Computer Gaming, Media and e-Sport

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Abstract:
This study calls for a change in sociological thinking about computer gaming and its relationship to established broadcast media and social forms. A major international computer gaming competition, the World Cyber Games (WCG), is used as a critical case study to help demonstrate this case. This popular event and the ‘cyber-athletes’ that compete in it cannot be explained by reference to existing studies of computer and video gaming, media and sport, media events, or organised sporting competition. It is not possible to think in terms of sport and the media when considering the WCG and competitive gaming. This is sport as media, or e-sport, a term that signifies the seamless interpenetration of media content, sport, and networked information and communications technologies. The article concludes by calling for the development of a sociology of media that is attuned to the effects of computer games and gaming in the Information Age.

The computer and video game industry globally generated $24.5 billion in revenue during 2004, outstripping cinema box-office receipts (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, cited in Grover et al., 2005). As this figure suggests, computer games are a topic demanding serious consideration, despite the apparent indifference towards them exhibited by many scholars in the humanities and social sciences. Systematic investigation of games and gaming is necessary if we are to understand the social world as it is becoming, as opposed to being blinded to this reality by former ways of thinking that are unable to accommodate the speed and character of social transformation in the ‘network society’ (Castells 2000a). As Lash (2002) discusses at length, prevailing social conditions are no longer based on the manufacturing and
industrial order of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Media, communication and information flows now define the logic and structure of social relations, and networked computer gaming is a reflection of this reality.

A change in sociological thinking about computer gaming and its relationship to established broadcast media and social forms is required. A critical case study of the World Cyber Games (WCG) (www.worldcybergames.com), a popular international computer gaming competition, is presented in support of this argument. Existing theories and studies of the media are incapable of explaining the evolution of organised gaming in digital media environments, the existence and character of this type of competition, or the increasingly publicised performances of ‘cyber-athletes’. The WCG is a gaming, computing, media, and sports event all at once; familiar in its presentation format but unfamiliar in its content. The introduction of the event in 2000 and its subsequent success, as well as other major North American based competitions such as Major League Gaming (MLG) (www.mlgpro.com; established in 2002) and the Cyberathlete Professional League (CPL) (www.cyberathlete.com; established in 1997), are indicative of a large-scale transformation in social systems and action, or ‘meta-change’ (Beck and Lau 2005). The relationship between gaming and one of the most publicised and popular spheres of social activity, sport, is the focus of this paper.

**Computer Gaming and the WCG**

There is abundant evidence pointing towards the fact that computer gaming is popular, profitable, and of broad social and cultural significance. For example, a recent survey commissioned by the Interactive Entertainment Association of Australia (2005) reported that 76% of Australian households have a device for playing games and 38% of players are female. About 70% of people who play do so at least once a week.

The WCG shows similarly escalating levels of popularity to the gaming industry in general. Emerging from a vibrant South Korean gaming culture, the first event was held in Seoul, attracting 174 competitors from 17 countries. Each subsequent year has seen the event grow, with the recent 2005 WCG in Singapore attracting approximately 800 participants from 70 countries (see Table 1), who were watched by 55,000 spectators. The 2006 event is scheduled for Monza, Italy, while Seattle is set to host the 2007 Games.
## Table 1: The World Cyber Games 2000-2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location</strong></td>
<td>Seoul, Korea</td>
<td>Seoul, Korea</td>
<td>Deajeon, Korea</td>
<td>Seoul, Korea</td>
<td>San Francisco, United States</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No. of Countries Represented</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WCG Participants</strong></td>
<td>174</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>456</td>
<td>562</td>
<td>642</td>
<td>Approx. 800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Prize money (Approx. $)</strong></td>
<td>200,000</td>
<td>300,000</td>
<td>300,000</td>
<td>350,000</td>
<td>420,000</td>
<td>435,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: World Cyber Games PR Committee (2005), World Cyber Games website (www.worldcybergames.com).

Contestants must progress through preliminary rounds in their countries and/or regions in order to qualify for the WCG. Organisers state that over one million gamers worldwide now enter the preliminary rounds (World Cyber Games PR Committee 2005). The event features single and team events played on PC and console games, complete with referees. Games cover different genres including first-person shooters (*Counter-Strike* and *Halo 2*), sports (*FIFA Soccer* and *Need for Speed*), action (*Dead or Alive*) and real-time strategy (*StarCraft*, *Warcraft* and *Warhammer*). Prize money for the 2005 event totalled approximately $435,000, with gold medallists in each event receiving between $20-50,000. Coverage of the 2005 event was available via the WCG ‘TV’ website (www.worldcybergames.com/wcg.tv), a daily television highlights package screened throughout Singapore by MediaCorp (www.mediacorp.sg), and selected reports in other media outlets internationally. *The New York Times*, for example, covered the national finals that determined the make-up of the victorious Team USA for the 2005 WCG, and *BBC World* has also run WCG reports.
There is no suggestion here that an event such as the WCG means the obsolescence of what is popularly understood about the media and sport. Such a notion is ridiculous and would deny the effort and energy devoted to coverage of and participation in football, baseball, basketball and the like. Rather, the WCG and the activities of cyber-athletes signal the advent of a qualitatively distinct phenomenon, e-sport.

A close look at the WCG, however, reveals that something new is emanating from the structure and form of media and sport as constituted within modernity. This is sport as media. Intense competition occurs in digitally constructed environments, and matches between players and teams are indivisible from the computing networks that provide the platform for competition. The WCG bears witness to a significant historical moment in the development of media content, sport and networked information and communications technologies (ICTs): the seamless interpenetration of previously distinct spheres.

**Olympism and Cyber-Athletes in a Global Context**

A notable feature of the WCG is its similarity to the Olympic Games. Medal tables, national teams, opening and closing ceremonies, a players’ village, a host city selection process, and an extensive tiered sponsorship program all mirror the organisational and promotional strategies used by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) for the quadrennial summer and winter Olympiads.

The philosophy of the WCG is of particular interest here, emphasising harmony, respect, and the creation of peace through gaming:

> The WCG slogan, ‘Beyond the Game’, means that the WCG is not just a world game tournament, but also combines the world to create harmony and enjoyment through shared emotions. Further, the WCG slogan hopes for peace to emerge during its tournament, which fosters mutual respect amongst all participants from all over the world as we strive together to build an attractive World Cultural Festival. (www.worldcybergames.com/wcg2005/wc_generalinfo.asp)

The quixotic notion of global fraternity through competition is hardly new. The six principles of Olympism are listed in the charter of the IOC, an organisation founded in 1894 (IOC 2004). Consultation with the full charter is recommended, but the second principle captures this document’s tenor:

> The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of harmonious development of man [sic], with a view to
promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity.

The company responsible for promoting and running the WCG, South Korea’s International Cyber Marketing (ICM), has appropriated the tradition of Olympism to promote a new form of competition and entertainment.

While the philosophical objectives of the IOC and WCG are identical, the festival or product being promoted is different. As a televised ‘media event’, the Olympics rely upon the global reach of television platforms to perpetuate their popularity and cultural resonance with viewers and sponsors. The WCG, by contrast, is conducted in and through communication technologies and networked computing. The achievement of ICM is to invent a tradition that naturalises this difference. Cosmetically at least, the WCG is another sports festival, complete with the national flags and medals that have adorned Olympic athletes for over a century. Matches with commentators screened on a broadband ‘TV’ channel maintain this continuity. An established historical framework of meaning works to ensure that those who come across the WCG for the first time can assimilate the character and worth of this event into their worldview.

By using the template of a sports festival, ICM is using the past as window-dressing to promote the future viability of its event. The instrumentality of this approach is revealed by a tiered sponsorship program, another successful idea borrowed from the IOC. The WCG are built upon a business model which contains different categories of sponsors, the most prominent of which is an exclusive ‘Worldwide Sponsor’, Samsung Electronics, a position this company has held since 2000. This sponsorship highlights the centrality of Korean culture and business to the shape and structure of the WCG, with the strength of gaming culture in this country combining with a major manufacturer of digital technologies. Nonetheless, the financial foundations of the WCG continue to extend beyond Korea with Microsoft now a ‘Premier Sponsor’, signing on until 2008 and providing major support to events in Asia, the United States and Europe. There are also ‘official Sponsors’ (SingTel and VideoPro) and a number of other multinational official suppliers and media partners.

The successful attraction of sponsors by ICM requires a framework of meaning that is easily understood. A sponsor facing the prospect of a large investment needs to identify the potential worth of an event easily. An Olympic-style festival achieves this
objective as it is an established organisational model. The WCG is sold to investors as a cyber games festival that also serves as a ‘trade event’ for multinational ICT and gaming companies and investment capital, with a game business conference and an exhibition included in its schedule. This event then serves as a forum and market driver for the consolidation of e-sport as a unique techno-social phenomenon.

The parallels between traditional sports festivals and competitive gaming are further confirmed by the public promotion of gamers as cyber-athletes. This strategy is evident in the WCG and other competitions such as MLG and the CPL. Dedication to training, teamwork, aggression and the precise execution of planned tactical manoeuvres are signs of top-level sporting competition. But there is little chance that the ‘athletes’ involved will jump, run or throw, let alone suffer or inflict serious physical injury. There is minimal physical activity during matches outside of the frenetic movement of hands, fingers and thumbs; although the intensity of matches does see competitors raise a sweat.

The indeterminate cultural position of cyber-athletes is underpinned by the fact that no one existing category of social perception - sport, media, or computer gaming - can adequately account for the totality of their activities. This inadequacy is reflected by news reports and debates over whether cyber-athletes are actually athletes. A 60 Minutes CBS News special (Kroft 2006) about Johnathan Wendel, aka ‘Fatal1ty’, one of the leading gamers in the United States, and a major feature article (Battacharya 2005) published in the Sydney Morning Herald on Matt Leto, aka ‘Zyos’, a college dropout from Dallas, evince an ambivalent narrative and set of responses. Wendel, a 24-year-old who lives in Kansas City, has reportedly won over $300,000 in tournament prize money. Wendel’s success corresponds with Leto, who is an official ‘WCG Legend’ for his performances in Halo. Leto has an endorsement deal with Nokia, appears on MTV and is being positioned by his main sponsor, MLG, as a global gaming celebrity / brand.

In the cases of both Wendel and Leto, the journalists acknowledge that skill, dedication, prize-money and endorsements make them like athletes, but they are not prepared to accord them this status definitively. Nor are they completely certain whether the games that they compete in are sport in a traditional sense. There is debate amongst gamer communities about this issue (which is worthy of a study of its own), with online responses to these stories reflecting the uncertainty felt.
Respondents struggle to describe competitive gaming, comparing it to chess, ‘conventional sport’, ‘energetic sports’, ‘physical sports’ and situating gamers as combatants in ‘virtual field sports’, ‘computer sports’ and ‘cybersports’. The journalists and their respondents are struggling to label both gamers and their activities accurately, and in a way that will produce widespread consensus. No amount of qualification or explanation is able to generate agreement on what is actually occurring here. Cyber-athletes are liminal figures in the Information Age, taking part in an organised activity that is competitive, but unlike traditional sport.

A solution to this impasse requires a minor change of syntax, which has disproportionately far-reaching analytical ramifications. It is necessary to think in terms of sport as media (material integration) instead of traditional sport and media (structural interrelation). The term e-sport emphasises this change and breaks the stranglehold of modern sport as a sociological unit of perception. e-Sport acknowledges the continuities of competitive gaming with sport as an historical form and organisational model. Yet it is also distinctive, creating the space necessary to explain what is new about this activity and those who compete in it. In other words, it is a term that allows continuity in understanding, whilst also helping to conceptualise the discontinuous features of this competitive activity.

Further confirming the betwixt and between nature of the WCG is the fact that it is both national and global in scope. The relevant section of the WCG slogan states:

This ‘World Cultural Festival’, which has no language or cultural barriers, longs to embody respect for universal fundamentals based on ethical principles without having any national boundaries in play.

(www.worldcybergames.com/wcg2005/wc_generalinfo.asp)

The WCG utilises the long-standing ideal of international fraternity, but adds an important technological layer to its expression. Gaming is conducted through networked computers, which are designed to communicate beyond national boundaries via the Internet. While the WCG takes place in a single location using a Local Area Network (LAN), the games played such as Dead or Alive and Warcraft are played both competitively and informally by and between tens of thousands of gamers situated around the globe on a daily basis. For instance, it is estimated that there are 100,000 people playing first-person-shooter games online at any one time.
(Morris 2004). This level of popularity supplies a ready-made global pool of potential WCG competitors, as well as an international audience.

The WCG capitalises on the appeal of an activity that is evolving within digitally de-bounded space. This is a noteworthy example of ‘internal globalisation’ (Beck 2002a), whereby local and national experiences are inflected through globalising processes. The experience of individuals playing games in local contexts and within national societies is structurally bound to the transnational communications networks that support game environments. Indeed, the enormous popularity of gaming makes this experience banal. Computer gaming and the WCG symbolise the ontological inseparability of the local and global in the Information Age, a point also borne out by the shared character of environmental risks, terrorist threats, the activities of global capital and markets, organised criminal activity, patterns of migration, and global chains of food production and consumption (Bauman 2002; Beck 1999, 2002b; Beck and Willms 2004; Castells 2000a, 2000b, 2004; Wimmer and Quandt 2006).

**Conclusion**

In response to the evidence presented throughout this essay, the key recommendation is that a sociology of media attuned to computer games and gaming is needed. Castronova (2005) has started down this road, showing that gaming is producing real social, economic and cultural impacts. Sociological studies are ignoring these effects, just as they have failed to account for the relationship that has arisen between sport, media content, and ICTs as a result of competitive gaming. The shape and appearance of the social world is changing as a result of games and gaming. The question of whether we need new concepts such as e-sport to accurately reflect this reality is open to debate. But it is essential that the historically continuous and discontinuous features of these social forms are recognised and carefully analysed if the impact of games media and culture is to be understood. A failure to adapt and/or develop useful concepts and theories will result in the deployment of zombie-categories more suited to the analysis of twentieth-century media, and an inability to contextualise games activities, events and the industry as a whole within the evolving context of the Information Age.
References


