

The Lone Esportsman

Tackling gaming toxicity in eSports community



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CONTEXT

What are we talking about when we are talking about eSports?

ESports are often used to describe multiple online video games that share some common features: they are highly competitive and organized as professional tournaments both online and offline. While it is consistently evolving, there are 4 influential eSports games today: RTS(real-time strategy), FPS(first-person shooter), MOBA, and Battle Royale. eSports is now a rapidly growing global industry over the past decade. According to recent research, its market size is over 900 million dollars in 2018 and is projected to reach 2.3 billion by 2022. It has over 380 million dedicated fans around the world and the highest prize pool of single tournament(Ti8 of Dota2) is now over 25.5 million dollars thanks to its innovative crowd-funding strategy, which is higher than most traditional sports events and nearly half of that of US Open 2018.

All the fancy terms and numbers aside, eSports is also a lifestyle, a home to many different groups of people. The eSports community is a global community built on various local communities and it is not accessible online without supports of offline events. Such factors are some main differences that distinguish eSports games from other games on the market.

4 influential eSports games

FPS(first-person shooter), MOBA, and Battle Royale.

over 900 million dollars

Market size in 2018

over 380 million people

dedicated fans around the world

over 25.5 million dollars

of a single prize pool

My passion

I am a personally a eSports fan. I have been playing Dota2 since 2013. I have been to a lot of offline events and communicating with players on the online forum. By playing the game and engaging Dota2 community both online and offline, I realize I am experiencing a whole different game compared to others. It associates not only with your online virtual lives but also your real lives. There are lots of people like me around the world who treat it seriously as part of our lives. However, I also noticed lots of social issues in this emerging but unfamous community during these years and I feel obliged to do something about it.



How eSports become a social issue?

Most people treat eSports games as a social issue because of the addiction issue. They saw kids get addicted to games, so they worry kids would not develop well both socially and intellectually. In the early days of games, some people describe games as “electronic heroines” While it is indeed a big concern to lots of parents, I don’t see this as a unique threat of eSports to our society because if people get addicted to eSports games, they can get addicted to other temptations in a similar way. In other words, this issue along with another addiction issue should be treated on a large scale with multiple interventions like school education, public education, and family education. The same principle also applies to other issues often brought up in this field such as gender gap, racism, cheating, and gambling.

So what is the unique social issue in eSports? The answer is gaming toxicity. Unlike other casual games and social games, eSports create a relatively suitable ground for toxic behaviors because of their “easy-in, easy-out” matching system and highly competitive gaming dynamics. Such behaviors have various spectrum, including but not limited to trash-talk, sarcasm, feeding, flaming and blame-shifting. This issue is unique because the reason caused it is deeply rooted in the mechanics of the eSports games themselves and the way people playing them. Therefore, we cannot make changes happen if we don’t intervene in the gaming environment.

In the next chapter, I will give more details about how this problem is caused and identified during my research.



RESEARCH

Initial Research

Research question: **why are there fewer women gamers.**

My research begins at an underrepresented group in eSports--women gamers. As we all know, eSports is a male-dominated world so I was wondering what causes that? Unlike traditional sports field, eSports is not that relying on physical ability and there is a common consensus that women can do as well as the man in the eSports field. To find the answer, I began a series of interviews with people in the industry and women gamers.

Method: interviews/ sencondary research



Quotes

"eSports community is full of 13-year-old perverts"

"Eh...There is a woman in my team"

"I am pissed off and I was like, what's wrong with my gender? You mean that I can't perform as well as you just because I have a vagina?"

"If I am not a stronger woman, it would have torn me down. I am bullied when I was a child, so I learned how to deal with that stuff and no matter what they say, it won't crash my confidence. I know I am beautiful."

"I just block/mute them"

"These guys travel around the world and live in the same room. It may cause some problems"

Insights

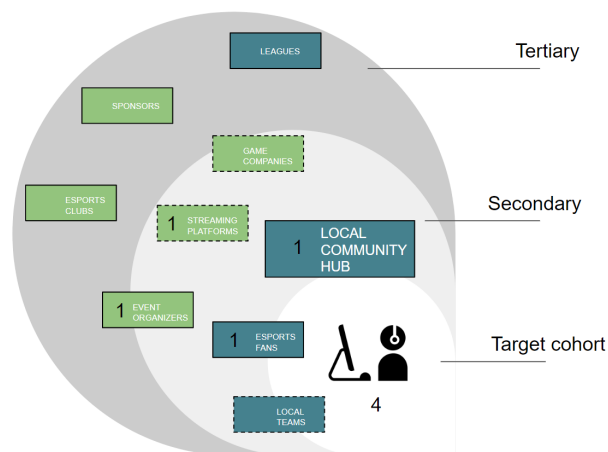
1. There are not a decent amount of eSports events for women gamers because there are few professional women eSports teams, who often lose against a male amateur team.
2. Women gamers are facing severe sexism and harassment every day.
3. While there are technically no restrictions for women gamers in the event organizer perspective, overall there are fewer support networks for women to get in touch with pro gaming due to the imbalanced participation.
4. There is a lack of and role models to inspire women gamers.

Second Round of Research

Research question: **What causes new gamers to leave the eSports game?**

After I interviewed with women gamers, I realized they are facing some issues shared by new gamers--not matter which gender. Therefore, I began to understand the experience of new gamers: how they interact with other gamers, what challenges they are facing, and how their experience with eSports events is?

Method: interviews/ secondary research



Stakeholder Map



Quotes

"It was fun at the beginning. Sometimes I won, and sometimes I lost. Even if I lost a game, he can still find pleasure in gaming stuff--but I didn't know that It would be the best time of my Dota experience."

"we were not having a conversation. We were playing a mind game"

"If you are seeking for sportsmanship, you are at a wrong place"

"I stopped playing the League of Legend because I can't bear that toxic environment"

"ESports game is not the kind of game you want to play in your leisure time, it's competitive and provokes mindsets like 'I need to be aggressive' "

Insights

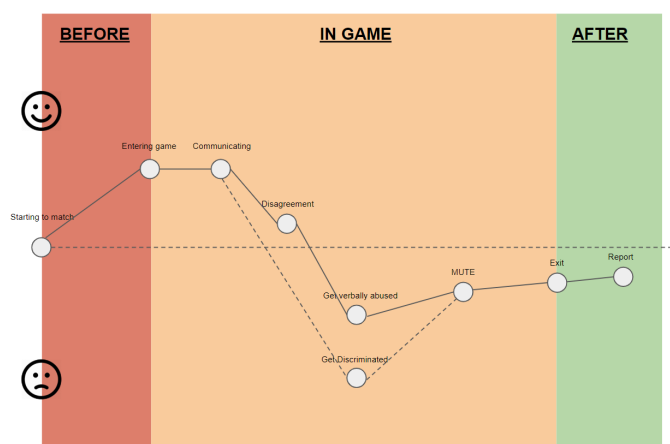
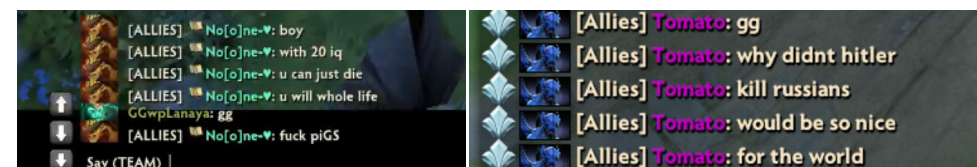
1. New gamers are suffering from gaming toxicity, which is the main reason to quit playing eSports games
2. Lacking education of sportsmanship, players aren't encouraged to communicate with others properly.
3. Most mechanics are designed to punish bad behaviors. Only a few encourage good behaviors.

Third Round of Research

Research question: What is gaming toxicity and how is gaming toxicity generated?

During the second round of research, I identified the biggest threat for new gamers are gaming toxicity, which is deep-rooted in the mechanics of eSports games. I decided to scope down to gaming toxicity and shift my thesis to tackling gaming toxicity and building a safer environment for eSports games.

Method: secondary research/ interview/ workshop

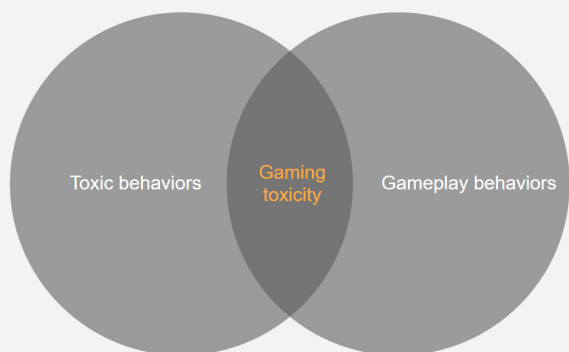


Journey Map



How I define gaming toxicity

Gaming toxicity have various spectrum, including but not limited to trash-talk, sarcasm, feeding, flaming and blame-shifting. It is too ambitious to solve them all, so I chose two typical toxic behaviors: flaming and blame-shifting, which is inherited in the gaming mechanics and most influential.



Sarcasm
Sexual harassment
Racism

Flaming-refers to the negative attitude expressed vocally during a game.

Blame-shifting-refers to shifting the blame on someone else to avoid taking responsibility for their own behavior.

AFK- short for away from keyboard.

Trash talk

Quotes

"They litererally call me a stupid pig."

"I still think it's your fault, otherwise, it is my fault and I don't like that"

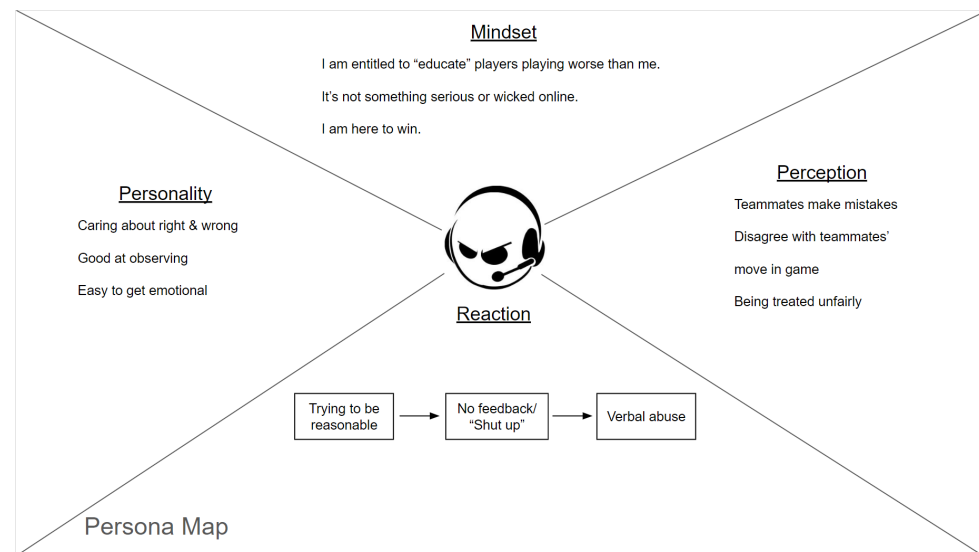
"It's not something evil in gaming world, we have a different set of language"

"I am here to win, not to make friends"

"There is always a triggering moment before the actual gaming toxicity emerges."

Insights

1. In real life, aggressive behavior triggers an immediate reaction from a victim – a change in facial expression, tone of voice, body language, perhaps even violence. But in the online world, these deterrents are missing or delayed, which helps abusers see their victims as faceless, imaginary cutouts who have no feelings and are unworthy of empathy.
2. Abusers see their victims as faceless, imaginary cutouts who have no feelings and are unworthy of empathy
3. Games are a place where all society standards fall away, where players seek fun and freedom they don't have in reality
4. There is always a triggering moment before the actual gaming toxicity emerges.
5. Gaming toxicity is just like flu that can infect everyone. A victim of gaming toxicity can easily be transferred to a toxic gamer in such process.



Ideation

Thesis Project

The goal of my thesis is to build a safer and more inclusive eSports environment by tackling gaming toxicity in eSports games.

So that: ESports can sustain itself healthily with mass support and our next generation can grow up in that environment safely.

Idea 1

Participatory mapping project

How might we map out what "eSportsmanship" means to the gaming community?

Idea 2

Gaming interactive mechanics

How might we design a buffer between these two processes?

"If you don't have something nice to say, don't say it."

Idea 3

A Social game

How might we create a social environment for gamers to have real connections?

How might we encourage conversations between gamers?
How might we help gamers build safe boundaries in team communications?

Prototyping

First prototype

eSportsmanship manifesto

Hypothesis: Once visualizing collective viewpoints on eSportsmanship, gamers will be educated about eSportsmanship.

How it works:

It is a participatory mapping project ideally contributed by gamers from global online community, aiming at mapping out what sportsmanship in eSports field means to them. The mapping project uses voting mechanics to make sure that the most popular opinions is easiest to identify in the map.

I want to learn:

I want to explore people's experience(both positive and negative) related to eSportsmanship and reach agreement on behaviors, values, and rules of eSportsmanship with the gaming community.

The result:

I did a demo of the mapping but the project failed. The technical issue is beyond my knowledge and I didn't launch the website.

Reflection:

I need to start something small from the community, not some big plan carried out by myself.



eSportsmanship manifesto Map

Value	Behavior	Rule
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

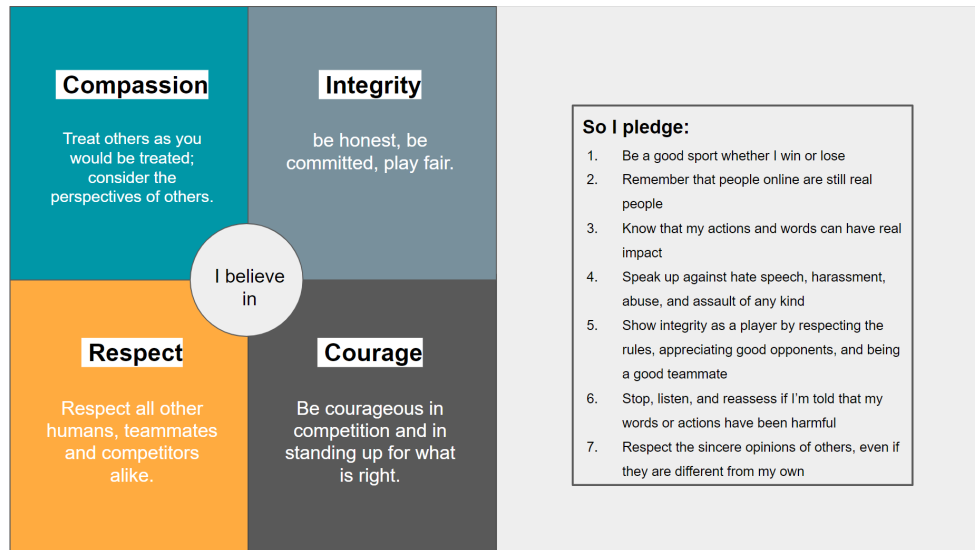
[About](#)

Jisheng Chen is a graduate student from DSI at School of Visual Arts and he is dedicated to design for the possibility of human future.

Second prototype

Keystone test

Hypothesis: Once educated about what eSportsmanship is, eSports gamers will adopt it.



How it works:

Keystone code along with GLHF pledge is written by eSports experts at Anykey to promote inclusive gaming. I visualize the content like this and bring them to the gamers at waypoint community to ask if they agree on the code of conduct and if they are willing to sign the pledge.

I want to learn:

What does eSportsmanship mean to the gaming community at this moment and how it actually affects those who believe in it.

Results:

Since there is no consensus of what sportsmanship is, I assume that players' opinions on them could vary. To my surprise, almost everyone who reads this agrees on those values and have nearly no opposing ideas of the pledge. They believe those values are shared by every conscious player. Then I let testers run through some hypothetical but typical scenarios where toxic behaviors happen in eSports game and ask them how do they feel about those behaviors. However, players' opinions start to diverge in this process. I find it interesting that some toxic behaviors I put into those scenarios are not interpreted toxic. For example, trash talk. Some players insist that it is a part of game culture.

Reflection:

How might we inspire eSportsmanship in actual game behaviors?

Third prototype

The Chat-wheel Challenge

Hypothesis: If a gamer can communicate with players in a professional fashion, he or she would be treated with fewer toxic behaviors

How it works:

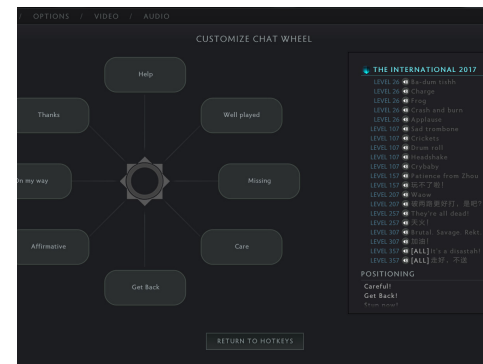
The Chat Wheel is an in-game interface tool for quickly sending messages to teammates. By holding down the assigned hotkey, moving the mouse in any of the eight directions and releasing the hotkey, a predetermined message gets sent to the team chat. In this challenge, testers are asked to communicate only via chat-wheel and to win a game under that restriction.

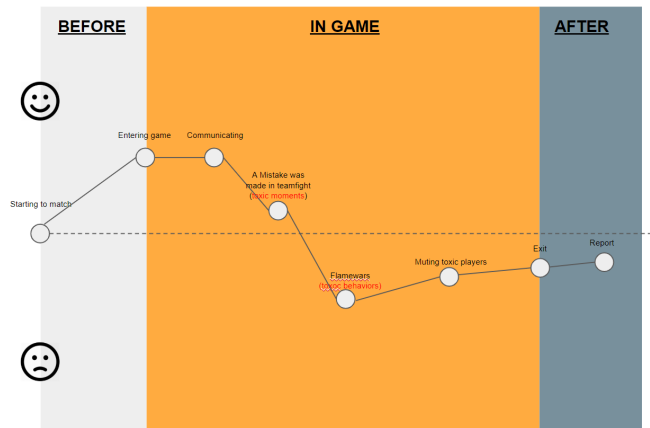
I want to learn:

Whether toxic behaviors are generated by one side only or through an interactive process. In other words, does toxic behaviors depends on the gameplay of players themselves? Will players who behave toxically will always behave toxic no matter what you do?:

Results:

The result shows all of four testers didn't encounter toxic behaviors against them, so it is safe to say that generally speaking toxic behaviors are generated through an interactive process and one-sided behavior change can change the whole dynamic of team communication. However, I find something interesting after analyses their commonality in-game experience via Journey map, I found that while chat-wheel challenge can reduce the chance of toxic behaviors, chat-wheel is a rather severe restriction to communication that can oppress gamers diverse emotion expression, which in turn, provokes more frustration and toxic moments. I need to find another way to provoke more positive behavior changes. In addition to that, all testers describe the experience is tough and didn't want to repeat it again. I also learned from my iteration of prototyping that if you want to guide them to behave nicely whether they will win or lose, you need to set a goal for them other than winning the game.

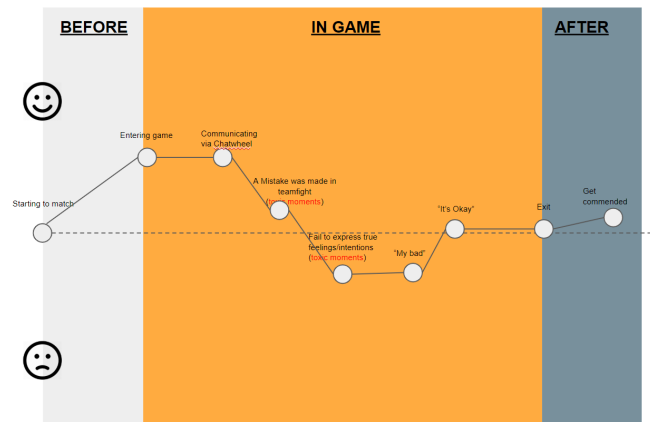




The Journey Map in normal gameplay

Reflection:

How might I design intervention without losing fun?
How might I design a buffer between triggering moments and actual toxic behaviors?



The Journey Map in the chat-wheel challenge gameplay

Final intervention

The Lone ESportsman

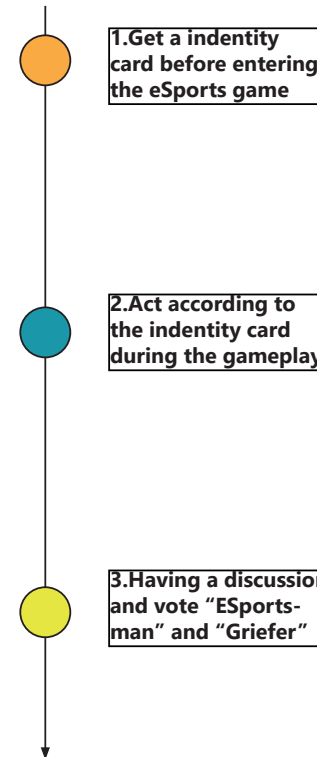
"The Lone ESportsman" is a social role play game co-designed with the gaming community that encourages conversation, builds safe boundaries and cultivates sportsmanship among eSports communities.

Background:

You are a gamer in dota2. You love the game and you don't want to see toxic players destroy the game. To prevent this from happening, you decide to save the environment of dota2 by stop gaming toxicity like flaming, blame-shifting, griefing and cheating. In order to do that, you need to encourage your teammates, take responsibility and stand up to speak against toxic behaviors when it happens. In that process, you will face two different teammates: normal players who only want to win and eSportsvillain who only want to express their negative energy to the virtual world. So, it's on you to decide how to move.

Rules:

1. Before the game start, each player gets an identity card with a trait and mission statement. There are three kinds of card: The eSportsman whose mission is to encourage teammates and speak up against toxic behaviors; The Griefer whose mission is to be toxic and discourage teammates. Casual players whose mission is to choose to act like eSportsman or griefer during the game.
2. Each player plays the game according to their cards while the observer watches the gameplay and take notes.
3. After the game end, each team will vote to identify the eSportsman and the eSportsvillain based on their memory and the evidence observer provide. Each player gets credits based on the results of both the deduction and votes.
4. The Goal of the game is to get as many as votes and you can after the game. that if you want to guide them to behave nicely whether they will win or lose, you need to set a goal for them other than winning the game.



THE LONE ESPORTSMAN



GRIEFER

- Traits:
Toxic/ Angry / Aggressive
- Mission:
At least discourage one teammate by saying the key words.

Prototyping questions

About the game

What is the ideal size of tester group for a play-test?

Is the instruction of the game clear and accessible?

Is the rules of the game actionable?

How can the aesthetics of the card be tailored to the gamers according to the game they play?

What is the best way to organize conversations?

How much time should be allocated to each round of conversations?

About the event

What is the best way to arrange a social event?

Where is suitable and available to arrange a social event?

What is the best way to communicate information about the social event? Channels?

Who are the ideal types of gamers to invite to a social event?

What is the ideal time duration for the social event?



ESPORTSMAN

- Traits:
Polite/ Friendly/Brave
- Mission:
At least encourage one teammate by saying the key words.



CASUALPLAYER

- Traits:
--
- Mission:
Choose to be "eSportsman" or "Griefer" during the game.

Implementation

Strategies

1. Game design

Co-working with gamers at Waypoint community to design a game that inspires conversations about gaming toxicity through the process. The game should be:

- a) a meta-game of eSports games
- b) that can apply to offline social occasions

2. User test

The game will be tested for several times with online gamers on a small scale first and iterated based on feedbacks from testers. Then it will go to the local community for the second play-test, when the playability and the mechanics are mature.

3. Launch

After further polishing, the game will be launched both online and offline.

Timeline

March 9-16

Co-design with the Waypoint community

March 17th

First Online test

March 23

Second Online test

March 29th

First offline test

April 19-21th

Official launch online and offline

First test

Online test with chinese gaming community

- Special designed card tailored to Chinese Dota2 Community
- Conducted through online insistence-communication software YY
- Two times of test with iteration of the rules



Feedbacks:

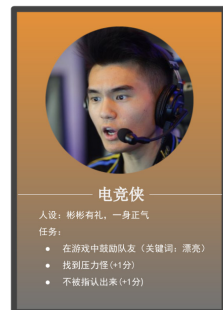
"It is really challenging to pretend to be someone else while focusing on the what happened in my lane."

"We don't need to know how exactly you calculate the points, we just need clear goals."

"I am confused about the goal."

"I didn't feel offended, I knew it was just a game."

"I would like to try the game again."



Reflection:

1. Giving more clear instructions
2. Alleviating their burden of missions
3. Focusing more on the traits than missions
4. Distinguish the goal of the meta-game and the goal of the eSports game

Second test

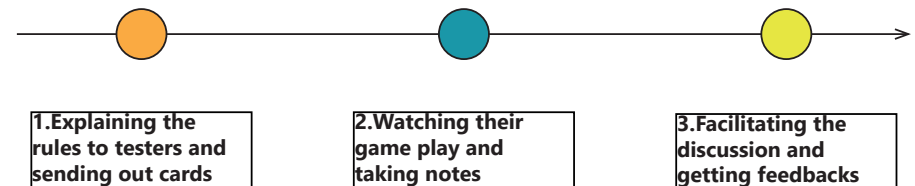
Offline test with Waypoint community at NYC

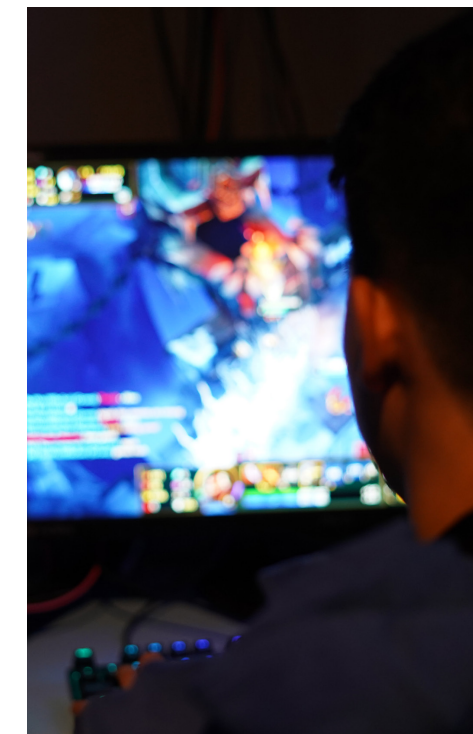
- Partnership wiht Waypoint Cafe and Super league gaming
- Conducted during the social event held every last Friday of each month regularly.

Working relationship



Implementing Process





Feedbacks:

"This game really helped us get to know each other, I felt like we need more conversations like this."

"The most interesting part about the game is that we all have different criteria on sportsmanlike behaviors and toxic behaviors."

"I didn't feel offended, I knew it was just a game."

"I would like to try the game again."

Reflection:

1. Social dynamics
2. Playability of the game
3. It's fun
4. Distinguish the goal of the meta-game and the goal of the eSports game

Iteration of Cards



M&E

Theory of Change

BIG GOAL

An safer and more inclusive environment in eSports

THESIS-GOAL

An safer and more inclusive environment in a eSport team

PRE-CONDITIONS

Less Gaming toxicity

More and better defined eSportsmanship

PRE-CONDITIONS

More aware-
ness of Gaming
toxicity

A safer boundary
between
teammates

More players show
sportsmanlike behaviors
during the game

More consensus
on what makes
eSportsmanship

PRE-CONDITIONS

A clearer
definition
of Gaming
toxicity

More willing-
ness of dis-
cussing gaming
toxicity

Increase in
awareness of
dealing with
real people

More willingness
of showing sports-
manlike behaviors

More opportunities
of discussing
sportsmanship

OUTCOMES

Teammates have more
opportunities to express
their own criteria on gaming

More direct contacts with
teammates and mindfulness
of their feelings

More incentives in the game
for teammates to talk about
eSportsmanship

OUTPUT

More mechanics that allow
and encourage teammates
exchange opinions

More opportunities for
teammates to communicate
face to face

More happiness to get to
know each other by per-
forming eSportsmanship

INPUT

A meta-game where
players interact with
others by talking

A guideline for team-
mates to start honest
conversations

A safer space for
conversations between
teammates

A role-play game
suitable for social
occasions

INTERVENTION

The Lone
ESportsman

Log Frame

INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES	GOALS
PEOPLE Gamers SLG Stuff Waypoint community members	CO-CREATING Co-creating with the gaming community, and designing a game	A ROLE-PLAY GAME Fun and suitable for social occasions	Increase in happiness by playing the game	Encouraging conversations about gaming toxicity and eSportsmanship
RESOURCES Funding Time Food	PROTOTYPING & ITERATION Prototyping games with both online and offline gamers and ask for feedbacks	OFF-LINE SOCIAL EVENTS Games played with new gamers.	More opportunities for gamers to have conversations face to face	Building clear and safe boundaries between teammates in eSports
ACCESS Internet connection ESports games Physical space Printer, paper	PLAY-TEST & PILOTING Cooperate with SLG to host play-tests in social off-line events Pitching the ideas to more event organizers	OPEN SOURCE CHANNEL Shared at open-source platform like Github	More safer spaces for gamers to exchange opinions	Helping new gamers get to know each other
SKILLS Game design Facilitating Hospitality Writing Programming	EVALUATION & Analysis Post-game surveys Follow-up interviews with gamers	DATA Qualitative data that help enhance the experience of playing the game Quantitative data that measure the success of the intervention	Increase in incentives that encourage them show personality during the game Increase in gamers' resilience to fight against gaming toxicity	Cultivating eSportsmanship among the eSports team

Monitoring

Monitoring questions

About the game

How many testers want to continue play the game?

How many testers willing to recommend the game?

How many testers are engaging

How much do they know about each other after playing the game?

How have their opinions changed? What did they learn?

About the event

How do gamers feel about the environment of the social event?

How helpful do gamers think the game and the event are in terms of understanding more about gaming toxicity and eSportsmanship?

Next Steps & Learning

Next steps

My thesis is not the end of my journey of tackling gaming toxicity, it is the start. Over the past year, I often ask myself, what am I searching for in eSports community? What I am building? It wasn't until I implemented my intervention that I realize, I am searching for social dynamics, which is rare in eSports games today. However, it was not like that. Long before eSports games disrupted and occupied the game market, there is a strong sense of community in gaming community. We make friends, build all sorts of artifacts with them. When eSports game bring the competitive mechanics and easy-in easy-out matching system to the gaming field, people changed. I know we cannot go backwards, but we can go forward with the attempt of being the social dynamic back. And, I, Jisheng Chen, is committed to building the tradition of effective and non-violent communication in eSports community.

Online

Make it open source

- *A full kit of game with well-designed cards and clear instructions*
- *Github*
- *Played at any game events*



Off-line

Make it a regular event

- *Cooperation with experienced event organizers*
- *Incorporating a competition via "the lone eSportsman" gaming mode*
- *Scale by authorization*

Learnings

Here are seven things I learned during the process of my thesis:

1. Community is everything in social design.
2. Building trust is as important as building empathy with people.
3. Plan early, act quickly.
4. It is always better and easier to build something small then grow it, than to plan something big then build it.
5. When you don't know what to do, go back to your community.
6. Trust your guts but question your assumptions.
7. Stay curious.

Acknowledgments

Thesis advisor

Miya Osaki
Cheryl Heller

Co-design team

Chen Yang
Yang Yang
Taiyi
Di Wu
Ryan

Special thanks

Yun Ang Tsai
Nicholas Fortugno
Rutvi Gupta
Wenqi Zheng
Joey Lee
Eddie Chy

Thank You!

Thesis of Jisheng Chen
Design for Social Innovation
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