Joysticks
How Competitive Video Games took the World by Storm
by Jack Parkinson

It's not news to say that gaming is popular. Video games make more money each year than the film industry, and the image of a 12- to 25-year-old male sitting in front of a television playing the latest Call of Duty is no doubt familiar to anyone who knows a man in that age range. Big budget video games routinely cast film actors as stars, such as Ellen Page in *Beyond: Two Souls* and Kevin Spacey in *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare.*

And yet in spite of all this, the appeal of video games (and especially competitive video gaming) can be totally foreign to people who did not grow up playing them. This is a huge waste of potential: video games, just as much as any sport, can fulfill the human drive for competition and challenge. Games can inspire competitors to stunning feats of concentration, strategy and technical skill, but to someone who does not follow a particular game, this is all so much white noise.

So why are millions of people around the world are willing to tune in and watch people who are paid to play video games?

The Situation Now

"The day I transformed into an adult was the day I started playing DotA . . . Gaming is simply the proudest thing in my life."
- Benedict 'Hyhy' Lim, professional DotA 2 player, leader of Scythe, a DotA 2 team

Games and competition have been around since the dawn of humankind, but video games are a relatively recent invention. In spite of this, the mainstream market has always demonstrated a thirst for competitive video games - the first Pong machine, installed in August of 1972 at a California bar, experienced technical problems shortly after its installation, not because the machine had broken but because bar patrons had played it so much the machine was overstuffed with quarters.

Pong was simple, however, and it would not be until 1991 with the release of Street Fighter II: The World Warrior that players would be discover the true meaning of competitive video games. Street Fighter II was revolutionary for a myriad of reasons (including visual design, complexity and ease of access), but the most important one is the purity of the experience - you choose a character to fight with, you choose an arena to fight in, and you fight. No waiting, no lost time. Dozens of games tried to ape Street Fighter II, but none came close to the focus on raw competition offered in the arcade original.

By far the most popular field of competitive gaming is the genre called "fighting games," which includes series such as Street Fighter, Tekken, and Super Smash Bros. In a fighting game, each player chooses a character to control. The characters are then pitted against each other in an arena, and whoever is left standing wins. Characters each have their own set of attacks and special techniques to attack their opponents with. Normal attacks are often punches, kicks and grapples which are used to attack adversaries in different ways, and defend oneself from the attacks of an opponent.

Due to Street Fighter II's focus on one-versus-one action, fighting games made today still follow the formula of two players, each controlling a single character. Ideally the players are sitting on a couch next to each other or are on the grand stage at a huge tournament, but most fighting games offer the ability to play opponents through the Internet. Matches within the game play out like a martial arts movie, with each character moving around the arena and fighting his or her opponent with anything from punches to knives to thrown fireballs.

Not every fighting game uses the same terminology, but the theory behind the games is universal: players use their characters' attacks as tools in combat. The solution these tools want to solve is how to best knock out their opponent by hitting them enough, netting a round win.

The other large section of competitive gaming is made up of strategy games, such as Starcraft and *Defense of the Ancients 2* (DotA 2). DotA 2 is currently more prominent as a competitive game, thanks in part to its simplicity in comparison to a game like Starcraft, a science fiction military strategy game where three species fight for dominance of planets and resources. Professional Starcraft players are required to perform a minimum average of 300 actions per minute while playing.

The competitive Starcraft scene is dominated by South Korean players who spend up to 12 hours a day playing to hone their skills and sometimes live in communal houses paid for by team sponsors. Starcraft and South Korea are so closely tied that Korean Air, South Korea's national airline, sponsored a series of Starcraft-themed commer-

given player - there are more than 100 characters to choose from, and dozens of pieces of armour and weaponry to equip them with.

But the parallels between DotA 2 and fighting games are clear - characters in the game are tools that players use to solve problems and meet win conditions. Often those win conditions and problems appear in a context that makes them interesting to the human mind; "how do I win this fight?" is a lot more visceral and immediate than "how do I reduce my opponent's hit points to zero and claim victory?"

Tournament play varies greatly depending on the scope of the event - one of the earliest gatherings for Super Smash Bros. Melee's competitive scene was Tournament Go, a small competition hosted by Matt Deezie in southern California. What made Tournament Go so special was Deezie's willingness to make Melee work competitively - Deezie used all three floors of his house to host tournament matches, and allowed players from out of state to sleep in the building and in his yard in tents. Deezie also helped with travel costs for some players who would have otherwise had difficulty attending, and his did it all out of his own pocket. He just loved the game that much.

The Appeal

"What's the difference between a casual player and a tournament player? Mental health."
- Seth Killian, former community manager at Capcom

So why is competitive gaming so popular? Why don't competitors turn to sports or other activities to satisfy their urges to compete?

The first reason is the most obvious: video games are cool. When two characters from Street Fighter square off in a fight, they each get lovingly crafted introductions, complete with cool poses and music. When a round ends,

Two professional Starcraft players square off in a televised match on the now-defunct MBCGame channel in South Korea. Starcraft players are typically afforded soundproof playing areas when money is on the line due to the intense focus required when playing. Commentators provide strategic insight while the players duke it out and crowds of fans cheer.

cials in 2010 to promote an upcoming tournament. Starcraft is also broadcast on television and has several channels dedicated to airing gameplay and discussing strategy.

DotA 2 is intentionally simpler compared to the grand strategy games that preceded it - instead of controlling entire armies and micromanaging every decision for every soldier, a player only takes control of a single hero on a team of five. Each team has a base, which are placed in opposite corners of the arena with a thick forest between them.

Games start out with each team of five heroes at their respective bases, and the heroes must fight their way through the forest, paths, river and opposing heroes to arrive at the enemy base. If a team is successful, they will have the opportunity to destroy the buildings which make up a base, resulting in victory.

If DotA 2 seems more complex than a kung fu fight, that's because it is. Matches usually take at least 45 minutes to an hour (compared to a hard 99-second limit for most fighting games), and there are many options available to any

an announcer yells "Knockout!" from offscreen, and there may be cheering from an electronic crowd. Even in real martial arts tournaments, no athlete can jump 10 feet in the air, only to dive downward with a kick - and there certainly isn't anyone who can throw a punch strong enough to leave a trail of flame hanging in the air.

Something as simple as visual appeal goes a long way for both players and spectators, and the developers of these games know it. They take great pains to fill the character roster with a wide variety of eccentric characters from all walks of life. To use Street Fighter as an example, that game series features characters like Ryu, a humble martial artist from Japan who travels the world seeking good fights and inner peace, and Blanka, a green-skinned, orange-haired Brazilian beast man who was lost in the Amazon jungle as a child and learned photosynthesis from plants and control of electricity from electric eels.

Yes, really.

Another reason why fighting games are so popular in North and South America is their history of being the cheapest, most accessible form of competitive gaming. In the 1990s, while games like Starcraft demanded a premium computer and a stable Internet connection (not to mention the privacy to play them at

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"In Street Fighter, you can't [laugh off losses]. When your opponent beats you, it's almost like a comment on your character, or your brain, or your understanding,"

- Seth Killian

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home), an arcade cabinet with Street Fighter 2: The World Warrior loaded would only run you a single quarter.

Because the winning player stayed on the machine at no additional cost, being good at the game meant that you would have to spend less money on it. The more rounds you could play off of a

single quarter before going to the back of the line, the better value you were getting off of your money. Every match was tense and engaging to the players not just because the game presented it that way, but because a lost match meant minutes of boredom waiting in line, mentally replaying the moment of defeat.

This situation also meant that every arcade had a clear divide between the good players, who could ride a single quarter for an afternoon, and the bad players, who could easily lose a week's allowance in that same time. Getting better at the game carried not only prestige, but a clear monetary gain.

Naturally, a tournament scene grew from this - after all, if people were will-

(and they were: four years after its debut, Street Fighter II had grossed over $4 billion, corrected for inflation), then why not give them the opportunity to win it back?

Small tournaments and individual

Below: Hulk Hogan and Andre the Giant at the main event at Wrestlemania 3 in 1987.
Left: Alex, left, and Hugo, centre, just before a match in Street Fighter III: Third Strike*, released in 1999. The characters and their custom intro animation is an intentional reference to Hogan and Andre's famous bout.*

money matches ("Oh, you think you're good? Let's play, then, and the loser forks over $20.") happened all the time, of course, but organized play was small. Evolution (EVO), currently the largest fighting game tournament in the world, got its start as a tiny 64-person tournament called Battle by the Bay. The attendees were mostly Californians, but there were a few Kuwaitis and Mexicans as well.

EVO would eventually grow to become

remember Super Smash Bros. Melee, one of the games featured at EVO, was released in North America just shy of 14 years ago, was never intended to be played competitively, and there are still international tournaments where people can win money by playing it.

The depth of passion for competitive video games is why tournaments like EVO exist - between the games, consoles, televisions, sound systems, lodging and travel costs required to

prize pots for a tournament like EVO would be illegal under that country's strict anti-gambling laws. This has led to a big difference in how the Japanese Street Fighter community has approached the game compared to their American and European counterparts.

"(Competitive gaming) in China is already . . . recognized by the General Administration of Sport. It is the same as tennis, ping pong, chess. The only difference is that it is not an Olympic

Hajime "Tokido" Taniguchi, left, and Lee "Infiltration" Seon-Woo ruminate on character selection on the main stage at EVO 2013. In contrast to more strategic games like DotA 2, fighting game competitors are expected to play with the roar of the audience right behind them. Many players feed off the energy of the crowd, and fans of specific players make a point of cheering louder than other fans. Picture courtesy of David Zhou and Polygon.

"the biggest fighting game tournament in the world," in the words of Joey Ceuller, its co-founder. The 2015 tournament awarded a total of more than $300,000 across the nine games showcased, three times the size of the pot the year before. Divided up that may not seem like much, but it is important to

host a competition the size of EVO, or DotA 2's The International, large tournaments almost feel as though they should not exist at all.

Prize structure also lend a national flavour to large-scale competitions which can affect how players approach each game. In Japan, for instance, having

sport," says Tang Wenyi, manager of Ehome, a Chinese DotA 2 team.

Because tournaments for money are illegal, players from Japan and other Asian countries are instead sponsored by gaming teams as their primary source of income, whereas in the West, players are supported partially by

sponsors and expected to win enough tournaments to make up the difference. This is not to say Western sponsors are cheap, or harsh taskmasters - this is just the reality of being a competitors in the East compared to the West.

The lack of financial support in Japan specifically means that players there take far more pride in their different style of playing each game. Daigo Umehara, a longtime competitor in Street Fighter, has made a point of using the character Ryu as his primary character in every Street Fighter game he has competed in, because that is what people expect him to do. Ryu is a basic, entry-level character with basic, entry-level attacks and techniques.

Both in person and in recordings of tournament matches, spectators enjoy seeing someone as good as Umehara use a basic character to defeat more powerful, tricky characters in tournaments, and Umehara is good enough to make a career out of it. Even if Ryu is, empirically, not as strong or fast as other characters, Umehara still makes a point of playing him.

This concept, called character loyalty, is universal to all fighting games and indeed many sports - people enjoy being able to apply narratives to competition, and the dynamic of a skilled player who intentionally handicaps himself by using a weak character is something straight out of a movie.

In the West, players are usually loyal to their characters, but out of convenience more than obligation - an aggressive player picks an aggressive character, and would never consider switching to a defensive character. Simple, but there is a catch: if your sponsor is expecting you to perform well at tournaments, then you are almost required to play the best character in any particular game. As far as excuses go, "I may have lost, but I had fun doing it" is a quick way to find yourself without a sponsor.

Again, this is not to say that the Western or Eastern model is superior or inferior - they are different, and that is that.

Competition Without Competition

"But really, my vision of Smash Bros. is that it's a party game, really."
- Masahiro Sakurai, Director of Development, Super Smash Bros. Melee

"We were trash. Just TRASH compared to these people. And that was very exciting for us. Once I realized how far down on the spectrum I was, the training began immediately."
- Christopher "Wife" Fabiszak, Melee *commentator and former pro*

All of this is well and good for the professional player who gets to fly around the world playing a game he loves. But what does it mean for Joe Average, who does not have the time to become a world champion? Two things.

First, it means there are more sharply designed and finely crafted competitive games in the world, which is basic supply and demand. As long as people are willing to watch other people play video games well, video game developers will continue to make strategy and fighting games. Most people will never learn the intricacies of Super Smash Bros. Melee, but that game is still great to play with friends.

The elegant thing about designing a game to work at the competitive level is that the game will also work at the casual level - if you are unsure about facing an opponent on a flat arena with nothing in the way, you can instead fight on a wacky arena composed of moving platforms over a bottomless pit. Not as skill-intensive, but still loads of fun.

The second and most important thing is that games like these give people (often young men who can have trouble striking up conversations) the chance to bond and connect over a shared interest. Gaming does not need to be impenetrable to outside understanding - it is simply one of the ways the new generation meets one another and spends time together.

According to Matt Treichel, president of the Kult of Gaming, Wilfrid Laurier University's gaming club, most players do not necessarily even care whether they win or lose. Treichel shed some light on the subject in an email:

"Gaming is a big part of my life, I just really enjoy all aspects of video games, and that's just multiplied by adding the

like with others. It's honestly my go-to social activity, there's just so many interesting ways you can play games, such a large variety of strategy and experiences."

At the end of the day, that is what games are made for: having fun with friends. If you win, you feel good and you've made some good memories. And if you lose? Well, every world champion has to start somewhere.