Embodied Virtual Capital:

The Neoliberal Rationality of Aspiring Electronic Athletes

By

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BA., University of Victoria, 2021

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We acknowledge and respect the Lək̓ʷəŋən (Songhees and Xʷsepsəm/Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Lək̓ʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

Esports entail competitive video game play for cash prizes and thus have become a career choice. Whereas once video games were strictly a leisurely activity, today, for elite gamers, they have become a viable profession. This thesis documents aspiring electronic athletes who seek to fashion professional careers playing video games. This thesis uses the concept of neoliberal rationality to analyze the embodied practices and forms of self-discipline in which aspiring electronic athletes engage. Using a combination of methods, including ethnography, interviews, surveys, and autoethnography, this thesis develops the concept of embodied virtual capital to document the techniques and practices aspiring electronic athletes undertake in their pursuit of careers as professional gamers. Building on Michel Foucault's analysis of the centrality of human capital to neoliberal rationality (Foucault 2008), embodied virtual capital captures the embodied practices undertaken by electronic athletes as they work the interface between physical technologies and virtual worlds on the pathway toward earning future livelihoods.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, who continually pushed me to strive for greater education and to pursue my passions. I cannot thank you enough. To my brother Leandro, I hope to inspire you and instill a desire to learn that will guide you as you continue to grow. To my partner, Ellice, I thank you for your encouragement and willingness to listen to me share ideas, support me through challenges, and for always being there for me. Lastly, to my group of gaming friends, many of my interests would not have been developed without our time playing together. Thank you. And to all my friends and family, thank you for believing in me!

Acknowledgments

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Chapter 1. Setting the Stage: An Introduction to Esports and Electronic Athletes

Introduction

On the last night of my time at the Vancouver Island Local Fight Nights, I found myself sitting high up in the lecture hall, sitting in the second-to-last row of long desks and swivel chairs. As I swayed from side to side in my chair, I watched as the players continued to play, laughing with one another, sharing food, sharing controllers, and showcasing the strong community Nick and others had created. I watched as the participants, who had shared so much with me over the past few weeks, continued in their journey as aspiring professional electronic athletes engaging with the gamepads that had sparked much debate. After some time, I returned to my notebook to continue to write down my notes, and to begin to disassociate myself from the world I had thrust myself into. I found myself saddened that my time of research had come to an end, but simultaneously excited and grateful for the new experiences I had. Eventually, I took my eyes off my notebook and looked up and saw one of my participants smiling at me and heading my way. He began climbing the many stairs of the lecture hall, placing his left hand on each row of desks as something to push off of to help him up the stairs. As he approached me, he said, "You weren't going to just leave and not say goodbye, were you?" I assured him I was not, but had simply come up here to continue to observe as I had on my very first day. He shuffled his way through the tight space between swivel chairs and desks to sit beside me. We began to talk, reflecting on my time and sharing my gratitude for being welcomed with such open arms. After many thanks, he laughed and told me that after my first time at the event, he was certain I would not return, and asked what made me want to come back. I explained that I had become fascinated by the different forms of controllers and the reasons behind the usage of one over another. He

continued to laugh, hitting the table as if I had just told a hilarious joke. He explained that it was funny I found that so interesting because to him and everyone here, it was just a no-brainer to pick one over the other. He explained that "buying a better controller or changing to a new and better one for me is an easy decision. I want to win, and if I want to win, I have to give myself the best chance possible and that's something I am willing to spend money on." I replied ecstatically by saying "I know and that's so interesting," he laughed once again. He further added that "to me it only makes sense that I have to spend some money, if I am going to get to the level I want to be at and make money and compete, spending money on my gamepad seems like a no brainer if it's going to give me some sort of advantage and a chance at becoming a pro." Whilst this was the final conversation I had during my time at the Vancouver Island Local Fight Night, it encapsulated what I had sought out to better understand and what this thesis aims to explain.

The participant had highlighted what numerous of my participants similarly echoed, that aspiring electronic athletes, players seeking to become professionals at esports, are willing to engage in the purchasing of better and increasingly expensive gaming equipment to eventually profit from game playing. This sentiment was observed extensively during my time attending the Vancouver Island Fight Night Local events, where conversations with attending aspiring electronic athletes pursuing careers in the fighting game Tekken 8, indicated that purchasing new gaming equipment for competitive advantages was non-negotiable. I considered these actions through neoliberal rationality, which I define as the extension of economic rationality to a domain not previously conceptualized in economic terms. It was through this process that I was able to conclude that aspiring electronic athletes do engage in neoliberal rationalized processes. However, I must make it clear that the participants were not, to my knowledge, conscious of the concept of neoliberal rationality. This process was one of the many comprehensive examples of

how the practices, methods, techniques, and decision-making of aspiring electronic athletes illustrated "the introduction of economic rationality and calculation into a set of domains that were previously organized in ways that did not strictly conform to the logics of the market" (Rudnyckyj 201, 21). Specifically, I assert that the common conception of video games is that they are strictly a leisure activity, and while for some this may remain true, it is irrefutable that video game play has become a domain filled with players playing for the accrual of various forms of capital, which I seek to understand through the use of neoliberal rationality. Applying neoliberal rationality to the actions of aspiring and electronic athletes allowed me to further understand why aspiring and electronic athletes make the decisions they make and therefore, understand how esports have become a neoliberal domain. In essence, I use neoliberal rationality as a means for understanding the pursuits of aspiring electronic athletes in their efforts to fashion themselves as professional gamers. In addition, throughout this process, aspiring electronic athletes actively engage with physical technologies, e.g., video game controllers, keyboards, mice, or monitors to enact virtual actions and accrue capital. To understand this, this thesis develops the notion of embodied virtual capital to illustrate how players engage through their bodies with physical technologies, in order to accrue capital through virtual worlds.

Embodied Virtual Capital

Much like Uperesa (2022) elected to develop a specific term for investigating the accumulation of human capital of Samoan American Football players inspired by Smith (1776), Becker (1993), and Foucault (2008), I suggest that when electronic athletes undergo a similar process of commodification, they acquire what I term embodied virtual capital. Embodied virtual capital is acquired through both physical and virtual actions alongside actions and decisions that

are indicative of an extension of neoliberal rationality to a domain not previously understood to be economic, i.e., esports. While terms like human capital are useful in understanding these processes, esports provide a unique and complex space that requires the development of new concepts and terminology. Specifically, due to the meshing of both physical and virtual actions, I opt to use the term embodied virtual capital, as the practices electronic athletes engage in transcend the boundaries of exclusively physical actions and decisions commonly understood in human capital theory. While electronic athletes do engage with physical technologies and infrastructures, such as their keyboard, mouse, gaming controller, gamepad, internet connections, monitor, and so on, and these interactions do play a role in their pursuit of capital, players' capital is extracted from a virtual world, their video game of choice. Without this virtual world, electronic athletes' bodily actions of pressing keys, clicking their mouse, or pressing buttons on their controllers have no true value but are only made valuable through the actions they enact virtually. Thus, the physical actions of clicking one's keyboard to move their character or clicking one's mouse to shoot an enemy are what allow electronic athletes to accrue capital, specifically, I argue, embodied virtual capital. To summarize, embodied virtual capital examines the process where players make a bodily action (such as pressing a key on their keyboard to move or pressing their mouse to shoot), this is then interpreted by the keyboard and sent to the computer, which enacts the command for their avatar (their in-game character), who then performs a virtual action. It is from this virtual action that capital can be formed, and the outcome of this action is sent back to the player in the form of virtual capital, which is then embodied by the player, becoming embodied virtual capital (figure 1). This capital is embodied as it shapes their decisions, actions, and identities. In addition, I acknowledge the importance of decision-making for electronic athletes such as deciding on purchases, or developing methods of

practice or training regimens, which are best understood through the notion of neoliberal rationality. While I build upon human capital as used by Schultz (1963), Becker (1993), Foucault (2008), Lowe and Sharp (2021), and Uperesa (2022), I distinguish embodied virtual capital from the former, due to the space in which electronic athletes accrue capital, a liminal zone between, and across, physical and virtual worlds.

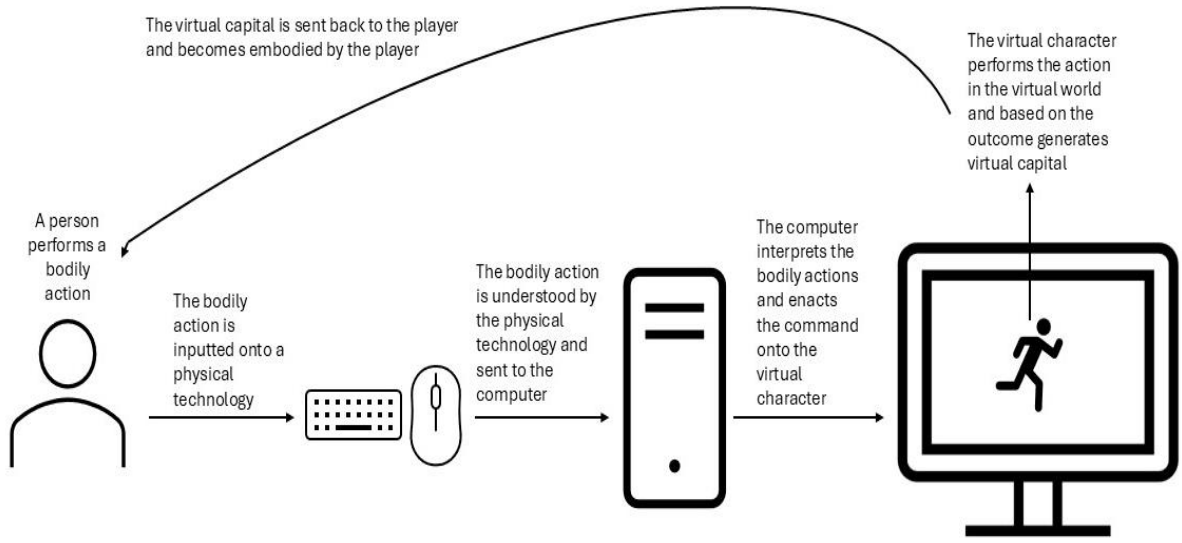

Figure 1 - A graphic of how embodied virtual capital works.

Situating Esports

Esports are the pinnacle of competitive video game playing, functioning similarly to physical sports leagues where only the top athletes, which I term professional electronic athletes, are invited to participate in publicly broadcasted leagues, tournaments, and events where they compete against one another for the chance to win prize money and move up in the rankings (Lux et al. 2019). Fortune Business Insight reports that the "global eSports market is projected

to grow from $USD1.44 billion in 2022 to $USD5.48 billion by 2029, at a CAGR[1] of 21.0% in the forecast period, 2022-2029" (Fortune Business Insight 2022). In addition, Newzoo reported that the "games-livestreaming audience reached almost 810 million in 2021 and is expected to reach 1.41 billion by 2025" (Newzoo 2022). However, it is hard to quantify just how many people on average are watching esports, as esports includes any video game being played at the highest level that includes paid athletes and prize pool tournaments. However, games like League of Legends have seen increasingly high all-time peak viewership numbers such as during the 2024 World Championship which reached a peak of 6,856,769 viewers and an average of 1,731,157 viewers (escharts 2024). For scale, during the 2024 Major League Baseball season ESPN's Sunday Night Baseball had "an average audience of 1,505,000 viewers" (Major League Baseball 2024). While impressive, esports still have far to go to rival the most popular of sports such as the Premier League with an average of "600 million viewers per match" (Moore 2024) or the staggering "1.87bn people [who] follow the Premier League worldwide, interacting at least weekly through media" (Premier League 2024). Additionally, it is important to note that the peak viewership during the 2024 World Championship was for the final event of the year, much like a more traditional sports post-season or playoffs. This is where esports remain behind; the Major League Baseball World Series had an average viewership of 18.6 million and a peak of 21,268,000 viewers (SVG Staff 2024), one of the lowest out of (commonly considered) traditional sports. Esports still remain noticeably behind more traditional sports viewership numbers however, the use and inclusion of live streaming, in-person events, tournaments, and

[1] CAGR stands for compound annual growth rate.

leagues offer a clear and undeniable resemblance. While the question of whether esports are a sport or not has been a long point of contention (see Hallmann and Giel 2018; Tjonndal 2020; Brain et al. 2024) I opt to place esports into the category of other more traditional sports such as soccer, baseball, basketball, American football, and so on. I reason that esports have gone through an extensive form of "sportification" which has seen the use of "aspects of sports that are widely perceived as positive are evoked to promote a familiar sense of popularity, engagement, entertainment, and excitement in the non-sports activity" (Cummings et al. 2022, 258). For esports, this has manifested itself through "major tournaments [which] are now commonly held in prominent stadia filled with spectators, harnessing the sense of grandeur and professionalism" (Cummings et al. 2022, 258). Making esports conceptually indistinguishable from more traditional sports.

Furthermore, in recent times, electronic athletes, to refer to the embodied dispositions in which video game players engage to become well-compensated esports professionals, have become much like the traditional sport athletes often idolized in modern media. For example, retired Valorant superstar Tyson "Tenz" Ngo has 1.4 million followers on Instagram (@tenzofficial) at the time of writing, while the starting point guard for the 2025 NBA All-Star game Jalen Brunson has 748,000 followers on Instagram (@jalenbrunson1). While this may be an isolated situation, it still must be said that electronic athletes have transcended the often thought of niche area and become well-known professional athletes. Additionally, the well-known trope of gamers as being "young men, [who] are too fat or too skinny, too pale, socially awkward or inexperienced, often single, living in their parents' basements or attics and living off fast-food and mountain dew" (Skoglund 2018, 21), perpetuated by much of the media only a decade ago has seen a rapid decline. With initiatives like the Gucci Gaming Academy which was

launched on May 22nd, 2022, through a collaboration between FACEIT[2] and Gucci. The Gucci Gaming Academy has the objective of "developing gifted CSGO players into professional esport athletes" (Gucci 2023). This campaign by Gucci is highlighting the new era of professional gamers by depicting them as high-end celebrities making money, dressing fashionably, and capable of affording luxury brands like Gucci. With these examples, we see how the process of sportification has subjected esports to a form of authenticity (Heere 2018, Cumming et al. 2022).

Terminology

Individuals who play video games have various names, however, the most pertinent is the term gamer, which can be applied to anyone who plays any sort of video game. This could range from a game on a phone or handheld device to the same games played by professionals who make an income. However, for the purpose of this research, distinctions must be made between various levels of play. Through my research, I identified four distinct levels of play, therefore, I elected four terms: gamer, competitive gamer, aspiring electronic athlete, and electronic athlete.

A gamer, as previously stated, is anyone who plays any sort of video game, it could be said that a gamer is anyone who plays any game, including non-digital ones, however, for the purpose of this research, gamer refers to those who play video games. Additionally, they are, in this case, someone who simply plays for fun, as a way to pass time, or hang out with friends. A competitive gamer is much like a gamer however, their desires to play divert from passing time and having fun to having set out goals that are taken seriously. A competitive gamer might participate in training or self-investment as described by Foucault (1978) and typically these

[2] FACEIT is an external server for Counter Strike players to compete on.

competitive gamers find themselves playing in groups of other competitive gamers. However, competitive gamers do not make income, nor do they typically have the goal of making a career out of gaming, instead their drive often comes from a self-satisfying need or competitive drive they possess. Aspiring electronic athletes are the central group that this research focuses on. Aspiring electronic athletes have a strong desire for self-satisfaction however, their desire surpasses that of self-satisfying personal goals that anyone might have and instead desires for careers, fame, and the ability to make an income from gaming, as a form of upward mobility, become essential to their game playing. Often, these aspiring electronic athletes have regimented training schedules, invest their own money into better equipment, play exclusively with other aspiring electronic athletes, and have a clear goal of becoming an electronic athlete. While I call them aspiring electronic athletes, they are still to be considered as athletes, they are only aspiring to become professionals not to become athletes. Electronic athletes are the pinnacle of video game play; they participate at the highest level of playing and simultaneously make an income. These athletes are part of organized teams and leagues which pay their athletes monthly salaries to play and have prize pools for tournaments. Those in this category have also been known as professional esports players, professional gamers, esports players, digital athletes (Flores 2022), or even simply gamers. I use the term electronic athletes as electronic refers to any piece of equipment that runs on electricity, such as mice, keyboards, or headsets, with which electronic athletes are constantly engaged. A term such as digital is sufficient, however, digital typically refers to data that is represented by binary code such as the game itself on the monitor, which neglects to showcase the importance of other technologies such as the physical keyboard, mouse, or gaming controller. It is because of this that I use the term electronic athletes, as many of those I interviewed spoke of the importance of the physical technologies along with the game being

displayed on their monitor. In addition, much like Taylor (2016) who professed that although the importance of gaming equipment is known by scholars, it has been overlooked as electronic athletes' engagement with technology is at the core of esports play. For this reason, I pay attention to the material infrastructures and technologies used by players. That being said, esports could not exist without the video games being played, while there are numerous games, I have elected to focus my research on the following three esports.

The Games of Choice

When setting out to conduct my research, I had three main games in mind: Counter-Strike: Global Offensive One and Two, and Valorant. I reasoned that I was familiar with both games and had played both extensively. At the time of writing, I have over 1000 hours played in CS:GO and CS2, and over 650 hours in Valorant. While I do not play either frequently anymore, I spent plenty time learning each game and following the esports extensively. Therefore, by choosing these games I would negate the need of having to spend additional time understanding the games I am researching. However, while I did focus heavily on players in CS:GO, CS2, and Valorant, I eventually found myself conducting ethnographic research on Tekken 8 players, a game I had no prior background knowledge of. I approached Tekken 8 as a research project, learning about the history, the current state of the esports, and the premise of the game. While I did not per say choose to investigate players of Tekken 8, instead an opportunity emerged that I as a researcher could not overlook therefore, leading me to focus on it as the third game studied.

Valorant

Valorant is a free-to-play first-person tactical shooter (FPS) developed and released by Riot Games on June 2, 2020. FPS games are a "mixture of strategy, fragging (killing) and completing an objective such as capturing a flag or setting off a bomb at a specific point on the map" (Chaloner 2020, 17) Valorant is the esport of focus for the research as it is the esport with which I am the most familiar, actively play, best understand, and is the most recent of the mainstream esports. During the Valorant's Champions Tour 2024: Masters Madrid, viewership hit 1,687,848, making it the 8th highest-ever concurrent viewership from any esports event (escharts 2025). Matches in Valorant consist of five players per team who select specific agents (characters or avatars) that have unique abilities. Matches are split into two halves; the first half will always have twelve rounds played, whereas the second half plays out until one team has reached thirteen round wins. If by the end of the second half, the match is tied at twelve to twelve, the game will enter into an overtime mode where the first team to win two rounds in a row wins the match.

Valorant's game objective is modelled after the famous first-person tactical shooter mode search and destroy, which sees teams playing as either the terrorists (attackers) or the counter-terrorists (defenders). Valorant uses the terms attackers and defenders instead of the traditional terrorists versus counter-terrorists. The attacker's objective is to infiltrate the bomb site that the defenders are defending, plant a bomb and have it detonate after 45 seconds. For the defenders, the objective is to either deter the attackers from planting until the round timer of one minute and 45 seconds runs out, or if the bomb is planted, the defenders must defuse the bomb before the time runs out. Both teams have the ability to win a round by eliminating all their enemies during

the round timer. For the defenders, if the bomb is planted and all enemies are eliminated the bomb still must be defused to win the round.

For almost all first-person tactical shooters, there is an included element of competitive play where players play games to acquire rank points or match-making rating (MMR). One can think of MMR as a visible number that represents one's ability and skill level in the corresponding video game. For example, if we had an MMR scale out of 100, with 100 being the very best, someone with a score of 80 would be considered better at all aspects of the video game compared to someone with a score of 30. For first-person tactical shooters, these numbers or MMR are dynamic, meaning that when one receives a rating, one can move up and down the points system. Simply put, when one plays a game of competitive Valorant for example, one will be matched up against players with a similar MMR, meaning someone with a score of 80, will play against and with others with a score around 80 and based on the outcome of the match one will either add to or subtract from their score of 80 or in game terms, their MMR. If one wins,

one will gain MMR, if one loses, one will lose MMR. For Valorant, this is tracked through their ranked system which is pictured below (figure 2)

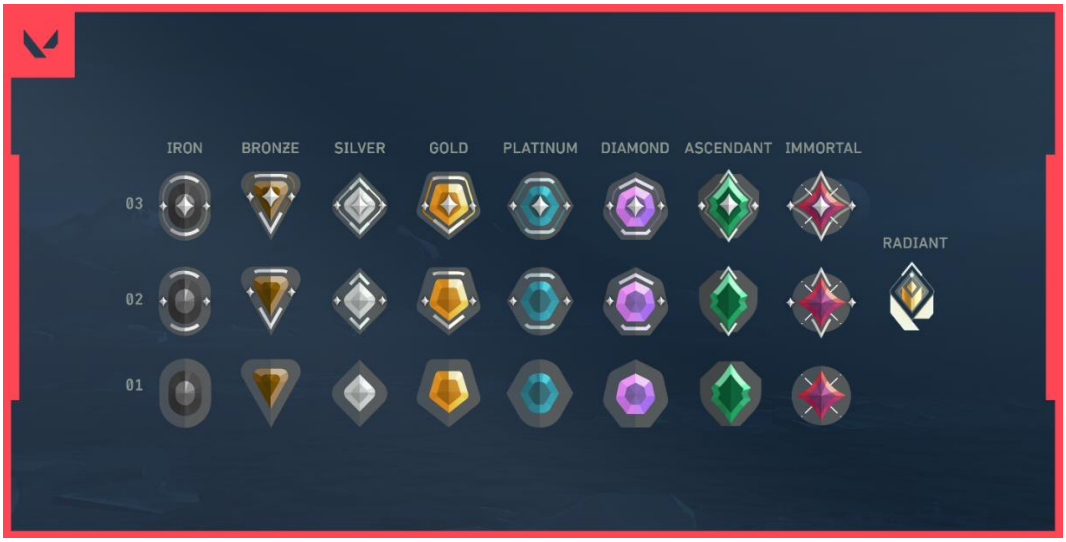

Figure 2 - Valorant's ranked system.

The lowest rank is iron one which contains about 1.4% of the total player base, however, in total the iron ranks make up a total of 11% of the total player base. The highest rank is radiant which makes up 0.026% of the player base and accounts for 235 total players (tracker.gg 2025), mainly occupied by well-accomplished electronic athletes.

Counter-Strike: Global Offensive 1 & 2

Counter-Strike is a franchise of first-person tactical shooter games developed by Valve. The first game in the franchise simply known as Counter-Strike was released in 2000, followed by Both Counter-Strike: Condition Zero and Source in 2004, Counter-Strike: Global Offensive

(CS:GO) in 2011, and Counter-Strike 2 (CS2) in 2023.[3] While the franchise has released five games no other has captivated the esports scene quite like CS:GO, however, with the release of CS2, CS:GO is no longer playable. Much like Valorant, CS is a first-person tactical shooter (FPS) where teams of five players compete with each other in a game of search and destroy. On a gameplay standpoint CS has one major difference from Valorant, CS does not have the included roles and abilities that characters in Valorant have. Instead, all players are identical and what role they assume is up to their team. Additionally, whereas Valorant ranks fourteenth all-time as an esport, CS ranks as the second most popular esport through a combination of prize pools, viewership, and total amount of tournaments held (escharts.com/top-games 2025). Arguably, CS is a more popular esport; the latest CS2 tournament IEM Katowice 2025 reached 1,299,747 peak viewership, while Valorant's latest tournament VCT 2025: Americas Kickoff reached less than half of that, with 553,842 peak viewership (escharts.com/top-games 2025). CS and CS:GO have had a long life in the esports industry, whereas Valorant's recency is likely the reason for the large disparity in statistics.

Much like Valorant, CS2 also has a distinctive form of ranking players through their MMR system. Unlike Valorant, CS2 has two modes of play that track players' MMR, the first is called competitive, which tracks MMR through a ranked system, like Valorant's pictured below (figure 3)

[3] I will refer to the franchise as CS, Counter-Strike: Global Offensive as CS:GO, and Counter-Strike 2 as CS2.

Figure 3 - CS2's competitive game modes ranked system.

The second is known as premier which is the true competitive mode in CS2, whereas the competitive would more accurately be named as a casual mode. CS2's premier ranked system also works on an MMR scale but instead of representing MMR through ranks, it does so through the actual MMR data, as seen below (figure 4).

Figure 4 - CS2's premier ranked modes MMR system.

In CS2, the lowest rank in the ‘competitive mode’ is Silver One, however much like Valorant where there are tiers in the ranks, the actual rank of Silver accounts for approximately 29% of all players, whereas the highest rank known as global elite includes approximately 1.2% of the rank distribution (Anderson and Hsieh 2024). In CS2’s ‘premier mode’ the ranks are represented by the raw MMR data (figure 4). Therefore, the lowest rank is anything below an MMR rating of 5,000 which accounts for 17.6% of the player base, while the highest MMR rating of anything 30,000 MMR accounts for 0.01% of the total player base, which much like Valorant is mainly composed of well-accomplished electronic athletes.

Tekken 8

Tekken 8 is the latest entry in Bandai Namco’s long-running 3D fighting game series. Originating on arcade machines, Tekken is a classic arcade game beloved by many around the world. In Tekken, players engage in one versus one combat, using a variety of fighting styles based on the character of choice. The Tekken 8 esports scene is quite popular, however, falls far behind in overall popularity when compared to Valorant and CS2. Tekken 8’s peak viewership came during the Evolution Championship Series held in 2024, where it hit a peak of 275,644 concurrent viewers (escharts 2025)

Positionality

I acknowledge my positionality as a Latin American Canadian-born cis-gendered male. I identify as a visible minority and therefore, must navigate spaces that are still addressing racialized colonial exclusions. Along with my racial identity, my position as a cis-gendered male

researching an area that has largely excluded women despite women accounting for up to 46% of all gamers (Crothers et al. 2024) is a critical frame for this research. Two of the participants in this research consistently reminded me of the difficulties that women face as aspiring electronic athletes or even just as women in the esports industry.

I would also like to make it clear from the onset that I would consider myself to be a competitive gamer and an avid fan of the esports industry. I do not make money. I play for fun, but my main desire to play video games comes from my desire to compete. Throughout my life, video games have been a significant venue for expression, community, and self-actualization that has led to friendships and experiences that all shape my perspective and feelings towards video games and esports. In combination, these characteristics may create an optimistic bias toward the esports industry. However, I believe that, if anything, my position as a competitive gamer and fan enriched my research and conversations with participants.

Research Motivations

During the final year of my undergraduate degree, I took the course Advanced Economic Anthropology. In this class, we were tasked with applying theories from economic anthropology to an area we assumed would have no connection. The challenge was to look for ways in which theory from economic anthropology could illuminate aspects of an ethnographic context. At the time, I was spending the majority of my time outside of school either working or playing the newly released game Valorant. I remember thinking, could esports have any similar economic logics to those we had been discussing in class? Additionally, I found it fascinating that I had the opportunity so late in my undergraduate degree to write about a topic I had an extremely personal interest in. It was from this work that my research idea began to develop.

I began to engage with how electronic athletes may fashion themselves as well-paid athletes and if their methods were similar to the neoliberal rationality as described by Michel Foucault (1978). Eventually, I landed on exploring if there were similar neoliberal economic market logics occurring in the esports market. This eventually became my final paper for the course, titled "The Economic Rationale of the Esports Market," which was one of the few papers I was excited to write. Following the paper submission and feedback from Dr. Rudnyckyj, I followed up with him about whether my topic had the potential to be explored further, and he excitingly told me yes, however, he made sure to explain that he was no expert on video games or esports. However, his enthusiasm for my topic and desire to learn more motivated me to continue researching and developing a topic that could be studied at the master's level. As someone who loves video games, esports, and anthropology, the idea that I could spend time studying all three, motivated me to pursue anthropology as a discipline. Ethnography as a method of research was a large driver of my motivation, as conducting my own research with participants was a goal of mine from the onset of my undergraduate degree.

Research Questions

Initially, my plans for research focused on investigating how electronic athletes conceptualize and enact economic logics in both their virtual (game playing) and their daily activities to become well-paid athletes. However, to investigate this question, I would have to find participants who were already well-paid electronic athletes, something I discovered to be incredibly challenging. Through countless efforts to meet with electronic athletes, I came up empty-handed. I had to adapt my research focus, shifting towards aspiring players and auto-ethnographic vignettes. I draw from Boellstorff's (2008) notion of the emergent, where

qualitative research can be more impactful when the researcher follows new research avenues which emerge during unanticipated moments. In addition, I take inspiration from Rees' (2018) derailment machine as a method of fieldwork. Rees explains, "fieldwork, for both classical modern ethnography and the anthropology after ethnos, is a powerful derailment machine, an opportunity to use the accidental as a tool for unanticipated discoveries" (Rees 2018, 80). Through this process, I was able to eventually focus my research on two questions: *How do aspiring electronic athletes conceptualize, enact, and frame the relationship between game playing and profit-making?* In other words, what methods and practices do aspiring electronic athletes engage with in their pursuit of becoming well-paid athletes? I*s the concept of neoliberal rationality useful for understanding these actions, and, if so, how?*

Objectives

Based on these questions, the objective of my research was to find examples of how aspiring electronic athletes are pursuing their goals of becoming electronic athletes and if neoliberal rationality was a suitable concept to understand their decision-making in the pursuit of embodied virtual capital. I look to Foucault's description of neoliberal rationality which is explained as "not only surrounded by, but founded on the unknowability of the totality of the process" (Foucault 2008, 282), meaning that when the outcomes of economic decisions are unknown, they must engage in rationalized thinking. Foucault elaborates on this by explaining that "when the economic subject sees that he can make a profit by buying wheat in Canada, for example, and selling it in England, he will do so. He does it because it is to his advantage" (Foucault 2008, 303). I therefore take these notions and apply them to the stories and experiences told to me by the participants to help better understand the efforts of aspiring electronic athletes

to fashion themselves as electronic athletes (professional gamers). This means looking for examples of what sort of methods, such as regimented training schedules, aim trainers, or coaching services, aspiring electronic athletes were using. Or examples of self-investment in the form of purchasing better gaming equipment, to gain insight into the ways aspiring electronic athletes go about becoming electronic athletes. In addition, much like Rudnyckyj (2010), through my research, I aimed to provide comprehensive examples of "the introduction of economic rationality and calculation into a set of domains that were previously organized in ways that did not strictly conform to the logics of the market" (21). Specifically, as the common conception of video games is that they are strictly a leisure activity, while for some this may remain true, it is irrefutable that video game play has become a domain filled with players playing for the gain of capital, which I seek to understand through the use of neoliberal rationality.

Lastly, as a firm believer in making academic work more easily accessible to a wider array of audiences, I actively sought to engage in methods, writing styles, and techniques that would allow my research to be accessed by public audiences in addition to scholarly ones.

Methods

I decided early on in my research that I was going to need to use an array of research methods to best suit the complex needs of research conducted in the online and offline world (see Bernard 2017). Using a mix of methods is nothing new, as "an ethnographer's tool bag is often filled with a diverse but ill-defined array of equipment. Fieldworkers usually pick, mix and refine a variety of research tools to suit their research questions and requirements" (Fontein 2014, 58). In addition, I concur that:

> Ethnographic fieldwork can now take so many forms it has become harder than ever to define it. There are some key methods, concepts or distinctions that are of central importance, such as participant observation, interviews, visual techniques, and other social science methods such as survey work. (Fontein 2014, 58)

Therefore, I have instilled the use of participant observation with methods for both online and offline worlds, interviews, the use of a survey, and autoethnographic methods. While I implement many research methods, my work is not completely unique and instead further contributes to the notion that "ethnography has been shown to involve the application of any number of the full range of methods available to a researcher in a way that is close to the way we all make sense of the world around us" (O'Reilly 2012, 1).

Furthermore, James Clifford (1986) stressed that "ethnography does not require that one give up facts and accurate accounting for the supposed free play of poetry" (Clifford 1986, 25) but instead "ethnography is hybrid textual activity: it traverses genres and disciplines" (Clifford 1986, 26), something I wish to emulate in my writing. Additionally, this could also highlight the need for a hybrid approach to ethnography, specifically one with online and offline elements. Specifically, Clifford claimed that ethnography "is a hybrid activity" (Clifford 1986, 26) and that there may be value in other approaches, meaning that as an ethnographer we must be open and willing to use various methods. I engaged in this hybrid approach, using various methodological approaches to navigate the complexity of conducting research both online and offline.

The Emergent

Due to the rapidly changing and advancing landscape of virtual worlds and digital media, I, much like many other ethnographers working in this space, assert that the notion of the emergent as a form of research is essential (Boellstorff 2008). Throughout my research, I often

found myself in situations where I had “no choice but to forgo [my] plans and to follow instead the trail of these rumours” (Mazzarella 2017, 44). Thus, I engaged with other methodological approaches by advocates of a focus on emergent phenomena (see Rees 2018), finding myself in situations that although unanticipated, ended up making large contributions to my research.

Participant Observation

Participant observation was a central method from the onset of the research, as I believed in its importance and had a strong desire to use participant observation as a method. As any ethnographer should, engaging with thick description (Geertz 1973) is pertinent to developing and thoughtful and complete dissemination of research results. However, due to the nature of my research occurring both online and offline, I had to implement a myriad of ethnographic methods and techniques (see Boellstorff 2008; Boellstorff 2012; O’Reilly 2012; Fontein 2014; Harper 2014; Bluteau 2019). I engaged with the classic form of participant observation during my time at the Fight Night Locals hosted at the University of Victoria, and in some sense, my autoethnographic work used classic participant observational methods and techniques. I would then engage with online forms of participant observation and observant participation in my autoethnographic chapter (see Bluteau 2019; Flores 2022)

For my work online I was inspired by various well-known virtual ethnographies (see Boellstorff 2008; Nardi 2010; Taylor 2012) and would often refer to *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Methods* (Boellstorff et al. 2012) for insights on how to progress in my research.

Interviews

During my research, I conducted seven formal interviews which helped fill many of the gaps left by my other ethnographic methods. Boellstorff et al. (2012) pointed out that although, when thinking of ethnographic methods, participant observation always comes to mind, interviews do have their place and "we cannot imagine a project that did not include them" (2012, 92). However, for my project, it is important to note that six of the seven formal interviews occurred virtually through Discord. While there are potential issues of participants having a greater ability to lie through an online interview, or scholars viewing online interviews as illegitimate, Boellstorff et al. (2012) assert that "interviews can be fruitful online or offline" and we must "take seriously the social reality of virtual environments and not treat avatar interaction as inauthentic" (2012, 94). Furthermore:

> Interviews provide opportunities to learn about people's elicited narratives and representations of their social worlds, including beliefs, ideologies, justifications, motivations, and aspirations" (2012, 92), and it is "through interviews, we learn about secret histories, internal power struggles, and unofficial customs. (2012, 93)

It was mainly through my interviews that I was truly able to learn about many of the aspirations my participants had and even some of the failed aspirations that likely would not have been discussed in a public setting. My interviews allowed my participants to open up as "interviews provide an opportunity for truly private discussions that can reveal beliefs and opinions difficult to access otherwise" (Boellstorff 2012, 93).

Autoethnography

As I wish to remain as reflexive as possible, I cannot hide the fact that I myself could be categorized as a competitive gamer, something I discuss at length later in my thesis. With this fact, the research I have conducted could be considered 'insider ethnography' or 'ethnography at home' which has the ethnographer conducting research in a familiar setting, unlike the more traditional approach, which sees the ethnographer delve into distant lands or areas (O'Reily 2012). It has long been a debate whether or not this requires special treatment or special consideration (Jackson 1987, Messerschmidt 1981) and it is true that "being an insider can be seen as both an advantage and a disadvantage" (O'Reilly 2012, 98), however, in the case of my research, I believe it was a wonderful advantage.

Because of my position as a competitive gamer and someone who has indulged in many of the common practices of aspiring electronic athletes, I was inspired by the work of the anthropologist Elizabeth Chin (2016) and author Patty Krawec (2022). Chin wrote extensively about consumption habits; however, Chin felt the need to stray away from traditional discussions of anti-consumption and rather "the minutiae of consuming as a way of life" (Chin 2016, 3) and opted for a different ethnographic approach through autoethnography. Krawec's (2020) book *Becoming Kin* is a call to action from Indigenous communities for society to unforget the past and delve into the difficult question as to how we can move forward and reimagine our future together (2022). However, throughout Krawec expertly includes bits of autoethnographic writing that help readers better connect to the author and better understand the message as a whole. It is the highly reflexive writing and implementation of autoethnographic methods by Chin (2016) and Krawec (2022) that left me feeling compelled to include them in my own writing.

Chin, "attempted to apply to myself the same theoretical and ethnographic tools we so often use to analyze and judge others" (Chin 2016, 4), something I felt would benefit my research. I decided to "turn my anthropological skills toward my own life and experiences, making myself the object of study" (Chin 2016, 4). For four months, I began to take field notes on myself, documenting my own experiences as a competitive gamer, from my spending habits, practice methods, and experiences playing with friends (Chin 2016). Additionally, in my method of autoethnography, I intended to "retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity" (Ellis et al. 2011, 276) in the case of my research I was apart of the competitive gamer group. While writing my autoethnographic chapter I attempted to "produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience" (2011, 277) much like an autobiography would read. However, as this is not an autobiography, I made sure to subject my own experiences to the same form of theoretical analysis as I did to the data collected from my interlocuters (2011). Through autoethnography I believe I will be able to:

> make personal experiences meaningful and cultural experience engaging, but also, by producing accessible texts, she or he may be able to reach wider and more diverse mass audiences that traditional research usually disregards, a move that can make personal and social change possible for more people. (2011, 277)

It is for these reasons that I opted to include a chapter of research solely conducted through autoethnography.

Observing Participation and Immersive Cohabitation

Coupled with my autoethnography, I intend to engage with a new form of participant observation championed by Joshua Bluteau (2019). Bluteau (2019) acknowledges the blended

nature of ethnography conducted in online and offline spaces and offers a new method through ‘immersive cohabitation’ known as ‘observing participation’. Observing participation takes an alternative approach to “the manner in which we investigate digital technologies” (2019, 268), and instead of observing one's participants, one commits to “learning through completing the same tasks they [one’s participants] did” (2019, 268). For Bluteau (2019), this came in the form of actively engaging with the use of Instagram to gain insights into how his participants were participating on the app. For myself, I engaged in observing participation during four months of competitive game playing on CS:GO 2.

Qualitative and Quantitative

Around the halfway point of my research, I began to struggle to find participants; often, they would indicate they were too busy to meet for an interview, or events I had scheduled to attend would be cancelled. Struggling to find a way to gather more data, I opted for a more standardized approach by administering an online survey. The survey titled “*Equipment Purchasing*” was sent to nineteen different participants, where they had the option to answer thirteen different questions. Although surveys are typically a form of quantitative research, my survey had the participants answer questions in sentence form, opting for a more qualitative approach. While I can still disseminate my survey results quantitatively, the intended use of the survey was to collect qualitative data. I, much like O'Reilly (2012), see the benefit of both forms of data as a mix of “some statistical data” and “face-to-face interaction, in everyday settings, [and] produced descriptive narratives of social worlds” (O’Reilly 2012, 21).

Limitations

From the onset of the research, there was a clear limitation: I had greatly overestimated my ability to find willing participants who had reached the professional level of esports. Originally, the goal was to have participants who had already become well-paid electronic athletes; however, as time passed, I had to continually shrink the scope of the research. The research eventually focused on aspiring professional electronic athletes; however, further limitations persisted. Events for this level of play were rare; those playing at this level were often too busy to meet for interviews, and finding cohesive esports teams was difficult.

My group of participants was small; therefore, my research does not reflect all collegiate esports athletes or aspiring professional electronic athletes. Instead, it is a small insight into a vast and growing field. These limitations led to a project that faced constant shifts throughout, but in which I eventually was able to land on a research goal, that although different, was achievable and worthy of study.

Consent and Risks

The research itself carried very low risk to the participants involved. Before any form of interview, participants were informed of my position as a researcher and consent was obtained. Participants, either in-person or online, were given a full breakdown of the research and what they would be contributing to it. It was made clear to all participants that they could withdraw themselves and all their contributions to the research at any point. Participants were given the option to stay anonymous or have their real names used; however, those who indicated neither were given a pseudonym for precautionary reasons. When possible, any identifiers were omitted.

Chapter 2. Examining Electronic Athletes: Theoretical Framework

This research focuses on understanding how current and aspiring electronic athletes fashion themselves as economically rational and well-paid athletes. I decided to delve into this topic by employing various concepts described by Michel Foucault (see 1980; 1983; 1990; 2008). I aim to use Foucault's neoliberal concepts to investigate "the increasing extension of economic rationality and calculative reason into diverse domains of human life" (Rudnyckyj 2010, 24). However, the research cannot be solely conducted through the use of Foucault's concepts. Instead, Foucault's work (1980; 1983; 1990; 2008) serves as the base framework from which all other theories, concepts, and methods extend upon in my research. While it is not possible to consider all research that would aid my own, I use a myriad of literature from ethnographies conducted on video games and esports to ethnographic work conducted on physical sports.

The central framework and concepts

Michel Foucault's (2008) *The Birth of Biopolitics* is a series of lectures exploring the shift in how the state regulates and governs society, and specifically how individuals become positioned within these economic and political systems (2008). Foucault used the concept of biopolitics to better understand the ways in which power operates at the level of populations and specifically how neoliberalism extends itself to those within and how they become economic agents (2008). Individuals within these populations are subjugated through forms of power to become economic agents or subjects that "in the strict sense, seeks in any case to maximize his profit, to optimize the gain/loss relationship; in the broad sense: the person whose conduct is influenced by the gains and losses associated with it." (2008, 257). It is this process that I take

inspiration from and use to understand the process aspiring electronic athletes undertake to fashion themselves as electronic athletes.

Neoliberalism

Defining neoliberalism is no easy task as countless scholars have debated the topic extensively. I acknowledge more classic definitions of neoliberalism such as that it is a “rather broad and general concept referring to an economic model or paradigm that rose to prominence in the 1980s” building on “the classical liberal ideal of self-regulating market” (Steger and Roy 2021, 12). I instead wish to build upon and follow Rudnyckyj's (2010) definition. Rudnyckyj defined neoliberalism as “a relatively mundane but increasingly ubiquitous practice of making economic calculation a universal standard for the organization, management, and government of human life and conduct” (2010, 21).

Along with this definition, I intend to use neoliberalism as a way to refer to a specific form of rationality, the same rationality I wish to apply to aspiring electronic athletes. Furthermore, much like myself, Rudnyckyj (2010) built upon Foucault’s analysis of neoliberalism as a set of “compromising pragmatic techniques to introduce economic rationality into domains that were previously considered external to market logic” (20). I apply this idea to aspiring electronic athletes and their pursuit of embodied virtual capital, rather than the esports industry as a whole.

The Subject of Interest, Power, and Governmentality

For Foucault (1979), “a subject can be defined who is a subject of interest and whose action has a multiplying and beneficial value through the intensification of interest” (1979, 276),

an individual who has been formed through discourse and practice (see Foucault 1982; 2008; 2009). In addition, subjects are often under a form of reproductive power "a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to" (Foucault 1983, 212).

Productive power conceptualizes itself in Foucault's concept of governmentality. Foucault (1991) explains governmentality as three things, first as a group of individuals that is formed by the institution (state) using "procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics" (102) or simply put as rationality exercised by the state on individuals focusing on the political economy and apparatuses of security. Secondly, "over a long period and throughout the West, has steadily led towards the pre-eminence over all other forms (sovereignty, discipline, etc.) of this type of power which may be termed government" (102) which has resulted in the development of specific government institutions that have in turn developed an entirely new form of knowledge. And thirdly, through "the process, or rather the results of the process, through which the state of justice of the Middle Ages, transformed into the administrative state during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, gradually becomes 'governmentalized'" (103) The state therefore develops institutions (e.g., schools, hospitals, and prisons) that through their rationalized methods develop subjects that conducive to the interests of the state. The productive power is exhibited through the institutions of the state in the case of schools, in which teachings or lessons are used to produce students (subjects). It is this power the state holds through its use of institutions that lays prominence to the claim that government is a productive form of power.

Foucault highlights that power in the case of the West "has undergone a very profound transformation of these mechanisms of power" (Foucault 1990, 136). No longer is deduction or repression the main form of power, instead it is a tool now used amongst others that mediates and works to "incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it: a

power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them" (Foucault 1990, 136). Foucault believes that the state is not "an entity which was developed above individuals, ignoring what they are and even their very existence, but on the contrary as a very sophisticated structure, in which individuals can be integrated, under one condition: that this individuality would be shaped in a new form, and submitted to a set of very specific patterns" (Foucault 1983, 214). Power has now shifted from either individualizing or totalizing to "both an individualizing and a totalizing form of power" (Foucault 1983, 213) where productive power reinforces the institutions that influences "the way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject" (Foucault, 1983, 208).

Through a form of productive power, institutions govern their subjects. In the case of my research, video game developers function in ways analogous to how Foucault conceptualizes the state insofar as they have deliberately designed their games to elicit specific feelings and behaviours from their players. I must make it clear that this form of power is the same as described by Foucault in his discussion of conduct which he explains:

> the term "conduct" is one of the best aids for coming to terms with the specificity of power relations. For to "conduct" is at the same time to "lead" others (according to mechanisms of coercion which are, to varying degrees, strict) and a way of behaving within a more or less open field of possibilities. The exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome. Basically power is less a confrontation between two adversaries or the linking of one to the other than a question of government. This word must be allowed the very broad meaning which it had in the sixteenth century. "Government" did not refer only to political structures or to the management of states; rather, it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed: the government of children, of souls, of communities, of families, of the sick. It did not only cover the legitimately constituted forms of political or economic subjection but also modes of action, more or less considered or calculated, which were destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people. To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others. (1982, 789-790)

This means that this form of power is not enacted through violent means but instead conducts subjects to act in certain ways. In the case of my research, the subjects are the research participants, as they are the ones subject to a productive power that is being enacted by the game's deliberate competitive systems. It is through this process that electronic athletes become governmentalized, economically rationalized subjects. With these concepts in mind, it begins to become clearer how and why neoliberalism is a useful concept through which to comprehend the subjectivity of aspiring electronic athletes.

Human Capital

Human capital or concepts concerning the embodied value individuals within capitalist societies possess is a well-researched point of discussion in economic theory (Adam Smith 1776; Becker 1993; Bourdieu 2002; Foucault 2008). Fitzsimons (2015) provides a brief overview of human capital theory as he explains:

> In The Wealth of Nations (1776) Adam Smith formulated the basis of what was later to become the science of human capital. Over the next two centuries two schools of thought can be distinguished. The first school of thought distinguished between the acquired capacities that were classified as capital and the human beings themselves, who were not. A second school of thought claimed that human beings themselves were capital. In modern Human Capital Theory all human behavior is based on the economic self-interest of individuals operating within freely competitive markets. Other forms of behavior are excluded or treated as distortions of the model. (2015, 1)

For this thesis I focus primarily on the second school of thought, that human capital is “based on the economic self-interest of individuals” (2015, 1) and that “it is seen increasingly as a key determinant of economic performance” (2015, 1), meaning that human capital in modern human capital theory can be understood as a direct determinant of economic success. Additionally, I

look to the work of Gary Becker (1993) who developed the term human capital, which he described as:

> "schooling, a computer training course, expenditures on medical care, and lectures on the virtues of punctuality and honesty are capital too in the sense that they improve health, raise earnings, or add to a person's appreciation of literature over much of his or her lifetime. Consequently, it is fully in keeping with the capital concept as traditionally defined to say that expenditures on education, training, medical care, etc., are investments in capital. However, these produce human, not physical or financial, capital because you cannot separate a person from his or her knowledge, skills, health, or values the way it is possible to move financial and physical assets while the owner stays put" (Becker 1993, 16)

Becker's work asserted that while many practices or practices do not directly produce profit, they instead increase the chances of increased profits by individuals participating in these activities, which may be called forms of self-investment, that seek to increase human capital, which I further explain later on. Becker furthered this sentiment by explaining that "education and training are the most important investments in human capital. My book showed, and so have many others studies since then, that high school and college education in the United States greatly raises a person's income" (Becker 1993, 17). Becker indicates that through education and training individuals can increase their human capital and therefore, increase income. It is this idea that I take inspiration from and apply to the methods, techniques, and practices of (aspiring) electronic athletes to help better understand their pursuits of careers as electronic athletes.

While I acknowledge the great importance of the work done by Becker for this thesis, I mainly look to Foucault's (2008) notion of human capital and its importance in neoliberal rationality, which was inspired by the work of Becker. Foucault describes human capital as "made up of innate elements and acquired elements" (2008, 227), innate elements are a mix of hereditary, some specific abilities one may acquire from an ancestor such as eye colour, and

others that could just be termed innate such as the ability to walk, talk, see, or think. Next, the acquired elements are the abilities or skills one acquires throughout one's life. An example could be the ability to write, read, or speak different languages, however, to put it simply, they are things one will learn throughout life and, in the case of neoliberalism, provide one with the ability to gain increased profits (2008). Neoliberalism apprehends how individuals strive to receive a degree or learn specialized skills as there is a direct correlation between their abilities and income. In doing so, they become economically rational participants. It is the conscious decision to introduce profit calculation into subject formation that seemed to illuminate the action of aspiring electronic athletes.

Foucault directly addresses the work of Becker (1993) when he explains that:

> I think the interest of this theory of human capital is that it represents two processes, one that we could call the extension of economic analysis into a previously unexplored domain, and second, on the basis of this, the possibility of giving a strictly economic interpretation of a whole domain previously thought to be non-economic (Foucault, 2008, 219)

Although esports are not an unexplored domain with plenty of scholarship exploring the economics of esports and even ethnographic work having been conducted, as someone with a strong passion for video game play the idea of economically rationalized individuals being the players is an idea I found astonishing. Specifically, I intended to interpret video game play, something typically thought of as a hobby, as something economic and apply the same ideas Foucault used to understand neoliberal subjects to those of the common gamer. The process of using neoliberal rationality and the notion of human capital to better understand decision making by individuals in a society is well documented and I take inspiration from work conducted by Gershon (2016), Lowe and Sharp (2021), Uperesa (2022), and Weiss (2024).

Gershon (2016) examined the personal branding of job seekers in the United States, personal branding can be understood as another form of human capital, as by branding oneself, one may be able to increase their employment and therefore, income. Gershon explains that "Self-branding is an instance in which one is supposed to select a limited set of terms based on one's self-understanding, and then tries to imply those qualities through all one's social interactions both online and offline, in anticipation of a potential client or employer's interest" (Gershon, 2016, p. 242), simply put, an employer's interest is the possibility of being hired and receiving income. Additionally, "in the United States, job seekers, and workers in general, are actively encouraged through workshops and most job advice to inhabit a version of the neoliberal self in which the self is taken to be a business" (Gershon, 2016, p. 226). By turning oneself into a business, individuals therefore must engage in business-like practices, which often manifest themselves in neoliberal rationality. This includes self-investment which Gershon expands "also involves specific techniques" (2016, 243) and "practices that require a constant investment of time." (2016, 243). The branding of oneself is evident in the efforts of aspiring and electronic athletes in their pursuits of accruing embodied virtual capital, as they attempt to brand themselves as electronic athletes through techniques and investments. However, I must point out that these accounts of human capital are highly individualistic and place the individuals as solely interested in their own benefits. While this may be true for some other work conducted on human capital, the work done by Lowe and Sharp (2021) showcases how this is not intrinsic to human capital, and therefore, we must take new approaches to understanding human capital.

For Lowe and Sharp (2021) human capital is not only "individual actors making rational choices" (2021, 47), but other aspects of life influence choices. They highlight this through their accounts of Women in Western Alaska who have "goals to give back to their communities

through higher education [which] conflicts with the individual return-on-investment goals of human capital development" (2021, 51), showing how human capital development theory must now include motivations that are beyond individuals but benefit groups as a whole.

Weiss (2024) investigated "why men and women who labor under conditions of insecurity and, nowadays, are often designated as squeezed are not more disruptive of the structures that bear down on them." (Weiss 2025, 1), which Weiss claims "the answer, in a word, capitalism" (2025, 3). Weiss further elaborates that "men and women are no longer simply members of a workforce. Rather, they are required to be resourceful in providing for their households while consuming optimally, investing in material and immaterial assets, making payments, and minimizing their claims on the public purse" (2025, 3), and instead they are now "activated as an entrepreneur of oneself, one's own (human) capital, and the source of one's earnings" (2025, 3). In essence, Weiss used human capital to explain why men and women in Berlin felt obligated to self-invest and continue to perform rationally under the structures on them. Furthermore, Weiss explains that "work once a shackle from which to break free, now constitutes a key means through which to gain social validation" (2025, 8), meaning that work which was traditionally thought of something individuals sought to escape, under the guise of capitalism has become an essential aspect of social well-being that is inescapable if one wishes to succeed in modern society. I take this point with great influence in my own work, as for aspiring electronic athletes, while video games were not something to escape, but instead often used as an escape from modern society, have undergone a similar process that now sees players seeking work and careers out of something commonly thought of as leisurely activity.

Lastly, I look to the work done by Lisa Uperesa (2022) who formulated her own concept of gridiron capital that aimed to help better understand the commodification of Samoan football players. Uperesa explains that "to compete successfully, football players undergo processes of commodification that enhance their value to their teams, accruing what I call gridiron capital" (2022, 106). The commodification process in football occurs through training to gain "practical mastery over the sense and action-execution of various body parts" in hopes of turning "themselves into high-value products that are then selected by coaches, and eventually – if one is both lucky and talented – idolized and consumed by fans" (Uperesa 2022, 109), a similar process of that of gaining human capital.

Gridiron capital is explained as "social currency attached to playing the game, and enhanced brand value" (Uperesa 2022, 109). Commodification and accruing gridiron capital "plays well in the media – attracting viewership and interest, selling magazines, and drawing clicks – and also helps brand particular players and teams" (Uperesa 2022, 106) all aspects that help increase profits for the organizations. A similar commodification process has occurred in the esports industry with teams commodifying their players to help increase viewership numbers and merchandise sales for an increase in profit. The commodification of electronic athletes functions similarly to the football players described by Uperesa in that athletes practice in an attempt to master physical movements that produce greater performance in their respective areas of competition. It is through their greater performances that they accrue gridiron capital, much like how aspiring and electronic athletes accrue embodied virtual capital.

I look to these accounts and descriptions of human capital and build upon them by developing my own concept of embodied virtual capital, as discussed prior. While these definitions and descriptions of human capital are the basis of where I develop my concept from, I

have opted to do so because these descriptions lack an inclusion of exploring the meshing of the physical and virtual. For aspiring and electronic athletes, they may gain human capital through their bodily practices, yet these bodily practices are futile without the use of technologies. Therefore, aspiring and electronic athletes do not only gain human capital through physical practices but simultaneously gain embodied virtual capital through their interactions and subsequent actions with their virtual representations in the game. In essence, while the player controls the character in the game, it is the character in the game where value is extracted from and then embodied by the player.

Self-investment

Self-investment is a key principle in the process of acquiring embodied virtual capital as it is in human capital development theory. Lowe and Sharp (2021) explain that "the power of individual choices (whether actors, consumers, or firms) is the central guiding principle in the field, and the influence of this perspective is clear in the preceding definition of human capital – *individual* competencies influencing societal well-being" (47), meaning that individuals in whatever field (for example, esports) must make individual choices that influence societal well-being or one's human capital. These decisions often appear as forms of self-investment or perceived "return[s]-on-investment" (48). Lowe and Sharp illustrate this in their discussion of Alaskan women's pursuits in postsecondary education stating that "the return-on-investment principle of human capital theory explains how educational achievement at the postsecondary level appears to contribute to success in labor markets and increases in income" (2021: 48), meaning that self-investment is used as an effort to increase income. For aspiring and electronic athletes, I suggest this mainly manifests itself in the practice of purchasing gaming equipment.

The participants in my research frequently engaged in self-investment through their purchasing of gaming equipment, i.e., keyboard, mouse, monitor, or controller. Additionally, I acknowledge that self-investment does not only consider investments made with capital but includes investments of time, something aspiring and electronic athletes frequently engage with. Aspiring and electronic athletes often invest their time into practices, game playing, studying game play, or even time spent with a coach. Becker (1993) explained that "each person produces his own human capital by using some of his time and goods to attend 'school', receive on-the-job training, etc." He referred to this as "investment in human capital" (1993, 77). Becker believed that individuals would partake in the investment of human capital because it "has an important effect on observed earnings because earnings tend to be a net of investment cost and gross of investment returns" (95), meaning that individuals self-invest for the prospect of perceived returns and increased human capital. Furthermore, Schultz (1963) focused on the "positive relationship between education and growth" (Lowe and Sharp 2021, 47). Schultz himself explained that "the producer values of schooling are straightway an investment in future capabilities to produce and earn income" (Schultz 1963, 38), highlighting a key principle of human capital, that individuals self-invest for the prospect of increased human capital. It is these ideas that I apply to better understand the decision making of aspiring and electronic athletes through their engagement with a form of self-investment.

Ethnographies

Although there are a number of ethnographies conducted on electronic athletes, from which I take inspiration, there has been little attention to the inculcation of economic rationality in the esports industry. With the scope of this research, I elected to focus on a select few that

were more closely related to my research and inspired much of the theoretical basis of my methodology. T.L. Taylor's 2012 book, *Raising the Stakes: E-sports and the Professionalization of Computer Games* highlights the path of the esports industry along with implementing ethnographic methods of understanding the players within. Specifically, Taylor's (2012) discussion of professionalizing players provides an excellent rubric for my own research with electronic athletes. Taylor provides a comprehensive breakdown of how the competitive play of electronic athletes is developed explaining that "gamers do not simply appear out of thin air but are created not only through their individualized efforts but a broader social process" (Taylor 2012, 86). It is the individualized efforts that I focused on for my research as these were similar to the logics of economic rationality as those described by Foucault (2008). Additionally, I often found myself returning to Taylor's work to crosscheck her findings with electronic athletes to my own, as the experiences of her participants were similar. Much like the participants in my research, they "find that over time they come to be the strongest player in their own friendship circle and hit a wall where they are often no longer getting the challenge they once did, and still desire" (Taylor 2012, 87). This realization was a major part of my findings as the competitive drive to continue on past playing in one's local groups was often a turning point for many competitive gamers to venture on to becoming aspiring electronic athletes.

For those who can be classified as aspiring electronic athletes or semi-professionals, I was drawn to an article by Ivan Flores (2022) about his ethnographic research conducted while following a Mexican League of Legends team with "aspiration[s] to earn money as a digital athlete" (Flores 2022). For over two years, Flores spent time observing and assisting several semi-professional League of Legends teams who all dreamt of turning gaming into a full-time paid job. Throughout, notions of upward mobility are evident in both the way the electronic

athletes train and talk about their game-playing and futures. Both Flores and Taylor make sure to highlight that "the career path from amateur to professional is quite bumpy and often unsuccessful" (Taylor 2022, 86) or that throughout this career path, there are "these moments that living the dream seems a long way off" (Flores 2022). Both Flores (2022) and Taylor (2012) take the time to step back from the majority of scholarly work which focuses on the already professional electronic athletes and the money being made, and make sure to focus on the real-life struggle that many aspiring electronic athletes face.

In addition, Caitlin Zaloom's (2004) ethnography on the traders at the Chicago Board of Trade and a productive form of risk is an excellent resource for understanding how aspiring electronic athletes also engage with risk. Zaloom explains:

> Within the trading pit, risk is productive in two key ways. First, aggressive economic risk is crucial to the social and spatial constitution of the marketplace. The conflicts and contests among traders define the marketplace. The traders sustain the market and, at the same time, the market is a site for the production of risk takers. In the pit, a particular kind of self is manufactured in relation to financial action. Risk is the key object for traders in their individual projects of self-creation and re-creation. Traders manipulate risk to manage their identities and establish status in the eyes of their rivals. These practices encourage the production of subjects who can sustain themselves under high-stakes conditions and thereby draw profit from economic risk. The ascetic practices and social displays of virtue enacted in the pit describe a capitalist ethic that centers on the mastery of the self under conditions of hazard and possibility (Zaloom 2004, 366)

Aspiring electronic athletes must engage in a similar form of productive risk as they too seek to "draw profit from economic risk" (2004, 366). Aspiring electronic athletes engage in economic risk through their purchasing of gaming equipment for perceived competitive advantages that subsequently help to improve perceived chances of increases in embodied virtual capital and career success. Furthermore, by engaging with economic risk aspiring electronic athletes "manufacture a particular kind of self" (2004, 366) that is then used as a model for future

aspiring electronic athletes, as pointed out by the participants of my research, showcasing the productive aspects of risk taking. Lastly, much like the traders who have “individual projects of self-creation and re-creation” (2004, 366) aspiring electronic athletes too echo similar aspirations through their pursuits of becoming professionals.

Also, as I would be applying neoliberal rationality to a domain often thought of as separate from other commonly considered neoliberal domains, the notion of “global assemblages” (Collier and Ong 2005) is a way to help contextualize this process. Rudnyckyj’s work on spiritual economies reveals how “spiritual reformers in contemporary Indonesia found justification for neoliberal norms in Islamic doctrine and practice” (2010, 21). Rudnyckyj's (2010) account of the implementation of neoliberal techniques and rationality at Krakatau Steel reveals how neoliberal rationality has extended itself to a domain where its techniques were not specifically designed. Similarly, Tsing (2015) engaged with assemblages through her work on the foraging and trade of matsutake mushrooms in Oregon. Tsing highlighted that “patterns of unintentional coordination develop in assemblages” (Tsing 2015, 23), much like the coordination of neoliberal rationality of aspiring and electronic athletes. I also look to Haraway, who discussed how as our world becomes ever more mediated by technology, further boundaries will be transgressed, and “potent fusions” (Haraway 1991 154) will lead to much-needed exploration. In the case of esports, these potent fusions manifest themselves in the union between the human and the machine, e.g., electronic athletes using physical technologies to accrue embodied virtual capital from virtual worlds, leading to new configurations and forms of economic relationships.

Lastly, although my work focuses on the esports industry and the electronic athletes within, I am still actively engaged with video games and virtuality as a medium. Therefore, I

look to Boellstorff's (2008) and Nardi's (2010) ethnographies conducted on virtual worlds as a means for navigating the complex virtual worlds my research often took place in.

Competitive by design

Although my research will focus on electronic athletes rather than the esports industry or video games as a whole, I believe it is still important to include a brief discussion as to what I believe allowed for the "extension of economic rationality and calculative reason" (Rudnyckyj 2010, 24) in esports. Video games for the majority of their existence have been considered a form of leisure activity (Taylor 2012) and for many, they continue to be so. Many of the most popular games are single-player games like RPG's (role-playing games), or action-adventure games that are not by nature competitive. However, these genres of games are not the subject of esports; instead games such as MOBAs or FPS games are at the forefront of the esports industry, and I assert this is by design.

To elaborate, I engage with notions of design, adjustment, and a player-centric approach as described by Natasha Schull (2012) through her work on gambling machines. Schull explains how gambling machines, through years of design, technological advancements, feedback, and adjustments, have become rigorously designed to "extract economic value from individual bodies" (Schull 2012, 57). A similar process has occurred in video games and the esports industry. Competitive FPS games, as the name suggests, are intended to be competitive, but how do they enforce this? This is achieved via well-designed metric collecting systems aimed to measure "what players do inside the virtual environment of a video game" (Brock 2021, 3), and while most forms of technology we engage with collect data metrics, competitive FPS games like Valorant or CS:GO display them publicly to all players. By doing so, as Beer (2016) and

Brock (2021) point out, “metrics have ‘affective power’ to entangle people into neoliberal discourse” (7), which games like Valorant and CS:GO have successfully done. By displaying players' ranks, KDA (kills, deaths, and assists), and win rate, competitive FPS have designed a visible and quantifiable form of human capital and embodied virtual capital. It is through this design, Silverman and Simon (2009) and Brock (2021) explain, “that this quantifiable-measure-cum-mechanism-of-disciplinary-power shapes player bodies and subjectivities; creating an obedient, efficient and productive ‘power gamer’ willing to embrace the most rational and competitive characteristics of a capitalist market” (5)

Foucault (2008) echoed a similar notion that when quoting Ropke (n.d.) explained “competition is a principle of order in the domain of the market economy, but it is not a principle on which it would be possible to erect the whole society” (2008: 243), meaning that while it is not the only principle of market economies it is intrinsic to them, I highlight this as competition is one of the core principles of esports and what has given life to both the industry and the pursuit of careers as electronic athletes by aspiring electronic athletes. Therefore, through the design of competitive FPS games, game developers have subjugated and directed gamers into conducting specific practices that I aim to understand through the use of neoliberal rationality.

Chapter 3. Electronic Athletes: Economically Rationalized Gamers

Background

During my research, I was attentive to indications of similar economic logic as that described by Foucault (2008). I felt that the idea of self-investment was a tangible idea that could be measured through the purchase of gaming equipment. Additionally, many gamers engaged in self-investment, which I define as any form of investment made in the pursuit of embodied virtual capital. Self-investment for aspiring and electronic athletes manifests itself in: time spent training, playing the game, purchasing gaming equipment or any decisions made with the goal of increasing one's embodied virtual capital. I wish to reiterate that I opt to use the term embodied virtual capital to make a clear indication that the value earned is directly correlated with one's avatar (see Boellstorff 2008; Nardi 2010; Taylor 2012) in their video game of choice.

In Foucault's discussion of human capital, he explains that to increase one's human capital, individuals must become "entrepreneurs of [themselves]" (Foucault 2008, 226), and as such they are responsible for their "own capital, being [their] own producer, [and] the source of earnings" (2008, 226). Foucault explains that this individual may be known as the homo oeconomicus: an economically rational individual who engages in self-investment for the increase of human capital. I look to Uperesa's (2022) idea of gridiron capital, where Samoan-born American football players engage in similar self-investment practices for the increase of their 'gridiron capital' and eventual income. Both the Samoan athletes and electronic athletes from my research engage in similar practices of self-investment that are reminiscent of Foucault's description of the homo oeconomicus. During my research, I, therefore, was attentive to indications of self-investment and how self-investment was perceived and enacted by both

aspiring and professional electronic athletes. But what does the self-investment of aspiring electronic athletes look like?

In many games, players are offered the choice to invest on in-game purchases commonly known as microtransactions; these allow players to purchase in-game items such as cosmetic items that pose no competitive advantage to their user, most notably CS:GO and their cases and skins.[4] Research conducted by Anthony King and Gloria Wong-Padoongpatt (2022) focused on how video games in recent years have seen a transition to becoming increasingly monetized for profit. Games like CS:GO, where players can gamble through cases that contain items available for real money trade, have changed players' motives from game playing to desires of upward mobility for financial gain (King and Wong-Padoongpatt 2022). Although the majority of games do not contain microtransactions that provide competitive advantages, there are instances where they do. The popular phone game Clash Royale has the ability to make in-game purchases of gems and coins (the game's in-game currencies) which can be used to upgrade one's cards increasing their stats such as damage and health which may give one a competitive advantage over someone with lower-level cards. This example when applied to a cost-benefit analysis has a clear benefit, by using gems to upgrade one's cards one may gain a competitive advantage over another player with lower-level cards. In-game purchases may also reduce the time needed to 'grind' up in levels in other games, trading one investment, time, for another. But what if the game one is playing does not have this function? How would a gamer, competitive gamer, aspiring electronic athlete, or electronic athlete playing a game such as Valorant with no

[4] In the game CS:GO there are cosmetic items known as skins which change the appearance of the weapons used in game, yet the have no competitive advantage. These skins are obtained through CS:GO cases which function as a form of gambling where players make purchases for the chance of receiving a skin.

advantage increasing microtransactions provide themselves with a competitive advantage? To do so, individuals engage in highly thought-out techniques and practices that seek to increase one's embodied virtual capital that are best understood through the use of neoliberal rationality.

Equipment Purchasing of Aspiring Electronic Athletes: "Seriously a big edge in Gaming"

Over the course of my research, I conducted seven formal interviews: four with competitive gamers, one with an aspiring electronic athlete, and two with retired or current electronic athletes. In each of these interviews, I held discussions focusing on the participant's history of gaming and competitive play, how they go about their gaming, what sort of practice they do (if any), what methods or techniques they use to improve, and their view on the purchasing of gaming equipment for a competitive advantage. As there were three different groups, I decided to write about each group individually so as to not confuse responses or make one group appear as agreeing with the other. As aspiring electronic athletes are the main focus of the research, that is where I will begin.

On the night of November 30th, 2024, I conducted an online interview over Discord with Noah Sanders who goes by Nowa online. Noah had let me know he was interested in participating in an interview but only had one day and time available and was only available for an hour. We agreed to meet at 4:15 pm, however, my day job ended at 4:00 pm, and although I regularly work remote, this was an in-office day, leading to me rushing home to meet Noah. As I left work, I drove thinking about what I would ask Noah, imagining how our conversation would go. When I arrived home, I quickly ran into my office, turned on my desktop computer, put on my headset, and launched Discord. I then waited for Noah to let me know I would call him. Right at 4:15 pm, Noah let me know I could call him, I made sure to check that all my audio

settings were correct, and that Noah would be able to hear me, and I would be able to hear him. As our interview began, I could not help but feel the uniqueness of conducting interviews online, while platforms like Zoom or Teams allow for face-to-face interactions, Discord, while one can use video, it is primarily an audio-only platform. I asked Noah if he would like to turn our cameras on, but he replied that he would rather not. The interview was therefore conducted solely through audio, meaning I never saw Noah during our entire one-hour long interview. After some introduction, I turned it over to Noah and asked him to tell me about himself. He explained that he is a student at the University of British Columbia who, as he puts it, is "actively" pursuing a career as an electronic athlete. Noah has played a myriad of games starting with Fortnite,[5] similar to many younger gamers, and eventually turned his sights onto more competitive games such as Apex Legends.[6] Noah explained that he eventually decided he wanted a harder challenge and started playing more standard competitive FPS games, like Rainbow Six Siege,[7] which he played for seven years before eventually landing where he is now playing Valorant on the daily with the goal of becoming a professional.

Noah, unlike many aspiring or electronic athletes, his first introduction to gaming came later in life, as he explained: "I grew up without Wi-Fi, eventually we got a PlayStation and it became a hobby with my brothers and then when Fortnite came out there was this feeling of skill levels, and I really noticed that OK I could actually get better than others." Noah's account of his path to becoming an aspiring electronic athlete was similar to other participants and those who I talked to in informal conversations, something that Taylor (2012) also found through her work.

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[5] Fortnite is a battle-royale third-person shooter game developed by Epic Games.
[6] Apex Legends is a battle-royale first-person shooter developed by Electronic Arts.
[7] Rainbow Six Siege is a 'search and destroy' bomb defusal first-person tactical shooter developed by Ubisoft.

During our conversation, Noah consistently highlighted his desire to feed his ego because “at the end of the day it’s all about confidence,” meaning that as long as a player has more confidence than another player, they should be able to outperform them. While to me, this may not be the only factor at play, the mental aspects of competitive gaming are important, and must be developed with practice to develop confidence in one’s skills to properly apply their practice during stressful gameplay. We had a brief discussion as I questioned Noah if he really believed that no matter what having more confidence would make him better. He explained that while he did believe confidence plays a huge role in how one performs, something I also agree with, Noah explained it was not the only factor that mattered. Noah explained that “obviously there are things like how much you practice, how you understand the game, your mechanical abilities,[8] and even the sort of gaming equipment you have that can really impact how good you are or can be.” All these factors that impact game performance are part of one's embodied virtual capital and can be improved through time spent practicing, with the exception of gaming equipment.

Gaming equipment is the pieces of equipment used to play the game of choice, these include one’s computer, monitor, mouse, keyboard, and headset. These items make up the essential items for playing games like CS:GO and Valorant, the main games I focused on during my research. Throughout this discussion, Noah was adamant about making me understand that gaming equipment is not something that can be overlooked if one is looking for any sort of advantage and that buying the best equipment is a way of improving. He explained that “I like to have the best equipment I can” and that “I believe that having the best equipment can have a competitive advantage.” For the majority of gamers or competitive gamers, increasing one’s

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[8] How good you are at using your mouse and keyboard while playing.

competitive advantage is something done to help succeed at the game's objective, to win, or even increase the overall enjoyment of the game. However, for someone like Noah, who is actively trying to become an electronic athlete, the competitive advantage is much more than that. Noah was focused on his metrics such as his kills, deaths, assists, win rate, and rank which he explained "honestly I really focus on my stats (kills, deaths, assists, win rate, and rank) because those are what everyone sees and obviously your game sense (the mental side of gaming) matters it's the numbers that people first see." It was clear that to Noah stats were highly indicative of whether he would be able to become an electronic athlete (see Brock 2021). Noah explained that "when someone sees you have really good stats they might just automatically think you are really good and then give you the chance to play with them or tryout and then you get more chances of going pro and being seen by organizations." With this in mind, much like Foucault's discussion of homo oeconomicus (2008) or Uperesa's discussion of gridiron capital (2022), Noah's efforts to gain a competitive advantage to improve his metrics or stats were indicative of an attempt to increase his embodied virtual capital.

As someone who has indulged in purchasing expensive gaming equipment, Noah and I spent the next twenty minutes 'nerding' out over what equipment we both had. Right away when talking about gaming equipment, Noah began ecstatically telling me about the Wooting keyboard, which is a brand of keyboard that uses "rapid trigger" technology that "eliminates all latency caused by physical movement of the switch by dynamically activating and deactivating the key based on travel distance instead of a fixed point in the key travel" (Wooting 2022). This means that for a regular keyboard after a key press one must fully release it to click it again, for the wooting keyboard one can click the key down, not fully release it and push the key down again and get a response, although only a difference of milliseconds these are the small but

crucial differences the participants of my research constantly spoke of. Noah excitingly told me that the “wooting keyboard, is seriously a big edge in gaming” and that when using it can sometimes “literally look like cheating! I think it should be banned, but got to use it till it is banned.” He then jokingly exclaimed, “I am just using it for research,” which we had a good laugh at. Noah’s discussion of the wooting keyboard was so enthusiastic that I almost bought one right after our interview, as from his perspective it was something any competitive gamer could not overlook.

Throughout our discussion, we talked about all different kinds of gaming equipment including keyboards, mice, headsets, and monitors. While Noah explained that all gaming equipment can help provide advantages, it was mainly the Wooting keyboard and monitor he believed could provide him with the largest advantage in his pursuit of becoming an electronic athlete. Noah explained that some pieces of gaming equipment are simply “non-negotiable,” such as his 240 hertz monitor. Noah explained that “you definitely need to have a 240 hertz monitor at the minimum if you’re serious,” the reasoning behind this is that monitors are where electronic athletes view their games, however, they are not all made equal. Most common monitors have a 60 hertz display, which refers to the number of times a monitor refreshes the image on screen each second, meaning that a typical 60 hertz monitor will refresh itself 60 times per second. For gaming, the higher the hertz, the more accurate the image on screen will be. For example, when playing competitive FPS games, players press multiple inputs rapidly, on a common 60 hertz monitor, these fast-paced inputs may receive a form of delay, while the 240 hertz monitor has the ability to more accurately and quickly display the inputs being made by the player. Additionally, the higher hertz allows players to see other players' movements quicker, providing players with additional time to respond to enemies’ actions and therefore, gain possible

competitive advantages. This sentiment was shared amongst many of the other participants I talked to, such as Jasmine and Wojtek, the retired electronic athletes I interviewed, who vouched for the use of 240hz. Noah explained that as an aspiring electronic athlete, “the little details really start to matter at this level and even the small competitive advantages you can get from different equipment may be the difference between staying where I am, or going pro.” This sentiment was shared by both Jasmine and Wojtek, who had already progressed from aspiring to full-fledged electronic athletes. In addition, throughout the majority of my other interviews, both formal and informal, and a survey I administered with nineteen respondents, the type of gaming equipment one uses at a certain level does begin to matter.

Equipment Purchasing: A Survey

Throughout my research, I faced challenges with conducting interviews with aspiring or electronic athletes as many explained they simply did not have the time to meet. To work around this, I decided to administer a survey in the hopes of collecting data regarding the equipment purchasing of aspiring and electronic athletes. I first sent the survey to Emily, the President of the University of Victoria Esports Organization. Emily, along with being a participant herself, was a great help in sharing my survey with friends she had made, which included gamers, competitive gamers, aspiring electronic athletes, and electronic athletes. In total, I received four responses from gamers, six competitive gamers, five aspiring electronic athletes, and four from current or retired electronic athletes. The two main questions the survey asked were “Do you think that better gaming equipment (mouse, keyboard, monitor, mousepad, headphones, etc.) can make you better at these competitive games?” and “If you have bought equipment, did it help?” Out of the nineteen responses, only two respondents said no to either question, and the two respondents

both fell into the category of competitive gamer. As the survey allowed for written responses, I received further qualitative data regarding the purchasing of gaming equipment.

One of the two respondents who said no to gaming equipment being able to make a difference in gaming performance explained that “no for me but likely depends on person” while the other simply just indicated “no.” However, although the first response was short, it provided an interesting point, that better gaming equipment and its ability to improve performance are subjective. While this may be a basic assertion, it informed an important part of my research on how neoliberal concepts and economic rationality differed at different levels of play. For those in the categories of gamer and competitive gamer, it seemed that while the majority agreed that equipment could indeed make someone better, it was not essential. Two of the gamers indicated that while they believed equipment does and can make someone perform better it was not necessary, while the remaining four competitive gamers all explained in some way that yes while better gaming equipment can aid players, it is only critical when one is taking the game very seriously or hoping to become professional. This belief was shared amongst all respondents in the categories of aspiring and current or retired electronic athletes. Alongside the survey data, during my formal and informal interviews, I received similar responses.

Electronic Athletes Equipment Purchasing: “It may not make you better, but it will certainly make you worse”

On March 13, 2024, I interviewed Wojtek Pienkowski, a retired CS:GO professional and now CS:GO coach who has made a living by playing and now coaching CS:GO. My main reason for interviewing Wojtek was to gain insight into aspiring electronic athletes' investment in coaching as a form of self-investment (Foucault 2008), however, as Wojtek is a retired electronic

athlete we spent some time discussing his time as an electronic athlete, what sort of methods and techniques he used to get there, and what he believes is necessary for aspiring electronic athletes to reach their goals.

Wojtek told me he began playing CS:GO "a long time ago, longer than I would like to admit or you would probably believe." He continued explaining that "maybe by your standard I am pro because I have made money, it's not like I have made $10,000 at once or anything, but I have made enough I guess that most would consider me to have been pro, as I got paid." From this point, I started to ask some more questions about how Wojtek was able to become an electronic athlete. He explained that a lot of it was just time, he has played over 10,000 hours of CS:GO and "once you get there, you're probably around good enough to make some money, almost guaranteed." Wojtek had been engaging with forms of self-investment through time, but he was extremely adamant about the importance of good gaming equipment. He explained:

> "and for me, you know, I am not anything special but I have played a lot of CS and such, and yeah when I was playing I always wanted to buy better stuff because I was like oh, this is going to make me better, you know?"

We continued to talk about gaming equipment and his opinion as to whether it mattered for aspiring electronic athletes, I asked Wojtek, "So if people want to take this seriously, they do need to invest money into equipment." He replied "for sure. I mean…no question. Like no way they're going to go pro on some shit mouse, keyboard, and yeah, [with a] monitor like 60 hertz or something," he then furthered explained that:

> basically, if you're serious about playing CS at a high level, you need to get all the equipment. You go on CSsettings.com and you look at someone who is pro and you look at his mouse, keyboard, headphones, everything, and you need to get all of that equipment [and] for the pc stuff you don't need to get a monster pc but you need to get FPS above the hertz of your monitor, and that's really not negotiable

Wojtek, much like Noah, was clear to make the point that gaming equipment does matter, and that one's chances to become an electronic athlete and increase one's embodied virtual capital could be done through means of self-investment and risk taking (Zaloom 2004; Foucault 2008)

As I highlighted in my methodology, I am a strong believer in the emergent (Boellstorff 2008; Boellstorff et al. 2012; William 2017; Rees 2018) as a method of research. I finished my fieldwork in December 2024 and had started the process of writing and planning out my thesis, however, once again Emily, the president of the University of Victoria Esports Organization went beyond what a participant might typically do, as I had interviewed her over a year prior to this conversation. Emily let me know that she had reached out to Jasmine Manakil known online as "Jazzyk1ns," a current collegiate-level electronic athlete playing for the Keyano Huskies of Keyano College on a full-ride scholarship. It was through Emily that I was able to finally interview a current electronic athlete who had played at the tier-one[9] level, the peak of esports.

Jasmine currently has 23.3 thousand followers on X (@JazzyK1ns) and is followed by some of the biggest names in the esports industry. Streamer Kyedae with one million followers on X (@kyedae), 100T Asuna playing in tier one Valorant on 100 Thieves (Liquidpedia 2025), one of the largest gaming organizations and brands in the world, and VIT Derke winner of 2023 Masters Tokyo and career earnings from tournaments of an estimated 263,148 $USD (Liquidpedia 2025), just to name a few. For me this was a critical break, an opportunity to interview someone at the pinnacle of esports who would likely have detailed insights into the enactment of economic rationality by aspiring electronic athletes.

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[9] Tier 1 Valorant is the highest level of playing for Valorant players.

On January 12, 2025, Jasmine and I met and chatted over Discord. I first introduced myself and let Jasmine know that I had some questions, but I first wanted to hear about her journey to becoming an electronic athlete. Jasmine was first introduced to video games by her older brother who started playing console games like Halo,[10] Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2,[11] Gears of War,[12] and lots of other shooter games on consoles from the early 2000s. Early into her gaming days, Jasmine noticed that she was "simply just better." Her brother was astonished at what he was seeing as she put is, "360 no scoping[13] kids in my games while teenage boys and men were screaming and shit-talking me while I was just this little eight- or nine-year-old girl." Much like other electronic athletes (Taylor 2012) it started off as a hobby and it wasn't until "CS:GO where gaming first became not much a hobby anymore, and I started to consider like ok I could actually get signed but at the time I was only ten or eleven." Jasmine explained that to even be allowed to sign a professional contract in tier one, the highest level of esports, one had to be at least sixteen years old, meaning Jasmine had to wait to sign professionally. For the time being then, Jasmine continued to play CS:GO. By the time she turned eleven, she was playing in ESEA advanced,[14] which is a level just below semi-professional. She continued to play there until the age of sixteen, but it was at this time that Valorant was released. Jasmine explained that "when Valorant came out it was so exciting and new and I had been waiting for so long to go pro. Playing CS:GO all the time and honestly with such a small women's scene, it felt like going to play Valorant might be a better option and provide some better opportunities to go pro."

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[10] First-person campaign shooter games with online matches for competitive play. Developed by Bungie.
[11] First-person shooter game developed by Activision.
[12] Third-person shooter game developed by The Coalition and Epic Games.
[13] A popular maneuver in shooter games where the player completes a full 360-degree spin and fires their weapon at the end resulting in a kill.
[14] ESEA Advanced is a private match-making service that only allows certain individuals to play.

Although Jasmine was taking a risk (Zaloom 2004) she expressed that it was a necessary risk and that the negative outcomes were far outweighed by positives. Along with the risk of switching to a completely new game, Valorant at this stage was lacking any real form of women's esports scene something that both Jasmine and Emily expressed as all too common in the esports industry. Jasmine explained that "there were women's teams but they were all already filled and getting into one as a newcomer to the Valorant scene was almost impossible," while Emily furthered this; "esports is just not really a friendly or often welcoming place for women, most of the women in esports stick together and have to really work with each other for reaching their goals," a similar notion to that shared by Crothers et al. (2024). Despite these challenges, Jasmine along with four other female Valorant players decided to put together their own team known as 'Majkl' and enter into FTW Summer Showdown tournament in September of 2020, which they would go on to win and earn a prize of 25,000 $USD (Liquidpedia 2025). It was after this victory that everything changed for Jasmine. Jasmine was indeed correct in her risk-taking; after switching to Valorant at sixteen years old, forming a team with a group of friends, and winning a large tournament, Jasmine was signed to her first professional contract as an electronic athlete with Cloud 9, one of esports biggest and most iconic organizations.

Jasmine joined Cloud 9 in 2020 and would go on to spend about four years with the organization, winning all six of their first tournaments and placing fourth and second in the following. Jasmine would then end her time at Cloud 9 with a first-place finish in the FlyQuest Trailblazer Tournament – Championship (Liquidpedia 2025). Over the course of her career, Jasmine would earn approximately 49,727$ USD (Liquidpedia 2025), in addition to her overall salary as she explained was paid out bi-weekly like a regular job (see Heere 2018). Jasmine eventually would retire from tier one Valorant in 2024 and seek to pursue a degree at Keyano

University in Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada. However, Jasmine joined with a full-ride scholarship as a member of the Keyano Huskies, the university's Valorant esports team. Jasmine explained that her decision to step down was due to “the lack of acknowledgement of women's esports and that fact there is no franchising[15] in women’s league made it really hard to see how I could really make a living by doing this for a long time.” Although Jasmine’s career as a tier one Valorant player has ended, Jasmine had invaluable insights into what process goes into becoming an electronic athlete.

Much like Noah and Wojtek who preached that at the higher levels “small details really do matter,” Jasmine concurred that “once you’re going pro everyone has that sort of mechanical ability, but the mental aspects start to become more important and the finer details really start to matter, small things that can give you an edge on another player really do start to matter.” I asked Jasmine to elaborate further which again much like Noah and Wojtek, Jasmine proclaimed that “you got to keep up with the new tech, there are just some things that are unnegotiable, for me, I had to keep up with the new gear that I knew would benefit me, and I was always trying to keep up with the new trends of other pros,” an indication of a form of self-investment and similar to how Wojtek expressed the importance of buying equipment used by current electronic athletes. However, unlike Wojtek and Noah who were adamant that better gaming equipment was unnegotiable for everyone, Jasmine was clear to admit that for some not all high quality and expensive gaming equipment “may not make you better,” but bad equipment “will certainly

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[15] “The franchising method allows numerous teams to participate in a single tournament throughout the year. Instead of competition prizes, teams earn a stipend and money from skin sales. In this league, there are no eliminations. Teams will keep competing unless they do anything outside of the contract that breaches the terms and necessitates ejection” (Desk 2024)

make you worse," and therefore, the risk of investment is justified as there is no harm done by investing in any perceived advantage.

My interview with Jasmine provided insight as to how esports organizations invoke a form of productive power on aspiring and electronic athletes and what may be the root cause for aspiring and electronic athletes' investment in aspects of gameplay such as their gaming equipment. Unbeknownst to Jasmine, she summarized this excellently in our interview, stating:

> In my experience, organizations are looking for a combination of a lot of things, obviously they want to see your stats and how good are doing, and they also want to see your gameplay to see how good your mechanics are and if you are up to the standard they have set. I also think a really underrated part of becoming a pro, that many people who are trying to become a pro overlook, is the importance of networking and meeting the right people that can vouch for you and really sort of up your ability to be signed

Jasmine here has provided a first-hand account of how embodied virtual capital in esports is valued by organizations. The organizations in esports function similarly to that of a state power that invokes a form of productive power on aspiring electronic athletes (see Foucault 1983; 1990; 2008), for they have the power to deem how valuable one's abilities are, therefore attributing embodied virtual capital. Jasmine seconded this, as they explained, "organizations have a real power over you, they can decide to sign you and they have the ability to just drop you whenever they want if they have a valid reason, and because of this job security is so low in esports." While game developers have designed competitive games to invoke a form of competition that is similar to that in market economies (Foucault 2008), the organizations themselves are responsible for how embodied virtual capital is perceived and attributed. Electronic athletes may be responsible for accruing embodied virtual capital but without the organizations who agree upon what is valuable, this would not be possible.

It was clear that all three of Noah, Wojtek, and Jasmine, as aspiring and retired or current electronic athletes, have engaged with self-investment and believed that better gaming equipment would be able to help increase aspiring electronic athletes' embodied virtual capital. However, self-investment does not only manifest itself in the form of using capital to gain capital. For all athletes or anyone aspiring to make a career, time is often the most important form of investment they can make.

Time is Money: In the Form of Embodied Virtual Capital

When I initially reached out to Wojtek, my main goal was to gain insight from a paid coach about another form of self-investment aspiring electronic athletes are deploying. Specifically, I was interested in learning about the methods, techniques, and practices that are used by aspiring electronic athletes. I hoped to find examples of aspiring electronic athletes engaging with neoliberal economically rational methods as a way to increase their embodied virtual capital. For the previous sections, I have focused on how embodied virtual capital may be accrued through means of self-investment through the purchasing of gaming equipment. It was clear that aspiring and electronic engaged in rationalized decision-making as they performed cost-benefit analysis on their decisions to purchase better gaming equipment, with the perceived benefit of increasing their embodied virtual capital for eventual employment. (Foucault 2008; Taylor 2012; Uperesa 2022). However, what was not discussed in the prior section was the

investment of time, to improve mechanical abilities and game sense,[16] other elements that make up the embodied virtual capital of aspiring and electronic athletes.

So far, I have discussed four of my seven formal interviews. The interviews with Noah, Wojtek, and Jasmine explored all aspects of their game playing, from their background with video games, how they self-invest as a form to increase embodied virtual capital and their experience and opinions on the purchasing of gaming equipment. While all three commented on their methods of improving mechanical abilities and game sense, these topics were not as deeply explored as in my three remaining formal interviews with Isaiah, Jack, and Liam. These three participants all currently fall under the category of competitive gamer, however, each had their own experience for a time as an aspiring electronic athlete.

My first interview was with Isaiah, who for over two years had attempted to become an electronic athlete. Isaiah expressed a large admiration for those who have made it as electronic athletes as "becoming pro is not easy, it takes so many hours, and you really have to be willing to sacrifice a lot." While Isaiah expressed the importance of gaming equipment, much like all my other formal interview participants, he wanted to highlight the fact that "really what is most important is playing the game, but you have to play a lot, and when you play a lot, you miss out on a lot of things. I spent so many hours daily practicing, aim training,[17] and watching videos to help improve my game sense and mechanics." Isaiah much like the Samoan American Football

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[16] Game sense is the knowledge players have of the game. This includes elements of understanding the layout of the map they are playing, how certain guns work, and what to do in certain situations. Game sense focuses on the mental abilities of gamers.

[17] Aim training is the training of one's aiming of their weapon in their game of choice. Typically, this is done through the use of an aim trainer, which is a program where objects appear at random, and players must physically move their mouse with their hand and land their cursor onto the object and physically press their right mouse button to hit the target.

players (Uperesa 2022), invested time into enhancing his "performance through training, where they hone their skills in daily workouts" (Uperesa 2022, 108). Jack and Liam agreed with this sentiment, reiterating the importance of daily practice and a focused, regimented schedule.

As part of our interviews, I had each participant talk me through what a day would have looked like when they were aspiring electronic athletes. Isaiah was by far the most regimented of the three, taking an extreme approach with a schedule followed ardently. Isaiah had a daily routine which began by waking up, and having his morning to do whatever he liked, often this was watching YouTube, and often videos about Valorant. He then would start by "hopping onto Aim Labs[18] and practicing my aim for like 30 to 45 minutes and then I would hop into a dm[19], and probably do like two to five matches." From there, Isaiah would then begin playing competitive matches in Valorant, the game's main mode. He indicated that he would sometimes start playing competitive matches around noon and sometimes wouldn't end until 5:00 or 6:00 pm to take a break for dinner and then would continue till anywhere between 9:00 pm and 12:00 AM. Isaiah's schedule although lengthy, is not all that uncommon for aspiring electronic athletes as all of my participants indicated that playing all day was common. During our interview, it was clear that Isaiah had unknowingly been engaging with economically rationalized decisions, as he actively attempted to increase his embodied virtual capital for employment. Isaiah indicated this while he explained that:

> I had the goal of becoming a pro, I wanted to be on stage and make money by playing video games and from what I had seen other pros talk about and do, it seemed the only way for me

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[18] Aim Labs is a free-to-use aim trainer where gamers can practice their aiming skills through a series of tasks, competitions, and game modes.

[19] DM stands for Death Match, a mode in Valorant and many competitive FPS games where players compete in a free-for-all mode where you kill each other till one person reaches a set number of kills, or the timer runs out. Death Matches are a staple practice method for many aspiring and electronic athletes.

> to get there was to do all this practice and spend a crazy amount of time playing because that was what pros had done to get there

By examining the methods of other electronic athletes, Isaiah conducted a form of market research, investigating the practices and methodologies that had allowed other aspiring electronic athletes to become electronic athletes. By doing so, Isaiah's methods and decisions had become economically rationalized, as others had enacted these methods and had done so with economic success. This same process was shared with me by both Wojtek and Jasmine, as they too had been following what Jasmine explained as "the things pros did to get where they are" which included "spending lots of time practicing, like aim training, playing dms, or talking with your teammates about what you're going to do better in the next game." Wojtek reflected similar beliefs that "to get better and go pro you need to play a lot and practice a lot and it takes a lot of time, but if you want to go pro you have to do it," he further said, "You look at all the pros and they all have over 10,000 hours and if any of them don't they are just really blessed then because without that many hours it's almost impossible to become a pro." With these statements, it is clear that aspiring and electronic athletes who engage with proven methodologies and vouch for them as the most rational course of action for increasing one's embodied virtual capital, can be said to resemble neoliberal rationality. It is thus valuable to understand decisions made by aspiring electronic athletes.

In the case of Jack and Liam, although regimented, and representative of how neoliberal rationality can be used to understand aspiring electronic athletes, they both took a more relaxed approach, as explained by Jack:

> I did practice a lot, and I spent I don't even know how many hours in aim trainers, watching videos online or just watching pros play, but I knew that I would drive myself crazy if I just did that, so I would often change up my schedule, some days I would practice more than others, and some days I would just play Valorant

Liam followed a similar method of self-investment practices as he too would practice at least daily but how he practiced was often different from day to day. Both Jack and Liam used similar methods as Isaiah, however, where they differ is their use of online coaching.

Both Liam and Jack had used online coaching as a method for increasing their game sense and mechanical abilities as a way to increase their embodied virtual capital. Liam explained that he was receiving coaching sessions every week or two for around three months through an online coach. The coaching service was one he found online through YouTube, where the coach was posting videos talking about common mistakes in Valorant, which Liam had been using in his practice. However, Liam explained, “I felt that the videos could only do so much because the gameplay being talked about was not mine and I really wanted someone to tell me exactly what I am doing wrong or need to improve on.” It is clear that Liam desired a tailored form of coaching that would best suit his needs, something Wojtek pointed out to me during our interview, “the experience of being coaching one on one by someone like me is highly personal and you get your own gameplay examined and there is a really big value in this.” From both my interviews with Liam and Jack, they agreed that the value of coaching was in the personalized and tailored nature of it that helped them become better players. I asked Wojtek to further elaborate on what he meant by the value, and he said:

> the value of coaching is time saved, by paying me to watch your gameplay and then meet with you over discord and tell you all the things you did right and wrong, it gets rid of the need for them to have to go over to YouTube and find gameplay this is sort of similar and then think oh they did that and the person commentating the video said not to do that so I should not either, and I mean that can work but it takes a lot of time and when you are already putting in a lot of time by playing and practice and stuff it is really valuable to have a coach. And obviously, by having a coach you can get better and that’s really what coaching is for so that you can learn from someone who has been at where you want to be and then you can learn from them and use their tactics and techniques to improve yourself and that I why I think people value coaching

Wojtek's answer when broken down has plenty of insight into how investment in coaching can be viewed as a form of economic rationality. It seems that Wojtek is highlighting the importance of making smart decisions when pursuing a career in esports, when Wojtek explains that the value in coaching in addition to time-saving is that the sessions are tailored to individual needs, and therefore can help one improve more effectively than watching videos online, it seems he is engaging with a notion of rationality (Foucault 2008). For aspiring electronic athletes, it seems that being rational manifests itself through making decisions that can more quickly and efficiently help aspiring electronic athletes accrue embodied virtual capital. As Wojtek points out, time is something of immense value to aspiring electronic athletes as simply getting time in the game is of utmost importance as referenced by Jasmine, Wojtek, Isaiah, Jack, and Liam. Therefore, if one cannot engage in a proficient amount of game time due to having one's time divided between other forms of practice, one may lose out on possible increases in abilities. We saw this same form of rationality applied by Isaiah in his hyper-regimented schedule, which was designed to most effectively allow him to improve and accrue embodied virtual capital. Moreover, aspiring electronic athletes like Noah have taken Wojtek's notion of the importance and value of time in the pursuit of becoming electronic athletes to a considerably higher extent than Isaiah, Jack, and Liam. While all the latter spent extensive time playing and practicing their games of choice, they remained full-time students. Noah, who is currently a full-time student, has decided to take the risk of taking a full-year-off from school. Noah explained to me that after concluding the final semester of the second year of his undergraduate degree, he plans to take an entire year off of school solely to practice and improve as an aspiring electronic athlete. He explained that "I really am going to bump up my hours with playing, as with school I haven't really been able to play much" and that "I am going to take the time to spend hours aim

training and come up with a really regimented training plan to get better." Noah explained that he was indeed aware of the risks of such pursuit, but felt that if he were to succeed, the benefits would far outweigh the risks.

The Production of Aspiring Electronic Athletes

In this chapter, I have used formal interviews supplemented by a survey as a method for investigating the ways in which aspiring and electronic athletes attempt to accrue embodied virtual capital. Noah, Wojtek, Jasmine, and seventeen of the nineteen survey respondents have all provided insight into the importance of self-investment through the purchasing of gaming equipment. It seems that in the case of my participants most would agree that purchasing better gaming equipment can help individuals improve and provide them with competitive advantages even if only slight. For the majority of gamers or competitive gamers, purchasing better gaming equipment was not necessary as although they may receive a competitive advantage, the benefits do not outweigh the cost. However, for aspiring electronic athletes or current or retired electronic athletes through a cost-benefit analysis (Foucault 2008), the benefits do outweigh the costs and investment is beneficial. As Noah, Jasmine, and Wojtek all explained, when competing at the highest level or pursuing the highest level of play, small details matter. Through this examination of purchasing gaming equipment, paying for coaching, practicing alone, or as a team I can assert that neoliberal rationality is useful in better understanding these processes, specifically pertaining to, self-investment, cost-benefit analysis, and the increasing of human capital and embodied virtual capital. Additionally, it would be said then that neoliberal rationality is apparent in a previously unthought of domain such as esports.

I aimed to highlight the perceived importance of time as a value by aspiring and electronic athletes. Participants made various points about how important time is when pursuing a career as an electronic athlete and that one must make well-thought-out decisions regarding their time. Aspiring electronic athletes, therefore, develop fine-tuned training schedules that prioritize creating a perfect balance between time spent practicing and time spent playing. These training schedules result from a rationality, one that is similar to that of neoliberal rationality, as individuals "seek to maximize [their] his profit" (Foucault 2008, 259). For aspiring electronic athletes maximizing profits manifests itself in their efforts of accruing embodied virtual capital, and as I have pointed out, maximizing profits forces aspiring electronic athletes to consider their time as valuable in these efforts.

The participants throughout the process of self-investment aspiring and electronic athletes engage deeply with a productive form of risk (Zaloom 2004). Much like the traders in the pits at the Chicago Board of Trade, risk can produce a "particular kind of self" one that is "manufactured in relation to financial action" (2004, 366). Whenever aspiring electronic athletes make a purchase for a perceived return of embodied virtual capital, they are actively engaging with a productive form of risk that continues to produce a specific form of aspiring electronic athlete. As the interviews have made clear, many of the methods, beliefs, and techniques implemented and enacted by aspiring and electronic athletes are similar to those used by already made electronic athletes who have proven their methods as effective. A similar idea appears in Zaloom's (2004) discussion of the traders who observe already made high-stakes traders and seek to learn from them. Zaloom uses an excellent quote from a trader named Vincent, who explained:

> Big traders are guys who are actively in there at all moments, and these people are watched... You know, Tom Baldwin, Bruce DeAlba, Joe Nicaforo, and all those guys. They know that they have developed their authoritative presence in the pit, and they know that when they just stick their hands in the air, everybody sees them. You watch them. We watch the players. We watch the risk takers; we watch the big guys. We watch the shooters, as we call them. We don't sit there and watch the little Mark guy who stands next to me who's never really good or offered a market at any given time … These developed risk takers – the big guys – have the presence (Zaloom 2004, 373)

By learning from the already established traders, new traders seek to emulate similar methods and tactics for profits, they take risks by engaging with these methods; however, they are rationalized decisions, based on those which previously worked. This is also apparent in the methods and tactics used by aspiring electronic athletes. As pointed out by Wojtek, "you really just need to go watch the pros play, see what sort of equipment they are using, or even like learn about the practices they do and then use those in your own training," something aspiring electronic athletes, like Noah, emulate in their training and purchasing of gaming equipment.

In conclusion, this chapter has provided comprehensive examples of the methods, rationale, and techniques used by aspiring electronic athletes in their pursuit of embodied virtual capital. Additionally, I have illustrated how they actively engage in a form of productive risk like that described by Zaloom (2004). Furthermore, I use examples such as planning of training schedules, purchasing of gaming equipment, paying for coaching, management of time, and decisions making in regard to the methodological approaches aspiring electronic athletes use in their pursuit of accruing embodied virtual capital as a way to showcase how neoliberal rationality is useful in better understanding these processes. While aspiring and electronic athletes may not be knowingly engaging in neoliberal rationality, the ways in which these techniques and practiced have developed, I argue are best understood through its lens.

Chapter 4. Ready, Fight! Gamepads Versus Controllers, Advantage, Disadvantage, or Personal Preference?

Introduction

One night as I was looking through the University of Victoria esports Discord channel to find local events I could attend; I stumbled upon an event being hosted by Vancouver Island FGC (Fighting Games Community). The event was a local fight night, a free-to-attend weekly event for anyone interested in fighting games. I was not someone who had been interested in fighting games, which I had only played a handful of times. However, I decided to message the organizer to see what exactly the event was, and if it would be ok if I attended as a researcher. We had a brief discussion where I introduced myself, my research, and why I would want to be attending. The organizer happened to be interested in my research and even had some understanding of scholarly analysis of neoliberalism. The organizer found it fascinating that I had connected it to esports. After some further deliberations, we decided I would attend the following week. Although all previous research had focused on Valorant and CS:GO, competitive FPS games I had struggled to find an opportunity to conduct a traditional form of ethnographic research through participant observation, and although I had no previous knowledge or real experience with fighting games I felt inclined to pursue (Boellstorff 2008; Boellstorff et al. 2012; William 2017; Rees 2018).

Before attending, I spent some time doing research, specifically on Tekken 8, the game of choice for the majority of the players attending the locals.[20] The Tekken series is a widely popular fighting game developed and published by Namco. The first Tekken game was released in 1994 for arcade consoles and PlayStation in 1995 (Alfonso 2012) and has continued to be a popular game in the genre. Although fighting games are not typically at the forefront of the esports industry, the 2024 Esports World Cup had a record-setting prize pool for Tekken 8 of $USD 1,000,000, however, the second highest ever prize pool is $USD 50,000 at Dream Hack Dallas 2024 (esports earnings, n.d.). Tekken functions similarly to all esports with a base game that anyone can play and high-level players playing in leagues and tournaments for prize money and salaries paid by organizations. However, there is something unique about fighting games like Tekken – they originated on arcade machines (figure 5).

Figure 5 - Original Tekken arcade machine.

[20] The term locals refers to localized in-person events where video game players all living in the same area come to compete against one another.

As Tekken originated on arcade machines the primary form of controller was a button pad built into the arcade machine (figure 5). Although Tekken has been released on console since its first iteration, meaning the option to play with a handheld controller is available, gamepads have remained the primary choice for most players. Up until Tekken 8, all previous versions have been released as arcade games alongside the console versions, however, Tekken 8 was launched exclusively on console and PC[21] (Donaldson 2024). Although the arcade machine era has come to an end, gamepads are still a pivotal technological interface. During my initial research into Tekken, with every search I was bombarded with advertisements for gamepads. Gamepads (figure 6), also known as fight sticks, are the primary method of play for fighting games as they seek to mimic the layout of the original arcade machines. Recently, there has been the use of a new form of gamepad known as leverless gamepads,[22] which are often referred to as 'hitboxes',[23] the reason for this, as Nick, the organizer of the fight night local, explained, is due to the primary company that sells leverless gamepads being named hitBOX. With all of the advertisements I came across during my preliminary research, I was expecting to observe only gamepads being

[21] PC means personal computer and for gamers refers to any computer used for gaming.
[22] Leverless gamepads are gamepads but do not include the typical joystick and instead are compromised of only buttons.
[23] hitBOX is the"best all-button arcade controller in the world, the core advantage of the Hit Box is that you have more deliberate control over your game, helping you make fewer mistakes in a match. Random execution mistakes are significantly decreased when you use your entire hand for motions, rather than your wrist or thumb" (hitboxarcade, n.d.)

used at the fight night local, instead, I entered into an event that, alongside the fighting within the games, had a debate ensue throughout my time attending the events.

Figure 6 - One of the traditional gamepads I saw at the Vancouver Island FGC that included a joystick.

On October 24th, 2024, I made my way to the Vancouver Island FGC fight night local, I arrived about 30 minutes past the start at 6:30 pm, and after arriving, the first thing I noticed was the sheer number of controllers and gamepads in the lecture hall. I entered through the back of

the lecture hall, so I had a full view of the room when I first entered. I stood and looked around, admiring all of the different gaming setups brought in for the fight night (Figures 7 and 8).

Figure 7 - A setup brought from home by one of the event attendees consisting of a PlayStation 5 and a foldable monitor.

Figure 8 - A setup brought from home consisting of a MiSTer FGPA which is an "open-source project that emulates consoles, computers, and arcade boards" (Retrorgb 2025) and a foldable monitor.

As I walked down the stairs, I saw one match being played between two players using controllers, which I found interesting, as I had assumed almost everyone would be using some

form of gamepad. However, more peculiar was the match occurring directly next to them, where one player used a PlayStation controller, and the other used a gamepad. I recall stopping midway down the stairs and just staring at them, thinking, how could that be perceived as fair? One player is playing the game with the intended form of the controller, while the other uses a controller that, although functional, is not made specifically for fighting games and more so a jack-of-all-trades controller, with the ability to be used for any genre of game. As I silently walked down the stairs, attempting not to have anyone turn around to see me lurking in the back, I decided to take a seat at one of the long rows of planted chairs and observe the match between the gamepad and PlayStation controller. While at first, the match seemed to be even with both players dealing blows to one another, as I continued to watch, the gamepad player won round two, and subsequently round three, winning the match three to zero in the best-of-five format. Were my initial thoughts right? Was this an unbalanced match-up? As I sat at the table, I quickly took out my notebook and began scribbling down notes, one of which (figure 9) reads “one guy playing with controller other with gamepad thing, is there any advantage for the guy using the gamepad? Do people who play fighting games invest in the gamepads for competitive

advantage?" Which would inspire the direction of my participant observation at the Vancouver Island FGC Fight Night Locals.

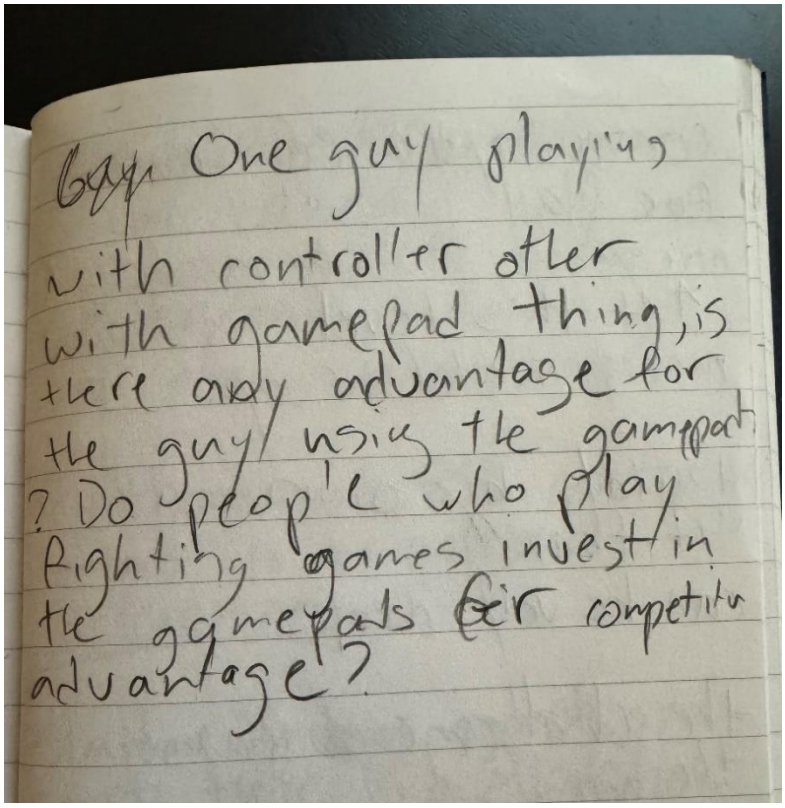

Figure 9 - The original note I wrote in my notepad during my first night at the Vancouver Island FGC Fight Night Local.

Before this moment, I had, in all honesty, not formulated any real objective for attending the events. Up to this point in my research, I had struggled to find events to attend to conduct participant observation. As someone unfamiliar with the fighting game genre, I had no expectations that I would be able to find examples of the extension of neoliberal economic logic at these events. Instead, I instilled my trust in my methodological approach, engaging the notion of the emergent (Boellstorff 2008; Boellstorff et al. 2012; William 2018; Rees; 2018), I walked right into an unanticipated and extremely useful part of my research – an investigation into the equipment purchasing of aspiring electronic athletes in fighting game scene.

While I have already written extensively in the previous chapter about how equipment purchasing by aspiring electronic athletes is a form of self-investment, and an example of how neoliberal rationality is useful in understanding the techniques used by aspiring and electronic athletes in the pursuit of embodied virtual capital. The Vancouver Island FGC fight night locals could not be overlooked as they provide a completely different genre to investigate for comparable examples. In addition to a new genre of esports, what was most valuable and imperative to include was the difference in equipment being used by FPS aspiring electronic athletes and fighting game aspiring electronic athletes.

As mentioned in the prior chapter, gaming equipment for FPS aspiring electronic athletes is mainly made up of mice, keyboards, monitors, and headsets. For fighting game aspiring electronic athletes, the equipment used includes monitors, controllers, and gamepads. While the difference between the types of equipment is an important distinction, what is far more important and interesting for my research, is that while electronic athletes competing in competitive FPS games all use the same form of equipment with only the brand or internal components varying, fighting game electronic athletes face a decision to make as to what form of equipment they use: gamepad or controller?

Gamepads or Controllers

Continuing on from my arrival at my first fight night local, I finished writing my notes and headed down the stairs to get a closer look at the match between the player using a gamepad and the other using a controller. I approached the two players and said, “Good match!” I introduced myself, I let them know I was a graduate student at the University of Victoria, and they introduced themselves to me as well; however, the conversations were informal and only

lasted a few minutes. I proceeded to ask them about the match I had just watched, inquiring if this was their first match of the night against each other. Both let me know that it was their third game tonight, I therefore followed up by asking who had been winning, and they let me know that the gamepad player had won all three so far. While I did not feel surprised, it only made sense that someone with, in my opinion, a clear advantage was winning I did not want to get too far ahead of myself and assume this was a common occurrence. We chatted for a little longer, as they asked me more questions about my research and let me know that they would be ok with me including anything we talked about in my research. After a few minutes, I moved on and continued observing matches being played at the event. During this night, there were six different setups, meaning there were a total of six matches being played at any given moment. As I continued to observe the matches, I witnessed three different matches where three different gamepad players beat PlayStation controller players. I began to question, was there this much of an advantage? Based on what I had been observing, one could likely assume that it was an understatement that gamepads were an advantage, as every match I watched had a gamepad player emerge victorious, appearing like a clear correlation to a newcomer.

After watching four matches, I went and introduced myself to the organizer, whom I will call Nick. Nick and I began discussing the formats of the events, fighting games, my research, and getting to know each other. Although I was excited to meet Nick, during this conversation I could hardly contain my excitement about what I had just witnessed and eventually, I was able to ask, “are the gamepads a huge advantage over the controllers? They seem unfair!” Nick looked at me, smiled, and let out a big laugh, explaining that, well, the easy answer is probably yes, it is not that simple. Nick explained that while gamepads for the case of most players are an advantage, it is ultimately personal preference whether you choose to play with a gamepad or

controller. I followed up by asking, “Even at the pro level?” Nick replied by explaining that at certain levels of play, such as top tier, a gamepad, specifically, a leverless gamepad is an undeniable advantage. This threshold of gaming equipment providing advantages to their users was evident in my previously discussed findings from my formal interviews and survey. In these, players towards the lower level of play such as gamers or competitive gamers, indicated that while equipment does matter, it was not enough of a difference for them to ultimately invest in it. A similar conclusion was made during my time at the fight night locals, as I talked to three different individuals who were using controllers, and all of them indicated that they were not aspiring to become electronic athletes and just played for fun. It seemed that again, as indicated by Nick and by the aspiring and electronic athletes I interviewed, if one is attempting to become an electronic athlete, the equipment you use, no matter how minute the advantage might be, indeed does matter. Nick provided an excellent explanation of why he believes this is the case; When game players reach a certain point where they are aspiring or electronic athletes, their mechanical abilities are often very similar, and therefore, you must look for other means of competitive advantage. This is something Jasmine also highlighted as she said, “Once you are going pro, everyone has that sort of mechanical ability, and sometimes there really is not much room for improvement so you got to improve other aspects of your game or get like better equipment that can help give you even the smallest of edges.” With this in mind, I asked Nick if anyone here was at that level of game playing where small details do matter, to which he enthusiastically replied “me!”

Nick has been playing Tekken 8 for five years now and is in the top 1% of players, placing him in the category of the most elite players. Still, due to small prize pools in fighting esports, Nick would likely fall under the category of aspiring electronic athlete, even though he

ranks much higher comparatively than the other aspiring athletes I interviewed. Nick explained that he has only made around $200 this year from tournaments; based on my definition of electronic athletes, Nick has not made enough to be considered an electronic athlete. Nick is, therefore, an aspiring electronic athlete who concurred with the other aspiring electronic athletes that at this level of play gaming equipment matters and in Tekken 8, “it can really matter.”

Over the course of my four visits to the fight night locals, I had various conversations with Nick which focused primarily on the debate between gamepads and controllers. For Nick, there was no question that at the level he was competing in, gamepads and specifically leverless gamepads were a clear advantage. He made it clear that although he believed leverless gamepads were far better than traditional gamepads, that this was ultimately up to a personal preference for aspiring electronic athletes. However, for Nick, it was nonnegotiable due to an injury he picked up many years prior that had forced him to invest in a leverless gamepad. Although I never inquired about the nature of Nick’s injury, he explained that he was unable to control his hand well enough to take full control over the joystick on a traditional gamepad, and for this reason, he had to switch to leverless. He did make it known though that regardless of his injury, he thinks he would have switched to a leverless gamepad as “it is just so much easier to use.” In addition, Nick’s injury had limited the position he was able to lay his hand and because of this, he had to design his own gamepad, specifically tailored to his needs. Nick’s leverless gamepad (figure 10) is completely custom-built, he designed all of the parts himself and had the designs sent to a metal factory in Ontario, Canada where they were milled and sent back to him for building.

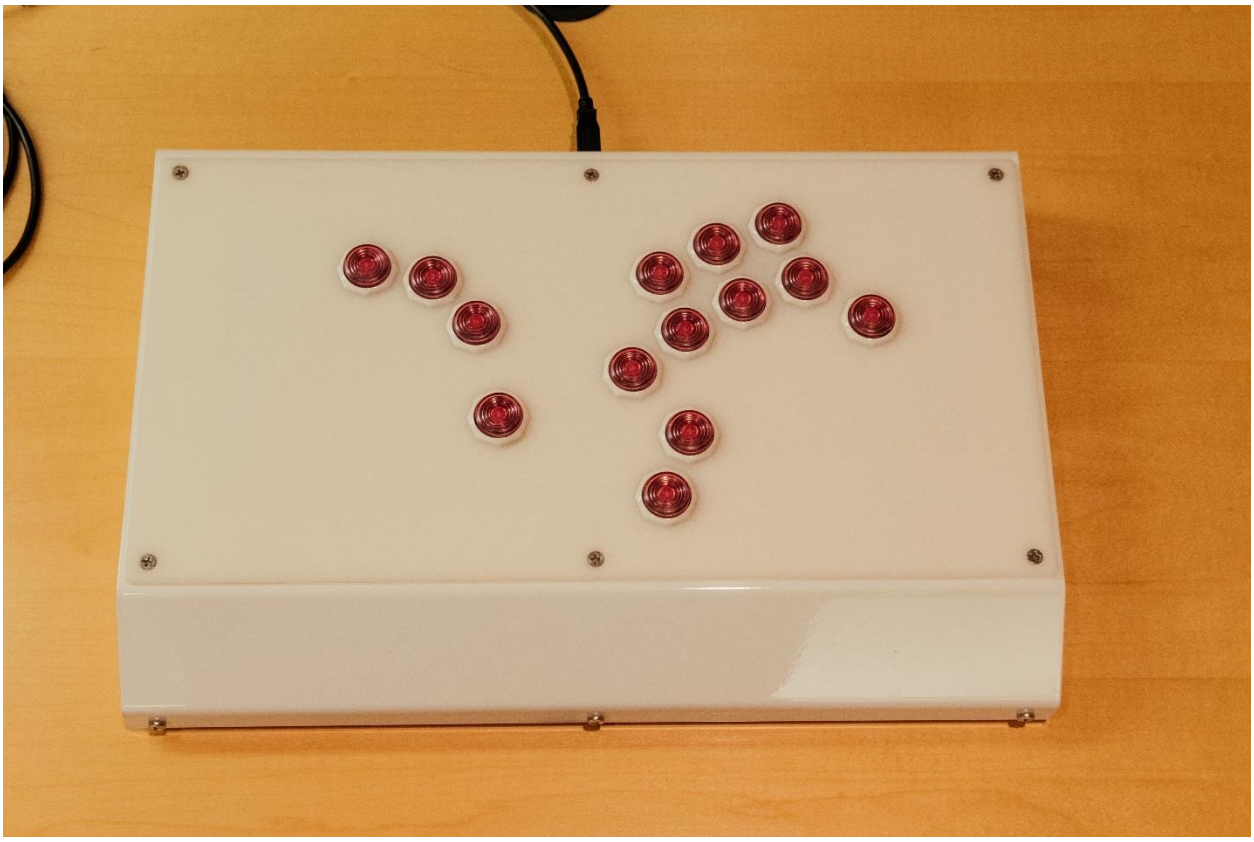

Figure 10 - Nick's custom-built leverless gamepad.

Although Nick never told me the full amount he paid, according to him it was "really really expensive but one hundred percent worth it." He furthered this by explaining that "if I am going to compete at the highest level, I am going to have to invest in something that I can use with my injury and if I am going to make money, win tournaments [then] I have to do this." Nick is an aspiring electronic athlete who, through the design and purchasing of a custom-built leverless gamepad, has engaged with self-investment for the means of accruing embodied virtual capital. Nick's development of a custom-built leverless gamepad is a fascinating example of how through the use of neoliberal rationality we can further understand the methods used by aspiring electronic athletes in their pursuit of careers as electronic athletes. While Nick's example and engagement of self-investment are highly informative for my research, I asked Nick to introduce

me to other aspiring electronic athletes who frequent the local fight nights. This prompted Nick to introduce me to Ben during my third visit to the fight night locals.

Figure 11 - Ben's customized leverless gamepad.

Nick wanted me to get a good look at Ben's rather expensive gamepad (figure 11). Ben refused to tell me exactly how much and insisted it was "a lot." I examined the gamepad for a little bit before Ben and I began having a conversation about his leverless gamepad and his time playing fighting games. Ben explained that about ten years ago he was an aspiring electronic athlete and at the time, the main form of gamepad was the joystick gamepad (figures 6 and 12) which he was happily using. However, during this time the first leverless gamepads came out, which prompted Ben to "switch almost immediately because the more time I had to practice on the new gamepads the more advantage I would have," once again the notion of time as value is

prominent in the methods of aspiring electronic athletes. As we continued to talk, he stated that "when I was really trying to go pro and I saw these come out there was a clear and undeniable advantage." Much like Nick, Ben had invested in a leverless gamepad for the sole purpose of gaining a competitive advantage, although Ben is a former aspiring electronic athlete who now mainly plays for fun, he remains adamant that leverless are a necessity for aspiring electronic athletes and serious players.

During the same night I met Ben, I was introduced to Jake, who told me he has been seriously playing fighting games for just over a year now and has been competing at the Fernwood locals, which is another local fight night where players can earn money. Jake told me that for the first bit of his time playing fighting games, he was using a controller but once he got serious, he started to notice a disadvantage and he decided it was time to make the switch to a gamepad. A little over six months ago Jake bought his gamepad (figure 12), a classic joystick gamepad which he admits still feels like a disadvantage to the leverless gamepads, but he prefers the feeling of the joystick and feels like he would have to start from square one if he were to switch to leverless. For Jake, it seems that the perceived risk of having to start from square one in his journey as an aspiring electronic athlete outweighs the potential benefits of gaining both a competitive advantage and increased embodied virtual capital. Alternatively, however, we may consider this to still be a form of economically rational decision-making, as Jake is still acting rationally, due to believing his best chance of becoming an electronic athlete lies with the use of a joystick gamepad. Therefore, through a cost-benefit analysis, Jake has elected to continue his use of the joystick gamepad as for him, it presents a greater opportunity for increased embodied virtual capital, and eventual status as an electronic athlete capable of making profit.

Figure 12 - Jake's joystick gamepad.

Whilst I spent plenty of my time at the fight night locals hearing from aspiring electronic athletes, who each weighed in on the debate of leverless versus joystick gamepads, I also intended to participate by playing to formulate my own opinion on the debate.

Can I play? Participating in Tekken Matches

As the fight night local is free, and anyone can play I asked if I could play some matches against another beginner like me. For these games, I would put myself in the category of gamer, someone with an understanding of how the games work but with little playtime and experience. I got the opportunity to play Tekken 8 against another individual who was also attending the events for the first time and had some experience but no more than ten hours of playtime. Before the match, we were brought over to the table with all of the controllers and gamepads, and we were allowed to pick any we wished. For the first match, I opted to play with a PlayStation

controller as it is something I have plenty of familiarity with, while my opponent opted to use a gamepad. I was given a quick rundown of the game, what buttons do what, and some easy combinations to do in-game. As soon as the match started, I felt out of my element, I struggled to control my character as the joysticks of the PlayStation controller moved in any direction leaving additional room for error. In the first round I lost, in the second round, I was able to win, and eventually, I lost the third and fourth rounds losing the match three to one. I immediately asked for a rematch and to switch to the gamepad. I had assumed that switching to the gamepad would create a more level playing field between me and my opponent however, as someone who had not used a gamepad since a child in an arcade, I felt even less comfortable. The gamepad, however, was far more streamlined; it was clear which buttons did what, and the joystick wa larger than a joystick of a controller, meaning that moving forwards, backwards, upwards, downwards, or at a diagonal was far easier, and I was less likely to make a mistake. After the match started, I felt it was noticeably easier to control my character, and with the increased size of the buttons, it felt easier to quickly hit the buttons and create combinations of attacks. Despite all these noticeable differences, I still lost the match 3-0, a worse score than before. Although I lost both matches, I had the opportunity to try both forms of controllers, and my experience validated Nick's sentiment that although there was a strong case to be made that the gamepads and leverless gamepads had the advantage, ultimately, it was personal preference at this level. My countless hours growing up and using controllers had made me familiar with them, and at any point, I could pick one up and play any game; however, with the gamepads, it was something new, which I would have to practice, which I continued to do over the following weeks.

I continued to attend the fight night locals for the following weeks to try and see just how much better a gamepad could make me. During my second week attending, I immediately

walked over to the table where all of the gamepads and controllers are kept, grabbed a gamepad and went out seeking competition. However, it was difficult to find equal opponents as the majority of attendees had plenty of experience in fighting games. In the previous week, a new attendee much like myself was there for me to play against, but they did not return in the second week. Whilst I did play some games against many of the regulars, in which I did not win a single match or round, I spent the majority of the time observing others play and even getting some free coaching from some of the more experienced players. Ben was helpful, as much like Wojtek, Ben took the time to watch me play against others and would tell me what I was doing wrong and right and give me solutions for my issues. At first, it was pointed out that I simply looked uncomfortable with the gamepad, and indeed I was.

For all of the games I play, I use either a mouse and keyboard or a controller and for the games I use controllers for I am typically sitting very relaxed, something I was unable to do with the gamepad. To properly use a gamepad, as instructed by Ben and Nick, I needed to have it sit in my lap, something that felt incredibly uncomfortable and unnatural for me, however, they insisted it was something I had and would get used to. Over the course of the visits to the local fight night, I focused on getting more comfortable with the gamepad which meant simply playing more games. As someone who is naturally extremely competitive, these two weeks were incredibly demoralizing as I spent the three hours each week at the local fight night losing game after game. Although I was aware it was for research, I cannot say it was the most enjoyable time I have spent playing video games. However, as Ben and Nick predicted, the gamepad began to feel more comfortable, and I started to win rounds.

It was during my third week attending the fight night locals that I noticed a major improvement, as it was the first time I was able to win a match. In attendance for this week's

fight night local was the beginner player I met during my first time attending who beat me by a score of three to zero. When I arrived, I was hopeful that this would be the week I finally got my win and when I saw the player I had faced only just two weeks prior, I thought that this may be my chance. As I did not have my own monitor to bring, I had to wait to play on the projectors (figure 13) or someone else's set up (figures 7 and 8).

Figure 13 - The projector screen used for playing at the Vancouver Island FGC Fight Night Locals.

Thankfully, Jake was nice enough to let me use his. I had now arrived at the moment I had spent the last three weeks practicing for the opportunity to seek revenge on the first opponent who bested me. The match began and he took round one, and rather convincingly so. Round two was next and although very close he was able to edge it out and take the round win. I was now up against the ropes, trailing by two rounds with only one round standing between me and defeat.

What happened next may sound like a fabrication, but I was somehow able to complete a full comeback, eventually winning the match with a final score of three to two. I had finally become comfortable enough with the gamepad to beat someone who was at the same skill level.

Although I had now become decent enough with the gamepad to win matches against other beginners like me, I wanted to make sure that my turn in form was not a result of simply playing the game but rather a combination of time game playing and the gamepad's natural competitive advantage. To do this, during my second to last week of attending the fight night locals, I played exclusively with a controller. During the beginning of this session, I felt uncomfortable with the controller as I had just spent the last three sessions learning how to properly use the gamepad. However, as I have stated previously, a controller is something I still regularly use and have done so for the majority of my life, therefore, eventually as muscle memory does, I was able to quickly adapt. During this session, I was able to beat two other newcomers who were using gamepads with a score of three to two and three to one, which I considered was rather impressive. It seemed Nick’s assessment that at the low level of play what equipment you choose to use is likely not going to matter as much was true. However, I could not help but notice that although I had won, it felt more difficult than it should have. It felt as though I understood the game and what I should be doing, but I had to think more with the controller about how I was going to do what I knew I needed to do. For the final week of my time at the fight night locals, I returned to using the gamepad. During this session, the same beginners I had beaten in the week prior with a controller were in attendance again, and I once again challenged them. This time I was able to beat the player I beaten three to two prior, three to one, and the other opponent who I beaten three to one, now at three to zero, a clear improvement.

In the final week of my time at the fight night locals, I spent the majority of the time thanking those who contributed to my research, particularly Ben and Jake, who spent time coaching me to improve as a Tekken 8 player. I went on to play a couple more matches, winning three and losing two, out of the five matches played, three of my opponents used controllers and two used gamepads. During this session, I lost one match to a player using a controller and one to a player using a gamepad. Based on the outcomes of my matches, you could assert that there is an advantage gained through the use of gamepads versus controllers, which I am inclined to slightly agree with, as the gamepads provide the ability to input actions at a faster and more controllable speed. For example, the joystick of the gamepad is gripped with your entire hand, while the joystick of the controller is only moved with your thumb, leaving the controller user with a more difficult task of controlling player movement. Additionally, the gamepad buttons are larger in comparison to the buttons on the controller, leaving less room for error on the gamepad versus on the controller. And while these advantages are true, at my level of play it was too unpredictable to make a confident assertion. Rather, my match results further confirmed the notion present in my formal interviews and informal interviews, that while gaming equipment does matter, it is only at a certain level that it becomes essential. That being towards the very top of players, such as those who would be considered aspiring or electronic athletes who are actively pursuing careers as well-paid electronic athletes. It is at this level that small competitive advantages become more valuable as they have the ability to sway results between competing individuals. As a novice, the small competitive (dis)advantage provided by different gaming equipment could not be fully felt as our physical abilities were not fine-tuned enough to see the impacts of the gaming equipment. In summary, while I may have had some slight advantage over the controller users, due to my mechanical ability I was not able to take full advantage.

For a total of five sessions, I attended the fight night locals in an attempt to gain better insight into how economic rationality frames the decisions of aspiring electronic athletes in regard to choosing a gamepad or controller (Foucault 2008). While I only ever used the joystick version of the gamepad, I did in the end feel as though I was gaining a slight advantage over controller users, focusing thus on the embodied practices, what Mauss (1973) deemed techniques of the body, associated with competition as they connected to material goods.

Game Over

My time at the Vancouver Island FGC fight night locals was an unanticipated avenue of research that provided me with detailed examples and accounts of how aspiring electronic athletes perceive potential gain of embodied virtual capital through the purchasing of gaming equipment for the means of competitive advantages (Zaloom 2004; Foucault 2008; Uperesa 2022). I was able to observe how aspiring electronic athletes view these differing gamepads and how they value and justify the purchasing of better equipment for competitive advantages. It was made clear by the participants that when pursuing a career as an electronic athlete, that no matter how minimal an advantage may be, when actively pursuing a career as an electronic athlete all amounts of advantage matter. I also recall back to my first discussion of embodied virtual capital and my reasoning behind its development and inclusion in my thesis, and no where better does this chapter illustrate the need for such a concept. This chapter highlights the fact that aspiring electronic athletes and their pursuit of embodied virtual capital is beyond the human, rather it is a union of the machine and how individuals configure new forms of economic relationships. Haraway illustrates that in high-tech culture:

> It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine. It is not clear what is mine and what body in machines that resolve in coding practices. In so far as we know ourselves in both formal discourse (for example, biology) and in daily practice (for example, the homework economy in the integrated circuit), we find ourselves to be cyborgs, hybrids, mosaics, chimeras. Biological organisms have become biotic systems, communications devices like others. There is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic. (Haraway 1991, 177-178)

Meaning that in domains that function on the interactions between humans and high-tech, humans become cyborgs as they communicate actions through technological means. For example, the participants at the Fight Night Locals communicate their bodily actions through their gamepads (high-tech) which are then interpreted and enacted in the virtual world (Tekken 8). These actions for aspiring electronic athletes are used to extract value from their game playing; however, this is only possible through the use of technologies that breakdown the separation between technology and biology. It is for this reason that I elect to use embodied virtual capital over other conventional notions of human capital, as not all of the capital gained is through biological means but rather a blend of human and technology that allows its accruement. Lastly, while the previous chapter achieves many of the same results, this chapter highlights the importance of ethnographic research and participant observation (O'Reilly 2012; Boellstorff et al. 2012; Fontein 2014) and how in combination with formal interviews can create a more rich and robust dissemination of results.

Chapter 5. Anthropologist, Ethnographer, Gamer, Fan

From the onset of this thesis, I have aimed to clearly indicate that I am currently a competitive gamer. I play video games almost daily and of the many games I play, competitive FPS games have been my go-to. Although I now consider myself to be a competitive gamer, as many with the same characterization would admit, there is always the feeling of what if? What if I could become a professional? Something my gaming group and I, explored for around four months starting in late September of 2023. Up to this point, I have been investigating the neoliberal rationality that frames the actions of aspiring and electronic athletes in an attempt to accrue embodied virtual capital. However, if I were not conducting this research and someone else was investigating the same question, I could very well be a participant. It is for this fact that I have decided to engage in autoethnographic methods (see Benjamin 1968; Ellis et al.; 2011; Chin 2016; Bluteau 2019) to add an additional layer of detail to my research.

As highlighted in the discussion of my methodological approach during my interviews I sought to use them as a way to more deeply find connections between the participants and me (Boellstorff et al. 2012). Interviews were a place to have more private conversations where more personalized stories could be told. At the beginning of each interview, after we introduced ourselves, I would simply ask the participant, what is your experience with video games? This question aimed to prompt participants to tell their stories in an open-ended manner, it was a chance for them to share whatever information with me as they would like. For most participants, this manifested itself in a chronology of their first experiences with video games to where they are now. To follow Chin's (2016) approach to autoethnography, I apply the same

theoretical and ethnographic methodology I applied to my participants, and ask myself, what has been your experience with video games?

My Experience with Video Games

I have been playing video games as early as I can remember, originally, they started as a way to bond with my father as we beat level by level in Super Mario World on the Super Nintendo Entertainment System. I remember waking up early in the morning and rushing to my parent's room to wake up my father, exclaiming "King of Mario! Wake up! Wake up!" at this point, my father was far better than I and had thus earned this title as the 'King of Mario'. However, it did not take long for me to become a worthy successor to my father's throne. In Super Mario World, you can replay levels and go for faster times, which, after beating the game, became my go-to form of entertainment. I spent countless hours trying to get faster and faster times, and every time I did, I felt an immense amount of satisfaction.[24] Although the games had started as a way for my father and I to spend time together which they did, and I have ever-lasting memories of, I had reached a point where he could no longer compete with me nor did the game feel challenging enough, I had finally become the "King of Mario." I, like my participants, found myself simply running out of people to compete with, like pro gamers, where "over time they come to be the strongest player in their own friendship circle and hit a wall where they are no longer getting the challenge they once did" (Taylor 2012, 87). Although I never became a

[24] This relates to the popular practice of speedrunning videogames, where competitive players, including electronic athletes within this sub-discipline of game-playing, seek to reduce the gap between a technologically executed perfect run, or Tool-Assisted Speedrun [TAS], and their own performance. This involves many techniques, careful use of technology, and, often, thousands of hours of practice, much like other electronic athletes, albeit competing not only against others, but directly against themselves.

professional electronic athlete this lack of challenge was something I was faced with and motivated me to go out and find it.

It first manifested itself by competing with other friends and in particular my cousin as he and I always competed to see who could more quickly beat a game, get a higher score, more kills, or simply just be better. However, after some time my cousin became less interested in video games, and I was once again left struggling to find a means of competing. Around the age of 10, in 2009, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 (MW2) was released. On the day it came out, I went and picked up a copy at my local game store and from this point on, I became obsessed with the competitive nature of first-person shooter games.

MW2 is not considered to be a competitive FPS as there is no form of ranked system, unlike those in games like Valorant and CS:GO. Because of this, players looked for other forms of competing, for me and many others this came in the form of 'trickshotting'. Trickshotting is a method of playing MW2 where players look for increasingly difficult ways to get kills, much like Jasmine pointed out when she explained she was "360 no scoping kids,"[25] I was doing the same. It was around this time as well that new forms of media such as YouTube were undergoing a form of legitimization as a career path (Taylor 2015), which proved to be a large motivator for many aspiring electronic athletes (Taylor 2012). I was only eleven at the time, but I began to hear stories from friends of other 'trickshotters' joining what were known as clans[26] on YouTube and making real money by playing the game. As an eleven-year-old, this completely blew my mind; the possibility of making money from video games had not seemed like a possibility prior.

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[25] A popular trick at the time, referring to doing a 360-degree spin, before a successful shot, without using the scope to reduce the accuracy and increase the skill and luck required.
[26] Clans was the name known in the trick shotting community for gaming organizations.

Quickly after hearing about this, I became obsessed with the prospect of making money from playing video games, and I began the pursuit immediately. At this point in time, the technology of recording your video game console was available but rather expensive, but without the ability to record I would be unable to upload to YouTube and have the clan see my trick shots to ask me to join. It was with this dilemma that although, unaware, I, at the age of eleven, engaged in a form of cost-benefit analysis backed by neoliberal economic logic (Foucault 2008). I spent the next few months saving up money from chores and eventually, when my twelfth birthday came around, I had saved up enough money to invest in a recording device for my game console, a Hauppauge HD PVR which at the time cost around CAD $250. This decision was met with large pushback from both my parents as they urged me to not waste my money and to buy something better. However, I was determined to engage in a form of self-investment, and I indeed made my purchase. Additionally, I invested in a better headset, and a new controller, and moved my gaming console to the living room to connect to my parents' better-quality TV.

From this point on, I began recording my gameplay, saving clips of trick shots, and eventually compiling enough clips together to create my own montage. I collected around twenty different trick shots and sent them to a video editor, a friend from California that I had met online. He was nice enough to edit my montage for free and after he finished, I uploaded it to my YouTube channel. I distributed the YouTube link to friends I knew in person, and friends I had made online and asked them to share it around. After about a month it received somewhere around 5000 views, and my wildest dreams had seemed to come true. I began being contacted by trickshotting organizations and eventually, I agreed to join the organization known as AE (youtube.com/@AEUproar) or Above Everything, which had amassed over 100,000 subscribers at the time, however, now sits at 87,500. By joining AE I instantly accrued additional embodied

virtual capital, as my YouTube channel skyrocketed to over 1000 subscribers, with my montage at over 10,000 views. Eventually, I would earn my first bit of money, a total of $20. While the money earned did not amount to much profit, it is evidence of how neoliberal rationality is being extended into a domain such as video games, which are commonly considered a fun or leisurely activity, as I was actively engaged with self-investment in the form of purchasing gaming equipment and time spent practicing for the means of increasing my embodied virtual capital..

After this period, I never made more money as I became more invested in playing soccer, which was encouraged by my father, and thus hard not to focus more on. Now, my YouTube channel which is still viewable by visiting youtube.com/@robbiealberto is a standing testament to my pursuit of embodied virtual capital through trickshotting. My channel now sits at 796 subscribers, and sadly, I deleted the original video of my trick-shotting montage when I entered high school, as I feared it would be discovered. I eventually re-uploaded it eleven years ago; it has since gained 792 views. After this time, video games remained a competitive outlet, but I never engaged with similar methods as I did when I was eleven until many years later when I and a group of friends made the active decision to enact similar logic in our game-playing of CS2.

Insider Ethnography and Observing Participation: Action Research

For about four months, a group consisting of myself and four friends actively engaged in similar forms of the pursuit of profit displayed by my participants. While we enacted the rationality of aspiring and electronic athletes, albeit not on purpose by the majority of the group, I cannot confidently assert that our goal was to become electronic athletes. I would like to make it clear that this period of time took place between the end of September 2023 and the end of January 2024, which was before some of the interviews and research I conducted. Therefore,

many of the methods I engaged with were mainly theories of what I believed I would hear about from my participants or what I had already seen while conducting secondary research (see Thin 2014) on electronic athletes. The inclusion of this portion of research in my thesis was contingent on whether the results of my research confirmed my hypothesis, or if not, if they could produce a valuable contrast. Collectively, our goal was to see how far these methods could take us, and if anyone was able to make it as an electronic athlete, then so be it. However, after about a week of playing, I recalled an interesting paper I had read a few months prior about a new ethnographic research method intended to alleviate many of the complex challenges faced when navigating both offline and online spaces. It was at this point that I decided to engage with the practice of observing participation (Bluteau 2019), where I sought to implement the same techniques and methods used by aspiring and electronic athletes into my own game playing of CS2. And in doing so, I examined my own game playing through the same neoliberal rationality as I did during my participant research

CS2 was released on September 27th, 2023, which was long anticipated by me and my ground of friends, therefore, we played on the first day of its release. For about five days we played together as a group adjusting to the new game system and refreshed, reworked mechanics. It was after about a week when we collectively decided we wanted to put our best effort into improving as a team and climbing the ranked ladder.[27] To do so, I engaged with the practice of fieldnotes (see Mannik and McGarry 2017; Fontein 2014), where I kept notes about potential examples of neoliberal rationality to improve my skill level and embodied virtual capital.

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[27] This is a common phrase for gamers that means to actively try to improve at the game and subsequently achieve higher ranked status in the game. See page 12 for further details.

During the first session of my time as an observing participant (Bluteau 2019), we spent the night strictly playing games as a way to develop a baseline as to where all our skill levels were. From this point, we would then develop a team plan for how we would improve. The team plan included participating in structured mandatory practices on a once-a-week basis and playing daily matches together as a team. During the practice session, we would spend time analyzing our previous games hoping to identify what worked and what did not. It was at this point that we decided we would need an in-game leader (IGL), which is a member of the team who makes the decisions of what the team does next while playing. We decided to elect our IGL through a combination of their mechanical and mental abilities, or in a sense their embodied virtual capital. While the IGL's main job is to make decisions during matches, our IGL also became a sort of coach for us during our practices. They would often let us know what they would like to do in our next match, and we would practice their ideas until we all had memorized them well enough to implement them at a moment's notice in our next games. We focused on becoming a cohesive unit, something Jasmine elaborated on extensively during our interview, explaining that "one thing that can really improve your chances of going pro is having a good team around you because if you play with people you do not like it is going to be really hard to improve together," she continued by stating "and it really matters like how you all work together you know? Like you need to all be on the same page." Coming from Jasmine, this is a great confirmation that what we emphasized as valuable in our practice methods was reminiscent of her own. When it came to playing games, I did not collect very extensive fieldnotes as the games functioned as simply a method for accruing embodied virtual capital in the most basic way, something echoed by Noah, Jasmine, and Wojtek as of the utmost importance. Where the use of my field notes excelled was through the examples self-investment both my teammates and I engaged with.

In my journal, I noted that I was struggling to aim as well, and I began to feel extremely frustrated by this. One game in particular on November 13th, 2023, I noted "just went 5-23[28] and I literally could not kill anyone, might be time to get a new mouse." During this time, I was using a Viper Ultimate[29] as my mouse and I had become very displeased with it. The shape was low to the desk, and I could constantly feel my hand rubbing against my mouse pad, a feeling I did not like. Because of this, I engaged in my first form of neoliberal rationalized self-investment, which for aspiring and electronic athletes is the process of investing with time or money with the goal of increasing one's embodied virtual capital and potential profits. I, therefore, self-invested through my purchasing of a Logitech Superlight Pro for around $200 CAD with the perceived benefit of increasing my embodied virtual capital. Much like Wojtek and Jasmine explained, I too went looking for what equipment electronic athletes at the time were using and it seemed the majority were using the Logitech Superlight PRO (Lars 2025) therefore, I made the informed decision to make this purchase. Following my purchase, all of my teammates also made the purchase, as we all agreed that it was time to upgrade our mice to something better.

After about a week of use, I began to feel the real advantage of the Superlight PRO, as in the name suggests, it is super light. The Superlight PRO markets itself as "an engineering breakthrough achieving a weight of less than 63 grams – nearly 25% lighter than our standard PRO Wireless mouse (Logitech.com 2025). Additionally, it provides "pro-grade wireless technology" and "ultra fine control for complete confidence especially during the intense, split-second moments of tournament play" (Logitech 2025). With all of this in mind, it was clear to

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[28] The represents the number of kills during the game, while the 23 represents the deaths. This is a poor score for a player in CS:GO 2.
[29] Gaming mouse developed by Razor.

see how I rationalized my decision to purchase as the perceived risk of investment was outweighed by the potential accruement of embodied virtual capital (see Zaloom 2004; Foucault 2008). For me, the mouse was a means to gain an immediate increase in performance displayed through my aiming ability and subsequent increase in kills during my matches. However, all of my teammates and I agreed that although we had perceived an improvement, we needed to add in aim training as a means to further accrue embodied virtual capital.

Aim training was something mentioned by every single one of my formal interview participants as a non-negotiable form of practice. Because of this I developed my own aim training plan that I implemented with the use of Aim Labs, a free-to-use aim training application where players have access to hundreds of preset and customizable aim training practices. As noted by me in my fieldnotes, all of my teammates also engaged in aim training with all of us spending approximately 30 minutes before we got into gameplay strictly aim training. While none of us had as rigorous schedules as that as described by my participant Isaiah, we all still took a regimented approach by taking our time to properly warm up through aim training before playing. By warming up, we perceived that it would benefit our performance in our games, which would then be displayed through our performance and data metrics (Brock 2021) in game, attributing to enhancing our embodied virtual capital.

Reaching New Heights: It Works, but at a Cost

Prior to engaging with similar neoliberal economic rational methods as described by the aspiring and electronic athletes I interviewed, I was at about 7000 MMR[30] when I first started

[30] See pages 11 and 12 for further details and explanation.

documenting my progress, which is the rank of around 9.2% of the player base of CS2 (Westerlund 2024). Comparatively to the old CS:GO ranking system an MMR of 7000 is around the rank of Gold Nova (Westerlund 2024, which is typically considered to be quite a low rank. Prior to CS2, I had always floated around the rank of Silver Elite Master and Gold Nova,[31] but during this time, although I would have considered myself to be a competitive gamer, I was not engaging in any forms of rationalized practice, methods, or investment. With this in mind, the results of my time actively engaging in similar forms of practice as aspiring and electronic athletes speak for themselves. By the time the four months had finished, I had reached a rank rating of 12,246 placing me with around 5.1% of the CS2 player base (Westerlund 2024), which is an astonishing 74.9% increase in MMR. Additionally, in terms of the CS:GO ranking system this would place me around Distinguished Master Guardian and Legendary Eagle[32] which is seven or eight ranks higher than I had ever been. I point this out as my use of common techniques, methods, and practices of aspiring and electronic athletes propelled me to ranks I had never been able to achieve prior. While I have stated prior that these techniques are not actively being used as forms of neoliberal rationality by aspiring and electronic athletes, my documentation of my time engaging with common techniques used by aspiring and electronic athletes showcased how by applying the concept of neoliberal rationality to these techniques we can further understand the process aspiring and electronic athletes undergo in the attempt to increase and accrue embodied virtual capital. Through an autoethnographic dissemination, I am able to provide firsthand accounts of my attempts at accruing embodied virtual capital. Lastly, I

[31] See page 12 for further details and explanation.
[32] See page 12 for further details and explanation.

gained a newfound understanding of the processes aspiring and electronic athletes undergo which helped enrich the research and thesis.

While the practices and methods I used worked, they came at a cost. Put simply, I was burnt out. As someone who had always enjoyed the competitive aspects of video games and constantly looked to find ways to engage in competition, I found it overly exhausting to constantly be in a cycle of cost-benefit analysis. By subjecting myself to the same rationalized methods of aspiring and electronic athletes, it meant I had to continuously be aware of the decisions I was making, decide if the benefits would outweigh the risks, and "negotiate economic uncertainties for profit" (Zaloom 2004, 383). While this is common practice in everyday life, the perceived risks are far more tangible than the ones I was navigating during my time playing CS2. A bad decision in CS2 may cause me some MMR, something I personally can live with, while an irrational economic decision in my everyday life may cause me major difficulty. While this may be true for me, it was made clear in the previous chapters that for aspiring and electronic athletes the risks they are engaging with do matter, and they matter to such an extent that they implement fine-tuned decision making in their everyday practices. Decisions on what gaming equipment to purchase are researched and well thought out, schedules are rigorously planned, practices are non-negotiable, and time playing the game is regimented. These decisions highlight how aspiring electronic athletes are constantly making decisions in the pursuit of accruing embodied virtual capital, indicative of an extension of neoliberal rationality to a non previously considered economic domain. I argue that neoliberal rationality aids in understanding these processes.

This chapter has illustrated both the value of engaging with autoethnography as a method and observing participation (see Benjamin 1968; Ellis et al.; 2011; Chin 2016; Bluteau 2019), while providing comprehensive and contextualized examples of the techniques used by aspiring

and electronic athletes that echo similar logics as those of neoliberal rationalized practices. These were seen in my use of well-thought-out gaming schedules, practice routines, and purchasing of gaming equipment, all techniques used by aspiring and electronic athletes in the pursuit of accruing embodied virtual capital. Furthermore, it exhibits the value of engaging with these practices, as I increased my embodied virtual capital by 74.9%, an incredible return on investment. Through autoethnography and observing participation, I have been able to reposition myself as a researcher and gain "a more nuanced subjective understanding of the processes conducted by one's informants and the space in which these actions are carried out" (Bluteau 2019, 271), exemplified by my struggle to continue to engage with the same rationalized practices the way aspiring and electronic athletes do.

Chapter 6. Conclusion: Accruing Embodied Virtual Capital explained through Neoliberal Rationalities

The esports industry is rapidly evolving and has undergone extensive legitimization and sportification in recent years (Heere 2018, Cumming et al., 2022) and has additionally, been subject to the "extension of economic rationality and calculative reason" (Rudnyckyj 2010, 24). While I recognize that the esports industry as a whole has been economically rationalized, I set my focus on the individuals within, the aspiring and electronic athletes. Through this thesis, I have presented various examples and accounts of the practices, techniques, methods, risk taking, and decision making of aspiring and electronic athletes in the pursuit of embodied virtual capital. It was through these accounts that I then applied neoliberal rationality for the goal of better understanding these processes. However, what falls at the crux of this thesis is my development of the concept of embodied virtual capital, which seeks to help understand the ways in which aspiring electronic athletes' fashion themselves as well-paid electronic athletes. The concept of embodied virtual capital highlights the complex nature of esports and high-tech domains that have seen recent adaptations of neoliberal rationality. I showcased that while human capital as a concept is useful for understanding the accrual of capital by aspiring and electronic athletes, it cannot do so solely but instead requires the rethinking of how individuals extract value and capital from virtual spaces.

The central body of this thesis provided extensive examples of how the pursuit of embodied virtual capital manifests itself in the daily practices of my participants. Through discussion with Noah, we saw the extreme risk-taking many aspiring electronic athletes engage in to become electronic athletes. Meanwhile with Jasmine, I was able to investigate the strategies enacted by a well-accomplished electronic athlete as a way to better understand what economic

logics had seen success. Similarly, Wojtek adamantly expressed the importance of investing in gaming equipment as a means to gain competitive advantages. Meanwhile, my interviews with Isaiah, Liam, and Jack all showcased the extensive methods aspiring electronic athletes enact for the perceived goal of increasing embodied virtual capital, and careers as electronic athletes.

Moreover, throughout this process, I have used a myriad of methodological approaches to collect and disseminate these results in a comprehensive manner. Through interviews I was able to gain personalized insight into decision making and investigate these through neoliberal rationality. While my participant observation allowed me to investigate perceived competitive advantages from a first-person perspective, to help me better formulate my arguments. Likewise, the inclusion and engagement of autoethnographic methods has allowed me to develop a portion of my thesis that can be better distributed and accessed by a wider audience. Lastly, as an observing participant (Bluteau 2019), I ascertained that while economic rationalized decision making was logical, it was not without inherent challenges. Through this process, I gained a deeper respect and admiration for the aspiring athlete's commitment to their methods, practices, and techniques, as my experience was not a straightforward task.

Finally, it can be said that aspiring electronic athletes engage in well-thought out and fine-tuned practices, methods, and techniques influenced by prior successful electronic athletes. Through the use of the concept of neoliberal rationality, we can make sense of the logic behind decisions and assert that neoliberal rationality has in fact become an essential aspect of aspiring electronic athletes' pursuits of embodied virtual capital and careers as electronic athletes. Lastly, primarily, this thesis has highlighted and validated that esports, aspiring and electronic athletes, and the accrual of embodied virtual capital is beyond the human, and as predicted by Haraway

(1991) we have found “ourselves to be cyborgs, hybrids, mosaics, [and] chimeras” as we have become “biotic systems” (1991, 177-178), crossing between digital and physical practices.

Future Considerations

While I believe I met the objective of my research, I can not help but regret some of the decisions I made during my research. For instance, my time visiting Tokyo, Japan, to attend the Valorant Tokyo Masters contributed little to the overall argument of my thesis, with a large amount of research going largely unused beyond providing some additional insights and context. My time in Tokyo provided insights into esports tournaments, and helped me further understand the legitimization of the esports industry (see Taylor 2012; Taylor 2015; Taylor 2018). However, at this point in my research, the focus was far too vast, and I had widened my scope to a point where I would simply never be able to include all of the research I had done both on esports and online and offline worlds, with the work I was doing with aspiring electronic athletes. Therefore, for future research, I would consider focusing on one singular avenue instead of multiple, no matter how exciting or intriguing one may be. Nonetheless, these avenues could provide the foundations for future publications, research, and other considerations outside the scope of this thesis.

For a brief time, I conducted ethnographic research with the University of British Columbia’s Valorant ‘blue’ team, UBC’s tier two Valorant team. This research, however, was cut short due to constant changes in players and eventual team disbandment. UVic’s esports president explained that “it is all too common for esports teams to fall apart, for players to leave, get too busy with classes, or even if they want to be even more serious, start playing completely separate from the collegiate level.” Something that, although a constant challenge, would also

become a great reminder to not ‘put all your eggs in one basket’. While setting up this research, I had almost stopped pursuing other potential participants, as I felt like I had found exactly what I was looking for. While I did spend two sessions with the team observing them during play and practice, I was not able to fully collect enough data to include it in my thesis. Therefore, I lost time and began to fall behind in my recruitment process. Considering this, in the future, I would make sure to diversify my potential participants as much as possible and not put myself in a position where, if one thing falls through, I am left scrambling. While each of these instances posed great dilemmas for me as I had to pick between various research avenues, these limitations, in my opinion, were not negative. Although I had to disregard plenty of research conducted, I instead focused more closely on one topic that proved advantages in helping develop a more thorough and detailed thesis, with remaining avenues for future work.

Future Research Avenues

Whilst it is true that I, throughout the chapters, praised and engaged with the emergent (Boellstorff 2008; William 2017; Rees 2018) as a methodology, the number of emerging research avenues was simply unprecedented. I did not anticipate that I would be faced with the challenge of having too many options to write about. However, due to the scope of this research, I had to focus on one topic. Thankfully, many of the emergent research avenues were far too large in scope to fit my master’s thesis, and therefore, I made my decision based on what was possible given the scope. Nevertheless, it would be a disservice to anthropological literature not to make these emergent research avenues known. Therefore, I leave you with a brief introduction to various future considerations of research I became aware of during my time researching aspiring electronic athletes.

It became apparent early on that esports events present a unique spectator experience and, for anthropologists, can provide insight into a space that showcases individuals operating simultaneously in online and offline worlds. Take, for example my time at the 2023 Valorant Tokyo Masters, where electronic athletes both represented themselves physically on the stage, while simultaneously representing themselves virtually in-game. The arena, housing both virtual and physical embodiments of electronic athletes, is a unique opportunity for anthropologists and ethnographers to investigate the online and offline concurrently.

While approaches such as Bluteau (2019) highlight a way to become enmeshed and conduct ethnography on the borderline between online and offline worlds as a researcher, esports events pose an interesting dilemma. As esports are increasingly being held at large stadiums with capacities upwards of 10,000 (Mclaughlin 2023) this leads to an impact outside of the stadium. Coleman explains that in a world heavily mediated by technology and media that "in some instances, digital media have extended their reach into the mundane heart of everyday life" (Coleman 2010). For Boellstorff (2008) and Nardi (2010), once their device is off, the virtual world ends, and their avatar remains frozen in time and space in whatever server their avatar is hosted on. For electronic athletes participating in esports events, even after the event ends for the day, their avatars continue to be embodied in their physical form, as they take the form of electronic athlete superstars competing for their team (Schultze 2011). This continuation of virtual embodiment transcending into the physical world is what requires a new and unique approach to digital and virtual ethnography, with unique infrastructural, material, and economic implications.

I was unable to fully investigate during my research how esports and organizations are able to make money. While there is plenty of literature regarding the profits being made by the

esports industry (see Taylor 2015; Taylor 2018; Chaloner 2020; Egliston 2021), I propose a different process of profit-making. Competitive FPS games like Valorant and CS:GO are free to play, meaning you do not have to spend any amount of money if you do not wish to. Although both games do have a 'store' where microtransactions can occur, both forms of purchasing are for cosmetic items that serve no form of competitive advantage, yet they continue to generate massive profits. Valorant makes immense profits from the sale of its cosmetic items, such as its 2023 champions skins, which "generated $40 million USD" (Fudge 2023). It is not something they can solely rely on for profit. Instead, they turn their focus to another audience, the spectators and fans and through what I propose to be a 'fan-centric approach', extract profit from the fans directly. I take inspiration from Schull (2012), whose notion of a player-centric approach for extracting profit from gambling machine players provides similar methods of extraction as those used by the esports industry. Specifically, through forms of technological advancement such as live streaming (Taylor 2018), where esports organizations make profits by having fans view ads.

Lastly, throughout my research, I could not help but consider what the pursuit of increasing one's embodied virtual capital would manifest itself in a context where career success was rather a necessity, rather than a desire. I, therefore, question how dreams of upward mobility differ across contexts between core and peripheral nations, where economic dreams may be increasingly resonant (Wolf 1972). Additionally, I would like to further explore class, the role of financial markets, professional experiences, wealth, and the economic realities of the broad industry. Particularly as a Latin-American Canadian-born visible minority of El Salvadorian descent, I would like to take this research to El Salvador, where esports have recently seen a rise in popularity and hold interesting connections to globalized upward mobility.

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