Counting Clicks: Esports, Neoliberalism and the Affective Power of Gameplay Metrics

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Introduction

This chapter argues that the gameplay metrics used to measure player performances in videogames enable the competitive logic of capitalism, and a neoliberal subjectivity, to circulate through esports cultures. Drawing on a case study of the esport *Defense of the Ancients 2* (Dota 2), this chapter will critically consider how its metrics, like 'actions-per-minute', 'match-making rank' and 'kills-deaths-assists', reward neoliberal bodily performances. In particular, it will show how these metrics entangle players into a discourse of 'competitive uncertainty' (Beer 2016 also see Davies, 2014) that requires players to monitor and optimise their performances to remain competitive within game's market.

This chapter begins by considering existing critiques of videogames and quantification (Whitson, 2013) and its relationship to capitalism (Silverman and Simon, 2009; Paul, 2018). The purpose is to show that gameplay metrics create the characteristics of a competitive market and the need for a neoliberal subject. What is meant by 'neoliberal' here? As Dave Beer (2016) argues, neoliberalism is made possible by the ability to rank and measure things. Ranking things requires the application of an 'economic methodology' to social practices that provide standard measures and tests against which to differentiate people and establish hierarchies of value (also see Davies, 2014). This chapter argues that the use of gameplay metrics to rank, compare and evaluate Dota 2 players is an example of the economic methodology needed to make neoliberalism possible. Moreover, it considers how esports requires a 'neoliberal masculinity' (Voorhees, 2015;

Voorhees and Orlando, 2018) to manage the game's competitive market and what relationship this has with risk and entrepreneurialism (see Baerg, 2012).

The second half of this chapter will discuss the affective nature of this process by examining the emotional and embodied responses that gameplay metrics stimulate and provoke. As James Ash (2010; 2015) argues, videogames produce sensory and perceptual forms of feedback that shape the habits and conduct of players by 'attuning' their bodies to meet with the challenges and demands of videogame environments. Drawing on Beer (2016), this chapter will consider how players 'attune' their bodies to the numericised setting of Dota 2, giving critical attention to how players navigate the risks and uncertainty of its competitive market. In particular, it will discuss the *feelings of anxiety* that come with the measurement of in-game actions and how players turn to networks and technologies of performance coaching and 'self-help' to manage their behaviour.

This chapter will further our understanding of how competitive videogames bring neoliberal subjects into being in three ways. First, it will draw attention to how gameplay metrics create the characteristics of a competitive market through the ranking, comparing and evaluating player behaviour. Second, it will show how metrics leverage competition and emotion to shape players bodily practices. Third, it will raise questions about the psychosocial dimension of player identity and how metrics structure the psyche of a neoliberal subject. Indeed, this chapter will conclude by suggesting that the competitive gamer is not a purely 'instrumental' actor (Taylor, 2011, 2012) but, instead, evidences a fragility and insecurity that metrics help stabilise.

Metrics, Power, and Neoliberalism

What are ‘gameplay metrics’? According to Anders Drachen, et al. (2013, p.23-24), gameplay metrics are quantitative measures about what players do inside the virtual environment of a videogame. As a player, users can generate thousands of behavioural measures throughout a single gaming session – each click of the mouse or control pad generating a reaction and response that is captured and analysed by the game's system. Indeed, sophisticated measures of player activity include the measurement of dozens of these inputs *per second.* Drachen, et al. argue that these measurements generate large databases of information that serve a range of purposes, including:

1) Informing critical business decisions, such as evaluating user experiences.

2) Notifying developers of games design errors and issues.

3) Supporting players by monitoring and optimising their in-game performances, specifically through the use of paratextual statistical analysis to 'theorycraft' (also see, Paul, 2011).

It is this third use of gameplay metrics – to optimise player performances – that is of concern here.

There is a critical, albeit small body of literature about the use of metrics within videogames and the monitoring of player performances. Most recently, Christopher Paul’s (2018) book, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Videogames*, argues that the measurement of player performances has a long-standing relationship to the divisiveness and inequalities present within videogame cultures. Of particular note is Paul's account of *World of Warcraft* (WoW) (Blizzard, 2003), which suggests that the game’s systems of item levels, gear scores, and achievement points, create a

culture that judges and attributes talent, ability, skill, and merit to those with the highest or best set of numbers. Indeed, Paul goes on to argue that, despite the fallacy of attributing skill to item level, players typically use these metrics to benchmark one another; pre-selecting and grouping only with those who have attained the highest-level items. This process, argues Paul (2018, p.138), reproduces a meritocratic ideal that encourages inequality and difference,

'Video games are predicated on inequality, on the perception that some people are better than others and that when one is victorious it is precisely because of that player's actions, that player's timely interventions and button presses'.

Metrics facilitate this normative expectation by providing players with a measure or number that acts as a 'symbolic currency' (Paul, 2018, p.113) of their skill.

Paul is not the only games scholar to critique this symbolic currency or to recognise that metrics play a divisive role in videogame culture. Silverman and Simon's (2009) account of 'Dragon Kill Points' (DKP) in WoW raises an interesting question about the relationship between numerical systems in videogames and competitive self-interest. DKP was a commonly accepted method of calculating and distributing rewards within raiding guilds by assigning players points for participation in boss kills. However, as Silverman and Simon note, many of the world's best guilds rejected the DKP system as it incentivised self-interest over group accomplishments. Players would accumulate or 'horde' DKP and exchange it for one highly prized item, rather than incremental upgrades that were of benefit to the raiding group as a whole. As such, the DKP system discourages collaboration and rewards meritocratic play (also see Paul, 2018, p.114). Indeed, Simon and Silverman (2009, p.364) argue that the DKP system was a prime example of what Foucault calls 'disciplinary power'; a set of techniques of (self-) surveillance that regulates

the behaviour of individuals to accept the competitive logic of capitalism. For example, the DKP system tracks and codifies the value or merit of each player; rewarding those sufficiently committed and skilled while punishing those who were either late or lazy. Simon and Silverman (2009) argue that this quantifiable-measure-cum-mechanism-of-disciplinary-power shapes player bodies and subjectivities; creating an obedient, efficient and productive 'power gamer' willing to embrace the most rational and competitive characteristics of a capitalist market.

Baerg's (2012) analysis of risk and risk management in digital role-playing games also highlights this relationship between ludic structures and neoliberal logics. Baerg argues that stat distribution systems and combat sequences in games like *Neverwinter Nights 2* position the player to manage the game's world as a risk. He provides examples from character creation to spell and equipment selection to reveal how players manage the data of the game to maximise their avatars. Baerg argues that the search for an 'optimal build' through cost-benefit analysis is an example of how neoliberal rationalities undergird players engagement with the game's quantitative systems. In this sense, he provides an excellent example of how play practices take up the mandate of 'neoliberal technologies of the self' to engender and refine more productive bodies (also see Whitson, 2013).

This argument aligns with more recent critiques of the body politics within esports. Recent esports research has interrogated the relationship between masculinity and neoliberalism to establish a groundwork for the critical examination of videogames. The work of Gerald Voorhees (Voorhees, 2015) and others (Voorhees and Orlando, 2018) has been central to this, as it recognises that esports is a nexus for thinking about the relationship between neoliberal rationalities and contemporary masculinities within western culture. Voorhees argues that the masculine-identities present within esports scenes is motivated by a single guiding logic or

principle – competitive success. Indeed, he uses Michel Foucault's theorisation of 'neoliberal governmentality' to make the following claim,

'The professionalization of digital gaming is a means of bringing into being *Homo Economicus* by incentivising, through high-stakes competition, a way of being dictated by rational choice and cost-benefit analysis… [Esports] rationalizes the activity of play and legitimates patterns of interaction that are otherwise unacceptable within the dogmas of hegemonic masculinity'. (Voorhees, 2015, p.68).

Voorhees presents a sophisticated analysis of the neoliberal body politic within esports, which draws on the idea that elite players must purposively train their bodies in the art of *Homo Economicus.* That is, through a cost-benefit analysis, players rationalise every act of play in order to determine their effectiveness within a competitive market. In this sense, Voorhees is developing an argument following the work of T.L Taylor (2012) and others (Taylor, 2011) who recognises that there is a tendency within esports to 'instrumentalise play'. For example, Taylor suggests that competitive success is contingent on professional players maximising their chances to win through the extensive study of game mechanics and the competitive circuit. The process of rationalising play occurs as players seek to achieve the most efficient return upon in-game activities through a great deal of study, whether of past matches, databases containing game data, and discussion forums. Voorhees argues that this practice transforms play into a kind of 'economic calculus' - the study and record of complex information to calculate costs and benefits. Indeed, Voorhees suggests that the gender-identity of the professional gamer is one which eschews a typically hyper-masculine, violent or muscular subject position. Instead, it is one that normalises neoliberal logic by celebrating the most efficient combination of skills and abilities needed to succeed (also see Brock, 2017).

Helpfully, these critical analyses draw attention to the power of metrics in videogames, but more needs to be said about their affective capacity to create neoliberal subjects. In the book, 'Metric Power', the sociologist Dave Beer (2016) examines the intensifying role that systems of measurement and calculation play in ordering and shaping everyday life. Drawing on a range of examples, from *Apple Watch, Facebook* and *Google Scholar,* Beer (2016) argues that metrics have the 'affective power' to entangle people into a neoliberal discourse. Beer's argument begins from the simple premise that metrics are often used to judge our performative capacities and create mechanisms that compare, rank, and display our victories and failures. *Apple Watch* is an obvious example – its systems continuously measure and evaluate our bodily routines against a set of performative goals. It tells us what to eat, when to sleep, and how much to walk. The device continually evaluates and ranks how 'well' each act is performed by providing us with positive or corrective feedback in the form of a 'score'. For Beer (2016), it is this quantifiable judgement of our performances that aligns our identities towards the values of neoliberalism. Metrics like, 'personal bests' or 'move goals', which can display information through competitive leaderboards, reward self-interest and normalise the idea that the market is the principal organising feature of social life. In Beer's (2016, p.7) own words,

'Perhaps then the very growth of systems of measurement that we have seen is a kind of marker of neoliberal rationalities at work – found in the desire to measure. Wearables devices like the Apple Watch make it possible to govern ourselves by numbers in much more nuanced, personalised, and direct ways'.

Beer's main point – which goes beyond wearable technologies – is that systems of measurement are crucial in the realisation and deployment of neoliberal political formations. Competition cannot exist without measurement as measures enable the criteria and hierarchies needed to

judge winners and losers. Why is this important? Because, for Beer, metrics change how people frame social relationships and practices. His concern is that quantifiable measures evaluate social conduct solely in terms of their capacity to compete productively within the market, rather than having any social or cultural value. It is this process, argues Beer, which connects metrics to the political economy: systems of measurement establish competition as the behavioural norm while cementing inequalities into the composition of social life. Indeed, following Foucault (2007), Beer (2016, p.27) sees metrics as a way to shift power into the hands of those who can present numbers as an 'apparatus of knowledge'.

Of particular interest in Beer's analysis is the affective or emotional capacity of metrics to entangle our bodies into neoliberal political formations. Beer (2016, p.212) argues that the power of metrics extends beyond mere surveillance – beyond the simple tracking, capturing or comparing of physical acts– into the *structuring of how we feel* and what it is that we think and do. In his own words, metrics can 'entangle' our bodies into processes of governance and self-governance by provoking emotions of anticipation, expectation, worry, fear, anxiety, and concern. Here, Beer is developing on the work of James Ash (2010), who argues that videogames are successful because they create environments that purposively produce affective encounters (they establish an 'architecture of affect'). Beer (2016, p.203) advances Ash's original argument by examining the way that metrics captivate or 'attune' bodies to the demands of marketised competition through negative affect. He argues that systems of measurement produce 'competitive uncertainty': an unshakeable sense that our performances will be compared, ranked and judged. This uncertainty cultivates feelings of anxiety, which people try to manage by adopting strategies of self-training and performance management. Competitive uncertainty is how metrics connect bodies to neoliberalism: by using anxiety to drive competitive advantage.

Indeed, Beer argues that the model subject of neoliberalism is the entrepreneur: a person who, through the calculation of risks and uncertainties, can pursue personal success competitively.

Beer's critique of the affective power of metrics raises the question of how a competitive videogame entangles people into the processes of neoliberal governance. This chapter argues that this entanglement takes place through the measurement, ranking, and comparison of player performances, which generates the uncertainty and techniques of self-surveillance required to secure competitive advantage. Uncertainty is a critical component of games design (Costikyan, 2013) and Dota 2 is no different in this regard. Indeed, the next section of this chapter will consider how *Defense of the Ancients 2* (Dota 2) generates a discourse around metrics that draws players into processes of neoliberal governance by requiring them to manage the uncertainty of its competitive ranking structure.

Dota 2: Metric Power

Dota 2 is a competitive team-based multiplayer online battle area (MOBA) with roughly 11.7 million unique players (Valve, n.d.). The objective of the game is to collectively destroy the opposing team's 'Ancient' base structure while defending your own. Two teams of five players battle against one another with each player selecting one of the 115 playable characters known as 'heroes'. The design of each hero has specific attributes, which influence health points, mana points and attack speed, and unique abilities, like offensive or defensive spells. Players may also purchase items that augment these heroes' unique abilities for in-game currency, earnt through the killing of 'creeps' – computer-controlled creatures that travel predefined paths along lanes within the map.

This arrangement means that Dota 2 has a complex and highly emergent rule-set that provides players with a vast array of information and detail. Players must use this information to develop their strategies while working together, as a team, to destroy the opposition's base. To help players efficiently control these heroes and assimilate vital information from the game world, Dota 2 utilises several systems of measurement. These systems analyse gameplay and provide real-time and post-game feedback to help players improve their performances (also see Egliston, 2019). Examples of these metrics include:

'APM', which measures how many actions a player performs per minute.

'KDA-ratio', which measures how many 'kills', 'deaths' and 'assists' a player has acquired.

'GPM' and 'XPM', which measures how much gold and experience a player has acquired per minute.

'LH/DN score', which measures how many 'killing blows' a player has landed to a creep or enemy hero to generate gold.

'MMR', which represents the skill level of each player and is used to determine leaderboard rankings.

These metrics are not only used to help players keep track of in-game events and activities. They are also used to help players acquire a sense of game mastery, and skill (Brock and Fraser, 2018) as increments in these measures reflect an understanding of the in-game strategies and the meta (Huang, et al. 2017).

Now, following Beer's argument about metric power, consider the discursive environment that these metrics generate. According to the esports journalist Stephen Chiu (2018), writing for the website *vpesports.com*, APM is considered the baseline that we give to measuring the 'raw mechanics' and 'peak potential' of a Dota 2 player,

'Spamming APM is one of the key things players should do as beginners for a few reasons. First is that it trains your fingers and mind to move at that speed […] The second step is to try to think about what you actually need to do in each game with your allotted APM. Then with practice, you push your limit over and over again in ladder games, and that is how you eventually improve'.

Chui suggests that APM is about connecting the body to strategy through what he calls 'processing speed': 'the ability to see a specific moment in time and analyse, break down, and come up with a counter-strategy within milliseconds'. This speed – which comes from clicking quickly – is said to establish a 'reflex' that connects a player's capacity for quantitative analysis with a competitive advantage. Indeed, it is an 'apparatus of knowledge' (Foucault, 2007 in Beer, 2016) within the Dota 2 esports community that APM (or to be more accurate, Effective Actions Per Minute, EAPM) facilitates active and faster reaction times. APM is said to give players better control over the game, better visualising of the maps, better knowledge of the items available, and insight into how to manage one's heroes and competitors effectively and efficiently.

The rhetoric or language used typically concerns advising players on how to 'better manage your game'. There are a range of websites, such as *dotabuff.com, joindota.com, dotafire.com,* and *dota2.gamepedia.com,* as well as YouTube or Twitch.tv channels, such as *Dota Alchemy, Game*

Leap, or *Purge Gamers,* which offer players many 'tips' and 'tricks' on how to maximise their game time and boost their leaderboard rankings. This advice comes in the form of advising players about their metrics as indicators of skill and areas for improvement. For example, as part of his 'Dota Basics' youtube series, Kevin 'Purge' Godec (2018a), suggests that metrics indicate the speed and efficiency by which players accomplish in-game tasks, such as farming resources, like gold or experience points. He gives the metric 'LH/DN score' particular attention, arguing that it reflects the effectiveness of players to generate gold by killing creeps (or by denying enemies of this income),

'…once you get the basics of the game you should try to improve your current speed. For example, if you average 40 last hits by 10 minutes, practice your last hitting a bit and later try to get 50 last hits by 10 minutes instead. The gold difference will give you a big edge over your opponents. Generally, always keep in mind how you are spending your seconds in the game if you become inefficient and accomplish little with your time then it will have a very big negative effect on your game'.

Central to Godec's advice is the idea that LH/DN score is a measure of player productivity and indicative of wasteful or inefficient 'gold farming' practices. He shows the importance of this through a discussion of the need to practice with the 'Last Hit Trainer', a core feature of the Dota 2 gameplay system, which provides players with additional scores, percentages, and rankings of their LH/DN capabilities. Godec suggests that each practice session with the trainer is an opportunity for players to learn from their mistakes, and he encourages them to ask the following questions, introspectively: 'why did you waste your time there?', 'what should you have done instead?', and 'how could that have helped you?' The goal of these self-surveying questions, Godec suggests, is to encourage players to secure an economic advantage; training them to be

more time and resource-efficient. Indeed, he concludes by arguing that a good (gold) income is the foundation on which Dota 2 players establish victory – cementing the connection between measurement, resource management, and competitive acuity.

This focus on measuring player efficiency extends beyond farming practices to a range of other behaviours in Dota 2, specifically those concerned with MMR. As a selection of articles, blog posts and videos affirm (Brown, 2018; Meric, 2019; Stronk, 2017), there are no less than 11 different metrics that calibrate player rank or leaderboard position, including KDA, APM, LH/DN score, Win/Loss Rate, Match Length, Damage to Tower, Damage to Enemy Heroes, Wards Placed, Neutral Creep Stacking. The implication here is that players need to multitask across many different activities and that metrics assist them in understanding their efficiency and effectiveness (also see 'Calibration MMR in Dota 2: A Detailed Guide', 2019). Indeed, there are several related YouTube channels, like *Game Leap, Goodboy Guides* or *Purge Gamers*, which promise to help players improve upon their MMR. This advice typically comes through the suggestion that players focus their training on practices related to these metrics, from laning effectively to stacking neutral creeps to optimising itemisation. As Godec (2018b) suggests, 'if you want to get good at Dota 2 it helps to understand how the numbers work'.

To take another example, consider Godec's (2019) advice about itemisation. Itemisation refers to how players can improve their hero's abilities by using gold to purchase in-game items that boost specific spells and attributes. There are over 150 of these items in Dota 2, each with attributes that modify core hero mechanics, like health, mana regeneration, armour, movement speed, attack speed and many more. Many of these items also modify multiple attributes at once, making the selection particularly complicated, as each hero only benefits from specific attributes. Godec's (2019) suggests that, if players want to win, they need to understand the costs and

benefits of each item. He gives a detailed analysis of the vast array of numbers that players must pay attention to when considering each item and its potential to influence a hero's damage, defence and mobility. In particular, Godec (2019) suggests that players need to understand how the attributes of each item correlate to specific hero abilities. Otherwise, players will 'waste' gold and time by undermining the effectiveness of their heroes.

This rhetoric draws an equivalency between metrics and player skill. In particular, it suggests that by controlling these numbers, players can render the competition more intelligible and manageable. Indeed, the launch of Dota 2's new premium monthly subscription service – called 'Dota Plus' – is aimed at delivering tools to meet with this very rationality. Dota Plus boasts a range of statistical features and measures to improve player performances (also see Egliston, 2019). One feature that is of particular relevance is here is its performance-coaching technology called 'Plus Assistant', which Valve (n.d.) describes in the following way:

'The collective knowledge of the Dota community is vast, and every day, in millions of games played around the world, it grows. Now, with the help of Plus Assistant, that global repository of Dota knowhow can be brought to bear on every single game you play. Plus Assistant offers real-time item and ability suggestions—generated from data gathered across millions of recent games at each skill bracket—to keep you up-to-date on the latest trends. Whether you need advice on which hero best fits a draft, or aren't sure what to build after securing that coveted Blink Dagger, Plus Assistant is in your corner'.

As such, for a small monthly fee, players can now pay money to have access to the latest in performance coaching technologies – they can benefit, on an individual basis, from the use of big data, statistical analytics, and AI modelling to get a competitive edge. The Plus Assistant will tell

players what items to buy and when. It will also offer players advice on what abilities to select, and it will change these suggestions, in real-time, depending on previous behaviour, current opponent hero selection, and lane – or area of the map – the player resides. In Valve's own words, Dota Plus is about 'enhancing' the play experience by helping players to get the *most* out of every match. Indeed, Dota Plus gives players access to smart data solutions to produce speedy and efficient subjects. 'Second-by-second death summaries', 'post-game analytics', 'spectator game outcome prediction graphs', 'in-game real-time analytics comparisons', 'hero trend analyses', including 'pick rate', 'win rate', 'ban rate', 'talent pick rate', 'average KDAs', 'average GPMs', 'average XPMs', and so on – all of these metrics aim to assist player victory by turning their clicks into clear frameworks of efficiency and progression.

Following Beer, it is this leveraging of data to help improve player performances that embed neoliberal rationalities into the gameplay practices of Dota 2 players. The real power of these metrics is in their capacity to simplify complex, competitive arrangements and present them to players as a way to promote their individualised agendas. Indeed, players use Dota Plus (and other community-generated content) as a means to leverage data to remain competitive. However, this is a double-edged sword. There is always an area where the data shows that players are behind or that their competitive position looks fragile. These metrics intensify the competitive culture in and around Dota 2 as its discourse attributes value to those who can(not) manage competitive uncertainty by making quick, accurate, and efficient decisions.

Dota 2: Affect and Anxiety

Like Beer (2016), we might unpack the relationship between metrics and neoliberalism by revealing the 'psychosocial costs' of measuring player performances. Indeed, Beer argues that the costs of neoliberalism often manifest themselves in the feelings of stress, insecurity, anxiety, and shame that comes from measuring people's performances (also see Gill, 2010). What instigates these feelings is a sense of the uncertainty of competition, which, then, drives agents to embrace further methods and techniques of self-training and risk management (also see Scharff, 2015). In particular, Beer argues that uncertain subjects are likely to fashion entrepreneurial strategies out of the precarious experiences afforded by marketised competition. Indeed, he argues that the neoliberal outlook is to embrace risk in the certainty that one can overcome its challenges and anxieties.

An excellent example of this is how the discourse of measurement and calculation provokes feelings of anxiety within the Dota 2 community. Indeed, there is an intense affective dimension to MMR with many forums, blog posts and community-driven content providing examples of players talking about the anxieties and insecurities that come with playing ranked competitive matches. A search of Reddit, as well as forums on websites like *dotabuff.com*, *joindota.com*, *dotafire.com*, reveals over 3,700 posts from Dota 2 players, discussing the negative effects that 'ladder anxiety', 'SOLOQ anxiety' (and other terms) have on player experiences of the game. For example, in one Reddit thread, entitled 'Does anyone else get solo queue anxiety?' (WinterTitan, 2017) players discuss the worries that come with 'obsessing' over MMR as well as the 'anger', 'fear' and 'frustration' that comes with losing coveted leaderboard positions. One player writes,

‘I have a hard time looking for a game on solo because I get so anxious about losing and can never hit the play game button. Idk if it’s just me or how to even get over it’.

This quotation reveals that the MMR system, through solo queuing, has the power to generate symptoms of stress and anxiety; the strength of which creates a physical and mental barrier to playing the game. Another player captures the way that this stress manifests as a result of criticisms of their previous performance(s):

‘I’ve had this for years, can't play solo unless I’m really drunk. I’ve tried a few times and it’s gone really well, no flaming, even won some, but it’s been so stressful. This is a type of performance anxiety, where you worry about playing well and that you’ll get flamed if you don’t. As a result I've become unable to take negative feedback in all parts of my life. If anything negative happens, I brood on it for days. I keep thinking about playing more, but as soon as I run the game and look at that play button, I get physically ill and give up’.

This quotation gives deeper insight into the affective power of metrics as the player reflects on the ‘toxicity’ of Dota 2 (also see Paul, 2018) and its mental and physical impact on their play. In particular, through the notion of ‘flaming’, it’s clear that the prospect of losing ranked games (and therefore MMR) justifies a *fear* of personal attacks based on previous experiences. This fear appears to generate anxieties alongside a strong physiological response (‘physically ill’) to stay away from the game’s competitive culture. Of course, this culture (and toxicity) also extends to the Reddit post itself, as one commentator shows,

‘Stop being a pussy. It’s a video game…’

Not all comments capture the negative affect that competition, through MMR, drives. There are also examples of players offering advice. For example, one player, in responding to a post by user 'Mega The Medic Main' (2015), entitled, 'How do I get over my solo queue anxiety?', writes,

'identify the root of problem: are u scared of playing vs other people? are you scared of getting pwnd? are you scared of losing mmr?

just remember that losing is a great way to learn..

learn the game, and raise your skill level instead of the number called match making rank points because your mmr will follow your skill level one way or another and not the other way around.

always have confidence in your skills and every time you queue you should feel excited to outsmart, outplay and destroy the opposition. =)'

This advice clearly links the physiological impact of anxiety to MMR and offers emotional and practical advice to help this player manage the uncertainty that accompanies competition. In particular, the advice suggests that the player can manage their anxiety by improving upon their in-game skill, bringing the focus back to the player's need to improve as a means of developing self-confidence.

Some members of the community take this idea of support much further, creating content that coaches Dota 2 players about their mental and physical wellbeing. For example, one YouTube channel, *The Dota Clinic*, dedicates some of its content to offering players explanations of and remedial strategies to ladder anxiety. In one video, entitled 'Understanding Anxiety', MJ 'Finch' Finch (2014a), whose public profile suggests that he is a behaviour analyst, and holds a master's

degree in Clinical Psychology, explains that ladder anxiety is caused by the physiological response(s) of the body to stress factors. These factors include;

- ‘Event importance – the more important the event, the more anxiety it causes in the individual.
- Uncertainty – the more uncertainty, the more anxiety.
- Personal sources of stress – if a person has a lot of personal things going on, it all builds up.
- Trait anxiety – some people are just more anxious than others.
- Self-esteem – low self-esteem leads to low self-confidence, which leads to more anxiety.
- Social physique anxiety – When a person is anxious due to a person viewing something about them (in sports, physical appearance). In Dota, your MMR rating’.

Finch argues that these stress factors are likely to effect player performances negatively as, if left unattended, anxiety can become overwhelming and lead players to ‘crumble’. As such, Finch (2014b) suggests that players adopt a range of self-care and confidence-building practices to manage the performance anxiety that accompanies ranked games. Finch suggests that by exercising regularly, eating healthily, breathing deeply, thinking positively and acting confidently, players can manage their ladder anxiety and compete more effectively. The key to these therapeutic techniques, Finch suggests, is that they manage the emotional aspects of the stress (or ‘fight-or-flight’) response that the ranking and evaluation of player performances instigates.

Finch is not alone in coaching players on the therapeutic strategies needed to persist in ranked Dota 2 games. Across various sites, and community-driven content, there is a list of remedial

practices, including meditation, stretching, drinking green tea, twisting a towel very hard, taking regular hot showers and hot baths, avoiding caffeine and sugary sweets, taking regular breaks, and reviewing past achievements. These practices appear to be particularly important when players are facing a losing streak. For example, as part of *Dota Alchemy's* 'Mental Game' video series, professional player Andrew 'Jenkins' Jenkins (2018), talks about the wellbeing routine that he has established to help him manage the competitive stresses of the ranked matchmaking system, which includes listening to classical music, keeping his bedroom clean, going for walks at night, and developing a 'mantra' that focuses and self-motivates him – all activities that Jenkins says help to 'calm' and 'ground' him by providing a sense of control. Jenkins notes that the need for these therapeutic strategies are particularly poignant when he is being 'flamed' or having his performance criticised by other players, as negative comments about his performance typically intensify his insecurities,

'… [these strategies] give me something that I can focus on that's not just okay does this guy hate me, is this guy going to trust me, oh my god, I'm going to fuck up. I'm not going to think all of these things. I'm just like okay, I got to do this job, I got to do this job, and I got to do this job, you know it creates this structure for you.'

Jenkins' advice here reveals the strategies that he deploys to 'become un-tilt-able' – a phrase commonly adopted (from Poker) to capture the state of mental or emotional confusion or frustration in which a player adopts a less than optimal strategy. Jenkins establishes a wellbeing routine to control his environment and manage this anxiety such that it does not interfere with the efficiency or productivity of his gameplay.

This idea – that anxiety must be dealt with to ensure competitiveness – is conferred through the advice of Dan 'Foxdrop' Wyatt. In his video entitled, 'How to deal with and overcome ranked anxiety', Wyatt (2015) suggests that he has consulted a chartered psychologist and an academic researcher on emotions to provide players with the coaching needed to change their behaviour. First, he outlines what the symptoms of ranked anxiety are – feeling nervous when queuing for games, getting cold hands, shivers, and a faster heart rate. Then, second, Wyatt offers players a list of methods to control their actions. He suggests that triggering player anxiety is a 2-step process. On the one hand, players 'think' incorrectly by spending too much time focusing on what is to lose or at stake. On the other, players 'act' incorrectly by not coping with the realisation that failure is a constituent of playing a competitive multiplayer game. This realisation leads Wyatt to suggest that players need to change the way that they view their losses because this will change the way that they 'cope' with them. He goes on to advise that players need to rethink games as opportunities to improve;

'if your end goal is to come out a better player than you went going in, there isn't doesn't matter if you lose as long as you learn something from each game that you play then win or lose you'll be successful and you can remove the anxiety connected with the outcome of the game'.

Wyatt's rhetoric establishes the idea that anxiety comes from misperceptions in player thinking. He reframes the problem to suggest that gameplay is not about winning but about one's ability to learn and improve. He suggests that players need to 'train their brains as if it were muscle' – the being to improve one's performances through micro-enhancements in player strategy. Indeed, in his own words, players need to develop a better 'internal locus of control' by focusing on the elements of gameplay that they can improve upon – like their gold farming practices, laning strategies, and build orders. For Wyatt, such practices establish a positive 'feedback loop' in

psychology that helps players to manage their anxiety by producing a stable internal locus of control.

It is clear from this rhetoric that the psychosocial costs of metrics – to generate feelings of stress, insecurity, anxiety and even shame – are all present within the discussions around MMR in Dota 2. Indeed, techniques of power and self-governance operate through the affective capacity of MMR to generate uncertainties and anxieties. In response, players seek advice and are offered amateur forms of psychological counselling as a way of coaching them to become 'better' players. These coaching techniques mix holistic remedies with cognitive behavioural therapy to encourages players to embrace methods and techniques of self-training and risk management. Indeed, the unifying logic behind each act of advice is that players need to improve themselves if they are to manage and overcome the competitiveness that characterises Dota 2. In this sense, players, as uncertain subjects, establish an 'entrepreneurial alertness' (Beer, 2016, p.194; also see Lilley and Lightfoot, 2013) to the precarious experiences afforded by marketized competition. The coaching and advice provided by members of the Dota 2 community reflect the need for players to develop entrepreneurial strategies to manage the psychosocial costs of neoliberal competition. The irony is that many of these strategies refer back to the very methods of measurement and performance evaluation that produce the uncertainties and anxieties that entangle players into seeking out advice.

Conclusion: Metric Tyranny

The application of Beer's concept of 'metric power' to Dota 2 reveals the impact of gameplay metrics to generate competitive uncertainty through the ranking, comparison and evaluation of player performances. As such, this chapter captures the tendency for measurement in games to

encourage players to adopt the approach of *Homo Economicus* (Baerg, 2012; Voorhees, 2015; Brock, 2017). There is plenty of evidence within the discursive environment of Dota 2 to suggest that metrics assist players to apply an economic methodology to their gameplay practices. Examples from the rhetoric used around APM, GPM, LH/DN score and other measures reveals how players manage the data of the game to maximise their efficiency and effectiveness. As with other examples, Dota 2 players are encouraged to adopt a cost-benefit analysis as the game rewards those who take up the mandate of self-improvement and productivity. Indeed, Dota 2 is an example of a 'neoliberal technology' (Whitson, 2013), given its emphasis on metrics as a pathway to performance enhancement and success. Equally, this technology leverages data to create a discourse of uncertainty in which success pivots on the capacity of players to respond quickly, accurately, and efficiently. Dota Plus is a technology built to aid players in managing the risk of this uncertainty, offering them even more measures on the understanding that this will render the competition intelligible and manageable. In this sense, the Dota 2 player meets with Voorhees' account of neoliberal masculinity – players use metrics to find the most efficient combination of skills and abilities needed to succeed. Indeed, the very idea of performance coaching draws parallels with his analysis of entrepreneurialism in esports. In essence, the Dota 2 player manages competitive risks by calculating the costs and benefits of this advice.

However, this chapter also contributes new knowledge as it reveals that behind the economic rationalities that typically characterise a neoliberal agent is a precarity or uncertainty that profoundly affects the Dota 2 subject. There is a 'biopolitics' (Foucault, 1997) to counting clicks – a fragility, uncertainty, and insecurity within masculine identity formation as it is thrust into the market of competitive gameplay and asked to cope with the stresses and anxieties of having one's performances monitored and evaluated. Following Voorhees (2015), this subject is both

neoliberal and hegemonic. It is clear from the discourse that players adopt techniques and strategies of self-governance that further rely on engaging with the competitive market. Thus, we see examples of community-generated content coaching players on the costs and benefits of managing the risks to their wellbeing. In other words, the community naturalises the anxiety that metrics generate by holding one another individually responsible for overcoming the psychological and physiological constraints that market conditions generate. Entrepreneurialism rules within this grid of intelligibility – as players coach one another into becoming speedy, smart, prophetic, efficient, and, above all, 'un-tilt-able', subjects.

There is, of course, something paradoxical about players packaging and distributing this self-help advice according to market criteria (Giddens, 1991). Dota 2 players position themselves as concerned with overcoming the anxieties that competition generates while also seeking out ways to make themselves more effective within its marketplace. This process often involves them having to embrace the risks, uncertainties, and anxieties that gameplay metrics generate while insourcing the responsibility for making the correct choices needed to remain competitive. As the advice from Wyatt and others show, the central motif running through performance coaching is that players must take responsibility for their own life and sense of wellbeing. This discourse takes competitive uncertainty and combines it with an ethos of self-actualisation, self-development, self-growth, and self-help to drive the player towards constant productivity. Indeed, Wyatt suggests that the only barrier to success is the player themselves, thereby securing the conditions for constant *self-work* through anxiety and guilt (see Salecl, 2011). This self-work through metrics is tyrannical: creating the conditions for social control through the ideology of life-coaching (see Cederström and Spicer, 2015).

In drawing this chapter to a close, it is crucial to consider its argument for debates about masculinities in play. It is evident through the work of Paul (2018), Voorhees (2015) and others (Voorhees and Orlando, 2018) that the competitive nature of videogames can contribute to the 'toxic' communications that take place between players online. Dota 2 is certainly no different in this regard. Indeed, in-game and paratextual communications often confirm examples of discrimination, exclusionism and cyber-bullying (Adinolf and Turkay, 2018; Sheepsticked, 2019). It certainly makes sense that metrics can contribute to the 'gender-assemblages' (Taylor and Voorhees, 2018) that facilitate patriarchy and misogyny as well as examples of neoliberal masculinity. After all, as Beer (2016, p.197) argues, metrics are *active deeds*, loaded and carry consequential forms of communication. The very notion of measuring is active: it is a practice in which someone is trying to do something to achieve something over someone else. What the arguments of Beer (2016) and others (Wetherell, 2012) raise is the recognition of the *psychosocial* power of metrics to penetrate individual subjectivity here, perhaps more deeply than rational choice. Indeed, as the example of performance coaching reveals, metrics structure the psyche by generating conflicting forces, tensions and emotions that drive players to act in fuzzy, paradoxical, and unstable ways. Future research on player subjectivities and constructions of masculinity may start here to reveal the power of metrics.

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