loses. Talk continues whilst the "damage done" stats screen appears)</i>	
<b>Atlas:</b> You're too far apart; you're running away from him	Team leader telling Rookie that his positioning on the field doesn't correspond to how "they" play. The distancing that Rookie created between the players left holes in their defence
<b>Plasma:</b> Yeah	Downhearted and of the same opinion
<b>Rookie:</b> I'm trying to go on the Mage though	New player explaining his personal tactic. Slightly confused and abashed at being spotted as "the trouble" or cause of the loss
<b>Atlas:</b> The Mage is on top of you and you're leaving <i>Plasma</i> WAY behind!	Team leader explaining the big picture. Moving the discussion away from a single offensive tactic to the team in play and with consideration of the pressure of the opponents

This somewhat jarring minute of gameplay illustrates the delicacy of each and every decision and movement at the high performance level of play, where missteps and mistakes are quickly taken advantage of. Several significant events can be pointed to here as "crucial plays" (those decisions and moves that decidedly changed the game).<sup>106</sup> The majority of the crucial plays are voiced alongside of an action performed by Rookie (literally "the odd man out"); which ultimately orientates his practice of play as something different from the established synergy of Team Nosh-Up. Even with just one new player to be held accountable in the small team, the existing team synergy is overwhelmed by mismatched and unpractised performances.

During a post-game team interview with Atlas and Plasma and yet another trial player "New Recruit", we got to talking about the *awareness* of the playing field that is required at LATs. In the following extended interview snippet, we discuss the significance of being sensitive, responsive to, and "knowing" teammates and how they move, their cadence, and their map specific proclivities.<sup>107</sup>

**Atlas:** It's so [player emphasized word] huge because, since he's the healer a lot is dependent upon him, and it's a lot to get used to. Like we just lost a game earlier in the morning because my position didn't correspond with his position very well, and it cost us the game instantly. So, it's just such a big thing to get used to. LOSing [line-of-sight: positioning on the map], player movement, and the way they rotate [spell or ability] and stuff like that.

**Me:** So how do you practice that?

**Atlas:** It's just games. Like, I can tell everything Plasma is going to do because I've played with him for so long. When he starts going one way I know exactly where he's going to come out after, so it just comes after time.

**Me:** Is that the same from your end?

**New Recruit:** I don't know their synergy, like I don't know how or how well they play together. I know how my old partners played, but when I'm playing with them [pointing to his new teammates] I have to, I'm expecting certain things, and I'm not really sure that things are going to come out the way I expect it to. So like if he's going to do one thing, is the other one going to do the following? Because I don't understand their synergy like I did my old team.

The substance and significance of team synergy is something mainly (but not always)<sup>108</sup> attained through a sensitivity to particular and collectively practised bodies. It's about being perceptive of the likely performances and "angles" that can be created within that triad of players – not only via a composition of synergistic class abilities but also, perhaps more discreetly, through how players hold, take, and flee in field positioning.

What can be taken here is that togetherness and team synergy are not auto-responses available to expert players to pull out of their bag of tricks like a well practiced signature move.<sup>109</sup> Practiced teams regularly point to the decided training together on their field of play in order to learn one another's, as well as the shared expressions of; movements, rhythms, and tactical inclinations in play.

## Movement interplay

Moving away from the intercorporeality of the individual team, movement interplay brings together the work of the place of play to be encountered (the five maps available at the time and the emotions evoked by them), the two teams (and their histories) matched against one another, and the multiple technologies at work (both visible and invisible).

Spacing or “locations” speaks directly to movement interplay. When the gates open to a map, collective performances are engaged through the sound, sight, and feel of the space in play – as locations.<sup>110</sup> In this respect we might draw on social anthropologist Tim Ingold’s (2000) work on perception of the environment, when he notes, “[a]s we travel from one place to another, we pass through a sequence of images, each of which is specific to – and in turn permits us to identify – a particular *location* along the way” (my emphasis. p. 224). A high performance player’s intentionality is consequently focused on the constant process of moving and meaning making (distance between opponents, LOSing, lag, cool-downs used, player actions in-the-room, crowd control, and so on),<sup>111</sup> as they take in such “locations”.<sup>112</sup>

At the BlizzCon final’s Dewey grabs the seat beside me. He’s a franchise player on the LAT scene who seems to enjoy “talking shop” with me. As we watch an excitedly applauded opening move executed by Team Triple-Bind, Dewey explains how desirable strategies are always contingent on the expressive field, but also notes how locations are taken in:

**Dewey:** Whatever they [the opposition] do, you instantly realize what they’re doing because of what they’re doing.

**Me:** But you’ve also already laid out your opener, so does it become too late ...

**Dewey:** No. This game is about instant decisions. Yeah, they saw the Rogue cloak [referring to a team we are watching compete, the Rogue uses his “cloak” spell – which makes him suddenly invisible to the opponents]. Latei played defensive instantly.



Everything was just instant decision making. So no matter what strat (strategy) you wind up, you could have it typed out, tattooed it on your arm. If they're doing something crazy, you have to change.

**Me:** You say they saw him cloak. Does that get communicated?

**Dewey:** No everyone knows it.

**Me:** How?

**Dewey:** It's noise, it's graphics, icons...

Desirable tactics are chosen with reference to the environment and opposition (map and lag expectations, as well as match-up histories, opponent preferences, and how things are “functioning” on the day), though such tactics can be picked apart by not only the visible field, but the sound (Jørgensen, 2008) and certainly the gaps left on the field (such as the suddenly invisible Rogue). Latei recognized not only the gap, but he also sensed where the Rogue would likely attack from, thoroughly tying his extensive gaming history to this particular moment of practice.<sup>113</sup> With each move an *Arena* player makes, the opponents (and indeed teammates) are seeing and reacting to the changing “locations” (images, gaps, and momentary landscapes) in which every movement is crucial to the end-game state. Though at the same time, such a location is being worked on by the game (software), which exerts movement pressures in the form of random path effects (such is the spell effect of “Fear”), pet AI, and the algorithms timing the movements of LOS objects on certain maps (such as the rising and falling pillars on the “Ring of Valor” map or the intermittent waterfall in “Dalaran Sewers”). The shaping and outcome of the play is a joint endeavour produced by intentional acts of many humans moving on the field, and via the productions of many networked technologies, of which software is just one amongst many (Sicart, 2011; T.L. Taylor, 2009a, 2012). Though, as players’ suggest, their experience of successful and synergistic team play is well situated in inter-embodied adaptability: Being able to see, sense, and adjust to the changing

“locations”—those fast changing moments in the game—together. In a more provocative phenomenological reading, Hughson and Inglis (2002), drawing on Merleau-Ponty, articulate on the expert play of football that,

...for the player-body-subject, the spatial elements of the field, such as the goal and penalty areas, and his or her subject-bodily dispositions are, in a sense, of *the same substance*. The spatial contours of the field and the dispositions of the player are mutually implicated elements of an indivisible whole. One may even go as far as to say that, after a fashion, the player and the field are literally *the same thing* (Original emphasis. pp. 7-8).

While Hughson and Inglis speak from the individual experience here, it can be stretched out by the LAT teams to highlight the joint efforts on the playing field where the “elements of an indivisible whole” include, players, teams, opponents, technologies, and the field of play as of “the same substance”.

Producing movement in games might be thinly read as “just” manipulating a mouse and keyboard to manoeuvre a playing character across a virtual environment in a framework of ICT competency (Wagner, 2006). A techno-centric reading however works to sideline the important multi-modal work of individuals and teams. Simple versions of players as ICT competent individuals cloaks how hearing and vision reveal other aspects of a sporting field of play. I.e. it is not simplistically “seeing”, but a specific practice of seeing such as the “active perception” of specific FPS players (see the work of Hubert-Wallander, Green & Bavelier, 2010, on active perception). It buries how a player’s actions per minute (APM) is tied to staying composed and not turning “frantic” (as nearly every player recalls an experience of being overtaken by their body during their early entry experiences at LATs). And lastly, it ignores the delicate work of many players who collectively “make more” of a field of play through acute sensitivity of themselves, the other players, and the technologies in simultaneous action and a sense of reversibility on shifting locations.<sup>114</sup> It is in such unquantifiable and vibrant team moments of collective spatio-temporal

execution that a secure indication of group expertise is found. That is, groups practiced at inter-coordinated awareness, which anticipate and harmonize around direct and dynamic plays that call for instant change-ups to survive. Riffing off of Peter Arnold (1979), the players are an ensemble of powers that when exercised helps the team to actualize itself.<sup>115</sup>

Up until now I have offered fieldwork examples of nuanced improvements towards excellence and break-downs at the high performance level of play. But perhaps a moment is needed on how these practiced players perform with a sensuous perception of the unfolding game, which touches on what it is to perform expertly as a body under pressure in these intense and dynamic fields of play.

### **Virtuoso composure & the creation of space**

Naehyun “OrangeMarmalade” Kang, or “Marma” as this spectacled South Korean player is fondly known as on the LAT scene, is a player with a reputation for fortitude.<sup>116</sup> North American franchise player Zeke fills me in on Marma’s practice by referring to an anxious pre-game chat they once had. Zeke acts it out as such:

**Zeke:** So how many practice games did you put in up to the tournament?

**Zeke acting as Marma:** “Oh, around 3000”.

**Zeke:** \*gulp\*.

Zeke rounded out his own team’s practice time to be in the vicinity of around 300 games.<sup>117</sup> The quantity of team practice aside, Marma has been a persistent player on the LAT scene with a penchant for sticking with one class (Mage) and the same team comp (RMP: Rogue, Mage, Priest), regardless of patch changes, or strategical advances. Theorycrafted “flavour of the month” compositions which “(advise) players how to optimally ‘play’ *WoW*, suggesting what equipment to

wear, what talents to choose, and an order in which to cast spells” (Paul, 2011, para. 1), are also provokingly shunned (highlighting that they see their skills as located in long-term practice over newly “buffed” and unpractised comps).<sup>118</sup> All of the regular players on the LAT scene could be qualified as experts; however Marma (along with a handful of other players, including Zeke) could be called out as a *virtuoso*.<sup>119</sup> The ever so slight difference between what he can do compared to others is akin to how many people can see the remarkable plays that were created by Argentinean football player Diego Maradona – someone who, throughout a career, made things happen in a more stunning and nuanced way than other players in terms of his overall style of play, but also in terms of his sensuous awareness of the field. That is, his practice and sense for seeing the gaps, often even before they are there.<sup>120</sup> Marma and Maradona make others aware that they can somehow do “more” with the field and situation at hand. Virtuoso players, the expert’s expert, act to deliver repeated skilful performances which allow one to buy into Hughson and Inglis’ (2002) thoughts on the (expert) players and the field as being “the same thing” - without a sense of interface between them. It is in the distinctive mechanics of *Arena* where play continues on (as competitors are progressively eliminated from the field) that Marma’s virtuosity and composure can be seen to come to life. Being highly attuned to the field in play is Marma’s practiced aptitude; and such an aptitude “clamours to be used” (Arnold, 1979, p. 31).<sup>121</sup>

This changing player landscape (that I will present shortly in Marma’s “play”) makes for a compelling occurrence, which brings together mechanics knowledge (based in theorycrafting) and game landscapes (the map, players, and seeing the shifting game locations in the moment-to-moment play) with the situated and practiced body. To put it mildly, the situation of play is intense. It is nothing less than LAT’s most infamous play. A play where Marma creates space; where he maintains a poised and unflustered though on-the-edge body. It’s a short couple of minutes of play

where he engages in pre-positioning and where he tends to the situational field with deep knowledge of the adjacently seated opponents and their inter-class abilities. Attunement and a sensitivity to these things is what Marma does very well, and these are to be kept in mind in the following paragraphs as you wander through my fieldnotes of Marma's play: the "Orange 1v2 kill".<sup>122</sup>

### *Orange 1v2 kill*

At the 3:23 minute mark, Marma's second teammate suddenly goes down. It's now a one against two fight: Mage versus Priest/Mage. Marma is left to single-handedly carry the burden of this moment of play: He has very little health left (was he perhaps thinking "I'm alive!" or maybe "I'm alone!"). The crowd cheers anticipating that a championship team will soon be raising the substantially large (in sum and size) check. As his opponents start to pre-emptively celebrate, Marma remains focused - "in the game". With the opponents hands raised in (an assumed championship series) victory, positioning their fingers far away from movement input, Marma takes action. He pushes and pulls at the two remaining opponents. Their lack of focus starts to fold back in on the playing field. The opposing Priest is still not working for the final kill – over-involved in celebration. Losing his composure in his teams (supposed) superior position, the opposing Mage becomes overly aggressive, and follows Marma who has stretched out the field by running off into a LOS corner of the map. Marma works to pull the opposing Mage further and further away from the healer. And in a well timed instant, Marma turns back on the Mage and delivers a perfect line up of offensive and defensive spells:

- His *Mana Gem* is played increasing his spell power and restoring his mana
- He spell steals the *Shield* on the opposing Mage
- He slows down the Priest trying to reach the distant—as pre-positioned by Marma—

place of action

- He senses incoming damage on the horizon and plays his defensive *Fireward* spell just moments before an offensive *Fireblast* hits him from the opposing Mage (Marma's well timed defensive spell absorbing most of the damage)
- He seamlessly launches two more offensive spells, which are followed by a timely "proc" (procedure)<sup>123</sup> initiated by Marma's (class choice - Mage) *Clearcasting* buff (which unpredictably activates and more importantly reduces the mana-cost of the next spell).<sup>124</sup>

These executions all happen in a flash (and they are gone as soon as the plays are made – See Lowood, 2010b; Gumbrecht, 2006), and they exemplify the contrasts of interplay on the field – composure versus calamity; using the field as a teammate, as opposed to losing your teammate on the field. With the Priest playing frazzled and having spatially fallen behind, the opposing Mage dies. Marma blows his entire range of defensive cool downs; he's still in the game and covering a huge amount of ground using the terrain, the class, and the final player on location (on screen and off) to feel out his next move. After several long minutes, Marma delivers the final blow and conquers the time and space of the contest (See Radford, 2009).



Figure 18: Naehyun Kang, aka “OrangeMarmalade”, finding the gaps. (Screenshots taken of the video – See Radford/SK Gaming)

Seeing the broader field of play and the players as “mutually implicated elements” is illustrated in Marma’s virtuoso performance (Hughson & Inglis, 2002). Pushing further at how the players and the field are together in making the game, Merleau-Ponty (1965), talking from football, suggests, “Each maneuver [sic] undertaken by the player modifies the character of the field and establishes new lines of force in which the action in turn unfolds and is accomplished, again altering the phenomenal field” (pp. 168-169). In this intense moment of play, Marma’s virtuosity captures the rich detail of movement interplay. It is a composition of actions, timing, practice, spectators, big checks, game knowledge, and the playing fields (online and off). It includes the gaps, composure, and *focused intensity* (Gumbrecht, 2006, p. 177)—all provoked by the absence of his two

teammates—which are all together at work in creating the striking performance.<sup>125</sup>

In this high performance tug-of-war for space, what becomes prominent is the creation of forms which are “closed off” to less talented teams or players.<sup>126</sup> Part of the fascination of watching high performance play is seeing how space is created on a pitch or field.<sup>127</sup> Or in a more velveteen turn of phrase made by International soccer player Eric Cantona, highly gifted players can “create space from nothing” (Hughson & Inglis 2002, p. 3). There are scores of examples where expertise plays into the creation of space on the playing field, and from various locations: The inventiveness and open baseline in action displayed in former NBA player Julius Erving’s first jaw-dropping behind the basket move against the long arms of the opposing L.A. Lakers (Hickey, 1997, p. 155); “total football” developed and taught in Holland (specifically Ajax FC) that worked to make every player a threat (Giulianotti, 1999, p. 133); or even the demonstration of the space of the field through the length and stretch of Svetlana Khorkina on the uneven bars, who made the space between and around the bars seem unfathomably larger with her own codified skill “Khorkina I”, which expanded the air space, but also the way other gymnasts would have to perform from then on.





Figure 19: Julius Erving, aka “Dr. J”, finding the gaps. (Photograph by Manny Millan/Sports Illustrated)

Marma’s own version of creating space from nothing includes the unpredictability of the *proc* (see endnote #123), the momentary lack of focus of the celebrating opponents, the use of the large map (LOSing opportunities and distance), and the 3000 practice games that sit confidently in his body memory.

As a non player, much of this detail is lost as a spectator. Henry Lowood (2007) emphasizes as such in his look at the virtuosity of RTS (*Warcraft*) player “Grubby” (real name: Manuel Schenkuizen) noting that, “A spectator cannot discern Grubby’s mastery of the syntax and tactics of *Warcraft* from staring at a screen... His interface mastery, tactics and strategy translated into a ‘story’ about this match that cannot be isolated at any of these levels” (p. 93). An unseasoned spectator may only see one thing, the instance it happens (if we even capture that). But amazing

plays are complexifications of things and most often are started long before the final blow is struck (Russell & Branch, 1979).<sup>128</sup> This is certainly a key point that challenges any purist notions of theorycrafting, or quantifying team sports excessively on numbers: As the “in-the-meantime” work of the group, the seeing of the opening locations of players and the field itself, are not as “numbers friendly” or static in execution. In Marma’s demonstration though hides a more mundane pleasure, and at times a real controversy, which is concealed from the spectator. That is, the sensory understanding of the materials of play, the feel of the materials in hand and the haptic engagement of the (sporting) body.

### **Haptics in play**

A part of the sensory landscape which players are acutely attuned to is the feel of touch of play. Some of the peripherals and interfaces touched during play include: Mouse (or mice), keyboard frame, headphones, mouse pad(s), “high tech” computer eyewear,<sup>129</sup> tables, seats, pillows, among many other personal items. Though for LAT players, it is the keyboard which shines out as a deeply personal and significant actor in the creation of high performance play. I thought this quite unexpected at the time, though as Latour (2004) reminds us on the nonhumans modifying acts, “[t]he only thing that can be said about them is that they *emerge in surprising fashion*, lengthening the list of beings that must be taken into account” (Original emphasis. p. 79).

Watching a second round LAT match play out at a MLG tournament, I notice that there are multiple keyboards strewn around one team’s playing space; discarded from play, but still positioned close enough to draw the attention of onlookers. I guessed that the keyboard was just a backup in case of malfunctions, but on grabbing hold of the players after their hair-thin victory, I found my hunch was terribly wrong.<sup>130</sup>

**Plasma:** No, it's not (a keyboard) for break-downs. What happened was, it's a rule at MLG where you can't use PS/2 keyboards (referring to the connecting cable-plug, not PlayStation), so at the last tournament, it was the last one where you could use adapters for PS/2's. So I didn't buy a new one (keyboard) in time, so I'm just borrowing Team Triple-Bind's.<sup>131</sup>

**Me:** So what's the problem with the other keyboard?

**Atlas:** They (the MLG) feel like the PS/2 and the adapters, the constant plugging-unplugging will break the computer eventually, like hurt the computer. Without like proper shut-down and stuff, like you just rip it out like we do. So they're worried about that. So they put a rule in and we don't have a choice but to follow it.<sup>132</sup>

**Me:** So is the PS/2 your sponsored keyboard or choice?

**Plasma:** Choice.

**Rookie:** I have a sponsored keyboard, but here I had to play with a different one.

**Atlas:** His keyboard is unique, so he had to like use a keyboard that he has never used before, like ever.

**Me:** What's unique? What is your keyboard?

**Rookie:** It's like a basic twenty dollar Logitech keyboard, but it's old. So you can't just replace it, you can't just go to the store and replace it, so I'm like accustomed to the way the F-keys are placed. And it's like a game changer; it makes me play completely different. So it affects the way I play.

**Me:** So how have you adapted under way?

**Rookie:** Well, the first series, the first match we had yesterday I had to play with it (another keyboard), and we won but only because the other team was bad. And if the keyboard was, if the keyboard, well, if they were a good team we would have lost, because I was handicapped. So I've got a different keyboard for today and it's a little bit better.



Figure 20: Tensions are mounting. With two keyboards disallowed for this team, they are feeling the pressure.

As one of the interviewed players put it, this was not just “a keyboard”; it was “Plasma’s keyboard”. This was the one he practiced on, the one that he had the feel as well as the spacing of. The measurement of the keyboard (distance between keys) was a part of his body memory, it shaped his own actions so deeply that on another keyboard “he FF’ed multiple spells”,<sup>133</sup> grappling at the features of it like a climber urgently trying to find a recess in an unfamiliar cliff-face. In this team’s situation, the tools which were altered in the rules of play impinged on two teammates simultaneously, throwing off timings, and most notably, the confidence to deliver expert performances together.<sup>134</sup> When the tournament rules were changed (no PS/2 keyboards allowed), many player’s experienced a drop in proficiency, voicing that their expertise in the game was indeed compromised. The expert interplay of high performance teams was altered considerably.<sup>135</sup>



Figure 21: Plasma’s practiced equipment – the PS/2 connector keyboard ruled “out of play”.

Altering the touched tools that high performance players engage with is by no means insignificant. In high performance sports, one particular tournament stands out: The 2010 FIFA World Cup. Throughout this tournament, the field of expert players were literally overwhelmed by the alteration of a touched tool of play – the football itself. The official match ball created for the tournament (the Adidas *Jabulani*) caused havoc; as players attempted to alter their kicking style during the competition owing to the odd feel of this particular technology (Sydney Morning Herald, 2010). Former professional football player (as well as football shoe and ball designer) Craig Johnston (2010) commented, “ [i]t [the Jabulani] has an artificial feel and trajectory and only about 20 per cent of the craft [how the player manipulates the ball in the milliseconds the foot is in touch with it] a player is putting on the ball is being translated”. Players voiced, in various ways, that they

could no longer play expertly. Their “craft” had been taken away with the changed tool of play.



Figure 22: (Left) Brazil's Julio Cesar attempting to get a feel for the new technology making havoc on the field (Photograph by Getty Images). (Right) A breakdown of the technology – The *Jabulani* football (Diagram by popsci.com).

The technology change highlighted the interplay between bodies and technologies in terms of expertise, and how dependent game outcomes—winning and losing—are on such touched things. As Hockey and Allen-Collinson (2007) suggest, “Sportspeople thus touch, and are in turn touched by the physical properties of terrain and equipment, and so build a two-way, embodied relationship with them” (p. 123). Such seemingly tiny controversies highlight the importance of haptic engagements. The feel of the football, or the spacing of keys on a keyboard are a few examples of the (many) things and relations that make up high performance play, which are very often hidden in plain view despite their role as fully blown actors on the field.<sup>136</sup>

In terms of working with the technologies at hand, teammates make constant suggestions to each other regarding alterations towards how they can be best manipulated and “put to work” during play. In my first post-game conversation teammates Muttley and Popsie, they get into an argument on UI’s, clearly a recurring internal discussion on how Popsie’s interface “should” look. Muttley harps on Popsie’s UI “bad habit”. Popsie places UI information (spells, icons, etc.) at the screen edge, or at seemingly random locations on the monitor. Muttley “sees” things differently.

He looks directly through the icons of the UI during play, engaging nearly peripherally with the interface information amassed in the centre of the screen (rather than “wasting time” by glancing off for information). Muttley’s instrumental point emphasized that his teammate’s current UI layout didn’t make the technology communicate as effectively as it should, in terms of what it could do.



Figure 23: Different ways of seeing. Player on left amasses all UI information into the center of the screen – looking through it; the player on the right leaves the UI information in its standard grid – with information spread out at the edges.

At the next event where I caught up with Team Triple-Bind, Popsie’s UI hadn’t changed. This last example illustrates that such seemingly small instrumental tweaks requires effort and practice in order to make such “little things” embodied and expert actions (despite their well argued positive effects for both player and team performance). Excellence may be called mundane, but it would do well to stress that excellence in terms of learning the fine-tuned modalities of play, of bodies and technologies working to become virtuoso teams together, takes time and effort – regardless of whether that activity takes place in a pool, on a pitch, or with a computer game.

## {Chapter 5}

### Gender performances at LATs

A certain type of young male is marketed as the high performance computer game player: He is competitive; he is heterosexual (and typically white); he is lean; he performs with a raised fist in victory and shows zero tolerance for flaws. He is in other words a vision of the (North American) digital sporting hero. However not all players or high performance gaming scenes fit this flawless model of gender production nor do all embrace it. This chapter looks at one scene of competitive, organized, high performance gaming where such productions are questioned and contested - made in relation to the situated event and event-goers on the scene. Looking at the state of LAT play at MLG tournaments, I explore how participants engage with, orientate themselves, and challenge the impressions of hegemonic sporting masculinity. The young men and women on the scene speak to issues of access, mastery, finesse, identities, and the legitimization practices sustained in order to continue on "at the top" in this gendered space of serious leisure. By looking at such arrangements of sporting events, the *conditions* under which players are more resistant or reproductive in their agency from within the scaffolding of the ascendant masculinity produced at the MLG can be considered (Messner & Dworkin, 2002) .



### *Entering my first MLG*

Walking into my first MLG was like busting unexpectedly into a men's college sports locker room filled with young players, uniforms with sponsor logos, and slightly older (mostly white) male administrators.<sup>137</sup> The first player remark that rings out as I move deeper into the event space is "rape". A young man of nineteen or twenty yells it out at an opponent facing him not two meters away (also a white, male, heterosexual teenager). He weasels again dominantly, "I'm raping this idiot!" On taking in the panorama of expert play scenes around me, I find that all the players, fans, supporters, and administrators are ensconced in a space projecting a very specific and commercial flavour of professional sporting masculinity. Young women hanging around the FPS console scene (*Halo 3*) are branded with t-shirts bearing their partner's or franchise's name across their back; players bear status kit, such as keyboard quivers and hoodies which have been picked up throughout a career with diverse franchise teams. In a display of hipness and technological mastery, "cool guys" in their late-twenties are employed by the MLG and various sponsors to promote and express their familiarity with the latest gaming technologies, retexturing the geek image. Slender teenage girls in mini-skirts dispense sponsored products: Otherwise as hired decorations, the girls' quietly mill around the scene distinctly performing a hyper-feminized and passive role, adding to the familiarity of this space as one made for heterosexual male achievement.



Figure 24: Talent's girl (left) – another marker of *Halo* player Talent's achievements. A veteran of the World Cyber Games (right) bearing the quiver (keyboard backpack), part of the exclusive kit for Team USA.

The branding style of professional North American men's sports is unswervingly integrated into the MLG as their own – an iconic silhouette on red, white and blue. Grandstands raise the best pro circuit teams, where young white men are foremost among the players made visible, symbolically cluing us all in on who exactly receives full access to the networks of technologies, people, and experiences that get one here.<sup>138</sup> And in what Wood (1994) calls “groping towards sexism”, the dominance bonding language of rape is barked out again and again, here, there, everywhere.

These were the things that stuck out to me on entering the MLG for the first time. Though, this unsettling panorama was also at times observable as leaky, where other mundane as well as

contradictory things were being performed. At the PC scene, heated conflict both on screen and off was followed by opponents self-initiating hand-shakes and hugs. Players posted to forums about the “gg”—good game—they all played. *Halo 3* and one of the fighting scenes had a handful of women playing in the amateur rounds. Nonetheless, arriving on the scene and noticing such appearances was the trace of what was “already in place” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 133).



Figure 25: Stages lifting the *Halo* scene and young women watching (and situated to be seen) at the MLG event.

### *The MLG*

Started in 2002, the MLG has two core branches. The first caters to amateur online tournaments through a credit to play system across the MLG website *GameBattles*; the second branch is a slickly produced “pro circuit” staged at live venues. Held in approximately four different locations annually, the MLG pro circuit projects a detailed gloss of professionalized male sports (N. Taylor, 2009). This suggests that engaging in this space of competition means meeting a very specific and thoroughly projected sporting masculinity head-on. The packaging of the MLG creates a visible hierarchy configured alongside of structural and sponsorship choices. At the top of the hierarchy is *Halo*, on the Xbox console. *Halo* has been the flagship game of the MLG since its launch, and as the

established community on the scene it also represents as the “flag bearer” of hegemonic masculinity through its long term visibility as the dominant e-sport (Bryson, 1990, p. 174). As the largest, best sponsored, and most visibly represented discipline at the MLG, *Halo* has multiple badges stamping it as a game with a legitimized career path (Zacny, 2012).<sup>139</sup> Though, there are still very few players who are positioned to receive a regular pay-check and this is where the structural advantages of the *Halo* scene come to matter most. Apart from the amateur competitions and large membership roll, the MLG offers an amateur to professional track for *Halo* players.<sup>140</sup> The best position and most space in the event room is allotted to the Xbox area, and finals are played on a flamboyant event stage. Even the Xbox controller, as placed within the official MLG logo, is on all MLG products.<sup>141</sup> In this last unassuming branding move, PC’s, mouse and keyboard, FightSticks, Wii controllers, and the players of them are all carved as secondary actors, or in more concrete terms – expendable on the scene.

The MLG and *Halo* are just some of the many things projecting gendered norms around these tournaments. Nevertheless, both are powerful stages of production (discursive and performative) which are engaged in projecting a look and feel of hegemonic sporting masculinity across this particular e-sports scene, both locally and delivered online, gruffly framed as media sports for “real men”.<sup>142</sup> But men (or “real men”) are not the only performers in this space. On that account, the performances of the few women actors on the scene are explored; those women who have also reached the highest *Arena* rank of “Gladiator”.



Figure 26: First impressions of MLG. Top left and going clockwise through scenes: *Halo 3*; *Tekken 6*; *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*, and *Arena*.

## Women (Gladiators)

In what Nick Taylor (2009) denotes as “masculinised technoculture” (p. 159), women players carry on in negotiation with what is clearly marked and marketed at e-sports LANs as a culture for boys or masculinity – that locker room-esque “inner sanctum of male privilege” (M.J. Kane & L. Disch, 1993). Theberge points to three general, but significant, ways male dominance in traditional sports has been maintained:

- 1) The “almost complete domination of” men in professional sports, sided with a much higher male participation rate in sports
- 2) Via the dominance of men in the organization and administration of sports
- 3) And, the broad construction of “cultural images” of women in sporting activity that

“trivializes” and degrades women’s sporting experience (as expressed by the media) (cited in Bolin & Granskog, 2003, pp. 249-250).

Bolin and Granskog (2003) emphasize that this combination of structural power and authority is far from a trivial matter (Cole & Birrell, 1994). And it is in particular organized sport, as an easily reached and highly visible institution, where biological reductionism is rendered as durable through particular expressions of “real” physicality (based on athletic men’s bodies) and the overall disproportion in participation numbers which render certain types of bodies (in)visible (Connell, 1987, p. 85; M.J. Kane, 1995). I argue that organized computer game play, such as that found at high performance LANs/LATs, as well as the practice grounds of high performance competitive circles subtly forges a similar “durability” in terms of who this type of play is “in favour of”. At LATs such as the MLG, the sporting physicality of high performance computer game players is produced as “masculine” not in extreme examples of strength or power (in rugby scrums or NFL tackles), but in the command of more subtle physicalities such as quick reflexes, actions per minute, strategic thinking/action. These physicalities are very broadly rendered as “masculine” in such spaces, very often on the simplistic foundation of who is on stage at the top level of play. The manufacturing of such gendered performances is detrimental in such spaces of leisure, limiting many “other bodies” from full or partial entry to the pleasures and perks of high performance computer game play. For many “others”, the gauntlet to get to the rewards of mastery and teamwork are simply too daunting. Though, for some women, a “masculinised technoculture” is not a gauntlet but rather a challenge which is negotiated, reproduced, but ultimately transformed throughout their participation. For these women, the high performance game is read as a (physically) “even-handed playing field” despite of the various structural constraints.

During my time on the LAT scene, two distinct personalities were prominent. The first player is *Heroe* – an Asian-American woman who debuted in LATs as a just turned seventeen year-old. She is now a current e-sports team player (in a newly released *Arena* styled game), as well as a media representative for a popular e-sports website. The second personality is *Chilli* – a serious amateur *Arena* player and an on-scene LAT video/blog correspondent for a popular PvP *Arena* community website (now defunct with the dearth of regular *Arena Tournaments* such as the MLG).<sup>143</sup> These two players' experiences lay emphasis on some of the various active positions of women at play involved in LATs, but also point to the tricky relations involved between high performance players, media sports, online player communities, and new institutions which in combination are at work painting women "at the top" (those players who made it through the gauntlet to high-level non-segregated competitions) as something "other". Both Chilli and Heroe's actions as well as limitations on the scene provoke some consideration on the dominant male-centric contours or footholds produced around e-sports (and the commoditisation of the player as product/entertainment) and the notion of technological mastery as linked to a male body or masculine identity more broadly (N. Taylor, 2009; T.L. Taylor, 2012; Kennedy, 2005).

### *Heroe*

Having already talked of Heroe's entrance into the game and about her access to specific networks of play, I want to discuss her status during this period of her LAT career. In very real terms – she was "big-time": a *Rank 1 Gladiator*,<sup>144</sup> a multiple LAT winner as well as the leader and tactician of a back-to-back championship team. Three years on, she continues to compete skilfully in "non-segregated" e-sports LANs (e-sports media outlets tend to call non-segregated tournaments "co-ed", though the positive spin on that title dilutes the organizational and sponsorship choices that

go into making separate tournaments for women).

In 2008, Heroe was hailed as the first woman to ever win a prestigious non-segregated major event. Though somehow, in the media hype (albeit small), the play of those women who don't necessarily win tournaments, but rather participate competitively on a regular basis, was pushed into obscurity. I would emphasize caution in focusing just on Heroe's or other women's "winning performances", as they very simply become another mechanism for positioning the many efforts of other women on the broader e-sports scene as "not good enough". As Heroe explained, she didn't even realize that she was "the first", as many women had made their presence known on gaming websites and in high level online play. She didn't feel that extraordinary, just fortunate to have such a good team to play alongside of. A year after our own conversations took place, I read an interview with Heroe which spouted with the same gusto and unabashed self confidence of her team oriented play (in another e-sports discipline), she specified, "I feel like I am the best theorycrafter on our team as I originally came up with the composition, and I can pick apart why we lose when we do." She has no hesitations in her competency as a player. And perhaps it is precisely in these active performances made by Heroe, where she performs this double-up as player and vocal expert (as well as performing in two high performance LAN disciplines), that we see her strongest resistance to the current toning of the scene as a men's domain. In expert gaming tournaments with high media coverage, very few women are visible on the scene with a focus on their activity – that is, without the industrious layering of "thought to be marketable" heterosexy candyfloss (Buysee, 2006).<sup>145</sup> In contests, Heroe performed as a self-assured representative of an underrepresented group. A player who demonstrated the leaky hegemony of competitive gaming as a "masculinised technoculture" by trivializing—via her productive play (achievements, tactical calls, championship wins, and general long-term participation more



broadly)—those arguments and structural arrangements which essentialise gendered gaming performances.<sup>146</sup> Her play at LATs became even more notable for me as she performed and hung-out without the added embellishment of “emphasized femininity”, which women in traditionally male dominated sports are so often subtly pressured to present in their “presumed masculine” performance in a convoluted balancing act (Bolin, 2003; T.L. Taylor, 2012; Wearing, 1998 ). At her first LAT, her team (playing without a sizable corporate sponsor) looked to be there more as players and less as products in that they played without the gloss of sponsored representation. One can appreciate the look of the “co-ed” LAT matches from 2008. Heroe was just another player, albeit a very good one, unadorned of the gendered gear (pink headsets and monitors) and overly emphasized styling of a “heterosexual female gamer” which many women players across the broader e-sports scene are a target of or complicit in producing (though certainly, this is a complex issue that can’t be boiled down to simple either/or’s).

In terms of Heroe’s presence as a competitor, another point on the structure of LATs might be mentioned. LATs are nationwide staged seasonal tournaments and dominated by young teenage men at local tournaments as well as across the LAN scene more broadly. For young women players moving into the high performance LAT scene, access to the tournaments at all needs to be considered alongside of parental control. As a teen, Heroe was attending tournaments notably in a space produced for young men, which often took place out-of-town (hotels, weekend stays), and with no responsible adult supervision (typically taken on in youth sports by coaches or managers). To put it bluntly, these few combined signs are would-be red flags to many parents not just of young women but of young men too (Dixon, Warner & Bruening, 2008).<sup>147</sup> As sports sociologist Giulianotti (1999) directly states, “Age, class, ethnicity and gender can effectively function as ‘stoppers’, in preventing social actors from gaining full or even partial access to the

economic and social resources within a society” (p. 171). With the LAT structured as a highly professionalised seasonal nationwide circuit, and with the added marker of being a hypermasculine space (if only through representation), there are many “stoppers” to access that are related to the intersectionality of a potential LAT player. Gender is not the only “stopper” at work here.

Heroe however had the support of her parents as understanding gatekeepers (who were fascinated by their daughters participation once she started being promoted), and her serious leisure activity was continued with the family’s consent backing her entrance to the next level of competition. To tweak Cassell and Jenkins phrasing “complete freedom of movement” (1998) towards Heroe’s situation; as a teenage woman, Heroe’s socio-economic circumstances (family support, friends as LAT players, etc) allowed her to overcome what for other players (men and women) are insurmountable barriers to entry.

Talking of her movement to the top level of competition, Heroe spoke of her determination in being ranked number one, of being one of the best Druids, and being respected by the local LAT community. At first glance, Heroe didn’t sit with the jock or the geek/nerd identities being performed at high performance LANs (T.L. Taylor, 2012); though on hearing how she mastered the game, she gave voice to both the geek and jock within. In her move towards the high level game, she found pleasure in the power of creating masterful performances (cringing at her own “terrible” past where she “pressed buttons and hoped for the best”) though mastery was motivated by her competitive drive. She broke down the game into duals; she ignored the advice of other experts (such as the *WoW* theorycrafting website “elitestjerks”) needing to “find the way” herself, she twiddled and tweaked, and when high performance team play arose, she figured out the tactics. She was game knowledgeable and technically competent. Though she also has tinges of the high

performance jock attitude layered into her passage to mastery. Evident when she reflects, “For me it’s just that competitive drive. If someone else can do it, I don’t see why I can’t. It’s a video game, it’s not like basketball, it’s not like my height is going to limit me”. Rather than seeing this as a positioning away from sports (and thus legitimizing her position and place there as a player), Heroe said this while flicking her hand (batting sex-role notions on gamer physicality away like a pesky fly), emphasizing the “anything you can do I can do better” stance.<sup>148</sup> In the continued conversation with Heroe, she takes on the jock attitude of being confident of her mastery or as Heroe puts it, just being “cocky and arrogant” about her skills. LAT physicality didn’t belong to seven footers or 300 pound bodies. It belonged to masterful competitive bodies – bodies like hers. Within the tight community of players, Heroe qualified as just “an expert” rather than a “woman expert”. And in her interviews, it is noteworthy that she never frames herself as a woman – just as a competitive and masterful player.

Heroe is an important figure on the scene. Her passageway to play followed a common configuration of young women’s exposure to gaming technology as having access to competitive circles via male friends or boyfriends (Walkerdine, 2007; Jenson & de Castell, 2006; Carr, 2006), but her work in developing into a competent, motivated, and self assured participant is a direct reflection of her agency. Around the scene, she is just another local, a familiar face; though at the same time her on-site presence works to crack the gloss of competitive, organized game playing as a mostly white male activity. However, there is another side to her story – her retention on the scene as a personality harnessed and commodified by organizations. In this position, Heroe’s movement “to the top” extends far beyond her play per say, and is encumbered by the institutionalisation of competitive gaming that sees her as “other”.

One particular conversation stands out as telling in the overall “made for men” outlook in

the commodification and media sports toning of e-sports.<sup>149</sup> While standing at the edge of the sectioned off LAT area, Gary and I introduce ourselves to one another. Gary is a team sponsor (and co-founder of a popular *Arena* 3<sup>rd</sup> party service website), and as we're both non-players on the scene it somehow gives us a common bond.<sup>150</sup> His conversation meanders off into talk of management issues until Blake joins us, the other 20-something co-founder of the multi-team sponsoring website.<sup>151</sup> I suddenly spot a young woman in the players' only area and blurt out "Is that Heroe!" (not having met her before); they know her and we talk about what she's doing now and her continued presence on the scene. Gary chimes in, saying that they wanted to hire her a year previous, and continues "Yeah, we wanted to hire her as a media rep. A position we thought she was perfect for. Really cute. (He freezes up for a second then adds hurriedly)... She knew a lot about WoW. Yeah, and we just thought she'd be good for it. But it didn't work out." Blake looked at Gary in a "You did not just say that" kind of glance. But Gary, a prominent *Arena* website owner and LAT team sponsor, had put it out there. And the "cuteness" of Heroe was, according to Gary, a key selling point as a media representative. Her knowledge of *WoW* – which at the time was still among the finest as an active player and tactician – was in his marketing eyes, subsidiary to her looks. (This is a strong point for "being there", seeing the body language of the speaker at work and the inter-embodied commotion between the two sponsors. Always to be remembered: Words aren't everything telling the story.) Gary's moment of candidness is just a tiny example which lays bare how women get positioned as others on the scene – placed to fill "other" kinds of work (N. Taylor, J. Jenson & S. de Castell, 2009).

### *Chilli*

In another striking way, the work of Chilli as a media representative expresses the consequences

for women playing in this maintained scene of structural and participatory male dominance. In one of her blog posts answering from a mailbag of community questions, Chilli discusses high level team play with a young woman gamer who has been asked by her raiding guild to play silent, without speaking (across their voice communication channel). The forum poster asks, “my officer team is uncomfortable with me being female. How should I handle this? They’d prefer me to ‘fly under the radar’... I can’t stop being a female”. Chilli, as a high profile player and well read blogger (drawing from her own experiences in similar situations) offers the following ruthless advice:

You CAN stop being female... You might have a lot of fun playing as a guy - it’s nice to be just one of the guys and not have that thought in the back of your head if he’s lurking on you or not. Plus, dudes don’t ask for your pictures that way. I’d give being a man +1 if it wasn’t so much work. ... [so] you want to fly under the radar. First, you’ll need a voice changer application [linked] ... [and] be mindful of who you are. I don’t mean making up a totally new person - go by your toon’s name and be normal. When you’re being casual after raid or making friends, remember you sound like a man. Don’t say your friend is picking you up to take you to a movie, you’ll sound gay. Just don’t sound gay.

The problematic layers in this post are seemingly endless, though we’ll stay focused on the main one – not being female. Chilli spends most of her time on the nuances of this point, because “being female” relates directly to the other recommendations: act “normal” (that is, like a straight guy); don’t be “gay”; it’s “nice to be one of the guys” (translating to not being an object). Offering insight on how such dominant groups (though here read as masculinity) are at work, Dovey and Kennedy (2007) speak to how hegemony and technicities collide: “...the power of hegemony is such that first, technicities that do not fit the dominant model are made invisible by those that do and second, those of us who do not belong to the dominant group also internalize their power and make ourselves invisible” (p. 146). While Chilli’s post can be read as unforgiving, it is also quite telling of her long-term experience as a top-level player in *WoW* and the cultures of play as well as dominant technicities that she is regulated to and measured against. The discussion of Chilli’s post indicates a model of high performance team practices as powered by hegemonic masculinity. A

model which women may (or may not) encounter on their move to the top, though a model which none-the-less gets discussed on a high performance *Arena* website and supported by one of the few women-as-expert commentators on the scene.

Where *WoW* reports some of the more equitable player demographics between men and women, parity on the scene is not just a numbers game; it is the positions (as well as positioning) held by those numbers that resonates as potent. If women are “advised” to “fly under the radar”, holding any role that leverages ones expertise in the direction of high performance play (other than role player) is unlikely. Where women are active on the LAT scene, they are seldom situated in positions of authority, that is, as a part of decision making circles which “have their own voice”. The following situations start to add up:

- Young heterosexual male guild officers emphasize that it is female presence in guilds that causes turmoil
- Sponsors frame women as media representation first and foremost as eye candy
- E-sports event spaces, such as the MLG, structures itself after recognizable male pro media sports
- Team leader recruitment decisions are steeped in their synergistic personalities
- The seasonal pro-circuit is created as a nationwide (and un-chaperoned) tour.

Taken individually, such “pressures” might seem trivial, but when the gendered layers pertaining to power and access are stacked together, the potential gauntlet for young women wanting to move into the top level of play is made visible as a potentially daunting task.

Chilli’s gender performativity shores up men’s dominance through her compliance with the hegemonic culture of expert computer game play as “masculine technoculture” (N. Taylor, 2009). In doing so, she reinforces the modus operandi of the scene as playing towards the contextual and dominant standard setters – mostly anonymous young men. Though as a simultaneous complicit-

resistant actor, as an active player and knowledge holder, but also as the accommodating second-class player, she exposes the tricky positionality that a young woman as the expert knowledge holder is asked (or to retain her position, required) to juggle. She is given little to no room to perform in the structures maintained around the game in these spaces (online and at LATs) as anything other than *as* or *for* a “straight guy”.

The state of expert women as performers on the scene is a decidedly tricky one. However, in combination these subtle themes, as established at the MLG (and through *Arena* live-realm and TR play online), shape and maintain a very familiar though often undetected “boy’s club” and heterosexual dominance which plays into the (full or partial) access as well as consequences for freedom of movement *as women* on the scene.

The North American LAT’s structural distinctions seem to “prop up” a more mobile, young, white (and increasingly Asian), middle-class, heterosexual male. Being a woman on the LAT scene as a gendered being is still, in various ways, tied to participating in a space designed and manufactured for recognizable heterosexual (sporting) masculinity (despite that the masculinity being presented is not attainable or even desirable for most – see Curry, 2000). Women players, however, are not the only ones affected by the consequences of this particular “gender game”. The expert players, the young men on the North American LAT scene during this research, express and put their agency into action as resistant (though also at times, complicit) to the on-site staging of hegemonic sporting masculinity as well.

### **The production of eventful masculinities**

There is a compelling panorama of computer game sportisation presented via the organization of mediated e-sports tournaments such as the MLG. Debates have been hard-hitting on the subject of

LATs as a “legitimate” e-sports discipline; and LAT players are steadily marginalized by established e-sports communities as being disconnected from “real sporting skill”. Game patches are framed as “game changing” and rhetorically composed to emphasise that physical skill (steeped in movement, dexterity, and timing) isn’t required. Rather, skills in number crunching and a gamesmanship attitude are voiced as the skill(-less) pathway to wins (See Heinseich, 2010). Such negatively toned discourses put LAT players’ legitimacy as bearers of expert skill into question on a daily basis; ultimately situating them as outsiders, as questionable or bogus sports men and women. Sportisation and the notion of a legitimate e-sports player are central to the following discussion on sporting masculinities shored up at expert LANs. And it is in the positionality involving notions of “real” and “other”, and the tensions there-in, that compelling accounts from players on the margins of “real” sports are articulated. The young men who I followed on the scene bring into play some *eventful masculinities*, as performances distinct from the gloss of hegemonic sporting masculinities produced at MLG events.

Hegemonic sporting masculinities and the sportisation of leisure activities were initially drawn into this study on the MLG’s high regard of North American *media sports* events (sports events whose continued existence rests on profit maximization from media investments – see Maguire et al., 2002. pp. 52-53). Media sports such as NASCAR and the NFL were voiced by MLG co-founder and chief brand officer Sundance DiGiovanni as widespread, competitive, and thus advantageous models.<sup>152</sup> DiGiovanni (ESPN Sports Nation, n.d.) explains,

The goal with MLG has always been to create a new platform of competition for guys who like video games. When we started our goal was to rival traditional stick and ball sports...Our goal is to become as widespread as other traditional [sic] sports. Our goal isn’t to stop, but to be on par with the NFL and NASCAR. A lot of guys play video games worldwide and that’s who this is for.

Stating that the MLG wanted to “rival” traditional sports is noteworthy, as one thing becomes



certain – the “pageantry” of media sports masculinities produced by and alongside of such models goes uncriticized (Sabo & Jansen, 1992).<sup>153</sup> My attention in the following is directed toward three core areas (1) hegemonic sporting masculinities at the MLG; (2) counter-hegemonic practices of LAT teams; (3) men’s complicity towards hegemonic sporting masculinity.

## **Hegemonic sporting masculinities**

Originally conceptualized by R.W. Connell (1995), hegemonic masculinities are framed as follows:

The concept of ‘hegemony’, deriving from Antonio Gramsci’s analysis of class relations, refers to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life. At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is exalted. Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (p. 77).

The concept has been widely employed in explorations of masculinity in sports, but also more recently critiqued within sports sociology on its dependence on an overly structural foundation (Pringle & Hickey, 2010). Current renderings of the term have integrated gender elasticity, historicity, and intersectionality in the configuration, and have extended from thinking in terms of masculinity to *masculinities* (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Masculinity as such is not one thing, or one way of being for one person – be that body male or female, but rather an individual can encompass many variations of gender performances throughout their everyday life and life history (Halberstam, 1998). Likewise, hegemonic sporting masculinities are accordingly not static or essential, nor reducible to simple framings of structural determinism or one-way power formulations, but rather, they are configurations of practice, contested, and with historic and contextual contingencies (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In this research, I could not follow the suggestion of Halberstam (1998) in looking away from the white, middle-class male body for a

legible reading of hegemonic masculinity, as the majority of the LAT scene was exactly that; however I could explore the actions of those performing in complex ways with and against the ascendant form of local masculinities being produced. The negotiations are what make LAT players compelling actors and as Halberstam suggests, players on the margins speak directly to how dominant masculinities are experienced, produced, and sustained in that particular context through their brush with and against it.

In this light, it is important to highlight the seam between gender and social class in terms of player resistances against the ascendant masculinities produced at the MLG. In Messner's (1992) look at elite level male athletes engaged in organized team sports, he finds that middle-class male athletes were less committed to the dominant masculinity of their sport owing to having a range of educational and career choices to opt into (p. 82). Athletes from higher status backgrounds (with greater social and economic capital) tended to place fewer eggs in the "athletic career" basket as a good choice in terms of their professional life. For the LAT players, an athletic—or in this case e-sports—"career" is likewise seen as only one of several places where a culturally recognizable masculine identity could be cultivated. The players did not see themselves as limited to the one identity that they had already developed and self-actualized, and they proved to be more than just the "digital mavericks" to which the scene caters for (Zitron, 2011).<sup>154</sup> They could see their future self somewhere outside of the gaming scene, as a different type of "somebody" – a programmer here, a corporate analyst there. They knew they could be contenders elsewhere. To be sure, in the exploration of resistant and complicit practices towards masculinities, social class cannot be ignored.

A final consideration allotted to these "players on the margins" comes from the context of their counter-hegemonic practices: Resistances are not just taking place on isolated fields (such as

at developer-specific LANs like BlizzCon), but rather, they are performed right in the middle of a hypermasculine space produced for competitive male gamers. LAT players bring their deliberate resistant, though also at times reproductive practice, right into that “inner sanctum of male privilege” (M.J. Kane & L. Disch, 1993) – the MLG/media sports setting.

### **Counter-hegemonic practices at LATs**

At the time of this research, *Arena Tournament* teams were situated on the periphery of the MLG and e-sports as a discipline of questionable sporting skill.<sup>155</sup> Patches to the game were distinguished as game changing and rhetorically composed to emphasise that physical skill (steeped in movement, dexterity, and timing) wasn’t always required. Rather, it was skills in number crunching and a gamesmanship attitude to play the “cheese comp” that would “fix” the winners.<sup>156</sup> The broader negatively toned discourses surrounding player competency put their legitimacy as bearers of expert skill into question on a daily basis; ultimately having to prove patch after patch that they were indeed “the real deal”. Though to state that the *Arena* players are marginalized on the e-sports scene is certainly a tough call to make, and must be taken with a grain of salt. The game they play *is* on a tournament circuit.<sup>157</sup> There *are* outlets to high performance competitions and various perks available from just such expert play. Other games “well suited” to e-sports tournaments and their broader communities have not received such institutional support or the residual perks of such organization and funding (one also must wonder if there exists a private incubator seed fund targeting digital mavericks that happen to have female bodies?).<sup>158</sup> Nevertheless, the players that traversed the high performance LAT scenes experienced different discourses and different confrontations—affirming (BlizzCon) and debasing (MLG)—regarding *Arena* and masculinities during their seasonal play. And at the MLG, the peripheral position of

*Arena* was acknowledged and was discussed by players as being an institutional concern that stretched beyond such tournament events.

The conduct of high level competitors “on the margins” offers an alternate version of gendered performance in this media sports space, what I call *eventful masculinities*. That is, masculinities made in relation to the situated event and event-goers on the scene. Notably, these are location-based and event specific performances of *Arena* players’, made with and in contrast to local practices, regular as well as new personalities, in addition to structural framings and adjustments.

#### *Institutional marginalization in context*

At the time of this study, no franchise *Arena* player was on a salaried contract (13 franchise teams were on the tournament tour), though the *Arena* players were affiliated to franchises where salaries were the contractual standard for *other* players of *other* games (such as *Counter-Strike* or *SC2*). One long time player offered a provocative comment on other possible institutions in play (outside of immediate franchises and tournaments) shaping the pro players “no-pay” status and mobility. He maintains,

I think it hints at the G7, like they all agreed that they weren’t going to salary *WoW* players. Just because that way, if no-one does it then no-one has to start doing it. As long as there’s not somewhere else to go that’s better, then the players can’t really do anything about it. So until I can say ‘give me a salary or this other team will’ then there’s nothing you can do.

It is notable that the consultancy work of the gaming union (the G7) is pointed out as an actor in their disenfranchisement. The G7’s membership list includes four of the franchise owners who were at the time sponsoring *Arena* teams. Franchise players adamantly that the gaming union had stepped in to puppeteer the “no salary” decision for *Arena* players was further discussed as being a counter-measure to lower fishing (player poaching) and done so in order to secure a more even

playing field team for team. Being treated as such, as an “automaton”, is troubling as the players “are regarded as mere means to others ends” (Walsh & Giulianotti, 2007, p. 67). In this case the other ends refer to the media sports business of providing “good match-ups”. Whether the restriction indeed took place or not (in the corridors or on paper) is highly debatable. Nevertheless, this discussion is a ripe part of the discourse within the expert *Arena* community surrounding their disenfranchisement as labourers, and their recognition of their play (and thus themselves) as given meaning only as a mere product.

Adding to their marginality on the scene are two further incidents which occurred during the 2010 MLG season. Firstly, the location-based *Arena Tournament*, usually played as a two and a half day double-elimination series, was abridged in tournament structure to accommodate for the newly added SC2 competition. Five months after this amendment, the *Arena* grand finals series was cut due to various complications involving the MLG finals schedule and the release dates for Blizzard’s latest game expansion (Cataclysm). The player’s caught wind of the rumour prior to the start of the Washington D.C. event (as did I through a random conversation with a sponsor – losing out, as the sponsors did, on already purchased plane tickets to the suddenly *Arena*-deficient finals event). Three days after the tournament, it was officially announced that the *Arena* finals were to be “postponed” – this was three weeks prior to the grand finals (the postponed finals have never taken place). Clearly, the business models of both the MLG and Blizzard had not placed *Arena Tournament* as a high priority e-sports discipline, or the players of that e-sport as a top concern.<sup>159</sup>

With such layering, one can gain a sense of how participants experience themselves as outsiders and as less invested in the gloss of hegemonic sporting masculinity of this bigger e-sports scene. And this thorough experience of being outsiders is key to their meaning making; it feeds directly into the players’ expression and agency on scene in their LAT play. For *Arena* players, the LAT scene

was framed as being so structurally contingent that the pleasures of the competition were talked of as being drawn mostly from other more stable areas, such as from the players themselves.

The no-pay, automaton, and exclusion stories perhaps read thinly on masculinities at first glance, though it is precisely in these slight but multiple layerings that LATs are positioned as something quite distinct from the trappings of the ascendant form. Where *Halo* reaps space, money, amateur structures, and event visibility; LATs expose the opposite. Such episodes filter into LAT masculinities in one key way – through being pervasively positioned as the “little guy” who is plainly peripheral to the existence of the broader scene. Playing in a recognized-as-marginal activity was a key conduit for these particular players to open up for other interpretations on the meanings of expert play and elite competition. Such media sports related correlations to their experience of elite level play provoked a critical and querying reaction to the activity they were engaged in (Pringle & Hickey, 2010, p. 134). As such, the marginality of the regularly competing players pulled them tightly together with a group identity (though certainly not without breaches), where the lingering issue of “how to perform” was produced collectively in introspection of how “they” wanted to be as a scene.

Perhaps the most interesting twist to the LAT players’ marginality is their graciousness to Blizzard e-sports (as directly involved in all LAT events). The players’ praise the administrators (who are regulars on the various scenes) most fervently, and never a tarnished word is spoken towards Blizzard. As an outsider looking in, I can’t help but wonder whether such performances are indicative of Blizzard’s history as a community oriented company, where opportunity for dialogue between players/communities and designers/Blizzard gatekeepers is notable (T.L. Taylor, 2012). Or whether, in this particular situation with various red flags waving, it tastes a little more of the “well-trained” (subservient) athlete, compliant to the coach or institution at all costs (Gearity,

2009). Certainly both flavours and actions are present in the making of the LAT scene, and need to be kept in mind when navigating the discussions.

### *A finesse foundation*

Perhaps the best place to start on the eventful masculinities of LAT players is with their interpretation of what it means to be “sporty”. Sporting masculinity as tied to the MLG look, and as projected by the *Halo* scene, is something immediately constructed as “other” by the players. Veteran LAT player Popsie makes a clear statement on what it is “they” do. He spindles his fingers through the air and does an elaborate movement mimicking the character animation of the female blood elf priest – his main character. We’re finesse, he says smiling: They’re the jocks – nodding to the *Halo* scene not twenty meters away. LAT players embraced this perception of finesse. They saw themselves as sophisticated teams: Carefully thought out line-ups of players who were practiced in the execution of intricate details. Finesse is certainly a term found in traditional sports, though in media sports, finesse is “never left alone” – and is often found heavily anchored to other “masculine role balancing attributes” such as power, agility, or strength.<sup>160</sup>

In the LAT players full embrace of finesse, they align themselves with a more traditional geek image. As T.L. Taylor (2012) illustrates in her research on pro players, in geek culture, “...Talking over minutia with your friends, or perhaps even the competitive jostling of knowing some arcane trivia, is highly valued... Social capital is produced by, and circulates through, the mastery of domain knowledge” (p. 111). LAT players talk of the finesse involved in putting such domain knowledge into action: Having to deal with the nuances of major patch changes, class line-up challenges, and the overall capability of balancing, planning, and practicing (in an MMO),<sup>161</sup> as well as theorycrafting as weighed up against the interplay on the scene.<sup>162</sup> These issues are

certainly parcelled out in other e-sports disciplines in various ways; however, for LAT players, these issues were marked as the everyday minutiae that high performance players must face. Finesse is a foundational characteristic of the local scene. It is embraced for the sensitivity and intimate understanding needed of one's own teams (and opponents) in a quick paced game where movement and spacing is vital to every outcome, and coupled to domain knowledge mastery which is needed to stay on top of the ladder.



Figure 27: The finesse animations of the female Blood Elf Priest.

Perhaps one of the most salient features in this LAT community's approach towards high performance competition is their identification of the scene as fragile.<sup>163</sup> Consequently, value is invested in other places (rather than purely into achievement oriented values) as can be seen in the persistence of *excessive survivalism* in media sports – where winning is persistently shored up as the only thing that matters (Kretchmar, 1994, p. 98). Recognizing the tournament scene as fragile brings an alternate reading on which longer term gains from this type of competition can be



positively harnessed. As several players voice, this includes new experiences (travel and mastery), testing a team's consistency, friendships and respect of peers, finding ways to enhance team synergy, and a chance to play; not just an opportunity to win, to be seen, or to gain financially. A chance to engage with and against the top players in an optimal setting – this is recognized as the most salient reward. A veteran LAT player voices his admiration of a consistent team on the circuit, as he notes, "... [they are] a truly great team and will be around as long as they want to keep playing because they will be able to be entertaining and create good games no matter the imbalances – win or lose they're always fun to watch" (Fnatic Team, 2010). The key phrase here is that great teams can *create good games*, not necessarily dominate or win consistently through instrumental play.<sup>164</sup> On the LAT scene at the MLG, this sentiment towards the game and the competitors play was deeply entrenched in what "their" game should be: Namely, mastery created together. Winning is certainly a goal, but it is voiced together with the aspiration for a "gg". However, creating good games does not mean that aggressive flair ups are absent from the scene.



Figure 28: Good games followed by handshakes and jokes.

### *Failure*

Part of the rendition surrounding finesse and togetherness sits with a constructive responsiveness to failure. Failure, it might be said, is not a component that is eagerly embraced in performances of hegemonic sporting masculinity. Though pointing to the contrary, many of the LAT teams proved to be magnanimous in failure; that is to say that for them failing to win was expected, and by no means aligned to failing to dominate in some all encompassing heroic fashion. Failure was dealt with and talked about as a part of the high performance experience, not sidelined as something that sullied the player/teams dominant status. Zeke notes,

**Zeke:** On LAN it's a lot of pressure, there's tons of expectations and stuff, and you can't win every time or anything, I mean we've done very well lately – we got 2nd last tournament and we won the finals not long ago, but I mean there's lots of tournaments where you're not going to do that well. Or you're not going to do as well as you'd like to. So I think it's just

like a lot of pressure, and like how people deal with it.

This is followed up by another long-term player on the scene who noted on the importance of handling a loss: “Winning is easy. Being able to appropriately criticize and improve after losing is very important” (Rapture, 2011). Dewey recalled that several teams he played with at the very top level didn’t manage to attain that team based open attitude that incorporated failure as a part of the game. Being an expert player online has a different feel; as it can mean that losing is not experienced in the same way.<sup>165</sup> Playing at LATs was a culture shock not individually as players but as a team, as the high level LAT play brought relentless competition and teams used to winning online were now experiencing repeated loses that felt somewhat out-of-control – as a tarnish on their skill.<sup>166</sup> Those teams self-combusted fairly quickly, Dewey notes. Failure is delicate for the team, something that you have to work together with and be willing to accommodate. Heroe talks about her team’s approach to losing,

**Heroe:** Every time you lose, or every time your team would lose, we would always talk it over, like why did we lose, how could we do better, it wasn’t like screaming at each other. I was lucky to be able to play with two of the coolest people, they’re so calm, they never yell, I see how these teams are just screaming at each other and our team was just like – Alright that sucked, what did we do wrong? So I think that’s why we were successful.

Heroe goes on to note that her team’s talk about failure is taken up immediately following the event; dealing with failure as a phantom actor on the field to be talked about gainfully.<sup>167</sup> This is not to say that *Arena* players are not hard-nosed competitors, but rather that failure is not rhetorically spun as an antagonizing failure of masculinity. Accommodating failure as a part of their elite level play certainly shakes them apart from discourses surrounding destructive sports masculinities; notably those unstably situated masculinities where winning is everything, and as a result, after each achievement the athlete must wake up just to “prove himself all over again tomorrow” (Messner, Dunbar & Hunt, 2000, p. 390).

### *Trash-talking at LATs*

During the Raleigh event there were touches of trash-talking and aggressive challenges, some of which were smeared as derogatory insults signalling a “failure” of masculinity. Notably, these gendered (mostly homophobic) slurs were not only audible in the MLG space, but also filtered out to the thousands of spectators via the online audio/video feed. Despite attempts (most often by teammates) to shut down the use of derogatory and “unsporting” language, appearances of complicit hegemonic masculinity reminiscent of aggressive contact sports also flared up from time to time. In the following scene where trash-talking erupted, in-team tensions were made audible with Grolitz yelling across the tournament floor (and the live feed) after defeating their rivals:

**Grolitz:** I’m about to scream like “nice spell-lock faggot”.

**Madner:** Don’t do that; don’t do that!

**Grolitz (yelling):** Hey, Hey! Lourk (rival player)! Fuck You!

On the transmitted feed of this event, the actions seemingly ended there – hanging silently on a “Fuck You”. No retaliation was heard in the room.<sup>168</sup> Aggressive players at LATs were notably in the absolute minority. Nick Taylor’s (2009) exploration of the MLG *Halo* scene offers some compelling texture that counter-poses the broader LAT community stance against such aggressiveness. In his analysis, aggressive conduct in *Halo* is both embraced as and appendaged onto “real” play: “...players engage in and reproduce a discourse around ‘professional’ *Halo* 3 play: mastery of a highly-codified lingo, and an ability to ‘trash-talk’, is as important as one’s ‘shot’, and silence is associated with incompetence and/or inexperience” (p. 168).

LAT players’ steady display of disregard towards outbreaks of antagonistic trash-talking speaks clearly to the disparity between what signifies “legitimate” behaviour for these separate (though spatially near-by) scenes at the MLG. For the LAT players that were engaging in trash-talk,

their actions often spoke more to the performativity of the conduct “for the cameras” (such as gaining a reputation as a “fun to love” or “fun to hate” player). However, the scarcity of players actively engaging with trash-talkers also speaks to the lack of purchase towards “manliness” that such actions are allotted by the LAT crowd. Where silence is configured on the *Halo* scene as weakness, the unanswered taunt on the LAT scene feeds into their positionality as finesse players; as able to handle the “little details” of high performance play. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) suggest that, “one of the most effective ways of ‘being a man’ in certain local contexts may be to demonstrate one’s distance from a regional hegemonic masculinity” (p. 840). Such divergent performances of masculinities which literally back onto each other at the MLG work as such; they are in regard of one another – strengthening the position and understanding of what masculinity is on each separate though co-located scene.

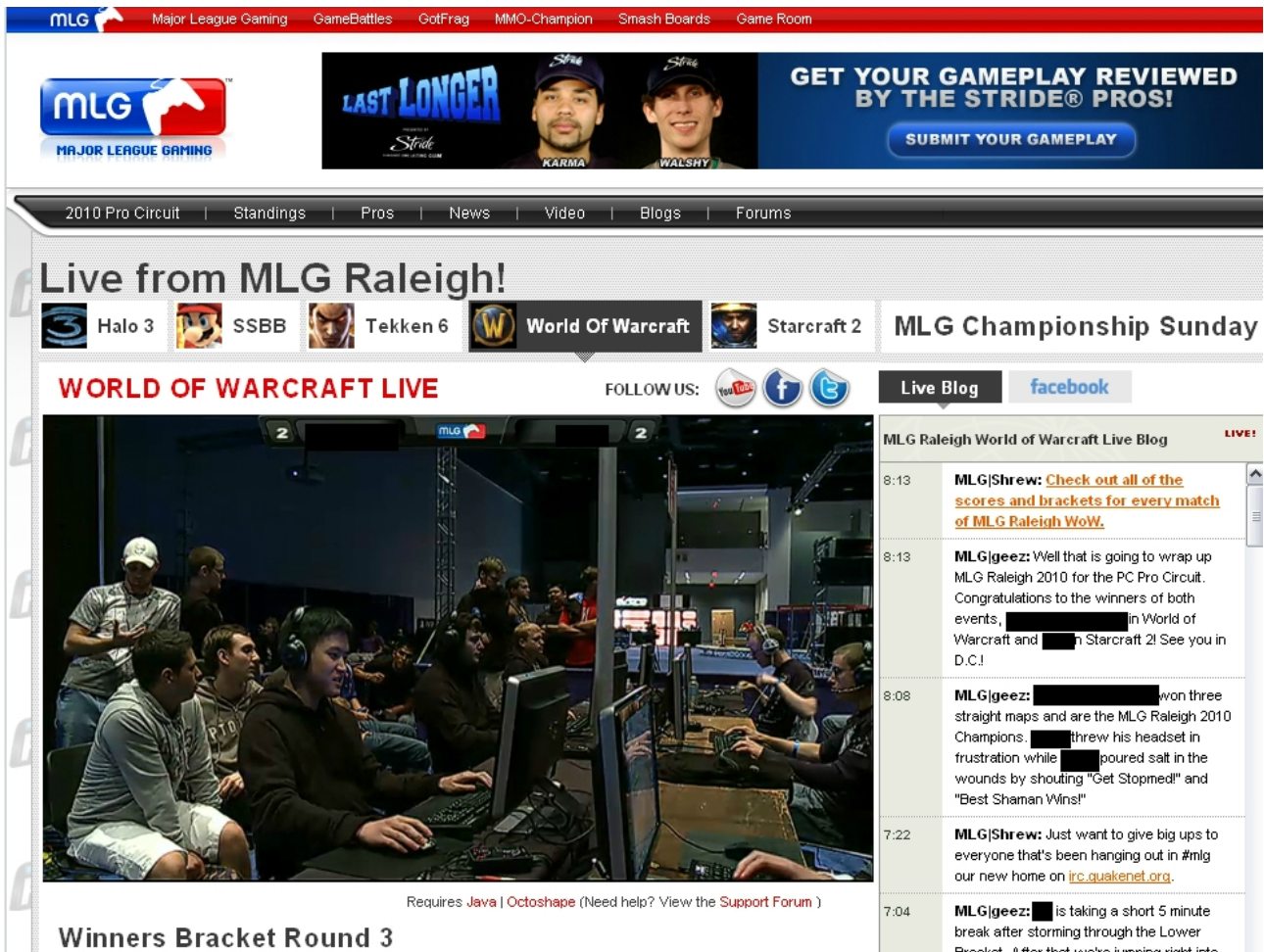


Figure 29: Screenshot of the MLG Raleigh LAT live-stream - empty though intimate settings where trash-talking (for the cameras) is managed.

### *Queering hegemonic sporting masculinities*

There is one particular distinction in LAT history: It is the only scene on the MLG where a woman has risen to the top as a championship winning high performance player and teammate. In her repeat successes and overall recognition as a former expert player on the LAT scene, Heroe works to collapse any idea of leaky hegemony, where, “...sport is seen historically to be a long-standing project to reinforce dominant modes of masculinity and male privilege while at the same time allowing ‘just enough’ and ‘just the right kind’ of female physical activity so as not to rock the boat” (Ritchie, 2004, p. 148).

Heroe did more than rock the boat, she as good as sunk it during the early days of LATs with her multiple championship series wins alongside of her role as lead tactician. Despite not being active as a player during my research, her spectre of play remained. And by means of the not-so-simple work of becoming an expert player, Heroe's visibility on and history with the scene in essence stamped LATs as "co-ed".<sup>169</sup> While Heroe's activity has marked the scene in a particular way, there still remains very little presence of women on the LAT scene. And this makes one particular aspect of LATs where different bodies are present most intriguing. That is, in the frequent use of female characters. The pervasive use of female characters added a layer of performativity within this space as something different from the ways things were getting done across the MLG scene more broadly.

Much work has been done on the practice of character selection and "gender-bending" in MMOs from identity exploration, to individual aesthetic pleasures or experienced in-game functional advantages (Eklund, 2011; MacCallum-Stewart, 2008; Yee, 2003). LAT players present a different purpose for gender-bending. As acknowledged by Popsie, the qualities located in the female characters work to augment the LAT scene identity as finesse (though do note that Popsie never used "feminine" to describe the animation quality). In Nick Yee, Nicholas Ducheneaut, Mike Yao and Les Nelson's (2011) work using big data sets taken from Blizzard on PvP play and character selection, they found that, "...we (gender bending players) conform to the roles that are expected of our avatars, independent of who we are in the physical world" (p. 4). Meaning that players were found to choose female characters as healers (such as the priest class) for example, as that is the stereotype of the gendered performance of that class. At LATs, the much smaller sample of situated players offers another interpretation.

Popsie doesn't choose a female character to represent his priest to conform to the gender

stereotype made around that role, he chooses a female body for the finesse of the animation that it projects back out into the world. He draws from the character those qualities which can fold back into the local significance of their game culture. The fairly stereotypical character designs are thus reinvented locally with different meanings of power – feminine/slender vs. masculine/strapping is rewritten as finesse vs. crude (Popsie’s words – perhaps re-emphasizing his stance on *Arena* as “brains” contra *Halo* as “brawn”). Even in Popsie’s last act here of “ideological recycling” of gender dichotomies (Laberge & Albert, 2000, p. 212), he steers clear of remaking the choice of finesse as fixed to moral strength (having the “courage” to gender-bend in the MLG space), or physical prowess (that the high performance game is only for well trained e-sports “athletes”). Gender bending at LATs is at times purposefully employed as a distinct move away from local hegemonic “jock” masculinity. Rather than a reification of women’s bodies as healers, female bodies are chosen to show off the best side of their, the LAT players, masculinity.





Figure 30: One of the many LAT players at work customising a female player-character.

Other small but significant instances which embrace the queering practices of the young men in play arise throughout the tournaments and interviews. One player, sporting a crew-cut, brings a hairdryer to matches; a traditionally gendered technology which he draws into his pre-game routine to warm-up his hands. Another player carries a fluffy white pillow around to use during and between play for increased comfort. And there are the manifold instances where players display their camaraderie through BFF moments across the various mega-screens, such as naming an alternative (alt) character after their good mate from another team who is sitting in the crowd (Alt 1: “Dewey”; Alt 2: “Dewzie”; Alt 3: “Dewyee!”).

The players on the LAT scene were oriented towards one another, not as fixed antagonists, but as a collective of gamers where room for queering the dominant look of e-sports play more

broadly was embraced. Ahmed (2006) offers some consideration on the social orientations and lines created in such actions relating to both bodies and the space: “The social also has its skin, as a border that feels and that is shaped by the ‘impressions’ left by others. The skin of the social might be affected by the comings and goings of different bodies, creating new lines and textures in the ways in which things are arranged” (p. 9). Tying the skin of the social to LAT performances, these players actively chose a specific embodiment as a significant way to highlight their performance of masculinity (notably, it was one that was distinctive from the scene of male military bodies in *Halo*). As gendered bodies they considered their visibility, the roles presented to them, and how to play with the bricolage of materials available. Intended or not, impressions were left – queering the highly visible e-sports event. Though the agency of LAT players was not steeped in some idealized complete freedom of movement; to be certain, it was at times reeled in and measured up against culturally recognizable masculinity more broadly.

#### *Reproducing hegemonic sporting masculinities*

LAT players were not just negotiating *against* the hegemonic sporting masculinity of the MLG – they were also engaged in complicit actions. That is, they were involved in “accepting the patriarchal dividend” though not defending patriarchy or the dominant form of masculinity itself (Connell, 2002, p.166).

In terms of the complicity of the *Arena* players, Pringle and Hickey (2010) offer some consideration of the complex challenges surrounding the competing discourses produced across various sports and games that can produce “identity tensions” (pp. 116-117). The identity tension most provocative is perhaps that in which young men are judged on the side-lines. That is, even if young men are not interested in participating in the hypermasculine sport on display, they are

nonetheless likely to have their identities measured against the masculinities that such a game or sport articulates (p. 117). Having to jog up on stage athletically, perform an ESPN reel effectively, and using the term “rape” during play (then hugging and hanging out with players when the game is over, as happened on the LAT scene), alludes to some of many awkward examples of young men “doing” the ascendant model of masculinity.<sup>170</sup>

Nick Taylor, Jen Jenson, and Suzanne de Castell (2009) suggest that the overt heterosexual gloss and performances within the MLG scene are more than just media sports mimicry, and rather they safeguard “an intensely ‘homosocial’ space from homosexual desire” (p. 248). Complicity to the ascendant masculinity on the scene might thus work like a safety net for the LAT players performing as less culturally recognizable “athletes”, and thus less “like men”. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) identify this flexibility, stating that, “Men can adopt hegemonic masculinity when it is desirable; but the same men can distance themselves strategically from hegemonic masculinity at other moments. Consequently, ‘masculinity’ represents not a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices” (p. 841). Acting complicity towards the heterosexual gloss of the scene via culturally recognizable cues on viable masculine performances thus works as a stabilizer for the players: Ultimately, the young male players on the scene carefully position themselves as always already recognizable as “(straight) men”.

One example of this became evident in the talk and bodies produced for the scene. In her exploration of pro e-sports, T.L. Taylor (2012) finds a panorama of gamer bodies on display, “Unlike traditional athletics, which weeds through physicality and segregates (and excludes), within pro gaming you will find short and tall, skinny and chubby, fit and not. There is no classic male physique dominating the scene” (p. 77). While on the broader e-sports scene I would concur to

this assortment of bodies (and to an extent the exclusion and segregation of traditional sporting bodies), however, on the LAT scene there was a decidedly different atmosphere produced around displayed bodies that honed in on the disciplined contra unmanaged male body. What curiously became prevalent in the players talk about LAT play was that practising for a big competition (notably live-streamed LANs with high viewer counts) included a training regime in dominating one's body for display. Grooming oneself in alignment with an athletic body was perplexing at first with the outwardly chummy feel of the scene. Evidently though, such preparation related much less to what happened in the local area of the LAN and between "friends"; the missing slice of performance here weighed in on the online perception and talk of male bodies in and out of play. The following sequence was voiced on a popular *Arena* podcast between top LAT players:

**Player T:** Why didn't Greeks (a talented live-realm player) want to go to regionals?

**Lourk:** I like the guy, but I think it might be add-ons.<sup>171</sup> For real.

**Dewey:** No he's getting his MBA.

**Lourk:** It just doesn't sound plausible. Maybe he's fat.

**Player T:** Yeah, that's probably the best guess.

**Dewey:** I remember the days of going to a *WoW* tournament and everyone was fat. But now everyone works out and lifts weights before they come to events. I mean back in Vanilla/60 everyone just used to play all day every day, I mean look at Jix (player). He was a big dude at his first tournament.

**Player T:** Google "Jix" - you'll see pictures of when he used to be large-ish. Everyone tries to get cut before the event now, trying to cut weight.

Most *Arena* players are not "known by body" prior to entering the live-stream/photo documented configuration of organized competitive LAT play. As suddenly visible persons, their stories resonate with personal flaming of the fuller, personal body – one that is tangible with hair styles, tics, and a represented and dimensional body. Such experiences that are attached to identity disclosure are

by means new to internet studies or e-sports performances of sporting masculinity (Kendall, 2002, pp. 156-157; M. Kane, 2008, p. 94). Though, it certainly emphasises the intensity of censure of young (North American) men by young men on the online scene. As Dewey notes, the transformation of the scene from seeing undisciplined bodies (everyone used to be fat) to engaging disciplined bodies (everyone works out) for mediated play is a significant change. As the sportisation of the scene developed to resemble a media sport, so too did the rhetoric surrounding other points reflecting on the “right kind of player body” and “right kind of play” more broadly. Here, real play is the Blizzard e-sports ruling that add-ons aren’t allowed. Here, the real body is one that is disciplined, that is not fat.<sup>172</sup> Being a top *Arena* player and *not* coming to LAN opens up for unbridled suggestions that a player might be a deviant: Either by ones invisible body, or via one’s visible yet undisciplined body in play. One is still an outsider to the LAT community; a veritable deviant until proven otherwise (where a legitimate “excuse” is deemed necessary to pass, such as “He’s getting his MBA”). Many top players don’t make the LAT circuit though the dialogue surrounding their non-attendance does not regard their skill as players, but rather often makes speculations regarding their physicality. Having to live up to the demands of masculinities as made online is also a demanding part of the LAT scene. And with so much at stake, hitting the gym a little bit harder, and looking a little bit more “cut” was part of the preparation that several of players took into their lead-up training to LAN.<sup>173</sup> Such a double body work-out, training for expert skill and disciplining one’s body emphasizes the work that goes into producing oneself as a recognizable and legitimate body on the scene. Despite LAT player’s reflective attitudes surrounding their engagements, they nevertheless don’t slip out easily from other signifiers of traditional hegemonic masculine constructions.

Complicity, in reference to the ascendant masculinity at the MLG, is desperately tricky; as

such complicit involvement sits not only in local performances, but also as calculated against broader understandings of “manliness”, heterosexuality, and formulations of geeks and (or in contrast to) jocks.

## {Chapter 6}

### The personalisation of high performance play

There is an ongoing conversation around the state of rules in computer games. On the one end are readings of rules as securely situated in code; as being less “malleable” in their black box; and as unique to computer games as the human adjudicator is “removed” from the equation of play (Myers, 2010; Adams & Rollings, 2007; Nardi, 2010). At the other end are culturally informed articulations which find the game rules to be a product of play; a collection of add-ons, “house rules”, and situated interpretations of the game (Harper, 2010; M. Jakobsson & T.L. Taylor, 2006; Jakobsson, 2007; Malaby, 2007; T.L. Taylor, 2009a, 2012). But perhaps it is unreasonable to place these readings of rules on a diametrically opposed continuum. Even the more rigorous game formalists locate, and “deal with” the local rules of play. And conversely, ethically or culturally attentive readings on computer game rules don’t just dismiss the work of code altogether. Compelling texture comes from the various interpretations on the state of game rules, and strong arguments are voiced from both corners. This exploration adds to them – as a culturally attentive account on the interpretations of codes and systems in high performance play.

## Feeling rules

In offering an account of the rules of play as neither player nor designer centric but rather as rules from in-between, with slippage and interpretation from all sides, I probe at a central provocation found in formal renditions of the game rules: What is missed when we do not consider the variety and nuance of the action (the socio-technical pressures on rules), and what else is at stake in burying the interpretative efforts of players?

In the subsequent player discussions and from observations at LATs, game rules are lived and experienced as contingent on the many “unintended consequences of practice” (Malaby, 2007). Such consequences include the impressions of *social unions* of play (Arnold, 1979)—“concerned with the manner in which one should ideally participate if the system is to flourish” (Arnold, 2003, pp. 73-74)—as well as the technologies orienting games, both of which are a part of the practice of high performance play.<sup>174</sup> Moving beyond LAT players, there are hordes of other people and things to consider which impact on play (often invisible to most of us watching) and which, in particular, amend or refine the rules as situated; club sponsors, spectators, adjudicators, and the game developers themselves are just a handful of actors that get caught up in the “here-and-now” of rule interpretation.<sup>175</sup> And as Winograd and Flores (1986) suggest, the interpretative work by all the actors on the field are relevant to game ontology (p. 30). As such, this look at the “lived game” is considered from the actions of the various actors involved in its creation.

Though to begin at the beginning: A deeper look at the rules (as played) in LATs arose from a controversy followed by dissatisfaction. I had just come back to Denmark after having spent four months following the LAT teams playing on the North American scene, the last game of which (the BlizzCon 2010 finals) was plagued with discrepancies surrounding the “real” rules of the game.



Rules were expressed across the community as “in the game”, as “adjudicated by the officials”, and as “belonging to the players”. What became explicit over the timeline of this incident—before, during, and after the game—was the instability of seemingly “static” (coded and written) rules for the experts on the scene. Rules were found to be deeply personal for the LAT players, for in the team setting they were intimately shared. The high performance community was busy at work shaping the rules through both performance and discourse as something socially intelligible (rather than pointing to some standardized all purpose rule-set); and power holders—outside of the gameplay—were at work driving a stake into their own diverse agendas.

At the same time that such rule negotiations and interpretations were steaming at the surface of the LAT scene, game studies arguments were re-igniting around computer game rules as being found soundly “within the fixed code” (Adams & Rollings, 2007; Braithwaite & Sharp, 2010; Nardi, 2010; Myers, 2010). This position is attended to most steadily by Myers (2010), who states, “... computer games, of all types of game and play, are most securely situated in the formal properties of a digital game *code*, which is much more measurable and more determinable than that code’s pre-digital analogue: game *rules*” (original emphasis. p. 5).<sup>176</sup> Contrary to this arrangement, my research collaborators live and express a slightly alternate reading regarding the determinability and location of game rules, as well as finding “outside” (of the code) sources which also shape the processes and meaning-making of their play. Their practices are recognizable in the theoretical standpoints of sports philosophers who locate the spirit of play as part and parcel of the rules of the always already interpreted game (McFee, 2004; Loland, 2002; D’Agostino, 1981; Arnold, 2003). Such readings have great carry on the LAT scene. There is a sensibility to the experiences and executions of the rules where the constitutive rules are read and considered (sometimes as regulative rules, sometimes as local amendments, and sometimes ignored), rather

than simply abided or accepted by participants prior to a match.<sup>177</sup>

In the following example, the local and collective interpretations—referring to national and regional server fidelity—of the game rules exemplify how *constitutive rules* (the “how to win” coded/written rules – Loland, 2002, p.15) follow the curvature of many players’ long-term practices.<sup>178</sup> Rules get folded along the interpretive lines of various different actors, orientations, and practices; as such, *regulative rules* (penalty invoking rules - D’Agostino, 1981) are made by many “on the fly”. Thus, the “essence” of the high performance game is not defined by a single “auteur” of code.<sup>179</sup> This extended close-reading of a controversy shows how tournament play— even at the high performance level— can cultivate quite diverse cultures of play which impact on the interpretation of the “standardized” rules (T.L. Taylor, 2012).<sup>180</sup>

In the grand finals series of the 2010 *Arena Pass Tournament* held at BlizzCon,<sup>181</sup> the members of *Team USA* (and their followers, online and offline, that perform within the same spheres of play) expressed that the spirit of play was compromised when *Team EU* challenged an end-game state (a loss), by appealing to the (human) referees, who needed in turn to run a third-party program (video playback) to come to an official decision. But many more controversies were evident as this event unfolded, where many variations and interpretations of the rules were found to be at work in shaping the game.

#### *The BlizzCon 2010 championship game or losing \$75,000 while really trying*

*Team USA* are on their third match in a row (moving from qualifiers, to semi-finals, and now playing in the championship game) which moves them into their fourth hour of play in what is to become an eleven game series. BlizzCon is officially closed, but the game stretches on into the night. The remaining witnesses to the event are a devout throng of high performance *Arena* chums,

tournament losers, media representatives, franchise owners, e-sports organizers, Blizzard representatives, and straggling but fascinated BlizzCon attendees. Around a hundred and fifty people linger to share the moment with the six on-stage players who perform the only act in the cavernous convention space.<sup>182</sup>



Figure 31: Getting a hug of support from the “fourth man” after winning another decisive game in the championship series; the crowd is still going wild after several hours of watching these two teams battle it out for the big win.

Late in a decisive game, a match point comes up for *Team USA*, who is playing a wizard-cleave (all players are spell-casters, and notably here two players have healing abilities making them difficult to kill). Their opponents are *Team EU*, another wizard-cleave who are proficient damage dealers. The game can be decided in two ways. The first winning condition is reached by killing all the opponents before the 20-minute game time limit is reached or, if neither team reaches the winning condition a “rematch” game is played. If this second match has no clear winner, the game gets judged on “damage done” - where the team who has dealt the most damage within the 20-minute period *in the first match* is deemed the victor (the software tallies the damage done from the time of entry to the time the players leave the game). The game unfolding is, in a nutshell, an official’s nightmare.

What “seems” to happen is that *Team USA* kills *Team EUs* Warlock, and after a short time the remaining players of *Team EU* are overcome. *Team USA* jump, run, hug, yell, and grab after teammates and friends who storm the stage. They have their name splashed on the big screen and streamed as the winners of the US\$75,000 purse. But what *Team USA* doesn’t know is that the game is not over yet. On the other side of the stage there has been a discussion going on for about 10-minutes, which started as soon as the Warlock went down.



Figure 32: Thinking the win is theirs; *Team USA* and one shoutcaster celebrate. Though the other shoutcaster already knows something is afoot as he warily looks to *Team EUs* side of the stage where the head official has ominously poked his head out from behind the curtains.

Spooling back to approximately the 19-minute mark: The Druid (the team’s healer) on *Team EU* had been checking his *in-game timer* (a part of the standard *Arena* software which is accessible to

all players) and saw that the game was 13-seconds away from the 20-minute end-game mark.<sup>183</sup> A short while after checking his in-game timer, the Druid stopped playing (game time was, after all, over) which led to the quick death of the Warlock (who the Druid was healing right up until he stopped playing). *Team USA* was relying on (human) referees to make the end-game call. Those human roles were filled by official (backstage) administrators, sideline officials (adding to the gripping situation of play, the sideline officials were suddenly missing half-way through the finals series),<sup>184</sup> and during this last match shoutcasters were drawn into the adjudication role as well, as they implored players to “Play on! Play on!”<sup>185</sup> The phrasing of the official rules states that a game “will be *limited* to a time period of twenty (20) minutes” leaving the rule ambiguously open in terms of how the game is timed and how the game is ended when the 20-minute mark is reached (many questions arise: When does the game-time start, how do players recognize official time, what is the “correct” way to end a game, and how is “damage done” accurately counted?).<sup>186</sup>

On being killed, *Team EU’s* Warlock promptly went backstage to the chief administrator to protest that the 20-minute time limit was reached. The time had run out, thus the game was over – they knew they were “right” as their in-game timers told them it was so. (And in all actuality the spectators could see it too, as the crowd was following the game on the big screens that had displayed the UI of *Team EU’s* Druid, who was constantly flicking over to the in-game timer as he monitored the approaching 20-minute mark.)<sup>187</sup>



Figure 33: The main screen on stage displays the UI view from *Team EU's* Druid (icon highlighted in yellow). 19 Min 47 Sec have elapsed, and everyone is on full health and not yet "OOM" (out-of-mana).



Figure 34: The Warlock arguing to the main officials behind the curtain while play continues on.

The game was judged (taking around 30-minutes in all) and after the administrators reviewed and manually timed the match it was officially called as having gone over regulation time (by three seconds).<sup>188</sup> The match was given to *Team EU* win on damage done from the initial game of the two (a real kicker here was pointed out by the “fourth” member of *Team USA* —the fourth player in their regular (MLG tournament) team who was not allowed to play in this 3-player-only event—who was coaching from the crowd. He noted that first game also went over the time limit—thus the damage done collected by the software accounted for more than 20-minutes of play in its sum. What he realized was that had the first game been called exactly at the 20-minute mark, *Team USA* was—possibly—ahead on damage done, and would have won the game by the second winning condition). The big screen was wiped of the falsely announced win, and the big check was taken

back off stage.



Figure 35: The head official is surrounded (by North Americans).



Figure 36: The shoutcaster talking to *Team EU* about the situation; the software calculates that the time elapsed is 20 minutes - *Team EU*'s data backs up their protest; the spectators are edging closer and closer to the stage as the drama draws out.





Figure 37: The "flourishing system" members – North American LAT players huddle in the corner as the decision is being announced on the protested BlizzCon game.



Figure 38: A relieved *Team EU* (left image); and a *Team USA* player in disbelief as he looks, hands on hips, across at the joyous opposition (right image).

The players sat down to play another championship round, and from my images you can see the difference in the energy of the before and after of *Team USA's* faces and bodies. *Team USA* was going to lose the match. They were drained. As one disappointed forum commentator put it post-match - their momentum was gone. They had put it all into that last match (one team member recalls in a post-match blog that they had blown any remaining energy on celebrating the win). In what was to be their last game of the season, *Team USA* went down during regular time and lost the championship game – a win/loss outcome that is so often suggested as being the result of “the

rules". *Team EU* were handed the big check. A handful of local fans booed – perhaps more at the collective work of the ruling than directed at the team itself. Most spectators went over to *Team USA* and expressed their distaste in the outcome of the game, and towards the inefficiency of the rules – coded, adjudicated, as well as the breaches in the (North American community's notion of) *social unions* regarding the spirit of play. The forums rumbled.<sup>189</sup>



Figure 39: What (the certainty of) winning looks like.



Figure 40: How losing feels, despite the largeness of the prize.

A breach in the social union was strongly voiced by *Team USA* and their entourages (online and off). Though, what happened at the finals was not just read as two different teams (and regional cultures) with different notions of sportspersonship, rather, it was strongly tied to a failure on the behalf of the officiating team (as represented by Blizzard). As Arnold (1979) charts out, a social union relates to how players and officials “should ideally participate if the system is to flourish” (pp. 73-74). The multiple layers creating the uproar hit directly on this experience of a breach in the flourishing system.

Despite the disputes and disorder, a regulating outcome—with *Team EU’s* play judged as impermissible (by many players) but acceptable (by adjudicators and many other players)—was reached.<sup>190</sup> Loland and McNamee offer some nuance to such an instance of rule interpretation, in

expressing that, “[e]very sport, and every particular sport competition, can be seen as a verbal and embodied discourse in which shared norms for the interpretation of the rules are challenged, negotiated and adjusted” (as cited in Loland, 2002, p. 7). The challenge, negotiation, and adjustment of rules, both during and after the BlizzCon finals, were not simply in the hands of players as faced by the code or adjudicators, but rather the rules were worked out in a web of relations.<sup>191</sup> The game ruling was found in context connecting among other things; franchise owners (who went backstage to watch the replayed game); Blizzard representatives (who announced the final decision); streaming and archiving technologies (which allowed for the instant replay); written rules (where the looseness for interpretation lay); coded rules (the in-game timer is accessible to use as a part of the game and the game doesn’t just end at the 20 minute mark);<sup>192</sup> spectators (who were providing key arguments for *Team USA* to challenge the protest); and the players themselves (deviations in the spirit of play – challenging the loss, and taking a “playing to win” stance which would “tarnish” the North American LAT players’ long-term work in nurturing a flourishing system of play).<sup>193</sup>

Rifts in rule interpretation (which frequently occurs at major competitions – See for example, T.L. Taylor, 2012) and the modifications of those rules draws attention to the influence that cultural or local collectives have on the played and regulated game, as well as on future play. The rigour of such an example in part sits with its ultimate trickle down through the community - where consideration on “what sportspersonship means” or “what the game is to me” is reflected upon personally (the bulk of the hundreds of pages of forum discussions often started with a “what would I have done” clause). Drawing from her work with progress raiding guilds, Nardi (2010) suggests that, “As inscriptions within a machine, digital rules are not established and re-established in interactions between human agents meeting in a shared space of performance; rules are

removed from such instances” (p. 62). And having followed similar instances of the break-down of coded rules and the human adjudications and discussions that come from world-first progress raiding attempts, I wonder what the “shared space of performance” on rules in play really gets to? From these examples where rules are indeed re-established, I find that such static frameworks sideline all of the rules that are actually brought into (or silenced in) the game, those which players know are a part of the game and that humans will be adjudicating (as they surveil the game in-action) despite of them not being visible (T.L. Taylor, 2012).

The game as given is always an interpretation, or better said, is always *in* interpretation with the situatedness of play (Banks, 2004; Jakobsson, 2007; T.L. Taylor, 2012). What the players conveyed at BlizzCon was that the coded (in-game timer), written (tournament rules), local rules sets (administrators from Blizzard and the technologies in use), and even the social union(s) of play are not stable in their interpretable state, nor could they be. This example asserts that trouble is afoot in shallow investments of the variety of things that pierce any given instance of play. To state that the coded rules *are* the game, or the *most* fundamental thing for play, doesn’t leave room for the present and dynamic others making the actual lived experience of play.

In making a claim to attain more nuanced understandings of what sports “really are”, McFee (2004) argues for a move towards an ethos account of games, stating that,

...the formal rules of a game distinguish between behaviour which is permissible (in that game) and behaviour which is impermissible. On a formalist account of games, this distinction is interpreted as a distinction between behaviour that is part of the game and behaviour that is not part of the game at all. But the ethos of a game distinguishes between behaviour that is permissible, behaviour that is impermissible but acceptable, and behaviour that is unacceptable (p.47).

As McFee highlights, it is the interpretations made in between the rules (ethical, cultural, written, and coded) which get us closer to an understanding of games in practice (See also D’Agostino,

1981).<sup>194</sup> Perhaps by looking at such newly formed situations of play such as LATs (that is, a place of play that is less idealized and pared down, or in a process of finding its feet), we can grasp hold of some of the nuanced work of designers, technologies, players, and non-players in the collective creation of a rich field of play.

This example highlights the many actors orientating the situation and interpretation of the rules of play. Though there are many more instances of the “missing masses” at work (Latour, 1992). Nonhumans impressing on the rules of play also need careful consideration, as they are “fully blown”, although to most watching, invisible on the playing field. One particularly multifaceted instance stands out in the fieldwork where delicate (team) attention is given to the “complexifications” of the rules of play (Gumbrecht, 2006). Specifically, looking at the many things involved in collectively producing the end-game state through performances of teamwork, technologies, rules, and expert players.

An *Arena* team using a “beast-cleave” composition recounts how they “play for lag”.<sup>195</sup> Most importantly for this example, the beast-cleave includes a Hunter (Beast Master Spec) - the class/spec which controls a variety of partly AI run pets.<sup>196</sup> What this team described was that their specific composition afforded them an advantage which could be capitalized on; practiced tactics could be put into action when lag was felt on the field of play. Feeling lag is key to this discussion, and I’ll loop back to it in a moment. The core attribute to consider in the beast-cleave is that the Hunter’s pet (its AI) is not affected by the lag in the same way as the player-characters. The AI-informed pet moves through the lag while the player-characters get “stuck” in it (best seen by player-characters frozen or running in place on other players’ monitors).<sup>197</sup> With such experiences in mind, this team developed several tactics for playing the advantage along the lines of the interpreted code and written rules which regulate issues of lag together with a sense for the

adjudication norms of this game changing connectivity issue.<sup>198</sup> On his experiences with lag, Zeke notes:

**Zeke:** Lag can be really frustrating because it can be at a pivotal moment of the game, and if you have delay even for just a second it can make the difference between winning or losing a round. The unfortunate part is that admins (officials) will generally not give you a replay unless you're lagging *very badly* throughout the whole match simply because they normally won't notice it. *It's a lot easier to feel lag than it is to see it* in my experience so I guess it can be *hard for them to identify*.

The ad-hoc sense of time tied to the difficulty of adjudication is what the beast-cleave team used to their advantage. Zeke emphasizes that lag can be a game changing part of play, where wins and losses are directly tied to the packet delivery of the software code.<sup>199</sup> And that recognition of this game changing event calls on the active work of adjudicators, but more so the players, as he continues,

There are times when something isn't working right, or you're dealing with some sort of little problem and it may be bugging you but the admins may not allow a replay. One major problem is simply that the admins *aren't even always paying attention*, so your best bet is to *make sure someone is watching your team before the match starts* if you've been having any problems and then to *point it out* immediately if it pops up so *that the admins have a chance to see it* and call for a replay.

On the high performance scene, the players themselves are involved in an incredible amount of busy-work and ancillary-officiating in order to get the rules essentially *into* the game.

This last example starts to illustrate the interplay of things that make up any given interpretation, but also the very functioning of the rules as presented. In this instance, not only are the players making tactical interpretations (pre-mediated and judged against the spirit of play), but the referees are also labouring to interpret rulings (how much time has gone by, is the lag causing an advantage?), the opposition are tackling the temporality shifts in the attack (with one AI-driven opponent moving through the lag and attacking, while other players' experiencing lag stack up actions and have to wait through it as their machines "catch up" before attacks are launched). And

at the same time, all players are feeling for the noise of lag – always on-the-ready to call for the attention of officials to notice what is really going on.

Hans Gumbrecht (2006) uses the term “complexifications” to outline how extensions of sporting bodies (via machines and animals) are intimately involved in the creation of the athletic performance. He writes that, “the more perfectly an athlete manages to adapt his [sic] body to the form and movements of a horse or car, the better he will control them and the more he will maximize his body’s effectiveness” (p. 175). The LAT team examples have perhaps the capacity to stretch out Gumbrecht’s notion of complexifications, as the adaptations and maximization of body effectiveness are not just seen between player and machine, they are between *players* and their *machines* – the interplay of humans and non humans, and of online and offline performances alongside of tactical set-ups (Giddings, 2006). High performance networked teams expose the multiple pressures that are simultaneously exerted and which shape players and game play; they also give texture and an intricacy to the sensuous field of play, described as one that is extremely complex when the range and diversity of actors on it is increased.

Accounts of rules that affix the agency of players as an accessory to the constitutive (coded) and operational (written) rules short-change the lived experiences of those who play the game. Pouring a foundation made only of coded software upon which player agency may be staged does not enrich our understanding of the lived experience of rules in play or computer games more broadly (Jakobsson, 2007). My fieldwork collaborators, most of them veterans and regulars on the LAT scene, would be quick to chime in that they too influence the foundation of the “stage” and that through their play they add to an understanding of the stages to come. Such an impression on the stage and certainly the orientations made “in play” must not be overlooked, as player agency also includes stage building, or perhaps more aptly put, it includes staged productions which are



lived as well as spectated (fed back to the community of players, adjudicators and designers, through live-streams, head-to-head gameplay, instructional videos, and forum posts). These are complex collectives of players, designers, organizers, others, and things that get oriented this way and that by the contextual complexities of play. And they exemplify how rule-systems are “in the wild” rather than limited to the boundaries of formal “essences” presented in codes and machines.

### **Beyond instrumentality**

At the expert level of play, Meyers (2010) suggests that players become more instrumental and more precise. In his work, game objects are more carefully regarded on their worth (in terms of winning) in the practice of experts, and thus this level of performance is more characteristic of the “essence” of play. *WoW* is steeped in theorycrafting cultures at the top level of play, as well as being privy to a variety of easily accessible instrumental tools, which includes; dps (damage-per-second) meter add-ons, theorycrafting dedicated websites, in-game “training dummies”, and merchandise such as *WoW* keyboards to name but a few (T.L. Taylor, 2009a; Paul, 2011; Nardi, 2010).<sup>200</sup> One leading discourse surrounding instrumentality in PvP play works with the term “cheese”. It is a turn of phrase which is projected by broader gaming communities as a player or team taking the “lesser skilled” route to victory, or as Moeller, Esplin, and Conway (2009) explain it, they are “Players who exploit weaknesses in programming and technical limitations of online play”; cheesing is a style of play marked for “players who bend the rules” (para. 4). Other high performance players might just title this as “playing to win” (Sirlin, 2006), but either way, cheesing provokes interesting discussions on expertise, skill, “human performance”, sportspersonship, and flourishing systems of play. However, I am actually less interested in cheesing—the “playing to win” style of high performance play—and rather will speak to another, somewhat more legitimized

variation of making the most of the software, or in this case, not doing so. It also has a neat term, “Flavour of the Month” (FoTM). In *WoW*, FoTM players are rendered as those who embrace the class/spec or composition which has been theorycrafted as the superior arrangement after a patch. The practices that I am fascinated by at the high performance level of play are those where players don’t stretch the rules, game the game, embrace the “overpowered comp”, or in Sirlin’s terms “play to win”. They are the players and teams who *don’t* roll a FoTM comp, and still manage to remain on the high performance scene and move beyond instrumentality, extending our understanding of what expert players “really do”.

There are several teams (such as Marma’s team who has stuck with a Rogue/Mage/Priest composition throughout the years) as well as players who exemplify this on the LAT scene. One veteran player who has held onto a high performance career of play almost exclusively on the Warrior class is emblematic of the non-FoTM position. In his advice to up’n’coming high performance players he suggests in an online interview that they should test themselves out with top level teams. He emphasizes, “Run non-FoTM comps. When you start taking (or) splitting games with other top teams, or top teams want you to play with them (or) try comps out...you’re headed in the right direction” (Rapture, 2011). He stresses that developing high performance proficiency moves beyond winning games with an overpowered set-up, as the qualities of high performance play are developed elsewhere in the body.<sup>201</sup> He goes on to clarify his position on what he sees as his role in high performance play, while at the same time calling attention to the connection between mechanics and teams:

I think a big part of good warrior play comes from leading or directing your team. You can be great at interrupting, applying pressure, or going defensive - but keeping composure and directing the game is #1 to me ... Gear and Spec are extremely important. Different gear is better for different teams, and understanding your spec/talents and what abilities will apply to the comp you’re playing *is almost as important* as what globals you press.

This veteran makes a staunch argument for the power of embodied play and intimate teams. From his experience of high performance play, theorycrafting and code mastery is *almost* as important – not *as* important as a player’s actions.<sup>202</sup> He points to leadership, composure, and directing the flow of the game as high performance team skills. In this light, his remarks start to fade the sparkle and promise of instrumentality as a stand-alone force. Football management traditions (which have an amazing history of working with both soft and hard versions of instrumental tactics) speak to some of the blind-spots that might catch up with the many teams who are absorbed in a dedicated FoTM philosophy. Speaking of the state of British football tactics in the 1970’s, Giulianotti (1999) clarifies that,

Through the simplified method of management by objectives (MBO), teams were instructed to play the ‘long ball’ as data analysis ‘proved’ that up to 90 per cent of goals came from less than five passes...This Taylorist aesthetic eroded working differentials between players who filled different positions; collectively, it amounted to industrial deskilling...It said nothing about the other goal-less 88 minutes of matches (p. 133).

The other goal-less 88 minutes is a key metaphor which can be reassigned to high performance LAT teams, as the other rudiments of LAN play such as composure, communication, timing, and pressure highlight the unquantifiable and endless temporal tension of play that run the entire course of the game. As previously established (by the virtuoso play of Marma), the mechanics of play only get a player (and a team) so far. Wins are made dynamically during all the minutes of play. That said the high performance team in the FoTM comp is a tough one to beat. Though, team synergy still matters. There is a well documented instance of the top two ranked players joining forces in a FoTM comp and performing outrageously poorly (in a 2v2 tournament), remarked to be a conflict of both personality and play-styles. Best on paper does not always equate to best on field. What non-FoTM players do is draw attention to other valued parts of high performance play.

Returning to Myers, it must be added that in his position on instrumental experts he is arguing mainly from an individual player perspective, and team chemistry and expertise as a collectively reached quality cannot be easily resolved in thinking with just one subject's instrumental adjustments. Another long-term player expounds the troubles of personal instrumental "desires" when situated in a high performance team. In his comments on not going with the FoTM, he notes, "I don't think I'd ever play Paladin in a tournament unless there was some setup that it was extremely advantageous to have a Retribution Paladin or something in since (my teammate) will basically always play the healer." In terms of such intimate long term teams, the roles already taken by teammates impinge greatly on individual decisions. (And as a popular *Arena* blogger pointed out in a historical look at LAT teams, those who had stuck together longest were the teams who consistently performed well at tournaments – See Pwyff, 2009.) Changing a comp to the FoTM (with each new patch) would, for many teams, splinter the team synergy: The intercorporeality between playing characters would need to be practiced anew, as would the knowledge of the diverse inter-embodiments that would be met (working out the feel, rotations, and locations to take as felt between new team and the opponents).

As these players' accentuate, the sum and substance of teams is not fully renderable in theorycrafting, and dominating via a mastery of code is often side-lined for what could be called "the high performance imagination". Three areas are stressed:

- 1) *The personal imagination*: Relates to class partiality (though in established teams, this is tied to the collective); players talk of preferring the play of certain classes (and playing them well), and teams talk of enjoying the feel and synergy they have in specific compositions (and being able to "make things happen").
- 2) *The practical imagination*: Seeing the practical realities of having to learn a new class

expertly (and a new comp as a team) as time consuming and as a drain on already harnessed skills (and with the knowledge that a change is always on the horizon, meaning that a team would just have to “do it all over again tomorrow”).

- 3) *The skilled imagination*: This position draws significantly on a broad range of capabilities, which are positioned as “game makers” – how to position well, how to remain composed, how to direct a team, as well as how to stretch the mechanics to the limit through creative team play. This position is a reflection on the impact and worth of all the other things that players bring to the field of play to make it of a high performance quality.

Though to be clear, moving beyond instrumentality does not equate to an absence of it.

Instrumentality is a *part* of the pleasure and the play of LAT players and teams. The pleasure, for example, may be in the tinkering with game mechanics, and finding possible advantages in existing comps (T.L. Taylor, 2006a). Engaging instrumentally is a part of the overall construction of “viable” compositions.<sup>203</sup> That is, finding an assortment of comps that should offer flexibility to play competitively against high performance opponents.<sup>204</sup> Again, instrumentality is only a piece of the puzzle.

Certainly, there are many teams that do opt to play the FoTM compositions, such as the wizard cleave (a composition of two spell casters and a healer), which became a notoriously difficult-to-counter composition in mid-2010. A striking cultural layer to the FoTM composition (as something more than technical) is embedded here though, as European and North American “flavours” of comps have been documented to differ in their uptake (during the same patch). The European scene for a time (for example, in 2009) choose to stick with established “skill” comps (i.e. “RMP” comps – Rogue, Mage, Priest), where the North American scene moved towards a greater adoption of theorycrafted comps (i.e. “TSG” comps – Paladin, Death Knight, Warrior). Such

adoption trickles down through the local/regional competitive community. And certainly, with this uptake, certain tactics and comps are tested more rigorously than others (in their work against other top level teams). Regional play thus also colours the composition cultures at the high performance level (T.L. Taylor, 2006b).<sup>205</sup>

A final twist to this theme is seen in teams choosing to play “the middle ground”. To avoid being channelled into an undesirable play style and to retain creativity, many teams pulled from both the FoTM theorycrafted comp and the synergy of team play, opting for a happy midpoint. In these examples, some of the team members chose to learn a second class in order to “complicate” or give more “diversity” to the team – increasing the team style options rather than choosing a strictly instrumental line-up or sticking to an utterly “nerfed” (and underpowered) composition.<sup>206</sup> These nuances in expert practice challenge dominant notions of what high performance competition encapsulates, they are truly fascinating performances where players re-texture the perception of expert play via play itself. In such instances where teams move beyond instrumentality, a new catch-phrase of “play is personal” is revealed.

### **Re-personalising high performance team play**

LAT players are sitting on a fault-line of organized high performance play. Sportisation of computer games is slowly pulling one direction with a “player as product” approach, while the players themselves are hard at work re-claiming the intrinsic worth of high performance play on their own terms. Coming from the same direction of sportisation, James Conner’s (2009) work is significant in its detail on exploitation in elite sports. He notes that subjects are used as “interchangeable and individually irrelevant” *widgits* in and for media sports for spectacle and profit (See also Walsh & Giulianotti, 2007.p. 75). LAT players voice their precarious position as widgits as felt throughout

their e-sports career. It resonates in the moments where players talk of having little room to manoeuvre if they want to stay on the scene, where they recall the embarrassment and loathing they felt in complying to athletic stereotypes, and to how they are just grateful to the organization, game company, and sponsors to be able to pursue this serious site of leisure as a side-line career (See also Taylor, 2012). Despite recognizing their specific exploitations (no-salary contracts for franchise players, being the ultimate QA testers and sounding board for Blizzard e-sports division and *Arena* PvP more broadly), they are balanced out against the personally weighed up perks of high performance play at LANs.<sup>207</sup> For many of the top players the perks include,

- 3rd party financial support for their expert play (via producing instructional videos)
- Status “rewards” (representing a franchise team, being requested for “expert” assistance via *Arena* rating websites, having large follower-numbers on personal gaming channels on Twitch.tv or YouTube)
- Travel and “winnable” pocket-money
- The exposure to leapfrog into other game-related careers such as shoutcasting, blogging, or media representation

Though also, one of the most regularly voiced perks supported the intrinsic pleasures of “serious” play itself (Stebbins, 1982, 2007). LAT players offer complex considerations on their state of play, and as top level competitors many of their reflections are tied tightly to the perks and drawbacks of media sports involvement.

The discussion I want to end with here is one of organizational player action. It is in an act of re-personalisation where a handful of *Arena* players rallied to make “a tournament of their own”: *The North American Online Invitationals* (NAOs). The NAOs was assembled by the hard work of several key figures, veterans of the MLG and BlizzCon scenes, and a collection of artefacts and actions. These included,

- the migration of participating players (from West Coast servers) to one of the largest PvP guilds on an East coast (US) server (forming new intimate connections and from this move the strongest/most active PvP *BattleGroup* was, for the first time, now located on the East Coast)<sup>208</sup>
- the incorporation of third-party sponsors (notably those involved have been steady supports of the *Arena* scene and high performance players); players taking on the core administrative roles as shoutcasters, videographers/tech-people, and adjudicators (players also worked to officiate themselves by adhering to the rules in what one shoutcaster noted as “the spirit of play”)
- tournament rules which work with FoTM “issues” (such as patched changes to class balance) by holding slots in the competition for different team compositions (embracing the “high performance imagination”), though also with reference to Blizzard).<sup>209</sup>
- And lastly, a Russian made UI (with all of its strengths and weaknesses) was implemented as the crucial add-on for making this tournament play deliverable as a spectator friendly live-streamed event (which allowed for in-game shoutcasters and “exciting” camera angles)<sup>210</sup>

I have to give an extra couple of lines to the work-around of players in making the UI (made by *Prestige Gaming*), as the player developed UI literally “made the game” possible (as a spectator friendly event). It involved the use of the 5v5 *Arena* game in *WoW*. Two teams of three enter the *Arena*, with two shoutcasters joining one team and two videographers/live-streamers joining the other. On entering, the non-players move to the centre of the *Arena* map to be killed off in order to stay “in-game” as spectating ghosts. A count-down is initiated by the shoutcasters (who along-side of the videographers and to some extent, the players themselves, officiate the match) and the match is thus begun as a 3v3 battle. That is the work-around to make a recognizable high performance tournament.





Figure 41: NAO tournament in action on “twitch.tv/naoinv” with its absolutely necessary user interface (UI) which makes this tournament possible as a “packaged for spectatorship” event. After four months online, their twitch.tv channel had already drawn over 8 million views.

The first tournament (held in 2011) lifted a high performance online event based on what could be called “the players’ game”. One of the most notable moves by the NAO organizers was some severe alteration to the rule set (as compared to, for example, the rule sets of MLG or BlizzCon)<sup>211</sup>, which were significantly tweaked to offer more nuance, yet also stability, in competition. Some key examples include,

- Only two teams from any composition could qualify for the tournament (opening up for more creatively composed comps to play at the top level, and extending the experience and range of tactics developed, movements seen, and player-types involved).
- No triple DPS or double healer teams were allowed (in previous LAT events, these comps proved to be both hard to kill within the 20-minute time limit but also “less

exciting to watch”. The NAOs held onto the programmed time limit set in the software at 45 minutes.)

- Specific overpowered PvE gear is disallowed (the teams all become self governing on their use of gear)
- All games start on the map “Nagrand” and the losers of each game (in a best of seven series) chooses the next map to be played (offering a standard starting field and a losers selection which gives the players the feeling of choice and control of the playing fields)
- A tournament specific rule that considers the UI in play (which allows for the 3<sup>rd</sup> party add-on to work fluidly meaning that certain buffs cannot be cast at certain times).

These are only some of the specifics from the rule set, which as the NAO organizers maintain, is in constant flux with the experiences learned from and with the playing scene. In speaking of the key alterations, Wert (the lead organizer) notes,

The [NAO] staff does include pro players and there have been known issues that the pros have had with other tournaments that had never been changed (maps is a great example) and it feels great to be able to fix some clear problems that no one disagrees with. Some of the other rules have to be made because it's an online tournament. Gear for example is a touchy one because [sic] unlike the other tournaments we don't have a way to give all players even gear so we have to restrict some from the players who have too much.

As one can read, the organizers not only consider the playing community – but they are the playing community. The rules are formed locally and iteratively to match the play and players from within.<sup>212</sup> The “players from within” stance has a real sense of power when looking back to the frustrations voiced by LAT players over the years regarding structural alterations (made by Blizzard for the broader software package) without “their tournaments” in mind. Heroe, for one, expressed estrangement or a sense of failing on behalf of the organization in such moments,

**Heroe:** Blizzard wanted to change the game (patch) like in the middle of OUR tournament.

**Me:** For me that'd be like you've been playing basketball for 20 years and now ...

**Heroe:** ...they tell you; you are now playing football.

Such powerlessness is tapered in by the re-personalisation of play. Long term LAT players have substantial networks of skilled players (as well as sponsors) to draw on, which was a key piece in making the NAOs a strong platform from their first tournament. With the NAOs, the expert community itself moves away from the depersonalisation process where as players they experience an intense commodification of their bodies into mere means by the media sports machine (See Walsh & Giulianotti, 2007, p. 70).<sup>213</sup> One might argue that the NAOs represent another variation of media sports (as live-streamed and moderately sponsored); nonetheless, it is an event that has been formed collaboratively from within. One of the lead organizer's of the NAO's expressed that their drive in forming the tournament came from "the goal of helping and improving the *WoW* community". Certainly, this is quite a different goal than the MLG, for example, which looks to "rival traditional sports" via the play of "digital mavericks". In working towards a flourishing system (rather than profit), these particular digital mavericks make a huge sacrifice – they side-line themselves from the only regular high performance tournament in order to keep the scene itself alive.<sup>214</sup>

Perhaps in the light of such changes in organization, a note from lifestyle sports (as sporting activities which provide an alternative to "mainstream sports values") can be considered. What such alternative renditions of sports do is effect a "*potential* challenge to traditional ways of 'seeing', 'doing' and understanding sport" (original emphasis. Wheaton, 2004, p. 3). Following the reflection of Wheaton (2000, 2004) as well as Maguire (1999) on challenging mainstream values in alternative sports productions, it could be said that in making a tournament of their own, the high performance *Arena* players have challenged the top down organization of play, and the construction of and influence over young, mostly male, computer gaming/sporting bodies from a

specific commercial backdrop. They present top level play in new packaging – new rules, collaboration with within, and embracing a flourishing system of play. Most distinctively, even as the LAT players depart or more aptly are left by media sports, they rally to reclaim their play for themselves, ultimately changing how others see and understand “their play”. In this “levelling-up” to player-organizers, the NAOs present a unique happening where the long term marginality of many intimately connected players bites back in the form of collective action.

### **On exiting the ride ...**

March Madness starts this month.<sup>215</sup> I am looking forward to seeing the battles between top tier teams but also the Cinderella matches where underdogs topple giants. I look forward to the evoked body memories of the joy and frustration found in high performance play. I look forward to seeing what weird little rituals and officiating as well as organizational dramas will certainly present themselves. I look forward to watching inspiring players and finding out who *really* is my favourite team as made clear throughout the play itself – made of coaches, uniforms, fight-songs, deep benches, clutch-shots, mega-screens, and garbage players.

These are also some of the things I miss looking forward to after having left *WoW* and the players of LATs. While I wasn't a player on this intense and intimate field of team play, I had some familiar experiences of player-characters, inspiring teamwork, and play spaces in *WoW* which were, like basketball, re-ignited experiences on watching the experts at play.

Of all the conversations that have been shared throughout this research, the one that sums up the experience of LATs most succinctly is made by Popsie. It is early November, and we are seated outside at a hip seafood restaurant at the end of Sunset Boulevard overlooking the Malibu surf. The waitress has already tried to get us to leave from our prime table position twice, as the

second hour of conversation rolls by with lemonades and fish cakes; watching dolphins flick through the waves. For the last 20-minutes he has been talking of how LATs make him feel, digging deeper into the significance that tournament play has for him – how it has felt for him. He shakes his head. “It’s a rollercoaster”. Simple as that. And the metaphor is stronger now at the end of things, where the missing masses have been accounted for. Tournament play is fascinating because of the multiple dizzying (disorienting) pressures of the rise and ride itself. Going on five years, Popsie is still on the scene. He just won the last NAO event. He did it with a new team constellation, and played against old teammates for the title. His “main” is still a priest. He is still on board the rollercoaster, though the design of it is one of his own.

## {Chapter 7}

### Closing remarks

Many of the most difficult moves in basketball take place away from the ball, where no one sees or understands them. (Russell, 1979, p. 99).

LAT competitions are created through both striking instances and subtle performances made by an expansive web of actors that impress on the field of play. Like Russell's awareness of the shape and action of basketball in the above quote, what this study lays bare are the many things that are taking place where no-one is really looking. From the attuned position of "sensuous researcher" (not expert in the game, but rather attuned to the practices), I find there are many tiny twists and turns in the details which make up this state of LAT play. And, perhaps there are too many details to remember now, here at the end. Are they all so important you might ask? What do such fine distinctions generate? Speaking from ANT, Law (2009) provides some scrutiny,

Why, they wonder, does actor network theory obsess over material minutiae? Why doesn't it look at what is important? The response to this is the counter-complaint that many sociologies have little sense of how the social is done or holds together. They ignore the material practices that generate the social: ships, sailors, currents. They simply move too quickly to a non-material version of the social (p.148).

Throughout this work I have traced the many actors involved in making things happen at the high performance level of play. I have generated nuanced layers of description on how networked teams

are held together materially but also as embodied and sensuous teams while also making important connections between game studies and sports studies. And if one could walk away from this research with just one turn of phrase that has a semblance of the whole, it would be an expression that Lane, the oldest player on the scene, is renowned for - "it's all in". To consider anything less than the whole thing in terms of the practice and production of high performance networked team play would be a greatly watered down solution. Granularity and an on-the-floor involvement are key - "closeness" needs to be a researcher position in game studies that is regularly taken up to get to the sensuousness, associations, and translations made and experienced by those who engage with the game. As gaming practices are produced by favourite keyboards, new best friends, and experiences of being second best (or not good enough at all); it draws together West Coast servers, unpractised adjudicators, *BattleGroup* regions, flourishing systems, attention to detail, technical actors, media sports events, patches, contracts, other e-sports, live-streams, major controversies, new media savvy, and a sensuousness towards all of the above as the package that makes-up the experience.

Within this mess of things, there are several themes that stand out when *zooming out* from the details (Nicolini, 2009) which need to be emphasized for future considerations on high performance networked team play. They are the interwoven parts of; serious leisure, distributable teams and gender performance (here framed as eventful masculinities), careers of sporting/gaming leisure and youth voices, together with considerations on diluted narratives and how play is re-personalised with a high performance imagination.

### **Serious leisure, distributable teams and eventful masculinities**

Throughout the research I repeatedly point towards LAT players enduring pursuit as a *serious*

*leisure* activity. The qualities of serious leisure, as defined by Stebbins (2007), speak clearly to the benefits of participation as described throughout this research. This includes the qualities of perseverance, a leisure career, personal effort, durable benefits (i.e. experiencing a sense of accomplishment, an enhanced self-image or belongingness), a unique ethos, and strong identification with the serious leisure pursuit (pp. 12 - 13). Serious leisure is a convincing quality-based framework to understand LAT players' fascinations with high performance play. Though, it doesn't get us far enough.

In terms of this arrangement, the performances of LAT players exposed the gendered rendering of the term serious leisure itself. Drawing on a feminist theoretical approach, Dilley and Scraton (2010) tackle the missing quality of serious leisure in their look at women's climbing careers. Most importantly in their work, they question the absence of *sociable conversation* as a *durable benefit*. In Stebbins conceptualisation, sociable conversation is tied to "casual leisure" – serious leisure's frivolous counter-part.<sup>216</sup> What Dilley and Scraton find is that women climbers' tie sociable conversation (the *role* of talk) as a significant component in their long-term experience and motivation to remain involved. As well as finding that "participation in these 'private cultures of intimacy' contributes to the construction of subjective identities" (p. 127). Ultimately, they stress that what is currently slotted as "serious" and of "most value" in serious leisure is drawn from very specific forms of experience that are defined by traditional masculine values.

Like the climbers, the young LAT players I talked to expanded on the notion of serious leisure and pushed at its borders. In their version of high performance play, LAT teams oozed of sociability, they talked passionately about togetherness, about friendships that came "with the play" through (among other things) the conversations shared. Serious leisure has sat as a lingering hook in this research alongside of excellence, deliberate practice, competitiveness, cooperation,



commitment, and a general sense of being an expert – though just as with the other terms, LAT players do serious leisure in a way that speaks to other “personal goods” found there. Sociability may not have been the driving force towards the high performance level, but it was certainly a quality that kept many players there, yoking them to the community and, once established, maintaining the motivation to stay and play. Without the “casual conversations”, the other qualities of serious leisure for many of the LAT players would pull apart at the seams. In other words, minus the talk the flourishing system of play, which requires participation and maintenance by a large number of actors, wouldn’t have a chance of being upheld.

The sustained talk of players feeds directly into the notion of distributable teams. Sharing a common practice intimately, made intimate through play and talk. Plato is quoted for having said, “You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.” LAT players engage in such “discoveries” through their shared experiences of play, though something is sidelined here. We converse during play and after play about our play. Participation in the game itself is certainly a place of discovery (of oneself, of each other), though the bonds which are secured between players come from both the shared foundation *and* the conversations which arise and preserve as well as continue the experience. This is where the strength of the distributable team comes from - it is continued “play connections”, rich with layers of togetherness and shared experiences that connect various players, where even would-be rivals are brought “into the huddle” as teammates.

At first glance, “talk” seems like a small issue to take up. Though in this research, it is found as a fully blown feature, which is central to this arrangement of networked team play and the cultures of high performance LATs. Without this layer of continued social connection, the distribution of players across intimate teams would certainly be less pronounced. In terms of the

players' maintenance of a flourishing system of play and eventful gender performances on the LAT scene (as distinct from the hegemonic sporting masculinity pervasive on the MLG, for example) distributable teams is key. Why has this particular community of players rejected aggressive and antagonistic behaviour (and the support of it)? Why is it that they perform so differently to other media sports teams in terms of; masculinities, the acceptance/dismissal of the pageantry of the organized event, their goals in play, and the spirit of play itself? I would suggest that one piece of that puzzle sits with talk and distribution. A feeling of togetherness comes from sharing in (serious leisure) play spaces as teammates rather than just as rivals. (As trash-talking someone who has "saved you" or "you saved" countless times before lessens the authenticity and impact of stabs at disrespect.) What these players present to games research in their "way of doing" play is a different reality of (mostly) young men engaged in high performance media sports competitions. What they have presented is in fact an alternative to how this level of competition *could* be.

This research makes visible the incredible nuance of networked team practices, and that it is in these fine gradations where interesting things happen (Taylor, 2009b; de Castell & Jenson, 2008). A more tightly focused lens is needed to follow the twists in practice and detail that make all the difference in experiences. Expressions found in-the-trenches on competition, excellence, communication, gender performance, and expertise offer comprehensive *zoomed in* accounts which can differentiate between the multiplicity and generality of these experiences (Nicolini, 2009). Through closer readings we are able to find the connections between lived experience and social-structures, and as Messner and Dworkin (2002) suggest, this assists in getting to the heart of the *conditions* under which players are more resistant or reproductive in their agency.

### *On computer gaming careers*

While the notion of the serious leisure *career* is well reflected in the players' long term commitment and "levelling up" throughout their play, an added conflict came to light when players reflected on how their families and (neighbourhood/school) friends were involved in their serious leisure pursuit. Considering that for many expert (or seriously engaged) players this pursuit may have been going on for several years and with a substantial and routine weekly time investment, the absence of engagement by family and local friends is significant to note. Several key points branch out from here including young women's access to serious computer gaming leisure, adult presence/influence at gaming events, and the production of hegemonic masculinity to name but a few. But there is another red flag waving. The high performance players who note that family support is offered only when "something the parents deem as beneficial" is detected are not the only players involved in this format of leisure.<sup>217</sup> There is a dense population of serious leisure players involved in such computer gaming activity who are never going to be the "best": Those who will never get the chance to play on a stage or earn money from their play. Those average, committed, seasonal team players who are working just as hard as the top players on their "leisure career". Invested individuals who would also reap the various rewards of serious leisure, which might include the following: Getting into the activity for the competition, but staying there for the friendships; becoming new media savvy; experiencing the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards of interplay; persevering through the ups and downs together; committing to long term goals (or being a part of a culture of commitment); participating on distributable teams; learning alternative communication methods and experiencing individual and group progress through attention to detail (embodied, tactical, technical), and getting to lead or contribute to a team.

There is a clear discrepancy between what many (young adult) serious players *do* and what

many adults may *think they do*. As Bart Simon (2007) explains from the perspective of outsiders looking in on a player of MMO EverQuest, “From the perspective of the serious player there is significant social weight to the game but from the perspective of the observer, the outsider, there appears to be no weight at all. You are just sitting alone at your computer. It is arguably this condition that helps make sense of the numerous stories of tension in the relationships of avid EQ players” (para. 22). At the same time as outsider assumptions of “unsocial play” are rife (especially in mass media), so too are available discourses on gaming practices which are time demanding. When gaming becomes time consuming (seasonal, intensive – in some cases what would be called career play) the very available discourse is often framed in terms of addiction. While addiction to gaming is certainly a serious issue, it is not the issue to be confused with serious leisure. The practice of serious gaming leisure seemingly needs to come out of the closet.

Other dynamic themes of serious leisure engagements that I observed during my field work included: The openness to leadership from junior players (for example, a 16-year old leading and mentoring a 23-year-old); a young woman leading a team of young men in “sporting-esque” competition; adaptation to difficult situations and quickly changing landscapes; experiencing flat-structure teamwork and participating in the creation of alternative gaming masculinities. Linking back to sports studies, several of these qualities resonate with the literature on team sports (such as playing for friendships) while several configurations strike out towards new territory which are worthy of more attention; in particular, the examples where there are role reversals - women leading/mentoring men or the young leading/mentoring the more mature in a competitive field of serious play. The combination of networked team play, sports studies and serious leisure has valuable connections to draw an account of what, for many young adults, is the everyday life experience of a “serious” networked team player.

### *Being taken seriously*

Computer game leisure activities, much like sports, are significant as they become dominant sites of identity construction (See for example Wheaton, 2004). Heroe, Rambler, Popsie, Dewey, Zeke, Biggie, Wert, Muttley, Freckles, Latei, Lane, Grolitz, Madner, and Fixt, to name but a few, are all still LAT players' or "on the scene", now heading into their fifth year with high performance circles of play. That sociability is a staid part of their leisure needs to be taken seriously. But also, a point might be raised here on youth voices.

High performance networked team players demonstrate that they are sporting in play, if not in discourse. And as such, their phenomenological experiences and sociological situations merit consideration as sporting leisure. More rigorous scholarship is needed to follow the rapid growth of, in particular, young people's engagements with this particular serious sporting leisure activity. As youth experiences are often overlooked in the various (mass media) conversations surrounding serious leisure (committed and time consuming) computer game play. Ultimately, this sidelines youths (and youth culture) from their own life experience of what they perceive as important. Such sidelining couldn't be clearer than when International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Jacques Rogge expressed that "[k]ids are attracted to visual, interactive forms of communication. It's not going to be easy for sport to counter that ... You won't hear me saying that sport is not fun – it is. But it requires austerity and discipline. The answer is achievement. You will never achieve in a video game. It is not really success" (O'Connor, 2008).

If the IOC president doesn't see video games as achievement activities, then I wonder how high performance networked play will fair in this "sporting arena". We can only assume that Rogge has not seen "Moon", the South Korean e-sports RTS player (or rather "star"), meticulously work down an opponent at a rate of 300 actions per minute or five mouse clicks per second

(BobYoMeowMeow, 2010). And we might also assume that Rogge alongside of the many other (mature) holders of positions of organizational power in sports have not heard of Heroe, or the “co-ed” space of LATs, which in one season of play buffered against the local performances of hegemonic sporting masculinity to produce their own sensibility surrounding play, ultimately changing the game itself by taking the organizational lead in order to realize a meaningful (as well as successful) place of high performance tournament play.

Throughout this research, sports have been a robust sounding board in considering the state of play of LAT players and teams in such organized instantiations of tournament play. Above all else, this research is a peek into one arrangement of high performance computer game play where we are offered a rich description on what these games, these structures, and the modes of participation mean *to* and *for* the actors involved as significant sites of, what some call, sporting leisure.

### **Diluted narratives, re-personalising play and the high performance imagination**

In David Sudnow’s (1983) detailed work of his play practice during an early era of video gaming, he asks, “What is a ‘thing’ in this terrain, what does an event mean here, what could ‘skill’ be with these events, what, if anything, do the notions of movement, coordination, thought, action, emotion, consciousness, motivation, and a ‘nervous system’ refer to with respect to this new microworld in our midst?” (p. 155). I am partial to Sudnow’s early investigation of what the “event” and what “skill” is, as it starts to explore how these things are not just found “in the machine”. The fieldwork I have presented thickens the description of the game via a sensitivity towards intercorporeality (between teammates), inter-embodiments (between teams), and interplay (play between many nonhumans and humans). Networked teams have an intense relationship with each

other, the “terrain”, and their opponents which produce events together. What is emphasized are the details on how expertise is recognized and honed through deliberate practice with many artefacts beyond the game, and through connections with like-performing chums and a circle of competitive players. Players articulate how team communication as well as excellence in movement and haptic engagement is produced across networks. At the level of high performance play, action is orientated by sensuous interplay, calling on embodied knowledge of system and self, space and situation, tools and others. In this rich detail of player practice, the rhetoric of number crunching, simplified versions of technical mastery, and “formulaic” high performance play is whittled away. Team performances mark out how deeply attuned LAT players are as practiced bodies alongside of technologies, not as determined by them.

The *high performance imagination* is a repositioning; it pushes against what sports sociologist Richard Giulianotti (2005) warns of in the introduction to this manuscript, namely that high performance sports are overrun by “instrumental rationalism” where “technical efficiency and result achievement” are weighed more valuable than “subjective immersion in experimental play” (p. 42). With LATs we have one tiny instance of high performance “sporting” competition where things are otherwise.

The high performance imagination puts bodies back in play, as the heart of play, and rationally so. As for these players, the play itself is made meaningful in *how they give character* to gaming pleasure, through *their* skill development, *their* kind of mastery, as steeped in *their* form of competition – competition which might not necessarily entail winning every game. The high performance imagination notably has failure on board as a friend, as a piece of the experience that extends the pleasures found in play (Juul, 2009). The high performance imagination pushes against messages in machines (Braithwaite & Sharpe, 2010) and against rules as the heart of gameness

(Juul, 2003). Though, perhaps it is what David Myers (2010) suggests on the play of experts which might have the most worth here, as he writes that “...expert analysis is indeed more ‘right’ in that the expert analysis is more *complete*” (Original emphasis. p. 115). Myers goes on to extol that from expert analysis we get more capable efforts of “winning”, “increasingly narrow” and “functionally valid” performances of instrumental play, where the system and code channel the expert play itself. But I would just stick with his first suggestion and leave it there: The complete and expert analysis of LAT players expresses that the game is always already personal.

LAT players have not only personalized play through individual expressions and team philosophies, but they have also moved on to organize themselves as a community to make “their game”. More frequent tournaments, a flourishing system, community participation, and rule changes – these are the threads the players pulled on in their efforts to re-personalise the “off the shelf” product and top down management of play. Douglas Wilson’s (2011) call to designers to “deputize the player”—to “uphold, reinterpret, and negotiate” the game as provided (para. 76)—is flipped by these actions; as here it is players who are taking the initiative to legitimately salvage the field of play. They are the ones leading the charge as they press the developer to quite literally, reinterpret and negotiate the expert field of (tournament) play itself.

The high performance imagination is a perception on player practice that just starts to get mapped out in this research, and it is certainly something that I intend to follow up on in future research.

## **Afterword**

Since my time on the scene, LATs have moved further in two directions – one continues towards a traditional media sports framework, with high profile players increasingly called out as “strutters”,



“above the rules”, “*Arena* poster boys” in contrast to just being really good players creating good games. There are still some big tournaments and sponsors involved and now, with a five year history since the sportisation of *Arena Tournament*, an amped up “professionalization” seems to be sinking in. The “winning is the only thing” mantra of pro media sports has found its way prominently into the LAT scene, and it hits harder than just “winning games” on the field per se. More significantly, many top teams are at work constructing but, more tellingly, also disbanding teammates in a hardcore instrumental fashion, as “getting to the big dance” (major prize money tournaments) is placed as the overriding goal. Certainly this type of activity pushes back against the notion of creating a flourishing system of play “for the good of the game”, or the embrace of eventful masculinities and the positive arrangement of distributable teams.

On the other hand, the more recent change to the field of play itself is a compelling shift amidst such media sports mimicry. Players are also seen steaming towards a re-personalization of play, where high performance gaming is self-organized on players own terms. The regular player run events of the NAOs make a high performance tournament space available to the top competitors, the community is provided with the spectacle, and the infrastructure of high performance gaming is shifted – via the formation of new large PvP guilds (and dominant *BattleGroups*) – redistributing players, teams, and forging new connections.

This last move certainly couldn’t have happened without Blizzard “loosening of the reigns of control” around *Arena* as an e-sport, and it is a compelling move. The NAOs, as well as the European version of this player-organized tournament (*The Prestige Gaming & GameSense Invitational Tournament*), are interesting first-steps in this direction for MMOs where committed players “make the rules”, officiate, and generally run the play (that is, if they don’t exceed a US\$5000 prize pool and live up to the “spirit of the game” as freely determined by Blizzard). There

are apparent and ethically questionable perks for Blizzard in the community creation, maintenance, and running of such events, though as the players discuss – it is the freedom to create “their game” that is the perk that matters most for continued engagement in their serious leisure pursuit. The power to create their game is what they are willing to support.

It is a fragmented image of the LAT scene, and with concern over Blizzard’s dwindling numbers in *WoW*, many LAT players are starting to show signs of “jumping game”, with top players streaming their play in other high performance (e-sports) games such as *StarCraft2* and *BloodLine Champions*. Perhaps it can be surmised that the point in time when I visited with LAT players was just “better days”, a period before broadly recognizable “star players”, before Blizzard’s rolling decline in account holders, before the expansion (Cataclysm) hit, and before the scene was completely scratched from major commercial e-sports tournaments. Maybe it was a stolen season, but it was an important one nonetheless.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> McFee (2002, p. 130) leans on the notion of “authorless” to emphasize the historical importance on the sport that is actually in play (and in the rules). I find it a provocative move, though one which aptly caters for the historical work of the many other things in “making the game” that get swept aside under traditional models of design. The notion of the authorless sport or game can move from thinking of just, for example, James Naismith and his original 13-rules of basketball, to being able to comprehend what exists and who was involved in shaping the modern game (now a magnum opus 81-page FIBA document which maps out the rules and regulations of elite level basketball, complete with pictograms). Sue Morris pushes at a similar point from her work with First-Person Shooter games and the communities that engage with them, arguing that these games are “co-creative media”, she continues, “neither developers nor player-creators can be solely responsible for production of the final assemblage regarded as ‘the game’, it requires the input of both.” (2003, p. 8).

<sup>2</sup> That is, where all competitors are co-located on the scene during their participation in the game.

<sup>3</sup> As well exemplified in Michael Messner’s work (2007) where he notes, “I never once saw adults point to a moment in which boy and girl soccer players were doing the *same* thing and exclaim to each other, ‘Look at them! They are *so similar!*’” (p.17).

<sup>4</sup> A phenomenological sociology specifically highlights the situatedness of consciousness, both by body and by social context (Allen Collinson & Hockey, 2011, p. 331). From this perspective, only plausible interpretations can be described where “causes” or “universal explanations” are rejected (Allen-Collinson, 2010. p.4) and more importantly for this work, the social-structural constraints and interactions are addressed.

<sup>5</sup> Lag is caused by poor Internet connectivity – in LAT play, it causes a delay in the packet delivery of information between game server (often located elsewhere i.e. North American West Coast) and the personal computer.

<sup>6</sup> The space between the repelling magnets of ANT (nonhumans as actors) and phenomenology (intentionality or the conscious association to an object) are given a field to play on here via a focus on worlds held in common. In our experiences of others, Sokolowski (2000), speaking from phenomenology, writes that, “... we do not look at the direct relation between ourselves and others, but the relation both of us, or all of us, have to the world and the things we possess in common. (p. 152) This common perception of the things at hand; the peripherals participating in making the action – mouse, keyboard, power plugs etc., the tables and chairs on which we are stationed around during play, the variation in net connections used, and lag experienced is what is recognized as the game. It is not *only* the game rules, software, visual digital medium, and net connection – it is the complete array of things and persons involved in creating the action on an everyday basis. This is how both phenomenology and ANT can be put to work together – in looking at the connections between things, talking about the sensuousness of the connections, and looking at how actions are produced not only intercorporeally, but through interplay more generally.

<sup>7</sup> The way I am embracing *agency* is in the orientation where “one could have acted differently” – leaving for movement where both free-will and socially constituted situatedness are involved in actions (Barker,



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2008, pp. 234-235).

<sup>8</sup> The interest can be seen in the sudden bloom of edited book collections and journal special editions, interdisciplinary workshops, and a general attentiveness in articles and dissertations to sports studies more broadly. Within the last year, the attention to sports and games (that is, moving beyond a single interest in sports video games) has bloomed. T.L. Taylor's work on pro gamers which engages with sports sociology is set for release in early 2012, as are two edited sports and videogames book collections. Other examples exist, such as the *Sociology of Sports Journal* edition on sports themed videogames or fantasy games (2010); though this edition, while relevant, situates the simulation of sport as a necessary component, rather than looking more broadly at the assemblage of "sports-esque" qualities of the game in play. As a more open strategy to understating games, video games, and the connections with sports more broadly, The IT University of Copenhagen has hosted various courses and workshops inviting from an interdisciplinary perspective on sports and games studies research since 2010. And Stanford University (under the How They Got Game project) held the first E-sports and cyberathleticism workshop in 2009. But perhaps there was a much earlier push that just didn't get over the hump, looking in game studies research Richard Bartle's conference presentation archives, it situates him at the "Online Games and Interactive Sports Summit" in 1998. The association of sports and games has been lingering, somewhat dormant, but seems ready to come out of the closet in full-blown connections.

<sup>9</sup> E-sports commonly refer to an organized and competitive approach to playing computer games played by both professional gamers and "serious amateurs" alike. For the past decade this style of gaming has been played across networked computers where structured online computer gaming leagues and locally networked events have offered players a place to engage in "serious" or "career" competition.

<sup>10</sup> There is a query of relativism that is begged here, but as Loland (2002) notes there are many things which make up a game such as "basic rules", which are a selection of rules and other things that make the game recognizable as that game and not something else. "Essences" of a game in play thus still can be read elsewhere from the same basic game rules.

<sup>11</sup> Self technologies, landscape technologies, implement technologies, rehabilitative technologies, and movement technologies make up Butryn's (2002) five part classification system.

<sup>12</sup> It might be added that algorithms and hi-tech framings also exist in landscape and implement sporting technologies (Wimbledon Tennis' use of Hawk-Eye technology and ten-pin bowling for example), just as computer games can be extended as "transmedial" (Juul, 2003) – such as when "Angry Birds" (Rovio Mobile) is played in a non-digital game version (Giddings, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Coleman and Kohn (2007) provide a little more nuance to the landscapes of play by looking towards tennis courts, with an eye on the alterations between "live-in place" and "generic place", as best highlighted by the difference in tennis courts clay, concrete or grass surfaces. The latter surface (notably, the surface of the Wimbledon Tennis Club) is given a life of its own in the following statement, "grass provides a growing, unpredictable medium for the tennis ball, a stubbornly indisciplined provider of randomness in 'bounce' that embodies the particularities of court, time and weather" (p.8). Former tennis pro Andre Agassi furthers this in his rendition of something even more mundane – through his experience of the liveliness and personality of tennis strings which have a real and felt impact on play (Agassi, 2010). When playing at Wimbledon he bemoans the interplay of his practiced game on specific strings as tied to the surface of play, he bemoans "On grass my newly augmented topspin (the result of a change in tennis strings) makes the ball sit up like a helium balloon...My ball is a creampuff ... How can I let everyone in this

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stadium know that this isn't me, this isn't my fault? It's the strings" (p. 344).

<sup>14</sup> It also reminds me that framings of other material game spaces as unvarying is perhaps a sign of non- or inexperienced players, perhaps even a spectators "view" (à la de Garis' 1999 rendition of "non-sensuous" research) rather than feel of the space of play.

<sup>15</sup> It might be noted that Nardi (2010) is also arguing for the ease of access to such visually "exciting" online spaces of play. In my example of top level basketball, perhaps not everyone gets 6,000 spectators adding to the atmosphere. Though, the other layers of materiality and architectures of space certainly are still in play (along with other more simple distinctions such as "shirts and skins/sportsbras" or the ambient scene of play – i.e. the Venice Beach or Rucker park outdoor basketball courts). I would though also argue that "ease of access" to virtual worlds such as *WoW* is perhaps a little tougher for most than just buying the game (Witkowski & Lybæk, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Considering the missed stair effect of the former Maples Pavilion hardwood floor, Grosz (1994) can offer us another layer to corporeality, arguing through the example of a visually not present, but "felt" phantom limb that "... our experiences are organized not by real objects and relations but by the expectations and meanings objects have for the body's movement and capacities" (p. 89).

<sup>17</sup> Butryn continues this through his classifications, noting that as "...much as a combat pilot and his or her aircraft are bonded through cybernetic interfaces, the athlete is engaged with sports technoscapes in much the same way" (2002, p. 112).

<sup>18</sup> As if a "white woman", or "middle aged" were enough: I am also – a native English speaker, heterosexual, "strapping", a migrant, married, a mother, "middle-class", sports-savvy, outgoing, and from "Generation-X".

<sup>19</sup> No hard feelings Sylvia. I know that Mum had coached us to watch the ball all the way back in Under 14's training; I still appreciate your learning-by-doing methodology!

<sup>20</sup> A player who fills the training roster but never plays, in this case I was the 15<sup>th</sup> player on a 15-player team – and yes, the coach told me that was my position at the bottom of the hierarchy.

<sup>21</sup> The term "local" is in this example refers to the "social world" (Coakley, 2008) – as the local is constructed of peers of players, administrators, and others that come together to play from various locations and backgrounds in North America, Canada, Australia and Korea, which complicates the often used terms which denote "local" or "national" affiliation. In this example the "local" has been created through: participation in specific US BattleGroups (server affiliations for PvP play) with specific team constellations, expert tournament play, and forum community debates contra to a more diversified—even decentralized in expert play—European scene, to name just a few variables that convolute the stability of the rules of play.

<sup>22</sup> As an approach, constructivist grounded theory was exchanged very early on in the study for a dual-lensed approach of Actor-network theory and phenomenological sociology, in order to foreground both context and practice which involves the work of both humans and nonhumans in their assemblage.

<sup>23</sup> A "world-first" refers to a guild of PvE (Player versus Environment) players with the explicit team goal to clear the newest content in a specific time or fashion i.e. first boss kills that are made available through

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new patches or expansions. A world-first guild is titled as such as they are attempting to claim the title.

<sup>24</sup> PvE refers to “Player versus Environment”, where-as PvP refers to “Player versus Player”.

<sup>25</sup> Though I tried to “get in” with many more, in particular world-first guilds, but to no avail.

<sup>26</sup> There already exist many fascinating works that study PvE raiding guilds and the socio-material practices of these networked teams, see for example the fascinating work of T.L. Taylor, 2006a, 2009a; Chen, 2010; Nardi, 2010.

<sup>27</sup> LAT tournaments generally allow the use of end-game PvE in the gear selection – thus if teams want “real” training, it necessitates that the relevant PvE gear is acquired to try-out with the team.

<sup>28</sup> As this description suggests, this research engages in a feminist epistemology where the text is produced with sensitivity to the personal, and with attention given to the complexity of the research (Sparkes 2002, p. 218). As Donna Haraway (1991) notes, this means attending to the “... limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. In this way we might become answerable for what we learn how to see” (p. 190).

<sup>29</sup> Had the project moved with LATs as the prime site from the beginning my “playing researcher” position would certainly have been different – to start with, by choosing a PvP realm and a PvP guild to move through the levels with and playing in the live-realm seasonal *Arena Tournament*.

<sup>30</sup> Aarseth categorises seven levels of play: superficial, light play, partial completion, total completion (not attainable in all games), repeated play, expert play, and the last stage is innovative play (2003).

<sup>31</sup> I would argue that de Garis’ (1999) stance comes from the clear realization (as a former professional sportsperson) that it is a “non option” for most people to “just become” a top level athlete. Let alone consider the implications of gender, age, or life experience on reaching a comparative level of experience in the thing one studies (See also Brownell, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> In order to be accountable for my researcher position, I must note that I was already familiar with *WoW* as a player. However, going into this study I only had intermittent experience of playing - I had never raided nor reached the level “cap” (the end-game), nor had I any experience of PvP. In this regard, the space that entered was unfamiliar territory.

<sup>33</sup> I shared my surprise with a sports phenomenologist on this quick “accord” I experienced on the LAN scene with the young (mostly male) players. He suggested that it was perhaps exactly my positionality as an interested and connected—via sports—mature woman that was what these young men responded to in regards to their serious engagements; as perhaps they had never talked (let alone been asked) about their practice and excitement for their serious leisure engagement before (D. Carless, personal communication, June 8, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> There were many more players that completed the various scenes I followed; typically 8 – 12 teams of three players were represented at each tournament.

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<sup>35</sup> I was on maternity leave from mid-2008 to mid-2009, which skews the timeline of the research. I was active in research for three years during this time.

<sup>36</sup> The “hanging out” on the scene is reminiscent of some points that Margarethe Kusenbach (2003) pushes at in her research and methods relating to the lived experience of others. In Kusenbach’s work, she uses the “go-along” as a method. With the go-along, she propositions that researchers need to do more than “just” become an accepted member of a scene/group (though she does deem this as an important position to also take up); as an accepted member is not provided “*automatic* clues to other locals’ lived experiences” (p. 461). Go-alongs take an active stance on “capturing their informants’ actions and interpretations” (p. 463), by for example, walking a community through a certain area and asking them to comment on what it is they see rather than waiting for something to happen or be said. In this sense, hanging-out on the scene and sitting next to the players talking about the on-screen action had a sense of the go-along, where the players led me through how they saw other experts actions *in situ*.

<sup>37</sup> Blue posts are forum posts or official news submitted to Battle.net from official Blizzard representatives such as designers, e-sports administrators, and support staff.

<sup>38</sup> While the high performance LAT scene was only short lived in its early days between 2007 – 2009, it already had some rollercoaster rides: From teams being promised permanent positions and salaries on the CGS (*Championship Gaming Series*) to *WoW* being dropped from major events including *World Series of Video Games* and the collapse of the CGS (Pwyff, 2009).

<sup>39</sup> Video link available at <http://emmawitkowski.com/dissertation/> - note [4.] “It makes it almost epic” – a player’s comment of how the sound of the LAN makes the game feel”.

<sup>40</sup> Fieldnotes, June 3, 2010 - continued: “There’s 18% stock left now at 4.22 AM - i’m position 9217 (on my first computer). On ebay there are already 39 results for blizzcon tickets - selling on average for 395 USD - the auctioned tix are also already way over the start price. 4.24AM and the ticket box is closed down. I came no-where near the ticket box. I literally didn’t see it for all the masses. A distasteful moment occurs when the tickets screen gets pulled, I am forwarded to the blizzard store page. I feel a little queasy.”

<sup>41</sup> A follow-up point to this, however, is that none of the players/teams who were offered a business card for an after-the-event interview (due to there not being time for the on-site interview) ever touched base again. Where the business card method worked well at establishing context, it did not harness any contact – a player’s email (or for most, it was actually a Skype handle) should have been acquired, leaving contact activation in my hands.

<sup>42</sup> There are certainly costs and benefits in these manoeuvres which must be acknowledged. One of the costs of the highly visible device was the expectation to be recorded by the many participants on-scene (one even asked me during a casual conversation “aren’t you going to record this?”). Performance “for the recorder” was thus something to be considered.

<sup>43</sup> Though at most LATs, nearness was made possible by chance of the facility set-up. I could stand a few meters away from the teams in play, take videos, photos and talk very specifically about moments that I had seen players perform on screen, with certain body movements and amongst the team cacophony that is LAN tournaments. Part of the decision to follow the more niche area of LAN tournaments, rather than online tournaments where participation is less marginal and more diversified, was specifically to gain such a “over-the-shoulder” viewpoint of entire teams in play, and more importantly the interplay between

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opposing teams and their technologies, including the space between them. Being there was an entry point to talk about the game experience and practices of this format of play *in situ*.

<sup>44</sup> Thus this study adds to the research on young people in serious leisure, where youthful generations have voiced how they are agents in their life-worlds and how they experience the culture in which they participate (See Piggott, 2010, for more on young people's voices in leisure).

<sup>45</sup> As a category "high performance" is acknowledged as far too erroneous for any "genuine" specificity to be taken elsewhere (my use of the term itself is drawn from sports studies). In game studies parlance this might equate to saying that the category of "hardcore gamers" is so absolutely stratified, that in talking of them as one thing wipes out most of the compelling nuance that actually comes at this expert level of play.

<sup>46</sup> These players are engaged in organized games, where goals are collectively located, records and performances are traced, teams of equally committed "others" are required to attend and to some extent also have a certain level of seriousness towards the game, e.g. they are constantly engaged in an effort to "move forwards" in the game.

<sup>47</sup> "Dedicated players" is a term used by game designers Salen and Zimmerman (2004). It encompasses the playing style where a player "desires to become an expert at the game, and diligently studies the rules of play in an attempt to maximize the chances of winning (pp. 269-270). In this work with dedicated high performance players and teams, many of the play practices observed and given voice worked to alter the common understanding of a "winning performance", where a winning performance might include "creating good games". Many of the LAT players invested meaning into the possibilities of the play structure and the challenges of competitive play – thus maximizing chances to win was balanced with how they wanted to play, what they deemed as skilful or pleasurable play. (Certainly there is another point to call up here. In *Arena* play more broadly, what might be termed as a "dedicated player" does not necessarily add up to playing with "expertise" or pursuing excellence).

<sup>48</sup> This might be seen in the same light that Smith talks of serious runners, that they are those people who practice their craft and are "regularly [running] further and faster than fitness for health would demand" (cited in Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2011, p. 334)

<sup>49</sup> Stebbins (2007) summarises serious leisure as "the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that people find so substantial, interesting and fulfilling that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a (leisure) career centered on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge and experience. (p.5)

<sup>50</sup> Allen-Collinson and Hockey (2011) propose that "embodied, embodied via auxiliaries, and inter-embodiments" be charted for the interrelationships of experience, specifically regarding sporting touch (p. 342). My renderings of intercorporeality, inter-embodiment, and interplay are directly inspired from their categorizations as I work to gather the multiple and interrelated sensuous practices of networked team play. And especially with regard to interplay, I attempt to harness the particulars of technologies pressuring back on the players and scene itself.

<sup>51</sup> Talking about the reversibility of experience between subject and object, Merleau-Ponty (1962) explains, "When I press my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but of an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the roles of 'touching' and being 'touched'. What was meant by talking about 'double sensations' is that, in passing

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from one role to the others, I can identify the hand touched as the same one which will in a moment be touching. In other words, in this bundle of bones and muscles which my right hand presents to my left, I can anticipate for an instant the integument or incarnation of that other right hand, alive and mobile, which I thrust towards things in order to explore them” (pp. 106-107). Such a concept is tightly attuned to teams in play; the moments between movements and attacks, the push and pull feeling involving players and environments.

<sup>52</sup> Remembering, these are the players experiences and sensuous ways of knowing – for many of them it is the first time they have tried to talk of such experiences of interplay, and working towards increasing our knowledge on what actually happens in the socio-technical practice of networked team play, these small steps towards recognizing (and articulating) interplay are actually giant hurdles being overcome.

<sup>53</sup> /roll is the slash-command in *WoW* to randomly generate a number between 1-100.

<sup>54</sup> In John Banks’ (2004) ethnographic research of a game development company, he discusses the feedback loop with one of the CEO’s between game developers, the playing community, and what they refer to as “hard-core online gamers”. Hard-core gamers, he notes, are important to the game; they are the “opinion leaders” and they have an influence that is felt through their pervasive presence online (p. 24).

<sup>55</sup> Several players in this study were in direct contact with Blizzard on PvP abilities, and the Blizzard e-sports team was a persistent observer of the tournament play of these high performance LAT players.

<sup>56</sup> These are called TR’s by the community (tournament realms). Players in these realms are granted free use of all end-game gear in competition, making these realms “more even handed” in terms of gear, enchants etc. Even the newest raiding PvE gear is available for use, which makes this experience quite unique (as that gear is not “easily” nor necessarily “quickly” obtainable).

<sup>57</sup> The top level moved from 70 to 80 to 85 during the course of this research.

<sup>58</sup> In the move towards BlizzCon, the tournament consists of one regional qualifier, followed by the regional finals. The winners of the regional finals get invited to compete in a global championship (these have gone under different titles over the years; BlizzCon, Battle.net Invitationals and Blizzard Worldwide Invitationals to name a few).

<sup>59</sup> It must be noted that while many of the players/teams are sponsored or on franchise teams, they don’t call the game they are involved with an e-sport (despite its presence on the e-sport scene). Also of note, none of the current players are on a salaried contract as a professional player. The standard contract for franchise *Arena* players includes remuneration for travel and accommodation costs as well as allowing players to keep their tournament winnings.

<sup>60</sup> The in-game *Gladiator* title is awarded at the end of each *Arena Tournament* season. The achievement is awarded to the highly ranked players sitting between 0.0% - 0.5% in a *BattleGroup*. A *Rank 1* denotes that the team was the highest rated of that elite group. Very few players worldwide can boast of having a *Rank 1* title.

<sup>61</sup> Arenajunkies.com, a core community 3<sup>rd</sup> party website for *Arena* players attaches, for instance, seasonal *Gladiator* title icons to forum signatures (drawn directly from Battle.net), bringing the in-game titles outside

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of the official game space (See final image in “Fieldwork” table).

<sup>62</sup> Specs or “talent specification” defines the role a character will play in a team. I.e. A priest spec’ed as “Holy” (Holy priest) will typically heal, while a Shadow spec’ed priest will generally be a damage dealer (dps) and take care of crowd-control (“CC” -which means delivering spells that slow, alter, or stop the movement of the opponents).

<sup>63</sup> Live tournaments do not allow add-ons during play. A rule instituted by Blizzard in order to keep the notion of “skill” attached to *Arena* play (See Taylor, 2012, p. 164).

<sup>64</sup> Other controversies crop up fairly consistently at LATs, from changes in which keyboard connectors are allowed, to lag issues and even to matters such as which security company is adjudicating the local tournament (which plays with the leniency on who gets to observe games from the tight over-the-shoulder position of other teams at play).

<sup>65</sup> The fourth player rule allows for more diversity in the team’s line-up, as most players at the expert level note that they generally only play one or two different positions, as becoming an expert and maintaining expert skill takes practice and training. As one player put it, having multiple classes means having to get at least double the amount of games in with the team, and as each player/constellation gets changed, the familiarity of who is on the field of play gets lessened (see section: “Beyond Instrumentality”).

<sup>66</sup> Line-of-sight or LOS refers to a player-character and its relation to an object (i.e. a pillar which a player can hide behind). LOSing for example can mean staying in view of your teammates so they can deliver healing spells, as well as “LOSing opponents”, where a player can hide behind an object in order that the opponent cannot do damage.

<sup>67</sup> The gates are the entrance to play. Upon “zoning into” an *Arena* match instance, players are placed in a holding area for one minute where their health, mana, and energy are restored, and they are able to prepare for the up-and-coming match.

<sup>68</sup> *Juking* is the terminology for faking a spellcast, i.e. starting a spell cast then deliberately interrupting it in order to draw a specific spell or cooldown out of the opponent. The term juking itself comes from American football, primarily done by runners who fake one way and go another. In *Arena*, juking works in an additional way, confusing the opponents collectively as a juke works over time to confuse the memory of what spells have or have not actually been effectively used in play.

<sup>69</sup> PvE play in MMO raids engages “bosses” – a non-playing character (NPC) that is a target of significant challenge, and typically the climax of a raid or a section thereof.

<sup>70</sup> Franchise affiliated players are those signed to a contract and who represent an e-sports franchise. Franchise players are different to sponsored players, as a franchise player will bear the franchise name at all tournaments, where-as sponsored players are not under the same “ownership” model, and are seen representing different (non-sponsored) teams, such as when they move through the qualifiers to BlizzCon tournaments.

<sup>71</sup> The sporting analogy to this is recalled through the legendary NBA match-up of Wilt Chamberlain versus Bill Russell, with the team line-up faced off as the Lakers (situated at The Forum) versus the Celtics (with the Boston Garden as home court), and the feel of those common working technologies, such as the shared

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yet differently experienced court played on, where the tightness of the practiced or unpractised basketball rims, or the bounce off the backboard, make all the difference to outcome of the game.

<sup>72</sup> Zeke also flags the interplay of bodies and technologies in this longer interview, as he refers to the camera at work helping keep an eye on the unfolding scene of play.

<sup>73</sup> As an example of ethnicity intersecting with age, Canadian players have previously been required by Blizzard to write an English essay in order to gain access to LAT tournaments. A disadvantage to English second language Canadians and Québécois, especially of a younger age/generation.

<sup>74</sup> For a handful of players, the tipping point towards serious commitment in *Arenas* and levelling up to a high performance player happened in correlation to illness or an injury - where leisure time was increased and the rate and style of involvement changed.

<sup>75</sup> See endnote #60 for details on online ranking.

<sup>76</sup> See description of theorycrafters in endnote #118.

<sup>77</sup> There is an interesting contradiction here between PvP and PvE experiences of expansion packs, teamwork and the feeling of togetherness. Both Nardi (2010) and Chen (2010) in their ethnographies of progress raiding highlight that *The Burning Crusade* (TBC) expansion was a breaking point for their guilds. Chen notes that his raiding guild and their team play more broadly was changed so drastically on the structural alterations in the software that their guild ultimately disbanded. For PvP'ers, TBC brought with it a new opportunity to pull together and it brought with it a stronger feeling of community and collective meaning for the *Arena* player in particular. In the many ethnographies of end-game *WoW*, PvP play is often a mentioned—though ultimately sidelined—story. And in the broader discussion of design changes, and what it means “for the community”, such divergent experiences certainly give more nuance the story. Or perhaps even more importantly, highlights that there are multiple stories surrounding the boundary object of the software (Star, 2010).

<sup>78</sup> If Popsie's claim has some truth to it, this ties together in devastating ways for young women to these spaces of play, as young women are traditionally not the early adopters of these high performance computer gaming pursuits.

<sup>79</sup> Players can play on as many teams as they like during the high performance *Arena Pass Tournament*. Meaning that expert players can simultaneously play with high performance teams as well as teams “for fun” within this elite level playing space. However, a player can only represent one team at the live qualifiers, and to be ranked, the team must have maintained the minimum play requirement of 10 matches per week (Vaneck, 2010).

<sup>80</sup> Scrimmages have been decidedly altered in *WoW*, and now go under by the title of “War Games”. These are unranked matches that can be played between formed groups, initiated by a command (/wargame) and played in a setting of the players own choice.

<sup>81</sup> Having spent so much time with the players, we have talked about their nicknames, guild affiliations, and aliases which were familiar enough to be able to spot LAT players on the Armory (via the top ranked PvP 3v3 link). Though only in the constellation with other high performance players, and as situated at the very



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top of the ladder and as tied to team names that have performed in other online tournaments.

<sup>82</sup> I have to stress that this “atmosphere” is the one built from LATs. A quick breeze over any online *Arena* forum would very quickly present a different, less amiable atmosphere. Certainly, the LAT community also has its grievances, player stand-offs, and “high drama” moments. Though the time I spent on the scene with the players was fairly docile, which is what is rendered in this contextual piece.

<sup>83</sup> The live tournament recruitment process seems exceedingly risky, especially for those sponsored teams who want to maintain some level of “good” performance to remain sponsored. It is interesting to look across to high performance raiding guilds, namely, world-first guilds, the leaders of which have much of the same rationale in their final recruitment decisions. As one world-first guild leader told me, the final recruitment happens in the live game, as that’s where you see the “real player” come to life. This is the very same experience of trailing a recruit at LAN, as some players simply cannot make the adjustment to the additional pressures. Though while the amount of pressure placed on the new recruit is enormous (not only to play well to save-face, or to remain on the team) it is interesting that the major flaws made at LAN were stated to me as being “play-style or personality flaws”, not rotation mistakes or other easier to improve or adjust aspects of play. The recruit was being judged on their inter-embodied synergy, not on instrumentally “correct” play.

<sup>84</sup> The “fourth player” is an interesting position, and in retrospect, I wish I had spent more time with more of them. Fortunately, Dewey was performing as a fourth at the time of this study, and Team Triple-Bind had a fourth who never saw any play while I was on the scene. At several of the tournaments, no substitute player was allowed, limiting the on-the-floor team to three players only. In these situations, the fourth was still brought to the tournament (franchise teams only – I never saw a fourth on the single tournament sponsored teams). The fourth often fills out other roles such as coaching, time-out tactics, and filling out the scene as a spectator. The BlizzCon 2010 finals were the most interesting use and misuse of the fourth I came across. During the debacle of the finals, the fourth player negotiated with officials, found strong cases for protest, joined the team for time-outs and called tactics, and provided motivational support from the crowd. The compelling part though came with the prize-winnings. Even though the team on stage was representing a franchise (a four player team), the team (as a fairly self-governing unit) saw itself as only the three on stage in terms of earning the money. When I asked one of the players if the fourth wasn’t a part of the team, he stated that he was, but BlizzCon is just different. And added, “Oh, but I’m going to buy him a digital camera with my cut” - of what was \$US35000 for “the team”.

<sup>85</sup> Though a fair amount of psychological warfare went on, trying to juke the other team into changing their line-up by feigning a player (class) substitution.

<sup>86</sup> Video link available at <http://emmawitkowski.com/dissertation/> - note [3.] “Four players on the field of play”.

<sup>87</sup> I don’t go further into the details of coaching, or no-coaches, in this research. Though, it is certainly an area that necessitates follow-up work. In particular, the expressed “happiness” in not having a coach on board in their LAT play, alongside of the expressions of “ownership together” (contra to obedience) of the tactical decisions that unfolds *in situ*. As a former player-coach myself of an elite basketball team, I find this LAT situation riveting, as the surplus of energy needed to handle the details of intimate play, tactical oversight, motivation, and dealing/overcoming failures is massive. If these players/teams are indeed revelling in this challenge, they are certainly gaining experience as composed managers in extremely

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complex and tasking endeavours, while still performing expertly, and from a very young age.

<sup>88</sup> The costs are high for the teams that have to “get rid of” a player not only playing wise (starting practice over with a new player for team synergy) but also personally. The pickiness in recruiting “at the top” certainly includes fore-thought on the personal costs involved in “firing a friend”.

<sup>89</sup> As one player replied to a e-sports blogger on what LAT play has given him, he answered, “Looking back, playing *WoW* at a high-level consistently has given me a lot of opportunities. I consider the benefits from that an accomplishment” (Rapture, 2011). Perhaps there is also a keen realization here on the “good fortune” of just being able to travel, earn pocket-money, and do something “serious” with this particular leisure form. In terms of media sports, players seem to have a much grounded understanding that “their sport” is not a career to be taken as “serious work”.

<sup>90</sup> This was one change up that LAT players had to deal with across tournaments and even during seasons of play. With the entrance of *StarCraft2* into the second half of the 2010 MLG PC Circuit, the round robin *Arena Tournament* (preferred by players) was altered to double elimination (to make time for the up and coming e-sports tournament already popular in South Korea). For the players, changing to the double elimination format felt that they didn’t have enough time to “warm” to the tournament setting (the round robin allowed for more mistakes and furthermore, more games before being seeded for the play-offs). As players emphasize, the LAT is where the best practice happens. And with fewer “promised” games, less good practice is achievable and practiced by body.

<sup>91</sup> A “ping fix” is a registry fix for latency reduction (Yes, 2009).

<sup>92</sup> Talking from the practice of Golden Glove amateur boxing, Waquant makes a fantastic observation on a possible ground for such “different play”, noting “The fact that one is always being seen at every moment by all the others also forces you to apply yourself, for fear of appearing ridiculous.” (Waquant, 2004, p. 116).

<sup>93</sup> This is somewhat different to certain larger team configurations (such as 5v5 PvP *Arena* or 25-player PvE raids) where players’ experience that there is a buffer for their mistakes, where others can pick up the slack.

<sup>94</sup> “Not having enough play” was most felt by four player line-ups going to tournaments where only three players were allowed. As the “substitution” player extends the constellations and possibilities available within the team just that little bit further.

<sup>95</sup> The *Arena Tournament* realms shut down after the season is over, meaning that LAT players have nowhere to practice with the full array of gear to choose from (as is the case of playing at LATs), but rather have to rely on their continued play in PvE progress raiding to gather necessary PvE gear (forged with high offensive ratings).

<sup>96</sup> One of the most commonly used local affordances is the double or triple stacking of event chairs to attain the “right” seating height to play from.

<sup>97</sup> This is a notably not the case for many larger PvE teams at play in *WoW* where squad/class leaders may take over the mid-management role of group communication, with micro-level communications—between say druids and the druid class leader—taking place “between” battles, much like moving to the corner after

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the ding of the bell in a boxing match. Most often, strategic leadership of big teams in action is managed by a few, both for reasons of consistency as well as to keep the voice channel clear for important actions.

<sup>98</sup> I did not manage to get a feel for the time, who initiated it, or precisely how this played out from my interviews. However, all the players on the 2010 tour talked exclusively of Skype as their VoIP for AT play.

<sup>99</sup> It has to be noted here too that no players use the in-game voice communication function of the packaged software itself. To cater for their needs, voice communications software located beyond the game were seen as the only option.

<sup>100</sup> An all-in move is when a team suddenly targets an opposing player in a risky attack where they “blow” all of their offensive spells, hoping to get the targeted opponent down in a surprise move. This tactic, where players go from full health to dead in a matter of seconds, is a precisely timed manoeuvre that takes into account the minutiae of play (the mana bar of the opposing healer, the opposing teams unused defensive spells, field positioning, etc.), and “risks it all” for the team employing it, leaving them incredibly vulnerable for a counter-attack.

<sup>101</sup> While it is not a case of traditional team interplay, Agassi’s (2010) explanation about his tennis strings is fascinating in this regard, where the work of his trainer, himself, and the variation of strings used on the single racket was finely tuned over time to find the “perfect fit”. He notes. “I’ve always played with ProBlend, a string that’s half Kevlar, half nylon...It never breaks, never forgives, but also never generates spin ... People talk about the game changing, about players growing more powerful, and rackets getting bigger, but the most dramatic change in recent years is the strings... I’ve always been reluctant to change but (coach) urges me to try ... Give the new strings a go, mate ... I’m sceptical ... Just try ... I don’t miss a ball for the rest of the tournament ... because of (coach) and his miracle string” (p. 343).

<sup>102</sup> In this tournament, Team Nosh-Up lost in the second round of play (two matches) in what is a seven round tournament. Game times vary greatly at LAT’s. The local rule set deems a maximum game time to be 20 minutes. Though games can last mere seconds (around thirty seconds was the shortest that I watched), and matches (i.e. best of five, seven or eleven games series) can last several hours due to draws (no winner at the 20-minute mark) going into a re-match, literally doubling up the game time. These local tournament rules combined with the recruiting culture of expert LAT teams work very poorly for recruits like Rookie who had approximately half an hour of play to prove his worth as a (potential) LAT regular.

<sup>103</sup> “Spec” stands for “specialization” – the talent focus tree that a player chooses. For example, a Warrior can choose between specs of “Arms”, “Fury”, and “Protection”, each which brings with it specialties (such as single to AOE [area of effect] tanking manoeuvrability or access to special stuns), strengths (for example, the sustained damage deliverable by the Fury Warrior) and weaknesses (such as dual wielding weapons thus relinquishing shield protection).

<sup>104</sup> “Crowd control” or “CC” refers to spells that limit opposition movement, either slowing them down, or grounding them altogether for a period of time with limited or no power to cast spells.

<sup>105</sup> Buffs are short-term favourable spells or effects placed on a player.

<sup>106</sup> It should be noted that team game outcomes are not always dependant on just one poor play; though there can be game changing players (attitude or performance) and moments (linked to time) that in teams

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get shored up through seasonal team talk (Fine, 1985, p. 311).

<sup>107</sup> *Awareness* as a concept (referring to how players see and take in the map and field of play) comes directly from PvE raiders' talk of "raid awareness" (which is itself a take on the military term "situational awareness"— See Nardi, 2010, p. 55). In raid parlance, this speaks more directly to the happenings as produced by the game software (i.e. fire on the ground, seeing mobs coming in etc.) but also specifically to teammates line-of-sighting. Whereas awareness in PvP is spoken of as first and foremost knowing the intimate details of one's own team followed by the performances of the opposition, the bricolage pressuring on action (LAN event, administrators, lag), and map in play.

<sup>108</sup> One of the two established team members noted that their synergy with a former player had a feeling of "instant knowing". This is certainly not an unusual comment (having a good connection right off the bat), but as Atlas goes on to say, "instant knowing" gets more thorny when more people are involved.

<sup>109</sup> As emphasized by T.L. Taylor (2012) in her work on pro gamers, these expert players, and I would extend to teams, don't just "appear out of thin air" (p. 55), but come to be through a long process involving individual effort and a multitude of other social practices.

<sup>110</sup> To draw on a sporting analogy, a location of play spotlights not only a coded *Arena* map or a basketball court's dimensions and its painted hardwood floor, it highlights the interconnectedness between specific team choices, the relationship between those choices in contest, and location specificity. I mention the basketball court dimensions here for a purpose. I happened to play for a team that could boast a home court (advantage) by means of a 4,200 foot elevation environment. When fast paced "running teams" (deep with athletic sprinter-esque guards and small forwards) from the bay area came to play, we always knew we would get them in the fourth quarter, just when our thin-air home court setting started to make a visible mark on their style and practice of play. When slower paced post-oriented teams headed our way, we didn't enjoy that advantage (the slower pacing allowing for players to "catch their breath"). Lourk, an Australian *Arena* player, talks in detail about his lagged practice field (playing on a strong North American server/BattleGroup) as opposed to the change up he meets playing on fast playing fields at LATs. A map location certainly has energy and affordances, but it is always already in relation to who or what else is brought to that play moment.

<sup>111</sup> A fascinating part of this sensorium which makes up the game locations comes from the integration of shoutcaster calls in the room. BlizzCon winner Quartzly tells me after a win that he heard the shoutcaster call a cool-down used by his opponent. It was a piece of information that he did not register during play, though something which led him to act immediately, as with the knowledge of that used cool-down, his team had an opportunity to attack.

<sup>112</sup> In his work on the philosophy of sport, Robert Osterhoudt (1973) finds that it is the manner in which movements are performed which is most significant in grasping the physicality of sporting movement. He explains that chess, for example, does not engage the body in sporting movement as the kinesthetic movement of any piece from A to B has no effect on the outcome of that movement. Whereas the many movement decisions made in getting to position A to position B on an *Arena* map has everything to do with the outcome of each in-play moment. Wright, Boria, and Breidenbach's (2002) work on *Counter-Strike* also highlights this key part of the gameplay, noting that "[p]laying is not simply mindless movement through a virtual landscape, but rather movement with a reflexive awareness of the game's features".

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<sup>113</sup> Latei's sensing here was described as "awesome" on the scene (by the audience, other players, and shoutcasters). The awesomeness is tied to "blindly" sensing that location in its dynamic force. I am reminded by a piece of YouTube pop science showing the deep sensory awareness of Portuguese football star Ronaldo. With Ronaldo standing on the opposite penalty corner, a ball is (corner) kicked, immediately followed by the stadium lights being turned off. This is no trouble for Ronaldo, as he smoothly head's the ball into the goal in pitch darkness, feeling where the ball should be (wander00000, 2011). Ronaldo's sensory awareness in movement emphasizes that vision is only one part of a bouquet of modalities used in a moving field of play. In Latei's beautifully sensed moment of play, he shows how one senses the others, those negative spaces on the field of play. This was a moment that opened up how the subtle plays which these players make can be the most intricate; in Latei's piecing together of what was missing across the field, the player invisible on the screen was found.

<sup>114</sup> Reversibility is a vivid expression of the action of the team (as a team of competitors) in play, as well as teams in play against other groups or things (opposing teams and the environment in play). What reversibility further highlights is the seeing of and working with negative space which is made and itself acting between the things in play.

<sup>115</sup> Peter Arnold's original phrasing: "... as a feeler of the actions I undertake I am an ensemble of powers that when exercised help me to actualize myself" (1979, p. 3)

<sup>116</sup> I have chosen not to place this player under a pseudonym for two reasons. Firstly, this play is so recognized, and available publically via multiple texts on the *Arena* scene, that even a player who only browsed the local *Arena* web forums would identify it as "his play". Secondly, such a play deserves recognition as a feat of sporting prowess, a collectively remembered and beautifully created play that is allotted to him as "the artist" (Hickey, 1997; Lowood, 2010b)

<sup>117</sup> This in part speaks to what players refer to as "It's Korean" fandom is perpetuated on the e-sports scene. The culture of practice is mentioned several times in interviews with North American players, especially in terms of the "expectations" of professionalism which plays out as the time spent on practice. It also hones in on team philosophy. The North American teams I followed emphasized "quality not quantity" in their practice sessions, claiming that poor teams would train them incorrectly (This philosophy is also favoured by *The Art of War* inspired former Street Fighter player David Sirlin, 2006). The few South Korean teams on the scene went with "practice makes perfect", emphasizing practice against anyone for repetition, diversity, and training at playing their best, no matter who the opponent.

<sup>118</sup> In terms of PVP play, theorycrafting "works the numbers", looking for the most powerful or versatile group composition – where a composition of three players (sometimes four) brings with it certain advantages (in spells, abilities etc.) and flexibility against other team (on paper) constellations.

<sup>119</sup> While watching an intense game, Charged, another LAT player who made the trip to BlizzCon just to watch the finals, marvels at one of these "virtuoso" player's doing the shoutcasting of the match. He states, "It's frightening to hear him, he's spot on, and seeing things before they happen. He is so spot on with all the different classes and what they should do."

<sup>120</sup> In terms of fandom, and watching such players, Giulianotti brings up an interesting point on the joys of spectatorship; "Players such as Maradona ... are lauded as *pibes* ('boys') by the fans, not only for their sublime skills, but also for their carefree and joyous play, which kindles personal memories of childhood games and formative experiences, uncluttered by the burdens of adult life" (Giulianotti, 1999, p. 140).

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Perhaps watching Marma's free-ness adds to this amazing moment, as I certainly feel evoked to go do something "special" (if only I could) in the game.

<sup>121</sup> *Arena* mechanics involves a shifting landscape of players; players are removed from the field as they are defeated (represented by zero health) by opponents, changing the player landscape from 3v3 match-ups into uneven teams at play (or different combinations of teams at play) such as the 3v2, 2v2 or 2v1. This mechanic of the gradually deteriorating team is quite unique when contrasted to mainstream sports, and it is certainly part of the excitement of the meticulous take-down of multiple players where sudden underdogs emerge (the suddenly "shorthanded" team). That said, several sports experience a version of the "one-player-down"; in particular the top level of football regards this "mechanic" seriously, with managers training specifically for such situations (J. Wilson, 2010).

<sup>122</sup> My fieldnotes for this moment of play were drawn together from multiple sources, as this was not a play I experienced firsthand (it took place in March, 2009 at the Electronic Sports Leagues Intel Extreme Master's finals). I have pulled it together from YouTube live-streams of the original shoutcasted play, alongside of an Electronic Sports League play-by-play video explaining what occurred in slow motion with graphics overlays highlighting what was happening spell for spell, as well as through the first-hand observations of the expert players I interviewed who watched the game unfold "live" and recalled to me their lived experience of the play. This last aspect of the vignette was given great detail by Zeke, who spotted that everything turned on its head when the opposing team jumped up from their seats to celebrate pre-emptively – something that is certainly not caught on the shoutcasters or expert appraisals of the game in play.

<sup>123</sup> A "proc" is a special procedure on a weapon, item, or ability that gets triggered under particular circumstances. It is framed as "chance": For example, a weapon hit might proc extra damage.

<sup>124</sup> Though the buff unpredictably procs, the talent is still one that is chosen by the player to fill the (Mage's) talent tree.

<sup>125</sup> A performance which that left the *Arena* community literally in awe of his skilful manifestation of sporting prowess. Perhaps what the community is in awe of, at least partly, is the virtuosity of his composed body. As Gumbrecht (2006) suggests, "...composure in the face of gestures of destruction is the highpoint of the [sports] production ... those who give in to mental anguish do not make it to the top of their sport" (pp. 164-166).

<sup>126</sup> This pre-positioning and expert eye on play was emphasized in an expert players shoutcast at BlizzCon, he was talking specifically of Player Y's movement work which I paraphrase here: When Team V brings the Warlock down below then they know that the Warlock is going to Port (teleport) back to the top to get out of LOS/Damage. But Player Y knows this will happen and he already starts to move around to where that Port is (on the top of the bridge away from the immediate action) before the Warlock is even considering using it. When the Warlock uses it he's (Player Y) already there to keep putting damage on him. Amazing. As the shoutcaster reveals to us, players are seeing things through movements and established tactics long before the game-in-play actually happens.

<sup>127</sup> Though, psychological space might also be considered here. Think, for example, of the confidence that number crunching brings ("theorycrafting says that we have the advantage!") or the 300 versus 3000 games of practice ("they have the practiced edge!") and what these things do for motivation and the "psychological edge" during the heat of a match (remembering that for most teams there is no coach or

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manager patrolling the sideline keeping their morale high).

<sup>128</sup> Though, from the spectators side where syntax mastery and tactics might not sink in, pleasures can be culturally constructed in the seeing – witnessing the underdog “not giving up”, “overcoming”, and “maintaining control of total chaos” (Lyng 1990, p. 871; Le Breton, 2000, p. 1); pleasures we know are hard to come by, making them all the more fascinating and admirable.

<sup>129</sup> Eyewear that is used to increase screen contrast.

<sup>130</sup> I use extended interview snippets in order to make available longer moments of contextual discussions which take between the collaborators and myself.

<sup>131</sup> The loaning of technologies is an important part of this story of high level competition. Opposing teams could just as easily brush off the request to borrow their keyboards, in order to better secure their own road to the finals.

<sup>132</sup> Another interesting twist to keep in mind here: The expert players, those with the chance of gaining financially, or via sponsorship or more general exposure, are not looking at all the rule changes from tournament to tournament. Even with such high stakes, the official rule changes are often overlooked.

<sup>133</sup> “Fat fingered” – hitting two keys at once or the wrong key, in practice he was making “typos.

<sup>134</sup> When thought of along the lines of action tools (keyboard’s being one of the handful of direct input tools involved in networked team play), haptics are exposed as tightly tied to the rules, the feel of the team, and also the spirit of correct “sports play”. There is a certain dominant culture of right’s and wrong’s in terms of what things can be apportioned blame for ones performance at LANs. In discussions with LAT players, there is a certain sidelining of the very real troubles involved with the changed tools allowed in competition. Players recognize these challenges as being not quite legitimate ones, or at least in need of some careful phrasing in terms of how much weight they give to the complaint or “excuse”.

<sup>135</sup> As a side point, such a move also tolled on player bank accounts. As two other players told me that they decided to chip in to buy a new US\$150 keyboard for their out-of-cash teammate after learning of the rule change.

<sup>136</sup> In terms of the ANT dictum “follow the controversies” (Latour, 2005), this one was significant - it was in the absence of a preferred tool that tournament players found the language to articulate how their technologies are significant in shaping team play. In the controversies that involved change or losing control, players seemed to find an easier pathway to expressing their sensuous knowledge and practice.

<sup>137</sup> This event was held in the massive convention halls at the Gaylord Convention Center in Washington D.C.

<sup>138</sup> Asian American men as well as e-sports franchise affiliated Asian players (mainly South Korean) were also visible, though by no means equally, as players on the scene. At the MLG, the diversity was broadened perhaps mostly due to location, with African American men strongly represented at the Washington D.C. event (mostly on the amateur fighting scene).

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<sup>139</sup> With the addition of *StarCraft2 (SC2)* to the MLG (backed by the strength of the *SC2* e-sports and fan communities in South Korea), *SC2* is quickly gaining momentum as the other “top tier” e-sports discipline at the MLG and is certainly also a “legitimized” game in which to develop a career.

<sup>140</sup> According to the *Halo Reach GameBattles* ladder overview, in 2011 over 200,000 players participated in online amateur tournaments. And approximately 140 players participated in the amateur and pro *Halo* events during the Washington D.C. MLG tournament.

<sup>141</sup> In the MLG’s mimicry of media sports, it is interesting to see how they appropriate not a generic player in the icon, but the Xbox controller. The logo design is a direct knock off of media sports logos such as the NBA and the MLB. However, with the individual player represented in the NBA logo, it is compelling to read that the NBA has in the past actively rejected that this is a particular player (Jerry West). The suggestion of the designer of the logo has been that the NBA did so in a move away from an individual player to an institutional understanding of the NBA (Crowe, 2010). The MLG seems to do the opposite move in establishing the Xbox controller in the logo; it situates that particular technology as the primus motor of the scene itself.

<sup>142</sup> Looking at e-sports as an international sporting movement, it is fascinating to see the extent of such media sports models and how they are appropriated and re-invented across robust e-sports economies and communities (for many pro players though, perhaps there is little choice or options available in regards to their appropriation). Looking beyond the MLG and to other established e-sports scenes, we can see well sponsored South Korean pro players kitted out in full NASCAR-esque racing tracksuits, riddled with logos from top to toe. Referees at e-sports tournaments don the traditional black and white striped jersey of basketball and NHL officials. Monstrous gold plated trophies, championship rings (à la North American sports), and generous prize winnings are some of the “badges of honour” presented to the mostly male champions. When I observed the World Cyber Games held in Los Angeles in 2010 (WCGs – the self-named “Olympics” of e-sports), the Danish *Counter-Strike* team (and their extensive entourage) draped themselves in the “Dannebrog” (the red and white Danish national flag) and participated in team huddles, pep-talks, organized supporter songs (Premier League football chants), and legitimized hand-holding and hugging (though with heterosexuality firmly in check, as such actions are weighed up against the main hypermasculine performance of the sport. Team leaders pace the “side-line”, screaming, cheering, and generally taking up space: Players dressed with hints of sporting attire - a headband here, a national team football scarf there. When the adornments and conduct are packaged together, it all tingles of a decidedly “performed as sporty” routine; systematically constructing an idealised and consistent version of masculinity affirming performances in e-sports (Connell, 1987).

<sup>143</sup> The readership of the blog which Chilli wrote and produced video interviews for was logging around one million views per month only a year prior to the MLG *Arena* folding. The community website’s ultimate demise was lack of regular content to report on. The elimination of the elite level, minimally attended (by players) tournament, has been a catalyst in breaking down the feeling of *Arena* community.

<sup>144</sup> See endnote #60 for description of Gladiator/Rank 1.

<sup>145</sup> In sporting constructions the heterosexy female player suggests “the sexualization of the strong female athlete, the engineering of the ‘buff bunny’ or the heterosexy competitor” (Buysee, 2006). The production of the heterosexy female expert in computer game cultures come in various forms – the commercial gaming team “Frag Dolls” (n.d.), the sponsored *Counter-Strike* team “Pinc Zinic” (2009)—one website proclaiming the team consisted of “five beautiful Scandinavian girls”—, or the all-girl multi-media



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production group “Team Unicorn” (n.d.) working the “geek girl/gamer girl” angle.

<sup>146</sup> The essentialising of gender in e-sports via segregated tournaments for men and women (most notably in CS) is however far more complicated than simply some unconsidered consequences and decisions by organizers. The catch-22 of segregated tournaments is not entirely lost on, for example, all e-sports franchise managers. In T.L. Taylor’s (2012) interviews with pro gaming managers, one talks reflectively of the broader social-structural influences that impact on women’s overall participation and what is at stake in the segregated tournaments. While segregation works to essentialise gender differences regarding physical capabilities and sporting performances of men and women, it also works as a buffer for other locally, historically, and culturally established troubles pertaining to full or partial access and participation (Theberge, 2000). As Butler (1999) emphasizes, “These domains of exclusion reveal the coercive and regulatory consequences of that construction, even when the construction has been established for emancipator purposes” (p. 7). Following arguments post Title IX on women’s sports, segregated tournaments also provide a different kind of access to those who are less likely to participate in a co-ed sporting environment. Another key argument rests on the issue of parental control, especially in allowing daughters access or, more troublingly, relating to the culture of coaching, seeing them get equal playing time “on the field” (and a chance to hone skills) in what are pigeon-holed as traditionally male sports such as football, basketball, or even Little League baseball (Dixon, Warner, & Bruening, 2008; Fine, 1987). The issue of segregated sports/tournaments is far from a simple either/or solution.

<sup>147</sup> As a “mature” seventeen year old woman, perhaps this issue of parental control seems somewhat out of place. Though, with younger men participating on the scene (a sixteen-year-old Canadian male performing on the nationwide North American LAT scene), I find it a relevant discussion in regards to who and when certain players can gain full access to the competitive spaces where their expert skills (and networks) are developed. Nick Taylor (2009) furthers this with a key point as he asks who it is that has to negotiate such discussions of safety (in his work, the one woman on the team he followed was the only one to talk of such negotiations), namely negotiating access in this manner is a seldom mentioned part of young men’s experiences – and complete freedom of movement – in attending LANs.

<sup>148</sup> In every second interview I have read on Heroe (or in that case, any high performance woman gamer), she has to tackle the question of being a “woman gamer” – the negotiations and rhetorical devices that these women use are fascinating (T.L. Taylor, 2006a; Kennedy, 2005; N. Taylor, 2009) and with the sportisation of the scene, more works needs to be done on the negotiations of this highly visible women players from within the media sports setting.

<sup>149</sup> Throughout my studies I have talked with many meaning-makers and power holders in North American and European e-sports that hold the “boys club” position. While I have also met the egalitarian opposite on the scene (in particular those developing, most often on a voluntary basis, European e-sports associations), they are without the powerful backing of big sponsors to make structural changes to the existing scene. This is certainly one area of development to follow – National development programs and associations and their structuring choices for gender equity in e-sports more broadly.

<sup>150</sup> I have no notes on who initiated the contact, but like most of the meetings and conversations on the live-scene, they just seemed to flow without awkward “introductions” – as I have mentioned elsewhere, it was a scene where I became a local on it very quickly. It was however an informal interview, this one lasted 17-minutes and was followed up by several other longer conversations.

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<sup>151</sup> The sponsor was not an e-sports franchise per-say, but rather a community based service site with a subscription-based option.

<sup>152</sup> Of the media sports the MLG chose to emulate (NASCAR and NHL)—even if only in representation—it is interesting to consider their disturbing histories. As both organized sports have, over time, produced a very specific kind of performance and product which is projected and acted as aggressive, risky, sexist, homophobic, violent, and at all times dominated by men in sync with hegemonic sporting masculinity.

<sup>153</sup> Alongside of the many varied e-sports ventures, the MLG is a striking example of a media sports event which has been formed and marketed around a very specific configuration of “sameness” in regards to shoring up hegemonic sporting masculinity (despite the perceptible community as well as player differences active across the various scenes). The hypermasculinised media sports model (along with discourses, symbolism, and tournament structures) has been appropriated as a ready-made backbone which commercially aligned e-sports organizers have not yet shown a critical appraisal of. It is certainly noteworthy to see NASCAR as a part of the culture to replicate; where the mastery of advanced technologies is central to the packaging and projection to that particular form of “masculinized technoculture” (N. Taylor, 2009, p.159). In this regard, Walker’s study of working class men and muscle car culture is compelling, where such couplings between *hypermasculinity* and advanced technologies is shown to work as a reinforcing barrier for exclusion for certain others, in particular women’s access to such scenes, based on peer group constructions of such technologies as masculine (cited in Connell, 2002).

<sup>154</sup> MLG co-founder Mike Sepso has invested heavily into the MLG, which is targeted at “digital mavericks”: Young, male, “first wave digital natives”. Alongside of the MLG, Sepso is the founder of a start-up fund aimed towards “creating things” for young men aged between 16 and 24. At the end of 2011, Sepso’s company (Legion Enterprises LLC) contributed additional funding to the MLG in the tune of 10 million US dollars (Zitron, 2011).

<sup>155</sup> At insulated tournaments such as BlizzCon, players, not surprisingly, received a different welcoming (both encouraging and motivating), experienced a different status, and felt an alternate ambience surrounding their game and play.

<sup>156</sup> A “cheese comp” (more correctly termed the “Flavour of the Month” in *WoW* parlance) is the statistically superior tactic or game character selection/composition.

<sup>157</sup> The prize-winnings of such tournaments in 2010 alone topped a quarter of a million US dollars. In 2011, Blizzard along with the WCGs held top-prize-giving tournaments in *Arena*, as well as the players themselves initiating their own online tournament for top *Arena* players with the North American Online Invitational (complete with some small sponsorship money and prizes, shoutcasting, and an e-sports quality UI mod).

<sup>158</sup> In addition, it might be noted that competitive games that embrace other forms of competition, and which have a more diversified player base have less support, if at all, on top tier stages that are designated with powerful titles such as “Major League” or “Olympics of computer games”, or “Cyber Professional”. Though the MLG has in the past engaged in competitions in a variety of game genres such as racing games, sports games, and mobile platform games.

<sup>159</sup> On discussing the idea of creating a player’s union with core scene members, all answered in a similar tone. They were just happy to be on a contract, being able to gain anything from their play, and in the end - they were just kids, and wouldn’t know where to begin. Interestingly, after five years of organised play and

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relative marginality on the e-sports scene, some of the veteran players have initiated their own e-sports *Arena Tournament* drawing on small sponsorships, 3<sup>rd</sup> party *Arena* site support, UI mods (modifications), and their huge network of elite level players – See “Re-personalising high performance team play”). While it is not a union move, it is certainly a move towards improved player power in the role of organizer where close community contact is maintained.

<sup>160</sup> A sensitizing frame here might be the status and dealings of kickers on American football teams. A position that is steeped in finesse, though combined with and rhetorically delivered as engaging extreme mental “toughness”.

<sup>161</sup> As an e-sport, the MMO-genre (if one can call it that) has certain challenges. One issue pertains to *Arena* being a part of a shared (designed) system where Player versus Environment (PvE) and Player versus Player (PvP) co-exist (thus obtaining specialized gear, such as an obscure PvE trinket, requires access to a progress raiding guild, the time to raid, and adherence to the local rules for obtaining the item for PvP use). In other words, practicing in “another kind of game” is deemed necessary to float one’s high performance pursuit.

<sup>162</sup> LAT teams complicate discussions around theorycrafting with their intense focus on team synergy and *in situ* interplay (the play made between players and technologies). See Chris Paul’s (2011) work on *WoW* PvE and theorycrafting for a compelling look at the different uses, interpretations, and play cultures that have formed around theorycrafting as an end game practice.

<sup>163</sup> The location-based tournament stage is not set in stone. And while no e-sports or high performance scene stakes itself out as permanent, there are several scenes that have a feeling of longevity and some player or community power – such as the CS 1.6 community scene (See T.L. Taylor, 2012 for an overview of the CS community’s work in maintaining CS 1.6 as the preferred game for competitive tournament play).

<sup>164</sup> This is not to say that instrumentality isn’t a part of the team condition, as it is, and very much so. Though in the case of the team which the veteran player speaks of, it is only one part of the team condition, and certainly not a part that determines or overrides exactly how they should play.

<sup>165</sup> Having to stick to a LAT schedule despite ones team performance on the day is quite different to for example choosing to play more games during the online tournament where the team synergy is functioning well. Such simple rule alterations make the world of difference to the experience of the practiced team in action.

<sup>166</sup> None of the players who I have talked to during this research have been banned for engaging in Win-trading (when a team raises its ranking on the tournament ladder by only playing a team who has been prearranged to lose), though several players mention queue dodging as a common practice even at the top levels of play online (choosing not to queue up against a team that is either very good, or a comp that stacks up well against one’s own).

<sup>167</sup> Perhaps I find this point so strong in direct comparison to my own experiences as a player and coach in elite team competitions. After tough losses, immediate dialogue following a game was often pushed off until a later time (often the training the following day or several hours after a match in a tournament setting) where tempers, frustrations, and other tensions had settled. Failure seems to be something that these teams—teams notably without a mediating coach—are practiced and extremely competent (that is those who stay on the scene) in dealing with by immediate, detailed reflection.

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<sup>168</sup> On the LAT scene, there were certainly a couple of players repeatedly pointed out to me (by other players) as “with attitude” and “not particularly mature”.

<sup>169</sup> While Heroe was no longer a LAT player, she was at several tournaments that I attended (as an e-sports website media representative), and we had several long talks about her experiences.

<sup>170</sup> At BlizzCon 2010, the *Arena* stage started to fill with a thick haze. I was standing beside Team Ruse, one of whom huffed in exasperation that at the last big tournament, they got the teams to run up on the stage through spotlights and smoke. A teammate recalls, “It was ridiculous. We all just shook our heads and asked each other what the hell was going on”. In contrast to the *Halo* teams who embraced and willingly mimicked this clear link to the ESPN-esque sports mimicry (N. Taylor, 2009), of being “in the spotlight” and heroically “centre-staged”, the *Arena* players felt otherwise about playing the role of the media sports athlete (T.L. Taylor, 2012). See <http://emmawitkowski.com/dissertation/> - note [1] “Awkward ESPN-esque ‘sports reel’ of BlizzCon 2010 *Arena* teams”.

<sup>171</sup> Playing with data visualising add-ons is disallowed in LAT play. Many players/teams choose not to participate in LATs (despite Blizzard remunerating travel/accommodation), as they are not practiced in playing without the extra layer of information that add-ons provide. As T.L. Taylor notes in her exploration of the work of these game modifications: Add-ons work like an extra player, and thus change the experience and certainly the embodied practice of individual and teams in high performance play (Taylor, 2009a).

<sup>172</sup> Though, something must be said for the context; as this may also be tied to the North American cultural influence of “real” male bodies.

<sup>173</sup> Interestingly, several other players at the LATs commented positively on how these players were “also” hitting the gym prior to LANs, in a reproduction of the “right stuff” of play.

<sup>174</sup> Before sidelining LAT play to some niche part of *WoW* as a game, one must acknowledge that the *Arena Pass Tournaments* (TR) are developed and maintained by Blizzard as an official part – not appendage – to the game. BlizzCon tournaments, the championship series of the TRs (now extended as the Battle.net World Championship) are very simply the “final product” of what has been happening in online in TR play.

<sup>175</sup> In one shocking instance of club sponsors impressing on the field of play, I was involved in a scene where sponsors manipulated a new team to the scene (who was running an obscure and “un-scouted” comp) to withdraw from the tournament. It was a squeamish moment, as the various actors were negotiating for their personal forms of expertise (players wanting to be recognized as experts, but also part of the community, and sponsors trying to maintain that their sponsored teams are “experts”). After the team decided not to withdraw, the sponsor blurted “Humph, it would be really funny if we got kicked out of the tournament on some random DPS comp. [Shaking his head]. I mean god!” There is certainly plenty at stake for the different actors involved, outside of the game itself. These are also the rules impacting on play.

<sup>176</sup> I might add that many of my hesitations or tensions surrounding formalist claims come from happenings within traditional sports. Several examples come to mind where the notion of a more “securely situated” site of game rules (as technologically adjudicated) is already in play. For example, the “basic rules” of play in a game of ten-pin bowling which takes place at the local alley are maintained in a way which is recognizable to Myers’ statement. In bowling, technologies highlight whose turn it is, the approach dots are located on the wood in a standardized manner for everyone’s use, technologies retrieve our favourite

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bowling ball, reset our pins (though not always well, requiring a service call or the manual press of a button to try for a pin-reset), they tally our scores (how much is the gain from two strikes followed by a spare again?). Or sometimes, such technologies and codes *don't* visualize our scores (so as not to “bring on our nerves” when several strikes in a row have been computed), and they even tell us with a beep when we violate the foul line separating the run up area to the lane itself (but do we care?). Perhaps looking at such full and partial examples of rule/code adjudication in the longer histories of traditional sports can assist in the critical consideration of formalist/anti formalist positions.

<sup>177</sup> In a keen discussion on the fallibility of such written/coded constitutive rules, D'Agostino (1981) offers an easy to grasp example on the conflict involved in constitutive rules. He reflects on the written rules of basketball, noting that the “no contact” rule as constitutive is troublesome as the rule is always already interpreted by players, spectators, officials, and coaches. “No contact” is a rule that requires constant regulation. Yet, “no contact” is a constitutive rule, in that the game wouldn't be basketball without it.

<sup>178</sup> *Constitutive* rules (which are reasoned to contain all of the conditions and values or the necessities for playing the game) are described by Suits (1973) to contain all the rules which prohibit the most “efficient means” that could be used to achieve the prelusory goal, that is “a specific state of affairs”. As an example of the reworking of notions of constitutive rules in game design, Salen and Zimmerman (2004) offer a tripartite outline of rules as including: 1) constitutive (coded), 2) operational (written), and 3) implicit (local/cultural) rules. In this rendering, however, prominence is still given to the first two rule categories as trumping the *implicit* variations of rules in play.

<sup>179</sup> This more sociologically and philosophically toned perspective is one that is slightly shifted from that of game designers (writing “for game designers”) Salen and Zimmerman (2004), who use the game of *Go* to describe how rules are the (true) nucleus of games. For Salen and Zimmerman, as long as the core rules are in place, then the context or materials used to play the game do not alter it. Sports philosopher, Sigmund Loland (2002), gives a slightly alternate reading on the purchase of the “basic rules”. These can be in play as ever shifting landscapes; the basic rules are something that players pick and choose from to make up their gaming session. His core point, which echoes many in sports studies from a political and ethics perspective, is that the game must be recognizable as that game, and not some other game. Thus there can be multiple versions of rules assembled from some “basic rules” set.

<sup>180</sup> This resonates in particular with an example from T.L. Taylor's (2012) work on pro gaming, where she discusses the South Korean StarCraft player “Stork” during play at the World Cyber Games (WCG) grand finals held in Seattle in 2007. During play, Stork was observed using a move, the “observer turret bug”, which was ruled as illegal at WCG 2007 – though notably this ruling was not illegal in many “local” South Korean tournaments, and certainly was accepted in his everyday practice of play. Such an example highlights the troubles bound to notions of “standard” rules of play (pp. 67-68).

<sup>181</sup> This also went by the title of the *WoW Arena* Global Invitational (though players just say BlizzCon finals).

<sup>182</sup> I had estimated the spectator head count after this event. My guess was 60 - tops. Looking at the images I took at the crowd, it was nearly three times that amount. I couldn't be more appreciative of all the hard work (and off-loading) my camera did for me at these events.

<sup>183</sup> The spectator client (what we as spectators at BlizzCon followed the game through) highlights the player view that is being followed by encircling their icon/name in yellow, as well as their icon/name being positioned on the left of middle of the lower screen. Who the player (whose view is being streamed) is

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targeting can be seen on the right of middle on the lower screen.

<sup>184</sup> Not having interviewed the adjudicators, one assessment would be that these officials were only paid during “regular” BlizzCon hours – not for the “after-hours” work. My assessment is driven from a complaint made by one of the camera-men on the scene, who commented to his colleague on how their over-time would be paid (as well as how he would get home at midnight from downtown Anaheim).

<sup>185</sup> This instance is also the heart of the disagreement, as the shoutcasters take on a “middle man” role as mediators for the officials – as knowledgeable players themselves, they fill out more authoritative roles at various tournaments which blend the lines between shoutcasting and adjudication (See T.L. Taylor, 2012 for a similar instance from the StarCraft scene). In the report from gaming site *G4TV*, they point towards the “poor play” of the administrators, “If an admin told the players to keep going after the twenty minutes, which resulted in a kill, and then went back on this decision after they had awarded (Team USA) with the title, well that’s just bad form” (Jackson, 2010). Which administrator is “official” in these cases? The lines certainly bleed over and caused confusion at this event.

<sup>186</sup> These same rules used during the *Arena Tournament* Regional Qualifiers map out how winners are determined: “... Arena Matches will be limited to a time period of twenty (20) minutes. If at the expiration of the time limit there is no clear winner, as determined by Sponsor in its sole discretion, the two Arena Teams shall play in another Arena Match to determine the winner, and if at the end of twenty (20) minutes there is no clear winner in the second match, as determined by Sponsor in its sole discretion, the winning Arena Team will be determined based on which Arena Team did the most damage to its opponent during the initial match” (my emphasis. “Tournament”, n.d.).

<sup>187</sup> Though it is fair to say that perhaps only a few, if any, caught that detail. I can only call to mind the in-game timer via a chance photo I took of the big screen displaying it at the 19:47 minute mark.

<sup>188</sup> During adjudication it was notable who had networking power on the North American scene. As the head of franchise of *Team USA* along with several other North American LAT players were present on the review of the video footage, where *Team EU* were left on stage to await the verdict.

<sup>189</sup> This LAT literally work as QA test, where developers, e-sports Blizzard insiders and adjudicators, shoutcasters, and the expert players are seen struggling together to find the game to be played. What this moment in play emphasises is how expert competition of a regulated field of play is an ever shifting practice.

<sup>190</sup> Arnold (1979) provokes us to consider the work between systems, officials, and players in creating a “commonly valued form of life”. With the humans as the only holders in this equation with the competency to attend to the complexity of values in context, and as the actors who can interpret what it means for a system to flourish. It is a compelling angle to take alongside of sports or games, as this stance brings with it an acknowledgement of the “system”, as something beyond code, that will act with flaws; as something made of and between systems, designers, players, and the other things pressuring on the given situation of play.

<sup>191</sup> This rule dynamism reflects Michael Jakobsson’s (2007) intricate work with a console gaming club and the local alterations (as well as international cultures that colour such alterations) made by players to the constitutive game rules. Jakobsson’s point relates to the situatedness of play, that the game is played differently depending on time, place, culture and technologies in play, making the role of the constitutive

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rules of play less foundational than formalists position them to be. Or as sports sociologist Jay Coakley (2008) expresses the position on constitutive rules: Sports are contested activities, “activities for which there are no timeless and universal agreements about meaning, purpose, and organization” (p.10).

<sup>192</sup> This is yet another quirk of MMOG high performance competitions at LANs. The LAT realm of play itself is isolated so only players of the tournament can enter, though the basic software is the “everyday code” shared by the players of *WoW*. In the TR and live-realm versions of play (available to all account holders who want to play *Arenas* or pay-to-play in the top level tournament), an *Arena* match ends (is stopped by the in-game code) at the 45-minute mark. At LATs, the 20-minute ruling is a tweak made for “the good of spectatorship” – much like the many instances of media sports rules being adjusted for a more “engaging” (watchable) sport. Though as this instance reveals, the game is ultimately marred by the change.

<sup>193</sup> The BlizzCon finals was attended and spectated (online and locally) by many regulars on the North American Major League Gaming (MLG) circuit and players on BattleGroup 9 (the strongest PvP BG in North America). The collective of expert players present expressed that they were quite proud of their finely tuned ethos of play as it distinguished them as something “different” from the other more traditionally e-sports (in the sense of hegemonic sporting masculinity) stances on the ethos of competitive play. In this case, the North American (and in this context, the “local”) *Arena* players had developed a sense of otherness as contrasted to the constant line of aggressive competition and “winning is everything” ethos that they experienced was produced at the MLG tournaments (most entrenched on the *Halo* pro-circuit - See N. Taylor, 2009).

<sup>194</sup> That is, reading the game as a practice, rather than finding that the configuration of play is in fact (on formal terms) not the game at all (D’Agostino, 1981).

<sup>195</sup> In this setting, *Arena Tournament* is not arranged in a “traditional” LAN set-up. Each machine in play is still connected to a server (rather than to a local network) and thus each machine encounters a difference in ping (though the proximity of the machines does offer slightly improved parity in the ping rate as opposed to players competing from their home and connecting to a specific server which has major advantages for those located close to the chosen server).

<sup>196</sup> I favour this description of “AI” from *WoWWiki*: “Artificial intelligence is generally abbreviated as AI, and *tries to describe the act* of instilling intelligent behavior on computer-generated artifacts. In other words, routines are coded that specify what the AI of an in-game NPC *might follow* once their script is interrupted by an event such as aggro.” (Emphasis added. “AI”, n.d.). The “tries” and the “might’s” are telling that the author of this post knows there is more at work on the actions than just the “coded intelligence”.

<sup>197</sup> The frustration and side-lining of lag may boil down to the suddenly changed feel and *expectation* of what one’s extended or distant proximal—the feel at the end of the mouse, a blind person’s cane, or even Oscar Pistorius’ Cheetah flex feet (See Dourish, 2004)— sensing body is practiced at perceiving. The frustrated player who doesn’t do well playing through lag does not accept it as a constitutive (through irregular) part of that field of play, as a part of the landscape technology (Butryn, 2002). The beast-cleave team are a case of the inclusion of the invisible field of play (the backdrop that is always there waiting) as a part of the “sensuous practice”, not to be side-lined as extrinsic to the play experience but a part to be embraced.

<sup>198</sup> This gets even more tied up in meta-game. I watched teams “dice roll” for the left side of the BlizzCon stage – not just for the placing based on superstition/luck, but rather because the left side of the stage had

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fewer technical issues than the right side.

<sup>199</sup> The code of *WoW*, whilst seemingly “fixed”, pushes through in various waves much like stormy weather can—with varying results—affect the *landscape technologies* (Butryn, 2002) of a football stadium field in play (Hockey & Collinson, 2007). This suggests that the uniformity of the field of play itself fails in such technologically (though unintentionally) mischievous moments.

<sup>200</sup> The keyset of the *SteelSeries* developed *WoW* keyboard features, for example, “one-touch macros for raiding and PvP gameplay”; training dummies are non-playing-characters in the game against which players can test out their dps on different level mobs; dps (damage per second) meters are “add-ons” that can be imported into the game UI for immediate statistical feedback on various actions i.e. damage, dps, or healing.

<sup>201</sup> Or perhaps as mountain climber and sociologist Robert Mitchell Jr. (1983) puts it, “The equipment ... is second in importance only to the people who accompany them” (p. 21).

<sup>202</sup> It must be recalled here that he is speaking of “getting to” or “playing at” the very top level of play. As many players tell me, they could “get by” against most teams on theorycrafted comps without having played them much, but against other top teams – they would be devastated on the embodied practices of the opposing team.

<sup>203</sup> However, these players are keenly aware that theorycrafting is never perfect nor complete (Paul, 2011).

<sup>204</sup> Balance hasn’t been spoken of here. As a short side-note – teams must have balance in their roles to perform at the top level. As Heroe noted to me, “You’re never going to see a triple-Warrior in any competition. Period.”

<sup>205</sup> Riffing on the industrial deskilling of the “management by objectives” football approach, it could also be said that the fields of play are “thinned” as a consequence of the instrumental attitude (Giulianotti, 1999. P. 133).

<sup>206</sup> “Nerfed” is the term for a class or item losing some of its power in a patch update.

<sup>207</sup> This could otherwise be framed as the game developers listening and integrating thoughts and experiences from the community. Blizzard has a long history with a community collaboration framework—where player commentary feeds back into the system. However, I find that the players’ position as the actual “product” of the paid-to-spectate media sport is a tenuous one in terms of their fair-treatment. Blizzard, as manager of the playing field so-to-speak alongside of the other power holders creating the media sports package (sponsors, third party tournaments), walk close to the line of exploitation; as players (as products) are directly contributing towards the improvement and entertainment package of *Arena* as an e-sport/media sport (most prevalent in the expertise “drain” of long-term players/teams). Though, as previously mentioned, this is not the stance of players towards Blizzard as a “sports organizer” and power holder over the field of play, but rather only expressed towards a few of the 3<sup>rd</sup> party businesses “using” them for profit.

<sup>208</sup> This movement of the strongest players is an interesting one in terms of the mega-guilds as actors in making teams intimate and distributable. Wert tells me that the move by many players was in part to “support” the work of the NAOs. As Jakobsson and Taylor (2003) write on guilds in MMOs, “... guilds



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themselves might become valuable actors in the community pushes us to consider the ways not only individual players, but more formal organizations, make up a part of the social space” (p. 86). The formal organization and efforts of the NAOs certainly have impacted on the social space of high performance play.

<sup>209</sup> As the NAO main organizer noted on discussions with Blizzard, “With our few contacts at Blizzard everyone seems to be very happy with the result of our tournaments. We have not broken any rules but Blizzard seems very lenient with these types of things anyways as long as we promote the game in a good light. There is a 5000\$ prize pool cap that we will have to receive approval for should we exceed that but I personally don’t think that will be too much of an issue.”

<sup>210</sup> The UI was made by Russian gaming site – *Prestige Gaming*. The UI literally “made the game” (as a media-sport delivered by players) possible. It involved the use of the 5v5 game in *WoW*. Two teams of three enter the *Arena*, with two shoutcasters joining one team and two videographers/live-streamers joining the other. On entering, the non-players move to the centre of the *Arena* map to be killed off in order to stay “in-game” as spectating ghosts. A count-down is initiated by the shoutcasters (who along-side of the videographers and to some extent, the players themselves, officiate the match) and the match is thus begun as a 3v3 battle.

<sup>211</sup> Rules sets from BlizzCon, MLG, and the NAO tournaments can be viewed at: <http://emmawitkowski.com/dissertation/> - note [2].

<sup>212</sup> It might be added though that “support” is not 100%, as one of the NAO organiser’s notes, “By no means are players expected to ‘step up to plate’ [and help out] but many have been very respectful helped wherever possible and made our jobs easy; while others have not.”

<sup>213</sup> The change in experience from such organizational shifts beg the question of other institutions (such as the MLG) as burgeoning media sports events, for if games/sports can be framed as activities where commonly valued form[s] of life are played out, then we need to question and make visible the values of those producing the organizational systems of such high performance competitions.

<sup>214</sup> Though, this might also be the hardest part of organization as Wert tells me, “We have set a rule that says that no staff member is allowed to compete although at times I wish I could break it :( haha.”

<sup>215</sup> The North American NCAA national basketball championship final series tournament.

<sup>216</sup> Where casual leisure is framed by Stebbins (2007) as “in comparison with serious leisure is considerably less substantial and offers no career...(is) immediately, intrinsically regarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable core activity, requiring little or no special training to enjoy it” (p. 38).

<sup>217</sup> This has been noted by the expert players as bring reimbursement for travel or free PC/net connection/graphics card etc., franchise team affiliation, or participation in elite tournament play. It must be mentioned that only the smallest handful of players reaches this level - a percentage much lower than the 0.3% that get drafted to the NBA (NCAA.org).