

The problem of treating play like work – how esports can harm well-being

May 26 2017, by Tom Brock



Esports has become big business. Credit: BagoGames/flickr, CC BY

We are mid-way through the annual esports calendar and South Korean team SK Telecom 1 recently scored a resounding victory at the Mid-Seasonal Invitational. The MSI, as it's known, is a tournament where

teams compete to win the video game League of Legends. This year, for the first time, there were world-class players from 13 regions across the globe battling for a US\$1.69m prize pool. SK Telecom 1 skirmished through three weeks of matches to retain their title, taking home [nearly US\\$700,000 \(£544,000\) in prize money](#).

As the esports market of professional gaming grows towards an [estimated US\\$1.5 billion in 2020](#), it is expected that world-class players will see further increases in their earnings. There are already prize pools of [up to US\\$20m dollars available](#) and some already earn millions of dollars through lucrative sponsorship and signing bonuses, as well as [prize money](#).

It is easy to be seduced by these large numbers. But beyond the glitz and the glamour of the esports arena, there are some serious questions that must be asked about how its economy works, and the impact that this has on player well-being. For example, [research shows](#) that the professional context of competitive gaming needs to be understood as a precarious form of work. And players are the most precarious labourers in the ecosystem of esports, which includes sponsors, managers, publishers and many others.

This is partly to do with the age of players. As in physical sports, youth is an important requirement of professional gaming. Gamers struggle to maintain their dexterous abilities past the age of 30 [and many retire before that point](#). This leaves professional gamers in a state of career anxiety similar to that of physical sports.

Most professional gamers rely on tournament income and live a subsistence life, dependent on how well they perform. It's an income stream that is uncertain and fragmented due to the varying scope and size of competitions. Few esports groups pay salaries, [though some have started to](#).

Esports is also precarious because of [the way the industry is structured](#). There is a pyramid where a very select group of successful elites such as SK Telecom 1 earn a disproportionate amount of money when compared to the tens of thousands of players who have seriously committed themselves to the pursuit of professional gaming as a career. The result is that professional gaming is characterised as a risky career path that is difficult to pursue. It relies on thousands of hours of unpaid labour and the expectation that new starters will fund their own training, travel and subsistence costs.

Harsh training regimes

In the case of the [game](#) League of Legends, teams have raised the issue of financial hardship with the developer and tournament organisers Riot Games. Late last year, a [joint letter](#) was sent to the co-founders of the company by 18 of the top North American and European teams calling for better job security, fairer compensation, and an appropriate infrastructure to support longer player careers.

This call follows a [series](#) of [high-profile documentaries](#) that have highlighted the negative impact that this uncertainty has on player well-being. For example, [research suggests](#) that players are expected to train for 14 to 16 hours a day within spaces organised like factories. They sit in semi-private cubicles or rows of PCs with the sole purpose of maximising playing hours and minimising distractions. These "distractions" include contact with family, friends and intimate partners, due to the unsociable hours that gamers work.

Some [esports commentators argue](#) that professional players must prioritise their training regimes over interpersonal relationships, acknowledging that the demands of other hobbies are detrimental to the [focus needed for success](#). Eating, sleeping, and regimes of personal hygiene are subject to the [same processes of efficiency](#). And this

commitment to the game is valued precisely because it's broadly understood that this is what is needed to make it within this highly competitive field.

Taking the fun out of play

Esports blurs the distinction between play and work by changing how players value the goals of gaming. Gaming does, after all, have many positive effects on human psychology. People express feelings of joy, happiness and satisfaction from overcoming the challenges present in gaming.

Tom Brock discusses issues with esports. The Conversation, [CC BY-ND](#)
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[Research shows](#) that players find themselves completely immersed and engaged in their play – in a way that many forms of work cannot offer. It is competition that gives players a sense of this energy and fullness: they derive purpose, meaning and contentment from unravelling the puzzles of games, and developing strategies to win. Games offer players obtainable goals that [generate a sense of achievement and motivation](#). From this perspective, esports should have a positive effect on mental health, by helping to boost players' confidence and self-esteem.

But where there is instability and uncertainty, the focus of play switches away from these positive benefits of gaming. In [my research](#) I've found that it switches to winning and the need to secure prize money. The result is that players [are speaking out](#) about the sense of disenchantment that follows from trying to make it as an esports professional. And many feel that the odds are stacked against them as a result of the precarious system of employment [that characterises the field](#).

Play is no longer an escape from work. Rather the way the industry is set

up appears to push esports players towards gaming the system they are in. Indeed, cases of [cheating](#), [match-fixing](#), and most recently, [doping](#), have begun to emerge. This is the kind of activity that fits a bleak picture of the [future of esports](#), where equanimity is lost to unbridled competition.

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