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IGF 2018 LIGHTNING SESSION #23 Frags and Rushes: Esports and the digital competition explosion

"Frags and Rushes: Esports and the digital competition explosion"

Speakers

- Chung, Jennifer (AP, DotAsia Foundation)
- Datysgeld, Mark (LAC, Governance Primer)
- Camacho, Salvador (LAC, Kalpa Proteccion Digital)

Summary

Esports, the competitive version of video games, evolved from being the focus of a few passionate fans into an industry that regularly hands out prizes in the millions of dollars range. Still stigmatized for a perceived lack of legitimacy in relation to more traditional sports, these competitive games find great success especially among a younger generation that follows it largely by means of the Internet and streaming services, but also attend live events in arenas across the globe. The factor that is central to the success and development of esports is the Internet, and both players and spectators rely on its stability and predictability in order to enjoy the games. A connection with a low ping is key to keeping online matches fair and dynamic, but for that to be achieved, there are many factors that need to be accounted for, ranging all the way from quality of physical connections to the politics around prioritization of packets. In this flash session, we aim to bring this phenomenon closer to the Internet Governance sphere, and tentatively explore ways forward.

Agenda

Brief historical introduction

Current state of the industry

Digital business and sponsorships

Net neutrality and packet prioritization

Session Time:
Wednesday, 14 November, 2018 - 14:40 to 15:00
Theme: Evolution of Internet Governance   Report:

IGF 2018 Report for Lightning Session #23

"Frags and Rushes: Esports and the digital competition explosion"

Session link: https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/igf-2018-lightning-sess...

Timeslot: 14 November, 2018 - 14:40 to 15:00

Theme: Evolution of Internet Governance

Organizer: Chung, Jennifer (AP, DotAsia Foundation)

Speakers:

- Datysgeld, Mark (LAC, Governance Primer)
- Camacho, Salvador (LAC, Kalpa Proteccion Digital)

Objective

The session had the purpose of explaining to the IGF audience what Esports, the competitive version of video games, are and what is their relevance to the broader Internet Governance agenda.

Session report

The session began with a historical overview about the origins of Esports and how their growth took place. Mark Datysgeld explained how the practice began in the 1970s but was only made famous when Nintendo started sponsoring competitions between children, something which was featured on the movie *The Wizard.* Outside of that, most of the focus was on breaking records, as that was a tangible measure of skill in a given game that could be sent to magazines and such.

The scene kicked off for good in the 1990s with Quake, Counter-Strike (shooting genre) and StarCraft (strategy genre). The first big Quake tournament was held in 1997 and its prize was being able to drive the game developer's Ferrari; nowadays the prize pools of the major tournaments are in the millions of dollars' range, so the progress can be observed in numbers.

The panelists commented on how while in Brazil these games were played in cyber café style places called "LAN houses", in Mexico the scene was more focused on groups of friends playing locally. Only with the Internet did Esports really kick off, however, as it was the factor that enabled players from different regions to play together, and Eastern Asia saw deployment of the network quite early, which enabled South Korea to take an early lead in Esports, with a massive following of the StarCraft tournaments.

Salvador Camacho commented on how, as time went on, professionalization increased, with the assembly of leagues, associations, and major sponsorship deals. Different genres had their spotlight in different eras, with MOBA games being a hit in the early 2010s, and in the late 2010s we see a move towards so-called *battle royale* games such as Fortnite and PUBG. These competitive games find great success especially among a younger generation that follows them largely by means of online streaming services

Moderator Jennifer Chung brought to the table two questions that stand out in terms of Internet Governance: the business model and the matter of net neutrality. In terms of business models, it was discussed about how the monetization of games transitioned from a pay-upfront model to one centered around microtransactions.

This model can make games attractive for people initially and generate a more vibrant community, but it affects both the quality of the game and its final cost. As new gameplay modifications have to be introduced constantly to generate revenue, players that want to remain competitive need to continue spending money, only for their investment to be neglected later on because it unbalances the game, and the cycle continues, up to a point where the game saturates and dies off.

As for net neutrality, both players and spectators rely on the stability and predictability of the network order to enjoy matches. A connection with a low ping is key to keeping online matches fair and dynamic, but for that to be achieved, there are many factors that need to be accounted for, ranging all the way from quality of physical connections to the politics around prioritization of packets.

It was brought up that very few industries have the need for such time-sensitive delivery of packets. Ping times of over 100ms are common around the world, but what is considered a good Ping rate for Esports falls below the 30ms range. In that sense, would it be fair to charge extra from the players or from game developers for a prioritized delivery? Or does that ruin one of the great aspects of Esports, which is the horizontality and how almost anybody can become good at them?

While the panelists defended net neutrality, it was exposed how the question is a fair one to ask, and as Esports grow bigger, more competitive, and feature larger prizes, the discussion in bound to pick up steam at some point. Thinking up good ways to design Internet-focused policies that take into consideration gaming should be considered an important part of Internet Governance, and not a tangential footnote as it is in 2018.