Online Toxicity as Violence in Esports: A *League of Legends* case study

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Abstract

This thesis aims to explore toxicity within esports using a case study of the game *League of Legends*. Toxicity has become increasingly problematic as online media become more popular, in particular with the growth of online gaming.

Gaming has experienced significant growth over the past decade, with an estimated net worth of 200 billion dollars by 2023. A burgeoning sector of gaming is esports, worth 950 million dollars in 2020 and estimated to be worth 1600 million by 2023. Esports are video games played professionally; they draw many elements from traditional sports but exist as their own distinct phenomena.

The thesis explores toxicity using the lens of violence to better understand its causes and potential solutions. This means exploring online toxicity as a form of non-physical violence as it appears in the *League of Legends* online community, including both its fans and industry professionals. The lens of violence allows this thesis to incorporate a wider scope of literature, most notably that of sports literature, to address toxicity.

By comparing and contrasting the two contexts of esports and sports along with literature on sports violence, this thesis constructs an understanding of violence in esports, its associated causes, outcomes, and potential solutions. Issues of violence have increasing importance as esports continue to grow and expand their audience, compounding the impacts of toxic behaviour. Given esports culture is new and currently being shaped, action taken now will determine the future of this rapidly growing industry and its community.

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Research at Macquarie University. I certify that the thesis is entirely my own work and that I have given fully documented reference to the work of others. This thesis has not previously, in part or whole, been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

Signed:

Jamie Wearing

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Introduction

Sport is constantly changing in response to broader social events and developments (Guttmann 1986). In his book *Sport, Culture and the Media* David Rowe (1999) explores the intersection of these three phenomena (Sport, Culture and Media*)* and outlines how they have developed over time, alongside changes in society and in particular technology. In a subsequent book Rowe and Hutchins comment that rapid changes in media and sport require both the industry and scholars to recognise that "the game has moved on", or rather, moved online (Hutchins and Rowe 2009). Miah (2014) states: "As sports become further constituted by digital technologies and the user culture that surrounds them, their values and the experience change as well" (Miah 2014). Miah also notes that society is ill equipped to navigate and manage this digital shift, meaning that "perhaps the single most important issue in this aspect of sport's digital future is how the increased management of social communication will take place." (Miah 2014)

This thesis seeks to understand how a shift to a digital medium changes the nature of, and our understanding of, violence in the area of esports. It explores the idea that violence is both an appropriate label for toxic behaviour, and one that can help in addressing it. This was achieved through a case study of toxicity as a form of online violence in the *League of Legends Reddit* community.[1] This case study is then contrasted to existing research on sports spectator violence in hopes of better understanding how we might approach the issue. Through an analysis of

[1] *Reddit* is an online social media platform popular amongst gaming communities. Members of these communities post news and opinions on 'subreddits' dedicated to specific topics; these posts are then discussed by the community in the form of comments. This thesis conducts an analysis of posts and comments made on the *League of Legends* subreddit.

toxicity in esports as a form of non-physical online violence this thesis aims to better understand its causes and potential solutions.

While past conceptions of violence have largely involved "the deliberate infliction of bodily violation or harm" (Shaw in Turner 2006, p. 652), more recent conceptions of violence have adapted in response to the digital world, and a society which understands the prominence and consequences of non-physical harm. Poland (2016) draws attention to the myriad of non-physical violence prominent in domestic abuse, including verbal abuse, economic domination and media control, stating: "Violence that affects women's physical bodies is all too common, yet it is not the only kind of violence that occurs." (Poland 2016, p. 13) Poland continues by highlighting how non-physical violence can be taken less seriously, even insofar as to appear socially acceptable, and how this violence disproportionally affects minority groups. As society has moved online so too has violence. This thesis examines how violence manifests online, and what can be done to address it.[2] Like Poland (2016), this thesis proposes that by addressing instances of abuse and harassment amongst other harmful acts of aggression as forms of violence, that they will be taken more seriously, and greater efforts will be made to address them.[3] It should be noted that while this thesis uses feminist literature it does not seek to directly address the issues associated with sexism and gender in esports. While these topics are important the aim of this thesis to provide a broader overview of toxicity through the lens of violence which may facilitate more specific research in the future.

[2] Brett Hutchins highlights "the enduring importance of history in understanding contemporary social life" (Chee et al 2021) and how our understandings of the past influence our view of the present and shape our future. Given the importance of the internet as a form of communication and individual expression in the digital age this thesis explores how our understanding of violence may change in order to shape "who is listened to and recognized, how issues are defined and understood, and who has the resources and right to enact change." (Chee et al. 2021)

Esports are video games which are played professionally. Esports have been growing rapidly in popularity and commercial success, with the esports market projected to be worth $1.5 billion by 2023 (Reyes 2021). This success has largely been driven by the overall growth of the gaming industry which can now safely be described as a popular mainstream cultural phenomenon, worth $60.4 billion in 2020 in the United States alone (Clement 2021). With more people playing and watching esports than ever before, it becomes increasingly pertinent to better understand the instances of violence which are perpetrated within it. Significant research has been targeted at documenting and understanding issues of harassment and abuse within the 'toxic' gaming community (Paul, 2018; Witzke, 2019; Adinolf and Turkay, 2018; Türkay et al., 2020; Mattinen and Macey, 2018; Kordyaka et al., 2020; Kou, 2020; Burgess et al., 2017; Aghazadeh et al., 2018; Maher, 2016); however, no research has placed toxicity, abuse and harassment in esports within a broader history of violence in sport. This thesis examines the existing literature on violence in sports and applies it within the online world of esports, drawing insights by observing the similarities and differences between the contexts of traditional sports and esports. By comparing and contrasting literature on violence in traditional sports with work done in online 'toxicity', this thesis aims to construct a more wholistic understanding of violence in esports and its associated causes, outcomes, and potential solutions.

> Esports is high-level professional videogaming where players compete for cash prices. It is perceived as a form of computer-mediated competitive activity that attracts spectators, and involve a governing body (Freeman and Wohn 2017 in Adinolf and Türkay 2018, p. 366)

It is important to note that esports exists as a separate entity to traditional sport. The debate surrounding the extent to which esports represents sport is arguably redundant and prevents a

better understanding of esports on their own unique merits (Cranmer et al. 2021; Funk et al. 2018, p. 9). However, it would be misguided not to acknowledge how esports have developed in reference to sports and reflect many similar or identical components. The simple basis of two human players or teams competing with one another for a prize, the presence of casters (commentators), cheering fans both in person and online, tournament brackets, and even examples of franchised esports leagues demonstrates the close connections. While esports does exist as a separate entity from sports, there is invaluable insight that can be gained by studying aspects of esports within the broader academic tradition of the sports literature.

This thesis has chosen to research online toxic violence within esports using the game *League of Legends* as a case study. A 'case study' is an empirical inquiry investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its real−life context (Yin 1989, p. 23). Stake (2003) highlights the importance of selecting cases based on their ability to provide insight into the research problem. *League of Legends* was chosen for its popularity and relevance within esports and academia, as demonstrated by the 99.6 million unique viewers and a prize pool of $2,225,000 USD for the 2018 World Championship had. In addition, *League of Legends* features prominently in esports research (Goslin 2018; Pei 2019; liquipedia 2018; Witzke 2019; Adinolf and Turkay, 2018; Türkay et al. 2020; Kwak et al. 2015; Kou and Gui, 2014; Johnson et al. 2015; Tyack et al. 2016; Sengün et al. 2019), while its community is renowned for having issues with toxicity (Searl, 2020; Jasmine, 2021).

> Case studies are of value in refining theory and suggesting complexities for further investigation, as well as helping to establish the limits of generalizability... Case study can also be a disciplined force in public policy setting and reflection on human experience. (Stake 2003, p. 156)

A case study enables an appropriately specific study of violence in esports through *League of Legends*. This methodology facilitates the intricacies and associated complexities of this new area, providing a framework which enables the necessary understanding of this space to properly refine existing theory and find solutions to inform policy.

This thesis has conducted a qualitative analysis of posts and comments made on the *League of Legends* page of the social media platform *Reddit*, in the tradition of the new and evolving field of digital ethnography (Dhiraj, 2008; Hjorth et al., 2017). Multiple studies have used this approach within gaming, including Burgess et al. (2017) who analysed the *Twitter* feed of Anita Sarkeesian to draw insight on online harassment within Gamergate, Sengün et al. (2019) who studied in game chat logs to better understand hate speech based on different geographical regions, and Taylor (2018) who drew evidence from the streaming platform Twitch and highlighted its importance in understanding and studying the gaming community. Finally, this thesis uses the new perspective provided by violence to draw on research from sports studies. Välisalo and Ruotsalainen (2019) also draw from sports literature in their study of the esports game *Overwatch*, noting the influence of sportification on esports, and the similarities between esports and sports on issues such as gender and nationality (Välisalo and Ruotsalainen, 2019). Games studies, and the field of esports, is still developing. This thesis aims to develop a more comprehensive understanding of toxic violence in esports using sports literature to better inform the research and help examine solutions and policy.

This thesis has three chapters. Chapter one provides context and definitions for the key terms and concepts used in this thesis through an examination of the relevant literature. It explores what it means to recontextualise the existing literature on sports and violence into the online world of esports. Chapter two details the findings of the digital ethnographic study of the *League of*

Legends subreddit.[4] It examines recent examples of toxic violence within the *League of Legends* community in order to understand their causes and potential solutions. Chapter three is a discussion of the findings of chapter two, it explores these findings with reference to sports literature and relevant recent examples in sports and media. It draws conclusions from the findings in this thesis to suggest possible solutions and highlight prominent issues for further research.

[4] A subreddit is a *Reddit* page dedicated to a specific topic where users will post and comment on recent news and events

Chapter One: Literature Review

This thesis explores toxicity within esports as a form of violence. It provides a new perspective on this issue in order to better understand its associated causes, impacts, outcomes and solutions. This chapter will outline the existing relevant literature on this topic and provide additional context and definitions to the key terms of violence and toxicity.

Violence is a concept that has been widely researched and debated (Allen and Anderson 2017; Hamby 2017; Shaw 2006; Poland 2016; Young 2019). Given that engaging with all the scholarship on violence is impractical for this thesis, it will focus on understanding violence purely within an online context. It is first pertinent to acknowledge that in the past violence has been confined and defined to "the deliberate infliction of bodily violation or harm" (Shaw 2006, p. 652). However, more recent conceptions of violence have developed in a society which understands the prominence and consequences of non-physical harm (Hamby 2017; Poland 2016). This thesis considers the potential for 'online violence', with a contemporary and highly contextual understanding of violence in the digital era.

Recent literature has shown how our understanding of violence has shifted to include the non-physical: "Violence that affects women's physical bodies is all too common, yet it is not the only kind of violence that occurs." (Poland 2016, p. 13) Poland argues violence extends to abuse, economic domination and media control, and notes how these forms of violence can often be socially acceptable (Poland 2016, p. 13). Through a focus on violence, feminist literature has drawn attention to the harm caused by actions not previously given the attention and public condemnation they deserve. This thesis hopes to draw similar attention to the problem of online violence and how it might be better addressed going forward (Hamby 2017; Poland 2016). This

shift in understanding shows how definitions and perceptions of violence can change along with society, most notably here to include the non-physical. As such it is pertinent to consider how violence has changed as the world and our interaction within it is increasingly digitized.

In order to establish an appropriate definition of online violence it is important to distinguish violence from aggression. Allen and Anderson (2017) outline how violence is a subset of aggression set apart by the extent of harm intended to the victim. They claim, "Violence is an extreme form of aggression that has severe harm (usually physical injury or death) as its goal" (Allen and Anderson 2017, p. 12), but also note, "In recent years, some nonphysical forms of aggression have earned the label 'violence' when the consequences are severe" (Allen and Anderson 2017, p. 3). Thus, it seems violence is separated from aggression by the harm intended by the perpetrator.[5] However, Hamby (2017) notes that social psychological approaches such as this fail to adequately distinguish between aggression and violence as they rely too heavily on exemplars.[6] Hamby also notes the 'harm' caused is often assumed to be physical and doesn't properly consider psychological harm which can have much more damaging effects, particularly in the long term. Subsequently, drawing from the broader literature and approaches to violence, Hamby concludes: "Violence is behaviour that is (a) intentional, (b) unwanted, (c) nonessential, and (d) harmful" (Hamby 2017, p. 168). In this definition violence is "distinguished from aggression by its nonessential nature, following the animal research model" (Hamby 2017, p. 177). As a result, in this thesis online violence will be defined as acts of aggression online which are intentional, unwanted, nonessential and harmful.

[5] Violence and aggression might also be distinguished based on the harm actually inflicted by an aggressor; however this is complicated by whether an unsuccessful aggressive act intended to cause significant harm is any less violent.

[6] An exemplar is an example used to define the boundaries of violence rather than an all-encompassing definition.

Despite expanding the range of actions which can constitute violence to an online, non-physical realm, and the threat this poses to weakening its meaning, this thesis proposes that the intentions of perpetrators of online violence, and the harm caused to victims of online violence, warrant such a classification. Powell and Henry (2017) outline how sexual violence has developed in the digital age, further cementing the idea that violence can take non-physical form. Research in similar areas such as cyberbullying has demonstrated the severely harmful effects that online abuse and harassment can have: "there is no doubt that there are serious long-term effects of cyberbullying such as youth depression, anxiety, lower self-esteem and even suicide." (Chadwick 2014, p. xi) Further research has shown how online harassment in the workplace can increase stress and lead to people leaving their jobs (Loh and Snyman 2020).

Having established a definition of online violence, it becomes useful to better understand the space in which this violence is perpetrated. This thesis will restrict its scope to the world of online gaming, more specifically esports and the game *League of Legends*. Only by understanding the unique parameters of this environment can we understand how violence within it is either the same or different to other areas of society. In doing so we become better able to identify its unique causes, outcomes and solutions. The most prominent voice in esports is Taylor (2012), whose book *Raising the Stakes* gave a well-rounded, in depth, accurate account of the esports scene, surprisingly ahead of its time. Despite these strengths, the sheer size of the topic area and its age (particularly in the rapidly changing world of esports) are notable issues. Taylor's (2018) book *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming* brings her work more up to date with the present-day world of esports and the meteoric rise of streaming platforms like *Twitch*.

Taylor's (2018) book brings her into a post-Gamergate world, a crucial event for the gaming community and its study. Gamergate has been thoroughly documented and researched, with a wholistic case study of its events completed by Aghazadeh et al. (2018). Centred around issues of sexism, racism, abuse and harassment within the gaming community, Gamergate brought to light the issue of 'toxicity' within the gaming community. Türkay et al. (2020) note how toxicity is difficult to define and can have different meanings to different people and in different contexts. They explain that toxicity includes "harassment, cheating, raging (aggressive outbursts, also called flaming), griefing (targeted attempts to annoy a player), cyberbullying, and intentionally helping opposing player(s) (or throwing the game)" (Türkay et al. 2020, p. 1). While this is not an exhaustive list, it encapsulates a type of behaviour and more importantly an intention, where an individual seeks to ruin the experience of another player. "Cook et al. (2018) found that motivations fell into three main categories: attack, sensation-seeking, and interaction" (Türkay et al. 2020, p. 2). Gamergate revealed the harmful potential for toxicity as harassment motivated particularly by sexism progressed beyond the game and into the lives of many female figures in the gaming community. This toxic behaviour even took the form of death threats and threats of sexual violence amongst other targeted, continuous abuse (Burgess et al. 2017; Aghazadeh et al. 2018).

Gamergate is the most prominent example of toxicity within the gaming community, however the elements that made it possible are the less sensational occurrences of toxic behaviour which have become a consistent reoccurring element of the gaming community. Paul (2018) notes the inherent competitive and meritocratic elements of video games as 'going hand in hand' with toxicity. Witzke (2019) also highlights competition as an underlying cause of toxicity and notes how toxic behaviours have become ingrained as accepted practice within esports communities.

This normalisation of toxic behaviours is noted by Adinolf and Turkay (2018) and in a latter paper Türkay et al. (2020) highlight fatalism and acceptance of toxicity within the community as the main barrier to finding solutions.[7] Türkay et al. (2020) add the anonymity of online spaces as the other main contributor to this problem. They note how, "surprisingly, some forms of toxicity, particularly sexism and racism, weren't even recognized by people who weren't targeted by them" (Türkay et al. 2020, p. 10). Türkay et al. (2020) suggest this implies an environment where perpetrators of toxic behaviour either don't consider their behaviour toxic, or don't consider it as serious and think they can get away with it. Meanwhile the victims of this behaviour, particularly minorities, are forced to deal with this abuse and harassment with little to no hope of change or repercussions (Paul 2018). Thus, it appears the main contributing factors in the toxicity of the gaming community are competition, anonymity, and normalisation.

Expanding on these findings, Mattinen and Macey (2018) also note key elements such as anonymity and competition, adding "previous research has shown that early exposure, and repeated exposure, to socially undesirable behaviours leads to desensitisation" (Mattinen and Macey 2018, p. 3), behaviours such as violence, pornography and verbal aggression. Mattinen and Macey (2018) cite a Finnish report which found that 70% of responders to a survey of people playing *League of Legends* and *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* had been victim to verbal harassment and that 90% had witnessed it. This finding gives some insight into the prevalence of toxicity within the gaming community. It also explains why the problem of toxicity might seem normal to many in the gaming community, and unsolvable to those who have to face it regularly. A study conducted on trolling (a prominent form of toxic behaviour)

[7] Responses to their study expressed sentiments including: 'it can't change', 'there's no problem in the first place' or 'it's just a part of the game'.

found that the most prominent cause for someone to troll occurred because they were trolled themselves (Cook et al. 2018).[8] Finally, the Mattinen and Macey (2018) study found that toxic behaviour was more common and taken less seriously by younger people, who considered it as a part of the games experience. These findings imply that toxicity will only continue to worsen in the community as it becomes normalised, more of the community is induced to become 'trolls' by being trolled themselves, and toxicity becomes more and more ingrained as a part of the gaming experience. Overall, these findings demonstrate that normalisation is a major issue in spreading toxicity.

Kordyaka et al. (2020) consolidate these findings in an attempt to find a 'unified theory of toxic behaviour in video games'. They define toxicity as "a behavior encountered when a player comes across a negative event during a game that generates anger and frustration, leading to a harmful, contaminated, and disseminated toxic type of communication" (Kordyaka et al. 2020, p. 1083). They note the aforementioned causes of toxicity (competition, anonymity and normalisation) and attribute them to the online disinhibition effect, social cognitive theory, and the theory of planned behaviour. The online disinhibition effect accounts for differences in online as opposed to in person behaviours. This accounts for the phenomena discussed in Dunja Autunovic's (2019) paper '"We wouldn't say it to their faces": online harassment, women sports journalists, and feminism'. In online environments individuals may not perceive their actions as seriously as they would in person, a finding mirrored in Adinolf and Turkay (2018), where individuals either didn't identify their behaviour as toxic, or didn't consider their actions as

[8] Trolling is derived from fishing jargon and the idea of dragging a baited hook behind a boat to catch a fish (Dynel 2016). In gaming it refers to baiting a desired response out of another individual/player, for example through an inflammatory comment aiming to irritate or anger the target. Ibid. highlights that trolling can be a result of many different motivations, not all of them toxic, highlighting the nuance and complexity of the phenomenon. Although this is important to note, this thesis will focus on the negative forms of trolling associated with toxicity as they pertain to its research interests.

serious: “It is concerning that many participants either did not notice toxicity, particularly racism or sexism, or reported normalizing such behavior” (Adinolf and Turkay 2018, p. 370). Social cognitive theory provides context to the infectious element of toxicity, where individuals mimic what they perceive in an environment, hence why toxicity breeds more toxicity. Finally, the theory of planned behaviour suggests that people go into situations expecting to interact in a certain way based on their past experiences and are essentially primed to be toxic in online gaming communities due to their past interactions.

Bastian et al. (2020) surmise that the changes needed to properly address toxicity in the gaming community require action from the companies at a design level. This is a conclusion echoed by Kou (2020) who found toxicity to be an ‘organic’ and ‘dynamic social process’ within gaming, requiring developers and companies to be proactive rather than reactive in their response. Kou notes that “if toxicity is an organic component of a particular community/culture, then nuanced perspectives and solutions should be taken to approach it for the ultimate goal of promoting community development and wellbeing” (Kou 2020, p. 12).

There have been some prominent examples of research targeted at addressing toxicity within the gaming community. Paul (2018) believes that solutions to toxicity revolve around addressing the fundamental issue of competition in game design. He proposes that the meritocratic culture around gaming breeds toxicity derived from people’s value and worth being inherently attached to their skill. He proposes that the gaming industry look towards other forms of game design not based too heavily on competition. This approach may hold merit for the future, but is of little help in addressing already existing games and their communities. Mattinen and Macey (2018) and Kordyaka et al. (2020) both highlight developer intervention as necessary in addressing the issue of toxicity. Their research highlights that placing the onus on individual reform will not

change the established culture within the gaming community, rather, broader action from the companies responsible for these spaces is required. Despite these contributions, toxicity remains at large and in a seemingly worsening state.

Viewing toxicity as an issue of violence allows us to draw from other areas of research which might provide a different perspective and suggest new approaches to a solution. Hutchins and Rowe (2012) note that esports reflect many elements of sports through a new technological medium, but also carry across many similar problems. Summerley (2020) observes "nationalism, classism, racism, ableism, and sexism are rife in the early institutionalization of traditional sports" (Summerley 2020, p. 60) many such issues which have been observed in instances of toxicity within the gaming community (Paul 2018; Burgess et al. 2017; Summerley 2020). The issue of violence is well studied in sport, an area which many have noted bares many similarities to esports (Välisalo and Ruotsalainen 2019; Summerley 2020; Cranmer et al. 2021). Hutchins (2008) posited that esports was rapidly shifting and developing but was still a part of the 'social world'. Subsequently while esports is its own distinct phenomenon it is possible to draw insight from related areas featuring problems with similar causes (Cranmer et al. 2021).

Since their inception there has been debate on whether or not esports are a sport (Cranmer et al. 2021). Cranmer et al. (2021) appropriately note that this debate is ultimately reductive to our understanding of esports and its development, since esports is its own distinct phenomenon and should be understood as such.[9] While true, this shouldn't prevent us from drawing comparisons between the two areas in order to better understand one or both. Recent literature has

[9] In his 2021 interview Brett Hutchins touches upon how esports are both influenced by and inextricably linked to sports while still being their own separate entity worthy of study (Chee et al. 2021). While it is important to understand the vital role sports have played in the development of esports, it is equally crucial not to overly conflate the two phenomena as has been done on occasion in the past (Summerley 2020).

successfully drawn upon sports literature to inform their research on esports including Välisalo and Ruotsalainen (2019) and Summerley (2020). This thesis seeks to draw on spectator violence, an area of sports literature not yet utilized in the study of esports. Spectator violence in sport is a well-researched field that offers potential insights into the problems faced by esports. The same causes of violence in esports are present in sports, the anonymity of being in a crowd replaces that of being online, and both normalisation and competition remain fundamentally the same (Crawford 2004; Wann et al. 2001). Nicholson and Hoye's (2005) research demonstrates the importance of education and sportsmanship in youth sport to create an inclusive culture, a focus which is notably absent in gaming. Guttmann (1986) explores how sport was 'civilised' in the twentieth century as society learned how to moderate violence within the spaces where sports violence was a problem. Crawford (2004) outlines how spectator violence in sport was curtailed over time through key improvements in the moderation of sports venues. He notes that companies were encourages to improve moderation by pressure from families and the potential for increased profits (Crawford 2004). This thesis will explore how these findings might be applied to online violence in esports.

Taylor (2018) highlights the issue of moderation in gaming and esports, noting that it is largely been carried out by volunteer members of the community. This reflects exploitative practices occurring more broadly within the gaming industry such as the issue labelled by Kücklich (2005) as 'playbour'.[10] Until the companies responsible for online spaces take the necessary steps to properly maintain them, the problem of online violence will only continue to worsen. This thesis posits that by better understanding the severity of toxicity online from the perspective of

[10] Playbour refers to the merging of work and play in creative industries such as gaming where the work of passionate creators can often see little to no remuneration (Kücklich 2005)

violence, that there will be greater pressure to properly address the issues at play in these spaces. Chapter two will explore this concept through an analysis of examples of toxicity in *League of Legends* as violence.

Chapter 2: A Case Study of Toxicity as Violence in *League of Legends*

Introduction

This chapter outlines a digital ethnographic case study of the video game *League of Legends* (*LoL*). Murthy explains that "as ethnography goes digital, its epistemological remit remains much the same. Ethnography is about telling social stories" (Murthy 2008, pg. 838). This thesis aims to study narratives involving toxic elements in social interactions within the *LoL* community. Given the vast multitude of online communities, each with their own unique idiosyncrasies, a case study of only *LoL* was considered the best way of achieving meaningful results within the scope of this thesis. Despite focusing on just one game and its community, this research is more broadly applicable to other games and online communities, given the similarities in the causes, effects and solutions of online toxicity (Suzor et al., 2019; Kordyaka et al., 2020; Mattinen and Macey, 2018; Paul, 2018; Türkay et al., 2020).

This thesis conducted a qualitative analysis of various examples of toxicity within the *LoL* milieu. The social media platform *Reddit* has been used as an entry point to find relevant examples from the community as it is popular amongst multiple gaming communities including *LoL*. A subreddit is a forum on *Reddit* for posts and discussion specifically related to a certain topic, in this case *LoL*. The examples chosen were restricted to those found on the subreddit for *LoL*, and specifically involved the esports scene rather than the games community more broadly. Specifically, this thesis sought to answer a) whether instances of toxicity could be defined as violence, b) whether considering these instances as violence would help in finding solutions, and c) what analysing toxicity through the lens of violence reveals about the nature of the problem.

The subsequent investigation encountered recurring debates on the definition, understanding and potential solutions for toxicity taking place within the *LoL Reddit* community. These examples have been examined with reference to the four criteria for violence outlined earlier in the thesis (intentional, harmful, non-essential, and unwanted) in order to better understand how violence can be used as a method of distinguishing different types of toxic behaviour.

Aside from its main goal to investigate toxicity in esports, this thesis also made discoveries on the usage of *Reddit* as a research tool. The original research plan was to analyse the content of the top 20 posts and their comments (chat logs/discourse) under the search term 'toxicity'. However, this was immediately problematic given that the *Reddit* search system turned up results with minimal to no relevance to the research questions. Following a range of varied attempts under different search terms it became clear that although relevant examples did exist there was no way to find them under a single search. Since toxicity is such a broad and subjective term the different examples were posted in different ways under different key terms, such that although they were linked thematically, they were not linked directly under any key search terms.[11] This provided insight into issues of toxicity's definition and normalisation within the community. Another issue was the quality of discourse within the community, lacking the more specific focus of a pre-prepared questionnaire or structured interview it made analysis more difficult. Despite these issues the analysis of these *Reddit* posts provided insight into the causes, outcomes and solutions for toxicity within *LoL* and online communities more broadly.

While this method proved more difficult in many aspects than many other forms of data collection it also provided unique benefits. Robinson (2001) highlighted the potential of the

[11] My solution to this problem meant finding all relevant threads relating to toxicity using search terms such as 'flame', 'harassment', 'abuse' and 'toxicity' and then selecting the most relevant based on their content and their metrics (ie. Likes, views and comments)

internet for data rich qualitative research in its infancy. The success of social media platforms like *Reddit* which allow a much greater portion of society to contribute to discussions in a highly visible way is revolutionary for qualitative research. Robinson (2001) particularly notes the exciting potential of unsolicited first-person narratives. The ability to observe the *LoL* community's thoughts and feelings on various topics unaffected by framing or bias from a questionnaire is an exciting benefit of this approach.

In many cases the issues discussed in this thesis have already been debated within the community for several years, making it only a matter of finding these debates and analysing them with reference to existing literature. However, Robinson (2001) also notes the evolving ethical considerations associated with this new form of research. These concerns have been further explored in more recent literature which also centres around issues of consent, and public vs private sources of data collection (Johnson 2010). As a result, this thesis used examples posted to public forums involving highly publicised issues readily available online. *Reddit's* use of pseudonyms is also useful in preserving the identity and privacy of the users whose posts are featured. However, it is still a crucial factor to consider when conducting this kind of research. Overall, it is my conclusion that this approach could provide unique insights into future research done on online communities.

The following four sections will explore violence in esports using Hamby's (2017) four criteria for violence outlined earlier in the thesis in order to better understand how violence can be used as a method of distinguishing different types of toxic behaviour. Having examined a range of cases of toxicity under the previously outlined search criteria, it became clear that while some examples could clearly be construed as violence, many were difficult to place definitively. The difficulty in placing these cases reveals complexities in how we understand toxicity. By

exploring these complexities this chapter establishes a better understanding of toxicity and the problems we face in addressing it. Intentionality is the first criterion we will examine.

Intentional

Intent plays an important role in distinguishing violent actions from a range of other similar but crucially non-violent behaviours. Hamby (2017) notes that many interpretations of violence specify 'intent to harm' as the key factor. However, problems include issues of cognitive preconditions (such as in the case of children or the mentally disabled) and accidental or negligent behaviour resulting in harm. Some of these complexities are reflected in the legal system and the differences between manslaughter and murder (Hamby 2017). The digital realm of esports impacts how intentionality is understood and determined. This section explores the role of intent in examples of toxic behaviour in *LoL* to determine how it impacts their potential to be considered violent.

While it is clear that the comments and actions in these examples were made intentionally, it is often less clear what they were intended to do. A common theme is the downplaying of comments as just jokes. In one example 'Reativo' responded to outrage resulting from a homophobic tweet: "Why was it shitty? I am trolling as always, I didn't insinuate anything and a herd of hurtful apes came, I just laughted-000 XDDDD". Trolling is commonplace in gamer culture and comes in many different forms: "A troll is a person "whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement" (Hardacker in Phillips 2015, p. 17). Phillips adds that:

> not all conversations about trolling have focused on deception… many accounts of trolling behaviors began to focus less on effects-based definitions (i.e., trolling is the process by which others are deceived) and more on communities that already regarded themselves as trollish (Phillips 2015, p. 17).[12]

Trolling has many similar attributes to toxicity, both can be harmful and hurtful, and both have the potential to overlap. Furthermore, trolling can mean different things to different people in the community, making it highly subjective. Finally trolling can be used as a way of avoiding responsibility for harmful comments, similar to bullies blaming their victims for being too sensitive (Kowalski et al. 2008). This demonstrates how intention plays an important role in identifying whether certain toxic behaviour could be considered violent.

Hamby (2017) highlights that it is necessary to understand the intentions of the perpetrator, and whether they were actually just joking or intending to harm someone. However, bringing violence into the digital realm adds complexity to this approach, largely due to anonymity and normalisation. The perpetrator cannot see the reaction of their victim, nor the victim the true intent of their potential abuser. Since comments are made anonymously it is very difficult to accurately deduce an individual's intentions, particularly when many forms of toxic behaviour have come to be seen as acceptable and normal practice online. Trolling can be common amongst friends playing video games together, or even in online communities where many streamers often ride a fine line between edgy humour which they claim is all in good fun, and comments which are hurtful and abusive. Perpetrators of toxic comments such as Reativo will

[12] The definition of trolling as a community-based phenomenon implies the use of sub-cultural approaches to studying online communities, an approach which features prominently in Phillips own research on trolls (Phillips 2015). While this approach was generally deemed too large to be fully explored by this thesis, it will be touched upon in the fourth section of this chapter titled 'unwanted'.

often state they were not to be taken seriously and they were just joking, however this does not prevent their comments from being harmful and damaging to others. Clearly intent can be an effective method of drawing out complexities in how we define toxic behaviour. Subsequently the following examples will examine further complexities associated with intent in toxicity, and how we judge the purpose of people's comments against their actual effects.

The first example is 'LS', who received large amounts of toxic backlash following reports that he had been selected to coach the South Korean LoL team SK Telecom T1 (now T1). The backlash was extreme with friends of LS reporting that his grandmother was also being harassed (theScore esports 2020). 'IWillDominate' tweeted: "The doxxing/harassment of LS's grandma is just sicking tbh[13], having to be on calls trying to plan out what to do if someone mails her something harmful or comes to her house to try harm her in person is surreal. How can video games make anyone do this…" (theScore esports 2020, 5:54) The scenario resulted in LS withdrawing from social media during the incident, with reports that he was dealing with poor mental health as a result of the attacks (WalIRose 2020). Following this occurrence, LS announced he would not be taking the coaching position and would instead take a role as a content creator with the organisation (LS 2020). He also condemned the racist comments made against the South Korean fans which had sprung up as a reaction to the harassment levelled at him (LS 2020). This example is a clear case of violence perpetrated online. The perpetrators went out of their way to attack LS, going as far as to include his grandmother in their attacks. This extreme behaviour is clearly intentional, non-essential, harmful and unwanted. As surmised by another professional within *LoL* esports, "this scenario is peak toxic fandom" (PaPaSmithy in theScore esports 2020, 5:50). However, not all cases are so easily defined. As such, this case will be used as a point of

[13] Tbh: To be honest

comparison and a benchmark for the analysis of other sources and their being labelled as violence.

A second example provides a more complicated view of intent in toxic behaviour. 'Broxah' is a professional LoL player who played for Team Liquid in 2020. During the season Broxah was often accused of underperforming and was replaced by the team at the end of the competitive season. Following these events Broxah responded to a question on his stream, "your reputation as a player kinda went down during the past year, why do you think that is?" (Broxah 2020, 0:17). He uploaded his response in a fourteen-minute video on *Youtube* titled, 'Opening Up About Toxicity in the Pro Player Community'. Once uploaded to *Reddit* it received more than 12,000 upvotes and 1500 comments. The conversation in the comments mainly focused on what constitutes toxic behaviour, and the role fans played in esports. Another professional player, 'Jankos', responded to Broxah in his own video titled 'Too Much Toxicity in the Pro Scene?', which explored the same issues of fans and toxicity. This dialogue and the conversation surrounding it provides insight into the concept of online violence, and the role played by intentionality.

In his video Broxah (2020) highlights the way public figures can influence opinion on players, leading to backlash disproportionate to a player's perceived wrongdoing. He also notes how harmful the effects of fan backlash can be, commenting on the treatment of rookies in the North American League (LCS) that year:

> these guys were treated by the community like they weren't even human beings… I had to stand up for ICah at one point because he was basically being straight up bullied by influencers, by content creators, by pro players… even if people out there think he is a bad player why does that make it ok to constantly trash talk him (Broxah 2020, 4:37).

Broxah's comments raise questions on the role of fans, public figures and social media in esports harassment. The role of fans will be addressed more thoroughly in the 'non-essential' section of this chapter. Meanwhile, public figures contribute to the systemic abuse of individuals online when they are negligent with the influence they wield over many thousands of people's actions. Systematic online harassment has been referred to as network harassment and a feminist study on this issue highlighted the role played by prominent public figures like Milo Yiannopolous and Mike Cernovich in the phenomenon of Gamergate and the broader alt-right movement (Marwick and Caplan 2018).

Social media has given much greater power to public figures with large online followings. The International Olympic Committee highlighted the issue of online harassment in their 'International Olympic Committee consensus statement: harassment and abuse (non-accidental violence) in sport' (Mountjoy et al. 2016). 'Cyber mechanisms' featured prominently in their statement where they noted the rapid rise of social media and smart devices as dramatically changing the landscape of harassment in sports (Mountjoy et al. 2016). They go on to note that harassment and abuse "risks are highest among elite, disabled, child and LGBT athletes, and that psychological abuse is at the core of all other forms", "exposure to an abusive elite sport culture can lead to a range of mental health difficulties and other negative impacts", and finally that "there is little research into the prevalence of cyber harassment and abuse in sport" (Mountjay 2016 et al., p. 1019, 1022, 1025). Issues of cyber harassment permeating across various online communities demonstrates the importance of research in this area. It also suggests root causes to this issue stemming from the online medium itself. These ideas will be properly explored in the third chapter, where literature from traditional sports will be analysed against the causes of anonymity, normalisation and competition.

Both the Olympic Committee and Marwick and Caplan highlight the issue of intentional harassment online. However, these viewpoints do not address the issue of unintentional harassment, nor how to distinguish between intentional and unintentional harassment online. As previously noted, anonymity and normalisation change the way we understand violence online. There is a greater disconnect between individual's intentions and the effects of their outcomes. Subsequently it becomes essential to address comments which unintentionally cause harm and their potential to be viewed as violence.

In his response video, Jankos states:

> toxicity from fans I don't think is misplaced necessarily. Because if a player is playing bad they can call him out. The only difference I would say is not liking someone and thinking he's bad and then there is a difference between that and… wishing 'someone go die' (Ch3ap - LoL Highlights 2020, 0:30).

Jankos surmises that the type of comments and method of critique separates toxicity from violence. This is an important area of distinction, however, Jankos also states that it is the job of a pro player to deal with negative comments and criticism provided they are not made in such an extreme fashion. This raises the question of what type of behaviour or comment is appropriate and what is not. Using Hamby's (2017) criteria this would mean judging appropriateness using the intentions of the individual. However, as this chapter has and will demonstrate this can be highly complex online given the difficulty in identifying these intentions, and the significant harm which can be done unintentionally.

Another issue contributing to unintentional harassment and complicating our traditional understanding of intention is dogpiling. Dogpiling is "when a large group of abusers collectively

attacks a target through a barrage of threats, slurs, insults, and other abusive tactics" (Pen Amercia 2021, p.1). This definition is taken from *Pen America's Online Harassment Field Manual* which begins by noting: "The first step to combatting online abuse is developing a shared language to identify and describe it" (Pen America 2021, p.1). This highlights an issue in the study of online communities given that it is a relatively new and developing academic field with many new phenomena and terms. Dogpiling presents a number of issues. First, it has effects on a victim disproportionate to each individual's contribution. Subsequently is can be difficult to appropriately attribute responsibility and blame to each individual contributor. Second, in many cases it can be difficult to determine whether the perpetrators are actually intending to be harmful. Since each individual comment can be harmless outside of the context of the collective it is possible many perpetrators do not intend their actions to be harmful at all. However, the opposite is also true, where individuals who do intend to make violent and harmful attacks can disguise their intent in the safety of a crowd. This is particularly problematic for esports, where fans criticise players constantly, and where the collective whole of thousands of fan comments may have harmful effects disproportionate to the individual contributions.

A single negative comment is very different from thousands, and even if each individual comment may be considered acceptable, their combined effects may have harmful outcomes. This leads to questions on how to moderate the behaviour of individuals in an online community to prevent mass movements of abuse or even the compounding effects of simple criticism targeting one individual. Broxah's (2020) video outlines one clear area to address, influencers and public figures. Individuals with large fan bases in online environments may need to be held accountable for how their words and actions influence their followers. The importance of this was seen in vivid detail during the capitol riots in the United States where President Donald

Trump made comments on his Twitter page which saw the beginning of a chain of events ending in his supporters storming the capitol (BBC News 2021). In the new digital age, it is becoming clearer how prominent figures can use their online presence to dramatically influence events. Given this understanding it becomes increasingly important to change how we address public figures, particularly in the predominantly digital realm of esports.

The comments made on Broxah's video provide further insight into the issue of toxicity within esports from the community itself. One comment highlights how toxicity "comes with social media. Fans feel that they are allowed to openly criticize and flame athletes online, often going into harassments territory" (Gabroux in HardAcorn 2020). Another states "I think it's fine to criticise poor performance, but there's a line that a lot of people don't mind crossing when they're typing on the internet" (EzSp in HardAcorn2020). These comments show how the online format has changed fan critique. Anonymity and normalisation have made it easier to make potentially harmful comments without consideration of their impact or fear of punishment. One user relays their experience trying to condemn fan critique and toxicity, "I've been trying to say this shit for so long and anytime I do… I just get told that it's "part of the scene"." (bimon_belmont in HardAcorn 2020) This comment highlights the role played by normalisation in the pervasiveness of toxicity in esports communities.

While these users identify problems stemming from toxicity within the community, other comments were quick to draw a distinction between abuse and criticism. The top-rated comment with 2.9 thousand upvotes states, "For the record. Context is key. Simply saying someone underperformed is totally normal and not toxic." (DeathByCudles in HardAcorn 2020) This distinction mirrors the sentiment of Jankos in his video response where extent is used to

determine the appropriateness of comments (Ch3ap - LoL Highlights 2020). Another user responded:

> 100% this. Everything comes down to the way things are said. You don't have to be a dick. In the non-pro scene, people just get defensive which leads to toxicity. I haven't watched the video yet cause I'm at work, but a fanbase will always have a toxic subset, regardless of esports, physical sports, whatever. Being a pro athlete/gamer comes with having to learn how to deal with it. It's when you start getting toxic teammates and staff that I think it starts getting f***** up. (playr_4 2020 in HardAcorn 2020)

Notably the respondent admits to not having watched the video, which reflects many individuals' entrenched viewpoints on this subject. This could suggest that portions of the community have established their views on these issues and fail to properly engage with new ideas. More research on the prevalence of this problem could provide a clearer understanding on whether this is a major issue that needs to be addressed.

A latter respondent adds another layer of meaning:

> Also where you say it matters too. There are three levels, imo.[14] In private (maybe on discord or in person), online forums (reddit, twitter) and direct messages (Twitter or reddit dms or tweets that link to the player). You can say the former as a direct message (as a fucking random fan) and be toxic, imo. (InfieldTriple in HardAcorn 2020)

This final comment highlights the importance of context given how it demonstrates intention. By observing the context of comments made, particularly what platform they are made on, it is possible to gain insight into the purpose of the comments, and the intentions of their user. For

[14] Imo: in my opinion

example, a critique of a player's performance made on a forum is voiced to the community as a whole, whereas a critique sent to them directly is only meant to target that player. Subsequently the direct message could be viewed as more likely to be intended as harmful and toxic.

There are several issues of importance here, that relate to the intentions of individuals and their toxic behaviour. These include: What language constitutes appropriate criticism and what constitutes abuse? Should we aim to reduce toxicity? Is toxicity wrong? Whose responsibility is it to deal with it? How can dogpiling be addressed, particularly given the added complexities of social media and influencers? The first issue of distinction between criticism and abuse is difficult to address beyond a case by case basis. However, the comments from both videos demonstrate that the line seems to be drawn around the intentions of the individual. If their intention is to hurt the player, such as to threaten them or attack them then this is deemed toxic and irresponsible by the community; these types of comments 'cross the line'. Alternatively, comments which are intended only as a judgement or opinion, without meaning to directly cause harm are viewed more favourably: "I think it's fine to criticise poor performance" (EzSp in HardAcorn 2020), "I think it is reasonable for fans of a sport to want to have a place to share their passionate opinions about the game" but "need to stop harassing pros on Twitter and whatnot" (Poincare_Confection in HardAcorn 2020), and "where you say it matters too" (InfieldTriple in HardAcorn 2020). These comments highlight how the importance of the platform chosen to make a comment also plays a part in determining its appropriateness.

Using intention as a method of dividing criticism from abuse raises its own set of problems, particularly in determining how to accurately judge people's intentions. The anonymity of online mediums makes it easy for abusive individuals to retract their statements as 'jokes', 'trolling' or 'unintentional'. Even more difficult to address is the normalisation of toxic behaviour. Toxic

individuals can be unaware of the effect of their actions (or at least their extent) having come to accept such behaviour as normal or as one commenter put it "part of the scene" (bimon_belmont in HardAcorn 2020). Comments such as "a fanbase will always have a toxic subset" (playr_4 2020 in HardAcorn 2020) seem to imply an inevitability of this kind of behaviour. This may be true; however, this should not prevent attempts to reduce its extent and impact within the community.

If we then assume that toxicity should be addressed, whose responsibility is it to do so? As previously discussed, someone must be responsible for determining intention and implementing solutions and punishments. Jankos implies that pros must deal with toxicity as a part of their job, and *Reddit* users express similar thoughts: "being a pro athlete/gamer comes with having to learn how to deal with it (toxicity)" (Ch3ap - LoL Highlights 2020; playr_4 2020 in HardAcorn 2020). Realistically professionals will have to deal with some level of criticism. However, Broxah highlights how new technologies have made this criticism grow exponentially, often making it unmanageable, particularly for young rookies with minimal experience or adequate support structures. This raises the broader issue of responsibility for policing and maintaining online spaces, which will be addressed in chapter three. However, it is worth further exploring the issue of social media and public figures, given the crucial part they play in this issue.

Public figures/influencers play a prominent role in the esports community. Influencers are prominent personalities within the esports scene who can influence opinion through their fanbases via social media. Influencers are an integral part of the success and growth of the esports community, creating content to be consumed by its fans (Rosenbaum 2011). This content can be educational and informative, create debate and discussion, and bring new people into the community. However, this content can also be very harmful, especially when drama and critique

can be very engaging, causing content on these topics to draw in a large audience. One example of a prominent influencer in *LoL* is IWillDominate, an ex-pro player who became a streamer and Youtuber after he retired. IWillDominate was infamously toxic, having been banned from professional play for a year in 2012 following continued toxic behaviour despite warnings from *Riot Games*[15]. This was widely considered a harsh punishment for an individual whose livelihood depended on playing *LoL* but sent a message at an early stage in the scene's development about *Riot Games'* stance on toxic behaviour in its professional players.

Following his ban IWillDominate continued to play professionally until his retirement in 2016 and has since become a popular and prolific influencer within the community. His brand centres around his knowledge of the game given his professional background, and a blunt and comedic approach to his opinions, critique, and commentary. *Riot Games* banned IWillDominate from co-streaming the LCS Championship Series in July 2020 for "violating Riot's "policies and desire to foster a safe and inclusive community."" (Hore 2021). Despite this he was reinstated 6 months into what was supposed to be a 12-month ban and recently appeared as an official caster (Riot employee and representative) for the English broadcast of the LPL (LoL Chinese Professional League) (Dumpers 2021).

IWillDominate has been inarguably integral in growing the *LoL* esports community and draws in an audience of many thousands of people. The merits of his style of entertainment and method of delivery are open to debate and personal opinion; however, they rarely seem to venture into territory that could be considered aggressive let alone violent. Despite this, it is undoubtedly individuals like IWillDominate that Broxah refers to in his criticism of the way public figures

[15] *Riot Games* are the company which created and own *League of Legends*

can cause disproportionate fan backlash against players. This adds another element of complexity surrounding influencers and the issue of intentionally. Influencers can make statements which may intentionally or unintentionally cause their fans to direct criticism against a professional player. This criticism may not be considered violent on an individual basis but can be harmful as a result of the collective impact. This raises even more questions regarding the responsibility of influencers for their comments, and the actions made by their fans as a result. Subsequently influencers are an integral part of toxic behaviour in the *LoL* community, vital to both esports success and many of its positive attributes, but also tied to its more harmful aspects in ways which are difficult to address.[16]

In summary, the example of Reativo downplaying homophobic tweets as a joke highlighted the obvious issues surrounding anonymity and normalisation when using intention to define examples of online violence. The abuse of LS and his grandmother demonstrated the clear existence of violence in the esports community and how anonymity and normalisation can work to create such extreme scenarios. The discussion surrounding Broxah's comments, Jankos's response, and the associated *Reddit* threads[17], facilitated the exploration of the complexities of intentionality in online violence. These included: the role played by anonymity and normalisation as causes for toxic behaviour, the difficulty in distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate comments online, and how toxicity can often be seen as subjective. An analysis of the online dialogues revealed the importance of intention, and how criticism can be labelled as toxic if it was perceived as intending to harm the subject. Further comments then highlighted the role of context in determining intention. Finally, the examples demonstrated the

[16] This also raises questions on the responsibility of game publishers to create safe spaces for play and the tools they have to go about doing this in a responsible manor

[17] A *Reddit* thread refers to a *Reddit* post and its associated comments

importance of influencers, an issue affecting the entire online world, and particularly relevant to esports. Overall, the major factors of intentionality in online violence are that it either allows intentional acts to be portrayed as unintentional, or for perpetrators to genuinely not understand or consider the full implications of their actions. These complexities demonstrate intentionality's use as a lens with which to view issues of toxicity. The respective debates and discussion make clear the areas which need to be addressed and provide a starting point for potential solutions.

Harmful

The second criterion provided by Hamby (2017) for something to be considered violence is that it must be harmful. A violent act doesn't necessarily need to result in harm if the act was intended to be harmful, rather it had to have a high likelihood of resulting in harm. Additionally, a sufficiently negligent act resulting in harm may also be considered as violent. Harm is not confined to the physical and must include psychological impacts. Finally, the complexity mainly lies in the level of harm required for an act to be considered violent. Simply being hurt by someone is insufficient to determine it as violence and the extent of the harm is therefore vital to the use of harm as a criterion for violence. This applies to esports in a number of unique ways. This thesis has already noted that normalisation and anonymity can prevent individuals from fully understanding the results of their actions. Hamby's conception of harm demonstrates how this may be an insufficient argument against defining these acts as violence. Furthermore, while the online realm has seldom been seen as a medium for violence, Hamby makes clear that this is in fact possible by highlighting the relevance of psychological harm (Hamby 2017). This highlights the main issue when assessing esports for harmful toxicity, determining the impact and extent of harm caused. The following examples were analysed to better understand the harm

caused by toxicity in the *LoL* community, and subsequently, whether it can be accurately considered violent.

This thesis has previously provided that the harassment of LS represented a clear example of violence. It is worth briefly revisiting this example to better understand the role played by harm in determining it as violence. The inclusion of LS's grandmother in the harassment was a clear indication that the harassment was intentional. It also contributes toward it meeting the criteria for it to be considered sufficiently harmful. The harassment affected not only LS but also his grandmother and friends, with multiple individuals including Nemesis and IWillDominate expressing their concern and shock at the events (theScore esports 2020). LS ended up with withdrawing from social media and streaming, both of which damaged his career as a professional and streamer within *LoL*. LS also briefly cited the psychological impacts these attacks were having stating in a tweet "I'm pretty depressed over so much atm.[18] Being personally harassed for things beyond my control… is too much for me to handle" (LS in theScore esports 2020). The impact of the harassment on LS's private and professional life clearly demonstrates the harm caused and demonstrates how harm plays a crucial role in determining this example as violence.

Similarly, Reativo's homophobic tweets are also worth revisiting through the lens of harm. Commenting on a male caster's (commentator's) painted nails Reativo tweeted: "What am I watching? Painting your nails and looking like a fag is a trend now?" (Haunting_Damage9917 2021). In response to the outrage this comment created he sarcastically tweeted "My most sincere apologies to everyone that was offended by my last tweet" accompanied by a picture of

[18] Atm: at the moment

him putting up his middle finger (Haunting_Damage9917 2021). Before finally tweeting in response to the backlash from this second tweet: “Why was it shitty? I am trolling as always, I didn't insinuate anything and a herd of hurtful apes came, I just laughted-000 XDDDD" (Haunting_Damage9917 2021). These comments showcase how perpetrators of toxic behaviour often downplay the severity of their comments when held accountable or challenged to avoid taking responsibility for their actions. This behaviour is not unique to toxicity and features prominently in other abusive interactions such as cyber bullying (Kowalski et al. 2008). Perpetrators downplay the severity of their actions or blame the victim for being too sensitive, Reativo going as far as to refer to them as ‘apes’ (Kowalski et al. 2008).

There are multiple complexities arising from this example worth exploring. First, because there is no response from Drakos, it is very difficult to know to what extent, if at all these comments affected him. Further, these were the comments of one individual rather than a faceless mass like in the case of LS’s harassment, comments which were condemned and provoked intense backlash from the community. Reativo was given a 100 euro fine, 4 game suspension and a warning (Duarte 2021). This punishment was considered by many as too light; however, it is worth noting that the Portuguese professional scene is significantly smaller than the North American, making differences in wages a key factor.[19] Despite punishment and popular denouncement, these comments could still have had significantly harmful effects. Though their impact on Drakos is unknown it is highly likely they were quiet upsetting. What is possibly more important is the potential harm these comments caused to fans and individuals in the community who saw them. Reativo is a well-known figure, particularly within the Portuguese *LoL*

[19] Top tournaments in the North American (LCS) and European league (LEC) are all more than $200,000 compared to the Portuguese League (LPLOL) which peaks at $16,836 and rapidly decreases from there (Esports Earnings 2021a; Esports Earnings 2021b)

community, making the weight and reach of his influence substantial, and the potential harm of his comments significant. Crucially this brings us back to the issue of influencers, this time centred on the harm their actions can cause given their wide reach and engagement.

Even in cases where the individual harm caused by their actions is relatively small compared to the clearly violent action of targeted cyber bullying, could the widespread collective harm caused by a tweet also be considered adequate for a label of violence? This question is important when considering instances that people have had their lives severely impacted by the actions of influencers. A perfect example of this from outside of esports was when the popular Youtuber Keemstar accused the 62 year old Minecraft streamer Sir Tony Ray or rsgloryandgold of being a paedophile (Waugh 2016). Keemstar's YouTube channel 'DramaAlert' features videos stylised as news broadcasts of recent stories occurring on the internet, regularly drawing upwards of a million views. In this instance Keemstar thought he had tracked down a paedophile named Sir Tony Ray who streamed Minecraft daily to a small audience. Keemstar's audience flocked to Sir Tony Ray's channel to hurl abuse and threats, reaching the point where the 62-year-old man was crying on stream. It was discovered shortly after that Keemstar had been mistaken and the person he had mistaken Tony for was still in jail. Keemstar issued an apology however the damage was done:

> Now everyone in the world knows my real name is Tony Ray Winchester, I'm 62, I'm retired, I haven't got my first social security check yet, but I'll get it soon… I'm not going to let someone run me off… but you guys know I'm a good guy now, so I'm going to go take a break. (Asarch 2016)

Keemstar faced some backlash for his mistake however he still posts videos to this day and remains as popular as ever. This example shows how the online medium challenges how we conceive of harm's role in determining violence.

To further explore how conceptions of harm change in esports we return to a comment from a previous example: "It's when you start getting toxic teammates and staff that I think it starts getting fucked up." (playr_4 2020 in HardAcorn 2020) This implies a greater potential for harm coming from toxic behaviour in professional environments. Workplace harassment can be more serious due to interpersonal relationships and inescapabilty (Einarsen 1999). Bowling and Beehr (2006) highlight the potential harm caused by workplace harassment, linking it with poor wellbeing, low self-esteem and depression. This brings us to our next example which allows us to explore the issues of harm further by introducing elements of workplace harassment; an important consideration when exploring violence in esports where the workplace is often largely situated online.

In February 2021 the owner of the *LoL* esports team *Team Solo Mid* (TSM), 'Reginald' tweeted: "Ignorant tweet. If every LCS team left the LCS- you'll be out of a job buddy and probably be paid minimum." (TSM FTX Andy 2021) This was done in response to a tweet by the player 'Vulcan's' tweet: "if u want full import team go buy a team in that region ?XD". (TSM FTX Andy 2021) These comments stemmed from an ongoing debate about the import rule imposed by *Riot Games* on *LoL* teams, where teams could only have 2 players from another region on a team's roster. This rule prevents owners from fielding teams composed of more than two European, Korean or Chinese players which are widely considered the best regions based on skill and performance at international events. Owners in North America believe this rule prevents their teams from being competitive internationally and makes the North American League less

commercially viable since it lacks the performances and therefore entertainment value of the other regions.

With this background in mind the aggressive nature of Reginald's tweet makes sense. Vulcan is taking a stance which opposes Reginald's business interests and the profitability of his company. Vulcan is also acting in his own interests, since the import rule gives him better job security, however he is not personally attacking anyone in doing so. Notably the comments and conversation surrounding these tweets is entirely in condemnation of Reginald and support of Vulcan. This mitigates a lot of the potential harm that could be done if the public had sided with Reginald. However, it is still worth noting that the power imbalance between an owner and player gives greater potential for harm.[20] Reginald is not the owner of Vulcans team, however the LCS is a small professional community with only 10 teams. Professional players are aware that they may one day want to play for another organisation, particularly TSM which has won more championships than any other team. As a result, players could feel pressured not to speak out against an owner for fear it would damage their careers. This power imbalance provides a context for Reginald's behaviour such that it could well be considered violent:

> The inclusion of the word "power," in addition to the phrase "use of physical force," broadens the nature of a violent act and expands the conventional understanding of violence to include those acts that result from a power relationship, including threats and intimidation (Hamby 2017).

[20] Another now retired professional player 'Doublelift' spoke out against Reginald. Doublelift stated: "He's like a bully who gets away with being a bad person, because he's powerful, because people are afraid to stand up to him… it's in everyone's best interests to not get in his way" (More Doublelift 2021, 11:35). He continues by describing Reginald as an abusive bully: "so many people experienced public humiliation, mental breakdowns, crying at work… People in power can get away with anything it seems" (Bergin 2021).

Vulcan is renowned as one of the best players in the LCS which likely contributed to him deciding to speak out on this issue, however Reginald's comments could dissuade other less secure players from sharing their opinion for fear of future retribution. Overall, this example demonstrates the key role that power plays in the harm caused by toxic behaviour, and the extra responsibility of individuals in positions of influence.

The role played by power in esports extends to the fans' interaction with the owners. The associated *Reddit* thread showcases disagreements between owners and fans, and establishes links with traditional sports. As one person put it: "This is how you know LCS is a real sports league now. Can I get a hearty round of "FUCK THE OWNERS!!" from the fans?" (flUddOS in micspamtf2 2021). This sentiment demonstrates the influence of professionalisation on esports. As a result of professionalisation esports is seeing increasing commercialisation (Taylor 2012). This is reflected in the franchising of the major professional leagues, high profile sponsorships and advertisers, and the integration of advertisements into the broadcast (Taylor 2012). A result of this increasing professionalisation could be a divide between the owners and the fans. While the fans priority is the esport itself and entertainment, the owners are more interested in the commercial aspects of esports growth. Despite these interests often aligning, occasionally, such as in the case of the import rule these interests are opposed, revealing a historic divide between the two groups. A recent example of this divide occurred in the football UEFA Champions League where owners attempted to form a Super League but were forced to back down due to pressure from fans (Harris 2021). Fans voiced their displeasure "certainly all this with the Super League just underlines how they don't really care at all about the club or its fans", even after the owners apologised for their lack of understanding "we failed to show enough respect for its deep-rooted traditions — promotion, relegation, the pyramid — and for that we are sorry"

(Harris 2021). This issue serves to highlight the links between traditional sports and esports, even implying that they will only grow more comparable as esports is professionalised. This link will be explored further in chapter three. Subsequently, it is important to note the role played by professionalisation in esports, given the way it changes how power can influence interactions, and the potential for violence.

Recent research has demonstrated how violence can be non-physical and harm can be a key component in determining actions as violent (Hamby 2017). Given that the extent of harm is a crucial part of determining violence, judging the psychological harm caused by toxic behaviour online is of vital importance. This is problematic since it can often be difficult to discern the nature let alone the degree of harm online. Given these concerns the harassment of LS is a good example to demonstrate the clear potential harm which can be caused by toxicity. Reativo's homophobic tweets show links between toxicity and cyber bullying and depict how toxicity can have wide reaching effects compounding their potential to cause harm. Finally, the abusive tweets made by Reginald demonstrate the role of influence in determining harm, and the onus of responsibility this places on individuals in positions of power within the esports scene.

Non-Essential

The third criterion maintains that violent actions must be non-essential. Similar to harm, extent and context are often used to distinguish aggression from violence (Hamby 2017). For example, self-defence is generally not considered violence, however an unnecessarily extreme response to an action, such as shooting someone trying to push you over could be (see Uniacke 2011). This criterion also helps explore the argument that toxic behaviour is part of the esports scene and

criticism is an essential part of fandom (playr_4 2020 in HardAcorn 2020; Ch3ap - LoL Highlights). Both these arguments have a degree of validity, however once again the distinguishing feature is extent.

The example of LS remains a useful starting point to establish a clear example of violence. As we will explore further in this section, criticism is arguably essential to fandom, a fandom which esports could not exist without. In our previous example involving Broxah's video on fans, Jankos stated:

> toxicity from fans I don't think is misplaced necessarily. Because if a player is playing bad they can call him out. The only difference I would say is not liking someone and thinking he's bad and then there is a difference between that and… wishing 'someone go die' (Ch3ap - LoL Highlights 2020).

Jankos argues that critique is a central part of fandom and establishes the extent of actions as the divide between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. The harassment of LS provides a clear example of unacceptable behaviour. Involving LS's grandmother in the 'critique' clearly demonstrates that these actions are non-essential. Furthermore, even without considering the actual content of the criticism, the sheer quantity of the responses does not align with the perceived wrongdoing. Perhaps most disturbing considering how blatantly nonessential this behaviour is, is the fact that it was arguably successful in achieving its goal. It is easy to see how this outcome could send a problematic message to future fandoms seeking to get their voices heard and the outcomes they desire.

In his seminal work *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins notes: "Like the poachers of old, fans operate from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness" (Jenkins 1992). This is in

stark contrast to the participatory culture of modern fandoms, who with mass movements facilitated by social media and consumer power can hold immense sway over the material and debates they care about (Hadas and Shifman 2012; Jenkins 2003). This power shift has been demonstrated in many areas of culture possibly most notable and recent being the release of the Zack Snyder cut of Batman vs. Superman where fan pressure alone pressured Warner Brothers to release a different version of the movie, reportedly costing them more than 70 million USD (Li 2021). This once again centres this issue around how developments in technology and communication have changed how we interact and highlights a need for our understanding of violence in these spaces to change as well.

While the harassment of LS serves as a good exemplar for what violence looks like in esports communities, there is a lot more toxicity that occurs in this space which less clearly meets the criteria for violence. By examining a less extreme case of toxicity from the *LoL* community centred on the professional player 'FORG1VEN', we are better able to understand the criterion of non-essentiality as it applies in esports, and claims that toxic behaviour is an essential part of esports fandom. In an interview now retired professional *LoL* player 'FORG1VEN' stated "Reddit bullying played a part in my retirement, not the major one, but it sure made a difference" (Belopavlović 2018, p. 1). This comment aligns with other statements on the issue of toxicity and community harassment within the professional community including Broxah's previously mentioned concerns and videos made by Voyboy and IWillDominate (Voyboy 2020; IWDominate 2020). Following a team's loss there is always a *Reddit* post with multiple comments assigning blame to individuals or the team as a whole (ahritina 2021). For example, one threads top (most popular) comment was: "broxah playing like a silver 5 jungler wtf is

that"[21] (sharkyzarous in ahritina 2021). Online debate and criticism are a crucial part of fan engagement in esports; however, it is unclear at what point these comments become inappropriate and potentially violent.

A comment thread from the *Reddit* post on FORG1VEN's interview explores the issues of fan violence further:

"Pretty big difference between trashtalk between players and a horde of faceless people talking about you." (SevenInHand in EsportsVesti 2018))

"Yeah you would think having a colleague personally insult you would be worse than random people who know nothing." (Ceramicrabbit in EsportsVesti 2018)

> Really? Because I think you have no idea just how awful the fans can be. Destiny, the streamer, was sent an email containing a detailed rape fantasy of his son, who was a toddler at the time (or close to it).
>
> I've had colleagues get mad at me before, and usually we settle it because it's one on one and we can handle or differences like adults.
>
> I've never had to deal with a subreddit of 1.2 millions subscribers screaming at me to kill myself because I flashed aggressively and misplayed.
>
> This subreddit needs to have a serious discussion about how fucking awful the discourse can be towards the pros. Like it or not, this place is a focal point for online discussion about league, SPECIFICALLY professional league, and has some responsibility towards

[21] Silver 5 is one of the lowest ranks in *League of Legends* competitive ladder such that approximately 37% of regular players are in this division (Milella 2021). In comparison only 0.013% of players achieve the Challenger ranking and even most of these players are not able to become professionals. Thus, the comment is stating that Broxah is playing very badly.

> its discourse. This doesn't mean any one person bears any specific blame, it's just a wish for us to all move to a healthier place where we can actually talk about league. Instead of shit posting memes and tearing pros down.[22] (Celestium in EsportsVesti 2018)

The conversation continues with comments citing rules against this behaviour, prompting responses that highlight how these rules often aren't enough to prevent toxicity. The now familiar argument that toxicity will always exist, and professionals must either learn to deal with it or avoid it by not engaging in online dialogues is proposed multiple times (EsportsVesti 2018). The responses often agree that toxicity cannot be eradicated but argue it is an important conversation regardless, highlighting the importance of thinking about comments as being read by a real person with real feelings. Another response suggests that avoiding these dialogues altogether isn't possible for professionals who rely on their personal brand online for their career. Despite these comments many responses still resist calls for change:

> It's like you've never seen a sports game in your life. Like it or not, this is how the fans of every sport in the face of the planet are. That's just how it is, and unless something changes about human psychology, it'll always be this way. (Lelouch4705 in EsportsVesti 2018)

This comment ignores the significant strides that have been made in spectator behaviour in traditional sports, but crucially reflects a very strong sentiment from parts of the community that change isn't possible (Guttman 1986). It also explores crossovers in interest and motivation between fans of esports and traditional esports (Brown et al., 2018).

[22] Importantly I was not able to find any evidence of the rape fantasy regarding Destiny's son. Additionally, Destiny is a controversial figure who seems to encourage conflict (Quirk 2020). However, Celestium's arguments are still useful when discussing this topic even if his example is not.

This hopeless outlook on the inevitability of toxic behaviour can only stand as a barrier toward progress on this issue, making changing this perspective an important issue for addressing toxicity online. Another comment states “None of those things are allowed on this subreddit. Nor do you almost ever see them, as the mods are pretty good at deleting them before they get traction. If you were talking about twitter, sure, because twitter is an absolute cesspool of death threats and just outright retardation, but this subreddit is rather tame. Every time I've seen shit like that get posted in my 5+ years on this subreddit people have rallied to call the person spreading that shit an idiot. You'll see people get called bad, or toxic, or anything similar, but you're not going to get any of the shit you listed being posted here.” (yonpaX6 in EsportsVesti 2018) ‘It’s not us it’s them’ is another problematic sentiment worth addressing, comments like this one shift the blame onto other platforms and thus negate their responsibility to change their behaviour.

This sentiment also downplays the very real harm that can come from less extreme forms of toxic behaviour. These comments represent some of the more considered arguments, others include: “In the persons defence that sent that email, it WAS to Destiny. The fucking moronic leftist that argues for open borders, multiculturalism, and incest being legalized. He lives in a bubble and doesn't realize how harmful those first 2 things are to actual people.” (65IQCommunist in EsportsVesti 2018) and “If you let anonymous people on the internet bother you, you're a pussy” (BrutusHawke in EsportsVesti 2018). It is obvious that these opinions are misinformed and damaging, it is possible these commenters were trolling (not being serious or sharing their genuine beliefs) however this represents yet another barrier to productive dialogues and meaningful change on this issue.

This comment thread raises several issues worth addressing. In the first instance, how do negative sentiments on this issue act as a barrier to progress. Secondly, how can fan harassment be taken more seriously given how out of sync its potential for harm is with how seriously many people regard it as an issue. It also brings us back to the issue of extent when discussing the non-essential nature of fan violence. When discussing the issue of fan violence, it is important to note that many of the associated comments would not meet the traditional requirements of harassment or abuse. Even in extreme cases like that of LS, the vast majority of participants are likely to be expressing their beliefs in a relatively acceptable manner. It was previously noted through the comments of Jankos that these reasonable comments and critique are seen by many as perfectly acceptable, and that they are both part of the esports community and arguably an essential part of fandom (Ch3ap - LoL Highlights 2020). Despite this view, these comments can clearly have harmful effects. Even though individual comments may not meet the extent required to be violence, is it possible that their contribution to a collective does?

If one person in a group criticised someone it is unlikely to be seen as violent, however if the entire group were to make the same comment it very well could be. How then can individuals be judged and held accountable for their role in a collective violent act? While it is plausible that criticism of a poor performance may be an appropriate part of a fans role, are they then responsible for judging when enough people have already commented that to pursue the issue further could be considered inappropriate and potentially even violent? At what point then does a mass of fan critique become cyber bullying, and to what extent are fans responsible for judging the difference? These questions have been raised by the changing modes of fandom and online interaction, and it is these questions which this thesis will seek to answer and discuss in Chapter Three through the integration of sports literature.

Unwanted

Violent behaviour categorised as ‘unwanted’ is the final category used to distinguish different forms of toxic behaviour. A range of actions can be considered harmful, intentional and nonessential but still not be considered violent because they are wanted. Examples include horseplay/play fighting, sadomasochism, contact sports and assisted suicide (Hamby 2017). Many of these examples would not apply to esports, however there are several possible elements within this criterion worth exploring. The first is the playful banter or trolling amongst friends online. It can be common to tease and make fun of your teammates, and for this behaviour to be considered both reasonable and wanted. Some of this behaviour can be quite extreme and may appear hurtful or violent to an outside spectator, however, can be considered entirely acceptable by those in that group. This concept touches on studies related to subcultures.

Given the limitations of space this thesis will only address this approach to demonstrate its relevance and provide additional insight, however even a brief exploration of these ideas provides a deeper understanding of the nature of online toxicity as violence.

> Subculture “is used very loosely to indicate a package of values, attitudes, beliefs, tastes and behaviour patterns that distinguishes a group sufficiently from the mainstream for it to stand out as different but which do not clash enough to cause major conflict.” (Bruce and Yearly 2006, p. 293)

“In the area of delinquency, subcultures refers to distinctive sets of values and behavior.” (Gelsthorpe 2006)

Looking at online communities as subcultures, and toxicity as a form of delinquency provides numerous interesting avenues to pursue.[23] Given the obscurity and lack of policing or moderation of online spaces due to their anonymity, these environments are perfect sanctuaries for behaviour that deviates from accepted social norms. This can make online spaces perfect for communities which might find it harder to fit into everyday society (McInroy 2020; McInroy and Craig 2020). However, they are also just as suited to facilitating damaging and dangerous groups who seek to keep more radical or dangerous views from broader public scrutiny (Wending 2019; Ortutay and Seitz 2021). Durkheim's concept of an anomie explains the moral degradation of smaller subsections and friend groups of online communities, at least as viewed by the norms of wider society (Durkheim 1997). Sarah Thornton's (1995) concept of subcultural capital provides another layer of understanding. Thornton uses Bourdieu's cultural capital or "knowledge which confers social status" within a subcultural context to understand the inner workings of various subcultures (Thornton 1995, p. 25). Thornton places particular emphasis on the use of slang in subcultures to denote an individual's social status as being someone 'in the know' (Thornton 1995). This directly applies to esports communities and the prevalence of slang, particular customs and appropriate behaviours, and the high value placed on specific knowledge related to the individual games themselves (Brown et al. 2018).[24]

Overall, the study of subcultures clearly demonstrates how smaller groups within esports can develop their own unique views and accepted norms of interaction. While there is rarely anything inherently wrong with these interactions it is not yet clear how well defined the divides

[23] Delinquency "can be defined as (real or purported) non-normative behavior that, if detected, can be subject to informal or formal sanctions." (Jenness and Goodman 2006)

[24] For example this glossary of *Reddit* terminology (Theory of Reddit 2017) and *Reddit* users specific distaste for the use of emoji's (vividvega 2020)

between these smaller groups and the wider community is. There is inadequate research on whether the views and behaviours learned within these groups bleeds into the wider community. Until there is more known about this issue it remains plausible that a bleed effect from smaller groups is contributing to the toxicity in esports as a whole.

Given the normalisation of toxic behaviours in online environments it is important to find a way of addressing toxicity without punishing individuals for having fun with their friends. This makes it crucial to establish clear boundaries within the community of what is and isn't appropriate within different contexts. This is an issue which clearly needs to be addressed considering the division in opinion on this issue previously noted in the first section of this chapter on intention.

It has become clear that appropriate behaviour online can be a very complex issue and both heavily subjective and contextual. It is because of this complexity that games companies have often avoided properly targeting this issue (Castello 2018). While simple solutions like chat filters can be useful there have been numerous concerns raised about relying on them to moderate toxicity (Voyboy 2020; IWDominate 2020; Castello 2018). Of particular concern is an AI's ability to actually reduce toxic behaviour, since programs are often based on responding to the use of certain words or phrases once perpetrators learn how to avoid being detected by the system they can continue their toxic behaviour free from potential repercussions (Voyboy 2020; IWDominate 2020).

This raises the issue of moderation in online spaces. T. L. Taylor (2018) brought attention to this as a serious issue in her book *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*. Live streaming platforms are sites which feature a variety of digital content being broadcast live to an audience. The most prominent example of this for video games in the streaming service

'Twitch'. The rise of streaming platforms has been instrumental to the growth and wider popularity of esports, providing a platform for professional gamers to build a following. The various esports tournaments are also broadcast on these platforms making them important places where the community congregates and interacts on a regular basis. These services feature chat functions where the spectators can interact directly with the streamer as well as other people watching the stream. Taylor highlights that many of these spaces are largely unregulated by the companies who created them (Taylor 2018). Even if rules are in place, they are not adequately enforced, with moderation often being left to volunteers (Taylor 2018). Up until this point this has allowed companies to create and earn profit from these spaces within having to invest resources in maintaining them. Examples of this can be seen across various online platforms, most notably Twitter and Facebook which have received increasing pressure to take an active step in policing the content on their platforms (Berg, Morton, & Poblet 2021). It is for this reason that multiple sources have concluded that solutions to addressing toxicity lie in more active intervention from the companies responsible (Suzor et al., 2019; Taylor 2018; Kou 2020). The problem of how to incentivise these companies to do this will be explored in chapter three.

The second and final way unwantedness could apply to esports is the criticism of professionals in esports by the fans. While this was largely addressed under 'non-essentiality' it is worth briefly discussing from this new perspective. Hamby notes that "some essential acts are unwanted by the recipient" and highlights how individuals who play contact sport sign up to engage in potentially harmful scenarios even if they may not 'want' to be hurt (Hamby 2017, p. 174). While this does not excuse the relentless harassment of any professional/public figure online, it does provide a basis for legitimate criticism of these individuals when conducted in an appropriate way. This understanding broadens the scope of potential solutions to include training and supporting these

professionals to deal with this criticism in a healthy manor as well as educating the broader community in appropriate methods of fan engagement.

Conclusion

This chapter examined a number of examples of toxicity in esports using data taken from the *LoL* subreddit. The analysis of these examples provides insight into an understanding of toxicity through the lens of violence. The findings from this analysis will be explored in chapter three where this thesis will examine how the framing of toxic behaviour as violence can help in finding new solutions to this issue. This exploration will include a comparison to existing literature in sports violence to determine whether progress and solutions already applied in this similar area could be useful in addressing problems present in esports.

Chapter 3: A Comparative Analysis of Violence in Traditional Sports and Esports

Chapter two examined examples of toxicity within the *LoL* esports community through the lens of violence. It discovered a number of problematic issues contributing to the pervasion of online violence within esports and drew particular attention to anonymity, normalisation and competition as causes of toxic and violent behaviour. It was also noted how many instances of violent behaviour in esports shared similarities with violence in traditional sports. This alignment is logical considering that research done on fan violence in traditional sports has already noted that they share the same underlying causes of anonymity, normalisation and competition (Kavanaugh, Jones and Marks 2016; Suler 2004; Wann et al. 2001; Cleland and Cashmore 2014).

Chapter three will explore this link between esports and traditional sport in more depth. Using literature on sports violence this chapter will explore potential solutions to the problems of online violence faced by esports. This comparison between sports and esports will also briefly address key differences as a way of highlighting areas which may require different approaches to those which have been used in traditional sports. Overall, this chapter will demonstrate the significant threats posed by violence in esports and suggest where we might begin to look for solutions.

Traditional sports provide a point of comparison for this research and enable a starting point for understanding esports. Given the similarities, future studies could use existing literature and research on traditional sports and their history to gain insight into a number of areas applicable to esports. One such area could include the evolving institutionalisation, professionalisation and commodification of esports. Summerley (2020) notes how “Nationalism, classism, racism,

ableism, and sexism are rife in the early institutionalization of traditional sports" (Summerley 2020, p. 60). Summerley (2020) continues by outlining how the hegemonic masculinity which has dominated traditional sports is reflected in the developing esports scene. Cleland and Cashmore's (2014) study on racism in the English Premier League found that solutions to racism needed significantly greater intervention from governing bodies and officials, that is, sports institutions and those working within them. Rather than acting as a positive influence they found that key figures were widely considered to perpetuate racism rather than assist in reducing it. Esports has an opportunity to learn from these mistakes and might even have an obligation to do so, when considering its current and projected success, and the implications this has for its impact on society.

Focusing predominantly on the issues associated with fan violence in esports, chapter two highlighted: the difficulty of determining individuals intent when making comments online, the wide reach and greater potential for harm from comments made on social media, the lack of moderation, the role of influencers, and the need for education and support networks. Similar issues have been dealt with in literature on fan violence in traditional sports (see: Awan & Brakemore 2011; Farrington, Hall, Kilvington, Price, & Saeed 2015; Cleland and Cashmore 2014; Duvall 2020; Miah 2014; Bennet 2017; Nicholson & Hoye 2005; Kavanaugh et al. 2016). These similarities make sense when considering fandom more generally and the role it plays in wider society. Rowe, Ruddock and Hutchins (2010) note how fandom is deeply embedded in social and economic life, and in his own article on esports Hutchins "locates gaming, media and sport within the broader social field, using them as a window onto how social relations and forms are produced and change over time" (Hutchins 2008). Further, sport and media have become indivisible, as "'we now live in a digital society', with social institutions – such as sport and

leisure – now being not just underpinned by, but rather intertwined with digital technology." (Kavanaugh 2016 p. 783; see also Rowe, Ruddock and Hutchins 2010) Collectively these insights place esports fandom within the broader context of fandom as a social phenomenon, which adapts to cultural and technological changes while maintaining many of the same fundamental features. This makes it possible to draw insight on fandom across a variety of activities, in this case sports and esports.

Offline Fan Violence in Sports

While many comparisons between sports and esports fandom are made in the digital medium, there are still some ideas from offline (in person) fandom at sporting events worth exploring that stem from the discussion in chapter two. In their book on sports fans Wann et al. (2001) address how violence became both accepted and embedded in culture, before exploring the psychological and sociological theories of fan violence. One such psychological theory is social learning theory, where behaviour is observed and mimicked by others within a community.[25] This theory demonstrates how violent behaviour can become accepted in certain groups and settings, and also appropriately provides insight into the normalisation of toxic behaviour in esports. Social theories such as contagion, convergence, and emergent norms provide additional insight into the normalisation of violence, but also highlight the need to be aware of broader contextual factors such as general incivility, the levels of violence in the community, and the presence or lack of negative sanctions. These issues map quite effectively onto the issue of violence in esports. This

[25] Social learning theory "emphasizes the importance of observing, modelling, and imitating the behaviours, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. Social learning theory considers how both environmental and cognitive factors interact to influence human learning and behaviour." (McLeod 2016, p. 1)

thesis has already mentioned the events of gamergate and the evidence of embedded toxicity within the gaming community. Such findings imply that a high degree of toxicity within games communities can play a key role in the levels of violence they experience. The lack of negative sanctions as a prominent cause for violent behaviour brings us back to the issue of moderation in online spaces. Anonymity and the online disinhibition effect are already prominent drivers of online violence; however, a lack of sanctions serves to reinforce this issue (Kavanaugh, Jones and Marks 2016). These theories provide insight into the proliferation of spectator violence in sports, an issue which still remains to this day, but has seen vast improvements thanks to successfully implemented solutions (Crawford 2004; Guttmann 1986; Wann et al. 2001).

Crawford (2004) outlines several factors which effectively reduced spectator violence in traditional sports. He recounts how profits encouraged corporations to make stadiums and the sports events within them a more appealing activity for families (Crawford 2004). This meant investing in more active moderation of these spaces, beginning with more obvious methods such as policing and stewards, and developing into more subtle and proactive measures such as CCTV (Crawford 2004). Once spectators felt they were being observed they were compelled to moderate their own behaviour (Crawford 2004). This approach has many useful lessons which can be applied to addressing fan violence in esports. By addressing the issue of anonymity in esports, fans may be more conscious of their own behaviour and engage in more active self-moderation. This kind of cultural shift would help address the issue of policing the many thousands of comments and interactions that occur online. This leads us back to the issue of moderation and the need for the greater intervention of corporations responsible for these online spaces which facilitate violent behaviour. Taylor (2018) drew attention to a lack of moderation

as a serious issue in her book on the popular streaming service Twitch, noting that moderation was primarily conducted by volunteer members of the community.

The need for more active intervention and particularly more proactive measures has been a consistent conclusion in literature on toxicity in esports and the gaming community more broadly (Suzor et al., 2019; Taylor 2018; Kou 2020). In the case of traditional sports, corporations were motivated to intervene by the promise of profits brought by families and the backlash from these families to the violence and incivility present in these spaces (Crawford 2004; Guttmann 1986). Given that esports are already a space occupied by many young children, and the clear issue violence presents in these spaces, it seems likely that parents are unaware of the extent of the problem of online violence, and the impact it could be having on their children. This is perhaps unsurprising given the recent beginnings of esports. Another key factor is the lack of literature in this space. While public attention has focused heavily on the potential of violence depicted in video games to cause physical violence, including the infamous links to mass shootings, it is possible that this sensationalist misappropriation of blame has drawn attention away from the more significant problem posed by online violence (Coulson & Ferguson 2016; Ferguson 2007; Przybylski & Weinstein 2019; Ferguson 2015; Markey et al. 2020). Based on these preliminary insights future research could focus on educating the broader public of the dangers posed by online violence. This is an approach which may then pressure companies into taking a more active role in moderating these online spaces.

Online Fan Violence in Sports

While literature addressing fan violence in sports stadiums provides some key insights into the issue of violence in esports, the study of digital sports violence provides a much clearer point of comparison to find solutions to the problems facing esports. Online violence has already been noted as a serious issue in sports literature which unanimously concludes that much more research is needed in this space (Raney & Ellis 2014; Kavanaugh et al. 2016; Mountjoy et al. 2016). This reflects a general lack of research and understanding of violence in digital spaces. This is troubling given its increasing importance, as Hutchins and Rowe noted on the study of sports and media back in 2009 "the game has moved on" and more specifically, moved online (Hutchins and Rowe 2009, p. 367). While certain areas such as cyber bullying and more extreme forms of violence such as sexual harassment have been the focus of academic study, this thesis has highlighted that a much greater range of violence is perpetrated in online spaces and only the tip of the iceberg is being properly addressed. Despite this, there is still much more literature addressing online violence in sports than esports so a comparison of these two areas still proves a fruitful exercise.

In 2010 Rowe, Ruddock and Hutchins warned against the prevailing notion that 'fandom is beautiful' (Rowe, Ruddock, & Hutchins 2010). They highlighted the romanticisation of fandom as an issue when it obscures the uglier, damaging impacts fandom can have. This would prove to be a particularly poignant point following the publication of Sanderson and Kassing's chapter titled 'New Media and the Evolution of Fan–Athlete Interaction' in the *Routledge Handbook of Sport and New Media* in 2014. Whilst the chapter is quite insightful in its discussion of the emerging relationship between fans and athletes on social media, it takes a highly positive view

of how these changes will impact society and fandom more broadly. This largely positive view comes at the expense of properly addressing the negative outcomes which would develop out of online fandom. This is largely a reflection of how much has changed in seven years regarding our understanding and perception of online spaces. It is interesting to note how a number of points made by Sanderson and Kassing (2014) are quite similar to those this thesis will address, however, where they tended to focus on the positive outcomes this thesis will address the negatives.

Sanderson and Kassing highlight how new media empowered fans and brought them closer together with athletes, "the cultural distance between the elite athlete and fan is erased momentarily through a repetitive communicative act" (Hutchins 2012 in Sanderson & Kassing 2014, p. 629). They continue by discussing the democratisation of sports, the empowerment of athletes through opportunities for self-presentation and promotion, and the chance to build closer relationships with their fanbases. While these points are valid, they do not properly address the negative outcomes that also come as a result of these developments. Opportunities for athlete's empowerment through an online presence also have the potential to become obligations. While an online media presence does give athletes an opportunity to promote their personal brand, it has also become an opportunity for corporations to market themselves and their sponsors through the images of the athletes they control. Promotion through social media is arguably less of an opportunity and more of an obligation for athletes in the present day at the expense of their privacy. This ties into Sanderson and Kassing's (2014) other point, a closer connection between fan and athlete. While this closer connection can be beneficial in developing an athlete's public image and fan base, it also leaves them more vulnerable to abuse and attacks. At this point multiple studies have addressed the abuse and harassment of athletes via social media, and it

should be noted how this issue disproportionally affects minorities through racism and sexism (Duvall 2020; Oshiro et al. 2020; Cleland and Cashmore 2014; Kavanaugh 2016; Mountjoy et al. 2016).

The negative effects of social media have become more pronounced in recent years as they gained both scholarly and broader public attention. It should be noted that Sanderson and Kassing (2014) do address the potential for maladaptive uses of social media in fan interaction, particularly as a means to abuse players, even if it lacks appropriate emphasis and detail when assessed by contemporary standards. However, Sanderson and Kassing (2014) also mention an example where a professional athlete posted a journalist's phone number on social media following the release of some information which the athlete disapproved of: "By sharing the reporter's telephone number via new media, Daly was able to quickly (apparently calls began shortly after Daly's tweet) and directly rally support from his fans" (Sanderson and Kassing 2014, p. 635). The depiction of this incident as a demonstration of athlete empowerment fails to address the worrying precedent and potential for future escalation these kinds of attacks could have. Incidents such as Swatting, DDoSing and death threats mailed to home addresses come to mind as the potential violent extremes resulting from personal information being leaked online.[26] The wrongful accusation of Sir Tony Ray for paedophilia from chapter two is a sad and powerful reminder of how damaging and harmful these actions can be.

It is much clearer today how the act of publicly sharing a mobile phone number to mobilise fans could just as easily be used for more sinister purposes. It is also worth noting how this links to the issue of influencers in esports, and the power they hold to directly or indirectly mobilise their

[26] Swatting refers to the act of having SWAT teams raid the home addresses of streamers, an illegal and dangerous act which led to a man's death in 2017 (Hanna and Lynch 2019); DDoSing is a distributed denial of service, a cyber attack which disrupts an individual's or collective's ability to connect to the internet (see: cloudflare 2021)

fans. Even where literature does exist on the issues involved in fan violence there is no research addressing the issue of professional athletes and public figures in both sports and esports, and the power influencers wield over the actions and views of their many thousands of fans. This accompanies a historic trend of mass movements of violent behaviour beginning online and ending in instances of physical violence, often spurred on by only a few figureheads, making this issue of influencers and public figures a vital target for future research.[27]

Public Figures

There are clearly two sides to the issue of public figures and online violence. The first is the power granted to public figures by social media and how this can be misused. The second is the obligation and vulnerability that social media places upon public figures, and in particular professional athletes. An athlete's job has developed beyond simply playing their chosen sport as a profession, a professional athlete must also represent their team, owner, and sponsors through interviews and advertisements amongst other marketing stints they are obligated to appear in. As aforementioned, esports have followed in traditional sports footsteps through the processes of professionalisation and commercialisation, with marketing playing a key role in this process. This has been clearly portrayed by the massive increase in sponsorship within esports. A prime example of this is having key moments in the game and its production team being sponsored by various companies, providing the *League of Legends North American Championship Series* (NA LCS) with the 'Statefarm analyst desk', 'Bud Light ace', 'Honda performance play' and 'Mastercard player of the week'.

[27] Recent examples include the Capitol Riots, the Christchurch attacks, and Gamergate (Macklin 2019; Atlantic Council 2021; Blodgett 2019; Burgess et al. 2017; Aghazadeh 2018)

Brand integration goes well beyond the live broadcasts and into the teams and players themselves. Professional esports players will appear in advertisements and interviews on their team's social media accounts as well as multiple other platforms. Multiple teams have a YouTube series updated weekly covering the team's practice, match results and general day to day activities. These reality TV style shows provide fans an insight into the players' daily lives and mean these players have cameras in and around them constantly. In one infamous incident in 2021 a team told their players that some of them were going to be fired at the end of the season, before fading into a 'Bud Light cooldown' title card (Grayson 2021). This exchange and the players' reactions were recorded and uploaded to the teams YouTube page. These are just some examples of marketing required of players by teams and their corporate interests.

The players may also engage with fans via their own social media accounts, or livestream to their fans via Twitch or some other platform in their spare time. While these additional activities may be technically voluntary, they are somewhat necessary for the players to develop their fanbases and personal brand. This is particularly important given that players often rely on full time streaming or work as an ex-pro within the esports industry following their retirement; opportunities largely made possible by their popularity and fan bases. Thus, it becomes clear how self-promotion via social media, while presenting exciting opportunities for athletes, has also become an obligation which comes at the expense of their privacy and safety. Social media has given fans unprecedented access to player's personal lives, while also providing fans with a platform with which to attack players, and it is important to understand how this makes players and athletes vulnerable to toxicity and violence (Kavanaugh, Litchfield and Osbourne 2019).

The examples of violence in esports explored in the second chapter of this thesis provided a useful insight into the state of violence as it appears now in esports. However, for an insight into

how this violence could develop going forwards into the future, we can turn towards the much larger world of sports. Unlike esports, various studies of sports have conducted research into the abuse of athletes via social media. This provides some insight into the potential future of online violence in esports, or perhaps a present-day reality which is simply unaccounted for due to a lack of research and public awareness.

Sexism

Kavanaugh, Jones and Marks highlighted in 2016 that "the nature of abuse in online spaces has been overlooked" (Kavanaugh, Jones and Marks 2016, p. 783). This is particularly problematic given that "online environments can pose a significant risk to individual emotional and psychological safety" (Kavanaugh, Jones and Marks 2016, p. 783). The authors highlight how dissociative anonymity and the difficulties associated with regulating online spaces have led to a rise in abusive behaviour and its subsequent effects (Kavanaugh, Jones and Marks 2016). These findings highlight how online violence is important since it represents a growing source of violence in society, but also how online violence can operate in new and more serious ways, resulting in more harmful outcomes:

> Findings demonstrate how social media provides a space for unregulated gender-based cyberhate targeting high-profile women in their workplace in a way that traditional sport media does not. (Kavanaugh, Litchfield and Osbourne 2019, p. 522)

The fact that many instances of online violence "frequently go unchallenged and are now accepted as part of virtual interactions" raises serious questions about the normalisation of online violence within society (Kavanaugh, Litchfield and Osbourne 2019, p. 522). A study of online

harassment received by prominent female tennis players reveals the extent of this issue in traditional sports finding that: “the virtual maltreatment of athletes is a rapidly emerging and highly significant problem in contemporary sport” (Kavanaugh, Litchfield and Osbourne 2019, p. 558). The article documented 1095 pieces of abuse directed at five female professional tennis players over the course of two weeks across Twitter and Facebook (Kavanaugh, Litchfield and Osbourne 2019). The study’s analysis of these comments had similar findings to the second chapter of this thesis. Abuse was often passed off as a joke, or used by individuals in positions of power, often straight white males, to establish and maintain power over a virtual space, both of which are reminiscent of the homophobic comments made by Reativo (Kavanaugh, Litchfield and Osbourne 2019; Haunting_Damage9917 2021). The article ultimately concluded that:

> the safety of women athletes and the need to educate individuals concerning the threats posed by virtual spaces should be on the agenda for sporting organizations. (Kavanaugh, Litchfield and Osbourne 2019, p. 569).

There is a notable lack of female esports players. Sexist abuse is one significant barrier which could be preventing women from entering and competing in this space. Just as this article concluded that sports organisations must protect women and educate their audience, so too must esports organisations. It is worth noting that traditional sports have also historically been a predominantly male space, and that only relatively recently women’s sport has seen significant growth (Lee, Westcott, Wray and Raviprakash 2020). If esports follows a similar path to traditional sports, as they have so far, then the need to address misogyny and sexism will become increasingly important. If these organisations act proactively, they could prevent a significant amount of harm for women in these spaces going forward.

Racism

Sexism is not the only common form of abuse within traditional sports. Racism has been an issue within sports long before social media, however, recent events have seen racist comments made specifically on social media resurface as a major issue within sports. This most notably includes the 2020 UEFA European Football Championship[28], where various players on England's national team received racial abuse following their loss in the final (ABC News 2021). In response the players in the *English Premier League* (EPL) took a knee before kick-off as a demonstration of 'unity against all forms of racism', a stance reminiscent of Colin Kaepernick's widely publicised and controversial protests in the *National Football League* (NFL) (Boren 2020). While racism appears to be improving in the traditional offline context of sports and sporting events it has found new life online (Oshiro, Weems and Singer 2020). This is despite society more broadly having seen a general gradual reduction in overt racism over time (Hagerman 2018; McConahay, Hardee and Batts 1981).[29]

One explanation is that the perceived anonymity of online racism empowers behaviour which is now deemed socially unacceptable or violent (Oshiro, Weems and Singer 2020). Duvall (2020) highlights how the online medium has empowered the Alt Right, a movement which used "the language of antifandom" to justify the abuse they levelled at Colin Kaepernick, presenting racist and political opinions through the medium of sports fandom (Duvall 2020, p. 270). This is

[28] Held in 2021 due to COVID-19

[29] The state of racism in society goes well beyond the remit of this thesis. However, while evidence demonstrates that racism may not have declined, but rather changed and taken new forms, this appears to support the claims of this thesis that understanding how racism operates online will be of vital importance going into the future. As historic forms of offline racism are deemed socially unacceptable, racist views and opinions may find a new platform online.

reminiscent of Gamergate, where a budding Alt Right community, formed via social media, made sexist attacks against women in the gaming industry under the guise of journalistic integrity (Blodgett 2019; Burgess et al. 2017; Aghazadeh 2018). This development of the Alt Right community through social media is a research project in and of itself, however these examples demonstrate how violence can be facilitated by social media and sports. Cleland and Cashmore (2014) note how sports bodies and officials within English Football have been slow to address racism, with progress often coming as a result of pressure from the fans. They note on online racism in particular:

> 'Social media have had a huge impact. People publish material that would never be permitted via written media (fanzines) or moderated message boards.' If criminal convictions continue to follow racist comments, then we are more likely to see a change of cultural communication across social media platforms. (Cleland and Cashmore 2020, p. 647)

Bennet (2017) notes how a university's Online Brand Community[30] "gives a voice to the fan, whereas the university doesn't attend to this voice" (Bennett 2017, p. 162). Miah (2014) adds: "perhaps the single most important issue in ...sport's digital future is how the increased management of social communication will take place" (Miah 2014, p. 237). Miah also cautions against excessive moderation:

> It is the playing out of one's ideas in public and the capacity to redefine these without catastrophic judgement that allows a society to progress and flourish, rather than the

[30] An online brand community is "any group of consumers with a shared enthusiasm for the brand and a well-developed social identity. Members engage jointly online, in actions to accomplish collective goals and/or express mutual sentiments and commitments. It is an online social space where information and experiences about a specific brand are shared among users, or between users and the brand." (EFOMI 2021)

> excessive stifling of thoughts, even if they are ill-informed and misguided. (Miah 2014, p. 237)

The internet has provided fans a new platform with which to engage in their love of sports, however some fans use this platform to engage in racist and violent behaviour. Without proper moderation of these online spaces the corporations responsible for them are facilitating and enabling various forms of racial abuse, casting a shadow on sports and the many positive things they contribute to society. More needs to be done to address violent behaviour in these spaces. However, Miah was correct in cautioning against excessive moderation, given that restrictions on free speech and in particular de-platforming can significantly harm democracy in this digital era (Blackburn, Gehl and Etudo 2021).

Fans may not respond positively to attempts at moderation. Hutchins and Rowe (2009) note that “rather than acquiescence and compliance from fans, the unintended outcome in media sport culture is likely to be resentment and resistance” (Hutchins and Rowe 2009, p. 361). Certainly, fandom has often been associated with themes of resistance and counterculture (Rowe, Ruddock and Hutchins 2009). This was clearly demonstrated in the aforementioned example where Last Shadow suffered abuse from SK Telecom T1 fans. SKT T1 fans spoke out strongly against the company, including hiring a truck with a large monitor displaying messages such as, "We, SKT T1 fans, demand a clear and detailed explanation from top management" and “Don't hide behind the backs of the players. T1 top management should take responsibility” (FarEastOctopus 2020; Kim and Jang 2020).

Education and Awareness

Striking a balance between the regulation needed for a safe and positive online environment while still allowing freedom of thought and expression is a difficult challenge that is yet to be overcome. However, it is arguable that many of the corporations who own these spaces have not yet been incentivised to address the problem with the resources and attention it deserves. Hence there is a need for raised public awareness to encourage their intervention with a push for more innovative and nuanced solutions. This highlights education as possibly the most important initiative going forwards in this space. This includes the education of parents and the general public on the state of online violence and the harm it can cause, along with the more targeted education of children on how to navigate online spaces safely, and how to behave appropriately within them. Finally, this involves the education of influencers and public figures to be aware of the potential harm they can cause, how to responsibly use their positions of influence, and how to cope with instances of online violence which many will inevitably face.

The importance of educating public figures on online violence has been made increasingly clear by recent events. Following Naomi Osaka's withdrawal from the French Open, Roger Federer said: "We need a revolution. Or at least an evolution of where we are today… I think we do need to help, coach and mentor the younger generation more. I can't imagine going through the beginning of my career with social media" (Reuters 2021). Along with education the need for proper support networks and infrastructure in esports professionals is vital. This is particularly important to note in new areas such as esports which have not had time to establish the same networks and infrastructure which have been developed in industries like traditional sports over decades. Moreover, the new and unique aspects of esports can lead to problems in finding

properly informed assistance for the problems professionals in these spaces may face (Crevoshay et al. 2019). The longer we ignore the full extent of the issues posed by online violence the longer we delay fully understanding how to properly educate and fund the support networks needed to assist those who suffer from potential attacks and abuse.

There appears to be increased awareness of online abuse as a serious issue. This is reflected by the Digital, Cultural, Media and Sport Sub-Committee on Online Harms and Disinformation in the United Kingdom, the US Senate inquiry into the harmful impacts of social media on children, and the ongoing developments surrounding the claims of the Facebook whistle-blower that "the company prizes growth and profits over combating hate speech, misinformation and other threats to the public" (Timberg 2021). One notable contributor to this committee was Rio Ferdinand, a retired English football player, now a Football Association executive, who accused social media firms of profiting from online abuse (Milmo 2021). Ferdinand cites the effects abuse has on friends and families, with close contacts often suffering more than the individual themselves (Milmo 2021). The same committee also received criticisms of social media companies for a lack of culpability for their "systemic failure to deal with hate, abuse and misinformation" (Milmo 2021). However, the Internet Association, a US lobby group representing companies like Google, Facebook and Twitter responded by condemning the proposed legislation for being too broad, undermining privacy and restricting freedom of speech (Milmo 2021). Reality TV star and influencer Amy Hart also contributed, citing the online abuse she received following her time on the show *Love Island*. She claimed to have received a death threat from a 13-year-old girl and that: ""some of the most awful messages I've had" came from schoolchildren" (Brown 2021, p. 1). She added "I've probably stopped reporting them now because I know there is no point," (Brown 2021, p. 1). This resignation and perceived inevitability of online abuse is

reflected in literature on toxicity in gaming and paints a disturbing picture of online abuse being normalised more broadly (Witzke 2019; Turkay et al. 2018; Turkay et al. 2020; Kordyaka 2020; Kou 2020). Turkay at al. (2018) found that these fatalistic views, that toxicity and violence could not be addressed, were increasingly commonplace amongst esports professionals. This despair likely stems from a lack of action from games companies in addressing the issues of toxicity and violence. Turkay at al. (2018) also note that this fatalism stands as a major barrier to addressing the problem and finding solutions, since if violent behaviour isn't reported its scale and impact aren't recognised and the problem isn't properly addressed.

Hart commented that children were common perpetrators of more extreme abuse. This reflects findings in studies conducted on toxicity in gaming, and possibly implies a level of desensitisation to abusive behaviour, thus leading to more extreme and frequent participation from younger generations (Brown 2021; Mattinen and Macey 2018). Hart concluded by defending influencing as a legitimate career, stating "it is a form of advertising. There is so much negativity around it as a job… people need to realise it is a real job" (Brown 2021). Taking influencing more seriously as a career could play an important role in properly addressing the issues that have arisen as a result of its rising popularity. Both influencing and gaming are recent developments made possible by new technology. The social stigma surrounding them could have influenced the slow response in both properly considering the existence and consequences of online violence and taking action to address it.

Overall, it is clear that there are useful insights for esports in examining online violence in traditional sports. Long before sports fandom expanded into the digital realm sports dealt with issues of fan violence. Social and psychological theories used to understand this phenomenon, can be used to better understand online violence in esports. Crawford's (2004) account of the

successful moderation of sports stadiums suggests that companies responsible for online spaces which facilitate violence could be spurred into action by greater societal awareness through education of the broader public on the extent and damage caused by violence online. Some evidence of this already taking effect is reflected by the respective parliamentary and senate inquiries in the UK and the US (UK Parliament 2021; Aljazeera 2021).

Beyond historical insights, literature on online violence in sports provides key insights into violence in esports. First it demonstrates that a lack of attention to this issue expands beyond esports into sports, and arguably throughout online platforms and their communities as a whole. Sports literature also reinforces the issues of violence and influencers, including both the violence caused by the actions of influencers and the violence perpetrated against influencers. Additionally, it highlighted the harm caused by online violence and its disproportionate impact on minorities, particularly stemming from instances of sexism, racism and homophobia. This literature concluded that much more needs to be done to combat online violence in sports. Solutions unanimously involved either improvements in education or moderation, generally both. This comparison places the issue of online violence in esports within the broader context of online violence in its entirety. This is helpful when highlighting the severity of this issue and in beginning to look for potential solutions. However, it is also important to note that esports also has many unique features and differences to other online communities, which must be understood in order to effectively address the issue of online violence in esports.

Differences

There are several key differences between online violence in sports as opposed to esports. It is important to understand these differences and how they may change approaches when addressing online violence in esports. While there are numerous technical differences between the two areas, this thesis's research has focused on a few key issues which appear from the literature to be the most influential. These include: the education of younger players, particularly regarding the concept of sportsmanship, the existence of support networks and infrastructure for professionals, and the younger demographic of gaming as opposed to sports and how this influences the normalisation of violence in esports.

Nicholson and Hoye (2005) highlight the importance of junior and non-professional sport in developing the culture of professional play in sports. It is important to consider that every individual who ends up playing a sport professionally has come through junior competitions or at the very least an amateur scene before becoming a professional. Many of the fans of these sports also participate in these same programs even if they do not go on to play professionally themselves. In sports these early years of engagement, often at the junior level, are crucial in moulding the values and behaviour of new players. This includes the concept of sportsmanship, which at its most basic level means respect for the opponent, one's own teammates, and the match officials (see Abad 2010). These are near universal principles in junior sport across the world, and while these measures clearly do not eliminate un-sportsman like behaviour (particularly as the participants grow older), it would be very difficult to argue that it has not played a significant role in reducing it. Compare this to esports. While there is some minimal effort to encourage certain values within individual games, there is a noticeable lack of broader

movements attempting to actively create and encourage a positive culture or concepts like that of sportsmanship. The relative recency of gaming, the sheer number of games themselves and the digital medium have likely all contributed to this absence. Nonetheless, the absence of a concept akin to sportsmanship within esports and gaming more broadly can only be negatively affecting the amount of violence and toxic behaviour perpetrated within it. Future research could investigate how measures encouraging sportsmanship within individual games communities have affected toxicity and violence. Research could also target the history of sportsmanship within sports and how it was implemented across different sporting codes to see if there are lessons to be learned that could be applied within esports.

Central to the concept of sportsmanship in sports is engaging with players at a younger age and teaching them appropriate behaviours in order to effectively shape the culture of the sport when they become older (Nicholson and Hoye 2005). This is reflected in guidelines across youth sporting codes in Australia, including School Sport Australia, who list 'being a good sport' as the first point in their code of conduct (School Sport Australia 2019). Subsequently it becomes important to note the youth demographic associated with gaming and esports, and to note how the communities associated with gaming and esports can impact young players, and the impacts this can have for the future. Turkay at al. (2018) found that esports professionals saw abuse and toxicity as normal practice within the community, a view which seems to be supported by the research conducted in this thesis and the consistent theme of normalisation. Mattinen and Macey (2018) provide context for this concept of normalisation in their article observing how age influenced the behaviour of players in the game *Defence of the Ancients 2* (DOTA 2). They found that younger players were both more likely to participate in toxic behaviours themselves and less likely to view certain behaviours as toxic.

This is to say that younger players saw certain toxic behaviours as normal, and subsequently were more likely to participate in these behaviours themselves. One explanation for this effect is that younger players who began playing the game who experienced toxic behaviours frequently would see this as the accepted form of behaviour and communication in the game's community. This bears strong similarities to the fan violence seen at sporting events which Wann et al. (2001) suggest could be explained by social learning theory. If new players are joining toxic gaming communities and learning to participate in the same toxic forms of communication, this would suggest that toxicity will only continue to perpetuate and likely grow. Therefore, as new players are indoctrinated into accepted norms of toxic practice, they will reinforce a cycle of toxicity as they themselves interact with the next generation of players. It also becomes easy to see how these players could then bring these behaviours into other online communities they participate in, or perhaps into the offline world and broader society.

Finally, it is worth noting how the infrastructure and support networks for esports are new and underdeveloped particularly when compared to those of traditional sports. This is reflected in the various sports programs, guidelines, competitions, and clubs, set up across the globe which form a formidable and comprehensive infrastructure for sporting activities. In contrast esports has little to no supporting infrastructure at the junior and amateur level, only now seeing some very new esports programs beginning to appear in secondary and tertiary education.

A 2019 White Paper into the state of mental health in the gaming industry highlighted a number of key issues including: crunch[31], addiction, diversity and social stigma (Crevoshay et al. 2019). These issues negatively affect the mental state of professionals working within gaming and can

[31] Crunch refers to working more than 40 hours per week over an extended period of time, a common practice in the gaming industry to meet deadlines (Crevoshay et al. 2019)

act as barrier to seeking and obtaining help should they need it (Crevoshay et al. 2019; Wearing 2021). It is vital that these support networks develop and improve. Amy Hart highlighted how the professional support following her time on the show *Love Island* helped her deal with the abuse she received (Brown 2021). It is important that any public figure who may be subject to abuse is able to find professional help, and that these professionals are given the proper education and support to provide it. As Kavanaugh et al. (2019) highlights: "The trivialization of online harassment puts the responsibility on the victim to respond to 'trolls' and ignores the physical and emotional harm inflicted upon them" (Kavanaugh et al. 2019, p. 431). This thesis's contribution has been to demonstrate the harmful potential for toxic behaviour as a form of violence, acting as a preliminary step towards properly understanding and subsequently addressing the issue of online violence in esports.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the role of online violence in esports. It noted that the lack of research done in this space has led to an insufficient understanding of the causes and effects of online violence. This remains a significant barrier towards addressing the problems and finding potential solutions. Chapter one introduced contexts and definitions for key terms using the existing literature. Chapter two's case study of online violence revealed how toxic behaviour in the *LoL Reddit* community could be violent when it was intentional, harmful, non-essential and unwanted. It noted how violence in esports was comparable to similar violence in traditional sports. Chapter three expanded on this comparison to find how the research conducted on fan and spectator violence in sports could assist in a better understanding of the issue of online violence in esports. It also contextualised online violence in esports and sports as part of the issue of online violence in online communities more broadly, particularly in relation to social media.

The moderation of online spaces has become an increasingly topical subject and towards the end of 2021 it gained the attention of policy makers globally. In 2021 the UK parliament held a Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Sub-committee on online harms and disinformation. The US Senate held a Sub-committee on social media's impacts on child safety following a whistle-blower's allegation that Facebook "prizes growth and profits over combating hate speech, misinformation and other threats to the public" (Timberg 2021, p. 1). Meanwhile in Australia Prime Minister Scott Morrison accused social media of being a 'coward's palace' and drew particular attention to the anonymity of social media that prevented individuals from being faced with accountability for their actions (Yosufzai 2021). There was a unanimous push for improvements in moderation and oversight from the companies responsible for these spaces

across these examples, which reflects the same conclusion made by this thesis in addressing online violence in esports. This issue will likely grow as the public becomes increasingly aware of the harms of social media and online violence. Governments will be forced to address the issue and conflict will escalate with big-tech companies like Facebook, Twitter and Tik-Tok which have already indicated they have no intention of acquiescing to increases in government regulations (Milmo 2021; Timberg 2021).

It is within the context of this broader global movement toward understanding and regulating the digital realm, and by extension the violence within it, that sees research into online violence become increasingly important. This will not only provide a better understanding which may lead to potential solutions and policy, but also to identify how violence occurs in different spaces online, and how these spaces should be approached and managed. This thesis presents several conclusions which could influence how violence is addressed in esports.

Chapter two highlighted anonymity, normalisation, and competition as key underlying causes of toxic and violent behaviour and it is suggested this provides a starting point for solutions to address violence in the esports community. The online format also effected change in public figures or 'influencers' and their fans. With such quick and direct methods of communication via social media, influencers could exert rapid and powerful responses from their fanbases. The results of these responses could be extremely harmful and there are serious issues with the degree of accountability for those instigating these movements and their online participants.

Chapter three introduces literature from fan violence in traditional sports. This literature details how spectator violence was successfully reduced through active intervention from corporations and highlights the issue of online violence as fandom becomes increasingly digital. Sports literature depicts how online violence disproportionately effects minorities, as shown by the

prevalence of racism, sexism, and homophobia in digital sports fandom. This sets a worrying precedent for the future of esports and the gaming community more broadly which has particularly struggled with sexism in the past.

Overall, the chapter finds that increased public awareness is vital in beginning to address the issue of online violence. The focus being placed on social media's role in online violence globally is encouraging, however it risks generalising issues which are unique to specific online communities. As a result, the chapter concludes by drawing attention to key specificities within esports which need to be addressed. Most prominent is the need for an active shift in the culture of esports to stop the normalisation of violence, particularly within new and young players. The chapter suggests this could be achieved through a concept akin to sportsmanship in traditional sport, executed through a broad framework of policy targeting newcomers to these communities. This would require significant improvements in the existing infrastructure and support networks in esports, which could be improved through national policies on esports values (akin to sportsmanship) and the formalisation of esports competitions within schools (UNESCO 2021; United Nations 2021).

However, all of these preventative solutions would be severely compromised if efforts were not made to address the existing violence perpetrated within the community. This can only be achieved through improvements in moderation of these spaces. While some game companies are taking steps to address toxicity in their communities it appears these are insufficient given the collective state of the esports community. As Taylor (2018) noted, moderation on *Twitch*, the largest streaming platform for esports, is mostly voluntary and unofficial. Much like the prominent social media companies it seems unlikely these corporations will take the necessary steps to address toxicity and violence without outside intervention, likely from governments.

This makes broader public awareness of the prevalence and harmfulness of online violence to encourage action from policy makers the most important step going forwards.

Chapter three outlined a range of avenues for future research on this topic. Suggested avenues include a closer examination of professionalisation's effects on traditional sports and how this could inform our understanding of professionalisation in esports. Additionally, more research is needed into the role of influencers in cyber-attacks and mass movements beginning online. This subject seems to be of significance given the influence public figures can exert over their fans' actions through social media.

Influencing is a product of the digital realm and a fundamentally new concept, which makes research essential in order to better understand its role and impact on society. This is a multi-dimensional topic which will requires a diverse program of research given the different spaces influencers can operate in, such as gaming, reality TV, or politics. Of particular interest stepping from this thesis is how influencers can be held accountable for the actions their fans take on their behalf or due to their influence. Finally, chapter three suggested research into how to develop a broad cultural shift in gaming and esports, to encourage more positive participation from its community as a reflection of sportsmanship and its role in sculpting the culture of traditional sports. It is possible that integrating esports into existing frameworks like the school system will provide the necessary infrastructure to begin implementing these broader cultural changes (UNESCO 2021; United Nations 2021).

This thesis brought attention to the lack of research and broader public attention on the issue of online violence within esports. It highlighted the changing role and perception of violence within an increasingly digital society and proposed that a focus on toxicity as a potential form of violence might better help depict the significant harm it can cause. As esports continues to grow

as an industry so too will its audience and its impact on society. With appropriate research to inform policy this growth can bring the positive entertainment of esports to the world, while working to limit the negative impact this thesis has shown to accompany it.

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