

Esports Casting and Commentary: Implications for Game Designers

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INTRODUCTION

Esports is a growing industry, not only for professional players, but also for team managers, coaches, and casters [3]. Casters are those who comment on the game as it is being played for the education and entertainment of the audience [1]. A good caster draws the audience into the game, by explaining what is happening and supporting excitement around the game. These casters usually fall into one of two styles, either play-by-play or color commentary. Casters play a vital role in helping tournaments and other large events garner larger viewership. Research has shown that players value not only attributes of the video games themselves (e.g., play mechanics, aesthetics) but the actors and institutions that build and support the gaming community [5]. We argue that video game design often ignores this aspect by failing to build interfaces for casters. In this work, we outline best practices to make the casting experience better for both the caster and the audience.

METHODS

This study employed qualitative methods of inquiry into video game casting. We conducted 20 semi-structured interviews [4] with casters over Discord of two game, Rocket League and Dota 2, ten casters from each game. Rocket League is a soccer like game, where two teams of three players try to hit a ball into their opponent's goal with rocket equipped cars. Dota 2 is a five versus five team based game where the goal is to defend their own buildings while destroying the enemy's buildings.

The first two authors also engaged in participant observation over four months learning, doing, and becoming video game casters. The first author casted both Rocket League and Dota 2, while the second author focused on Rocket League. Each casting session was video recorded (~20 hours total) and after each session reflective notes were taken for later analysis.

Interviews transcriptions and notes were analyzed with a grounded theory approach [2]. All authors iteratively engaged in open coding and axial coding to capture emergent themes in the data. We developed a shared codebook

reflecting a theory of how competent casting is accomplished.

Our informants had a wide variety of expertise, from a few months to several years. All focused on one main game for their casting, few tried casting other games. 18 presented or read as male, the other two identified themselves as female. Only one caster made a full time living doing casting. Casters who identified their age were between 18 and 30 years old.

FINDINGS

While our findings are still preliminary we highlight three key themes. First, all games are not created equal in terms of casting. Games have different interfaces and affordances for casters, which makes them harder or easier to cast.

P2, a Dota 2 caster who also helps to organize collegiate esports tournaments for various games expressed frustration at some games lack of what they called a spectator client. This client allows not only casters, but general players to watch games. Some games allow for players to create a private lobby, in order to organize a match between specific opponents. These lobbies are a place where one can allow a spectator join in the formation of the game. Both Rocket League and Dota 2 have this capability.

Second, casters universally felt that casting with a cocaster was better than casting alone. Most of the time, a caster is not simply casting. They are also responsible for camera work, setting up and maintaining the stream, managing downtime between games, and in some cases even acting as an admin or representative of the tournament.

Finally, all casters agreed that the way to get into casting is to simply start doing it. P1, the only caster who made a full time living off of casting, described how they started: *"The very, very first cast I did was for YouTube, so I just recorded locally and then, I think I did one intro that was just total garbage, started again. muscled my way through the whole cast, it wasn't good, but it was finished."* By jumping into it a beginning caster is able to figure out what information they have available within the game and how to incorporate it within the cast.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGNERS, PUBLISHERS, AND TOURNAMENT ORGANIZERS

The main takeaways for designers is to consider casters when designing your game. As P2 noted simply having the ability to spectate games within the game client is vital to casting games. This spectator needs free control of the camera to take on the role of the producer/cameraperson they often also fill. The ability to spectate games will benefit the entire player base by letting new players watch higher skilled players. It also provides an entry point for new casters to cast games and get the practice they need.

Casters also need access to relevant statistics and information based on the game. Rocket League provides statistics such as shots on goal and saves which helps the caster craft a story about the game.

Finally, for those who organize tournaments and leagues, give fair compensation to your casters. They provide their own equipment, their time and energy to make the event the best it can be.

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

A key ethical concern that arose in our project is that of worker exploitation. Most of these casters have not been paid for their time or services and do it for the love of the game. Only one has been able to make a full-time job out of casting, and that was only for a year before they choose to go back to school. Those who are paid at all for their time are paid by the match, regardless of length and with little to no regard for the time, effort, and money they put in outside of the boundaries of any given match. On average casters who get paid are paid less than \$10 an hour when considering the time they devote to research before matches, and the time it takes them to set up and maintain the stream.

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