

Ethics in Esports: A Look at Blizzard's Response to Democracy in Action

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Introduction

A new trend in the video game industry is the practice of watching esports (electronic sports), in which teams or individuals play competitively for an audience. One study found that (like traditional sports) people view esports to escape everyday life, for novelty's sake, and to watch the aggressive behaviors that athletes exhibit (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2016). This year marks the break of esports into over \$1 billion in revenue with over 450 million global viewers (Pannekeet, 2019). A popular esports tournament which receives thousands of viewers is *Hearthstone*, a card fighting game developed by Blizzard Entertainment. During its latest season, Blizzard banned an esports competitor for speaking out in support of the Hong Kong protests. The company's response lacked an understanding of how to maintain an effective relationship with their esports players and their audience by blatantly contrasting the values of the gaming community. This resulted in severe backlash from individuals across the world, and thus prompts a discussion of the ethics behind their decision. This paper will provide background on the case and analyze it via the values of community and free expression, and conclude with a final judgment.

Case Background and Details

On October 6, 2019, esports player and Hong Kong resident Chung Ng Wai celebrated the win of yet another *Hearthstone* match at a tournament in Taiwan. In his post-game interview, he yelled a common saying among Hong Kong protestors, "Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times" (Agencies, 2019, p. 2). He also wore a gas mask and eye goggles, gear typically worn by the protestors. The protests began peacefully in June 2019, in opposition to a bill that would allow the government to detain and transfer wanted individuals to China. A main criticism of the

bill was that if enacted, the government could potentially extradite any individual it wanted (Ives, 2019). The protests escalated after a series of brutal police responses involving severe beatings, arrests, and the use of tear gas. At the core of the movement is a desire to preserve the freedoms in Hong Kong. The region once belonged to the British until 1997, when it was given back to China. Though unlike the rest of the country, Hong Kong is able to maintain liberties such as unrestricted internet access, free speech, and the right to free assembly. The proposal of the extradition bill only amplified the growing sense that those freedoms might be violated by mainland China (Victor, 2019).

Standing up for one's beliefs would be applauded in most Western societies, especially when democracy is being impeded. However, Blizzard deemed Ng Wai's actions had violated the competition's rules, quoting from its handbook, "Engaging in any act that, in Blizzard's sole discretion, brings you into public disrepute, offends a portion or group of the public, or otherwise damages Blizzard image will result in removal from Grandmasters..." (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019, p. 12). The rule also states that prize money can be withdrawn by the company. On October 8, 2019, Ng Wai was officially banned from participating in *Hearthstone* competitions for twelve months (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019). His prize money earned during the season was revoked, which he claimed to be a total of \$10,000 (Agencies, 2019). The company also removed the video of the interview (Chokshi, 2019).

At a base level, esports cannot function without a relationship between the players and the companies that host tournaments. Players bring in audiences while companies provide the space and advertising. They both have different desires, too. Players are attempting to boost their gaming career while companies aim to maximize profits (Witkowski & Manning, 2018). If either party is to succeed, they must rely on this symbiotic relationship. Consequently, collaboration is

inevitable and inherent to the very definition of esports. In fact, the entire gaming community is driven by relationships. Strong themes among responses to the incident were those of community and free expression. It would be in Blizzard's best interest to inherit the same values as their audience, which should further be reflected in their actions. Had these two values been respected and utilized, it is unlikely the company would have encountered such controversy.

Ethical Criteria

Appiah's concept of cosmopolitanism helps shape an understanding of how Blizzard's response lacked integrity. Its focus is on the relationships we must cultivate, especially with those unlike us, due to the inherent connection we share as humans. This concept is present in the two strands of its definition: first that we have an obligation to others - not just those around us; second that we should value human lives by taking interest in an individual's practices and beliefs (Appiah, 2006). Under this ethical framework, we must move beyond the self to conceptualize ourselves as components of a larger system. Cosmopolitanism "begins with the simple idea that in the human community, as in national communities, we need to develop habits of coexistence..." (p. xix). We must take a step beyond tolerance of others to not only accept difference, but to learn from it. This requires an open exchange of views in which all parties should be heard. Appiah also notes that while we are to tolerate others and their opinions, there are some things an individual just cannot accept. Tolerance is a spectrum; at one end, we reach a point where we must speak out when we acknowledge something as a strong moral offense (Appiah, 2006). These are not the low stakes offenses we encounter daily, but rather acts that push beyond our ethical boundaries. Cosmopolitanism sets up a foundation for how we should interact with others (relationships) and allows diverse opinions to be heard (free expression). The absence of these concepts in this case point to potential areas of improvement for Blizzard.

With a framework for what went wrong, we must consider how to approach the situation presented in this case. Kidder (1995) provides a list of various ethical dilemmas one might encounter and principles with which to analyze and solve them. Among three of these principles is care-based thinking. It is described as, “putting love for others first... In other words, it asks you to test your actions by putting yourself in another’s shoes and imagining how it would feel if you were the recipient, rather than the perpetrator, of your actions” (p. 25). This approach is commonly known as the golden rule and prioritizes empathy. At the heart of this principle is the idea that we should think beyond our ourselves. A second principle is rule-based thinking. It is defined as, “Follow[ing] only the principle that you want everyone else to follow” (p. 24). It compels one to act in a way that sets a standard. When considering this principle, one must decide whether their actions are behaviors they want others to emulate. If the answer is no, it points to a decision that may not be ethically sound. By putting care- and rule-based thinking at the forefront of our ethical decision making, we are better equipped to make sound judgments.

Ethical Analysis

Appiah’s idea of cosmopolitanism and Kidder’s ethical principles work together to set up criteria that can help effectively analyze the situation. Cosmopolitanism went beyond theory and stepped into action when gamers worldwide shared their outrage at Blizzard’s decision under the hashtag #boycottblizzard. Several Twitter posts used inclusive language like “us” and “we.” (Appendix A-C.) This was indicative of the community gamers form in the industry. These posts came from individuals across the world bearing different values, cultures, and identities. Despite these differences, they responded almost as a singular unit, going as far as uniting under the phrase “gamers for freedom.” (Appendix B.) The obstruction of free expression was not just a personal offense, but an offense to the entire community. Regardless of whether they agreed,

they saw themselves as connected individuals who acknowledged a human right was being restricted.

Ng Wai further demonstrated cosmopolitan habits by speaking out against what he perceived to be an intolerable moral wrong. The brutal treatment of protestors in Hong Kong, paired with the legislative actions of the government required him to speak out. Unfortunately, Blizzard did not consider his words a valued opinion. The company's censorship is not far from Hong Kong's response to its protestors. In a way, they were silently supporting the government's tactics. The outrage was so egregious that Oregon Senator Ron Wyden posted on Twitter, "Blizzard shows it is willing to humiliate itself to please the Chinese Communist Party. No American company should censor calls for freedom to make a quick buck" (Wyden, 2019). Tencent, a major Chinese technology company, bought a 5% stake in Activision-Blizzard in 2013, which helped the company separate from its parent (Messner, 2019). This was noted by several gamers, with many commenting on how the freedom of speech had been obstructed to serve Chinese interests (Appendix C-D).

Whether there is truth in this skepticism, the situation called for a better response from Blizzard. A more sympathetic, care-based approach certainly would have prevented the backlash they received. The company should have placed itself in Ng Wai's shoes: a young man seeing an injustice and voicing his opinion. They would then not only begin to understand Ng Wai's perspective but begin to see the relationship between them. As a U.S. company, they should share similar values. However, Blizzard claims it values the voices of its players and employees. An excerpt from their mission statement says:

Every voice MATTERS. Great ideas can come from anywhere.

Blizzard Entertainment is what it is today because of the voices of our players and of each member of the company. Every employee is encouraged to speak up, listen, be respectful of other opinions, and embrace criticism as just another avenue for great ideas (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019, p. 1).

Blizzard's actions blatantly contradict their statements. The company appears to be floating between two points: free expression and censorship. Despite being a U.S. company, they acted in direct opposition to the country's values. If we were to consider their actions a standard for everyone to follow, the world would be ruled by silence. No one would be allowed to share their views and we would miss the opportunity to learn valuable lessons from one another. Their response contrasts cosmopolitan values; it shows they have little tolerance for coexistence and allowing people to be heard.

As much as Blizzard would like to avoid it, issues experienced outside the gaming world are going to be present in digital contexts, especially in competitive settings (Weiss & Schiele 2013). Preventing individuals from speaking out on events that affect them most is an unrealistic and callous resolution. Pairing a rule-based approach with the care-based approach would set forth a standard of empathy and an appreciation of free expression. The company would then fully embody its values by its actions. In doing so, it would not only be known for its games but its integrity and its relationship with its audience.

Conclusion

Blizzard's response to Ng Wai's statement speaks to a greater problem of cultivating and maintaining relationships. When we recognize our connectedness and appreciate one another, we allow people to express themselves. There are various other issues esports players encounter with the companies that sponsor them, from where they can play to who they can play with. If we are inevitably connected and reliant on one another, we should be more relationship focused and work to build a sense of understanding. This case study should prompt more discussion about the significance of diverse relationships in the gaming industry and how political or business interests may impede these relationships.

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Appendices

Appendix A



Appendix B



Appendix C



Appendix D

