

CLIMBING THE RANKS IN HARD MODE

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WHAT

Semi-structured interviews and participant observations set out to explore the students' wellbeing when being part of an inherently competitive gaming environment. Eighteen students were interviewed and a total of 18 hours of training sessions in CS:GO and League of Legends were observed. A phenomenological analysis was employed to extract the essence of the environment as perceived by the students themselves, resulting in a descriptive account characterized by three elements the students navigate in-between.

WHO

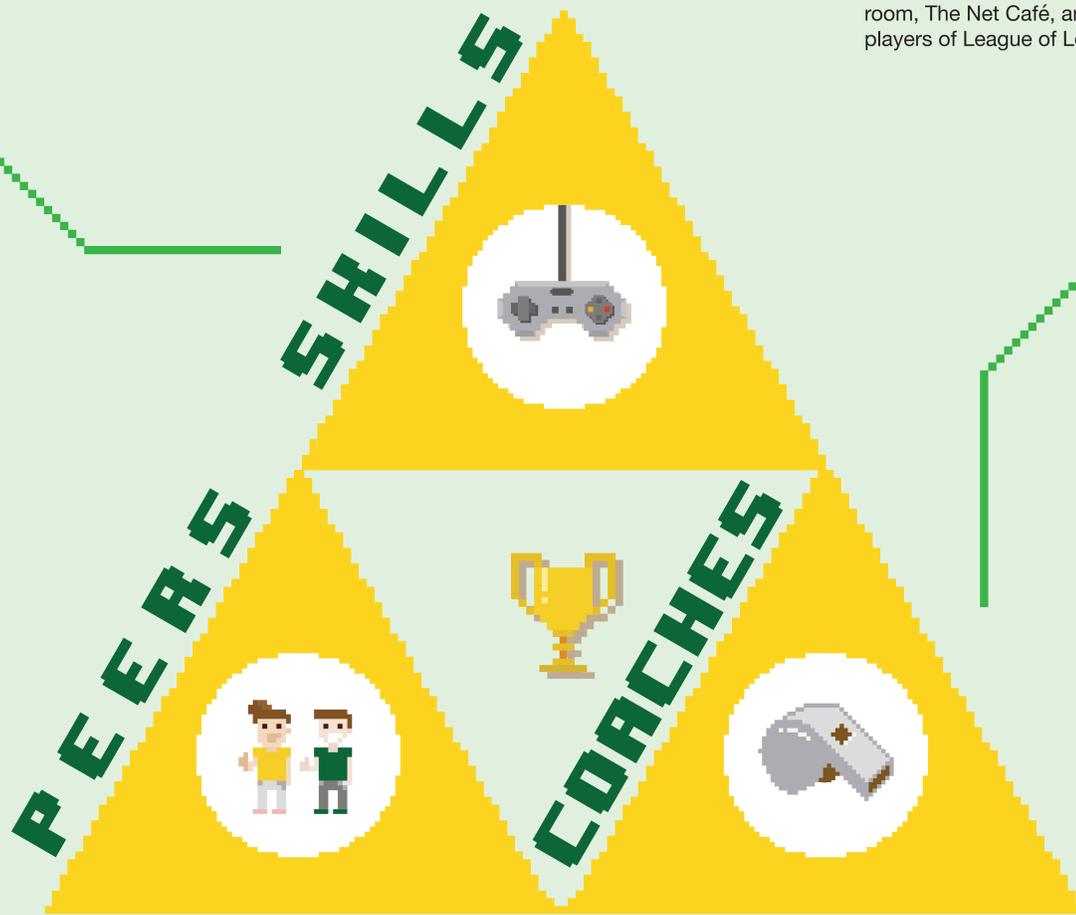
Students ranged from 16-21 years old, ten were 1st year students, eight were 2nd year students. Of the 18 students, 8 played CS:GO (5 with access to the Pro Room) and 8 played League of Legends (3 with access to The Pro Room). Two students played other games.

WHERE

An educational institution offer courses combining upper secondary education with an elite training programme in e-sports; a so-called e-sport academy. Students attend e-sports training after regular school hours 3 times a week and engage in compulsory physical activity at least 6 hours a week. Students of the e-sport academy have exclusive access to a gamerhouse open from 13.30pm-11.30pm on weekdays, and 8am-2.30am on weekends. The gamerhouse consist of three rooms; one large room, The Net Café, and two pro rooms exclusive to the 20 best players of League of Legends and CS:GO respectively.

SKILLS

The students acknowledged a hierarchical structure to their social environment as both natural and necessary. With any sport, there will be those who are more skilled than others, and as much as that is a natural order, it works also motivation for these students as well. They aim high: becoming professionals or the very best they can be means beating down the competition in the process, preferably those that are currently better.



COACHES

Coaches have the final say on who joins the pro rooms and who doesn't. However, some students experience unclear criteria for advancement, favoritism and a lack of opportunities to prove or better themselves. Students in The Net Café receive less training and feedback than their counterparts in the Pro Rooms, thus making it even more challenging for them to advance.

PEERS

The students describe the gamerhouse like a small family; everybody games, everybody know what it's about. While friendships are made (even across rooms), different narratives on peers develop depending on the room you "belong to": those in the Pro Rooms are perceived as more loud and obnoxious, those in The Net Café are perceived as plebs (a derogatory term).

CONCLUSION

Students' psychological wellbeing seems affected by navigating between accepting an inherently unequal sport while struggling with an inexpediently unequal system for climbing the ranks. This system creates a diverse gaming environment in which some thrive while others' motivation for improvement is diminished.

ASPIRANT

"I really want to be in The Pro Room, but I feel like my level isn't there yet. At the same time, I'm at the same level as some of the guys in The Pro Room giving me the feeling that I actually can make it."

"Generally, I don't think [The Pro Rooms] are motivating, because I feel like it's so exclusive it's very difficult to get in."



"... sometimes I just feel like they could handle the big room a bit more. I feel like we're looked down upon sometimes. Also when the parents are shown around. "These are the ones that aren't aspiring to so much" – I'm sitting here, training just as hard as everybody else!"

PRO

"[People in The Net Café] are thinking that the coach doesn't like them, and everybody is better anyway, so "why should I even be here?" That's how I think, they think. Some of them are cool and try to train and get better."



"... I was actually sitting in the net café at one point. Not because I wasn't any good, I just didn't have a team at that point."

"I'm a little disappointed on behalf of those sitting in The Net Café – they're being forgotten. They don't benefit from the training."



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