

A League of Their Own: The Evolution of Professional Video Gaming

Some games live, most games die, and every once in a while a game evolves. One need only look as far as the Thanksgiving holiday for examples. To pass the time between the big meal and Black Friday shopping (where you can find great prices on new games), families will often break out the cards or a board game. Instead of playing *Tabula*, *Parcheesi*, or *Poker*, they will more likely play their evolved counterparts: *Sorry!*, *Backgammon*, or *Texas hold 'em*. In many ways it has been the game *type* (or genre), rather than the game itself, that has survived. With video games there has been a similar evolution, albeit at a much more rapid pace.

In 1992 the first modern first person shooter (fps) *Wolfenstein 3D* burst onto the computer gaming scene, followed a year later by the uber popular *Doom*. In less than twenty years the fps genre has evolved to the point where at least one fps game is included in every major professional video game competition or tournament, with annual prize money now measured in the millions. Often referred to in short hand as e-sports, current popular titles such as the fps *Counterstrike*, the real time strategy (rts) *Starcraft*, the sports game *FIFA*, and fighting game *Street Fighter* show up at most major e-sports events. While sexy, visceral on screen action may be what we typically think of when we think e-sports, savvy producers have managed to find a formula for creating a pleasurable viewing experiences without overly emphasizing these more primitive elements. With the use of experienced players as announcers, gaming broadcasts now feature articulate and nuanced descriptions of the strategies and tactics of the players employ during the matches.

Even so, in many ways professional video gaming, as a spectator sport, is much like soccer. That is, from the perspective of the non-player it is boring. While a soccer player watching the game might enjoy a ninety minute, one-nil contest, a non-player would probably last less than ten minutes before getting up to do something more "interesting." It is not that one is right and the other wrong, but simply that the player, having played the game, can appreciate the subtle strategies and nuances on the pitch, and need not see a goal every five minutes. As with soccer, it is very difficult to watch and enjoy a professional videogaming event if you have not played the game. As such, it typically takes years for a new game genre to build up a big enough base of players to warrant inclusion in the professional video gaming circuit. In 2011, a new game genre, the multiplayer online battle arena (moba), bucked this trend and stormed onto the professional video gaming scene.

Moba games are spin-offs of the real-time strategy genre, specifically of the 2003 *Warcraft III* custom scenario *Defense of the Ancients*, or Dota for short. Dota actually proved to be nearly as popular as *Warcraft III* itself, and built up a sizable fan-base and following. The fan-base was big enough that in 2008 a team of developers, including the original Dota designer, Steve "Guinsoo" Feak, formed *Riot Games* and produced the 2009 moba game *League of Legends (LOL)*. As it turned out, Dota was to the moba genre as *Wolfenstein 3D* was to the fps genre: the beginning of something much, much bigger. In two short years since its release in, *League of Legends* is now included in high profile professional gaming competitions like the *World Cyber Games*, the *Intel Extreme Masters*, and *Dreamhack*. Over 1.6 million viewers tuned in to the live broadcast streams of the *Dreamhack* tournament itself. And while its predecessor may have had a sizable following, *Riot* reports that LOL currently has over 15 million players (at its peak, *World of Warcraft* had 11.2 million subscribers), with approximately 1 million playing each day.

For my part, I was introduced to the game about a year ago. To me it is the amalgamation of all that is good in multiplayer gaming, and I've never had a multiplayer game experience quite like it (the closest would be *Guild Wars*). In particular, as a very busy professor, husband, and father of three, time has always been the limiting factor for me. The ability to play for short periods of time, with days or weeks between plays, was simply not a viable option in the typical pay for play multiplayer game models. LOL, on the other hand, is free to download, free to play, and features great strategic, team-based gameplay. To put it simply, it presses all the right buttons. And like soccer, which is to me the most

highly evolved team sport on the planet, *League of Legends* is the most highly evolved multiplayer video game on the planet. *League of Legends* and the multiplayer online battle arena genre that it represents are here to stay, and professional video gaming is very much well and alive. I can't wait to see what comes next on the evolutionary ladder.

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