The Paradox of eSports: Roger Caillois and the Transformation of Play into Work

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Abstract

In *Man, Play and Games*, Roger Caillois warns against the 'rationalisation' of play by working life and argues that the professionalisation of competitive games (agôn) will have a negative impact on people and society. In this article, I elaborate on Caillois' argument by suggesting that the professional context of electronic sports (e-Sports) *rationalises* play by turning player psychology towards the pursuit of extrinsic rewards. This is evidenced in the instrumental decision-making that accompanies competitive gameplay as well as the 'survival' strategies that e-Sports players deploy to endure its precarious working environment(s). In both cases, play is treated as work and has problematic psychological and sociological implications as a result.

Introduction

> 'The rule of instinct again becoming absolute, the tendency to interfere with the isolated, sheltered, and neutralized kind of play spreads to daily life and tends to subordinate it to its own needs, as much as possible. What used to be a pleasure becomes an obsession. What was an escape becomes an obligation, and what was a pastime is now a passion, compulsion, and source of anxiety'. (Caillois, 2001a, p.45)

In *Man, Play and Games*, Roger Caillois' warns against the 'rationalisation' of play by daily life and argues that when play becomes an obligation, like work, it can have a detrimental impact on people's autonomy and society's moral character. Caillois (2001a, p.43) identifies six qualities of play that he suggests working life may corrupt as play in his view should be: (1) free, (2), separate, (3) uncertain, (4), unproductive, (5) regulated, and (6), fictive. Caillois argues that these 'formal' qualities of play are

brought into disrepute as the 'sharp line dividing their ideal rules from the diffuse and insidious laws of daily life is blurred'. In other words, the social, political and economic organisation of modern life has a tendency to *rationalise* these formal qualities of play through the games that we interact with.

Readers will be familiar with Caillois' typology of ruled games – *agôn* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (simulation), and *ilinx* (vertigo) – and how he describes the transformation of play from a 'free activity' into 'work' and the characteristics that are said to take 'hold' in human cultures as a result. For the purposes of this article, I am particularly interested in what Caillois (2001a, p.83) has to say about *agôn,* and the manner in which games of competition shape human agency. Caillois is clearly concerned about what happens to human psychology when the rules of games become inscribed into the 'habits' or 'reflexives' of players. This is how he articulates it in the case of *agôn*:

> 'Outside of the arena, after the gong strikes, begins the true perversion of *agôn,* the most pervasive of all the categories. It appears in every conflict untempered by the rigor or spirit of play. Now competition is nothing but a law of nature. In society it resumes its original brutality, as soon as it finds a loophole in the system of moral, social and legal constraints, which have limits and conventions comparable to those of play. That is why mad, obsessive ambition, applied to any domain in which the rules of the game and free play are not respected, must be denounced as a clear deviation… A good player must be able to contemplate with objectivity, detachment, and at least an appearance of calm, the unlucky results of even the most sustained effort or the loss of large sums…' (Caillois, 2001a, p.46)

This article intends to show that this perversion of *agôn* is a consequence of blurring work *with* play, particularly through e-Sports competitions.

E-Sports, writes T.I. Taylor (2012), is exemplified by computer game players who compete for money and prizes within a 'professionalized context'. This context may be represented through the large sums of money that now circulate through e-Sports competitions. For example, in 2016, competitive gaming competitions had an audience of around 300 million people, generating $493 million in revenue, and over $75 million in prize money (Newzoo, 2016). These competitions have taken place in dozen of countries across Europe, North America, and South-East Asia with sponsorships from Microsoft, Intel, Sony and Google. The games played at this level cover a range of genres, including real-time strategies, such as, *Starcraft: Brood War* and *Starcraft II*, first-person shooters, such as *Counter-Strike* and *Halo*, and multiplayer online battle arena games, such as *League of Legends* and *DOTA 2*.

What makes playing a video game a 'profession' may also be represented through the gameplay practices that accompany it. To focus on one competitive scene – that of *Starcraft II* – we see that players from all over the world compete with one another to destroy the base of their opponents as quickly and/or efficiently as possible. This is known as 'real-time strategy' and refers to the cognitive and embodied processes of managing a series of complex tasks in real-time, including resource management, base construction and individual unit control (also see Witkowski, 2012).

Importantly, such gameplay activities are also regulated by the rules and normative expectations that govern the professionalized context. For example, *Starcraft II* is a propriety technology developed, owned and operated by Blizzard Entertainment (now Blizzard-Activision). As such, gameplay activities are governed by changes outside of the players' control. For example, patches and/or expansions will transform how the game is played through the introduction of new units or maps.

Second, tournament regulations concerning 'fair play' govern how the player *should* play, i.e., without the use of software or hardware 'hacks' that give unfair advantage (also see Consalvo, 2007). Third, professional players must also align themselves with the corporate financial investment that often provides them and/or their teams with the very financial resources needed to play competitively. As such, what makes the professionalized context of any e-Sport possible is a complex relational configuration of social-psychological, cultural and economic factors.

Though critics such as T.L Taylor (2012) and Seo and Jung (2014) have cast doubts over Caillois' distinction between 'play' and 'work', I will defend Caillois by arguing that e-Sports leads to the development of a highly rational mode of human 'reflexivity' (Archer, 2007), one which is oriented towards the pursuit of *extrinsic* over *intrinsic* rewards (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Ryan, et. al. 2006). This is demonstrated in the rational decision-making that accompanies success in competitive gameplay (Mauricio, et al., 2015) as well as the choice to 'fix' competitive matches (Shea, 2015, Platt, 2015). In both cases, I will argue that play is treated as work: it becomes an object for instrumental rationality, which leaves the player not only subject to psychological issues (Sudnow, 1983) but also precarious sociological factors (Woodcock and Johnson, 2016). From this perspective, the article extends Caillois' original warning: the demands of modern games culture are perverting play by turning human psychology towards instrumental rationality.

Caillois, Games and Culture

Play, Games and Human Practices

To appreciate Caillois' concern that working life 'rationalises' play, one must reflect on the manner in which he critiques the social construction of ruled-games. In *Man, Play and Games*, Caillois (2001a, p.65) lists the qualities of play, which he suggests

take on a near-universal (albeit contradictory) character in the realm of social life (p.65; original emphasis):

> *-The need to prove one's superiority*
> *-The desire to challenge, make a record, or merely overcome an obstacle*
> *-The hope for and the pursuit of the favour of destiny*
> *-Pleasure in secrecy, make-believe, or disguise*
> *-Fear or inspiring of fear*
> *-The search for repetition and symmetry, or in contrast, the joy of improvising, inventing, or infinitely varying solutions*
> *-Solving a mystery or riddle*
> *-The satisfaction procured from all arts involving contrivance*
> *-The desire to test one's strength, skill, speed, endurance, equilibrium, or ingenuity*
> *-Conformity to rules and laws, the duty to respect them, and the temptation to circumvent them*
> *-And lastly, the intoxication, longing for ecstasy, and desire for voluptuous panic.*

And yet, Caillois argues that these instincts are circumscribed through the (social) construction of rules into a typology of games based on four categories: *agôn* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (simulation), and *ilinx* (vertigo). It is said that these games come to shape the values of different cultures and the character of its people; his key theoretical assumption being that:

> '[A] game that is esteemed by a people may at the same time be utilised to define the society's moral or intellectual character, provide proof of its precise meaning, and contribute to its popular acceptance by accentuating the relevant qualities… It is not absurd to try diagnosing a civilisation in terms of the games that are especially popular there' (Caillois, 2001a, p. 83).

For example, when talking about Rome and its gladiators, Caillois suggests that their games lead to certain 'habits' and 'reflexes' that came to be characteristic of the aggressive nature of its empire. 'Games', he suggests, 'cause certain kinds of reaction

to be anticipated', 'They necessarily reflect its culture pattern and provide useful indications as to the preferences… of a given society at a particular stage of its evolution' (Caillois, 2001a, p.83). For the Romans, Caillois argued that the gladiatorial games were evidence of the Empire's *agôn-alea* character, captured in the Roman adage: 'Ubi societas ibi ius' – 'Where there is society, there is law' (2001a, p. 126). Hierarchy, codification, combat, violence and competitive merit were seen to characterise the 'qualities' of its culture, and its gladiatorial games were said to offer the Roman people ideas and practices that ensured stability and universality throughout the Empire for over a thousand years.

From his perspective, the formal qualities of play may blur into the social and political organisation of everyday life through the playing of particular kinds of games. They provide proof of the constancy of human culture on certain levels, and if one can point to the origins of games, then one will be able to recognise that they take on a near-universal quality, particularly in terms of the rules that are applied, as well as the principles and kinds of 'people' that are established. Of course, such an understanding is in keeping with Caillois' realist perspective.[1] A student of the structural anthropologist Marcel Mauss and functionalist philosopher Georges Dumézil, Caillois studied at the École pratique des Hautes Etudes in the early 1930s, where he founded the *Collège de Sociologie* alongside the surrealist writers Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris (Frank, 2003). As such, Caillois, like Émile Durkheim, spoke of the structures of society in terms of their real, that is causal, functionality. The ludic conventions associated with games are just one example of these 'social facts',[2] and Caillois treats them as imperatives that can initiate, socialise and maintain order in societies.

Contaminating Play

Yet, Caillois (2001a, p.44, 48) argues that these very qualities may be 'contaminated' (and social stability threatened) as the line between play and reality blurs, particularly as the formal qualities of play become *institutionalised* in working life. 'What used to be a pleasure becomes an obsession', he writes, 'for professional boxers, bicycle riders, or actors, *agôn* or *mimicry* has ceased being a recreation intended as relaxation from fatigue or a relief from the monotony of oppressive work. It is their very work, necessary to their subsistence…' Caillois sees the institutionalisation of these game types as threatening to the values of modern society. Here, the ludic conventions of games are seen to have a negative impact on people and society as subjects take on the character of the games that they come to master. For example, Caillois (2001a, p.54) talks of the prevalence of social and economic competition in modern society as an example of the institutionalisation of *agôn*. 'Transposed to reality', he suggests, 'the only goal of *agôn* is success' as '[i]mplacable competition becomes the rule', and culture(s) comes to value rivalry, violence and cheating.

Here, Caillois conceives of these competitive cultures in terms of what Nietzsche (1999) refers to as 'the will to power': a driving force in humans to reach the highest possible position in life through ambition and achievement. Similarly, Caillois (2001a, p.65, 75) talks of social conformity as an example of the institutionalisation of *mimicry*, and the ways through which some games laud the values of compliance and passivity in modern society, but also at the cost of social estrangement. 'Pretending to be someone else tends to alienate and transport', he suggests, 'it provokes such seizures and paroxysms that the real world is temporarily abolished in the mind that is hallucinated or possessed'. Thus, the rules that regulate

play and permit games to be classified make their influence felt in social life by potentially alienating people from themselves and others.

This argument manifests itself most clearly when Caillois critically considers the manner in which modernising societies have lurched towards the 'methodical control' (2001a, p.101) of its publics through the deployment of games as leisure. Echoing Weber (1947), Caillois presented a picture of games of competition as a means through which to order and control the public. It is worth noting, as Henricks (2011, p.175-176) does, that Caillois' main political contention with these games emerges in juxtaposition to his anxieties with fascist ideology. Caillois was critical of the ways in which fascist systems sought to present themselves as egalitarian but actually sought to systematise merit, and use games as a mechanism by which to offer luck or competition as the only means for the less fortunate to have some chance at victory. As such, Caillois (2001a) warned that modern forms of urban life would come to *emphasise competition as the basis for personal mobility*, and that the ethos of self-regulation, perseverance, and accomplishment were values to laud and celebrate. For example, he argued that state-sponsored gambling, including national lotteries, shored up ideas about competition, personal wealth and success. The same was also said of sports heroes and celebrities. Indeed, Caillois felt that the function of these games was to provide the masses with a glimmer of hope. It offered those with limited life opportunities a means of 'working-class escape' (see Bleasdale, 1995 cited in Casey, 2016), that is, a chance for the working poor to attain the kind of luxury and glory of which they could only ever dream. Play functioned conservatively: it acted as a means of controlling populations through institutionalised competition and offered the 'myth' of chance to maintain inequalities between people.

Engaging Caillois' Critics

Despite these insights, Caillois' ideas appear to have lost favour amongst some game studies scholars today. In particular, Taylor (2012) has argued that Caillois' work fails to understand the 'messy' nature of work and play. In her own words,

> 'A heavily policed model of the "magic circle" has far too often led to the claim that when play is touched by the outside world, when it takes on a meaning beyond the specialized game system, when it *matters* to anything other than the play experience itself, it becomes corrupted, and corrupting. Unfortunately such a hard-line position is untenable… actual players, be they pro or not, recognize the messy nature of play, the way it can occupy a "both/and" relation to work and obligation' (Taylor, 2012, p.99).

Here, Taylor rejects Caillois' argument that work is inherently corrupting of the formal qualities of play. She is critical of his idea that play has characteristics distinct from work or that play can have a value that is *sui generis* (unique) from the matters of everyday life. In her view, what a person constitutes as work or play is ultimately subjective; a social construction that only 'exists' in relation to other circumstances. Seo and Jung (2014, p.10) make a similar claim specifically with e-Sports players in mind. They argue that Caillois' discussion of play and work fails to appreciate the ways in which e-Sports players are 'empowered to find extrinsic benefits, such as prize money and social status'. As such, Seo and Jung *reject* Caillois' idea that professional gaming can be considered an example of 'false' play. Rather, they argue that we should analyse the professionalization of computer gaming as an assemblage

of subjective 'doings and sayings' (a position that echoes Taylor's) from which players derive personal autonomy.

There is some conceptual confusion here concerning their interpretation of Caillois' work, which has implications for developing a critical account of professional gaming. Both Taylor and Seo and Jung are critical of the manner in which Caillois presents 'play' and 'work' as discrete phenomenon within his social ontology. They instead offer a relational account of what constitutes work and/or play as a subjective interpretation established as an 'assemblage' within an actor-network (ANT) (see Latour, 2005). In other words, what constitutes 'work' or 'play' cannot be defined in reference to a set of discrete qualities, properties or powers (psychological or otherwise). Rather they are treated as configurations of socio-material relations set within an indefinite, indeterminate and increasingly heterogeneous world (also see Deleuze, 1980).

I see two issues with this critique of Caillois' thesis. The first is that it overlooks the relationship between his politics and social ontology. Caillois maintains a qualitative difference between 'play' and 'work' in order to critique the way in which working life *rationalises* play into a means of socio-political control. This point is completely overlooked in Seo and Jung's (2014) critique of Caillois for instance. Indeed, these authors assert that the 'extrinsic' (monetary as well as symbolic) rewards of professional gaming '*empower*' players (p.10; my emphasis) with little attention given to the ways in which the political economy of e-Sports intensifies social competition, celebrates invidious comparison and leads to precarious working relations –issues that I will return to in more detail below (Woodcock and Johnson, 2016; Dal Jong Jin, 2010).

Relatedly, Caillois describes the formal qualities of play, as distinct from work, in order to establish an *ethical* boundary between 'good' and 'bad' play. That play is said to be 'separate' and 'unproductive' from working life is important for understanding how players treat games with composure, distance or 'equanimity'. Here, Caillois (2001b) argues that that those who sufficiently 'confuse' the domains of play and working life cannot hope to be considered a 'good player'. On the contrary, 'a good player … is one who shows, even when he loses, that for him, play remains play, that is to say, a pastime to which he does not accord importance unworthy of someone well loved, and he regards it as indecent to be crushed by its risks' (2001b, p.159). As such, Caillois maintains a distinction between play as a 'free activity' and work as an economic 'obligation' in order to acknowledge that the latter restricts the former when it *constrains* personal autonomy.

In my view, the issue does not require a rejection of 'play' and 'work' as discrete entities but rather an appreciation of the manner in which human agents *reflexively negotiate* the 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' rewards of both (see Ryan and Deci, 2000; Ryan, et. al. 2006). From this perspective, it becomes possible to see how competitive gaming becomes like 'work', particularly as instrumental decision-making characterises the way in which players *rationally* achieve its extrinsic rewards. The article will now turn to this issue in more detail.

Play and Human Reflexivity: On the Rationality of Competition

Intrinsic/Extrinsic Rewards

Research in social psychology distinguishes between the 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' rewards associated with play (see Ryan and Deci, 2000; Ryan, et. al. 2006). Play is said to be concerned with 'intrinsic' rewards: it is a free activity that is motivated for its inherent satisfactions, such as 'fun' (Lewis, 1982) or the 'challenge' of completing

puzzles (Danesi, 2002). It is commonly associated with a strong sense of personal autonomy based on an *internal* locus of control; that is to say, people feel that they have control over their life (Gray, 2011). Work is said to be concerned with 'extrinsic' rewards: it is an instrumental decision that is motivated by compliance with an external source of control, such as the need for money (Deci, 1975) or the requirement to perform a task or job well (Lawler, 1973). It is commonly associated with a weak sense of personal autonomy based on an exterior locus of control – people feel that their decisions are controlled by circumstances not of their choosing (Gray, 2011).

Caillois (2001a, p.65) presents an image of play as containing elements of both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. As highlighted above, play is said to contain elements of 'mystery or riddle' as well as 'the need to prove one's superiority' or show a 'test' of strength. The issue is that under the rationalising conditions of modernity (that is, the drive to turn play into an obligation) societies tends to value games of *agôn* and the extrinsic rewards that they bring. And yet, one of the issues of Caillois' theoretical framework is that his discussion of how this process takes place remains underdeveloped. He simply states that players develop the 'habits' or 'reflexes' characteristic of the games that they play. This is problematic for two reasons. First, it 'elides' (Archer, 1995) structure and agency together. By which I mean that 'habit' or 'reflex' do not adequately capture the *reflexive imperatives* (Archer, 2012) that underwrite how players come to value extrinsic goals over intrinsic rewards. Second, these terms do not explain how the demands of working life may threaten the 'equanimity' with which players can treat games. Again, an analysis of human reflexivity is needed to appreciate how economic competition

prompts instrumentally rational behaviour. The social psychology Margaret Archer can help us address the problems raised here.

Human reflexivity

Margaret Archer (1995, 2007, 2012) has spent much of her academic career devoted to tackling the problem of structure and agency in social theory, and one of her most well developed concepts, 'human reflexivity', is often cited as a means of bridging the relationship between the two. It is defined as '…*the regular exercise of the mental ability to consider our selves in relation to our circumstances and vice versa*' (Archer, 2007, p.5). Archer argues that human reflexivity underwrites the kinds of choices that people make as they negotiate the contextual circumstances within which they are situated (including the rules of games).

This logic, and the philosophical reasoning that underpins it (see Bhaskar, 1997), is central to the work of Margaret Archer, whose study of human reflexivity insists on the need to *analytically distinguish* between structure and agency in order to avoid 'eliding' or 'conflating' them together *as one in the same process*; an issue that is common to actor-network theory's concept of the 'assemblage' (see Elder-Vass, 2015). Archer argues that the causally efficacious nature of any 'structure' – and the ludic conventions of games can be included here – cannot be determined without an appropriate account of how the 'agent' comes to reproduce these structures psychologically. Viewed in this way, games of *agôn* afford structural demands that players must negotiate reflexively – they must make choices – rather than simply relying on 'habit' or 'reflex' to solve problems.

Key to this perspective is Archer's defence of a first-person ontology, which she develops in order to explain the causal influence of our 'internal conversations'.

In her view, people exercise their human agency *through* their capacity to deliberate on the roles, rules and responsibilities that they confront in the world. Archer does not seek to reduce social action to these internal deliberations; on the contrary, she underwrites their significance precisely to preclude attempts (by other social theorists) to render agency in the third-person by way of structural or cultural properties. In other words, it is our process of 'inner reflexive dialogue' that needs to be explained when it comes to discerning how games shape people.

The overarching point is that reflexivity is considered key to explaining the *kinds* of choices that a person makes and how their inner thoughts inform their actions. This point is best encapsulated in her book *The Reflexive Imperative*, where Archer (2012) argues that reflexivity operates through distinct *modes* that are congruent with contextual circumstances. For the purposes of this article, I will focus on one modality, what Archer (2012, p.34) calls 'autonomous reflexivity', as it resonates with Caillois' claims that competitive games orientate people and cultures towards instrumental rationality.

Autonomous Reflexivity

Archer (2012, p.34) characterises autonomous reflexivity in a similar manner: as strategic decisions constituted through purposeful, self-contained and instrumental deliberation. This is said to be in contrast to other modalities of reflexive deliberation ('meta-reflexivity') that can lead to more empathic, self-other relations. Autonomous reflexivity is a self-self relation that emerges to advance the concerns of subjects directly:

> 'Because of the intrinsically competitive nature of these situations, subjects must determine where their own best interests lie and deliberate about the best means to achieve these ends… In other words, extreme practitioners of autonomous reflexivity come closest of all to act like the 'rational man' of Rational Choice Theory.'

Underlying this concept is Archer's broader point about human subjectivity under late modernity. Archer argues that today we face more and more choices (what she calls the 'situational logic of opportunity') given the tendency for variety to produce more variety. The arguments made here are quite intricate but their main ramification is that instrumental rationality becomes a way to balance the increasing time and economic demands placed on people's lives in contemporary Western or 'neoliberal' societies. The autonomous reflexive is said to make choices that meet their nascent concerns through the most *practical* and *strategic* means possible: allowing them to reach their ends quickly and efficiently. Importantly, Archer (2012, p.169) suggests that competitive actors are examples of autonomous reflexives. This is because such activities are seen to allow these subjects to re-affirm their independence and hone their sense of control over the world through practical endeavours. Archer (2012, p.169) cites competitive sports players as an example, suggesting that this group of people have a '*deep self-investment in the practical order*', and develop practice-based routines that help them achieve one central aim – to win.

Competitive Gameplay and Autonomous Reflexivity

We see can examples of autonomous reflexivity operating in research on competitive gameplay. For example, Mauricio, et al., (2015) suggest that the appeal of playing

Multiplayer Online Battle Areas, such as *DOTA 2*,[3] may be explained in terms of the challenges that 'hypothetico-deductive reasoning' brings. Based on an analysis of in-game behaviour, they argue that players enjoy generating and falsifying hypotheses in order to develop winning strategies. This often involves cues (or internal conversations) such as 'I think it is likely' or 'I think it is probable' as a means of selecting between the competitive demands that the game places on the players' time, resources and situated knowledge. From this perspective, what is considered 'skilful gameplay' in *DOTA 2* is the ability to methodically manage a number of competing demands, including map awareness/visibility, hiding information, and misleading the enemy, all for the purposes of winning. In *DOTA 2*, this means *minimising* what is known as 'feeding' (when you or your teammates repeatedly lose thereby providing the opposing team with resource/experience points) and *maximizing* resource/experience collection to help defeat the opposing team. This kind of cost-benefit logic presupposes a relatively autonomous but also highly rational subject: a player who initially derives (intrinsic) value from the challenge(s) of solving puzzles but often at the expense of creating a rather inflexible view of its ends (and how best to meet them).

This is precisely the concern that David Sudnow's (1983) phenomenological account of *BREAKOUT* raises – that a rational view of play awaits those who seek to establish a sense of autonomous skill through the methodical calculation of the game's rules. For Sudnow, his fixation with *BREAKOUT* stemmed from his attempt to find a pragmatic mathematical solution to achieve 'the perfect game'. This led him to spend hundreds of hours developing and testing formulas to check whether he was making progress. Sudnow used the term 'cathexis' to refer to the singular mental focus (or energy) that he invested into achieving this end. He concluded that such a

focus was unhealthy as his search for a mathematical solution to the game diverted his attention away from the 'fun' of play towards its 'perfect' ends. It also distracted his attention away from his family, friends and the filthy conditions that he had become accustomed to playing in.

There are many similarities between how Sudnow recounts his instrumental orientation towards *BREAKOUT* and the thinking associated with elite competitive gamers, particularly in South Korea. As Seo and Jung (2014) argue, South Korea is one of the major e-Sports hubs in the world, where competitive gaming has become a way of life for many young Korean men. *StarCraft II* is one of its most popular games and is played competitively by players of one of South Korea's top e-Sports teams – KT Rolster. As highlighted above, the main challenge of playing *Starcraft II* is multi-tasking – identifying threats, building units, and managing resources. To do this as quickly and efficiently as possible is considered characteristic of skilled gameplay. Readers may be familiar, for example, with the focus on a high APM or 'actions-per-minute' ratio as an indication of skill. This refers to the total number of actions that a player can perform in a minute. It tends to indicate what a player not only knows that to do in the game but also has the manual dexterity to carry it out. Beginners tend to have a low APM ratio, typically below 50. KT Rolster players, such as Lee 'Flash' Young-Ho, will have APM counts around 300-400. Such a High APM ratio alone does not indicate skill but when brought together with a reflexive knowledge of the game's rules and large time commitments, it is used to indicate a player who is operating at a 'mechanically flawless'[4] level.

From this perspective, the competitive rules of games can structure the kinds of internal conversations that people have. A sense of skill in competitive games appears to be established through finding solutions to problems quickly and

efficiently. Whilst it might be suggested that it is 'fun' to direct our thinking towards the resolution of these challenges, the search for the 'perfect' game can orientate player thinking towards instrumental ends, particularly as measures like APM indicate what constitutes a 'flawless' performance.

In the remaining section of this article, I will examine how the use of prizes and money in e-Sports further compounds this psychological process. In particular, I will argue that match fixing becomes a rationally justifiable option in a competitive context that establishes extrinsic rewards as the marker of skill and professionalism. Here, Caillois' warning about the rationalisation of play comes back into view: the alignment of gaming and work serves to control but also alienate players who have become dependent on its extrinsic rewards as a means of subsistence and personal identity.

Precarious Play: Match Fixing in e-Sports

Caillois (2001a, p.43-55) forewarns us about the 'institutional coupling' of play with financial and interpersonal competition. He suggests that play becomes 'contaminated' when the two domains become 'confused' and the player can no longer treat the game with 'equanimity' (2001b, p.159). In other words, when play becomes intractably tied to winning, whether for money, prizes or peer-gratification, self-control and poise are lost –players can no longer detach themselves from the game when their livelihoods are dependent on the extrinsic rewards it grants.

In the remaining section of this article, I will argue that the same is true of those players working towards professional recognition in e-Sports. An e-Sports career path is an uncertain one and I would like to consider how match fixing emerges as a rational decision – a strategy – within this precarious context.

Woodcock and Johnson (2016) argue that the professionalised context of competitive gaming needs to be understood as a form of precarious work. They suggest that professional players are the most precarious labourers in the entire of ecosystem of e-Sports, which includes sponsors, managers, publishers, and many others. Woodcock and Johnson (2016) justify their claim on three counts:

- Firstly, as in physical sports, youth is an essential requirement of professional gaming. World-class gamers cannot maintain their ability past the age of thirty with many retiring before that point. This is said to leave professional gamers in a state of career anxiety similar to that of physical sports but without the stable career opportunities (in TV, radio, and so on) available to them.
- Secondly, tournament income is a major source of subsistence for professional gamers, and this is an income steam that is uncertain and fragmented due to varying scope and size of competitions. *Some* e-Sports groups have begun to pay salaries but this is an uncommon practice and is underpaid. In their words, 'for all but a few, therefore, victory in tournaments in the primary method for acquiring financial security'.
- Thirdly, the political economy of e-Sports can be understood as an apex or pyramid with the successful elite very small in number compared to the tens of thousands of players who have seriously committed to the pursuit of professional play as a career. The result is that professional gaming is characterised as a risky career path that is 'extremely difficult' to pursue and relies on players developing strategies to 'bargain' with the financial and temporal demands placed on them.

To extend this position, I would argue that these precarious socio-economic conditions *structure* the development of an elite gamer 'mind-set' – the deployment of autonomous reflexivity to negotiate these demands in instrumental ways. As Dal Yong Jin (2010, p.82) argues, players like 'Flash' must spend 14- to 16-hours-a-day tapping away at a keyboard and mouse to establish the skill but also the *modus operandi* – the valued commitment – needed to 'make it' within this highly competitive and precarious career. As such, players will live in houses or flats that are designed like factories: with semi-private cubicles or rows of PCs with the sole purpose of maximising gameplay hours and minimising non-productive 'distractions', including contact with family, friends and intimate partners (Lee, 2015). Indeed, professional players must *prioritise* training regimes over interpersonal relationships, acknowledging that the temporal demands of girlfriends and/or other hobbies are detrimental to the focus needed for success (Thorin, 2014). Eating, sleeping, and regimes of personal hygiene are subject to the same processes of rationalisation or 'sacrifice' (Savov, 2014;). Everyday life becomes formulaic – a drive to 'min/max' their human subjectivity.

The dangers of this mind-set should not be understated. For once play has been turned into a productive activity, as Caillois warns (2001b, p.159), equanimity is lost, and the player is said to become dependent on the rules of the game to survive. Wark (2007) and Kirkpatrick (2013) have made a similar claim about contemporary social life: that competitive games are analogous to the working rules of neoliberal capitalism. These authors argue that the structure and culture that encircles competitive gaming resembles the principles that underwrite the contemporary political economy: that reality is presented as a level-playing field when in actuality the game is akin to a 'rat-race' that celebrates invidious competition and meritocracy.

From this perspective, instrumental rationality is a *necessary* and *sufficient* condition of both capitalism *and* competitive gaming. Kirkpatrick (2013, p. 21-23) draws this out in detail by suggesting that there is an equivalency behind the idea of 'playing well' and the manner in which workers approach the demands of the free-market. In his words, competitive games teach players how to 'streamline' themselves: to focus on performing well as a rational response to the precarious forms of working life that characterise modernity.

Viewed in this way, the ambiguity that characterises competitive gaming manifests itself in e-Sports as players simultaneously strive for success within a fragmented and uncertain ecosystem. I call this 'precarious play' and I would argue that match fixing is a logical outworking of its contradictory state: competitive players develop a highly instrumental mode of human reflexivity to negotiate the (extrinsically) dependent, yet also precarious futures that currently characterise e-Sports. This can be seen empirically in one case study.

Match fixing as a survival strategy

In a documentary with the US news organisation *VICE*, elite *League of Legends* (LoL) player Cheon 'Promise' Min-Ki, describes his transition into professional gaming and the consequences that it had on his life (Shea, 2015). It is one of the few biographical accounts of an e-Sports player that gives due consideration to the social, cultural and economic demands placed on those negotiating this emergent career path. The documentary describes Min-Ki's life history in detail, including the events that led up to his fears over unemployment, accusations about his match fixing, and the suicide attempt that followed his lifetime ban from South Korea e-Sports. This case

study is offered as evidence of the rationalisation of play through the instrumental decision(s) that faced him.

Like many young men in South Korea today, Min-Ki was introduced to the world of competitive video gaming out of necessity. 'I literally devoted myself to training to become a professional player, as I'm poor', Min-Ki tells the reporter, and 'The only meal I had was a pot noodle and two cans of coffee per day. Sometimes when I was training my fans asked me whether I was hungry and they would order me a delivery'. Dal Yong Jin (2010) argues that this is not an uncommon picture within South Korea. Many young men, like Min-Ki, are drawn to the allure of playing computer games professionally by the promise of wealth and success. But the psychological costs are great. Players become dependent on the sponsorship needed to fund daily practice routines. In his interview with *VICE*, Min-Ki suggests that such financial pressures finally pushed him to collude (with his manager Noh Dae Chul and the Korean e-gambling website *Toto*) to fix their competitive matches. Min-Ki recalls being acutely aware that his team would disband if he did not help them secure the funds needed to pay for food, rent, and equipment costs. It was at this point that Min-Ki realised that he had to make a choice:

> 'Honestly, I didn't want to do it. I simply wanted to play my game in my way. But if I didn't do it, they said there wouldn't be a future for me as a professional player. At the time I couldn't imagine that happening. Playing games… it was life or death for me.' (Shea, 2015)

This decision is an example of the negative effects of blurring work and play together, as with financial competition comes the rationalization of match fixing as a viable

choice in times of financial hardship and precarious employment.[5] Min-Ki decided to act out of economic necessity, and the team's potential bankruptcy provided the conditions of possibility – the urgency – for an autonomously reflexive decision. Further research reveals that the team's manager had urged Min-Ki to remain silent over the events, leveraging his professional career (and social mobility) against the demands of this emerging economic opportunity (Ashcraft, 2014).

Alienation

Viewed in this way, Caillois' warning about the rationalization of play in modern life appears prophetic: professional players are seen to be participating in a neoliberal system or 'game' where the odds are often stacked against them. They are encouraged to play well and act in a manner that maximises their chances of winning, whilst at the same time developing an instrumentality that will help them navigate the precarious employment relations that characterise the field. Play is no longer an escape from work, rather in its commodified form, professional gaming shapes human cognition towards more instrumental ways of being. The result can be seen as a contamination of play, particularly as the player rationalises an act like match fixing, which in effect is evidence of how autonomous reflexivity mediates a breakdown in the equanimity with which professional players treat ruled games.

The effect of this breakdown is captured by Caillois (2001b, p.159) who warns that players may be 'crushed' by its inherent risks (of blurring work and play). Min-Ki's instrumental commitment to competitive gaming nearly became his undoing, as the prospect of personal and professional failure was compounded with the economic need to match fix. The contradiction became unbearable – a point that is reflected well in his suicide note: 'After practicing to my best for a year, all I had left was a

feeling of emptiness' (Ashcraft, 2014). This bears striking resemblance to how Caillois (2001a, p.49) speaks of 'Alienation': the point at which the player can no longer recognise him or herself in the actions that the professionalized context has taken them towards. From this perspective, when the passion for winning through such hard work is set within a political economy that has many 'losers', professional players will make instrumental decisions that contaminate play and their understanding of how the game should be played. Playing well is no longer recognised as the only way to win. Match mixing is also a viable means of beating the game. Min-Ki is lost in the disconnection between the two. He no longer recognises the player that he has become: disenchanted with play as an economic object whilst also 'crushed' by his failure to actualise its extrinsic rewards. This is how precarious play has become.

Conclusion

This article sets out to defend Caillois' sociology of games and his warning that the 'rationalization' of play by reality can have a negative impact on people and society. I have tried to show that we can understand this process of rationalization through an analysis of human reflexivity and how it mediates the demands of the political economy of e-Sports. The major points of my argument are:

1. From a critical realist perspective, Roger Caillois' account of causality between the game, player and culture is ellisionist and lacks reflexivity as a mediating process. Margaret Archer's work helps here.
2. That a discussion of reflexivity prompts game studies to recognise that competitive games (*agôn*) shape human cognition towards patterns of

autonomous, instrumental action. Such patterns exist always *in relation* to the social and economic contexts in which these games are played.

3. In the professionalized context of e-Sports, case studies of *autonomous reflexivity* show that instrumental thinking mediates the choices that professional players make as these choices become a feature of their biographies.
4. Critical realism helps illuminate the psychological mechanism through which instrumental rationality becomes a *necessary* and *sufficient* condition of competitive gaming and capitalism. This is seen in contexts where professional players deploy autonomous reflexivity to find effective ways to establish a career.
5. Under conditions of intense competition and financial insecurity, professional players will make instrumental choices to try and endure. Match-fixing scandals support this point and show that this unsportsmanlike behaviour is mediated by autonomous reflexivity.
6. The contamination or corruption of play of which Caillois (2001a, 2001b) writes is seen in examples where the demands of work operate to breakdown the equanimity with which players treat gameplay. Caillois' account of 'alienation' captures this point: there is evidence to suggest that some e-Sports players no longer recognise whom they've become as the professionalized context pushes them to survive in conditions of extreme competition.

In closing, I would like to add that these points should remind us of Caillois' legacy: over half a decade ago his sociological project set out not only to typify games (a common focus in game studies) but to explore the morality of them. Like Johan

Huizinga (1938), Caillois was concerned that we were submitting ourselves to the 'games' of our societies, and that we should remain vigilant not to let them determine the character of our cultures and people. I hope that in refining Caillois' social ontology through an account of human reflexivity that more critical attention can be devoted to problematizing professional computer gaming from a sociological-psychological perspective.

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[1] For a realist rendering of the work Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois please see Phillip Mellor (2004). Mellor suggests that purpose of the *Collège de Sociologie* was to keep the idea of social realism alive through a connection with Durkheim's interest in explaining social (mal) integration. He rejects readings of Bataille and Caillois as postmodernist as a result.

[2] Roger Caillois appears to use the phrase to refer to 'function', which reflects the social order of Marcel Mauss' 'total social fact' (see Frank, 2003, p.110). Frank (2003) also suggests that much of Caillois' writing at this time moves away from his early embrace of surrealism to find a more stable source of the imagination: the cultural and material structures and patterns that animate collective life.

[3] DOTA 2 is a free-to-play multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) in which two teams of five players compete to collectively destroy a large structure defended by the opposing team known as the "Ancient", whilst defending their own. The game is considered to have elements typical to a real-time strategy game, like *Starcraft*.

[4] Liquipedia details what it is required to be become proficient at playing *StarCraft* http://wiki.teamliquid.net/starcraft2/How_to_Practice - accessed 5th June 2016.