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PREPARING FOR ESPORTS COMPETITIONS: GAMING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Abstract. Communities of practice are groups of people united by a passion for something, who deepen their knowledge and experience in their field through ongoing interactions. This article focuses on the importance of institutionalized relationship networks and mutual recognition in preparation for esports competitions. The study represents inductive, qualitative analyses. Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with players ($n = 12$) that have significant achievements in *Magic: The Gathering* (MTG) competitions. In the social world of MTG enthusiasts, numerous groups reflect the functionality of a community of practice. These groups constitute a fundamental aspect of preparation for top-level MTG tournaments. Examples of the functioning of so-called testing groups among MTG enthusiasts allow the formulation of a new analytical category – the gaming community of practice. Contrary to stereotypes, the presented study supports the thesis about the significant role of video games in the formation of social competencies and the creation of specific communities, which is particularly important in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: esports, *Magic: The Gathering*, communities of practice.

PRZYGOTOWANIE DO WSPÓŁZAWODNICTWA W E-SPORCIE: GROWE WSPÓLNOTY PRAKTYKÓW

Abstrakt. Koncepcja wspólnoty praktyków zakłada, że jest to grupa osób, które łączy zamiłowanie do czegoś i które pogłębiają swoją wiedzę oraz doświadczenie w tym obszarze poprzez bieżące interakcje. Prezentowany artykuł skupia się na znaczeniu zinstytucjonalizowanych sieci relacji i wzajemnego uznania w przygotowaniach do rywalizacji w e-sporcie. Badanie stanowi przykład indukcyjnej jakościowej analizy. W jego ramach przeprowadzono indywidualne wywiady pogłębione z osobami ($n = 12$) mającymi znaczące osiągnięcia we współzawodnictwie w grze *Magic: The Gathering* (MTG). W społecznym świecie miłośników MTG liczne grupy odzwierciedlają funkcjonalność wspólnoty praktyków. Grupy te konstytuują podstawowy aspekt przygotowań do najważniejszych turniejów MTG. Przykłady funkcjonowania tak zwanych grup testingowych wśród

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miłośników MTG prowadzą do sformułowania nowej kategorii analitycznej – growych wspólnot praktyków. Wbrew stereotypom, prezentowane badania wspierają tezę o znaczącej roli gier wideo w kształtowaniu kompetencji społecznych i tworzeniu specyficznych wspólnot, co jest szczególnie istotne w kontekście pandemii COVID-19.

Słowa kluczowe: e-sport, *Magic: The Gathering*, wspólnoty praktyków.

1. Introduction

Social reality is based on numerous multidimensional connections linking the most diverse individual and collective actors, forming a kind of mosaic. According to Manuel C a s t e l l s (2011), the basis of modern society is the functioning of networks understood as direct and indirect relationships linking individuals and groups, including organizations. Studying networks of informal social relations is as important as analyzing their formal dimension.

Castells emphasizes that networks, developing with the support of new technologies (mainly operating on the Internet), are now the most characteristic structure organizing social life. They are characterized by: 1) flexibility, and 2) adaptability. It is these elements that determine their great advantage over traditional forms of organization. In a relatively short period of time, new communication technologies have ceased to be the exclusive domain of wealthy citizens of developed countries (G i d d e n s 2012). In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic has made this even more evident. During the outbreak of the pandemic, instant messaging, which had been around for quite a long time, was rediscovered. Furthermore, in many cases, electronic sports became a successful "extension" of traditional ones (W e s t m a t t e l m a n n e t a l. 2021; K e, W a g n e r 2022).

The primary attributes of the vast majority of modern social networks include: 1) the ephemeral nature of the relationships established; 2) the geographic dispersion of communicators; and 3) the extraordinary speed of information flow (G i d d e n s 2012). New technologies undoubtedly bring new challenges. However, harnessing the potential of the Internet for networking allows social relationships to be established in different, previously unknown ways (C h a m b e r s 2006).

2. Esports

One of the most characteristic emanations of technological transgression and blurring of the boundaries between the real and the virtual are video games. Organized competitions involving computers, consoles or mobile games are most often referred to as esports. The prefix "e" comes from the word "electronic" and indicates a connection to an electronically processed image, generated by a computer program on a monitor, television or other multimedia device. "Sport",

in this case, means playing according to certain rules in order to win or achieve the best possible result (Hindin et al. 2020). The permanent components of the definition of esports are: 1) technological dependence, and 2) competition (Taylor 2016). In recent years, video games, including esports, have been growing in popularity. The rising number of enthusiasts of this type of competition, professional players, the organizations they represent, and the events they participate in, are associated with the relatively rapid development of the new economic sector. Every year esports attract more interest from potential sponsors, as well as from sports organizations and educational institutions, and as a result they are becoming more profitable (Campbell et al. 2021).

The issue of esports is an interdisciplinary field of research. Since the beginning of the 21st century, a growing number of works have appeared showing the complexity of this phenomenon, which escapes the categorizations used in the sociology of sport or sports science (Sahaj 2021; Hallmann, Giel 2018; Stempień 2020; Voisin et al. 2022). The recognition or rejection of competition in video games having the status of sport generally depends on the theoretical perspective adopted and, consequently, the definition of sport and the category of games that is taken into account (Jasny 2021). In the humanistic analytical approach recommended by Przemysław Nosal (2015), defined as structured contextualism, sport is a set of socially constructed practices that fit into a certain universal structure of characteristics. One of them is the fact that sports activity is carried out by people and towards other people.

The multiplayer mode contributes significantly to the attractiveness of a given video game, since this allows competition between individuals or teams. Competition with other players usually follows a struggle with artificial intelligence (AI), which, after a certain time or reaching a sufficiently high level of play, eventually ceases to be attractive because it is too predictable. It is much more satisfying to win against an intelligent, thinking rival than its computer simulation – an AI. This is because human behavior is much harder to predict. The exception to this are role-playing games, which are single-player by design (Jasny 2019).

The desire to spend time with friends, to meet new people and make connections, can be a significant motivation for using video games. In this context, the tradition of gaming among family members is also interesting. Natalia Koperska (2021) compiled a number of studies indicating the important role of video games in shaping social competencies. Game use can increase dopamine levels, which (like serotonin) is commonly referred to as the "happiness hormone". By compensating for the negative emotions that arise during interactions (felt especially by shy individuals) and consequently improving mood, games not only facilitate networking, but can also have therapeutic potential (Lorenz et al. 2015). Games that contain pro-social elements, including empathy-driven responses in which characters support each other, may foster similar behaviors in players, regardless of their age or cultural belonging (Gentile et al. 2009). In young gamers, however, better well-being

and more frequent pro-social attitudes may depend on the amount of time spent in front of the screen of a multimedia device. A study by Andrew Przybylski (2014) found that playing for more than three hours a day intensifies undesirable effects.

Competition in video games, which is characteristic primarily for young people, can help improve communication and adaptive skills and have a positive impact on resourcefulness (Barr 2017). It can also help develop leadership skills (Hettrick 2012). This has important implications for the functioning of modern education systems. After all, games can be a valuable addition to curricula – helping to develop socially relevant competencies in a way that is attractive to young people, with the use of new technologies (Koperska 2021).

Media sports changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a huge impact on both traditional and electronic sports. Researchers reported the remarkable growth of esports during the pandemic (Kim et al. 2020; López-Cabarcos et al. 2020). Lockdowns made it highly visible. This was a step in gaining widespread public approval not only as a "real" sport, but also as something capable of "compensating" the temporary lack of traditional competitions.

3. *Magic: The Gathering*

The most recognizable video game categories are: 1) strategy games, including real-time strategy games such as *StarCraft II*, *League of Legends* and *Defense of the Ancients 2*, with the second and third belonging to a popular subgenre known as multiplayer online battle arena; 2) first-person shooter games such as *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* and the *Call of Duty* series; and 3) sports games such as *FIFA 23* and *Rocket League*. The ways in which each type of game is used can vary significantly (Thiel, John 2018). A separate category is made up of games such as *Hearthstone* and *Magic: The Gathering* (MTG), inspired by card games, which for obvious reasons, in terms of the motor involvement of their users, resemble chess, bridge or checkers.

MTG was published by Wizards of the Coast (WotC) in 1993. Its rules are governed by *Magic: The Gathering Comprehensive Rules* (2022). In addition, *Magic: The Gathering Tournament Rules* (2022) contains the most important information on the organizational aspects of the game. It is worth noting that the product was originally created for traditional card play. Over time, however, the rivalry became more frequent via the Internet. Released in 2002, Magic the Gathering Online was WotC's first step into the world of electronic sports. From the beginning, it was designed to mimic traditional play as closely as possible.

The two basic groups of MTG formats are: 1) Constructed – the player enters the competition with a previously prepared deck of cards; he can use all the officially available cards in the format to build it, with the restriction that he cannot have more than 4 cards with the same name; the deck must contain at least 60 cards

(popular Constructed formats are: Standard, Modern and Legacy); and 2) Limited – a player enters the competition without a previously prepared deck; instead, he receives a limited number of sets of randomly selected cards and builds his deck from them, which must contain at least 40 cards (popular Limited formats are Sealed Deck and Booster Draft).

Fundamental to MTG is the variability of the deck shaping not the game in the strict sense, but its metagame. This term refers not only to the skills associated with playing the game, but also to knowledge of what players can expect during competition, such as deck construction or tactics. This is information from outside the game, in the strict sense, which can nevertheless influence players' decisions made during competition. The metagame evolves with the development of the core game. Regularly released additions to the game, changes made to the game's formats, or bans,[1] are intended to maintain the interest of enthusiasts in this type of competition, the outcome of which thus becomes more unpredictable.

In designing upcoming additions to MTG, it is crucial to make changes to the deck in a way that will not affect the balance between various card categories, marked with five different colors. Each new card is labeled with a symbol to identify the addition it comes from. WotC regularly releases four additions to MTG during the year. This ensures that Limited formats are constantly changing. As mentioned before, this is meant to maintain players' interest. The additions also affect the game in Constructed formats. This is most evident in the Standard format, where the publisher uses rotations. Each year WotC removes older additions from the pool of cards used to build the deck. With the release of each ninth addition, four of the oldest are removed. This keeps the Standard format "fresh". It pushes players to keep designing new decks or to improve previously created decks, and to keep attempting to identify the most effective tactics. During their tournament preparations, players try to maximize their chances for victory by analyzing the current situation within the metagame.

The methods used by players to prepare for MTG tournaments can vary significantly, as there are many factors that shape their attitudes towards this type of training. The time that players can devote to preparation is certainly relevant, as well as whether they apply an intuitive or analytical approach to the information they collect. It is also important whether they work individually or collectively.

4. Communities of practice

Communities of practice are "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger et al. 2002: 4).

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[1] In the subculture of gamers, a ban is defined as a punishment for violating the rules of the game. It means a ban on participation in games involving a temporary or permanent blocking of the account of a given user by the game organizer or publisher.

The constant components of the definition of a community of practice are: 1) domain, 2) community, and 3) practice. Domain refers to the common interest that builds the group's identity. Community includes individuals establishing relationships that foster learning. Practice, on the other hand, enables the formation of a repertoire of shared resources (Bowles, O'Dwyer 2022). Early conceptualizations of this issue indicate the importance of the following components: 1) participation, 2) identity, and 3) practice. Participation is based on past experiences, identity undergoes change, and practice is inherently social (Handley et al. 2007).

A community of practice is usually established by an individual or members of a small group that share a common goal. Some communities can be relatively large, but most researchers identify them as groups of several people (Bowles, O'Dwyer 2022). Developing the relationships that sustain a community can take time (Goodyear, Casey 2015). Gaining trust is crucial in the early stages of development. The viability of a community, on the other hand, depends on the motivation of the individuals that form it (Pemberton et al. 2007). Building lasting communities can be hindered by the time required to establish relationships based on trust (Penney, Kidman 2014). Such groups emerge and develop naturally. They exist, however, as long as their members are willing to learn together to achieve a certain goal (Kerno 2008).

The community of practice concept has been utilized in numerous studies of the social world of sports, although in fact only in terms of supporting the process of coach education (Culver, Trudel 2006; Bertram et al. 2017). Learning from each other is an important component of informal coach education practices (Culver, Trudel 2006), and the community of practice provides an opportunity to support this process (Penney, Kidman 2014). However, while trainers tend to value the things they learn from interactions with other trainers, they may be unwilling to share knowledge with rival trainers (Wright et al. 2007). As a result, it can be difficult to develop and maintain communities comprised of coaches of competing players or teams, as they may be reluctant to reveal their sports strategies (Gilbert et al. 2009). Therefore, organized learning from each other may be more effective when the participating coaches are not competing against each other. This suggests that the potential for collaborative learning is limited by the socio-cultural conditions that exist in a given environment (Phelan, Griffiths 2019).

5. Methods

The players' statements included in the following section of the article are some of the results of the research carried out as part of the project aimed at exploring the approaches adopted by experienced players who compete in MTG, with regard to their tournament preparations. The study represents inductive, qualitative analyses. A purposive sampling was used. Players ($n = 12$) that have significant achievements

in MTG competitions were interviewed. The study included Polish players aged 25–38 years (mean – 28 years), whose training experience in MTG was 7–15 years (mean – 10 years).

Data was collected in the first half of 2020. Semi-structured individual in-depth interviews were conducted via Messenger and Discord. The decision to carry out online, computer-assisted interviews was motivated by: 1) limited opportunities for interaction with interviewees due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions; and 2) the relatively large geographical dispersion of the study group, consisting of players living in different regions of the country.

Conventional content analysis (Hsieh, Shannon 2005) was used to examine interviewees' statements. The results of the study were shaped into a thematic structure resulting from a classificatory process of coding and pattern identification. This approach assumes that the coding categories flow out of the analysis, somehow naturally, without being adopted at earlier stages of the research process.

The article focuses on the importance of institutionalized relationship networks and mutual recognition in preparation for MTG competition. At the initial stage of the research, it became clear that the co-creation of a specific community of players is an immanent feature of advanced tournament preparations, since it appeared regularly in the interviewees' statements. It quickly became evident that this is the key element of the thematic structure of the conducted interviews.

6. Results and discussion

The community of practice concept has been used so far in studies on traditional sports. However, there is still a lack of works testing it in the context of unconventional electronic sports. The statements of the interviewed players show that in the social world of MTG enthusiasts one can observe numerous groups reflecting the functionality of the community of practice. These are groups of people who are united by their passion for MTG, and who deepen their knowledge and experience in terms of preparation for competition in this particular game through ongoing interactions.

The article formulates a new analytical category – the gaming community of practice, exemplified by the communities of MTG enthusiasts described by interviewees as testing groups.[2] These communities have the characteristics that constitute a community of practice: 1) domain – the common interest that builds the group's identity is, in this case, succeeding in MTG competitions; 2) community – individuals establishing relationships that foster knowledge acquisition within the MTG metagame; and 3) practice – development of a repertoire of skills and new or more effective MTG tactics (Bowles, O'Dwyer 2022).

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[2] Among MTG enthusiasts, testing is defined as tactical preparation for the competition.

Referring to the classic concept of a community of practice, its emanations in the community of MTG enthusiasts include all the key components. The criterion for inclusion in a testing group is extensive experience in playing the game. Inclusion in the group is identity-relevant, and the practice is essentially an informal social norm (convention) (Handley et al. 2007).

> I rely on the foundations built over the years and the fact that I play online a lot – it is more convenient and enjoyable than on paper. It is also important to share conclusions with other players, whose opinions I respect (Interview 4).

Testing groups, like other communities of practice, are relatively small and usually consist of several individuals that share a common goal (Bowles, O'Dwyer 2022). One of the interviewees listed the following elements of his method of preparation for competitions.

> Testing with a test group of 8 to 10 people, meetings for a few hours each, several times a week. Interspersed with playing online. The two methods complement each other (Interview 10).

As mentioned earlier, coaching communities of practice are by far the most frequently described examples of such groups in the sports field. Coaches learn from each other during informal meetings that over time consolidate the community (Culver, Trudel 2006; Penney, Kidman 2014). In competitive playing of video games, however, the role of the coach is not as well distinguished as in traditional sports. Little is known about the expected and actual competencies and qualifications of a person aspiring to this role. The coach's position is usually filled by an experienced player after the end of his professional career. In the course of the research, interviewees described testing groups as communities composed not of coaches, but of players – active competitors that most frequently participate regularly in various tournaments.

> I play online a lot. Then I put my results into a special Excel and we analyze them in our testing group, and talk through what they mean to us (Interview 9).

Competition is a distinctive feature of sports, and consequently members of coaching communities of practice, on the one hand, are interested in acquiring useful information. On the other hand, however, they do not necessarily return the favor, being reluctant to share their own knowledge (Wright et al. 2007). This is naturally due to the concern about revealing confidential data, original training methods or ways of dealing with certain problems on and off the field (Gilbert et al. 2009). The above mentioned mechanism can threaten the very survival of the community. What drives it, however, is the potential increase of group members' chances for the much-desired success in sport. A similar pattern can be observed in the case of MTG enthusiasts. According to the interviewees, despite the fact that players participate in competitions individually, they nevertheless typically cooperate

with each other in their preparations – acquiring and passing on information within the metagame. Furthermore, during the interviews players emphasized that group testing significantly increases the chances of winning in MTG competitions.

> I have always been, and still I am, permanently short on time. I have had to focus on efficiency. Before big tournaments, I organize a hive mind that collects and processes data together (Interview 5).

When weighing up the potential benefits of belonging to a testing group, interviewees justified their membership, for example, by the opportunity to work closely with more talented experienced players (in some cases, called community leaders).

> I do not have my own training system. When we test in groups, I simply adapt to those who have one (Interview 8).

The interviews show that MTG formats significantly differentiate preparations for competition, including the legitimacy of creating testing groups. The most recognizable basic formats were listed and briefly characterized in the previous section of the article.

> Preparations differ significantly because of the formats. In Modern, there is not much to discover, so you take what works for you and play. In Standard and Limited, if you have people to help you with testing or who have a talent for finding decks, then you can try to break the format[3] (Interview 3).

The potential for learning in a community of practice is socially and culturally determined. Each environment has its own special and unique character (Phelan, Griffiths 2019). The presented research results are only a starting point for more nuanced analysis. Other examples of gaming communities of practice would enable a more comprehensive description of the issue. Numerous aspects of the functioning of testing groups require further research exploration. For example, it is not clear who, typically, establishes this type of a group. Is it – as in the case of coaching communities of practice – usually an individual or members of a small group of passionate friends, or previously unknown players brought together by a common goal (Bowles, O'Dwyer 2022). It is also unknown how long it typically takes to develop the relationships that structure a community (Goodyear, Casey 2015) and whether the slow acquisition of trust makes it more difficult to build (Penney, Kidman 2014). This is especially important at the group formation stage (Pemberton et al. 2007). Another interesting point seems to be how gaming communities of practice changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially facing lockdowns (Bolisani et al. 2021).

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[3] Among MTG enthusiasts, breaking the format means finding a tactic that stands out from others by having a significantly higher win ratio. From a statistical perspective, this is a card deck configuration that wins significantly more often than others.

Coaching communities of practice may perform better when their members are not competing directly against each other in any kind of competition (Phelan, Griffiths 2019). The same may be true for gaming communities of practice. The interviews suggest that members of testing groups usually know each other quite well. However, it is unclear whether this is a result of the group's functioning, or whether its members knew each other long before the group was formed, thus making it easier for them to trust one another. It is also questionable to what extent variables such as age or nationality are significant in the context of the formation and functioning of such communities. Given the aforementioned primal desire to increase one's chances of success in the game, it is not known what the structure of motivations determining the survival of a testing group is (Pemberton et al. 2007). It is also unknown what the viability of such groups is, and what determines their disintegration – achievement of the intended goal, or reluctance to continuing practicing together (Kerno 2008).

In summary, the statements of the interviewed players indicate that testing groups are a fundamental aspect of preparation for top-level MTG competitions. It is a popular institutionalized practice adopted in the gaming community, an overarching custom of organizing a kind of regular panel discussion characterized by a fairly free exchange of ideas and sometimes the use of the capabilities of specialized data analysis software. The example of a gaming community of practice reinforces the thesis about the important role of video games in shaping social competencies and building a special kind of community (Koperska 2021). Functioning among MTG enthusiasts and being a member of a testing group can facilitate relationships, contribute to improving communication, adaptive and leadership skills, and positively influence players' resourcefulness (Lorenz et al. 2015; Barr 2017; Hettrick 2012). Due to the still observed: 1) significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social life; 2) manifestations of stereotypical perceptions of video games enthusiasts; as well as 3) the technological mediation that is a constitutive feature of video game competitions (Taylor 2016), gaming communities of practice appear as a non-obvious issue and are therefore even more interesting. Undoubtedly, this phenomenon, now that it has been initially identified, demands further, more extensive examination.

Acknowledgements

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