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2016 was a pretty crappy year in all aspects but one - esports. Over the year esports saw massive growth, with international revenue now valued around \$900 million USD, total prize money at play topping \$50 million and concurrent player numbers steadily rising. What better time to put together a special containing everything you need to know about the most exciting new competitive field in the world?

DANIEL WILKS
RED LEADER

58





12

PARAGON

Epic Games enters the action MOBA marketplace



30

NINTENDO WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS

In 1990 Nintendo brought the gaming world together



74

ESPORTS PCS

Build and optimise the perfect rig for your chosen game

84

PRO GAMERS SPEAK

Learn from some of the best pro gamers from around the world

START

- 09 Battlerite
- 14 Cloud Pirates
- 16 Supernova
- 18 Breakaway
- 20 Quake Champions

- 22 Gigantic
- 24 Battalion 1944
- 26 Master X Master
- 28 Lawbreakers

FEATURES

- 36 Nintendo and Esports
- 44 Regional Esports Boundaries
- 50 Esports Gambling and Australian Law
- 58 Heroes Never Die
- 68 The Australian Fighting Game Scene

INTERVIEWS

- 34 Dan Scheckenbach - Manager, Team Immunity
- 42 Dan McHugh - Esports Manager, Smite
- 48 NakeZe - Manager, Mindfreak
- 56 CaptCoach - Manager and Coach, Smite
- 64 Jini Jun - Manager, World of Tanks
- 82 Daniel Ringland - Manager, LoL

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START

9

Battlerite

Better than Battlerong

12

Paragon

Virtuous or vicious?

14

Cloud Pirates

The sky's the limit

16

Supernova

Boom

18

Breakaway

Have a break

20

Quake Champions

Arena shooters are back, baby

22

Gigantic

Gonna be yuuuge

24

Battalion 1944

Remember when CoD was good?

26

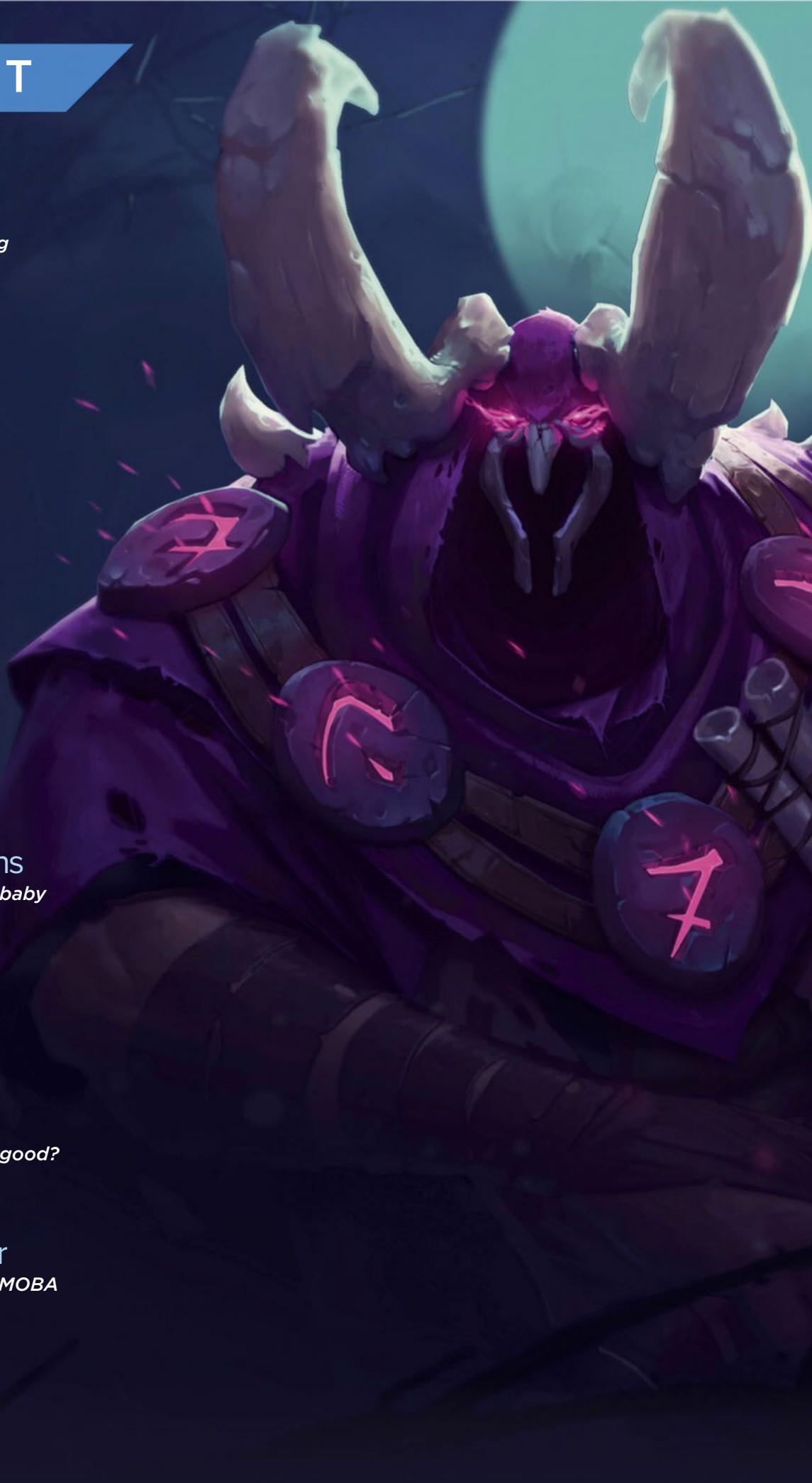
Master x Master

A masterful reinvention of MOBA

28

Lawbreakers

Stop, criminal scum!



CATEGORY
DEVELOPER
PUBLISHER
PLATFORM
DUE

Arena Brawler
Stunlock Studios
Stunlock Studios
PC
2016 (Early Access)

Battlerite

Julian-Rizzo Smith jumps rite into the fite

Battlerite is a team-based arena brawler offering adrenaline-pumping action and a unique approach to character progression. Players compete in best of three style team death matches with two to three players on each team.

Matches are quick but fun, with

level design encouraging tight combat encounters and fast-paced action. Two versus two matches can be fun but are far less entertainingly chaotic and strategic than three versus three encounters. You can play in standard, private, player vs AI, training and ranked matches, and there's a short

tutorial for newcomers. In ranked mode, you gain a new player rank the more rounds you win, but you aren't punished for losing matches. In this way, the game's competitive scene isn't as stressfully toxic as others. That said, there's not a strong player community for Battlerite so far, as I



Battlerite's heroes are charismatic and memorable even without the aid of background fiction

often found myself waiting several minutes for a ranked match. In fact, in some instances, I played with the same group of players several times in a row.

Environments are designed around the game's fast-paced combat. You begin each round on a floating isle heading towards the coliseum. Riding in on a mounted beast, you head towards the centre of the battlefield where the other team is most likely at. That said, you can use this assumption to your advantage by hiding in the upper and lower corners of the map to flank your opponents. Rushing tactics are often unwelcome unless you're playing with a group of friends, but even then, Battlerite's lack of a voice chat makes communicating with your team mid-battle distracting.

Matches are timed for two minutes with the arena radius gradually getting smaller at the thirty second mark. This not only makes fights even tighter and tense to play, but also to watch. I enjoyed watching my team compete on occasions where I died early in a round, and even found myself supporting them in the chat. Matches are engaging and adrenaline-pumping. Viewing them ignites a feeling of excitement that would only be amplified competing in a tournament stadium with thousands watching, much like the coliseum fights in the game. A power-up orb spawns every thirty seconds and rewards the team that destroys it with a recovered health and ultimate meter. This adds a fun power struggle between the competing sides, as whichever team

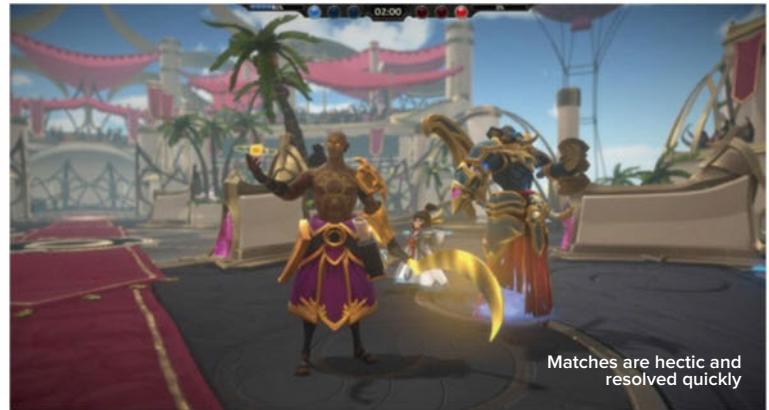
that deals the final blow is granted all the rewards.

One of the game's most unique features, however, is its approach to character progression. Unlike other competitive games, you don't exactly level up in Battlerite. Rather, you level up your abilities by selecting one of three battlerites each round, creating your own custom spec tree each match. Early round battlerites affect your basic abilities, resetting the cooldown of a skill or increasing the debuff effect of another. Later game battlerites can significantly influence the tide of the battle, however. The lone gunner Jade's tier one battlerites can add a root effect to one of her abilities, allow her to enter stealth after vaulting out of harm's way, and reset the cooldown of stealth after casting another skill. Her tier four battlerites add significant passive skills such as a 20 percent damage increase to enemies that are under 30 percent health, and increased movement speed. Her tier five battlerites are naturally tied to her ultimate ability, Explosive Shells, however. They can either add a 50 percent snare damage for a brief moment, or resist damage taken when channelling the spell by a whopping 75 percent.

Battlerites add another layer of strategy to matches, allowing you to completely rebuild your character mid-game. The lack of needing to constantly worry about your equipment is refreshing for a hero-driven multiplayer title. The battlerite mechanic helps harness the



BATTLERITES HARNESS THE ADRENALINE-PUMPING ATMOSPHERE OF MATCHES, AND CAN QUICKLY CHANGE THE TIDE OF BATTLE



Matches are hectic and resolved quickly

adrenaline-pumping atmosphere of matches, and can significantly change the tide of a battle, too.

Character design is well varied if not archetypal. Character classes are defined by their choice of weapon rather than stats, and are either a melee, ranged or support champion. A short character bio in the character selection screen gives a brief background on a character while creating a sense of world building. Characters are hyperbolic and fantastical, reflecting their image as coliseum champions.

Ashka, the gnome-shaped masked pyromancer, was a personal favourite of mine. Lighting himself on fire, he violently charges into enemies, fires fireballs in multiple directions and casts walls and erupting holes of molten lava. His nimble and explosive behaviour is not only charismatically ridiculous, but makes him a diverse ranged user. His area of effect spells can damage an entire team and help him and his allies get out of harm's way.

Another more demonic and imposing hero, Ruh Kan, consumes enemy souls and pulls foes towards him for devastating melee attacks. He joined the Battlerite coliseum battles after being awoken by a grave robber. A majority of characters' backstories are left underdeveloped, but the cartoon voice acting and costuming bring these champions to life. Characterisation is so often underwhelming in arena multiplayer experiences, so it's welcoming to see some attention to creating a world and likeable personalites.

There's also a lot of intricate player details in Battlerite's ranking system that extends its potential as a competitive experience. esports fans will

appreciate the attention to detail in player stats, as scoreboards micro-manage and calculate each player's involvement in a match. Namely, your overall damage, protection, and your overall duration in disabling enemies. The game also micro-calculates each of these stats, determining the percentage each of your spells and status effects had on your overall performance, letting you know which spells you use often and whether you're playing effectively.

The death recap pop-up icon details the moments leading up to your death too. The mechanic lists the second-by-second moments of your demise, informing you why you died and suggesting ways to improve. A spell that charges you towards the enemy and various enemy attacks for instance, suggest you focused too much on rushing and left yourself vulnerable and overwhelmed. It's a great mechanic that adds a further layer of depth, and could easily be taken into account when commentating a match.

Daily and weekly challenges ensure the game's longevity, too. These challenges often encourage you to experiment with other heroes, rewarding you with weapon and character skins found in chests for playing a set of games as a ranged or eastern originated hero.

Players can upload their matches to the game's community network, as well. Here, they can view tight competitive games that they, other players, and the developer Stunlock Studios have uploaded, learning from the action and improving their game.

Battlerite is an interesting addition to the esports scene. Despite shorter competitions than other competitive games, the increasingly tight environments and combat make it engaging to both play and watch. ■





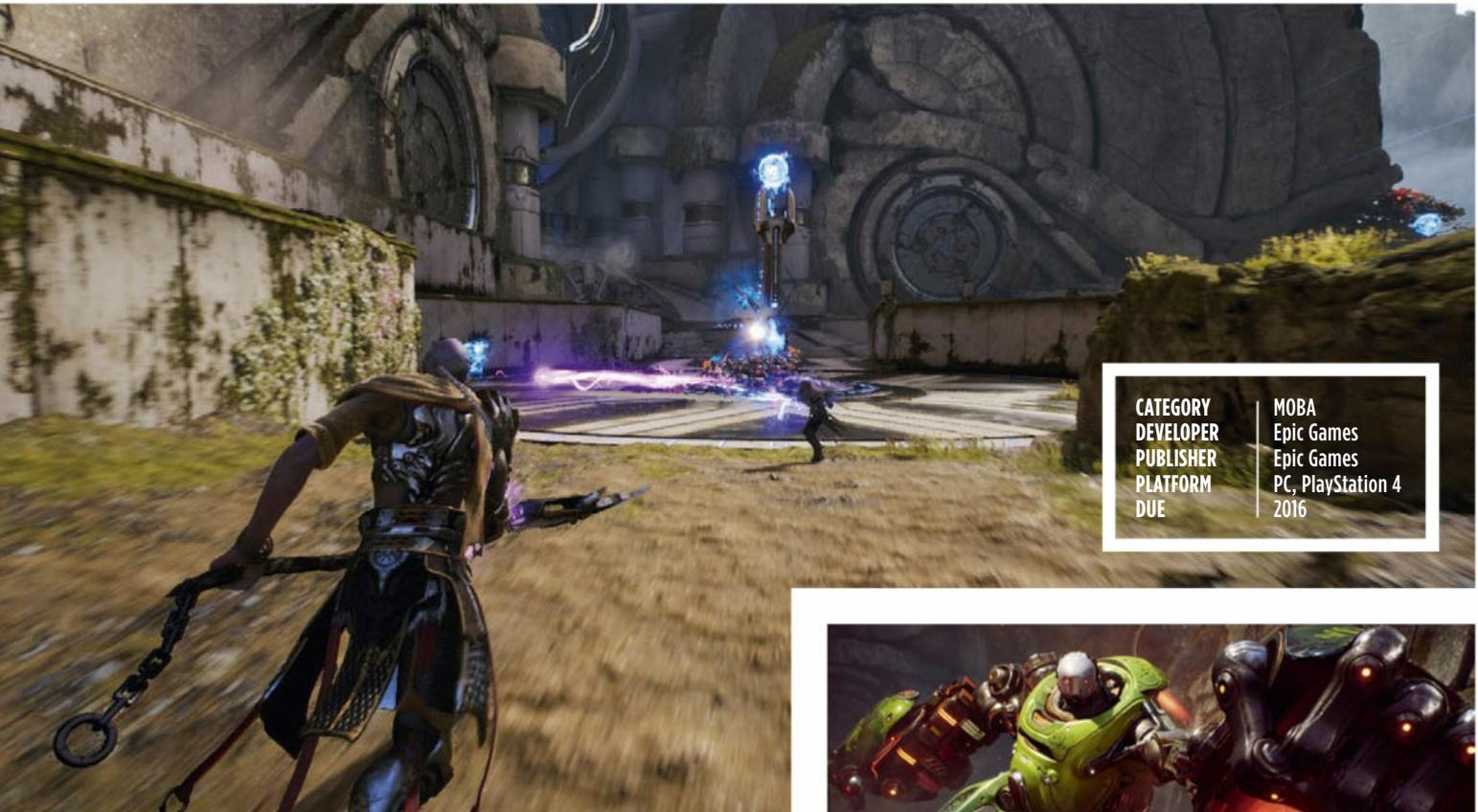
Paragon

Julian Rizzo-Smith on the virtues of bringing competitive MOBA to console market



Paragon embodies the virtues of MOBA game design but in a third person perspective. Players work in teams of five destroying enemy towers as they progress through three-lane maps. You can play by yourself against AI, with other players, or in competitive PvP matches, with the latter often lasting 30 minutes to an hour.

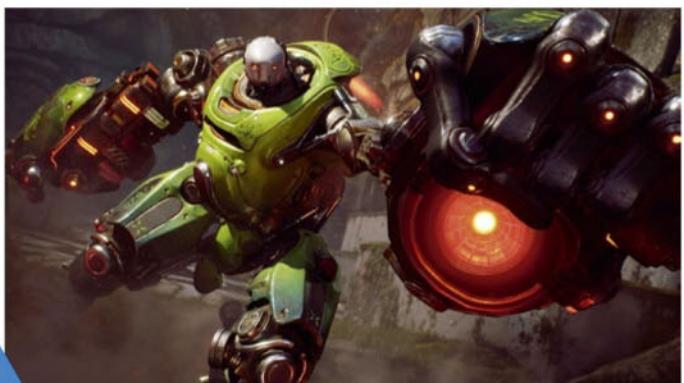
Like other games in the genre, your character progression is tied to match duration. You begin a match with few items and only your basic ability, chipping away at enemy minions and towers to level up and progress. You unlock your four other abilities – two active skills, a passive, and an ultimate ability – as you level up. You can influence your character's stats by



CATEGORY	MOBA
DEVELOPER	Epic Games
PUBLISHER	Epic Games
PLATFORM	PC, PlayStation 4
DUe	2016



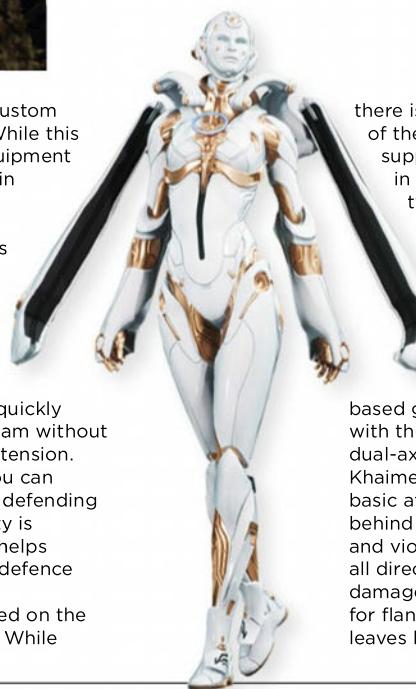
MOST OF THE CAST IS MADE UP OF DPS AND SUPPORT ROLES, WHICH FURTHER VARY IN ASSASSIN, CASTER, AND RANGER-TYPE BUILDS



purchasing cards from a custom deck at your team base. While this is essentially the same equipment micromanagement found in other games in the genre, creating your own custom build outside of matches is fun and unique.

Paragon encourages teamwork and communication, too. Button shortcuts on the PlayStation 4 version of the game allow you to quickly communicate with your team without the need of a keyboard extension. Using these commands you can indicate that a lane needs defending or that your ultimate ability is ready, which significantly helps with maintaining a line of defence between the three lanes.

Character design is based on the game's six classes as well. While



there is a set of tank heroes, most of the cast is made up of DPS and support roles, which further vary in assassin, caster, and ranger-type builds. Competitive players will no doubt be more strategic in their team's character selection, as each character has their own strategy and tactics.

Paragon's cast doesn't come to life on screen as naturally as other hero-based games, but I enjoyed my time with the characters I played. The dual-axe wielding reptilian assassin Khaimera strikes his enemies as a basic attack but can later teleport behind them for a quick ambush and violently swing his weapons in all directions. His high agility and damage per second make him good for flanking but his low defence leaves him vulnerable when directly

attacking a group of enemies.

Another character, Narbash, is an orc bard and plays more of a supportive tank role in matches. He has unusually high health, defence, and damage, but has long ability cooldowns, swinging his (literal) drum sticks in slow, heavy arcs while healing and buffing his allies. Tutorial videos on each hero instruct you on the strategy that works best for them, so it never feels overwhelming – which isn't something you can say for certain other MOBAs.

Despite still being in beta, Paragon has already acquired a respectable following, with competitions regularly streamed on Twitch and a new hero introduced every three weeks. With an emphasis on teamwork, traditional level design, and a third person perspective, it has the potential to introduce competitive MOBAs to the console scene in a big way. ■



CATEGORY	Action MMO
DEVELOPER	Allods Team
PUBLISHER	My.com
PLATFORM	PC
DU	2016

Cloud Pirates

Julian Rizzo-Smith takes to the sky with a patch on his eye

Cloud Pirates is a tactical PvP multiplayer game involving sky pirate combat. Working together with your ten person fleet, you compete in basic capture the objective and team death match-style battles in the sky.

Combat is very strategic. The health, speed, altitude, and angle of your ship each have a tactical purpose. When manoeuvring around the map, speed and altitude not only determine how fast and high you are, but also the chance of incoming projectiles hitting their mark. Your angle marker signals nearby enemies and debris within five metres, but the overall radius display points out enemies from a further distance. The target icon partly helps with aiming, too, but individual attack ranges, enemy speed and altitude, and interfering debris influence the chance of a successful attack.

Using both main and broadside artillery gives you a near 360 degree attack radius. You can't thoughtlessly waste your ammo, either, as your weapons can overheat. Deciding on the right time to use an ability or charge into an enemy for a close-quartered assault is great fun, and emphasises Cloud Pirates' approach to tactical combat.

Levels also differ in scale and environmental aesthetics, as each map requires you to adapt your strategy to your surrounding environs. Floating debris might necessitate careful navigation but it can also be used as

cover, giving you a brief moment to heal or flank.

Destroying parts of an enemy ship disrupts its movement, rewarding you for exploiting their weakness. If it happens to you, you'll have to spend your in-game currency on making repairs after combat. This adds weight to your decisions, but the cost is never anything substantial so it doesn't feel especially punishing.

You can also research new equipment and abilities in a skill tree based upgrade system, influencing the movement and durability of your ship. Upgrades cover details such as horizontal and vertical speed and detection range, as well as your shield capacity. You can also upgrade your weapons' damage per second, projectile speed and range, and overheating time, which can give you an exceptional competitive advantage. While this adds an extra layer of role-playing strategy to the game, the potential for pay-to-win is obvious.

In battle, you can choose from twelve different ship classes, each with its own unique weapons, stats, and aesthetic builds. The Mine Corvette focuses on AoE attacks often used to break the enemy's tight line of defence, while the high DPS-built Interceptor Cruiser makes it harder for the enemy to respond in kind. Battleship fans will also appreciate the variation in size, speed, and construction material in each class.

**YOU CAN
CHOOSE FROM
TWELVE DIFFERENT
SHIP CLASSES,
EACH WITH UNIQUE
WEAPONS, STATS,
AND AESTHETIC
QUALITIES**

Despite being potentially unbalanced and facing stiff competition from other vehicle-based multiplayer games like War of Tanks, Cloud Pirates has enough depth and charisma to potentially make it a big player in a crowded marketplace. Keep an eye on this one. 





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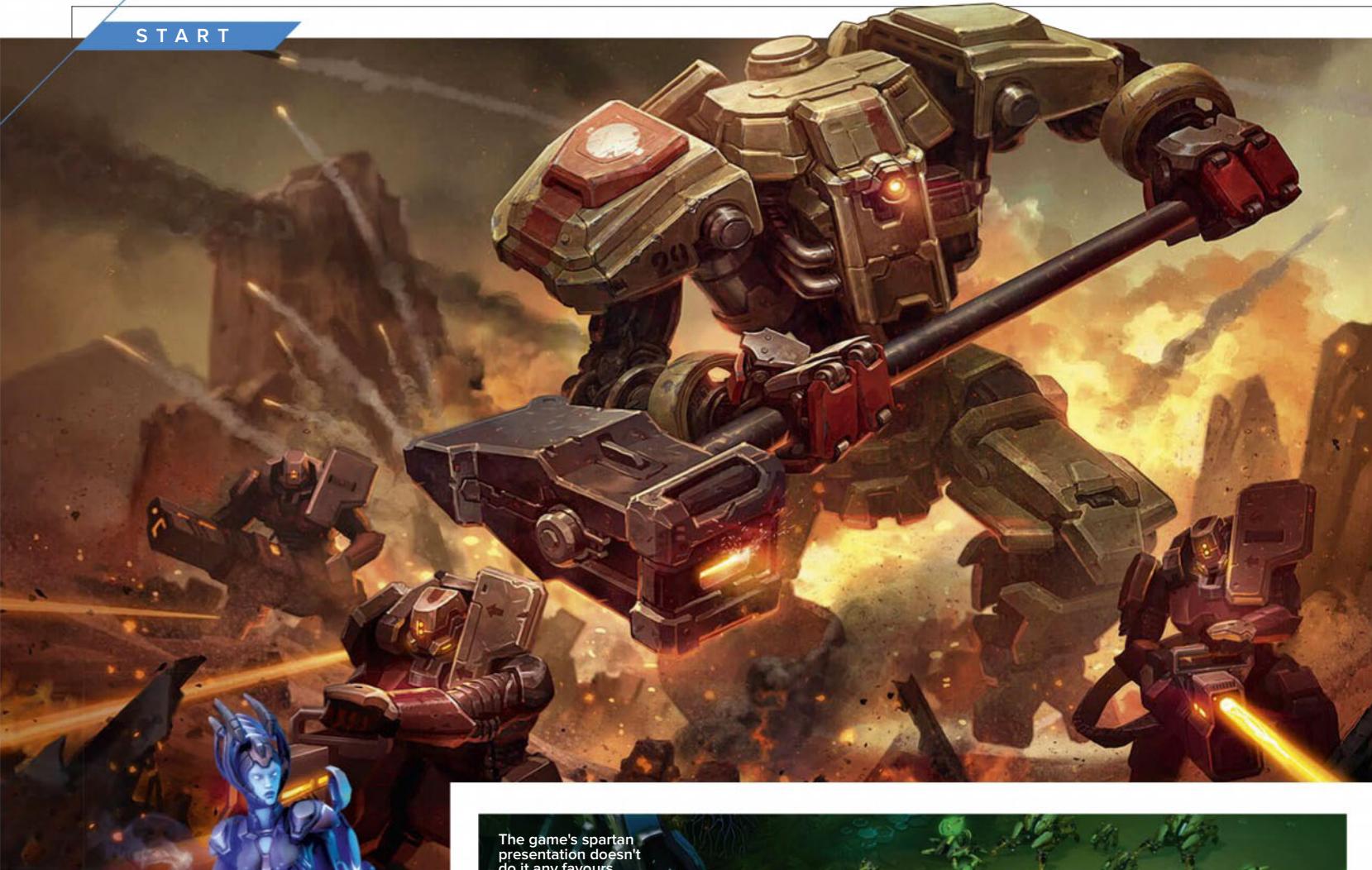
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START



The game's spartan presentation doesn't do it any favours



Supernova

"No, not the nerd expo" explains Julian Rizzo-Smith

In the past, developer Primal Game Studio has referred to Supernova as a MOBA/RTS hybrid, a statement that could be construed as being more than a bit muddled given how MOBA gameplay arose from RTS. With a little digging, however, it makes complete sense: Supernova is bringing elements of RTS gameplay back to a genre that had previously excised them. On the surface, it looks like a sci-fi take on a traditional three lane MOBA, with teams of five taking each other on to destroy the enemy's base. Dig a little deeper, though, and Supernova reveals itself to be a whole lot more.

Whereas MOBAs tend towards the micro in terms of control, with players doing little more than controlling their character, Supernova brings back elements of the macro planning that comes with RTS games. Players not only control their characters and cooldowns but also a tech tree and economy for building minions to send in waves at the enemy.

It's an interesting little wrinkle that gives identity to the game. Rather than using in-game currency to buy equipment and upgrades, Supernova instead features a personal upgrade system, with experience accrued through battle used to upgrade stats and abilities, RPG style.

PLAYERS NOT ONLY CONTROL THEIR CHARACTERS AND COOLDOWNS BUT ALSO A TECH TREE AND ECONOMY FOR BUILDING MINIONS



The different types of units available for construction all have different strengths and weaknesses, so deciding what set of units are best for your lane is paramount to smooth play. If the enemy is concentrating on infantry it could be advantageous to build some flying units to take them out relatively safely. Of course this could leave your units very vulnerable to anti-air or turret attacks, leaving the commander alone to try and advance a push.

The game utilises a traditional three lane MOBA setup with jungling, spawns to kill for powerups, and the like. This lends Supernova a powerful sense of familiarity despite the fact that the resource management and building mechanics distance the game from others in the style. At its current stage it's a fun and relatively fast moving affair that contains both multiplayer and single player vs bots

CATEGORY
DEVELOPER
PUBLISHER
PLATFORM
DUE

MOBA
Primal Game Studio
Bandai Namco Games
PC
Open Beta

to get you familiar with maps, spawns and play styles. The game will be free to play when it finally releases with some form of microtransactions (most probably the buying of new characters and skins).

The only area in which Supernova really falls flat is in its presentation and story. On the surface it looks like a rudimentary Starcraft II expansion, with all the variety and flash that implies. The two factions, Humans and Cyborgs, are pretty uninteresting as well, with the two sides essentially being humans in robot suits and robots in human suits. It's a functional premise, and MOBAs are definitely games that don't really rely on story, but a little more effort with the background would be appreciated.

Supernova has been in open Beta for some time now, so we should expect the final game some-time in early 2017. ■



Breakaway

Daniel Wilks makes a break for it

Blood Bowl is one of the most well-known fantasy sports games in the world, but unfortunately, due to arcane mechanics and rushed development, the videogames have failed to truly live up to the potential of their tabletop counterparts. Now along comes a game that, while not quite as bloody as Blood Bowl, is brutal in its own unique way.

Breakaway, an upcoming 4v4 MOBA, sits somewhere between a more traditional MOBA, a capture the flag game, and football, with a touch of basketball as well for good measure. The general gist of the game is that two teams battle to bring a relic located at the centre of the arena to the goal at the opponent's end, scoring points and ending the round. It sounds like a simple capture the flag scenario, but things are made a little more complex due to the deep combat mechanics, interesting movement, team synergy, and the inclusion of buildables. Such complexity makes sense when you realise that Amazon Game Studios is made up of Double Helix devs, the people behind the excellent Killer Instinct reboot.

So far there are only seven announced characters but there are more to come. Each character has a role - DPS, Tank, Healer, Support - and a host of skills to help them in their chosen role. Each character has one main attack and three other abilities tied to cooldowns, as well as access to two buildables that can change the way a game plays out. Healing shrines restore the health of those around them, Sun Mirrors fire

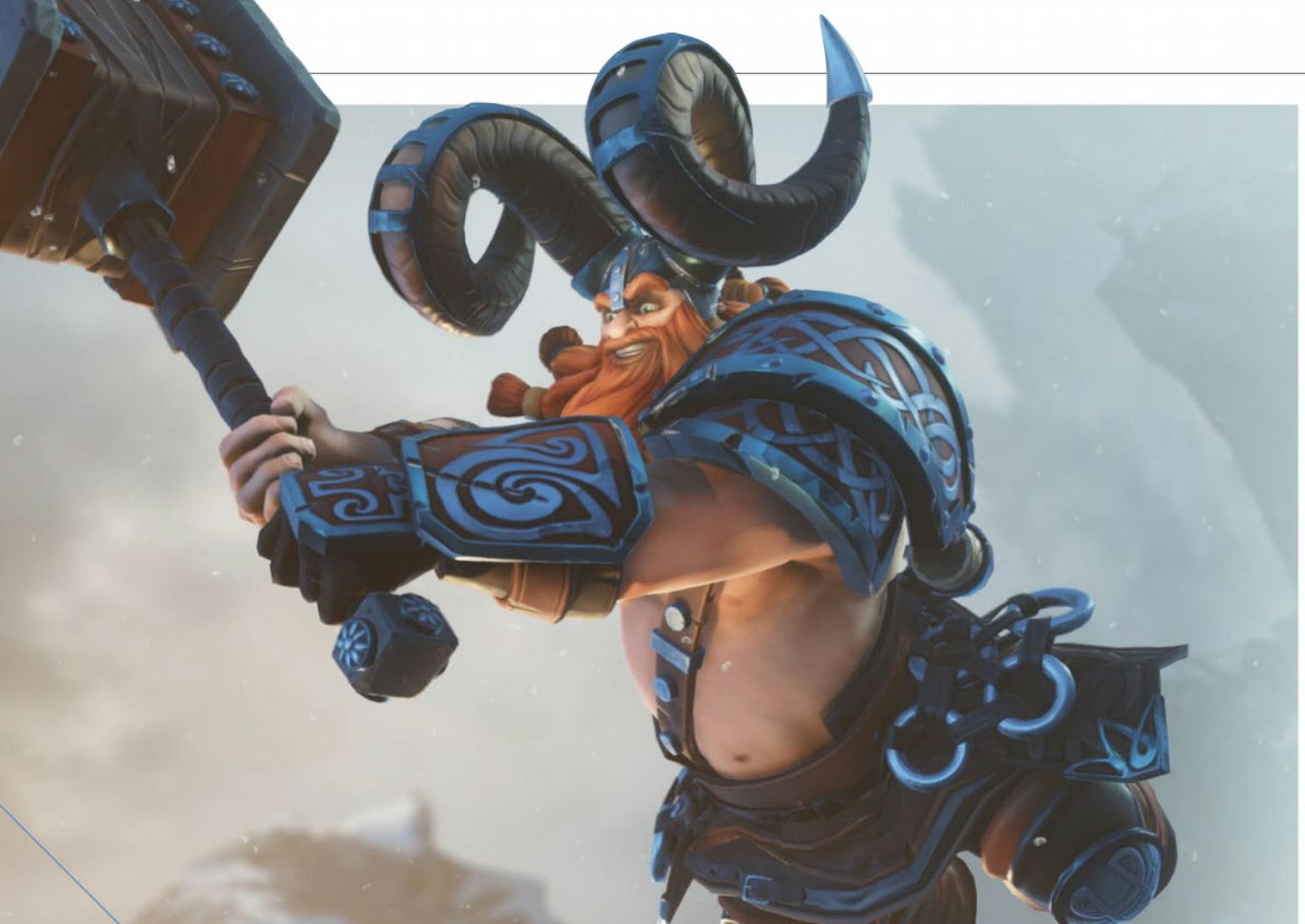
beams at enemies that do damage over time, explosive barrels roll across the arena and explode, damaging and interrupting anyone in the blast, and Thumpers smash into the ground, stunning nearby enemies. These are but a few of the buildables available.

Add in a levelling system similar to most MOBAs and equipment that can be purchased between rounds and you have a recipe for some very complex combat sport. Any character can carry the sought-after relic but while holding it they are restricted to running and throwing. Running the relic into the opposing base scores one point, but throwing it in from a distance scores three due to the added difficulty. Scoring a goal ends the round, as does wiping out the opposing team. It makes for a spectacular, fast-paced, and immensely watchable game, the latter being one of the driving motivators behind development.

Although there is no set release date as yet, Breakaway has gone into alpha, and the first streamed match was received extremely well. In the already crowded MOBA market, it looks as though the people at Amazon Game Studios have found their niche, not just for potential players but for gamers keen to watch esports as well. From what we've seen there's more than enough depth for players to sink their teeth into, and for viewers the game is accessible and entertaining enough to watch and understand what's happening, even if you're not up on the intricacies of every character. That's a killer combo. ■

A VARIETY OF BUILDABLES AND FAST-PACED PLAY MAKE FOR A SPECTACULAR AND IMMENSELY WATCHABLE GAME





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Quake Champions

Daniel Wilks shakes the dust off his shootin' mouse one more time...

CATEGORY	FPS
DEVELOPER	id Software
PUBLISHER	Bethesda Softworks
PLATFORM	PC
DUE	TBA

When Quake Champions, the first game in the venerable shooter franchise since 2005's decidedly average Quake 4, was first announced fans were a little sceptical. Not only was the game coming a decade after the franchise essentially died, it was also announced that for the first time in the series, each character would have unique abilities. This may not sound like a big deal, but given the fact that Quake multiplayer has always been about speed and player skill with all the characters being nothing other than reskins of a base model, it's quite a large thing to fans of the franchise to accept.

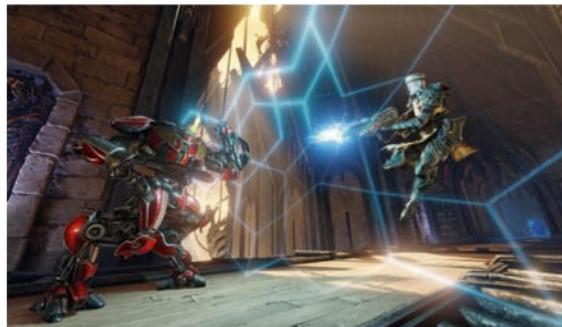
Luckily there is a workaround for purists. Tim Willits, Creative Director for id Software has stated that through custom games players will be able to turn off the champion abilities, turning the game into an experience akin to Quake 3 Arena. That said, from all evidence it would be hard to call Quake Champions a hero shooter in the vein of Overwatch, as each character only has one ability.

that has been described by the developers as being "additive" rather than transformative. If these abilities just add a little flavour to characters but don't affect game balance there should be no reason to turn them off.

So far only a few characters and abilities have been revealed and they definitely sound interesting but, with the exception of two, don't sound particularly game changing. Ranger has a throwable teleporter that he can teleport to as long as it's still in flight. Visor can see through walls for a short time. Scalebearer can charge to close distance quickly. These three sound fine but the two others that have been revealed sound a little overpowered at the moment. Nyx can temporarily turn invisible and Anarki rides a hoverboard that appears to make him faster than any of the other characters. Of course, the effect these abilities may have on gameplay is conjecture at the moment - the game doesn't go into beta until early 2017.

Quibbles about unique characters aside, Quake Champions looks like everything you'd want a Quake game to be. The movement appears to be extremely fast, there are no limits to the amount of guns a player can pick up, there are no between round shops or loadouts, it has been designed especially with competitive esports in mind and, most importantly, rocket jumping is definitely a thing.

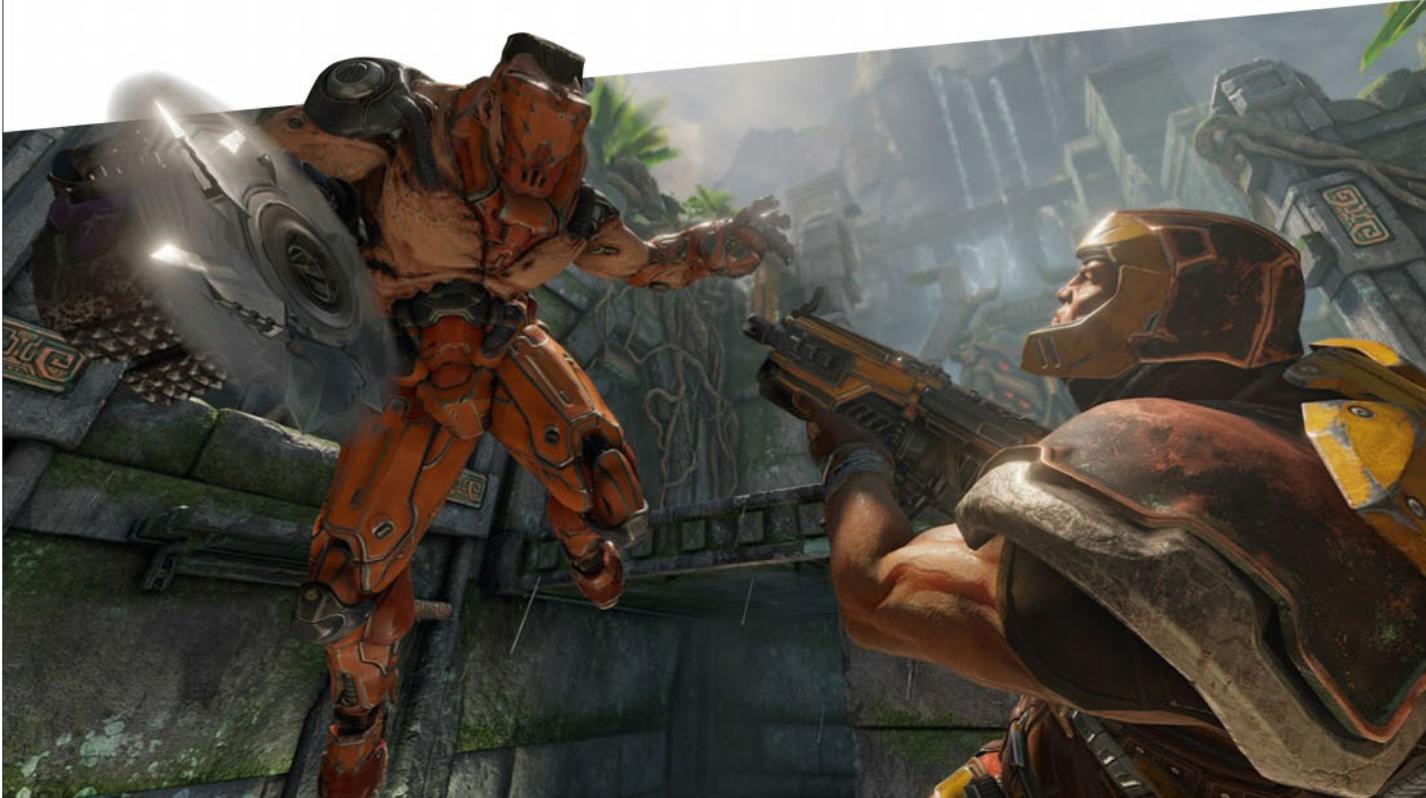
On a technical level, Quake



Champions lacks Quake III's vibrant cartoonishness, going instead for a slightly more "realistic" aesthetic

Champions should definitely impress as well. Not only does it look great, it has been designed with an entirely unlocked framerate, so if your machine is beefy enough and you have a 120Hz monitor, you can run the game at your native framerate for the fastest, smoothest shooting experience this side of Quake 3 Arena.

There is no set release date for Quake Champions as yet, with the aforementioned beta still a ways off, but we do know that it will be launching with 12 characters and will keep introducing as the months go by. We also don't know if the business model will be free-to-play or retail or even possibly subscription based. Whatever the case, fingers crossed it's good - we long to resurrect the age old Next Media tradition of ending the day at Quake O'Clock. **¶**



The background of the advertisement features a large African elephant standing in a grassy savanna under a clear blue sky. In the lower-left foreground, a person wearing a VR headset and holding binoculars is looking towards the elephant.

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Gigantic

Daniel Wilks has big, big love for this unique MOBA

Aside from being one of the best looking games we've seen in ages, there are a few other things in Gigantic that make it one of our top picks for upcoming esports games. Sitting somewhere between a third-person MOBA like Smite or Paragon and a hero-based shooter like Overwatch, Gigantic pits teams of beautifully cel-shaded characters against each other as they struggle to awaken and fight alongside their massive guardian creatures. Due to the third-person shooter nature of the game, there is a welcome sense of speed and verticality in Gigantic, but this is just icing on an already very tasty cake.

In many respects, Gigantic recalls the competitive elements of Battleborn (don't stop reading, please), with the heroes fighting their way through a third person version of a three lane MOBA map. When the game begins there are no creeps or mobs on the map. Instead of these AI creatures being a constant spawn, players instead have to cap certain points around the map to summon creatures to act on their behalf. These creatures may not necessarily act as normal mobs, either, instead functioning more like a tower or turret. Some summons heal allied players within a certain radius, while others can slow enemies.

Each of the 16 heroes currently available have unique skill trees and abilities making for some excellent variety when it comes to play styles. There are melee characters capable of doing damage up close and personal, with a selection of tanks and DPS characters, including the

giant, demonic Margrave (a tank), the mystical little girl warrior with a huge sword that houses the spirit of her dead father, Aisling (utility), and the frog martial arts monk Wu (mobility/DPS) and an equal number of ranged combatants and support characters.

Mobility is a huge factor in the game given the verticality of the environments. Less mobile characters may be forced to travel along the bottom of ravines unless aided by support characters, while other characters, like Beckett, a ranged mobility DPS character equipped with a jetpack can fly over obstacles or find vantage points difficult to access by conventional means.

As fast and fun as the action is, the real spectacle of the game comes in the form of the massive guardian creatures that represent each team. These creatures are essentially the final boss of a battle and must be taken down to end a match. Trying to take one on solo is suicide, and even team based it's a fool's errand as player attacks can't hurt them. The only way to combat a guardian is with another guardian. These are activated by a team amassing 100 points through combat, summoning, and collecting. When you reach 100 points the guardian's activated and makes its way to the enemy. Players then have 20 seconds to do as much damage as possible.

Gigantic will be free to play when it is released some time in 2017, but people interested in jumping into the beta can purchase a Founder's Edition of the game giving them access to all the characters off the bat and some exclusive skins. ■

Gigantic's gorgeous cel-shaded visuals help distinguish it from other MOBAs on the market



SITS SOMEWHERE BETWEEN A THIRD-PERSON MOBA LIKE SMITE OR PARAGON AND A HERO-BASED SHOOTER LIKE OVERWATCH





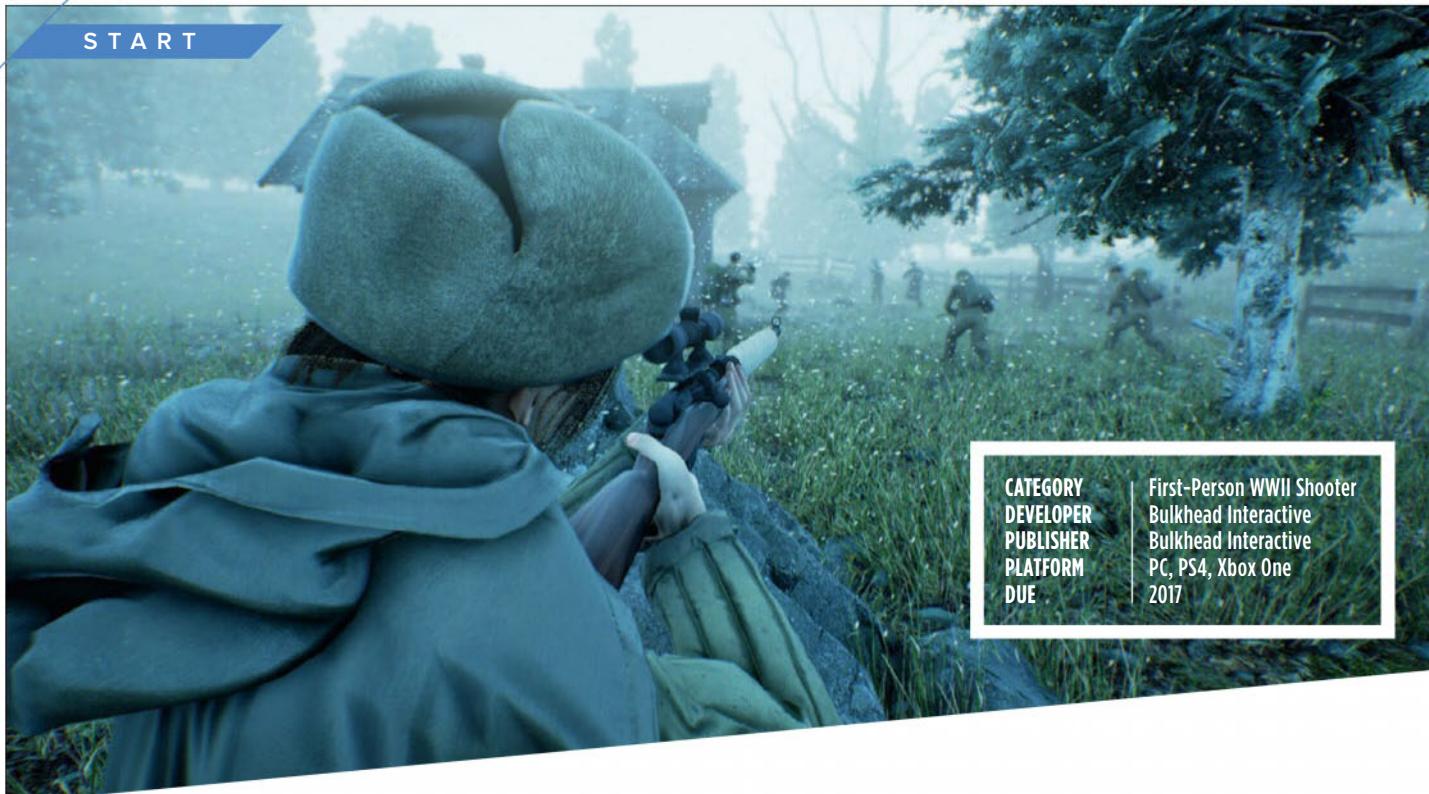
CATEGORY
Developer
Publisher
Platform
Due

Third Person MOBA
Motiga
Perfect World
PC, Xbone
Open Beta



This would be one of the guardians from which the game's name is derived – resistance is futile





CATEGORY
Developer
Publisher
Platform
DUE

First-Person WWII Shooter
Bulkhead Interactive
Bulkhead Interactive
PC, PS4, Xbox One
2017

Battalion 1944

Battalion 1944 is a first-person shooter that aims to recapture classic World War II competitive multiplayer experiences. The developers at Bulkhead Interactive draw their game and level design inspirations from growing up playing Medal of Honour and Call of Duty 2. Consisting of former AAA developers, modders, and esports professionals, they are designing the game with both the hardcore competitive and modding communities in mind.

There is a great sense of authenticity in Battalion 1944's weapon design. Unlike other military shooters, Battalion 1944 is exclusively infantry-based. Weapons have a sluggish and heavy feel to them, reminiscent of WWII weaponry. From the hollow sound of your Thompson submachine gun running out of ammunition to the numbing boom of exploding grenades nearby, everything about Battalion feels real.

Map design stresses an emphasis on player skill over casual fun. Environments are based on real

WWII locations and have a rich level of authentic detail. The developers travelled on-site to various famous warfronts and cities significantly affected by conflict. Maps are designed for competitive play, too, and take advantage of the infantry gameplay with environments used as cover. Fans of modern European history will appreciate the rich attention to detail.

Motion capture and DirectX 12 allow for richer environments, as well. Despite the historic map design, the game's modern graphics distance it from earlier choppy WWII multiplayer experiences. The few framerate issues and texture-popping is easy to overlook when compared to the breathtakingly realistic foliage and particle effects that bring environments to life. An emphasis on vibrant colour and lighting further sets it apart as a more visually expressive WWII shooter.

The global Battle Rank system also encourages team-based competitions. Joining a battalion-styled clan, you

fight for your team in multiplayer matches. You can compete in seasonal matches fighting for your battalion, and later be rewarded with experience points that can be used to unlock new costumes and emblems. Other regular seasonal challenges such as capture the flag, and getting the most knife kills in 24 hours, give objective-based matches an interesting dynamism, too.

To keep the game balanced and fair, there's no weapon unlocking system in Battalion 1944. Rather, you use your experience points to unlock cosmetic changes for your character, allowing you to engrave your gun or customise and embroider your clan insignia. In this way, you can not only personalise your equipment but do so in a way that doesn't give you or other players a competitive advantage, ensuring you rely on skill instead of add-on gear.

Battalion 1944 feels like a call back to classic WWII shooters but plays with all the advanced technology us modern gamers have come to appreciate. Like most competitive games, winning requires skill, practice and an understanding of each map and their respective strategies. With dedicated servers, anti-cheat software, balanced weapons and asymmetric map design, Battalion 1944 has the potential to make it big in the esports scene, bringing the classic military shooter genre back into the competitive scene once and for all. **«**

Julian Rizzo-Smith
will see you on the beach



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START



Dunno what they're doing in the XCOM base, but that new jukebox is boss



Master X Master

Julian Rizzo-Smith blasts masters like it ain't no thing

Master X Master is a bit of an odd beast. It's a strange hybrid of action RPG and MOBA with the unique quirk of players taking the role of not one but two heroes (hence the title). With characters from established NCSoft games such as Guild Wars 2, Blade and Soul, Wildstar, Aion and Lineage, as well as unique new heroes, Master X Master will boast around 30 playable heroes, with more promised after launch.

The selection of heroes may be large, but even more impressive is the diverse selection of game modes.

In addition to a traditional three lane MOBA, Master X Master boasts a PVP arena, a single-player PvE mode, and a co-op PvE mode.

This focus on a dedicated single-player game that's more than just a tutorial is extremely interesting. Players can take their heroes through a series of linear dungeons, battling baddies and picking up loot and powerups before eventually meeting and (hopefully) defeating a massive boss. Although the equipment picked up during the single-player game will not translate across to multiplayer

(aside from co-op) for balance reasons, in-game currency earned can be used to buy new characters that will be available in all modes.

The MOBA element will be mostly familiar to fans of the genre, though there are a few twists worth mentioning. Earning enough currency and completing some core conditions enables a team to summon a massive titan to rush down the centre lane and clobber everything in its path.





CATEGORY	Action MOBA
DEVELOPER	NCSoft
PUBLISHER	NCSoft
PLATFORM	PC
DUe	2018

CHARACTER TITANS HAVE TWO MODES: A FAST HITTING FORM AND A SLOWER SIEGE MODE FOR DISHING OUT APOCALYPTIC DAMAGE TO ENEMY BASES



Summoning a titan is not the be all and end all of strategy though. Killing an opponent's titan will result in a titan fragment that can be taken back to your base. Collect 10 of these and you can turn into a titan for a limited time. Character titans have two modes, a mobile, fast moving and fast hitting form for attacking opposing heroes and creeps, as well as a far less mobile siege mode that attacks slower but is capable of dishing out apocalyptic damage to enemy towers and bases.

NC Soft is billing Master X Master

as an "Action MOBA", and from the way the game plays it's easy to see why. Rather than a click and hotkey interface, MXM controls much like a twin-stick shooter, with the WASD keys controlling character movement and the mouse used to aim. Each character can also jump, giving the game a dash of verticality uncharacteristic of a MOBA.

To survive, it's necessary to pay close attention to the environment, with the game's dense and intricate level design rewarding a keen eye for opportunity. Defensive movement like jumping over a laser or dodging to the side uses a mana-like recharging resource, so it won't be able to abuse these abilities and become a Captain Can't Be Killed. Thank goodness.

Whether Master X Master can execute all its great ambitions remains to be seen, what we've played so far is fun, exciting, fast-paced and different enough to warrant a second-look in an overcrowded genre. ■



Lawbreakers

Daniel Wilks fought the law and the law won 10-6

Set in a post-apocalyptic American landscape where the laws of gravity are more like suggestions, Lawbreakers is an intense first-person shooter that empowers you to play with one of the fundamental forces of the universe. Players take on the role of the law enforcers or law breakers in team-based encounters where each side is pitted against the other. Unlike other team-based games, though, the game emphasises individual player achievements over those of the group.

Gameplay is clearly inspired by arena shooters of the 90s. The Titan class, for instance, calls back to the Juggernaut character of Unreal Tournament, with immensely high HP and a rocket launcher to boot. Matches are as intense as classic arena shooters, too, with many encounters resolving bloodily in cramped, funnel-like corridors.

Multiplayer modes subvert and twist familiar gametypes with the gravity mechanic. Overcharge, for example, is a take on capture the flag, with players taking the battery pack from the centre of the map to their home base and protecting it till the device has fully charged. These matches can be a tense power struggle, as the battery jumps between the two

team's possessions at an alarmingly fast rate. The mode is unfortunately only available in the Alpha build of the game, however, with a Turf War mode in the works. Respawn times are impressively quick, though, so you're never left waiting to return to the heat of battle.

Equipment is also tied to role-specific heroes. In battle, you're equipped with a primary and secondary weapon, as well as a grenade, movement ability, and ultimate. Each ability is visually impressive and used for different strategies, but they all have fairly long cooldowns so you need to time them perfectly. The Vanguard's powerful movement ability can knock enemies back, allowing you to spray rounds of your Gatling gun at stunned crowds. The ability can also be used to propel you in the air, giving you a height advantage to reign fire to your enemies from above with ease. The Enforcer is a more traditional assault based class, equipped with an assault rifle and pistol. He can throw an ability-cancelling grenade, and dock a lock-on missile launcher on his shoulder as an ultimate ability.

Map design defies gravity, too. Each map is made up of open and tightly-



See, this is why you make sure your weapon's unloaded before doing parade drills

spaced environments. The currently playable Grandview and Promenade maps are based on famous American landmarks, the Grand Canyon and Santa Monica beach. Zero gravity zones in more open areas require you to use the environment to quickly move around. Your role defines the way you traverse through these areas, as well. The Assassin can swing across environments with their whip, at times entirely avoiding combat in big open spaces. Meanwhile, the Vanguard's jetpack ability lets them easily manoeuvre in zero gravity zones.

Lawbreakers looks to be a tightly designed and executed competitive experience and should be interesting to both play and watch. ■

A tale of emotion versus reason



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6 minutes and counting

MIKOLAI looks at how the 1990 Nintendo World Championships introduced the world to competitive gaming





1990 was a great year to be a kid. The Simpsons debuted on TV, the Ninja Turtles rushed cinemas, and the Nintendo World Championships propelled videogames from suburban bedrooms to centre stage in LA.

Held at Universal Studios in Los Angeles, the tournament was a watershed moment for the industry, and helped lay the groundwork for competitive gaming's eventual rise. Almost three decades later, the battles that were fought and won on that cool winter day continue to reverberate. Here's the abridged story.

COMING TO A SHOPPING MALL NEAR YOU

Nintendo has a long and celebrated history of innovation. From its Game and Watch range to its revolutionary control pads, and pioneering 3D work, the Kyoto company has shaped the videogame industry for decades. But its role in competitive gaming's formative years is often underappreciated.

Long before we had South Korean

The real wizard was whichever exec thought up the idea of disguising a 90 minute ad as a legit movie

stadiums hosting League of Legends tournaments, that infamous Street Fighter 3 video featuring Daigo, and million dollar prize pools for Counter-Strike, there was the Nintendo World Championships.

Held in 1990, the competition toured 29 cities across the U.S. before hosting the grand final in LA. Getting there meant playing specially modified versions of Super Mario Bros., Rad Racer and Tetris against strict time limits to earn the highest score, and a shot at videogame immortality.

FOLLOW THE WIZARD

The origins of the Nintendo World Championships can be traced back to late 80s Hollywood and a film called The Wizard. It's a long and convoluted story, but all you really need to know is that some suits from Universal Studios and Nintendo sat down and agreed that the best way to promote the upcoming Super Mario Bros. 3 for the NES was to create a G-rated road movie showcasing the title.

The end result was a master-class in product placement starring Fred Savage (of Wonder Years fame), Christian Slater, and a very young Tobey Maguire. The film had them road tripping across the U.S.A., playing various Nintendo Games en route to a videogame tournament and a chance to play Super Mario Bros. 3 before anyone else.

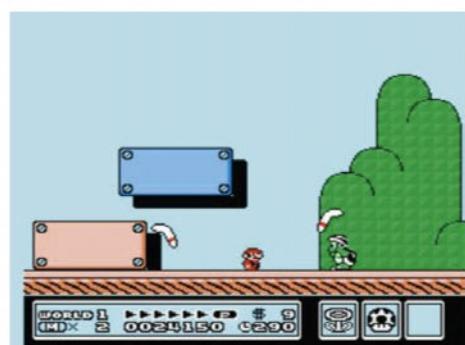
As Ricky Fernandes explains in an article for goombastomp.com, "Nintendo was everywhere [in the late 80s]. Kids had lunchboxes, watches, t-shirts; even magnets on their refrigerators. The next logical step was the big screen and Nintendo's plan was to use The Wizard as a catalyst to publicise the release of Super Mario Bros. 3 and the Powerglove."

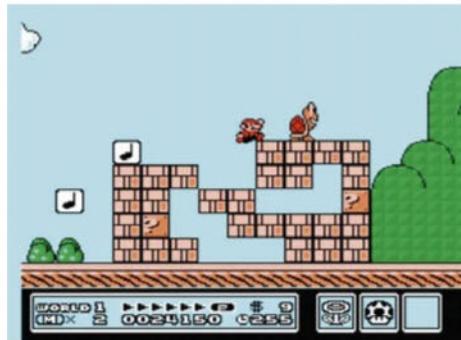
Although the film was not 'well received' in critical circles, it hardly mattered. Kids flocked to see it, and Super Mario Bros. 3 went on to become one of the highest selling games of all time.

This makes sense when you consider the videogame industry at the time. As Patrick Patterson noted in an article for syfygames.com, "In the days before streaming press conferences and YouTube reveal trailers, the general public rarely got to see footage of a



NINTENDO HAS A LONG AND CELEBRATED HISTORY OF INNOVATION, BUT ITS ROLE IN FOSTERING COMPETITIVE GAMING IS UNDER APPRECIATED





new videogame prior to release. In 1989, most of these reveals could only take place through photos and articles in videogame magazines. The Wizard forever changed that by showing that a videogame could be revealed and promoted in a more impressive manner than a few magazine articles could ever provide."

Meanwhile, back at Nintendo HQ in Redmond, Washington, an idea began to take shape – what if the company hosted a real tournament?

WHERE'S FRED SAVAGE?

The first leg of the Nintendo World Championships was held in Dallas, Texas, on March 8, 1990. A writer from VG&CE magazine was there to witness the spectacle and write about it for future posterity.

"The building covers the area of two football fields [with] an inflatable Mario, looming three stories tall, greeting everyone... Recently released titles like Robocop, Batman and sequels like Double Dragon II, Ninja Gaiden II, Castlevania III and Super Mario Bros. 3 are available for everybody to sample... As if these 130 NES game stations aren't enough, there's another section in the building with 200 Game Boys to play."

If that doesn't make you feel nostalgic you're obviously too young to remember the dominance Nintendo had over the console industry throughout the late 80s and early 90s.

Launched in the U.S. in 1985 (Australia in 1987) the Nintendo Entertainment System brought the videogame industry back from the abyss. Powered by the 'Nintendo Seal of Quality' and the all conquering Super Mario Bros., the system helped restore the public's faith in the industry after Atari drove it off a cliff during the 1984 industry crash.

By the time people were lining up to compete at the Nintendo World Championships the company owned approximately 90% of the U.S. videogame market, one in three homes owned a system, and 'Nintendo' was pretty much shorthand for videogames.

All this meant that the chance to be crowned the official Nintendo World Champion was, in some circles, a far better thing than winning the Super

Bowl, the Kentucky Derby and the Oakland Roller Derby finals.

WHEN THE GOINGS GETS TOUGH.

The rules of the actual competition were straightforward enough. Each participant had a time limit of 6 minutes and 21 seconds to score as many points as they could across the three aforementioned games – Super Mario Bros., Rad Racer and Tetris.

These games were stored on custom cartridges Nintendo created specifically for the contest. Starting with Super Mario Bros., players had to collect 50 coins before the cartridge would jump ahead to a Rad Racer circuit, and then onto Tetris.

To make this more interesting, the games had specific score multipliers built in. Super Mario Bros. played like the home console version, but Rad Racer multiplied scores by 10, and Tetris multiplied them by 25. This setup encouraged competitors to rush through the first two titles and onto Tetris, where the big points could be accumulated.

While various theories and 'cheats' were circulated concerning the best way to score big (including glitches and warp pipes on Super Mario Bros.), the score multiplier in Tetris proved the best way to rack up big points, with all the finalists setting scores north of two million (compared to an average 300-400K among regional finalists).

In a sign of the times, the eventual winners were split into three age categories, with Jeff Hansen (11 years and under), Thor Aackerlund (12-17 years), and Robert Whiteman (over 18 years) triumphant. Each walked away with a \$10,000 U.S. savings bond, a new 1990 Geo Metro Convertible (a

horrible looking car, Google it), a 40" Rear-projection television, and a gold painted Mario trophy.

Once the formalities were out of the way the three finalists held an 'informal' battle up on stage. Amassing a score of 2.8 million, Thor Aackerlund won, and went on to become a minor videogame celebrity, a recluse, and eventually reappeared on the scene in a documentary titled Ecstasy of Order: The Tetris Masters.

PARTY LIKE IT'S 1990

Despite the competition's success, there wouldn't be another Nintendo World Championship for 25 years. A number of smaller events were held over the years, including the 1991 Nintendo Campus Challenge and Powerfest 1994, but none matched the scale or the spectacle of the original, and as Nintendo's dominance over the industry began to wane the competitions disappeared.

But the event's legacy lives on, both in the outrageous prices being charged for the original cartridges that were used in the competition, and the impact it's had on competitive play.

BEFORE THE TERM 'ESPORTS' EXISTED, THE 1990 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS SHOWED THERE WAS AN AUDIENCE FOR COMPETITIVE VIDEOGAME PLAY



ULTIMATE NES REMIX

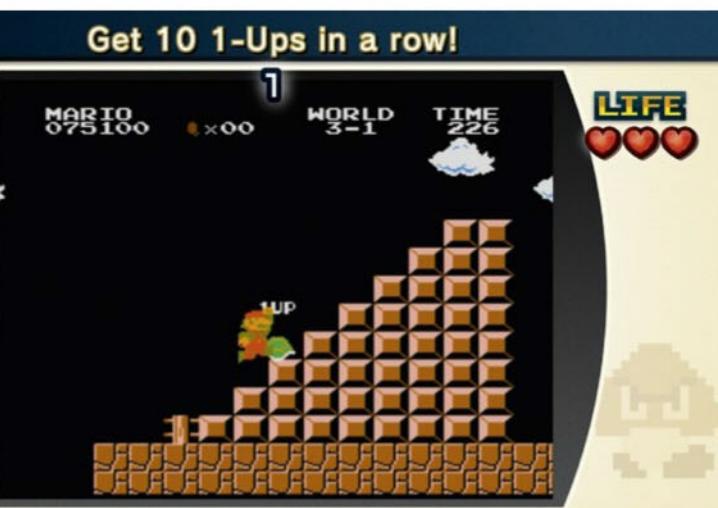
Released in 2014 on the Wii U and 3DS, Ultimate NES Remix sought to capture the spirit of the original Nintendo World Championships. Featuring bite size challenges set in classic NES games, it included titles such as Super Mario Bros., Zelda, Punch Out, Metroid, and Excitebike. Online functionality means you can do your own, lame version of the Championships anytime you want.



Before Twitch, Evo, and Smash Bros., before the term 'esports' even existed, the 1990 Nintendo World Championships showed that games could be more than just a bunch of kids crammed into a local arcade, or sat around a TV, and that there was a mass-market audience for competitive videogame play.

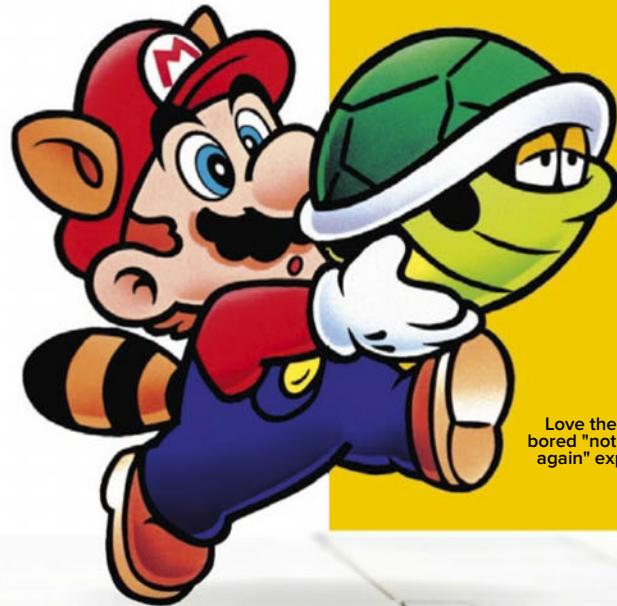
If the first promo video for the upcoming Switch console is any indication, Nintendo appears ready to embrace that legacy and capitalise on it to the fullest possible extent. The video features the unmistakable imagery of esports, and as company president Reggie Fils-Aimé explained to Fortune magazine, that's no coincidence. "We saw success with the Smash Bros. Invitational, and we're [seeing people] embrace Mario Kart 8, as well as Splatoon, in a competitive environment."

Whether Nintendo can reclaim past glories remains to be seen, but with The Simpsons still on TV, the Ninja Turtles resurrected, and the Nintendo mini selling out in shops, the spirit of the early 90s lives on. In the words of another early 90s luminary, "Don't call it a comeback." ■



THE WORLD'S MOST EXPENSIVE CARTRIDGE

Nintendo created 90 special cartridges for use during the Championships. Each of these grey, numbered cartridges contains four switches in top left corner that can be set to an on/off position in order to alter game parameters. These cartridges were given out to finalists after the competition was over. Nintendo also produced 26 gold competition cartridges, which were given out as prizes in a Nintendo Power magazine competition. A Gold cartridge sold on eBay for \$100,000 in 2014, while the grey ones have sold for up to \$18,000.



Love the koopa's bored "not this shit again" expression

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Executive Spotlight

Behind the scenes with Dan Scheckenbach, general manager for Team Immunity

HYPER: Let's begin with the basics: who are you and what is your involvement with esports?

DAN SCHECKENBACH: G'day, I'm Dan – Team Immunity's General Manager. I've been involved with Australian esports since around 2003 where I started off playing Counter-Strike: Source and eventually transitioned into a management role.

HYPER: Tell us a little about your work as a manager of Team Immunity. What's the daily routine look like for an esports manager prepping a team for a big tournament?

DAN SCHECKENBACH: My job with Team Immunity is to look after all aspects of the organisation to ensure we're operating to our full potential. In the lead up to a competition I aim to make sure all our players have what they need in order to perform at the highest level – and ultimately, beat their adversaries. From a management perspective, we make sure players are staying motivated and on track with their preparation as well as liaise, plan and organise any logistical requirements.

HYPER: From your perspective, what does it take to be a high-level esports competitor? What tips would you give to any budding esports pros out there?

DAN SCHECKENBACH: I believe there are two parts to being successful in the esports industry; proficiency and professionalism. Displaying a single one of these traits will likely lead to short-term success, but to have any chance of a long-term esports career, both need to be displayed in unison.

An important point for any potential professionals is to be willing to go above and beyond the bare minimum required for the organisation you are part of. That is – don't just be good in your game, be good outside the game. You'll be surprised at how far you go with your organisation and your sponsors if you put in a good effort with marketing.

HYPER: There's been some controversy recently over "doping" in esports: what can be done on an organisational level to discourage the use of performance enhancing drugs in esports?

DAN SCHECKENBACH: Like any sport, people are always going to try and get an edge over their competitors. I don't believe it's in the spirit of the game to artificially enhance your own abilities. Luckily in esports, steroids and other drugs typical of physical enhancement are almost redundant – big biceps won't help you click on those heads much better.

HYPER: What are some of the unique challenges associated with running an esports team in Australia? How has the scene changed/grown during your involvement with it?

Australian esports has come a long way in the last five or so years. These days prize pools are larger, the talent pool is growing, and interest is increasing rapidly. On the other hand, there is still not enough money in the Australian industry to allow players to earn a living from it. This essentially puts a limit on the skill level of players due to the fact that they must still maintain a non-esports-related job. In places like Europe and North America, professional players are able to fully commit themselves, therefore continually improving the level of competition, and subsequently more money is injected into the industry.

Unfortunately for the Australian players at the top end of our scene, the only way to improve is to move overseas to compete in the higher level competitions. This is becoming more prevalent recently and will most likely continue until we are able to support our players full-time.

HYPER: Finally, if someone wanted to get into esports coaching and/or management, what kind of skills/experience would they need?

DAN SCHECKENBACH: Firstly, be mature, be keen, and expect to do the work for free. Since the beginning of my esports management career I have never earned money. Of course there are occasions where you'll pick up some new gear or travel around to national or international events – but you'll be most successful (and have more fun) if you have a genuine passion for it. 



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FEATURE



NOW YOU'RE PLAYING WITH POWER

Nintendo and esports

James O'Connor still thinks blue shells are bullshit



The reveal trailer for the Switch had something that has been missing from the reveals of all prior Nintendo devices – an acknowledgement of the existence of esports. Two teams were shown mapping out plays on a chalkboard, playing a new version of Splatoon on their personal units, and strategising. The teams meet in a packed arena, greeted by an enormous cheering crowd, plug their portable screens into the Switch units in front of them and start playing. This is the note the trailer ends on, and while it may seem uncharacteristic for Nintendo – often thought of as a company that caters more to families than the hardcore – the truth is that Nintendo already has several games with large competitive scenes.

MARIO KART

Mario Kart 8 is, by far, the most commercially successful Wii U game. Its 8 million sales mean that it has a

stunning 60% attack rate, although it still pales in comparison to sales for Mario Kart Wii (36.38 million copies; the fifth best-selling game of all time). Despite the franchise's huge success, and its popularity as a multiplayer title, Mario Kart is not often thought of as a competitive game. Many believe it to be a game of luck, in which items can unbalance everything in an instant and an amateur can beat a pro under the right conditions. Anthony Cailou, the captain of Team Australia in the Mario Kart World Cup, thinks otherwise. "Personally, I don't believe Mario Kart involves luck of any sort. Competitive play is mostly about strategies and being focused on yourself as well as your surroundings."

The Mario Kart World Cup began in 2013 with Mario Kart 7 for the 3DS, and was run by the Prime League for the first two years. It was picked up by EndGameTV the next year, before MKBoards, the largest Mario Kart

The enduring popularity of Smash Bros. is a testament to its carefully tuned design

community on the Internet, took it over in 2016. The World Cup features both Mario Kart 8 and Mario Kart Wii: even though the official Wii servers have been offline for a while now, the tournaments are run through the unofficial 'Wiimm-Fi' servers, which still see about 500 log-ins every day.

'Savannah', one of the administrators on MKBoards, is an expert on the competitive Mario Kart scene. "On Mario Kart Wii, the room settings are those of a normal VS race", she says. "No teams, and vanilla (regular) tracks. Thanks to Custom

MEMORIES OF MELEE

The enduring popularity of Smash Bros. Melee has led to a few now-classic pieces of technology remaining in high demand. Beyond the Wii U compatible GameCube controllers released for the latest iteration of the series, most tournament organisers also need to source CRT televisions for the game. There are several technical explanations for why CRT TVs are important for precision, and Melee was designed with a 4:3 aspect ratio in mind.

Track Grand Prix Revolution, an application obtained through modding your Wii, you can play also play a custom track match if you desire – but both teams must mutually agree to it! The default match size is 5-versus-5, but it can be higher or lower if both teams want it. On Mario Kart 8, the room settings are 150CC, no teams, and normal items. The engine class can be changed to 200CC if both teams mutually agree to it. The default match size is 6-versus-6, but can be a lower size if both teams decide on it." These changes, that can be permitted if mutually agreed upon before a match is started, make the Mario Kart World Cup one of the more malleable esports tournaments out there.

Anthony Cailou, who took over as Australian team captain in 2015 after the previous captain retired from the game, has been involved in the competitive Mario Kart scene since 2011, when he broke the Australian record on one of the tracks in Mario Kart Wii (although some accused him at the time of changing his region, and of actually being based in Europe, which he managed to debunk). "I first discovered the competitive scene through a website called MarioKartWii.com, which has since been taken over by malware", Cailou says. "From 2013, MKBoards.com entered the scene, which later became the go-to place for anything Mario Kart related."

The Australian team is one of the 15 competing in the Mario Kart 8 World Cup competition, and one of ten in the Wii competition. "In the World Cup, there are 3 divisions labeled A, B, and C", Cailou explains. "All teams

competing, apart from the top three teams from the previous season, are randomly drawn out and placed in a division for the first stage, an elimination round. A schedule is then published for two teams to compete against each other. Depending on the win-to-loss record, and the total points you won by overall, you can move up to the quarter-finals with a total of eight teams, then the semi-finals and final match. The winning team would be offered a prize, which has varied between seasons."

Racing as a team allows for some advanced maneuvers, with different racers taking on different 'roles' within the team. It's notable, though, that both World Cup series are played with the 'team' function turned off. This means that it's possible to attack members of your own team if you're not careful. "Teamplay means coordinating your items to benefit the rest of your team", says Savannah. "Examples of this include using the lightning while a teammate is using a star, Bullet Bill, or other invincibility item (a technique called dodging shock), or being in first place on the last lap, approaching the finish line, but waiting for your teammate who is in second place, so they don't become the target if a blue shell is thrown (which is called waiting for blue)." Part of the reason for Mario Kart Wii's enduring popularity in the competitive scene is how effective these techniques are. "While dodging shocks can be beneficial in Mario Kart 8", Savannah says, "they are game-changing under the right circumstances on Mario Kart

Wii. In fact, since dodging shocks and target shocking (using lightning as an opponent goes over a jump) are so powerful on Mario Kart Wii, almost all teams find themselves with at least one member that dedicates themselves to 'sandbagging'" (see boxout).

The scene is big, without being

Pokémon is a lot deeper than its cartoonish presentation suggests



MARIO KART 8 PRO TECHNIQUES

FIRE-HOPPING: The user hops left and right repeatedly during a turbo boost for extra speed.

BRAKE DRIFTING: Tapping B during a slide to slow down for tight corners. Much harder to perform with motion controls.

DEMON-SLIDING: In Cailou's words: "you hop in a neutral position (the joystick positioned in the default position), then proceed to move left/right, then do the same with the opposite side"

SANDBAGGING: During team-play, one player on each team will purposely stay behind or drive in reverse to get better items that will help their team.

huge – there are plenty of people playing, but the footage on YouTube rarely cracks 1000 views. Nintendo has hosted their own Mario Kart tournaments at events like E3 and PAX, but these games are unlikely to ever be as big as other competitive racers. This is a shame, because Mario Kart is an ideal game to watch – it's easy to understand, exciting, and competitive play routinely reveals great tricks for some of the games' trickier courses.

POKÉMON

2016 was the eighth year that Nintendo's portable games were included in the Pokémon World Championships, which between 2004 and 2008 focused solely on the Trading Card Game. In that time, five new Pokemon RPGs have released: Black/White 1&2, X/Y, Alpha Sapphire/Omega Ruby, and the recent Sun/Moon. The Pokémon metagame changes substantially between releases, but new additions for battles made in the last three games have clearly been huge, even for casual fans and players. In X/Y, Mega Evolutions added an extra tactical wrinkle that affected team composition, whereas Sun/Moon have ditched these in favour of Z-Moves, which open up options for more monsters but which can only be used once per match.

When I spoke with him, Phil 'Boomguy' Nguyen was three weeks away from flying to London to compete in the latest World Pokémon Championship. The location of the competition is interesting: the game launched in the UK behind Australia and the US, meaning that players who weren't given early access over there may have been at a disadvantage. Nguyen has been playing competitively since 2010, and now has a sponsorship with Final Loot Games. "Every competitive player has a different approach to playing Sun and Moon", he says. "Some players rush through the story to get into building teams and practice online. Other players would like to enjoy the story, catch every Pokémon along the way and play with all the features of the game. I personally take the first 4 days off work and just play the game for most of the day for those days. I go through the story, collecting every item and setting myself up for a long 9-month competitive season."

In 2015, Nguyen finished 21st in the World Pokémon Championships. This year, despite some challenges (the rules allowed for the use of certain 'legendary' Pokémon that were difficult to counter with Nguyen's style of play), he was crowned Pokémon National Champion for Australia. He admits, though, that this was a draining experience. "I got depressed and frustrated, and I wasn't enjoying playing the game. But I still wanted to qualify because I planned my overseas adventure to compete in the world championships. I was able to reset myself emotionally thanks to past experience and some friends outside of the game. That helped me qualify for the world championship at the end of the Australian regional circuit and allowed me to play Australian Nationals without any pressure."

A large part of the Pokémon experience is the attachment you form with your team, your sense of

Pokkén Tournament is an odd mish-mash of Tekken and Pokémon that has been more or less ignored in the West



loyalty to the creatures that you've been using. Playing competitively, however, can mean discarding your favourites. "I used to have a mainstay Pokémon I always tried to include in my teams", Nguyen says, "but it never won me enough matches. I had to do the smart thing and use what is best to win. Finding out who the strongest Pokémon are and supporting their weaknesses with other Pokémon is a simple way to create a good team. One popular strategy is the use of 'weather teams', where certain Pokémon create a weather effect and other Pokémon can take advantage of it." To a casual player, these weather moves may not feel particularly useful, but to professional players, entire strategies can be built around them.

Nguyen has gone through some hard times playing Pokémon, but believes that successful players



POKKÉN IT'S HEAD IN
Pokkén Tournament, the spin-off fighter that's part Pokémon-brawler, part Tekken, will also be present at EVO 17. The first Pokkén Tournament World Championship – an official event across North America, Europe and Asia – occurred earlier this year, shortly after the game's Wii U release, meaning anyone who had tried out the arcade game in Japan was at a distinct advantage. Japanese players have, thus far, swept most international tournaments, but this may change now that the game has been available internationally for close to a year.



Splatoon is a big deal in Japan, which explains its prominence in the Switch trailer



should prioritise mental health. "My best advice is to any Pokemon trainer is to not let your happiness depend on your wins and losses. Get excited about what you learned and use that experience to help you get new ideas to improve. My other advice is to learn from others. Talk to your opponents and ask questions. Watch other successful players play and listen to their stories."

SMASH BROS.

The Smash Bros. community has, since the release of the Wii U entry in the series, been somewhat divided. While the original Super Smash Bros. for the N64 is viewed as a fun curio and Brawl is seen by many as an enjoyable misstep, debate rages over whether Melee or Smash 4 (the less-clunky shorthand for Super Smash Bros. for Wii U) is the superior game. Smash 4 is considered much more balanced than Brawl was, but has still retained some of that game's over-the-top aspects, while certain techniques that professional players needed to master in Melee don't really factor in. There's a lower barrier for entry, perhaps, although there has been some debate over whether this is a good or a bad thing. Both games featured at Evo 16, the most important fighting game tournament around, and both will return in 2017. Smash Bros. is the only fighting game franchise in next year's competition divided between two entries. It's not just Evo, though: in 2016 alone, there were over 20 major tournaments for both Melee and Smash 4. By comparison, there were only two for Brawl, although there were 12 tournaments that featured the game's fan mod, Project M.

Despite this contention over which Smash is superior, pro player Mr R - who mains Sheik, finished second in Smash Bros. 4 at Evo last year,

and is considered the fourth best player in the world - believes that the Smash Bros. community is in a good place right now "The fights over which Smash Bros. is 'the best' don't really happen anymore", he says. "It used to be a thing, but people have matured and realised we all belong to the same community." Like many Smash 4 players, though, Mr R still plays with the GameCube controller. "It's the controller that I'm the most comfortable with", he says.

Mr R favours Sheik - the third highest 'tiered' character in the game, after Diddy Kong and Cloud Strife - because "her frame data is amazing; and because of that she has a great neutral game, punish game, and ledge trapping". A neutral game is a situation in which no player has an advantage, and one must make the first move; a punish game means taking advantage of the other player's miss or mistake to do the most damage possible while they cannot defend; ledge trapping refers to the way characters can recover or attack while holding onto the edge of an arena, as well as defensive options when your opponent is in the same position. Perfecting these techniques requires precision timing, and the ability to interpret the animation frames of your opponent. Smash Bros. is a far more tactical game than its party-game reputation would have some believe, and the tweakable options - including the all-important ability to turn items off - have made it an esports mainstay. The metagame is constantly shifting across Smash 4, although Melee seems to have settled somewhat, fifteen years after its initial release.

Still, the advice Mr R gives for succeeding in Smash Bros. sounds similar to the advice you might give any prospective competitive fighter. "In Smash 4, you definitely need to





consider your matchups, because there's so many viable characters that can surprise you in a tournament setting", he says. "You also need to be able to hold your composure and stay calm, so you can adapt to your opponent's playstyle."

SPLATOON

Splatoon, the game featured in the Switch trailer, has made (somewhat appropriately) a giant splash in Japan. While it hasn't attracted a massive international esports scene, tournaments in Nintendo's homeland are offering huge prizes. Nintendo has gotten the ball rolling with the Splatoon Koshien, which first happened in September last year. The inaugural event, named after a popular stadium in Nishinomiya, offered up the equivalent of well over \$1 million in prize money.

There have been plenty of other Splatoon tournaments, including the Messtival series and the Nintendome Cash Turney, as well as the Great British Splash-Off, the footage from which is currently hosted on Nintendo UK's YouTube channel (although not much was done to promote the event, and the finale was not streamed). But the Koshien – although largely unheard of outside of Japan – is one of the biggest tournaments Nintendo has been involved with, outside of the Nintendo World Championships of 1990 and 2015.

At the time of writing, the second Splatoon Koshien is underway, with regional battles leading up to a finale in February. Across the country 752 four-person teams are competing for a spot in the finale.

The final match from the previous Koshien had a fun feel to it, despite the high stakes. Stage choice was determined by a quick game of rock-paper-scissors, and the music of the Squid Sisters played in-between matches. The commentators wore sunglasses inside and joked around with each other.

It's easy enough to read between the lines here and see that Nintendo's continued investment in Splatoon is gearing players up for a Switch sequel with a strong in-game focus on tournament play. As a system designed with portability in mind, the Switch might just be ideal for the esports crowd – it'll be interesting to see whether Nintendo, who has made strides in this area, will nurture competitive crowds going forward. ■



Executive Spotlight

Behind the scenes with Dan McHugh, senior esports manager at Hi-Rez Studios

HYPER: Tell us a little about your job and what it involves on a day-to-day basis. What's involved in being an esports manager?

DAN McHUGH: My responsibility as a senior esports manager is to ensure that we are providing exciting, healthy, and competitive environments for all of the titles that we support. My general work load includes managing league operations, creating event schedules, being the point of contact across various internal and external teams to accomplish common goals and tasks, keeping up to date on recent esports rules and trends, facilitating budgets and event logistics, and more.

HYPER: How long have you been involved with esports, and SMITE in particular? How has the esports scene grown and changed during your involvement with it?

DAN McHUGH: My first direct involvement in esports came from volunteer tournament administration for SMITE Weekly tournaments held online. I was asked to help out at the SMITE Launch Tournament in March 2014 which lead to my full time employment at Hi-Rez Studios that July as an esports administrator. When I came on board we were just starting to structure an official League for SMITE in the North American and European regions. Now we've got leagues in Oceania, China, Latin America, and Brazil – all of which culminate at different events throughout the year including our SMITE World Championship at the Hi-Rez Expo.

HYPER: What are some of the unique challenges associated with growing esports in Australia? How does Australia compare to other countries in the region?

DAN McHUGH: No matter the region, one of the most important aspects of growing an esport is making sure you're providing a healthy amateur scene for new teams and players to develop their skills. In regions where our offices are not local like Australia, we rely on third party organizers (like Double Jump) to carry out our needs.

HYPER: From your perspective, as someone involved in the business and

management end of esports, what does it take to be a high-level esports competitor? What tips would you give to any budding esports pros out there?

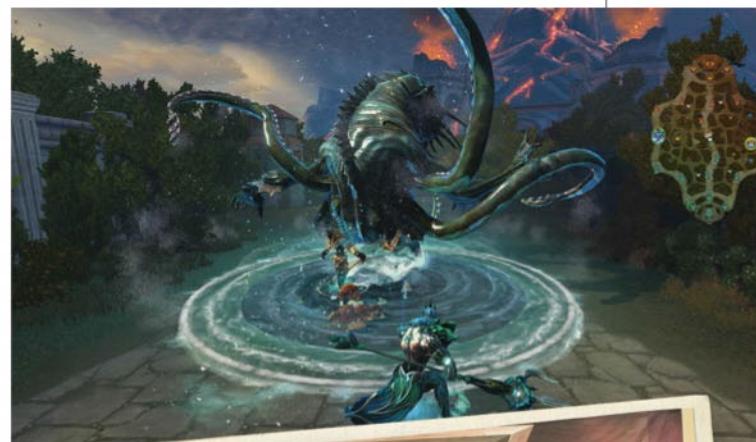
DAN McHUGH: Practice, practice, practice. It really doesn't matter what esport you're dealing with too, you've got to be hungry, it's got to be in the back of your mind that there are players out there right now practicing more than you. Besides practice, one common theme among great teams is that they all have strong communication. You need to be able to work well in a team and handle constructive criticism.

HYPER: Is there a place for gambling in esports?

DAN McHUGH: Gambling is a touchy subject. There are so many laws and guidelines around the matter that it often makes it difficult for companies to facilitate any sort of gambling that is within the confines of law. While there may be a place for it eventually, I can't be sure if it will be private companies or legal institutions that coordinate these initiatives.

HYPER: Finally, if someone wanted to get into esports management, what kind of skills/experience would they need? Are there any resources (online or off) that you'd recommend?

DAN McHUGH: Obviously being involved with any premier esport as talent, production, administration, or even as a player or team owner can provide a fundamental understanding of how a successful esport operates. That understanding is the biggest factor in my opinion. But don't worry if you don't have access to the big tournaments. This same experience can be gained from smaller tournaments as well – putting yourself out there is just the first step in achieving your career goals. »





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Smiting regional esports boundaries: Harder than it seems

Jason Imms explores the challenges faced by local teams looking to play internationally

2016 was the first year an Australian team qualified for the SMITE World Championships. It was the first year that an Oceanic regional championship was included in the road to Worlds, providing a pathway for a single Australian team to compete on the world stage. It was the first year that an Australian team was soundly knocked-out of the championship in the placement stage, and unless things change significantly in coming years, it won't be the last. Team Avant Garde wrecked house every time they participated in an

Australian SMITE championship in 2016. They didn't lose a match in the Oceania Pro League (OPL) split that led them to Worlds, and they won six of their seven online matches in the OPL invitational. They were an exceptionally strong team, and none of the other teams competing at their level of competition could even come close to their precision, communication, or cohesion.

Despite the high of victory, this put Avant Garde in an awkward position in the weeks leading up to their trip to Atlanta for Worlds: No other team

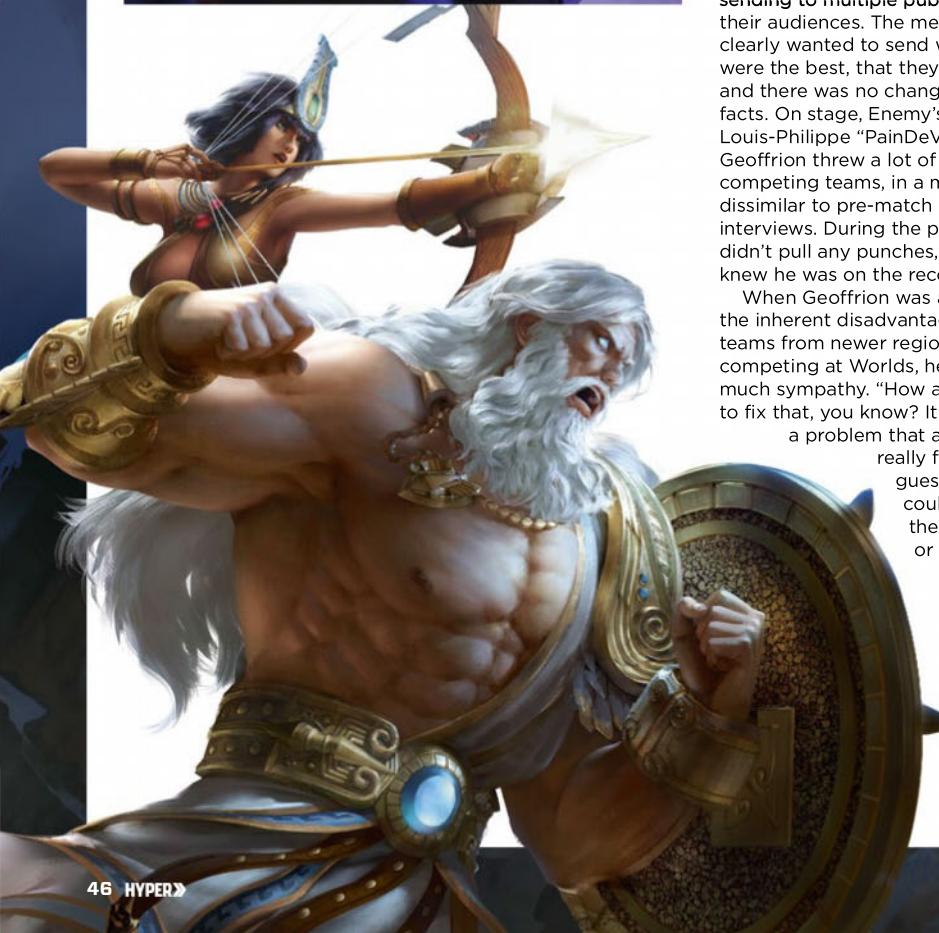
in Australia could challenge them. They were the dominant force in the country, which meant that every friendly scrum (practice match) they organised with fellow Australian teams always and easily fell their way. They were already at the top, with no further challengers to play against in order to improve themselves, to test their mettle in the fire of competition. Well, why not practice against international teams?

THE PRIMARY ISSUE IS SCIENCE
Packets of information can only be



WHAT IS SMITE?

SMITE is a twitch-heavy MOBA-style game that features gods from various real-world religious pantheons as playable characters. In the primary competitive mode, teams of five face-off against one another from an over-the-shoulder third-person perspective, directly targeting abilities via mouselook, as opposed to the point-and-click interface employed by LoL and DOTA 2.



sent across the planet so fast, which means the more geographically disparate two teams are, the higher the latency they have to deal with during a scrum. In reflex-reliant games like SMITE latency is a major problem, which is why most major competitions happen on a local area network (LAN), rather than over the internet. If two teams on different continents chose to play a match, they need to decide on which side of the planet the match is going to be hosted, and generally speaking whichever team is physically closest to the host will win.

There's only so much you can learn from playing matches under these conditions or by watching replays, and most of what you do learn about your opposing team will be useless when facing them over a LAN. There's just not enough benefit in intercontinental practice to warrant the time.

This presents a challenge: How can newer regions to an esport like SMITE hope to compete against established regions that have had access to the game for a much longer period of time? North America (NA) and Europe (EU) were the first regions to have pro-league competitions financially supported and managed by SMITE developer Hi-Rez. Those regions have had years of extra practice and community-building that newer regions such as Oceania and Brazil simply haven't. This means that the competition in those regions is more mature, with established rivalries, player experience, and communities.

WE'RE NOT YOUR ENEMY

After a win that guaranteed them a place in the finals at the 2016 SMITE World Championship, North American team Enemy sat down in the media room for a press scrum. These communal interviews are messy, but important for those being interviewed. They're a great chance to establish or shore-up your public persona, and to manage the message you're sending to multiple publications and their audiences. The message Enemy clearly wanted to send was that they were the best, that they would win, and there was no changing those facts. On stage, Enemy's captain Louis-Philippe "PainDeViande" Geoffrion threw a lot of shade at competing teams, in a manner not dissimilar to pre-match wrestling interviews. During the press scrum, he didn't pull any punches, even when he knew he was on the record.

When Geoffrion was asked about the inherent disadvantages that teams from newer regions face when competing at Worlds, he didn't have much sympathy. "How are you going to fix that, you know? It's not really a problem that anybody can really fix," he said. "I guess the sponsors could bootcamp them in non-NA or EU, but like,

that's a big investment." What about friendly intercontinental scrims? "I don't think any NA or EU team were willing to scrim the foreigners because they have their reputation of not being the better teams, right? So we'd rather keep it between us so we can get the better practice and show-off at Worlds."

It seems that the idea of 'a rising tide raises all ships' doesn't carry much weight at such high-level competition. Do competing teams have a responsibility to help grow the global SMITE community, though? Or should they only be focused on the competition, on getting their prize money while they can? We reached-out to Enemy manager Dan "Clerkie" Clerke to ask these questions and to offer a chance to expand on his team's comments, but he was unresponsive at the time of writing.

We did however have a chance to sit down with Hi-Rez senior esports manager Dan McHugh, to ask what the company is doing to support newer regions to become more competitive globally. "The thing we're really taking a look at for next year is the path from amateur to pro, we want it to be really digestible, and in the players' eyes, something that's really achievable," he said. "We're going to be revamping how we handle our amateur scenes to create a healthy player base that will feed into the pro leagues in each region." Hi-Rez handles this by providing guidance and financial support to local third-party organisers, to ensure that how they handle regional SMITE competitions fits with Hi-Rez's vision for the road to Worlds.

When asked about Enemy's comments, McHugh disagreed. "I think there's some level of responsibility for every team to ensure the overall game's success, so I'd have to disagree with the players there. If the game's succeeding around the world, that's good for everybody. It's important for all regions to come together, because at the end of the day we might be from separate regions, but we're all really on the same team."

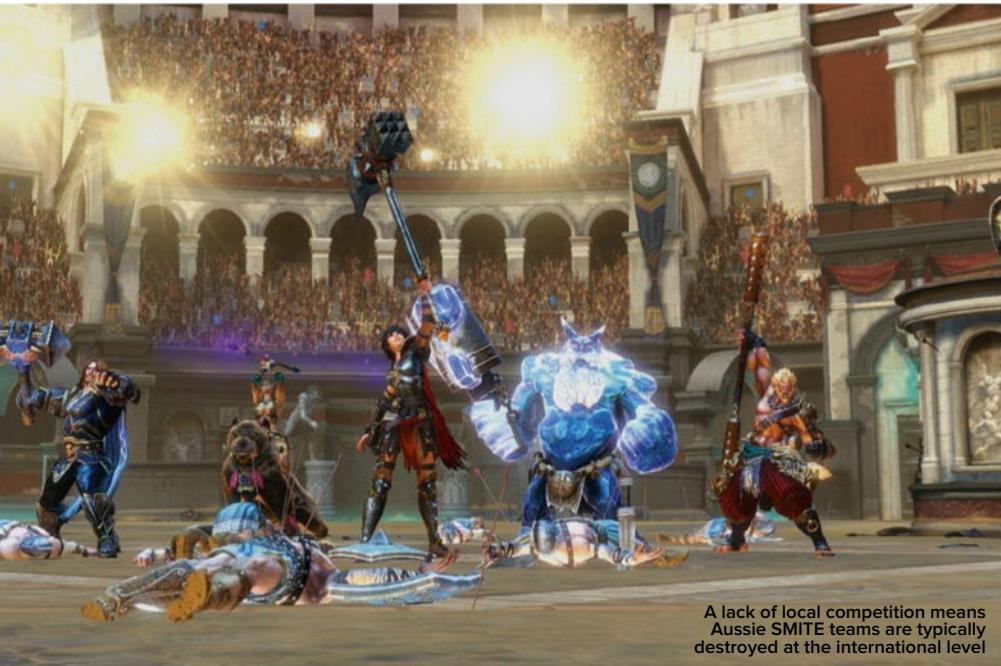
THROUGH THE FIRE AND THE FLAME

After their defeat in the early stages of Worlds in January, Avant Garde coach Job "CaptCoach" Hilbers, and jungler Daniel "Rowe" Rowe, were disheartened, to say the least. Their postures were closed-off, and turned slightly away from one another. Neither wanted to volunteer answers to questions, deferring to the other rather than talking about what just happened. "There will definitely be changes," said Rowe when asked whether the same team composition would be playing for a spot at Worlds in 2017. "I'm keeping my options open," said Hilbers when asked if he wanted to continue working with Avant Garde. As the conversation wore on, Rowe's eyes hardened and he allowed himself to become angry,

WHO IS HI-REZ?

Hi-Rez Studios an independent game developer and esports platform provider for SMITE, and the new FPS, Paladins. The studio also worked on the now free-to-play shooter Global Agenda, Tribes: Ascend, and mobile title Jetpack Fighter. Based in Apheretta Georgia, Hi-Rez employs more than 200 people across its esports and game development teams.





A lack of local competition means Aussie SMITE teams are typically destroyed at the international level



TRUFAX: Like vampires, dragons are vulnerable to sunlight and will burst into flame upon prolonged exposure



SMITE's highly reflex-driven gameplay makes competing over the Internet all but pointless

and speak more freely.

"By far the biggest thing is there needs to be at least two teams from each region going to Worlds," Rowe said. "As it is now, one team wins their shot at Worlds, and none of the other teams have any reason to keep competing. We had another team back home that wanted to help us practice in the lead-up to Worlds, but in reality they're not giving their all in scrims because they don't have to. We have pressure to keep our practice up, and I think they really wanted to help, but they'd already given up on 2016."

"Changing that is up to Hi-Rez," he finished.

Fast forward to November 2016, and Team Pandamonium – made up of three fifths of the Avant Garde squad that competed at Worlds 2016 – just won a guaranteed seat at the SMITE World Championship in early 2017. Veterans of 2016 Rowe, Biggy, and Ochita will be heading back to Atlanta to compete against the intimidating teams from Europe and North America. Will they make it past the placement stage this time? Only time will tell. But once again they're going over alone, as the only representative team from Oceania.

"I think there has been a major

improvement in the [Oceanic] competition this year, and the gap has definitely closed," said coach Kurtis "Biggy" Davidson via email. "However in comparison to teams from the top regions, I still see a major gap between us and them."

Compared to other games with pro esports leagues, such as DOTA 2 and League of Legends, SMITE is relatively small. The fact that it has grown to a point where it can field a world championship competition with a prize pool of \$1 million is testament to the passion and dedication of Hi-Rez and players around the world. It takes time to make changes to such large-scale competitions, and it sounds as though Hi-Rez is at least thinking about what more it can do. Through consultation with players and the viewing audience, the situation for the smaller regions may change, but for the Australian team attending the 2017 SMITE World Championships, the die may already be cast. ■



Executive Spotlight

Behind the scenes with Albert "NakeZe" Nassif, owner and operator of Mindfreak

HYPER: What's involved in owning and running an esports organisation like Mindfreak?

NAKEZE: Owning and running Mindfreak is basically a part time job in which I have errands/goals I need to get done during the day and night. I'm often forced to take time off work, or interrupt my workday with online calls from international partners as time zones wouldn't permit us to chat when it's more suitable. The reward is seeing my old team mates, and the different teams in Mindfreak, having such great support, which I sometimes lacked during my competitive career.

HYPER: How has the esports scene in Australia grown and changed in the time you've been involved with it?

NAKEZE: In 2009, a couple hundred dollars was considered a massive win. In 2016, our Call of Duty team competed for more than \$500,000 in Australian competitions alone, and then finished up with \$1,600,000 at the culmination of the whole year's competition: the Call of Duty 2016 World Championship.

HYPER: What are some of the unique challenges associated with growing and participating in esports in the Asia/Pacific region, particularly in Australia?

NAKEZE: One of the hardest parts is trying to compete internationally when 99% of professional players in Australia are playing as a hobby, with esports coming second to schooling and work. The next part is finding partners who are willing to support and fuel your ambitions, though we've been lucky enough to work with a local distributor in Australia (Bluemouth Interactive) and have three out of five of our partners all linked with this company.

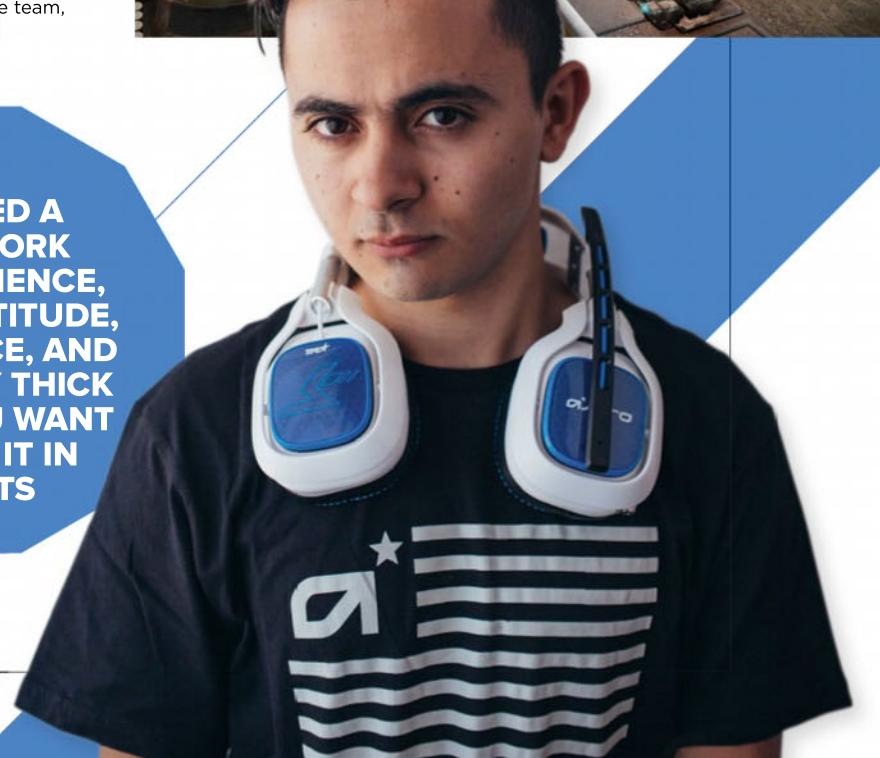
HYPER: From your perspective, as someone who has been both player and manager, what does it take to be a high-level esports competitor? What tips would you give to any budding esports pros out there?

NAKEZE: The most important thing is heart, it doesn't happen overnight, not for anyone. You need a great work ethic, patience, ability, attitude, confidence and extremely thick skin. If you want to make it in esports, you

need to become a student of your chosen game, learn everything you can about it, and treat every mistake as a learning experience. One of the most famous quotes that goes around in the Call of Duty scene is: "Winning is teaching, losing is learning".

HYPER: Finally, if someone wanted to get into esports team coaching and/or management, what kind of skills/experience would they need?

NAKEZE: I'll be really blunt here, there is a different bucket of fish with every organisation's management. Some have trained and qualified professionals, some have logos created and some disposable income and that's as far as it goes. It's an investment and you need to treat it that way, don't expect to make something out of nothing. Above all, you need to dedicate time to master your craft. I'd like to think I've been blessed with the teams I have, their maturity and loyalty is literally better than 99% of teams worldwide and they understand that we need to work together, just because I run the organisation, doesn't mean I run them. The level of mutual respect and trust is what keeps us going, and keeps the fans loyal to Mindfreak as their favourite players always stick around. I truly believe that people remember Mindfreak for the faces of the team, not the logo on the jersey. 



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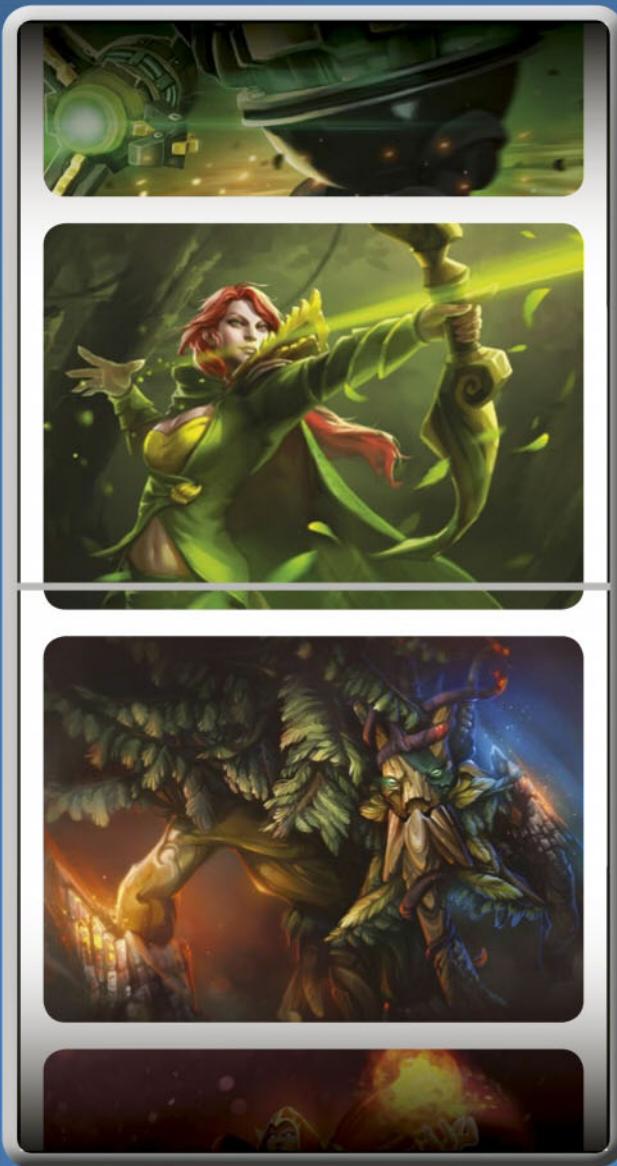
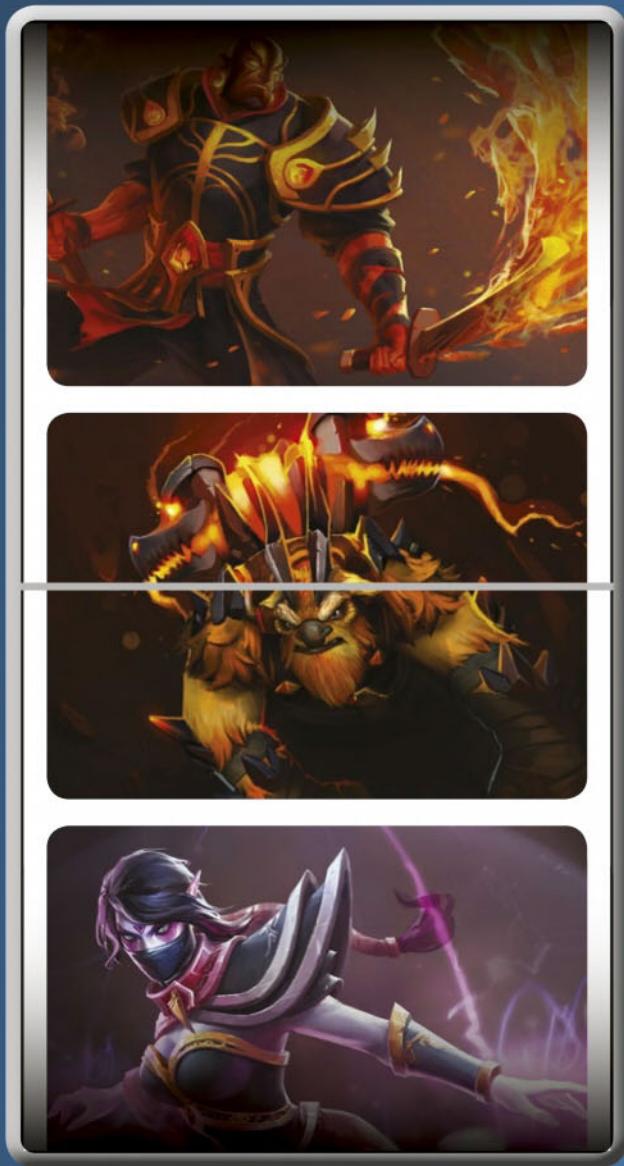
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Esports, gambling, & the laws of Australia

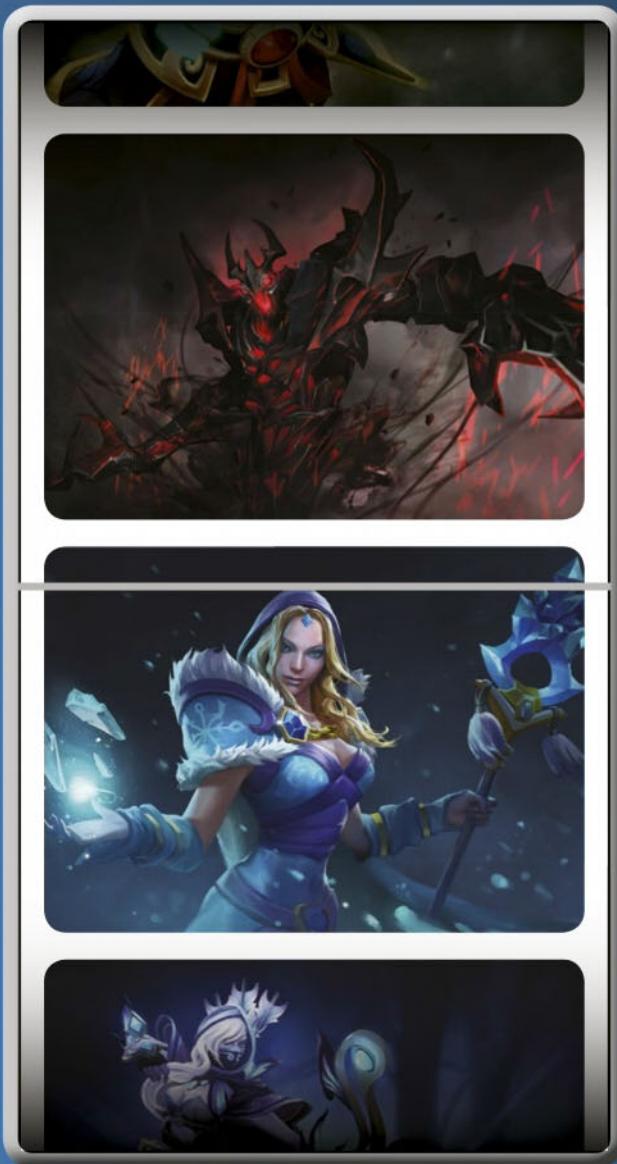
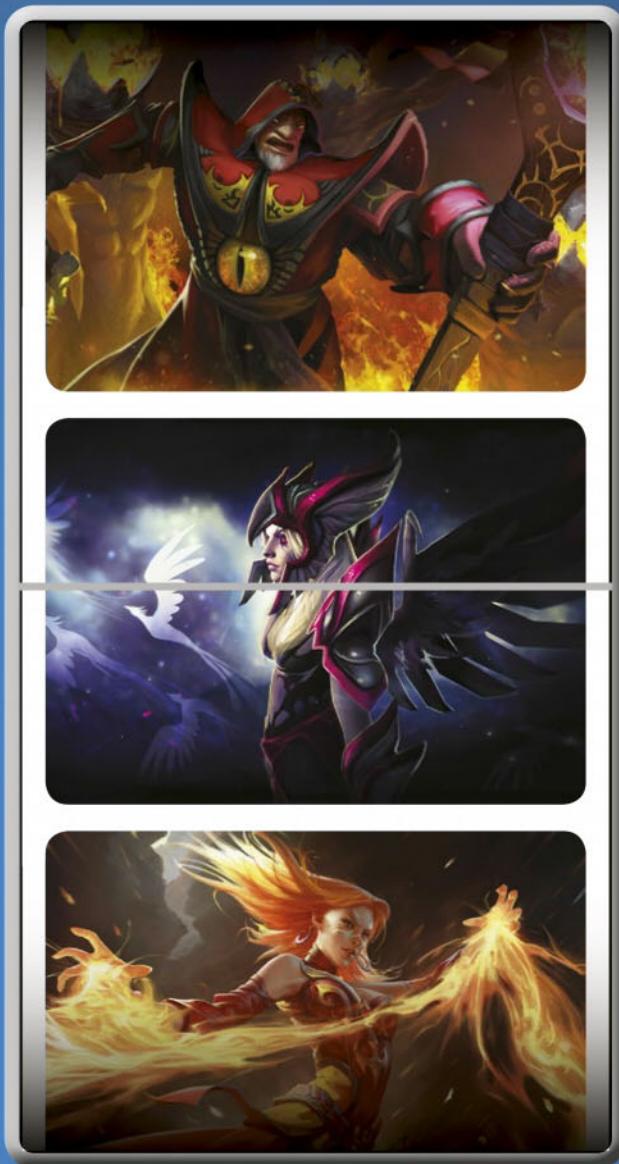
Patrick Lum is willing to bet you'll find this interesting

Independent Senator Nick Xenophon made minor waves in the gaming world a few months ago when he promised to introduce legislation singling out Valve's popular esports titles Counter-Strike: Global Offensive and DOTA 2. But why are videogames in Senator Xenophon's crosshairs? The answer, as you might expect, is gambling.

"This is the Wild West of gambling that is actually targeting kids," he told Fairfax Media back in July. "Instead of shooting avatars, parents soon find [their kids] have shot huge holes through their bank accounts."

Senator Xenophon, a fierce anti-gambling advocate, usually restricts his targets to pokies and sports betting. But the world of videogames and esports has attracted much attention from bookmakers and gambling regulators alike in recent years due to its unprecedented growth, with the scene reaching an estimated total value of US\$1.1 billion in 2019 according to market researcher Newzoo.

This growth has also fuelled an extensive network of companies and websites that provide gambling



services aimed at the esports audience – as well as a number of scandals revolving around corruption, match-fixing, and underage gambling. Yet the scene remains almost wholly unregulated worldwide, with governments moving slowly to bring archaic legislation in-line with this sudden and utterly baffling market.

DRAW

Discussion and news articles about esports gambling, wagering and betting often conflates and confuses the various types of gambling activities that are taking place in connection to esports. There are three primary types:

- Wagering is a familiar model, treating esports as events to place bets on; third-party bookies take

LEGAL CONCEPT 1: JURISDICTION

Jurisdiction is the geographical and conceptual boundaries of legal authority – in other words, it's the areas over which certain laws can apply. Australian legal jurisdiction is, primarily, Australia – it can't really affect actions in other countries except to the extent that those actions affect Australia, or Australian citizens, in some way. Legal jurisdiction and the internet has always had a complicated relationship, and it's no different in the case of esports.

bets on the outcome of matches and punters can cash out if they win. The major difference in gaming is that bets can also take the form of virtual items as well as cash, most commonly (in CS: GO at least) gun skins.

- Virtual Casinos are not strictly esports related, but have become so in recent years. As above, in-game items such as skins are often used as gambling tokens on third-party sites to play games of (allegedly) pure chance such as roulette, slots, or jackpots or lotto. Gachapon/Blind Box sets are also not strictly esports related, but have become ubiquitous in the gaming landscape as of late, and are also often the only type of gambling that is built directly into games. Customers open 'crates' or similar packages which contain in-game items of varying levels of rarity, often paying per 'draw' – either in in-game currency or time, or via microtransactions.

As practically all esports related gambling takes place via the internet, the relevant Australian Federal

legislation is the Interactive Gambling Act 2001 ('IGA'). Varying State and Territories legislation technically cover over-the-counter or phone betting, but it's largely irrelevant to esports at present. Notably, the IGA is provider-focused; individuals engaging in online betting or gambling aren't committing offences.

The IGA prohibits both providing and advertising 'interactive gambling services', which is defined as 'games of chance, or mixed skill and chance played for money or items of value over a carriage service', the carriage service in this instance being the internet. However, there is an explicit exemption for 'excluded wagering services' on a number of types of events, including sporting events and a miscellaneous exemption. In other words: you can't run casino games online, but you can still run a betting service like the TAB.

As the legislation was crafted long before the rise of Facebook, let alone esports, many questions remain as to its real-world application. On the face of it, it would seem that wagering on esports events is permissible while everything else mentioned



above is not. But questions remain. Is esports a 'sports event' for wagering purposes, thus gaining certain rights and responsibilities available to official sports? Are virtual skins 'items of value', given the fact that they only hold value within the Steam economy or on the black market and can't officially be cashed out? And although the Department of Communication and the Arts says computer games are regarded as games of skill, what about in-game blind box draws - are they games of chance and thus impermissible under the IGA, despite their massive and still-growing popularity?

These kinds of questions will only be more definitively answered by the courts when someone raises a case that addresses them, or more accurate legislation crafted specifically for esports is enacted. In the meantime, publishers, esports leagues, bookmakers and punters

are left to interpret from the IGA - legislation which Xenophon has said "may as well be 150 years old in terms of dealing with these issues."

THE HOUSE ALWAYS WINS

One of the reasons the situation remains so uncertain is that, to a large extent, game publishers don't like to associate themselves with gambling in any way. Valve, for instance, has recently responded to a Washington State Gambling Commission inquiry by denying any involvement whatsoever in gambling, the promotion of gambling, or 'facilitating' gambling. "A lot of game publishers have a natural antipathy to gambling," says Ian Smith, Integrity Commissioner of the esports Integrity Coalition. "They don't like it, they don't want it. But betting will occur, so what we have to do is be realistic and pragmatic about it."

"With online access, you can have an online liquidity pool, which allows for single events to draw on people from all over the world, allowing a betting market to be profitable," explains Dr Sally Gainsbury, an internet gambling researcher at the University of Sydney. "The gambling companies have realised this opportunity and begun offering markets on esports at a pro level."

The largest wagering providers online are traditional bookies moving into the field like Bet 365, UniBet, and Sportsbet, as well as more dedicated esports bookies like Pinnacle and Unikrn (operating in association locally with TabCorp). But smaller operators providing technically-prohibited casino game betting also exist, and with them comes a larger

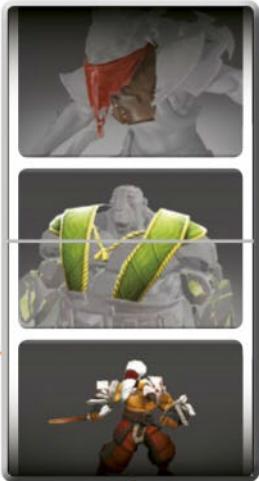
LEGAL CONCEPT 2: LEGISLATION, CASE LAW, AND PRECEDENT

Legislation is what we generally think of as 'law' - bills voted on by the House of Representatives and the Senate that codify what is permissible or prohibited conduct. Case law is what happens when those laws are actually applied to facts in court cases that are brought before judges. Those judges, in interpreting legislation, create precedent, which is binding on lower courts, but can be overridden by higher courts or by newly-created legislation.

In the context of this article, the IGA is the relevant legislation, but since nobody's actually sued anybody over esports gambling yet, nobody is sure yet how the IGA actually applies to the field - there isn't any case law to guide the way.

Weapon skins like these are used to gamble in lieu of real-world currency





“THE PROBLEMS THAT HAVE OCCURRED IN CRICKET, IN RUGBY, IN FOOTBALL, THEY'RE ALL COMING, AND IT'S SIMPLY A MATTER OF TIME”

potential for corruption.

In early July, the CS:GO scene was rocked by revelations that popular streamers Trevor 'TmarTn' Martin and Tom 'ProSyndicate' Cassell were key staff in a site called CSGO Lotto, promoting the jackpot service to their online following of around ten million subscribers without disclosing their own involvement in it. Others were exposed, or confessed to, gambling on-stream using site-provided skins – effectively house money – in return for exposure and payment. The site CSGO Diamonds, meanwhile, admitted to sharing inside information with notable streamer Moe 'mOE' Assad to inflate his on-stream win percentages at their casino games, mainly as a promotional tool.

Since then, Valve has sent cease-and-desist letters to a number of websites utilising the Steam public API for gambling purposes, with most of them ceasing operation shortly thereafter. Nonetheless, a quick search brings up a number of newer sites that have sprung up to fill the vacuum left by their absence.

“Given that they’re not regulated, [these sites] are unlikely to have any consumer protection measures built into them,” says Dr Gainsbury. “There’re no limits, there’re no warning signs. And there’s nothing to

stop sites just fleeing into the night and taking the virtual accounts and items with them.”

Another spectre raised by the intrusion of gambling into esports is match-fixing. “Most stakeholders in esports are ignorant of the threat,” says Smith, who prior to his entry into esports worked as a lawyer for over twenty years in relation to cricket and integrity. “Outside of Korea, what’s happened? iBUYPOWER, Episilon [E-sports]... Mickey Mouse-level cases, opportunistic stuff, a couple of hundred bucks here and there.”

“But the problems that have occurred in cricket, in rugby, in football, they’re all coming, and it’s simply a matter of time. There’s only one way this ends, without regulation – in a scandal.”

THE YOUNG ROLL DICE

Xenophon’s primary charge against esports and videogame gambling is the natural potential of videogames to lead to underage gambling, telling TripleJ in August that there was a real risk that young people could develop gambling problems. Rahul Sood, CEO and co-founder of the aforementioned Unikrn, authored a blog post last April contemplating the issue. “When my 13-year-old son and his friends talk about skins betting it

**CITATIONS**

- Interactive Gambling Act 2001 (Cth) ss 4, 5, 8, 8A, 15, 61AA, 61BA.
- Interactive Gambling Amendment Bill 2016 (Cth)
- Explanatory Memorandum, Interactive Gambling Bill 2001 (Cth).
- McLeod et al v Valve Corporation et al (D Wash, Case No C16-1227-JCC, October 4 2016).
- Sally Gainsbury et al, 'Convergence of Gambling and Gaming in Digital Media' (Report, Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation, 2015).

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made me seriously uncomfortable," he wrote. "Responsible and safe gambling should be [legitimate operators'] top priority. Underage gambling is a complete non-starter and should be shut down."

"Underage gambling is a huge problem," SkinXChange.com lead developer Justin Carlson told Bloomberg back in September 2015, saying that many children were taking their parent's credit cards without their knowledge and using them to wager skins. "[They often] rack up

hundreds or thousands of dollars in skins, only to lose them all on some betting or jackpot site."

Besides gaming's inherent appeal to younger audiences, the general lack of age-gating on unregulated sites and the widespread use of virtual items as tokens is a problem when it comes to stopping underage users. "[Virtual items have] really changed the way people engage with betting," says Dr Gainsbury. "You don't have to use real credit cards or accounts which may have age limits or verifications on them."

She also points out that assessing the value on virtual items is a step removed from simply betting money, making it difficult to assess the actual worth of wagers. "There's also the fact that these kinds of things

may introduce gambling to people who otherwise might not have been introduced to that activity," she adds.

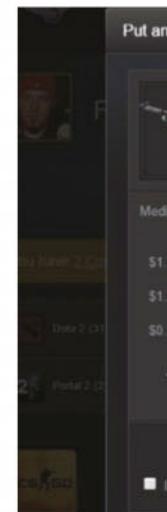
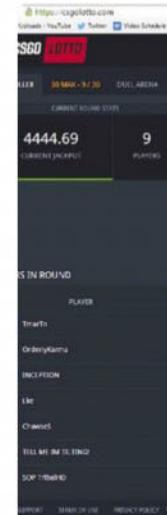
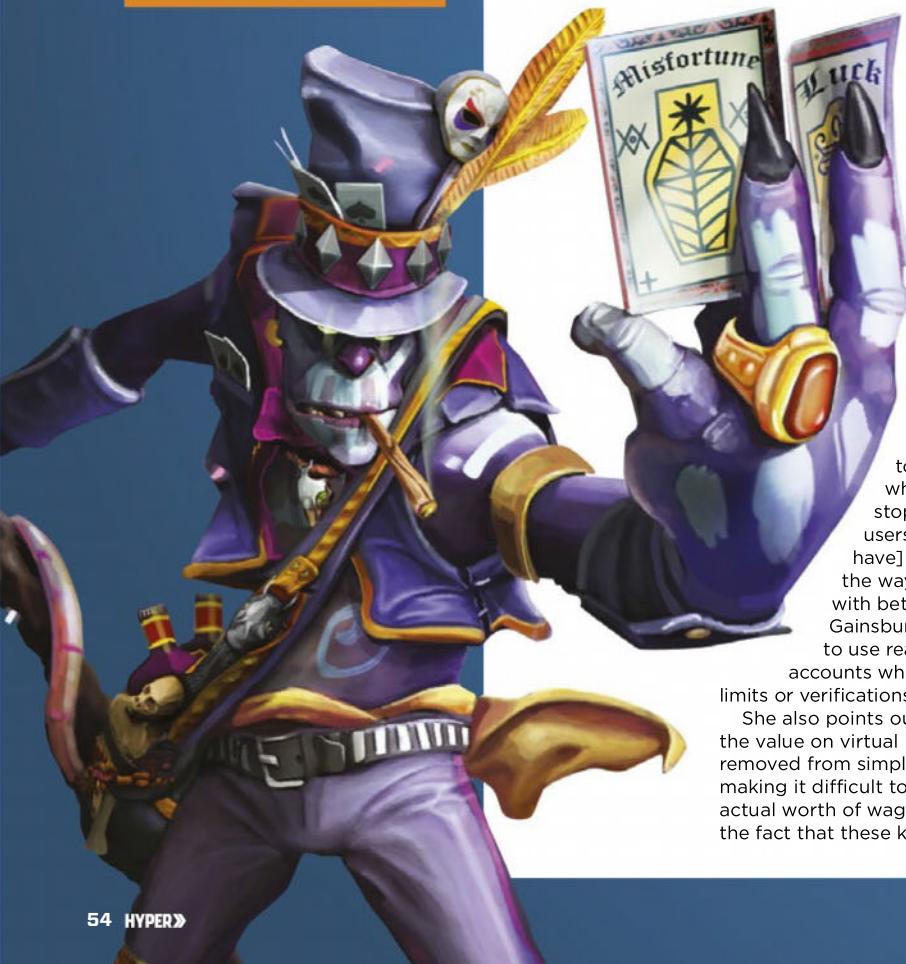
Certainly, familiarity by exposure has always been regarded as a particularly insidious concept – witness candy cigarettes, banned under State and Territories legislation since 1999 due to its obvious links to the tobacco industry. In a paper prepared for the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation, Dr Gainsbury also points out that repeat exposure – even in cases where no real money is involved – may nonetheless encourage viewing of gambling as an acceptable, everyday activity, though she stresses that this has not yet been tested empirically.

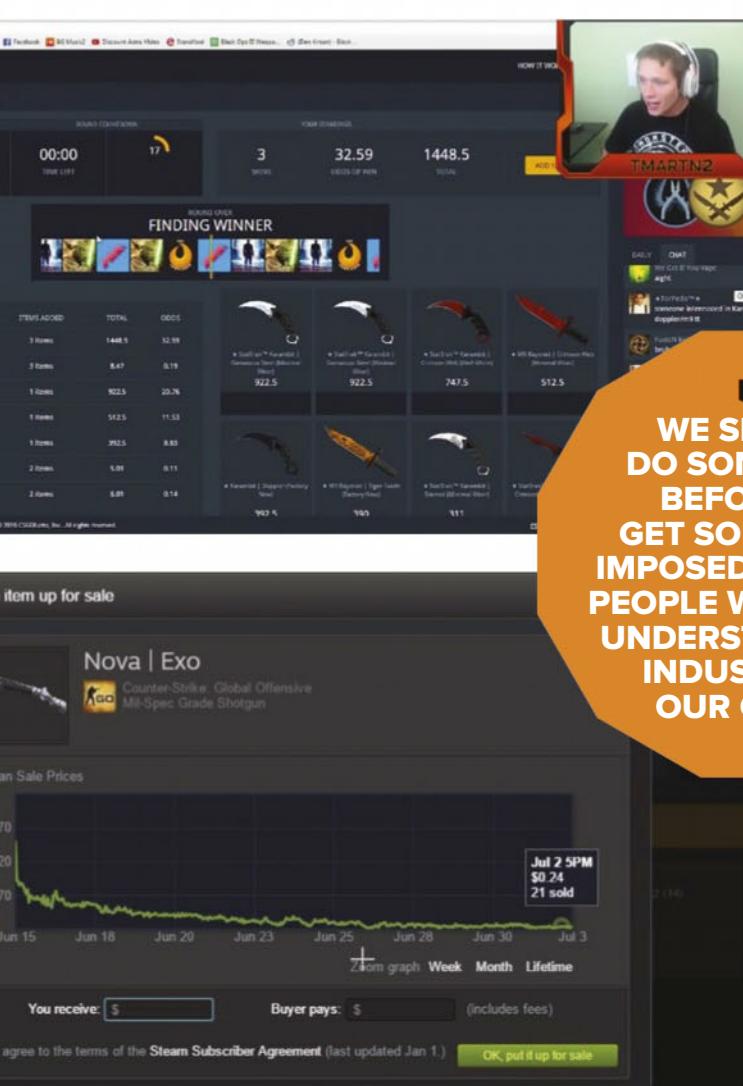
In the meantime, a Class-Action Lawsuit against Valve (and CSGO Lotto) which alleged that Valve knowingly 'allowed an illegal online gambling market' to 'take money from teenage customers' was dismissed in early October on jurisdictional grounds. The case may be re-opened on appeal, but for now, it appears as though the courts have no formal opinion on the matter.

FRAGGED

A difficulty in the regulation of esports and esports wagering is the natural fragmentation of the market between the various different games and leagues. League of Legends is different to CS:GO is different to DOTA 2 is different to Starcraft or SMITE – not to mention the plethora of individual associations like ESL Pro League, Esports Championship Series, the upcoming Professional esports Association and so on.

"Every other sport has someone at the centre," explains Smith, who says the lack of centralisation is a major problem preventing further growth of sponsorship and advertising for the industry. "If you wanted to buy sponsorship of the World Cup, you'd go to FIFA and you'd buy it. If you





WE SHOULD DO SOMETHING BEFORE WE GET SOMETHING IMPOSED ON US BY PEOPLE WHO DON'T UNDERSTAND OUR INDUSTRY OR OUR GAMES

want to invest in an esport, you have to go to 20 different places with different countries, different needs, different abilities..."

"I don't ever see a coalition of Blizzard, Valve, Riot, and Hi-Rez getting together and deciding there's going to be a central point," he continues. "But they might just buy into someone else's idea of this, if there was a dominant overall provider on the scene."

The lack of a central authority also has implications for difficulties regarding regulation – not just in integrity, but also in a plethora of other areas including contracts, dispute resolution, and employee rights. But Smith is focused on the integrity side of the picture. "It's scary for these top-end Olympics, World Cup level brands that

have been hit by doping scandals, match-fixing scandals, corruption, sexual assaults and so on – they're terrified, and quite rightly so, of potential associations," he explains. "But they know that in traditional sports, at least, there's regulations and systems that are at least trying to deal with it. There's a degree of brand control they can rely on."

"Say Panasonic goes to a league and asks them what they would do if there was a match fixing scandal. They'd ban the players. Well, it's not just a question of how you would react – but also what you are actively, proactively trying to do to try and stop it from happening. And the answer is still, across large parts of the industry, absolutely nothing."

ALL BETS ARE OFF

Dr Gainsbury believes that industry self-regulation will be the first to move, primarily because otherwise it will hurt the industry's reputation and, ultimately, bottom line. "Annual competitive events and prize pools have almost doubled since 2012, so when you're crossing that size, it's going to have to become legitimate,"

she says. "People won't bet if they don't think it's legitimate. So there'll have to be an industry body organising it all, with regulation to monitor the events and players, just to make sure what consumers are betting on is both a legitimate and fair event."

Smith, meanwhile, warns that government regulation will step in if the industry does not. "Major scandals always bring the politicians out, particularly in sports – it's a sexy area, it gets the votes, it gets attention. So I have no doubt if something happens in esports, and we've seen this in South Korea already, the relevant government departments would be all over it."

"If the industry had any wisdom at all, they'd say that we should do something about this before we get something imposed on us by people who don't understand our industry, our game, and our sport," continues Smith. "It's absolutely inevitable in my view that regulation will be imposed, unless the industry convinces the politicians and the various gambling commissions that they are acting proactively, and in the best interests of the broad public and the players."

Certainly Xenophon, despite his many valid points about the glaring inadequacies of our current gambling legislation, gives no indication that he really understands esports, or even just videogames more generally. "Mario Kart is a fantastic game that many millions of people around the world have enjoyed, but there are legitimate questions to ask about a kid's game being used as a vehicle for online bookmakers and gamblers," he said in a somewhat bizarre press release attempting to link a legitimate, Mario Kart tournament held in Adelaide with esports wagering. Imagine the headaches ignorance of this sort would provoke if expressed in binding legislation. It's obvious that the industry can no longer afford to be complacent.

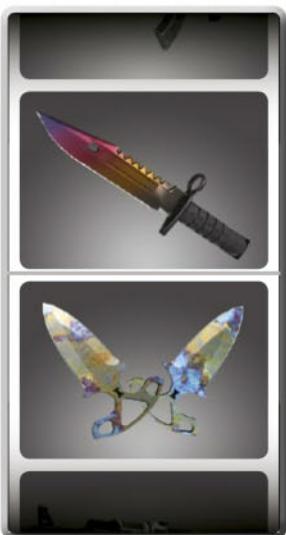
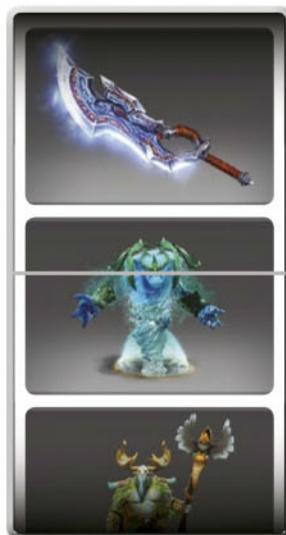
"If the industry doesn't react," warns Smith, "then others will react for them."

Senator Xenophon was approached for comment but did not respond by time of writing. Many thanks to Nick Commins of Macquarie University and Christopher Chin, Lawyer at Mills Oakley for their help and advice. ■

GET OUTTA TOWN

One oft-ignored aspect of the IGA is that, despite the plethora of things that are deemed illegal under the Act, to date there have been no prosecutions made. The Australian Media and Communications Authority has limited powers under the act against overseas offenders, mainly being to refer them to the Australian Federal Police or to ask ISPs to filter the offending sites. The few complaints that are recommended to the AFP are often not followed up on due to higher-priority tasks (or a lack of resources).

Although Nick Xenophon's proposed legislative amendments are yet to be tabled, a separate amendment – the Interactive Gambling Amendment Bill 2016 – is currently before the House of Reps. Though not esports focused, the proposed Bill does introduce a licencing scheme and a civil penalty regime that might prove for greater enforcement capabilities in future.



Executive Spotlight

Behind the scenes with Job "CaptCoach" Hilbers, former SMITE coach and manager

HYPER: Let's begin with the basics: who are you and what is your involvement with esports?

CAPTCOACH: My name is Job Hilbers, but in the esports industry I am better known as CaptCoach. I am a former SMITE coach and manager, and have briefly been involved in the competitive European Overwatch scene. Currently, I am working outside of the esports industry, but looking for a paid job, however small, in any part of the esports industry.

HYPER: Tell us a little about your work as a coach for Avant Garde and Team Titan. What's the daily routine look like for an esports coach prepping a team for a big tournament?

CAPTCOACH: It is interesting that you mention both teams in the same sentence as my duties with Titan differed greatly from my duties within Avant Garde. This is mainly due to the coaching subfields that I was exploring during my time with each team. With Titan I was very new to coaching, and so was the entire esports industry. I mainly focussed on team dynamics, communication, drafting, and warding. While with Avant Garde I did not focus as much on team dynamics and communication, but rather delved straight into the strategic and tactical side of esports.

When I joined Avant Garde I really wanted to continue establishing the strategy side of my coaching and explore more in-depth systems that I had adopted from regular sports. The latter is still a big hobby of mine, and I continue to develop this even though I do not have a team to teach my strategies and insight into the game to.

HYPER: There's been some controversy recently over "doping" in esports: what can be done on an organisational level to discourage the use of performance enhancing drugs in esports?

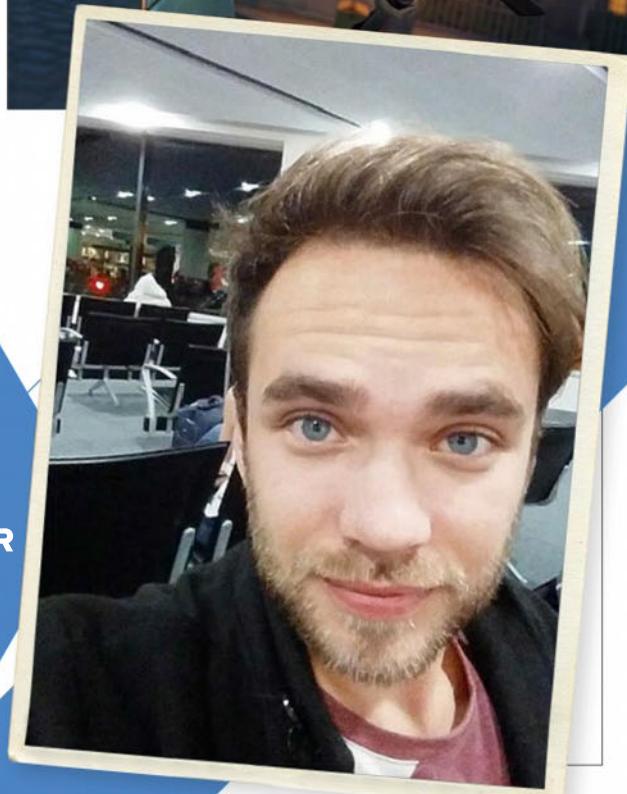
CAPTCOACH: I think a big part of performance enhancing drugs in esports is that they are legal and accessible. For organisations this means that they have to take a stand against performance enhancing drugs on their own accord. Of course the ability to win is desirable and therefore performance enhancing drugs can offer a temporary solution,

but truthfully you cannot take pride as a player nor as an organization in winning while using performance enhancing drugs. For league organisers I think it is crucial that they put high fines and permanent bans on those people who use performance enhancing drugs.

HYPER: You've done work on how to reduce toxicity within the SMITE community – could you give an overview of what your findings were, and how – if at all – they apply to esports communities more generally?

CAPTCOACH: While I cannot delve into the specifics of my research the main conclusion is that videogame developers should look to create safe environments for their playerbase to play their game in. In the end the online or digital playground is no different from actual playgrounds. As digital environments come with anonymity players forget they are interacting with people. Helping players to realise that there are humans on the other side of their game should be a priority for videogame developers. Did you know that people who display toxic behavior, even in a small form or shape, tend to lose 40% more games than people who display neutral behavior? People who display positive behavior tend to win about 15% more games than people who display neutral behavior. So in essence, it even benefits individual players who are playing the game if their goal is to win as many games as possible. ☺

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A PRIORITY FOR
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Heroes never die

James O'Connor investigates how a behemoth like Blizzard does esports

I still remember the first time the enormity of esports, and the arrival of competitive gaming as a global phenomenon, really sank in for me. It was the 2011 Global StarCraft II League Grand Final, held that year at Blizzcon. It was the first time the event had ever been hosted by a country other than Korea, and I was there to cover it for Hyper's sister mag, PC PowerPlay. While things didn't go particularly smoothly (there were technical issues with one of the PCs that delayed the match by about half an hour), the crowd's excitement when MMA (Seong-Won Mun) defeated IMMp (Jong-Hyun Jung) eclipsed any other sport event I'd been to.

In 2017, Starcraft II is just one of Blizzard's esports pillars: Hearthstone, Heroes of the Storm, and Overwatch are all games designed explicitly to foster competitive scenes. Blizzard isn't just a developer and a publisher: it's in the entertainment business now, facilitating champion players and making sure that the infrastructure exists so that fans can watch and follow their favourites. Blizzcon 2016

was dominated by esports: there were major tournaments for all four of these games, as well as World of Warcraft (see boxout), with massive prizes on offer. In the afterglow of these numerous championships, we spoke with producers, players, and shoutcasters to try and get a sense of what makes Blizzard one of the top publishers for modern competition-ready esports titles.

HEARTHSTONE: DESIGNING A COMPETITIVE F2P GAME

Hearthstone, Blizzard's free-to-play digital collectable card game, has attracted a huge esports crowd. At the time of writing, Hearthstone (current player base: over 50 million) is Blizzard's most watched game on Twitch. At the recent Hearthstone World Championship, held during Blizzcon, the top prize was USD \$250,000 from a prize pool that totaled \$1 million. The winner was Pavel Beltukov, an 18-year-old from Russia, whose previous top prize had been \$5000 in the Championship League earlier that year.



DEFINING ESPORTS

The term 'esport' can be defined broadly, so I asked Blizzard's Jason Chayes to give me his personal take. "A competitive, skill based game is at the heart of esports", he says, "but it also includes a passionate community that watches and cheers on its champions, the game developer and publisher that builds the context to experience these matches, and most importantly, the players that devote themselves to being the best they can be."





According to Jason Chayes, the game's production director, it's becoming more important "that games are fun to spectate while visually delivering important information to viewers" in recent years. Hearthstone is Blizzard's most easily accessible game (it's available widely on mobile devices), but it can be a hard one to keep up with. The latest expansion pack, Mean Streets of Gadgetzan, just added 132 new unlockable cards. The new cards offer big boosts for the Druid and Priest classes, which Hunter decks are, reportedly, less prominent now.

With a game like this, which is free-to-play but lets you buy new card packs with real money, there's always going to be a question of balance and economy. "As a design value for Hearthstone, we wanted to make sure that players could compete at the top levels of play without spending any money in the game", says Chayes. "Players can play for free, and earn the cards they need to reach legend ranking. We have seen several community influencers reach the top levels of play by earning their card packs through gameplay. We did not design Hearthstone to grant wins to players just because they spend more money than others."

The 'card pack' has become a fairly major part of competitive gaming: outside of actual card-based games, sports games like FIFA and NBA 2K16 use cards in their competitive career modes as well (and physical card games, like Magic: the Gathering, still do very well for themselves). In

Hearthstone, though, winning isn't simply about acquiring the 'best' cards and throwing them at your opponent. Blizzard wanted the game to make it clear to players when they had become 'good' at it, and when they were ready to play at a competitive level. "In Hearthstone, we have endeavored to make accessing the esports scene a matter of just playing ranked play within the game client", Chayes says. "If you are good enough to make it to 'Legend' rank, you are automatically connected to the Hearthstone esports scene as you'll be granted 'points' which will place you on the competitive ladder."

Balance issues are addressed quickly, and are taken very seriously. "Designing for esports means working towards a very high skill cap", Chayes says. "That means that effort and thoughtfulness are rewarded, which is an important consideration for design. It also means that you are conscious of the viewing experience and thinking about how you can make the action as clear to follow as possible". At the same time the game needs to be designed with accessibility and readability in mind, as with most sports, so that "someone who has never played the game before can follow an esports broadcast and can connect with the narrative and action around the event".

In 2017 Blizzard plans on expanding its Hearthstone seasonal championships into global events, ensuring that four times a year the best players from the game's four target 'regions' (American, Asia-

Pacific, Europe, and China) will be able to meet up and battle. These championships will have \$250,000 prize pools, and will be, Blizzard promises, extremely competitive to qualify for. In China, a new app, Hearthstone Box, was recently released. It allows for players to set up tournaments much more easily than before – whether it will be released elsewhere is not yet clear. The future of Hearthstone will be driven by this competitive scene, and the idea that anyone who downloads the app may find themselves, some day, able to compete: after all, this isn't a game that requires fast reflexes in the way so many other esports titles do.

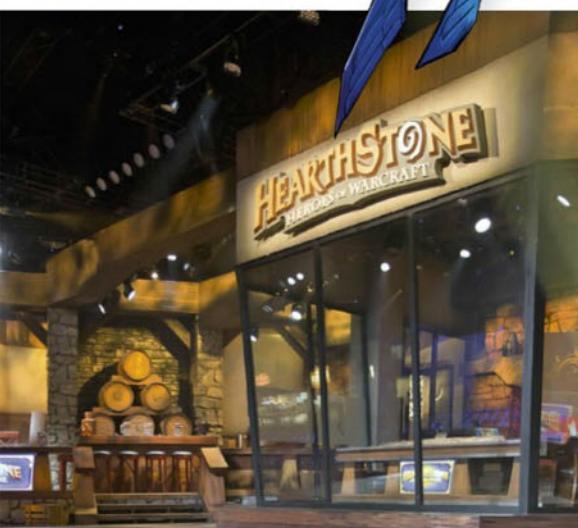
THE FIRST SIX MONTHS OF COMPETITIVE OVERWATCH

Australia's performance in the Overwatch World Cup, ultimately, did not add up to much. In their first match, on Temple of Anubis, Australia managed only one kill while attacking against South Korea, barely making a dent in their defensive line. On defense, they managed to add six more, but the point fell exceptionally fast. In their first grouping Australia also lost to Finland, and although





Predictably, competitive Overwatch is immensely popular among players, streamers, and fans



they managed to beat the team from Taiwan it wasn't enough to carry them to the next round.

Of course, squaring off against South Korea in the first round was unfortunate seeding – they would go on to beat Russia in the finals, while Australia placed equal ninth out of sixteen teams – but Australia also doesn't have a particularly developed competitive Overwatch scene just yet. Elliott 'Muselk' Watkins, team captain for Australia in the Overwatch World Cup, doesn't actually consider himself a competitive player: "I'm more of a YouTuber", he says. Because the World Cup teams for 2016 were voted for by the community, they weren't necessarily made up of typical esports players, and

Watkins made the cut because of



CRAFTING WAR

World of Warcraft has its own esports championship as well – it's much less high profile, but the competition pot is still huge. The World of Warcraft Arena World Championship pitted six teams against each other during Blizzcon, with a total prize pool of \$250,000. Team Splyce ended up taking out the competition, defeating Method NA in a PVP arena battle. World of Warcraft's esports scene has probably peaked, but the game itself remains very popular, with the Legion expansion recently becoming the game's fastest-selling expansion.

the popularity of his videos. "Coming from a Team Fortress 2 background, Overwatch was always a game that I knew I'd love", Watkins says. "I'm currently making videos for it almost every day. Overwatch was designed from the ground up to function as a competitive game, and I've always seen class based shooters as the absolute best type of shooter for the competitive scene."

Preparing for the World Cup meant planning a good team strategy, developing synergy, and examining the metagame. Watching Overwatch's competitive scene move and change since its release in May has been very interesting – gone are the days where Bastion would dominate, or when teams could run multiple Tracers. "The game is still young, so in many instances players are still discovering

what the meta really is", Watkins says. Genji has been nerfed, D.Va and Symmetra have been reinvented, and at the time of writing Roadhog's hook is broken and needs fixing (the first player in the world to achieve the game's highest experience level, Tazerk, mains Roadhog, as does Evermore, the player who first hit the highest rank possible during Overwatch's third competitive season). Overwatch is still a young game, and competitive players are still settling into it.

"Unfortunately, we had three support players on Team Australia", Watkins says, "so we needed to decide on what team composition to run with. While we did practice and discuss strategies for certain maps, we had no way of knowing which maps we'd be playing on during the tournament. Because of that learning to work as a team was the main focus." The triple-tank triple-support configuration (first popularised by Swedish team Ninjas in Pyjamas) has been a huge part of upper-level play, but during the World Cup teams seemed to lean more towards the characters and strategies they were best with – the characters who got them there in the first place – rather than the currently popular crop of strategies.

"The Overwatch metagame is shifting incredibly quickly at the moment", Watkins acknowledges. "Only a few months ago, Blizzard decided to implement a one hero limit in competitive. That's done a huge amount for increasing variety. Up until that point teams would almost exclusively run two Tracers, two Winstons, and two Lucios in every game, always." As an entertainment company, Blizzard needs to make sure not only that players will have a good time and need to find new strategies, but that people who are drawn into the game by watching it will get a sense of the variety offered by different characters and configurations. "Variation in team compositions is constant in Overwatch", Watkins says, "which is one of the things that makes it so great to play and spectate."

Overwatch will almost certainly remain huge for some time (by October 2016, over twenty million players had been recorded), but Watkins acknowledges that the local competitive scene isn't what it could be and still has a ways to develop before it matches the standard set by its counterparts overseas.

"Right now Aussie esports is more behind than any region in the world," he believes. "I'm hoping that in the next few months and years, it can receive the recognition it deserves."

SHOUTCASTING STARCRAFT II

Starcraft was, at one point, the golden child of esports. Well before the scene exploded, the discussion on professional gaming outside of Twin Galaxies and arcade world records was focused on the success of Starcraft in South Korea. Of the 9.5 million copies of the original Starcraft sold, 4.5 million were bought in South Korea (current population: approximately 50 million). In the early 2000s, the fact that Starcraft was televised in South Korea – and that it was the most popular sport in the country by a significant margin – was used in many arguments about the legitimacy of the medium.

Outside of Korea it's Starcraft 2 and its two expansions that have really taken off as esports, but it's worth noting that, as of 2016, Starcraft's competitive scene isn't what it once was. Numerous match-fixing indictments, feuds with Korean esports associations, and – perhaps most significantly – a decline in the popularity of RTS as a genre (League of Legends ate heavily into Starcraft's potential audience, and few significant RTS games have released in the last five years) have all made an impact. In 2015, the game was briefly dropped from Major League Gaming's tournament schedule (it was soon reinstated, and MLG was purchased by Activision Blizzard in 2016). Yet it still remains, by most standards, very successful, with high-profile tournaments and events still offering substantial prizes thanks to Blizzard's continued support of the game.

As anyone who has watched a match without playing the game beforehand can attest, Starcraft is complicated. Even with a basic grasp of the rules, navigating player strategies, following the ebb and flow of the match, and identifying risks, clever maneuvers, and which feats were actually

difficult to pull off can take time. So, like many sports, Starcraft II benefits from commentators, or 'shoutcasters'. Jared 'PiG' Krensel's first big shoutcasting gig came in the middle of 2015. Before that, he'd done it casually on his own streams, benefiting from his immense knowledge of and skill within the game. "I'd casted some Starcraft matches for a bit of fun when I was first getting heavily involved in the Starcraft scene, but nothing too serious", he says. "As a pro player I was asked to guest-commentate the odd series at events occasionally, and I really enjoyed it. I was glad to take the chance to get up there and share my passion for the game." Since then, Krensel has been flown overseas to commentate numerous events, and finally got to cast at Blizzcon in 2016.

Krensel has played a lot of Starcraft, but believes that "super advanced knowledge isn't a must" for shoutcasters. Different kinds of casters fulfill different roles. "If you're a play-by-play commentator who focuses more on narration, hosting and hyping, than in-depth knowledge is not as important as it is for someone like myself who's a much more analytical caster", he says. "For my role, playing the game a huge amount and keeping in touch with all the pro players and the current strategies is an integral part of my job. Luckily that meshes well with my own content on Twitch and YouTube."

Observing others playing also gives Krensel a new perspective on the game. His





Although not as big as Blizzard's other esports titles, HoTS has a dedicated and enthusiastic following



DIABLO 3 SPORTS (SORRY)

In an interview with Gamefront back in 2011, Julian Love, lead technical artist on Diablo 3, made it very clear that the game would not court esports crowds. "Absolutely not", he said. "There is no intention to make D3 into a sport, and we are actively making design decisions to prevent it as being perceived as or even accidentally falling into the area of esports." Diablo 3 now stands as Blizzard's only game without an esports component to it.



favourite moment as a caster came while commentating a 14-year-old (Reynor's) path to the quarter finals at Dreamhack Valencia recently. "The crowd was really getting behind him. There was so much excitement to see such a young player achieve such a great finish at a big championship. Seeing young players step up to the plate like that is always great, but it was really seeing how supportive his family was that made me realise just how different the gaming world is from when I was his age."

HEROES OF THE STORM

Heroes of the Storm, which was originally unveiled as Blizzard DOTA before a trademark dispute with Valve forced them to change its name, has developed a huge following.

MOBAs are massive in esports, and Blizzard has been able to capitalise on their enormous catalogue of established characters.

James Baker, the HoTS team captain for Team Dignitas (based in the UK), says that the game's esports scene hasn't quite reached its full potential yet. "The game's failure to explode, along with some real marketing and production issues, saw the esports scene struggle a bit over the past year", he says. This holds true in terms of its popularity on Twitch, compared to other MOBAs. At the time of writing, League of Legends viewership on Twitch is hovering around 90,000, while DOTA 2 pulls in 16,000; Heroes of the Storm is pulling in around 4,000.

"We're not the most popular

pro scene", Baker acknowledges, "and there's not as much money in it as DOTA or League of Legends, so everyone who plays Heroes professionally is doing it because it is the thing that they love the most." He believes that the pro scene around the game is one of the most passionate out there.

Baker has been playing the game since its initial beta, and has seen it change and improve dramatically since then. "The core fun gameplay was always there, even in beta, but until recently it was buried under bad game systems, terrible ranking systems, questionable hero balance, and a lacklustre UI", he says. "Not all the issues are fixed yet, and problems stemming from the game engine itself still rear their head from time-to-time, but comparing the game now to the game at release is almost like looking at two completely different games. It's so much better now!"

Beyond game improvements, it's clear that Blizzard will continue to support Heroes of the Storm heavily going forward. The World Championship finals at Blizzcon matched the prize pools for their other, bigger games, with a total of \$1 million up for grabs. "We closed it out in fantastic fashion with Blizzcon, and next year's format looks a lot better for the health of the scene and the viewership", Baker says. Next year, in North America, Europe, China, and Korea, the competitive scene will shift to a uniform online league format, meaning that top players will be guaranteed compensation. This will ensure that the best players will be able to focus more time and effort onto the game. This isn't something that every publisher can offer, but as a company with such a rich esports history, it makes sense for Blizzard to support their best players. ■

Executive Spotlight

Behind the scenes with Jini Jun, head of APAC competitive gaming for Wargaming

HYPER: To begin, tell us a little about your job and what your day-to-day responsibilities are as head of APAC competitive gaming for Wargaming.

JINI JUN: Competitive gaming includes esports and clan wars and all the other competitive gaming modes – team battles, clan wars, platoons, random battles – that are included in Wargaming titles. What I do is make sure the player's introduction to all these is more structured, so that hopefully they'll become more involved and eventually make the journey to league and even pro play.

HYPER: How has the esports scene grown and changed in the time you've been involved with it?

JINI JUN: It's always changing at a very rapid pace. The esports scene has grown a great deal since I began working in the industry three years ago, and now it's more popular and more profitable than ever before. One of the bigger changes I've witnessed is that it's no longer confined to PCs and consoles. Competitive gaming is now available on mobile devices, and I think that's going to have a big impact on its popularity in the future.

HYPER: What are some of the unique challenges associated with growing esports in the Asia-Pacific region, and in Australia specifically?

JINI JUN: The biggest challenge for the APAC region is that it's made up of many different countries with different languages and very different cultures. It's always a challenge planning events for the region while taking all these differences into account, so we tend to focus on planning events for specific countries.

HYPER: What kind of personality and skills do you need to make it as an esports player?

JINI JUN: First and most importantly, you have to love your chosen game. You have to put in a lot of your time – most of your time, actually – into playing and you need passion for that. You have to really enjoy competition too, especially as a way to improving your skills. A big part of being an esports pro is learning from other players, so you need to know how to give and take constructive criticism.

HYPER: How much of a role do you play in organising esports teams from the ground up? Do they typically form organically or is that something you take an active hand in?

JINI JUN: No, mostly they're self-organised, but we do support them. After they reach a certain level – like say in the Wargaming League, we have gold series teams that are the top 10-12 teams in their region – we'll step in and help them get sponsors so they can focus on their training. We'll also help out with things like social media and marketing.

HYPER: Is winning a lot the only criterion for receiving that kind of support?

JINI JUN: No, it also helps if the team regularly produces their own content. Streams and blog posts and social media pages and things of that nature help grow a fanbase, which makes it much easier to attract sponsorship.

HYPER: What are your plans for growing the profile of Wargaming competitive gaming in the APAC region over the next year or so?

JINI JUN: One of our big initiatives is training camps, where we get famous league teams or streamers to lecture interested players who want to improve their skills. We started in Taiwan and expanded into China, Japan, and Hong Kong. It's proved very popular – our players love it. We also plan to bring it to Australia soon, but I can't say when just yet. ■

THE ESPORTS SCENE HAS GROWN A LOT SINCE I BEGAN WORKING IN THE INDUSTRY, AND NOW IT'S MORE POPULAR AND PROFITABLE THAN EVER





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The Australian fighting game scene

As a pro player, then volunteer and event organiser in the scene for many years, Daniel "Berzerk" Chlebowczyk is Australia's first paid professional fighting game player. He has travelled the world playing fighting games, and now shares the story of the scene today by talking to its top players



The oldest genre in competitive gaming, for a long time, didn't consider itself part of esports at all. Collectively known as the fighting game community (FGC), the social and competitive scene for fighting games grew from the arcade. From grassroots gatherings to major tournaments, the scene holds true to its origins. Bringing the spectacular skills and unique, larger than life personalities of the fighting game community to a wider spectator audience will be a big part of esports growth - but don't call it a comeback.

When you go to a fighting game event, you will know it immediately from the noise - a raucous atmosphere with an energy all its

Author Daniel "Berzerk" Chlebowczyk commentating

own. The clack of buttons on arcade sticks and the intermingling, match-focused murmurs of both players and spectators, builds from excited anticipation to an explosion of shouting, laughter, and cries of shock as big moments play out - whether it be an intense finals on stage or a hard fought local rivalry deep in the qualifying rounds.

While there's no doubt fighting games are part of esports and are evolving in step with the changes that have caused the rise of esports today - live spectating, increasing professionalism, and bigger prize pools - the interconnected communities in the FGC retain pride in a scene that values playing in person. Matches take place side by side more than online, and tournaments are structured so that anyone can enter, and topple giants.

Of course, online play is a big feature of all fighting games now, and the rise of live streaming has revolutionised the community. Online play grants variety in casual matches, but latency means playing offline is a genuinely different experience. Even when just learning the games, playing casual matches in person is paramount. It's more fun, more social, and you advance much faster.

Tournaments in Australia are foremost an opportunity to gather with your friends, as much as it is to

test who is the best at your particular game, or enjoy interstate rivalries. Organisations that manage regular meetups around the country include Melbourne's CouchWarriors, Sydney's Ozhadou, the South Australian FGC (SAFGC) and Standing Fierce over in New Zealand.

Inclusivity is a key ingredient, as players from a whole range of games gather together at these events to strengthen the whole community.

Grown and maintained by the communities themselves, recently two of Australia's national events have had extensive growth in numbers. The combination of the Smash community integrating with the rest of the FGC, and the consistent efforts of its volunteer organisers, saw Battle Arena Melbourne (BAM) by CouchWarriors grow from 300 to 600 attendees in 2014, then over 700 in 2015, and topped 800 in May 2016. Ozhadou Nationals (OHN) in Sydney, landed over 600 attendees in August 2016. Both BAM and OHN in 2016 were Capcom Pro Tour Ranking Events, which each attracted top players from Asia for the Street Fighter tournaments - bolstering the streaming viewership of each to over 50,000 viewers.

The integration of production features expected of modern esports events has worked well in the FGC. The visually accessible games - taking



Xavier Nardella (middle)



FEATURE



place one-on-one with the match state visible all on one screen – have wide audience appeal, and international qualification is now a real prospect.

BAM has been sending players to South East Asia Majors (Singapore, Thailand) for some time, while this year opportunities included travel and entry into the Korean Capcom Pro Tour Asia Finals event and the Dead or Alive Battle Royal finals at North East Championships (NEC) in the US.

Many players have made their own pilgrimages to major tournaments in Asia and the largest tournament in the world, EVO in the US.

WHAT'S POPULAR AND WHY

As the scene continues to grow and the changes in esports brings more opportunities to fighting game players, I spoke to some fellow players across popular games to explore where the scene is heading.

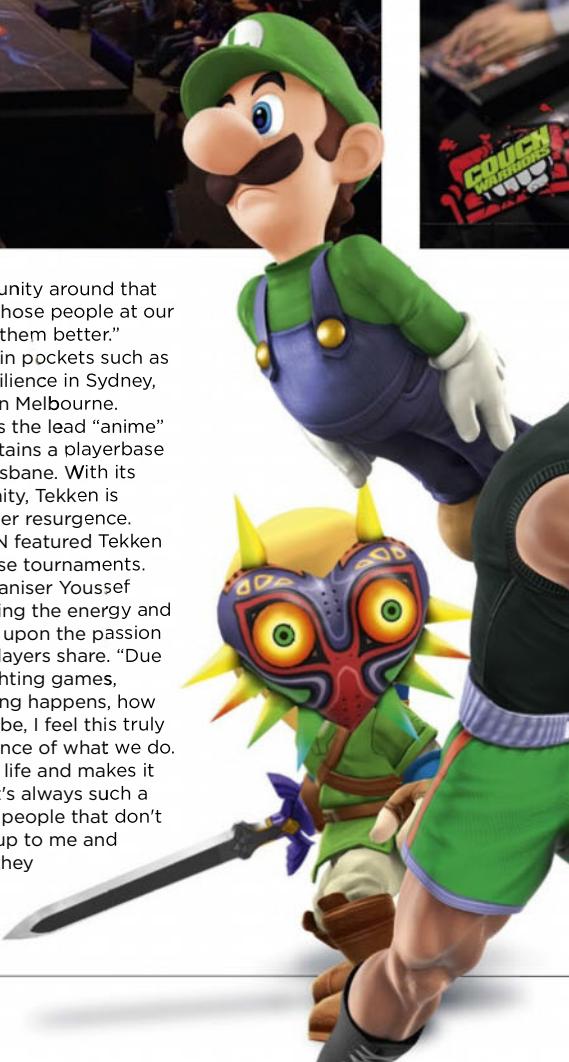
Xavier "Somniac" Nardella is a two time BAM Street Fighter champion who has had respectable showings at EVO and placed top 32 at South East Asia Majors. He summed up

the appeal of the genre. "There are countless reasons why people would be interested in fighting games and it's not specific to just Street Fighter either," Xavier recounts. "I've talked to many people that think that the character designs are really cool or the way the character moves is exciting, some people just love the one on one interaction between players, visiting events and interacting with the one of a kind community. Competitive players love the mind game aspect where their decision making is very important. You can never really stop getting stronger in fighting games, there's always a new goal to achieve and an opponent that will push you beyond your limits."

Which games see play at tournaments is influenced by both international precedence and local factors. What organisers see people playing at small events has real influence on the majors, CouchWarriors' Daniel "Spoony" Finegan confirms. "If there's a dedicated organiser for the game, often they can create a tight-nit

competitive community around that game, and having those people at our events only makes them better."

We've seen that in pockets such as Virtua Fighter's resilience in Sydney, or Dead or Alive's in Melbourne. While Guilty Gear is the lead "anime" fighter, BlazBlue retains a playerbase in Adelaide and Brisbane. With its dedicated community, Tekken is preparing for a wider resurgence. Both BAM and OHN featured Tekken 7 in large pre-release tournaments. Sydney Tekken organiser Youssef Faddoul, in explaining the energy and hype of Tekken, hit upon the passion all fighting game players share. "Due to the nature of fighting games, how quick everything happens, how explosive they can be, I feel this truly brings out the essence of what we do. It really brings it to life and makes it that much better. It's always such a good feeling when people that don't play Tekken come up to me and tell me how much they enjoy the crowd, the reactions, the banter"





IMPORTANCE OF SIDE TOURNAMENTS

The FGC is by nature multiple communities. Not all make the main card, yet see play as side events. Beloved by pockets of the community, players still play for pride and prestige, and travel just for the chance to play their game. Also a great way to play an obscure old game for fun or try something new.

Left: Jacob Cabjoy Byrnes at BAM8



Kim, female fighter



MAJOR ANZ TOURNAMENTS 2017

- MAY: Battle Arena Melbourne (BAM) - Melbourne - CouchWarriors.org
- AUGUST: Ozadou Nationals (OHN) - Sydney - Ozadou.net
- OCTOBER: Southern Cross Up - Auckland NZ - Standingfierce.com
- DECEMBER: Southern Cross Championship (SXC) - Adelaide - SAFCG.org

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and even watching the game even though they don't play it. It's truly an experience to them and another thing they look forward to at any Australian tournament."

The two most supported tournament titles now are Street Fighter 5 and Super Smash Bros., both Melee (SSBM) and 4 on Wii U. SFV has maintained its top place in tournaments as the best recognised franchise, with well-known characters and a long history. SF4 had great success in bringing attention back to the genre by trading on this, after a long hiatus for the series. Despite a slow start for SFV, the game is still a leader in tournament attendances and is well supported by Capcom through its Pro Tour and regular updates.

As for Smash Bros., the longevity of Melee is now well understood but nonetheless remarkable. A niche community that kept supporting and playing its game, there was an influx of interest with the "Smash documentary". That brought renewed interest in being part of the community. In Australia, the ongoing inclusion of Smash in CouchWarriors events and the strong support of the event for Smash particularly at BAM after the Smash doco came out, helped grow the local scene.

Internationally, the wave hit EVO and more communities saw the benefit of working together - "traditional" FGC and Smash as one. When Smash 4 arrived, there was a unified organising group and numbers

have gone up, with new players pouring into a scene that boasts equal or larger numbers than Melee.

Sam "SD" Darroch, a multiple time BAM champion in Melee, shared his thoughts. "Mainstream franchises popularity, in my view, stems largely from legacy, in that the franchises in their first iterations had excellent, engaging

and competitive elements which have persisted in later releases.

"I think what draws people to SSBM compared to the general FGC is that it is rather different in mechanics and offers an experience divergent to standard 2D fighters.

"On the surface it attracts players through familiarity with popular Nintendo characters, but the techniques and room for creativity and individual expression is seldom found in any other fighting game."

DIFFERENCE IN TACTICS AND STYLE

Looking deeper, games do vary in tactics and style, often with impressive, intelligent and creative design applications, while maintaining commonality. Mind games - knowing what your opponent will do before he does it - are key.

Differences in basic controls, the number of buttons and whether you hold back to block or use a guard button, all add flavour and depth to the choices of fighting games. 2D games focus on zoning, jump ins and left/right mixups; 3D fighters on spacing, sidestepping and high/low mixups, and the environment - letting yourself get hit with a wall to your back in Dead or Alive or Virtua Fighter changes everything. Smash has a whole different movement system altogether. Yet every player needs to thinks about spacing, what moves are safe or have long recovery, and when to punish an opponent you've forced to make a mistake.

Sam notes "Smash is completely different to other 2D/3D fighters, which I believe contributes to the lack of crossover between traditional fighters and Smash... [it] requires a series of quick decisions on the fly to account for the opponent's directional input, which can be used for survival and to escape combos. The other unusual thing is, knockback increases every time your character is hit. This is another factor which makes the combo game highly varied."

Mortal Kombat champion Jacob "Cabjoy" Byrnes, who placed 5th at BAM, then 1st at OHN this year, agreed that "Conceptually all of these things are very similar between games, there's just some key mechanical differences which make them stronger or weaker in each game." Elaborating on using MKXL's run function, he

said "It adds another layer of mind game in the neutral and is difficult for most to grasp, but extremely satisfying once you get used to it."

Overall, the games have fundamental common ground and the joy of discovering your own playstyle in each game, mastering moves and competing socially or in tournaments is universally an experience fighting game players relish.

AUSTRALIA VS THE WORLD

So with a strong grassroots community and solid local events scene, how do how Australians match up to rest of world? Historically, we've seen very few top placements. At EVO in 2003, Sydney's Mike Abdow placed top 8 in Virtua Fighter, then in 2007, landed 5th; a huge achievement in a game dominated by Japanese players. Mike was the top placing Westerner, beating out all the US players.

That same year, yours truly won Dead or Alive 4 qualification at both World Cyber Games and Championship Gaming Series, attending world finals for each, and CGS again in 2008. Adopted Australian Johnny "Humanbomb" Cheng, a Sydneysider for many years, placed 5th in Street Fighter 4 at EVO 2012. The same year, an Australian Tekken team of MMT and Lucky Strikes placed 5th at Super Battle Opera in Japan, while current top Tekken player Dion "D-On" Xu hit 13th at EVO this year.

Since 2009 when the fighting game scene saw a resurgence with SF4, more players have made their own way to international events, but there has been no highlight success so far.

MKXL's Jacob Bynes put forward a view shared by many players on the challenge of increasing skill level in Australia. "We lack experience in tournaments of really large volumes of players, we have less frequent tournaments so are less comfortable with high stress situations and overall we don't have the player numbers to learn most character matchups in any real depth."

Xavier "Somniac" Nardella, who put in a top 32 showing at South East Asia Majors, spoke highly of two current SFV players when looking at our current international prospects.

"Locally we have (team) Dark Sided's Adric Middleton "DS|Falco" who has placed 5th in SFV at both OzHadou Nationals 14 and Battle Arena Melbourne 8. Both tournaments had strong representation from Japan and USA. Internationally we also have the world warrior Kevin "Burnout" Kim who has been traveling to numerous Capcom Pro Tour events over the past year. Placing top 16 in both Manilla Cup in Phillipines and Thaiger Uppercut in Thailand."

Kevin attributes a larger player base, and collective experience, as the reason Australia lags behind. "[Larger] region players tend to base on their specific match up practices and apply strategy they formed while studying up on the knowledge of the game. Australian players naturally lack the number of 'hours played' while other regions are developing at a much faster pace."

Adric, fresh from South East Asia Majors, acknowledges the challenge.

"Making top five at our own Tournaments in Australia against the internationals shows me that we have the talent to win but currently just lacking exposure to the world stage." However, through a combination of direct practice and closely following the replays of international counterparts Middleton suggests even in a small scene there are ways forward. "The goal is to surpass them so being creative with your own style of play while adhering to match up specifics is what makes a great player in the end."

ONLINE PLAY AND STREAMING

In the modern era of fighting games, as with all esports, Twitch live streaming of tournaments and near universal access to tutorials or top player replays on YouTube has had a positive effect. Once a rarity, footage of tournaments and top players is now plentiful.

Xavier Nardella makes it a habit to complement practice with research. "Having the ability to review matches that people around the world have just played is amazing.... I often find myself reviewing matches that take place on Twitch/Youtube & Capcom Fighters Network between strong Japanese or American players to get a better understanding of how to play the game and deal with scenarios that I find difficult. Without the ability to watch these matches players in Australia would definitely be lost in the dark and lacking a lot of vital information."

It's become essential for players to share knowledge as part of growing the overall skill of the community, so new players can see how a particular combo, setup, or tactic may work, and apply to their own playstyle.

The ubiquity of online play has made it easier to find matches. But fighting games, running at 60 frames per second, are highly sensitive to latency. So being able to play and practice against international competition requires travel. Adric Middleton says "The Australian scene has some strong players but the scene is spread out all over. This mixed with poor internet in the country for the general amount of players makes practicing together as a group very difficult."

Henry "Genxa" Sham, an organiser of Ozhadou Nationals, says offline play enhances the games themselves, by playing "the way they were originally designed to be played, next to another human being."

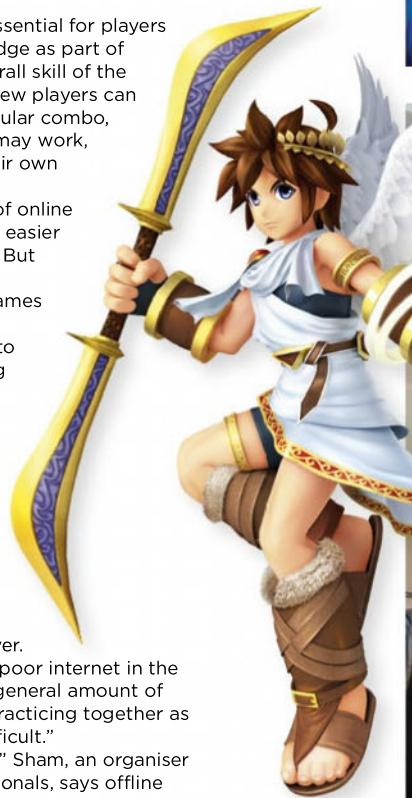
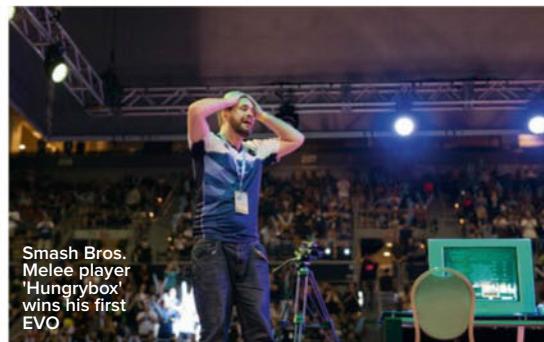
Sam echoes, "I see it as beneficial to have a primarily offline community. This is good for personal interaction, hype at events and friendship."

GROWING THE SCENE

Fighting game players play out of

DO I NEED AN ARCADE STICK? (OR ORIGINAL GAMECUBE CONTROLLER)

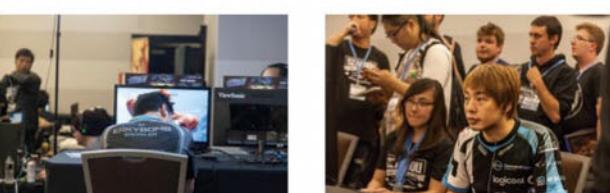
No! Pick the tool that's best for you. However, for certain games it's highly recommended. Players at local events are usually pretty good with loaners, advice on where to buy, and even help with mods if you want silent buttons or a sick new artstyle.



Daigo Umehara playing Street Fighter V.



Competitive Smash player Villyness celebrates a victory



FEAR NOT: HOW CASUAL PLAYERS AND COMPETITIVE PLAYERS SHOULD BE HAPPY TO MIX

The best training modes are other players. Don't be shy to ask for advice. Players will often play long sets, mirror matches, and explain how to improve the finer points of your game. Try different games too. You'll learn how to apply techniques from one game to another. The scene has both character specialists and multi game champions, all willing to help.



Youssef Faddoul



passion for community and eagerly welcome new players. There is a good understanding among most players that the more you teach a new player, the better the whole community will become. Henry Sham adds, "FGC events offer a place for newcomers to test their skills, learn more about the game they play, perhaps learn about another game but most importantly it allows them to make new friends."

While the professional level for fighting game players representing Australia is still uncommon, the prospects are becoming stronger.

The days of skepticism of esports and its formats, have largely gone, as the scene has been able to grow and establish itself. Big events like EVO, broadcast this year on ESPN, or Red Bull Battle Grounds, have shown events can have the big production and stay true to the integrity of the tournament format players respect. There's still some misunderstanding of the FGC, but home grown events are finding large scale tie ins such as the Capcom Pro Tour.

As Australia's two major national tournaments at once retain their grassroots management, and simultaneously incorporate global league play into their structures, growing bigger again is almost assured. Attracting large attendance and viewership, the road ahead is bright for fighters in 2017.

For a scene that preceded the term esports, and held

its independence dear, it's now well positioned to represent the best of its diverse existing community and the growth esports has to offer.

In the meanwhile, players will play for passion. In a message to new players, Youssef Faddoul enthuses that joining the scene is "one of the best decisions of my life. I got to meet my closest of friends and travel the world. I recommend it to anyone considering to make the jump. You will not regret it." ■



The ideal esports build

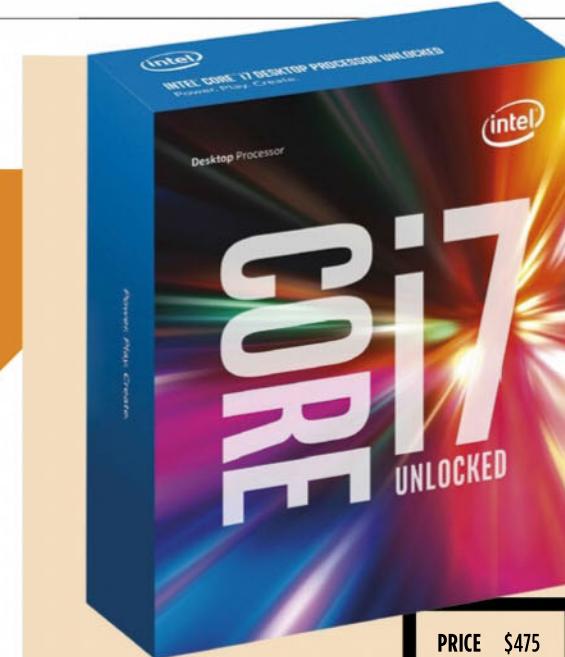
Want a PC that'd made the pros weep with envy? Bennett Ring has you covered

It's taken its sweet time, but Australia is finally getting into the swing of esports. While other countries have been giving away millions in prizes for almost a decade, it's only in the last couple of years that serious competitions have made their way down under. Major tournaments are now being held across the East Coast at casinos and other fancy establishments, with prizes in the tens of thousands. The higher-end competitions generally supply the computers at the venue, but to make it to these upper echelons you're likely going to have to attend a few BYO LANs or play in an online league first. And for that you're going to need your own gaming PC.

However, depending on the genre that you're planning on becoming the next world champion in, you may not need to spend a small fortune building a mega-rig; some genres have very low system requirements, which is part of the reason they're so popular. For example, MOBA's in particular can run on entry-level hardware and still have the super-speedy response times needed to win. So we've gone through three of the major genres that make up the majority of today's esports competitions, and laid out the specs and suggested components needed for each. Enjoy the read, and if you are taking part in professional gaming, we hope our tips give you the edge needed to make it to the top. Note that we've gone for Micro-ITX builds across all of our machines, making them far more portable if you do need to take them to a local LAN.

REAL TIME STRATEGY

Generally-speaking, RTS games require relatively low GPU power, but need a super speedy CPU to render the large number of units that are on the battlefield at any one time. In certain RTS games, there can be several thousand of units on screen at once, and that takes up a lot of CPU cycles. They're usually not using a lot of GPU features though, so it's possible to go for a lower end GPU, though newer games like Total War: Warhammer require a beast of a GPU as well. You're also going to want a keyboard that supports macros, and a mouse that has extra buttons for macro binding too. Audio isn't too important in these games, in particular directional audio, as the player gets most of their info from the interface, so low-end sound hardware is fine for this genre as well. With this in mind, let's take a look at what we think makes for a good RTS build.



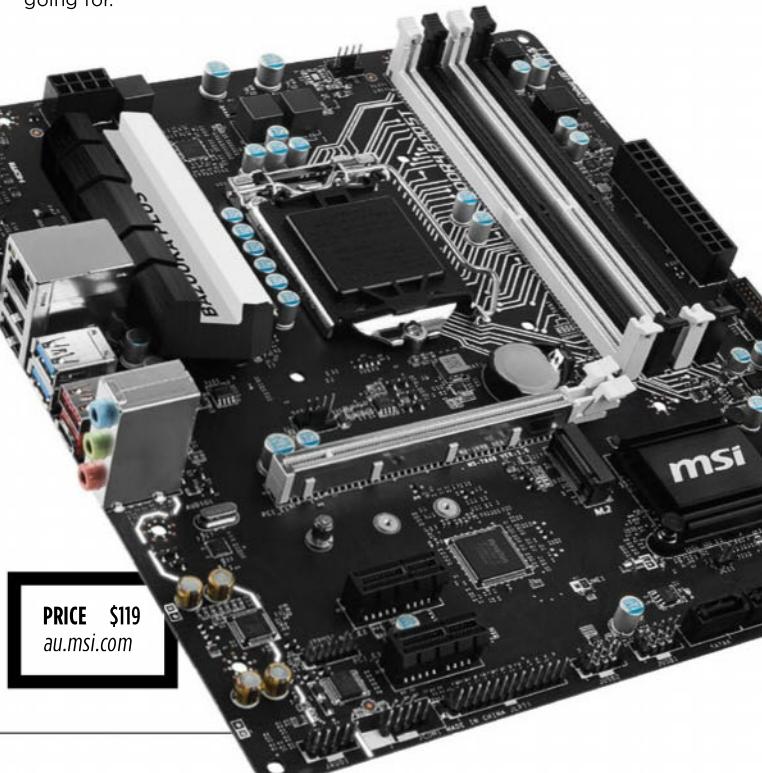
PRICE \$475
intel.com

CPU: INTEL 6TH GENERATION CORE i7-6700K

We're going with the best-darned gaming CPU on the market for our RTS box. It's only four cores, but we can't think of any competitive RTS games that need the extra cores offered by Intel's Haswell-E CPUs. It also includes Hyper Threading, and has a maximum Turbo speed of 4.2GHz. The K means it's overclockable, but we'd suggest keeping it at stock speed, as you really don't want your PC to crash mid-match.

MOTHERBOARD: MSI B150M BAZOOKA PLUS MOTHERBOARD

This Micro-ATX form factor board is nice and cheap, but comes with all of the requisite features required for an RTS box. Socket 1151 support means it'll run the i7-6700K CPU, while an M.2 slot means you can use a snazzy new M.2 drive to ensure you're first into the game and there'll be no stuttering as data loads from the hard drive. A single PCIe x16 slot is enough for the single GPU we're going for.



PRICE \$119
au.msi.com



PRICE \$110
kingston.com

MEMORY: 2 X KINGSTON VALUERAM KVR24N17S8/8 8GB

Even though the motherboard only supports 2133MHz memory, this 2400MHz kit will work fine with it. We've gone for the cheap stuff, as DDR4 memory speeds don't have much of an impact on performance.



PRICE \$599
asus.com.au

GPU OPTION 2: ASUS GEFORCE GTX 1070 DUAL 8GB VIDEO CARD

While most RTS games aren't effects heavy, on the other end of the spectrum are games like Total War: Warhammer, which demand immense GPU power to play well. Given that you'll likely be playing at 2560 x 1440 or less, we think the GeForce GTX 1070 is a good compromise between price and performance.

POWER SUPPLY: THERMALTAKE TR2 S 550W 80 PLUS POWER SUPPLY

Thanks to the low power demands of the GPU and CPU, we're going with something very cheap and simple.



PRICE \$65
thermaltake.com.au

GPU OPTION 1: MSI GEFORCE GTX 1060 GAMING X 3G

As mentioned earlier, most RTS games in the esports world don't focus a lot on spiffy shader effects or detailed units, as there tend to be a lot of them on screen at once. This is why we've gone for the GeForce GTX 1060 chipset as our first option, focused on RTS games that don't need a lot of grunt, and this MSI variant is one of the better priced ones around.



PRICE \$369
au.msi.com

HARD DRIVE: SAMSUNG 950 PRO 256GB M.2 SSD

This is one of the fastest M.2 drives on the market, thanks to its inclusion of NVMe technology. Not only does this mean you'll load into your games faster than everybody else, you'll also never have to worry about hitching or stuttering as data is loaded from the hard drive to the memory. Given this box is dedicated to your chosen RTS, we've gone for a smaller capacity to keep the price down.



PRICE \$219
samsung.com



PRICE \$138
razerzone.com

MOUSE: RAZER NAGA EPIC CHROMA

Designed for MMOs, the extra 12 buttons on the side will make selecting your grouped units that little bit quicker, as you won't have to reach for the Function keys. It's also hugely customizable thanks to the excellent software support.

KEYBOARD: CORSAIR K70 RAPID FIRE

The low travel of Cherry's MX Speed keys makes response times up to 40% faster, and that's absolutely crucial in any esports environment. Sadly it doesn't have macro keys, but that's why we went for the mouse above.



PRICE \$150
corsair.com

CASE: FRACTAL DESIGN CORE 1100 MICRO ATX CASE

At just 175mm wide by 358mm high by 410 mm deep, this tiny box will be easy to lug around to your local LAN-fest, especially as it only weighs a mere 3.8kg. It's got a decent cooling solution with the inclusion of one fan, and the option for two more. Easy access to I/O ports on the front means plugging in your headphones, mic, keyboard and mouse will be quick and easy.



PRICE \$70
fractal-design.com

AUDIO: ONBOARD + COOLERMASTER MASTERPULSE PRO

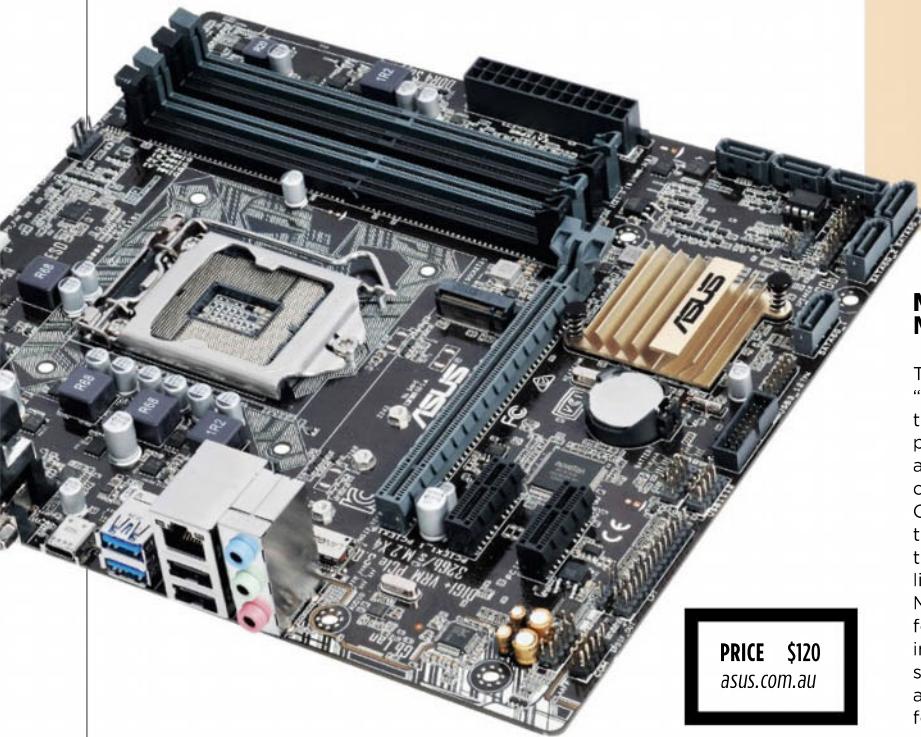
As audio quality isn't too important in RTS, we've gone for the cheaper option. The onboard audio provided by the motherboard is fine, while this affordable headset is extremely comfortable for all-day tournaments. And the price is right too.



PRICE \$105
coolermaster.com

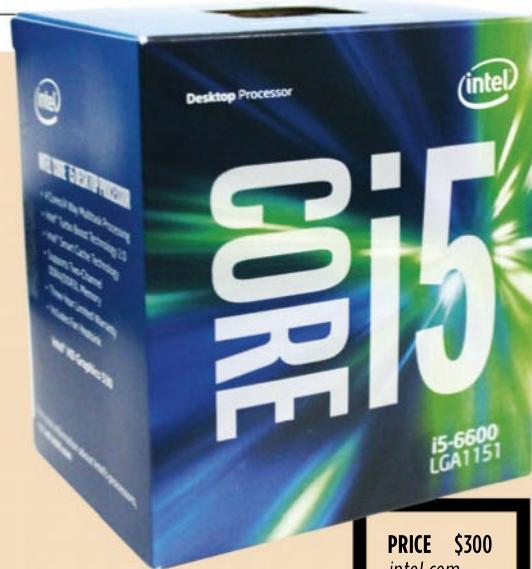
MOBA build

MOBAs tend to be the least technically demanding of the major esports genres. They seldom have very many units on screen at once, and they've been designed specifically to be playable by a wide audience, hence their low system requirements. As a result, a rig built just for MOBAs is probably the most affordable of the lot, as you won't need a high-end CPU or GPU. Of course, you could always go for a super-fast rig to get frame rates of 100Hz and above, but we don't think this is essential in MOBAs, as they (generally) don't require super-quick response times from players.



MEMORY: 2 X GEIL 8GB SINGLE DDR4 2133MHZ PRISTINE SERIES

As the motherboard only supports DDR4 2133MHz, we've matched it with a low-priced kit of the same speed. Note that we always go with two sticks of 8GB instead of a single 16GB stick, as this takes advantage of the extra performance of dual channel memory offered by Intel's chipsets. It's also compatible with Intel's XMP 2.0, adding slightly better performance.



CPU: INTEL 6TH GENERATION CORE i5-6600

We've gone for a nice mid-range CPU for our MOBA build, and the i5-6600 has one of the best price/performance ratios on the market. It's still got the four cores utilized by most modern games, but lacks Hyper Threading - debate still rages on whether this feature actually increases or decreases performance, and tends to be dependent on the particular game being played. We can't think of any MOBAs where Hyper Threading will provide an advantage. The Turbo speed of 3.9GHz is more than enough for MOBAs, while the low TDP of just 65W means the included Intel heatsink should be adequate, and won't make the interior of your case an oven. It's not overclockable, but we don't recommend overclocking your CPU in any esports build anyway, where reliability is one of the key factors - crashing mid-match is a great way to make the rest of your team rather upset.

MOTHERBOARD: ASUS B150M-A M.2 MOTHERBOARD

This Micro-ATX motherboard comes with Asus' proprietary "5X Protection II", which is a range of hardware safeguards to ensure the utmost in stability. This includes surge protection on the Ethernet port, overcurrent protection and DIGI+ VRM for stable power supply to your CPU. It's obviously a Socket 1151 board, required to fit the i5-6600 CPU we've chosen for this build. Despite its small size, there are four memory sockets, though we'll only be filling two of them, and like all boards in this price range, RAM is limited to speeds of 2133MHz. Most importantly, it's got an M.2 port for a speedy hard drive, and also includes support for two USB 3.0 ports on the front panel. At this price, the inclusion of a USB 3.0 Type-C connection is a pleasant surprise, though it's not Thunderbolt 3 compatible (as far as we can tell from the specs, which don't mention any form of Thunderbolt support).



PRICE \$65
antec.com

POWER SUPPLY: ANTEC BASIQ VP-500P 500W POWER SUPPLY

Once again we're going for a low-end power supply, and this 500W provides enough juice to power the components within. It's rated up to 85% efficiency, and Antek's specialty in making PSUs means it will deliver a stable supply of power without spikes.



PRICE \$75
corsair.com

CASE: CORSAIR CARBIDE SPEC-M2 MICRO ATX GAMING CASE

We're huge fans of Corsair cases here at Hyper, as they offer excellent build quality, clever designs, and solid value for money. Weighing a mere 4.8kg, it measures 448mm by 198mm by 378mm, making it ultra-portable. It'll easily fit the graphics card we've chosen, while the ability to fit up to four fans means you can keep everything nice and cool. It'll even fit a radiator if you choose to take the water cooling route. There's room for a full-sized ATX power supply as well, while the front I/O ports allow you to easily connect all of your peripherals, including a USB 3.0 port. And at just \$75, it's fantastic value for money.

KEYBOARD: ASUS STRIX TACTIC PRO

With a whopping 21 Macro keys, this beast comes well equipped to handle all of your extra abilities with ease. It's a little on the large size though, so make sure your designated gaming desk has plenty of room. There are four different Cherry MX options, so pick the one that feels best to you.



PRICE \$115
asus.com.au



PRICE \$289
sapphiretech.com

GPU: SAPPHIRE AMD RX 470 4GB OC VIDEO CARD

AMD's new Radeon RX series deliver great value for money, and the 470 sits right in the middle of the range. With an average frame rate of around 85FPS in DOTA 2, it's more than fast enough for to take you to the top, and AMD's "Flip Queue Size" is very similar to Nvidia's pre-rendered frame option. This automatically lowers the latency in MOBA titles by up to 40%, though this genre doesn't tend to need super-fast response times. With many games adding DX12 support, AMD's strength in this area means that DOTA 2's recent support for the Vulkan renderer should also give it the edge at this price compared to Nvidia's competing products. 4GB of memory is plenty for this genre, while the multiple outputs means you can easily run dual or triple monitors.



PRICE \$219
samsung.com.au

HARD DRIVE: SAMSUNG 950 PRO 256GB M.2 SSD

We didn't want to duplicate products between these machines, to show there are a variety of options on the market, but when it comes to 256GB SSDs, Samsung's 950 Pro M.2 is simply untouchable. It's got the best performance on the market for this price, with similar performing M.2 drives costing at least \$80 to \$100 more, such as Plextor's M6e M.2 2280, which is \$340. It utilizes both NVMe and the full bandwidth of PCIe 3.0 x4 to deliver blistering load times, and is also renowned for being extremely reliable.



PRICE \$99
razerzone.com

MOUSE: RAZER NAGA HEX V2

Designed specifically for MOBAs, the unique 7-button mechanical thumb wheel makes activating your various macros a simple thumb-flick away. It also comes with several pre-configured MOBA profiles, such as LOL and DOTA 2, so you don't need to spend hours programming macros.



AUDIO: ONBOARD + PLANTRONICS RIG 600

MOBA's don't require the very best in audio, so we're going to stick with the solid onboard audio offered by the motherboard, and pair them with the Rig 500 headphones. They're nice and cheap, yet deliver excellent sound quality for the price, and are very comfortable over lengthy gaming sessions.

PRICE \$129
plantronics.com

FPS rig

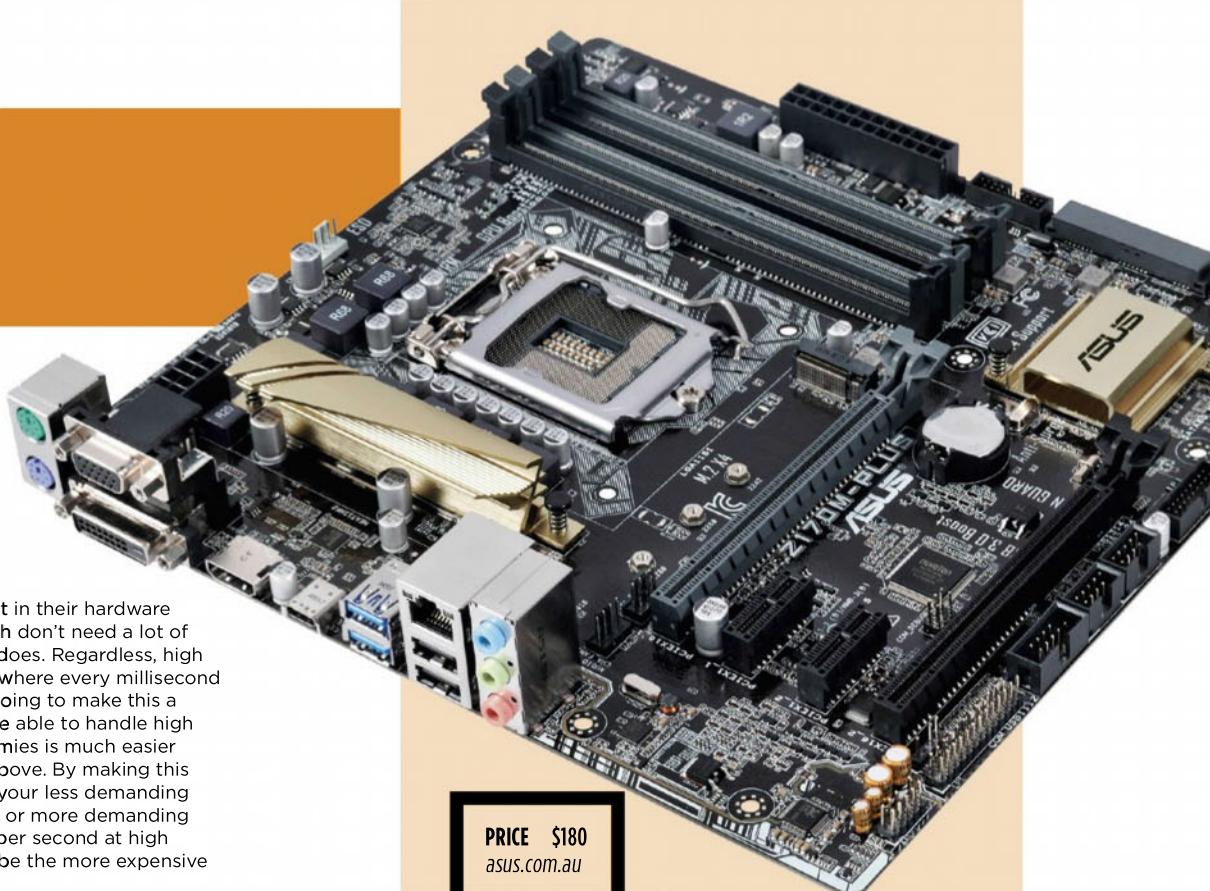
FPS machines tend to vary the most in their hardware requirements. Games like Overwatch don't need a lot of grunt, whereas the new Battlefield does. Regardless, high frame rates are a must in shooters, where every millisecond counts during a firefight, so we're going to make this a beast of a machine. It should also be able to handle high resolutions, as spotting distant enemies is much easier when playing at 2560 x 1440 and above. By making this a beast of a machine, you can play your less demanding games at 100+ frames per seconds, or more demanding games at a minimum of 60 frames per second at high resolutions. Obviously it's going to be the more expensive machine though.

CPU: INTEL 6TH GENERATION CORE I7-6700K + COOLER MASTER MASTERLIQUID MAKER 92

The most powerful gaming processor on the market is a must for our FPS machine, and nothing touches the 4.2GHz delivered by this silicon rocket. It'll absolutely shred any FPS you can throw at it, with its four Hyper Threaded cores ready and willing. Despite the high speed, it's not an absolute power demon, with a TDP of just 91W. Note that this CPU does not come with a cooler though, so you're going to have to purchase that in addition. Due to the Micro-ATX form factor, that means you're going to need something with a low profile, like the Cooler Master Masterliquid Maker 92.



PRICE \$475 + \$165
intel.com



PRICE \$180
asus.com.au

MOTHERBOARD: ASUS Z170M PLUS MOTHERBOARD

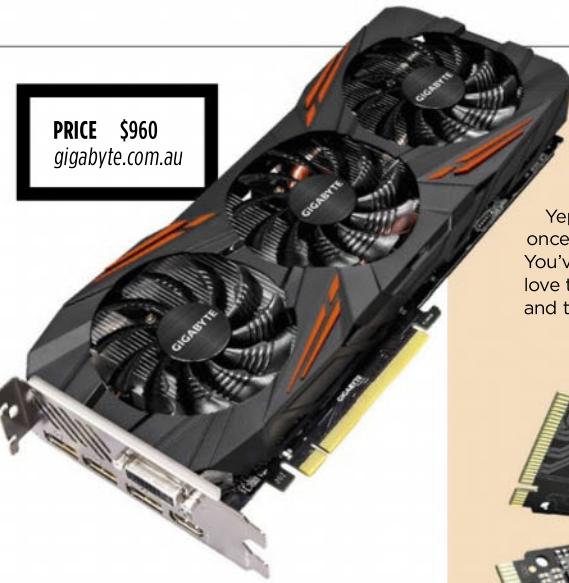
It might be a little more expensive than the other boards, but it uses the Z170 chipset, which offers more features and a little extra performance. There's the ever important M.2 slot for our hard drive, while the range of I/O connections is over the top, and includes USB 3.0 Type C for all your fancy new peripherals. Once again we see the "Asus' 5X Protection II" set of features, which should ensure the utmost in stability during tense tour. It's even got excellent gaming audio, but as sound is so important in shooters, we're going to go with an external headphone amp instead.



PRICE \$149
hyperxgaming.com

MEMORY: KINGSTON 16GB KIT DDR4 2600MHZ HYPERX FURY

We're going for slightly faster memory in our gaming rig, as the motherboard can handle it and the price leap isn't extortionate. Kingston is one of the world's biggest memory makers, so there's no dramas with compatibility, and the tight memory timings will deliver a small performance increase.



GPU: GIGABYTE GEFORCE GTX 1080 G1 GAMING 8GB

We told you we were going to deliver a beast of a machine, and when it comes to GPUs, nothing currently beats Nvidia's GeForce GTX 1080. Gigabyte's version comes with a cherry-picked GPU that has allowed for an excellent factory overclock, while the triple fan cooler is our pick of the bunch on today's 1080s. It's super cool yet nice and quiet, thanks to the stacked design where the middle cooler sits beneath the outer two. An 8+2 phase power design means it's ultra-reliable, but again we don't recommend pushing the card past the limits that Gigabyte have imposed on it. Overclocking in an esports machine is a no-no, ok?



CASE: CORSAIR CARBIDE SPEC-03 MID TOWER GAMING CASE

It's a little bigger than the other cases, being of the mid-tower specification and measuring 493mm x 215mm x 426mm, but that's because we want to ensure the best possible thermal performance when running such a fast CPU and GPU. A lovely side window will show off your expensive hardware, and it can handle a huge range of different cooling configurations, with up to six fans. You'll need easy access to plug in your keyboard, mouse, microphone and headphones, and there's inputs for all of these on the front of the case. The sturdy steel construction means it'll handle life on the road without getting bruised, yet it's still very affordable. It's also got plenty of room for the graphics card, able to handle cards up to 420mm in length.

PRICE \$960
gigabyte.com.au

HARD DRIVE: SAMSUNG 950 PRO 256GB M.2 SSD

Yep, we've gone with the same drive once again, as its dominance is unrivalled. You've already seen the reasons why we love this SSD in the last two machines, and they apply here as well.



PRICE \$219
samsung.com

POWER SUPPLY: CORSAIR VS650 ATX POWER SUPPLY

As our power requirements are a little heavier than the other machines, we've upped the ante to a 650W power supply. It's a full-sized ATX model, but will still fit in the case we've chosen. Corsair PSUs are known for their reliability and stable power supply, so you can rest assured that there won't be any damaging spikes mid-match.



PRICE \$90
corsair.com



AUDIO: SOUND BLASTER E5 + AUDIO TECHNICA ATH-M50X

Directional audio is absolutely crucial in shooters, which is why we've spent almost \$500 on our sound solution. The E5 is one of the best headphone amps at this price range, and a recent firmware update added excellent virtual 7.1 surround sound. Pair this with the brilliant studio-quality ATH-M50X headphones, and you'll never have an enemy sneak up behind you again.



PRICE \$278 + \$199
soundblaster.com
audio-technica.com.au/



PRICE \$85
corsair.com

MOUSE: CORSAIR M65 PRO RGB FPS GAMING MOUSE

We didn't intend for this machine to have so many Corsair components, but when it comes to FPS games, the Corsair M65 Pro RGB FPS Gaming Mouse is hard to beat. It's got a fantastic optical sensor, while the large glide pads make it slide across your mouse pad with ease. Of special note is the sniping button on the side – hold this in and your DPI drops to a pre-set amount, making it easier to pull off long-range headshots.

KEYBOARD: CORSAIR K70 RAPID FIRE

Speed is everything in an FPS machine, and Corsair's exclusive rights to the Cherry MX Speed Switch makes it the obvious choice for our first-person monster. It's also one of the few to include a wrist-rest these days, which we find a must for all-day gaming. The pretty lights don't hurt either, and you can program each one to a different colour, allowing you to easily identify which one throws grenades, which does melee attacks and more.

PRICE \$150
corsair.com



Optimising your esports build

When it comes to ensuring your esports rig is running at optimal performance, it follows many of the same rules as a home-based gaming rig, with a couple of rather large exceptions. The following tips will ensure that not only are you getting the best out of your hardware, but – crucially – that it won't break down in the middle of a \$50,000 prize match.

1. NO OVERCLOCKING!

We love to overclock here at Hyper, but even the most stable, well-tested overclocked PC isn't as reliable as a machine running at stock speeds. It may only be a 1% difference in reliability, but due to Murphy's Law, you know that 1% will occur in the middle of a very important match. If a component is factory overclocked, that's a different story though; it *should* be fine to run at the speeds set by the manufacturer. It's not always a given though, as we've seen graphics cards in the past that weren't 100% stable when running in their designated OC mode. As such, you might like to set it back to the default speeds designated by AMD or NVIDIA, just in case.

2. STABILITY TESTING

Again, you really don't want your rig breaking down during a tournament, so ensuring it's 100% rock-solid stable is absolutely crucial. And that means putting it through some serious torture testing. We suggest running a wide range of different stress tests, and they're all free. Some of our favourites include 3DMark's new stress test feature, AIDA64, Prime95, SiSoft Sandra's stress test, MSI's Kombustor GPU stress test, OCCT, GeekBench, and PCMark 8. There's a myriad more, but we recommend going for something like SiSoft or PCMark 8 to test all of your components at once.

3. REMOVE ANY "CHEAT" APPLICATIONS

Several GPU, audio and motherboard manufacturers now include software with their hardware that are deemed as cheats in competitive gaming. The most common of these provide an on-screen "radar" that shows where sound effects are coming from, which means you can see immediately where

a gun has been fired from. There are also various sound alterations such as Creative's scout mode that many see as unfair, as they highlight footsteps and other sound effects to make it easier to hear where your enemies are. As a rule, uninstall any software that includes features that are designed to give you an unfair competitive advantage.

4. KEEP IT CLEAN

There's no better way to slow down your PC than to install all of the various applications that come with each component. Otherwise known as bloatware, they promise to deliver various functions that might sound handy, but if you have several of them running, they're chewing up valuable CPU cycles. Even worse, they'll often pop-up mid-match, so you're left looking at your Windows desktop instead of where your opponent is flanking you from. We suggest ignoring the disks that come with your hardware, and instead install the barest of driver installs – motherboard chipset, USB and SATA controller drivers, GPU drivers and the like. You can grab these directly from the makers of the chipsets, such as Intel, AMD or NVIDIA.

5. KEEP IT NEW

As well as downloading your drivers directly from the manufacturers of the chipsets behind your various components, we suggest regularly updating them. This is especially important with graphics drivers, which generally offer performance improvements over time. Having said that, always do a quick Google first to check that the latest drivers don't cause any issues with your esports game of choice, as it's not uncommon for new drivers to actually break certain games. We'd also suggest staying the hell away from beta drivers, as they're called beta for a reason.



6. GET WIRED

No, we're not suggesting you take performance enhancing drugs before your match. We're referring to wired devices, such as mice, keyboards and headphones. While the latency in most of today's wireless mice and keyboards is now almost on par with wired connections, they're generally still not quite as fast. More importantly, they usually use the 2.4GHz spectrum to communicate, and when you're in a hall with hundreds of smart phones and a powerful Wi-Fi network, it's not uncommon for these devices to suffer from interference. This also extends to connecting your PC to the Internet - if possible, use Ethernet rather than Wi-Fi, as it's far more reliable.

7. MOVE SOMEWHERE THAT HAS CABLE OR FIBRE BROADBAND

We realise this is a big ask, but if you're really serious about your online tournaments, nothing beats cable or fibre when it comes to latency and stability. ADSL2+ is fast, but doesn't come close to the pings offered by cable or fibre, and also can suffer from reliability issues when there's bad weather if you're in a neighbourhood with old telephone lines. So the next time you're planning to move, check out whether your new abode has access to these ultra-fast connection options. Thankfully the roll-out of the NBN means this shouldn't be an issue for much longer. At the current rate, we predict it should be fully deployed by 2040 or thereabouts.

8. BLOW THAT CRAP OUT

If your keyboard is full of crumbs and dust, it can interfere with the registering of key presses, so clean it out every now and then. It's usually as easy as grabbing a can of compressed air and giving it a good blow, although you may have to remove each and every key if the grime has really gotten out of hand. Also check that your mouse sensor is nice and clean, as well as your mouse contact pads. If they're getting a little ratty, it's possible to buy special replacement mouse pads that stick to the bottom of your mouse, usually made from Teflon or something similar, making it slide with ease. Also check out your mousing surface - you'd be surprised what residue on your mouse pad can do to your accuracy.



Executive Spotlight

Behind the scenes with Daniel Ringland, head of Oceanic esports for Riot Games

HYPER: Tell us a little about your job and what it involves on a day-to-day basis. What's involved in organising esports for Riot Games in Oceania?

DANIEL RINGLAND: I'm the team lead. I spend my time working alongside the people who work on esports and focus on alignment, vision/strategy building, and tactical execution. Esports involves five main areas: The operation of the Oceanic Pro League (OPL) and its two feeder leagues, the broadcast, business development, publishing and operations.

HYPER: How long have you been involved in esports? How has the scene grown and changed in that time?

DANIEL RINGLAND: I've been working with Riot on esports since 2014. In that time we've gone from non-paid players, disconnected leagues, and a very basic broadcast through to a 26 week league, paid players, teams with sponsors and a professional broadcast.

HYPER: What are some of the unique challenges associated with growing esports in Oceania, particularly in Australia? How does Australia compare to other countries in the region?

DANIEL RINGLAND: Our main challenge is the fact that Australia is an English speaking region. Australians and New Zealanders can watch EU or NA leagues, which are operated by bigger teams.

HYPER: From your perspective, as someone involved in the business and management end of esports, what does it take to be a high-level esports competitor? What tips would you give to any budding esports pros out there?

DANIEL RINGLAND: I'll focus on the business performance side as that's my strength. However on the player side I'll list focus, teamwork and dedication as key success components. On the business side, teams need to function as traditional sporting clubs do. They need to create value for fans and sponsors. They need fans. They need revenue. With those two things, they can build what they need to be successful on the Rift.

HYPER: What do you say to people who claim that esports aren't "real" sports and don't deserve the same coverage and attention as something like football?

DANIEL RINGLAND: Whenever I'm asked if esports is a sport or not I answer that I don't care whether it's viewed as a sport or not, and neither do the 36 million people who watched the 2015 Worlds final.

HYPER: There's been some controversy recently over "doping" in esports: what can be done on an organisational level to discourage the use of performance enhancing drugs in esports?

DANIEL RINGLAND: I think we need more study into this area to identify how much of a threat to competitive integrity it is.

HYPER: Is there a place for gambling in esports?

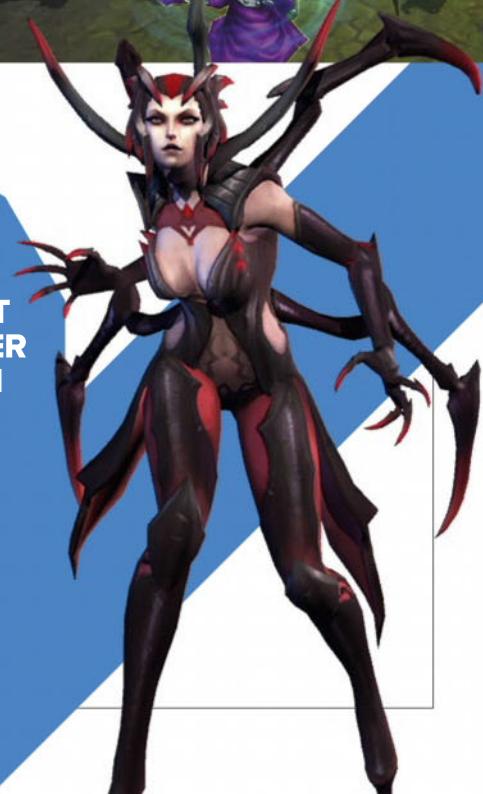
DANIEL RINGLAND: I do not believe gambling has a place in esports. For an adult, the choice to gamble is theirs to make. However, many esports fans are under the age of 18 and it's not morally correct to expose them to gambling at such a susceptible age.

HYPER: Finally, if someone wanted to get into esports team and league management, what kind of skills/experience would they need?

DANIEL RINGLAND: When hiring in general I look for someone that's a culture fit for Riot: they're player focused, driven, passionate and they challenge convention. They care about the quality of their work, they're always looking to grow and improve and they're intelligent plus a team player. For league management specifically I look for organisation, attention to detail, critical thinking, and strategic thinking along with certain other skills. ■



"I DON'T CARE WHETHER IT'S VIEWED AS A SPORT OR NOT, AND NEITHER DO THE 36 MILLION PEOPLE WHO WATCHED THE 2015 WORLDS FINAL."



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ON SALE JANUARY 19

PRO GAMERS

Esports insight

Talking shop with seasoned esports veterans

It wasn't too long ago that the idea of playing videogames for a living was considered an absurdity. "Pro gamer?" scoffers would scoff. "What's next? Pro television watcher?" Part of the reason many people were – and, let's be honest, still are – sceptical of pro gaming and esports is that they fail to appreciate how much talent and effort it takes to play games at an international level. Videogames are considered entertainment, and entertainment is not

supposed to be difficult.

Over the next thirteen pages, you'll come to understand just how false this assumption really is. You will find out what it's like to be a pro gamer from pro gamers themselves. What does it take to make it to the top? How much training do you need? What happens to your social life, and how do you convince your family that you're not throwing your life away? For the answers to all these questions and more, read on...



Guan "FOXTS" Shaoqing

Pro World of Tanks player and senior member of EL Gaming

HYPER: Tell us a little about the origins of EL Gaming. What's it like being part of China's premier World of Tanks team?

FOXTS: EL Gaming has been around for three years now and is made up of players from all over China. We are a professional team, so we live and train together with other members of the team, including managers and the coach. Living and training this way helps us build a strong rapport, making us better communicators in game.

HYPER: Could you tell us a little bit about your training regimen?

FOXTS: Our days are divided into three parts: morning, afternoon, and evening. We have the mornings off, and in the afternoon we train individually, working on solo skills. In the evening we come together and practice as a team, which involves looking at our overall strategy and making sure that everyone is on the same page.

HYPER: Does all that training impinge on your social life at all?

FOXTS: A little, but not a lot more than any other full-time job. Each week we've got one day off, so we use that to socialise and to look out for family members and do normal stuff. Plus living and working with the team is its own kind of social life. We enjoy

each other's company and even spend time together outside training.

HYPER: How do your friends and family feel about your being a pro gamer? Have you encountered any scepticism?

FOXTS: When I first started, my parents and friends didn't understand at all. It's hard for some people to believe that you can make a living playing computer games. But when they saw what I had achieved as a pro-gamer and understood that it's possible to earn money this way, their attitudes quickly changed. Pro gaming is still a new thing – as more people begin to earn money in esports, I think that more accepting attitudes will become more common.

HYPER: You've had a few big victories in your career so far. What was your greatest?

FOXTS: In the 2015 Wargaming League finals, we came back from a very shaky start to defeat Kazna Kru 5-3. We used new, aggressive tactics that were untested at the time, so it was great to see our approach vindicated.

HYPER: And what about your greatest defeat?

FOXTS: In that same tournament, we ended up losing to another Russian team,



HellRaisers, in the grand final. After our unexpected win in the semis against Kazna Kru, it was very disappointing to not take the championship trophy.

HYPER: What advice would you give to someone who wants to be a pro gamer like you?

FOXTS: There are two conditions for being a pro gamer: aptitude and persistence. Obviously you have to be good at your chosen game, which is why you need to practice and learn all the time, not only by playing the game but also by watching footage and keeping up with the meta.



Samuel "SD" Darroch

Pro Smash Bros. Melee player and multiple Battle Arena Melbourne champion

HYPER: What attracted you to competitive Smash in the first place? Have you played any other games competitively?

SD: Smash was a game my brothers and friends would always come back to and I'd always had that 'best on the block' syndrome. There was something so fluid and addictive about the gameplay that gave it endless replayability. When we discovered how deep the mechanics truly could be it opened up a whole new world of possibilities to explore and perfect. We'd always been curious as to whether anyone better was out there or if there was a proving ground. That eventually led to discovery of the nearest tournament scene and I was instantly hooked. Playing in a room full of people with the same passion and competitive drive for a game I loved was a dream come true.

I've not played anything competitively to the same degree. A couple of ELO FPS and Hero-shooters and a few good times in Mario Kart but I've never entered a tournament in anything aside from Smash.

HYPER: Tell us about your training regimen. What does your day-to-day routine look like when a tournament's just around the corner?

SD: My practice routine is highly dependent on the upcoming events calendar. In down times with little more than regional monthlies my practice tends to be close to zero. However when there's a big tournament or season on the horizon I try to put in 30 mins - 2 hours per day (around full-time work). I have a structured practice routine to hone movement skills which occupies 15-20 minutes then I will have a focus for that session, usually perfecting a new or difficult technique or perfecting a micro-situation response or specific punish set-up. I tend also to go over recent footage of my gameplay in matchups I'm likely to face to determine areas for improvement. I will also cross-reference situational tactics by watching footage of top international pros in similar scenarios.

HYPER: Does being a competitive Smash player impinge on your social/family life at all? Have you had to give anything up to pursue this path?

SD: I've been fortunate to have a partner who understands the role competitive gaming has in my life and she is fully supportive of whatever lengths I take to pursue it. Apart from the occasional weekend away from home I've had to sacrifice very little to get to the point I'm

at. To take a step further and attempt to become truly competitive on the world stage would require some significant sacrifice (probably moving to another country or travelling internationally much more regularly) which would put some strain on relationships.

HYPER: How long can a competitive Smash player expect to be at the top of their game? Do you think you'll still be playing Smash competitively in 5-10 years time?

SD: Everyone has peaks and troughs in performance, so I think it's important to have a high skill floor to compensate. If you can be mechanically/technically sound it can paper over human elements like fatigue, emotional state etc. Understanding your own motivations as to why you play and managing your expectations and ego are other factors that allow longevity in my view, as they circumvent issues of burnout. I believe a player can always push the barriers of their skill ceiling irrespective of factors such as age so long as they are constantly searching for weaknesses and willing to work at overcoming them.

The game itself is currently at an all time high in terms of participation, professionalism, sponsorship and prominence, so I can see it lasting another 5 years at least. For as long as there is an active community, I envision being a part of it.

HYPER: What was your greatest ever victory in competitive Smash?

SD: My greatest victory was probably my maiden major tournament win, which came at Battle Arena Melbourne in 2012. I'd long been established as a top 5 player but had never managed to put it all together on the big stage. In BAM 2k12 I came back from the loser's bracket and rode momentum all the way through to victory over an old rival, which was a moment of great satisfaction for me after four years of effort and a strong belief in my capability to take out an event of that status. That victory justified my self-belief and gave me a lot of affirmation moving forward.

HYPER: And your greatest defeat?

SD: I've had some fairly crushing defeats over the years, including what I saw as a weak performance in my two international excursions to Evo where I failed to get out of first round pools. My losses when I've phoned in my preparation are probably



MELEE IS SIMPLY
A MASTERPIECE,
CLOSER TO A FORM
OF ART THAN A
FIGHTING GAME AND
THAT'S WHAT KEEPS
PEOPLE COMING
BACK



the ones that hurt the most, as opposed to being in peak form and coming up short. In the latter instance I'm happy as long as I feel I left everything on the table and was fully immersed in challenging competition. I think the most emotionally distressed I've felt after a tournament was a loss in grand finals at Miles Warehouse 2, a community led grassroots tournament where I was 4 stocked in the final game of the series. I let my mentality crumble after a series of unfortunate events leading to a loss in the penultimate match and unravelled, which was a great source of disappointment.

HYPER: Smash (as a series) has maintained an active and vocal competitive community for years now. To what do you attribute its remarkable longevity?

SD: The game and the community behind it are the keys to its longevity. The movement and gameplay options offer a sense of freedom and room for individual flair and creativity that I've never experienced in another title. A passionate grassroots community, which has only galvanised after years of being looked down upon by the general FGC, has blossomed into a force

which has fostered continued growth. I think at the heart of it, Melee is simply a masterpiece, closer to a form of art than a fighting game and that's what keeps people coming back.

HYPER: What tips do you have for aspiring Smash pros out there?

SD: Practice makes perfect. Learn the game inside out. Learn percentages, matchups, combos, defence, offence, and perfect your tech skill. There's no shortcut to success in Melee and it takes a long time before you reach a level where you can truly start to 'play the game'. Once you have complete control as second nature, that's when the true beauty of the game is revealed. Focus on your weaknesses instead of your strengths – practice the things you can't do, not those you can. Watch your losses more closely than your victories, for they're the greatest teachers. Most of all, have fun, and don't be burdened by ego and expectation. Play to express yourself, for Melee is a great canvas and vehicle for self-expression. It allows you to play your own way and succeed, and when you do it's extremely rewarding.



Xavier "Somniac" Nardella

Competitive Street Fighter player and two-time Battle Arena Melbourne (BAM) champion

HYPER: What attracted you to Street Fighter in the first place? Have you played any other games competitively?

SOMNIAC: I've always had a love for competitive gaming. Before my time in fighting games I played Warcraft 3 and Starcraft: Brood War, and my forte was Quake 3, placing first in many Melbourne tournaments and constantly within top five at interstate tournaments, including WCG for Quake 3 nationally.

Like everyone, I had played many fighting games when I was younger but did not know of a massive competitive scene until Street Fighter IV. I had spent quite some time playing Street Fighter III with friends in the arcade, but the game was never really big and competitions were not frequent.

In 2009 when Street Fighter IV was released, I strove to win the local tournaments held at the arcade, and focused all my energy towards proving I was the best player with my character. There I met many members of the fighting game community and we grew to be friends, meeting up regularly to play.

I have now been playing fighting games competitively for over 7 years, and have competed around the world in many fighting games including all versions of Street Fighter IV, Street Fighter V, King of Fighters 13 & 14, Street Fighter x Tekken, and Ultimate Marvel vs Capcom 3.

HYPER: Tell us about your training regimen. What does your day-to-day routine look like when a tournament's just around the corner?

SOMNIAC: When a tournament is coming up I'll spend a lot of time working on characters I find difficult to fight and if there is a known player attending I'll focus more on their habits. This means several hours of match footage reviewing and training mode, with the goal of trying to develop strategies that I can use in the match.

It can be difficult to find time with full time work, but I often schedule a few hours a night to work on each game I am competing in.

HYPER: Does being a competitive Street Fighter player impinge on your social/family life at all?

SOMNIAC: I wouldn't say that being known for playing Street Fighter has any stigma behind it or caused any difficult situations to arise through family or work. There's difficulty in managing time for the most part. I'll often find issues with traveling to

events, as it's usually an entire weekend and my partner often has other events planned that I need to skip out on.

Occasionally work is a concern as well, I need to plan ahead of time to make sure I'm not expecting to be working on a tournament day.

HYPER: How has the competitive fighting game scene in Australia changed while you've been involved with it? How do you see it evolving over the next five years?

SOMNIAC: There have been definite changes with the scene over the years. Fighting games originally had a start in arcades, with a very grass roots approach to tournaments. Over time we have seen a greater movement towards making fighting games esports, with some initial growing pains towards how to approach community development towards that goal.

People were concerned at the beginning that we would lose some of our identify and grass roots feel by involving ourselves in esports, but over time and with a fair bit of trial and error, I believe the fighting game community has really embraced esports lately, with the last few Evolution world championships and the seasons of Capcom Cup. I believe that now we've reached a perfect middle ground where we have our same grass-roots community feel and identify with the professionalism that is expected when dealing with major sponsorships and investors.

HYPER: How long can a pro gamer expect to be at the top of their game? Do you think you'll still be playing Street Fighter in five or ten years' time?

SOMNIAC: Age does not seem to be a factor when it comes to Street Fighter with a several competitive players being over 30. I actually think that age can be an advantage in fighting games, as with age you're accumulating a vast amount of knowledge and experience, just having good reactions isn't enough to be good at fighting games because you can be tricked into making the wrong decision.

Not to say you need to be old to play though, there are definitely amazing





young players in the scene these days like Liquid NuckleDu & John Takeuchi who have combined their reactions with training from their peers to become significant international threats. As long as you are willing to learn, you can play fighting games competitively.

HYPER: What was your greatest ever victory as a Street Fighter pro?

SOMNIAC: My greatest victory would have to be my first Battle Arena Melbourne win (BAM 4), it was the first time I'd ever won a major event and it was in my hometown, which made it even more special. Everyone remembers their first big win as their breakout moment so that is why it will always hold a special place in my memory and on my trophy wall.

Every time I attend Battle Arena Melbourne, I want to make sure a Melbourne player takes it out so that we can defend our turf – that alone makes any win carry extra weight for me. I was able to do this again in

2015 with BAM7, defeating both

international competitors

Perfect Legend (USA) &

Waza (New Zealand)

in the losers finals

and grand finals

respectively to win

the tournament.

HYPER: What about your greatest defeat?

SOMNIAC: There are definitely losses that sting more than others and they aren't always grand scale losses. I've had many times where I could have beaten some of the world's best in tournaments but fell short by the smallest margins.

One of my most notable was against Evil Geniuses|Kbrad at Evolution 2013, which came down to the last few seconds and really could have gone either way. It was a nail biter that I wish I could have taken as it's every fighting game player's dream to take an Evolution championship, and a win here would have taken me a step closer to that goal.

I treat each defeat as a learning experience though, adding more strategies to my game play so that I won't lose the same way again.

HYPER: What tips do you have for aspiring Street Fighter pros out there?

SOMNIAC: Reach out to your local community, getting to know the players of your local scene and scheduling regular training sessions with them will help you level up much faster as you can bounce ideas off your peers.

It's also important to try to find answers to problems, always take note of how you lost and make sure you can work on a strategy to fight it. Fighting games have a nearly limitless ceiling for improvement because as you get better, so do your opponents, and they will always present a new challenge every time you sit down to play with them.

There's really nothing like the Australian fighting game community and you get to meet both amazing players and people by attending events. Speaking of events, remember to regularly check OzHadou.net (for Sydney and Australia-wide events) and CouchWarriors.org (for Melbourne-specific stuff). You won't regret it!

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FIGHTING GAMES HAVE A NEARLY LIMITLESS CEILING FOR IMPROVEMENT BECAUSE AS YOU GET BETTER, SO DO YOUR OPPONENTS



Daniel "Rowe" Rowe

Pro SMITE player and captain of Pandemonium

HYPER: What attracted you to competitive SMITE in the first place? Have you played any other games competitively?

ROWE: I was drawn to SMITE after seeing it featured on Twitch back in early 2012, mostly because of the fact that I was well aware of the hype around MOBA's at the time and that SMITE had the most similarities to World of Warcraft, which I had been playing for many years already.

HYPER: How did Team Pandemonium come about? When did you guys start organising and playing together?

ROWE: Team Pandemonium was formed after we chose to depart from the Avant Garde organisation following our run at the SMITE World Championships last season, beginning with 4/5ths of our previous roster. Since then we've made quite a few changes, and have ended up with our strongest roster yet. Some of us have been playing together for two years now, and at the very least we've all known each other for well over a year.

HYPER: Tell us about your training regimen. What does your day-to-day routine look like when a tournament's just around the corner?

ROWE: Our team's training regimen as of now is to practice five nights a week, for at least four hours against other top teams in the region. Outside of that we also review our recorded practice sessions as a team, study our opponents, and play the game casually in our own time.

HYPER: Does being a pro SMITE player impinge on your social/family life at all?

ROWE: Towards big events we often sacrifice our Friday and Saturday nights to get in some more practice, so that can obviously affect our social lives – but working and playing as a team is often a social event in itself. I think I can speak on behalf of my team and say that we're all lucky to have understanding and supporting family too.

HYPER: How long can a pro gamer expect to be at the top of their game? Do you think you'll still be playing SMITE competitively in 5-10 years time?

ROWE: I really don't know how long a pro gamer can be on-top of their game, but it's always been said that the retirement age for esports athletes is very young. In 5-10 years time I'd love to be heavily involved with esports in some regards, but I think by then

I'd prefer not to be competing but to instead be working somewhere else in the industry.

HYPER: What was your greatest or most memorable SMITE victory?

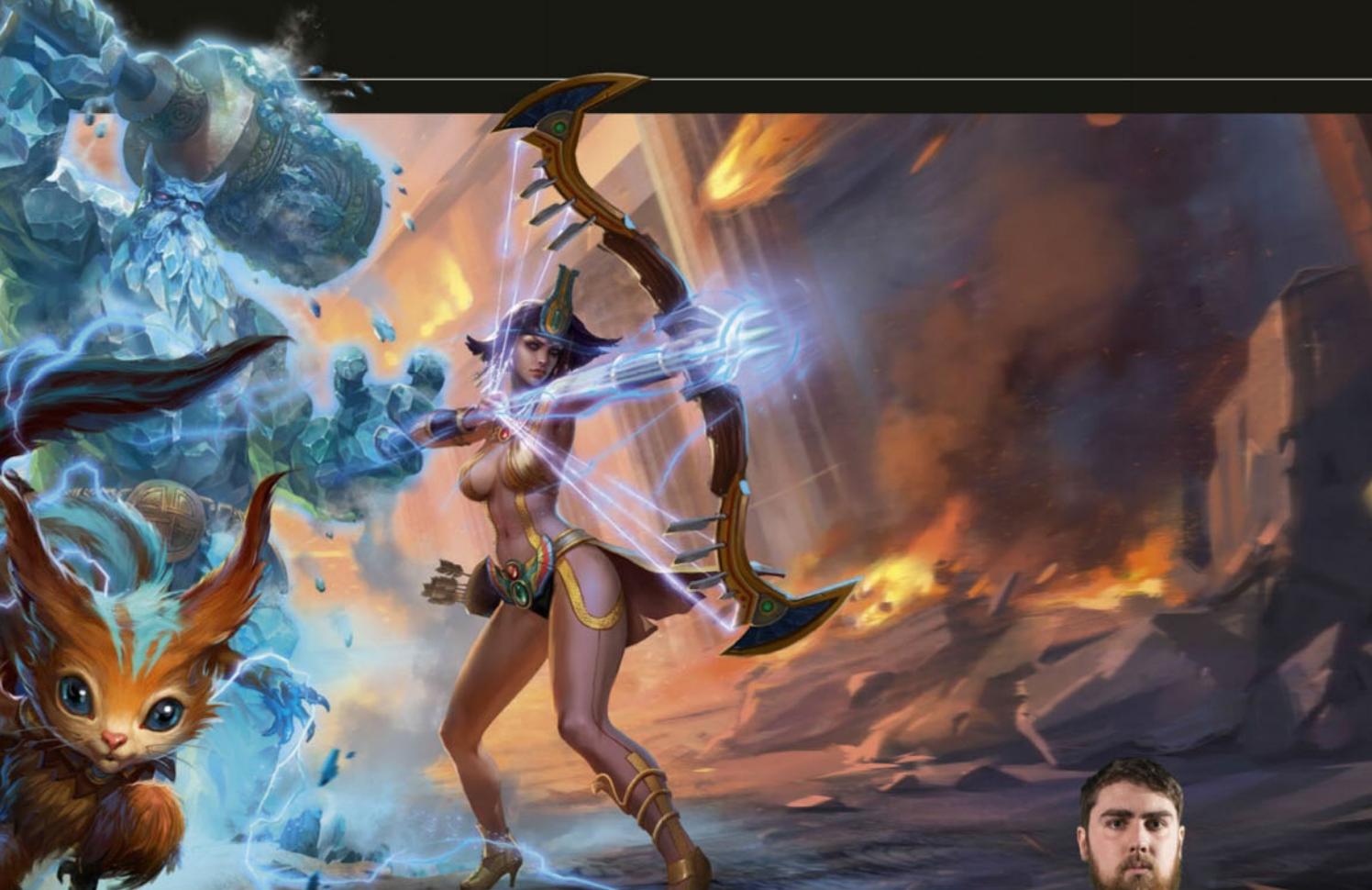
ROWE: Until I achieve my goals of breaking into the semi-finals at an international event, I'd say my greatest victory was at PAX Aus 2015 where we won our \$65,000 Regional Championship – the largest Australian prize pool esports event at the time.

HYPER: And your greatest defeat?

ROWE: After our regional championship, we were invited to represent Oceania at the SMITE World Championship, where after a very rough trip we ended up in 9th/10th place. It was devastating for each of us, so many friends and fans from back home had such high hopes for us...

HYPER: Any tips for aspiring SMITE players out there?

ROWE: Attitude is absolutely everything! A bad attitude can not only stop you from improving, but can also quickly discourage other players and organisers from wanting to work with you in the future.



Nick "LiquidRenegade" Howlett

Pro SMITE player and captain of Avant Garde



HYPER: What attracted you to SMITE in the first place? Have you played any other games competitively?

LIQUIDRENEGADE: At the end of 2012, Some of my friends from school started playing in the closed beta and got me a key to play. I was instantly hooked. I had played other MOBAs previously but the 3rd person perspective and the WASD controls felt comfortable due to me playing a lot of RPGs as well. I had no competitive gaming experience before SMITE but I had always played traditional sports like cricket, rugby union, and AFL.

HYPER: Tell us about your training regimen. What does your day-to-day routine look like when a tournament's just around the corner?

LIQUIDRENEGADE: Our team's training regimen normally consists of scrims (*i.e. practice games - Ed*) four nights a week for three hours at a time. We also play OPL (league) games when they're scheduled, as well as individual practice on the gods we need to learn as practicing mechanics

is something that we can do by ourselves. Lastly we watch past games to analyse what we did well and what we did poorly to improve our play as individuals and as a team unit.

HYPER: Does being a pro SMITE player impinge on your social/family life at all?

LIQUIDRENEGADE: Yes, quite a lot! Having to be around for interviews and playing the games for Saturday and Sunday broadcasts takes a lot of time commitment from our weekends and our social commitments are compromised due to it.

HYPER: Do you make enough money for pro gaming to be your full-time job or is it more of a paid hobby?

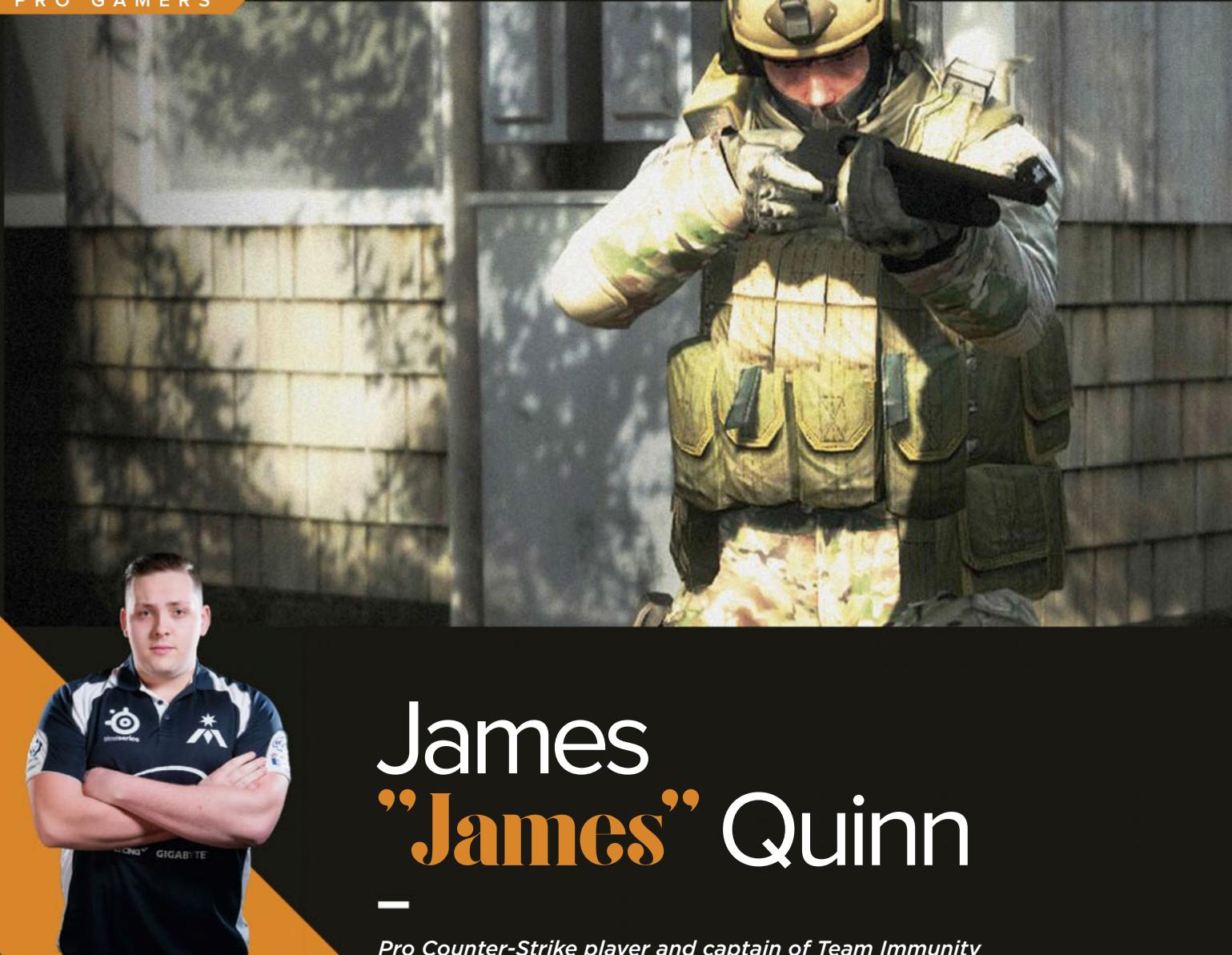
LIQUIDRENEGADE: No, no one in OCE SMITE makes enough money to make it our full-time job. Not that I'm complaining! I really enjoy playing and the fact I earn any money is really nice, but it is nowhere near enough to live off of.

HYPER: How long can a pro gamer expect to be at the top of their game? Do you think you'll still be playing SMITE competitively in 5-10 years time?

LIQUIDRENEGADE: I think pro gamers can have careers of around ten years, but that would be only for the elite players. The average pro can probably be competitive for 1-4 years before new talent surpasses them. They lose the desire to play or injury prevents them from playing anymore. Personally, I have no idea how long I will be playing SMITE for or if I will attempt to play another game competitively once I'm done with SMITE.

HYPER: What tips do you have for aspiring SMITE pros out there?

LIQUIDRENEGADE: Master the basics before trying to learn all the tricks. Being able to land every auto attack is invaluable, knowing the best places to ward and when is sooooo important, but most people don't know where or when to which causes them a lot of issues.



James "James" Quinn

Pro Counter-Strike player and captain of Team Immunity

HYPER: What attracted you to Counter-Strike in the first place? Have you played any other games competitively?

JAMES: I think what attracted me to Counter-Strike was the competitive and teamwork aspect of the game. It's very different to other games because it relies heavily on individual skill as well as teamwork and chemistry. I never really had any other interest in playing other games competitively, Counter-Strike is the game I'm passionate about and that's how I want it to stay.

HYPER: Tell us about your training regimen. What does your day-to-day routine look like when a tournament's just around the corner?

JAMES: As the weeks count down to a tournament, my training regimen gradually becomes more intense. It starts with the team reviewing our opponents, which normally takes a couple of hours. Following that we do our own team practice which we normally do Sunday to Thursday 4-5 hours a night, and to finish it off my individual practice which takes me about an hour or an hour and a half per day.

HYPER: Does being a pro gamer impinge on your social/family life at all? Have you had to give anything up to pursue this path?

JAMES: Of course it's intruded onto my social/family life, it does every night. I have to sit in my room most nights to practice, and I'm at university during the day. The only real time I get to sit and talk with my family is on the weekends, and pretty much the same as my friends. At times I've missed important events - birthdays and more - when I'm attending an event and I'm not happy about it, but it's my passion and hopefully my career so I've had to make it a priority.

HYPER: How do your friends/family feel about your being a pro gamer? Have you encountered any resistance or scepticism?

JAMES: Some family and friends are very sceptical about it and don't fully understand. At first neither did my parents; in fact and they found it hard to support my passion. It wasn't until I got the opportunity with Team Immunity to start travelling the world, competing at the highest level and found the happiness it brought me that my parents started to understand and take an interest in it. Even after a few years of being a professional player I still find it funny when I'm explaining to someone what I do and they cannot believe how big esports is, nor how much money is in the industry.

HYPER: What was your greatest ever victory as a pro Counter-Strike player?

JAMES: I've had a few great wins as a Counter-Strike player, but my greatest ever victory as a professional player was at an Australian event back in 2015 held by Crown Casino. We came up against our domestic rivals and beat them 2-0, then onto one of North America's best teams, Cloud9. We were clear underdogs in this match-up, just scraping in at around 20th in the world at this stage - up against a top five team in the world.

We started strong in the series going up one map, but despite our best efforts, we couldn't manage to win the second. We came back with an absolutely dominant performance in the third, though, and it truly was the greatest feeling I've ever had in CS:GO. Overall we finished 2nd that tournament but I strive to recapture that feeling again every day.

HYPER: And your greatest defeat?

JAMES: My greatest defeat was actually at the event before my greatest victory. We were at an event called DreamHack in Stockholm, Sweden. We were in the elimination phase of the tournament and a win would have gotten us to the next major in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. We fell short by four extremely close, tense rounds and it was truly heartbreaking for us. So close yet so far.



Tyler “tucks” Reilly

Pro Counter-Strike player and captain of The Chiefs esports club

HYPER: What attracted you to Counter-Strike in the first place? Have you played any other games competitively?

TUCKS: When I was 9-10 years old I saw my cousin playing Counter Strike: Source and instantly wanted to buy and play! It was a tough effort to get my dad to purchase the game for me but once he did I never looked back. Just how simple but tough it can be makes me keep playing every day.

I played League of Legends a fair bit between 2012-2014 where I reached Diamond 2 in 2014. I really wanted to compete at the highest level in League, but eventually came back to CS where I enjoy competing a lot more and just in general enjoy the game a lot more.

HYPER: Tell us about your training regimen. What does your day-to-day routine look like when a tournament's just around the corner?

TUCKS: We generally start team practice every night around 7:30pm because everyone has jobs and school etc. For me I'll start to watch some demos/VoDs of international teams playing to get better ideas on how I can structure our team and how we should play the game.

After I finish doing some research I'll do some individual practice like deathmatch to help improve my aim, for about 30-60 minutes. Our team practice will start at

7:30pm and finish around 10:30-11pm. We would love to practice longer but because of jobs and school and all that stuff, it just isn't possible at the moment.

HYPER: Does being a pro gamer impinge on your social/family life at all? Have you had to give anything up to pursue this path?

TUCKS: Yes, absolutely. For me personally I've given up a lot of my social life to achieve being one of the best players in Australia. Lucky for me I have a bunch of extremely good friends who also play videogames that I can hang out with in TeamSpeak whenever I need to.

HYPER: How long can a pro gamer expect to be at the top of their game? Do you think you'll still be playing Counter-Strike competitively in 5-10 years time?

TUCKS: I think it's still unproven as to how long you can actually be competing at the highest level in a certain game. In Counter-Strike especially we have teams like Virtus Pro who have players who have been competing in CS for 15+ years with a few of their players 30+ years old, and they're still a top team in the world. I would love to think I will still be competing in Counter-Strike in 5-10 years time. I absolutely LOVE competing, nothing I'd rather be doing.



HYPER: What was your greatest ever victory as a pro gamer?

TUCKS: I haven't won a whole lot that there is a big defining win. I guess last year at the CyberGamer PAX Finals against Team Immunity where we were pretty clear underdogs and played a very long and gruelling 3rd map and 3 OTs to take home the top prize! That was also my first significant win as a player and first LAN victory under The Chiefs esports Club, so I'm particularly proud of it.

HYPER: And your greatest defeat?

TUCKS: Greatest defeat would have to be very recently against Athletico at the ESL AUNZ Season 2 Championships at PAX Australia. The first Best of 5 Grand Final in Australian Counter Strike: Global Offensive history and we lost it 3-1. Very heartbreaking.

HYPER: What tips do you have for aspiring Counter-Strike pros out there?

TUCKS: Always be looking to improve your game. Never be satisfied with how you are performing currently. Watch as many VoDs/demos of pros as you can. Aim prac as much as possible. But most importantly always try to improve on the mistakes you make, always look at how you died and what you can do to avoid the same fate in the future.

Daniel "Berzerk" Chlebowczyk

Ex fighting game pro and two-time Australian champion in Dead or Alive 4

HYPER: What attracted you to fighting games in the first place? What prompted you to start playing competitively?

BERZERK: I grew up in the era of Street Fighter II in the arcades. I still have a vivid memory of playing it for the first time (as Blanka) at the local bowling alley when I was in high school. Hooked, I would always look for opportunities to play my friends in the home versions, and being a Sega Saturn owner, I had access to the best fighters of the time and became a big fan of the Virtua Fighter series, then on Dreamcast and Xbox, Dead or Alive 2 and 3. It was the first online fighter, which broadened the interest in competition. When DOA4 launched with Xbox 360, I kind of kicked into high gear to improve my skills. When World Cyber Games came around in 2007, I ended up winning and that led to selection opportunity for another league: Championship Gaming Series.

HYPER: Tell us a little about your involvement with CouchWarriors.org.

BERZERK: I learned about local CouchWarriors events around the same time I was playing in the leagues in 2007 and started attending with friends from the DOA scene, playing a range of fighters. In 2008 I began running Virtua Fighter tournaments for CouchWarriors, and in 2009, like the whole scene, I dived into Street Fighter IV. As the scene was blowing up, I also got more involved in helping organise events, including the major, Battle Arena Melbourne, from the first event. We're heading into BAM9 next year. I saw a need in the community for a person to help with media and sponsorship, so I took on a PR Manager role, helping BAM expand with better prize support and awareness.

In 2013 I took over the role of president from cofounder Brendon "Loki" Watson, who continued to work on projects as an amazing tournament organiser. With him we made the group an official not-for-profit organisation to better serve the community, and in my tenure as president BAM has grown to be the

largest [fighting game] event in the country. We've participated in multiple convention events, for example running fighting game tournaments for PAX Australia each year.

I stepped down as President in 2016 to encourage further growth in the leadership group. It's a great events team.

HYPER: Tell us about your training regimen as a pro player. What would your day-to-day routine look like when a tournament's just around the corner?

BERZERK: Regular practice is an ongoing part of life once you're playing in tournaments, and the hours amp up leading to a big event. You exchange your other leisure time to focus on the game and work on setups, nailing your combos. I was playing pro before YouTube and Twitch were really big, so to research opponents I would have to just play them as much as possible, and then practice their characters myself.

The good thing about being well practiced in a game over a long period of time is you have inbuilt skills and habits, and don't have to play through six hours a day, you can be mindful of time and stay focused on particular parts of your game. I've always worked full time along with gaming, so it's a necessity.

HYPER: Does being a pro gamer impinge on your social/family life at all?

BERZERK: It can do, and you have to take a balanced approach, and most of all communicate. It's like having a personal project or some important homework to do. Like any other responsibility in your life, you negotiate for the time. When I became a pro player it became easier to make that case because there was a clear outcome and my girlfriend and family were all on board. It was fun to turn "when are you going to finish playing that game?" to "Shouldn't you be practicing?" So the support was good.

HYPER: Your work in esports is more organisational these days. What prompted the transition from player to organiser? Was it an easy transition to make?

BERZERK: Love of the scene and partly necessity. It's always been a volunteer driven grassroots community, so I think that top players have a responsibility to pass on their experience to other players and give newcomers opportunities to learn and grow. The transition is natural, as a small community compels you to get involved.

HYPER: What was your greatest ever victory as a pro gamer?

BERZERK: Probably the overall performance to requalify for CGS at an event called





Gameathon at ACMI in 2008, my second year in the league. The most stress I've had anticipating a tournament, I actually lost a little sleep on that one, practicing up on characters for players I knew would be a threat. Yet when it came to game day, everything clicked and I ran through undefeated, so my spot on the team was beyond doubt. It felt like the fulfilment of a lot of improvement at the time.

HYPER: And your greatest defeat?

BERZERK: That same year, facing the German team and their top DOA player "The Tactical", a Ryu Hayabusa player, a matchup I'd had some good practice against and had been winning over some other Hayabusa players in the league in casuals. But when it came to the match, I was just playing too much not to lose, and not imposing my own gameplan, and he had complete free reign, a total wipeout.

HYPER: Do esports teams sometimes employ psychologists to help deal with the stress of training and competing?

BERZERK: That's something that will become more common in the future, I think. Right now, I would say top teams and clubs, particularly those with League of Legends teams, would be employing psyches because the money is there. Team games typically have managers and coaches, and they pseudo take on those roles. In fighting games you have friends or coaches to talk to between rounds, or you can talk to the guy who just beat you and get good feedback or another practice match.

HYPER: You've been involved in the Australian esports/pro gaming scene for a while now. How has it changed in that time? How do you see it developing in the next 5-10 years?

DC: I was fortunate to be part of a well funded league with amazing presentation, high definition broadcast, and built in media team covering results and player stories. For all its faults, it was well ahead of its time in that regard. It was before the age of ubiquitous live streaming, which has been the biggest change, driving much greater awareness of tournaments, exposure for players, and the ability to research and learn from other players on video around the world very quickly.

We're now seeing sustainable investment return to the scene and bigger major events should mean the pathway from local communities to international events is much more integrated. I'd like to say online play will improve a lot, but Australians will still face the tyranny of distance for the medium term without a world class NBN. So we will have to continue to grow our local community, which will become more professional in itself.

HYPER: What tips do you have for aspiring esports pros?

BERZERK: Keep a good balance with all other aspects of your life, but go for it. Seek out and be part of your community. Contribute. Share knowledge. The more you do that, the more you'll get back - we have a small population, so players and teams need to work together to build the overall skills in each scene, so our best teams really are good.

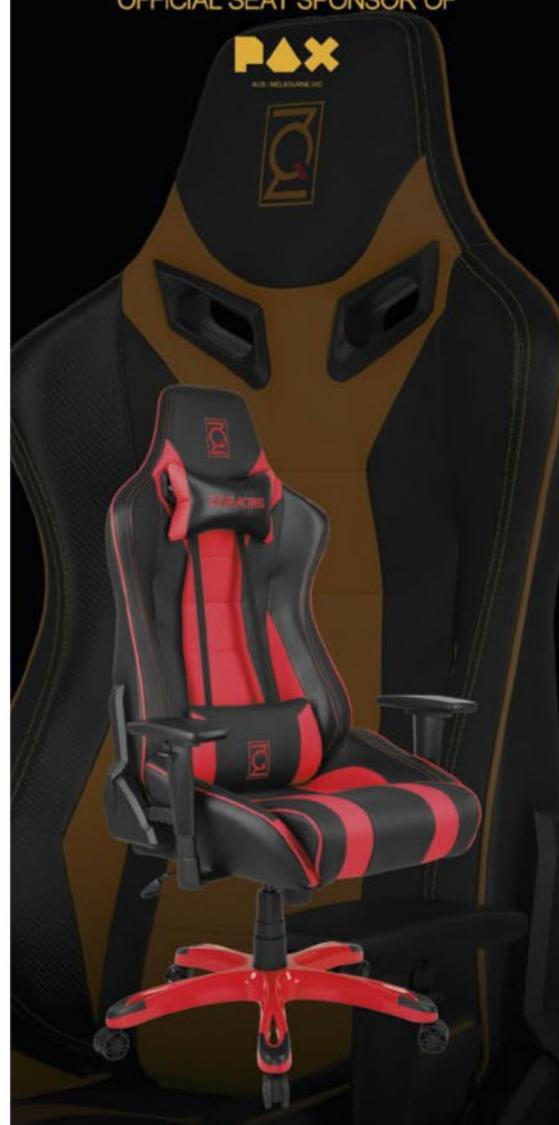
The opportunities and support are so much greater and broader now; but players also need to be creative, put themselves out there with social and streaming, and develop a range of skills beyond just playing.



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Alexander "HughZ" Hughes

Esports caster and winner of Hi-Rez's "So You Think You Can Cast" talent search

HYPER: So let's begin with the basics: what does a caster do?

HUGHZ: A caster is one of the most important people in bringing an esports scene and pro play to life. A caster is in charge of communicating and translating what is happening on screen to the viewers at home or in the crowd. Think of them as the commentary team you would hear in a football match - you have your play by play to give you, as the name suggests, the play by play and the action of the game, the colour commentator who gives more detailed analysis of the game, and occasionally you have a 3rd commentator, usually an ex-pro or coach who can give in depth insight into a team's various play-styles and behaviours.

HYPER: How did you get into casting? Was it something you pursued deliberately or did you fall into it?

HUGHZ: I was participating in a weekly tournament back in February of 2015, my first tournament actually. It was random seeded so my team somehow got a first round bye. We were taking the tournament very seriously and so we decided to spectate the games before us to study the opposition. When we got into the game and started looking around, I remembered having just recently watched the North America and European regional finals for SMITE as well as the SMITE World Championship and so I decided to start talking over the game we were watching, mainly humorously. My friends all enjoyed it so much that they suggested I should give it a try once we were done with the tournament.

We had our asses handed to us in our very first game and were knocked out, but I - in my anticipation for a heroic run through the tourney to claim top prize - had cleared out my whole schedule for the day to play the game. Not having anything else to do, I grabbed one of my teammates and we casted a ranked game replay and put it on YouTube as well as the community Facebook page. Here a few of the existing SMITE casters took notice and liked my stuff and gave me some tips for my next video. From there I made more and more videos until I was asked to join the team for the official broadcasts of competitive SMITE in OCE and I've been casting ever since.

HYPER: What kind of living can one make casting? Are there many opportunities for amateurs to turn pro?

HUGHZ: Within Oceania the opportunities have traditionally been very limited but the field is starting to open up. The crew from Riot Games that do League of Legends, as well as several ESL casters, are now casting full time which is awesome to see. The opportunities are still very limited but the future looks bright!

HYPER: How much preparation goes into casting? What does your pre-match routine look like?

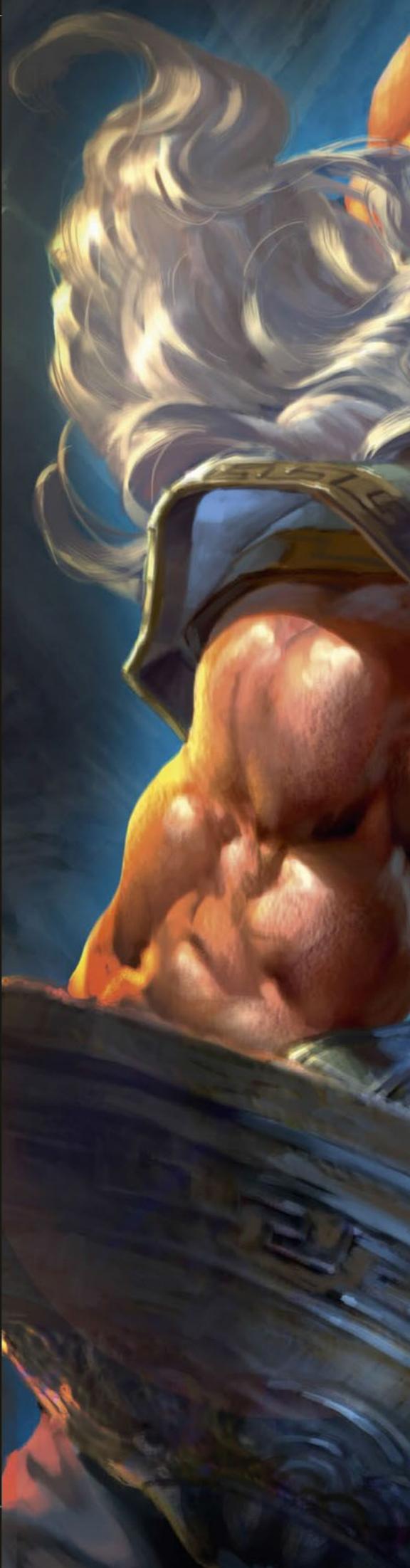
HUGHZ: Preparation depends on the caster, the casting team, the information you have available and how much time you have. With casting for myself being more a hobby than a full time career at the moment I cannot spend as much time preparing as I would like. However, there is still a fair bit that goes on beforehand. Obviously one of the key things is to know the players you are going to be casting, any of their backstories, and any rivalries they might have. I also personally compile a large number of statistics about the players that I like to use during the broadcast although this is not always possible given preparation time.

Pre-match routine is getting my camera and backdrop set up with the help of our broadcaster Steven "Cyanide" Sams, loading up the match and adjusting my spectator UI to how I like it, looking over the matchup and any key statistics I might like to use during the match. After that, it's making sure I've gone to the bathroom and got myself a tall glass of water for the broadcast!

HYPER: What kind of skills does a caster need to succeed? What can casters do to distinguish themselves and gain a following?

HUGHZ: One of the most important skills a caster needs, particularly play by play, is the ability to think on your feet. You need to be able to see and understand what is happening in front of you and immediately communicate that to the audience in a manner that they can understand. As well as this, due to the fast paced action of team fighting and engagements, you have to be willing to take risks and call things you anticipate will happen and even though sometimes you make that call incorrectly, it doesn't matter as you can turn that into a compliment about a player's skill in getting out of that situation when even you thought they were dead.

This leads into my next point: you have to have a short memory and move on from your mistakes. This split I had a total brain





fart moment and couldn't speak for a solid 10 seconds and fumbled horribly with words – a clip of that moment has now been turned into a meme within the SMITE community. I had to move on immediately from that and continue the rest of the cast.

HYPER: Is casting more or less the same across games and genres, or do different audiences require different approaches?

HUGHZ: I think the basics of casting are the same across all games, genres, and even between sports and esports. It is all about communicating to the audience what is going on and making it interesting, creating a story and narrative for them to follow. There are big differences in the style of casting between a MOBA and an FPS for example, the different game styles require different kinds of knowledge and different ways of communicating the match narrative to the audience.

HYPER: What tips do you have for new casters? Are there any resources (online or off) you recommend?

HUGHZ: My number one tip for new casters or anyone looking to get into casting is very simple: cast something. I cannot count the number of Facebook messages or Twitter DMs I've gotten saying "I want to get into casting, how can I do it" or "I want to be involved in casting competitive SMITE, how do I do it?" and I always reply "Grab a mate, cast a game, upload it to YouTube and then ask for opinions and criticism".

My first game I casted and uploaded to YouTube I did for fun, because I wanted to cast, not because I wanted to cast pro league. You need to cast and create something before you can do anything else. There are so many benefits to that, from simply learning what it takes to cast a game, to discovering your style, to feedback from other casters and the community, to also creating a name and brand for yourself. You will be amazed at how far that gets you. I casted for the first time ever in February 2015 – later that same year I was invited to cast at the SMITE World Championship in Atlanta Georgia on Hi Rez's dollar. The very first step in that was making a YouTube video for fun with a friend.

And that I think is something people need to make up their minds about – do they want to cast because they enjoy it and have fun doing it, or do they want to cast for the rewards? There's a right and wrong answer to that question, and those that choose correctly have no limit on where that passion can take them. //



NEXT ISSUE



ENTER THE DIGIWORLD !

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YOUR DIGI'ADVENTURE STARTS
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PG

Mild fantasy violence



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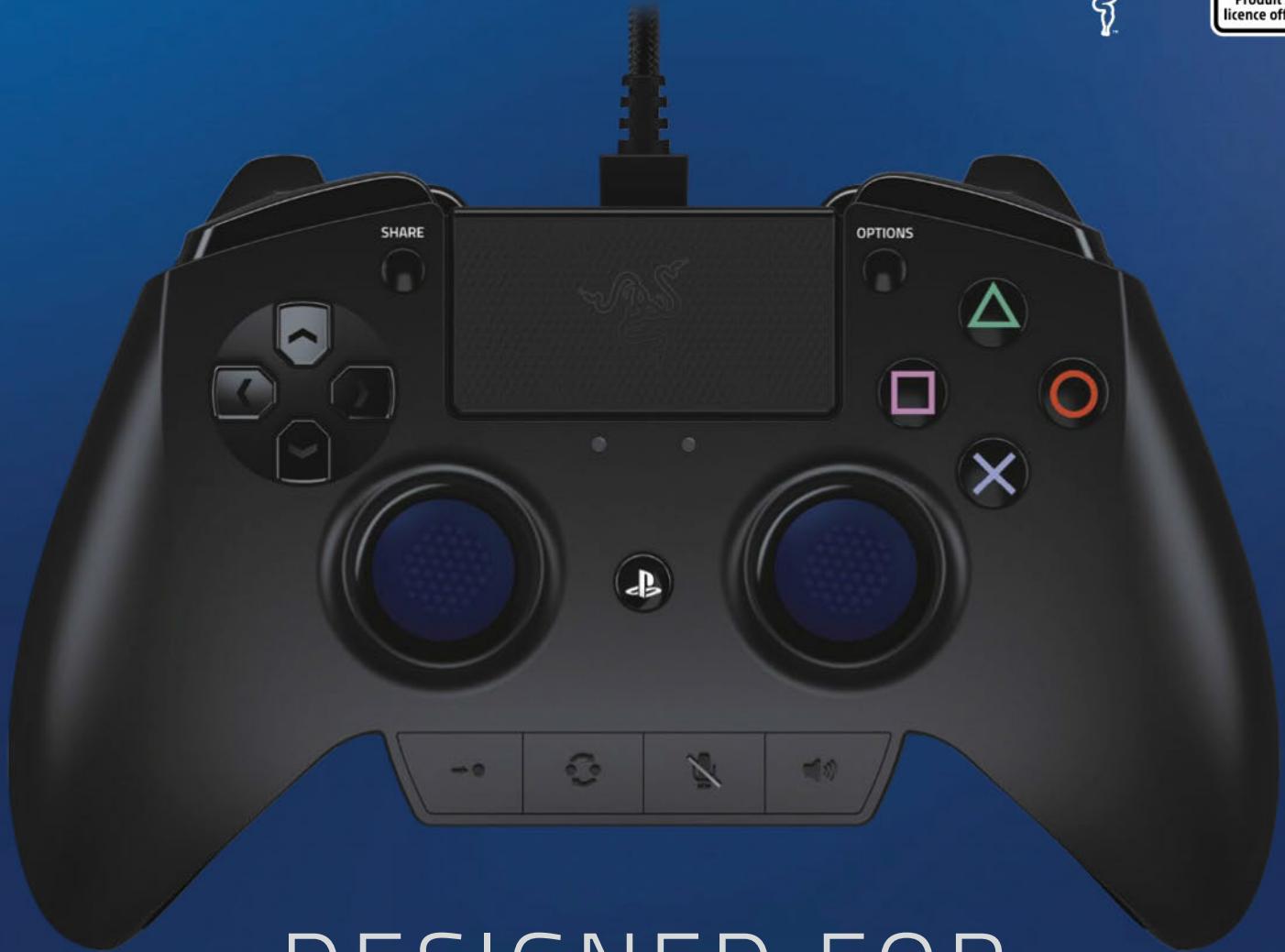


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ERGONOMIC SHAPE AND WEIGHT FAVORED BY TOP ESPORTS ATHLETES

To ensure undisputable gaming comfort, extensive research was done, and multiple iterations have been rigorously tested by prominent esports athletes. As a result, the chassis of the Razer Raiju not only perfectly accommodates the touchpad, but stays comfortable for use even in the most intense of battles.



QUICK CONTROL PANEL FOR EASY PROFILE AND AUDIO CUSTOMIZATION

From toggling between profiles to adjusting both game volume and mic mute, the Quick Control Panel gives you easy access to a whole range of functions. Conveniently located between the grips, you can simply switch your preferences in-game without taking your hands off the controller.

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