

E-sports and Creating an Audience

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Abstract

My paper is going to cover the roots of how gaming competition started and how the internet helped push it into the mainstream competition scene via espn, gomtv, justin.tv and own3dtv. Most of this was done by the high end players and upgrades throughout the infrastructure in the internet and in cities. With speeds and accessibility on the rise on a yearly basis, these pro gamers can reach out to their admirers and can now watch them play everyday. These pros can coach less talented players for a fee. The elite in the world can have upward of five thousand viewers on a nightly basis and the usual player find themselves not playing the game but watching the game for enjoyment over standard television or news. How did this group of non-media watchers get attracted to watch something they should be playing? What can we learn from this group of people?

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Just a few short years ago gamers around the world never really thought they could do much with their “expertise in the field”. However according to CNN Tech, “Contrary to popular belief, though, many (games) build, not burn brain cells by requiring extensive problem solving, teamwork and dynamic decision-making skills (Steinberg 2011).” Before the explosion of the internet, gamers were often confined to their own houses, arcades, or sleep over’s (LANs) in which consoles would be connected to play. All that changed with the introduction of MLG in North America. The first games played were Halo: Combat Evolved and Super Smash Brothers Melee. That all started back in 2002. Rewind back farther to 1998 with the release of Starcraft 1 to the world. South Korea has been having professional competitions, sponsorships, and televised tournaments since 2001. What caused this great explosion of gamers? The answer is the internet, and today more than ever, players can reach out to the everyday gamer and create an audience. CNN Tech put it best when it comes to what the everyday gamer at home faces, “At minimum, they readily encourage fans to fall on their face then pick themselves up and try again, promoting hands-on learning without the fear of ridicule or embarrassment (Steinberg 2011).”

The first place we can start to analyze is South Korea. Today, it’s on its way to having the fastest internet in the world. This began with high end competition of gaming back in 1998 with the release of the real time strategy game, Starcraft. The game was played on LANs (local area networks) and over the internet and the game took off in a few years time. The best way to compare this would be American football. You have huge and dedicated fan base watching live games on a daily basis. Even skyscrapers are equipped with giant flat screen televisions broadcasting Starcraft matches and you can turn on any television and on multiple channels you can find games being casted. The graphics are quite dated these days and despite that, to this day

it's a part of Korean culture. Hundreds of teams own houses all over the nation's capital and LAN centers can be found all over as well. According to reporter Kristie Lu Stout in her report, "In high-tech South Korea -- which has one of the highest broadband penetration rates in the world -- the StarCraft video game series has spawned devotion more akin to professional sports teams (Stout 2010). This craze over online gaming took significantly longer to reach Europe and the Americas but thanks to big advertisers and firms, the outreach is getting much bigger and e-sports in conjunction with host sites, are expanding rapidly. The primary advantage that Korea has over its international competition is that the city of Seoul is condensed. The city itself has all the technology and is a hub for gaming with LAN centers on every corner and houses for gamers. Many of the premiere clans in the world send their best players to stay and train among each other and with other clans to play in the Global Starcraft League (GSL). The gamers themselves when in competition sport jackets similar to what you would see on a racecar driver in NASCAR. This prestigious league serves as the platform for professional Starcraft players all over the world. There has never been a foreigner that wins the GSL; it is always a player of Korean descent. With the introduction of Starcraft 2 into MLG, the NASL, IGN pro league many Koreans are finally leaving Korea to participate in these tournaments to gain more fame, fans and sponsors. Everyone is gaining attention even though they are not winning as much.

When most countries bring up Americans the first thoughts they seem to come up with are obese and lazy individuals. It's a stereotype that also gets passed along to the gaming community in America with the explosion of Halo 2, Call of Duty and Modern Warfare. They do have teamwork though which is what many skeptics seem to miss. In CNN's report, "many (games) require active teamwork and high-level project management to do well (Steinberg 2011)." However, of late with the release of Starcraft 2, we are seeing the launch of even more

leagues and the first major gaming tournament in North America, the NASL. The North American Star League (NASL) is the premier league and has attracted competitors from all over the world. This league is a landmark for the world of professional gaming because according to PC Gamer: “Matches will be streamed for free every weeknight at 5pm PST, and again later for European audiences. There’s also a subscription feed that will let you watch the matches in HD, (Senior 2011).” The league also boast a \$100,000 prize pool to the top players..The only other league that comes close to this reward is the GSL which has been the only league with any kind of worthy reward since 2000 when Starcraft started turning into a sport in Korea. Casters from all over the world will be in California for months as the tournament comes to a close and will have a few months downtime in between seasons. The tournament will feature daily games which will be streamed for free, but you can purchase a premium ticket to watch video on demand and view an HD stream and even get access to more streams. With daily streams on the Team Liquid forums, thousands will turn their attention to an all-star lineup as they battle for the biggest reward ever put on the line for gamers. Now we must observe where these thousands of viewers came from over the years.

The stereotypical gamer lives in their parent’s basement with no real aspirations to grow past that. According to Steinburg (2011), video games promote higher levels of engagement TV or movies because players are actively and enthusiastically in their on-screen action. In theory with these living habits, they will avoid social media for the most part and swear off watching television all together since it really doesn’t fit into a busy play schedule. The biggest problem for advertisers is how do they reach this group of customers that doesn’t seek them? The answer is slowly becoming apparent to them and YouTube is a primary example. After so many years of being relatively ad free, some videos now require you to watch an ad first before your video. The

same thing happens now with websites like Justin.TV. However, justin.tv grants the players the ability to take a commercial break whenever they decided too. Live streaming is on the rise and according to Venture Beat, “Live streaming has become a particularly popular form of media consumption, with live stream usage jumping 650 percent this year when compared to 2009 (McDermid 2010). This is a heavy advertising medium vendors can use and it allows them to reach the audience of gamers. The older standard required an ad to be played on a set timetable. These time tables meant you would see an ad in fifteen minutes regardless of what you are doing. This led to games blacking out for a few seconds and could be during a big turning point in the game. Justin.TV introduced the ability for you to trigger commercials when you want to and when viewers watch it, the streamer gets a set amount of money depending on the viewers. The advertiser also gets a cut from the ads as well. This trigger is what the advertisers needed all these years. The team liquid forums have at least forty streams going at a given time and many of the featured streams regularly hold over one thousand viewers per player. These groups of players who paid to play a game end up not even playing but watching for hours as their idols compete and can passively learn from them for their own application. In addition, for all the tournaments that go on, multiple sponsors are present and are part of a rundown that is read in between every match. Maximum exposure is key and these gamers are slowly becoming soaked into the world of advertising while watching what they love and being able to play. They can even penetrate the mobile market since according to Venture Beat the Justin.TV app for iphone has 3.6 million installs (McDermid 2010). None of this is more apparent than at the largest convention of gamers in the world, MLG.

Major league gaming (MLG) was started in 2002 and takes tours to cities all over the US. Recently they came to Dallas and it was very apparent how heavy advertising was being pushed.

All three event stages for the major games were being setup with banners for four vendors. Also, all four projectors had vendor banners that scrolled every few minutes. Hot pockets, Dr. Pepper, Sony Ericsson, stride and Alienware were among the sponsors represented and it was very clear with every booth you came across. Players and spectators had a chance to try out the newest of the desktops by Alienware, get free drinks by Dr. Pepper, free trials of Stride gum, and also purchase pro gaming gear from vendors. They also got to experience a new kind of smartphone that is directed at gamers the Sony Erickson Xperia play. Sundance DiGiovanni had this to say about it, “At MLG, we aim to showcase the latest technology that will benefit our community of gamers (Panther 2011).” This exposure comes only once every two months which is why the advertising is so heavy. It doesn’t stop there though, in between matches, just as if the gamer were at home, they watch ads in between showcase matches on the main stages. The primary problem with the US in regard to professional gaming is that the US is huge. It is not as congested as South Korea, so conventions like MLG need to travel to 6 locations all over the country to get as many gamers as possible. Greg Fields also known as “Idra” in the professional Starcraft gaming scene had this to say about E-sports in the west:

“You have so many casual gamers in the US, everyone really loves gaming. It’s just a matter of getting the word out. Every event at MLG so far is just growing bigger and bigger. I really think e-sports is poised to take off, and Starcraft 2 is a great vehicle for that, so it’s really looking good for the future. I really think that everything is ready to kick start here in the US and Europe (Idra on E-sports, 2-11).”

Even with so many events all over the US, the conventions are still out of range for some gamers, and as such, professional gaming cannot grow as fast as it has in South Korea. Team Liquid.net, and Justin.TV changed this by bring it directly into the players bedroom.

In conclusion, you will find that e-sports has the gamer base to begin to grow here in the US. With exposure on sites like Justin.tv, Ustream, and mobile app integration, it helps to get the show out to gamers whether they be on the go or at home waiting for the next match. Advertisers can take charge and target these views much as Sony Ericson did by making a product that directly targets players and goes to events to show them. Smaller organization like can replicate what e-sports has done as well, it is not just specific to e-sports. Anything that can have a spectator base can do what e-sports has done with Starcraft 2, as long as the loyal base is there.

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