Whose voice matters? The gaming sphere and the Blitzchung controversy in eSports

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Abstract

With eSports and video games rapidly gaining popularity, we are witnessing a rise of semi-autonomous gaming communities. I propose using Alexander's civil sphere theory and my concept of the gaming sphere to understand the dynamics of the meaning-making processes herein. I ask: why did the Blitzchung controversy spark such outrage? I explore the hidden meanings behind the controversy where the professional Hearthstone eSports player Ng Wai Chung was punished for expressing his opinion during post-game interview by calling to "Liberate Hong Kong," losing $4000—all happening in the ostensibly apolitical gaming sphere. I first build the gaming sphere from the civil sphere, establishing the constitutive and communicative institutions of gaming as well as identifying the sacred and profane binary oppositions within the gaming sphere. Second, I provide a thick description and interpretation of the Blitzchung controversy using my concept of the gaming sphere. Lastly, I conclude that despite winning fairly, Blitzchung's punishment for being "political" was not removed entirely. However, as the civil sphere was invited into the gaming sphere, the controversy shifted toward Hong Kong protests. The gaming sphere was partially restored as apolitical, even supporting a noble cause, but the Blitzchung controversy never achieved full societalization.

Keywords Gaming sphere · Civil sphere theory · Video games · Blitzchung · Activision Blizzard · Hearthstone

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Introduction

Ng Wai Chung, aka Blitzchung (Liquipedia 2019), is a professional Hearthstone eSports[1] player. He was banned and stripped of his $4000 prize pool winnings and title two days after winning the Hearthstone Grandmasters 2019 Season 2 tournament for the Asia-Pacific region. During the final interview after the last game on October 6, he shouted, "Liberate Hong Kong, the revolution of our times"[2] while wearing a gas mask. The hosts then abruptly ended the stream, alleging technical difficulties. On October 12, CEO of Blizzard Entertainment J.A. Brack[3] (Brack 2019) justified this ban in an official post on the Blizzard website, accusing Blitzchung of "taking the conversation away from the purpose of the event and disrupting or derailing the broadcast" (ibid.). Shortly after, the tag #BoycottBlizzard started trending on Twitter. This punishment was called out first by members of what I call the "gaming sphere." The drama escalated when, on October 18, 2019, US senators and members of Congress sent an open letter[4] to the CEO of Activision Blizzard,[5] Robert A. Kotick. The gaming sphere went wild, and protests began. Headlines calling out Blizzard for its action flooded the Internet. Protesters came up with innovative ways of garnering attention from the civil sphere, including American students protesting for the liberation of Hong Kong in another Hearthstone competition. Furthermore, the character Mei, a Chinese scientist from Overwatch, another Blizzard game, was transformed into a symbol of the protests; players used this to show their disdain in-game, but also in out-of-game performance.

I will be analyzing the Blitzchung controversy by discussing (1) the remedy response from Blizzard Entertainment CEO J.A. Brack, (2) the symbolic transformation and performative appropriation of the video game character Mei, (3) the open letter to R. A. Kotick, and (4) the case of American students' protest. My goal is to unpack the "how" and "why" of this performative battle, its consequences for the eSports industry, and the significance of civil society in the conflict. Why did the Blitzchung controversy spark such outrage in the gaming sphere?

The significance and reach of eSports are on the rise. With the COVID-19 pandemic having forced people to isolate and seek other forms of entertainment, eSports has become an easy alternative to regular outdoor sporting events. Many professional sports leagues and celebrity athletes have turned to eSports to stay connected with fans during lockdown (Allen 2020), strengthening the already quickly

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[1] A multi-player video game played competitively for spectators by professional gamers.

[2] Original: 光復 香港, 時代革命 (Guāngfù xiānggǎng, shídài gémìng) which roughly translates to "Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times".

[3] As of the time of writing, J.A. Brack is no longer the CEO of Blizzard Entertainment as he left in a wake of rising allegations concerning a hostile working environment and sexual harassment in the workplace within Blizzard Entertainment.

[4] Available from the government website at: https://www.wyden.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/101819%20Wyden%20Letter%20to%20Activision%20Blizzard%20RE%20Hong%20Kong.pdf.

[5] The parent company of Blizzard Entertainment.

expanding eSports industry[6]. Theoretically, my main goal is to establish a new concept of a gaming sphere based on Alexander's (2006) civil sphere. I will show how the gaming sphere helps us understand videogame-related social drama, how such drama is resolved within the gaming sphere, and how the gaming sphere interacts with the civil (ibid., p. 31) sphere. I then use the concept of the gaming sphere to analyze Blitzchung controversy concluding that the Blitzchung controversy started as an intra-sphere problem and partially restored the gaming sphere. But later shifted toward Hong Kong protests thus not finishing full societalization.

Literature review

Video games emerged as a form of entertainment for kids and adults alike in 1970s (Whalen and Taylor 2008) and have been socially relevant since 1980s (Kirkpatrick 2015). Devices such as smartphones and tablets have allowed the spread of video games beyond PCs and gaming consoles (ibid.) as they grew more powerful and able to handle more advanced graphical processing, increasing the accessibility of games. In the US alone, this spread led to more than 150 million people being "gamers" (Entertainment Software Association 2020)—people engaging in the act of playing video games. When considering US households through this gaming lens, four out of five households have at least one gaming device (ibid.), a gaming-capable PC, console, smartphone, or tablet. This so-called casual revolution (Juul 2009) led to an exponential increase in people engaging with video games in the last decade, expanding to mobile devices and social media sites such as Facebook being the main propellers. Although video games emerged in 1970, their accessibility was poor compared to that in the 21st century (Whalen and Taylor 2008); this is when research into gaming cultures began to rise (Cade and Gates 2017). Dini (2012) even argues that video games are now a pervasive part of the (broad) culture and that gamers have their own culture. Apart from the rise in popularity stemming from the increased accessibility of gaming-capable devices and fast internet, there was also an emergence of a new type of multi-player video games that helped propel them toward the massive popularity they enjoy now. This evolution from single-player games to multi-player games, facilitating an immersion into virtual worlds and societies (Jones and Park 2015), started in late 1990s. These self-contained worlds brought a social factor into the mix by allowing gamers to live in a virtual world of their choosing. As is apparent from Taylor's (2006) ethnography or Mikael's (2007) study of the Smash Brothers console clubs, experiences and meaning appear in these virtual worlds as in the real world to the gamers involved within them.[7] Hand and Moore (2006) concluded in their paper, "Community, identity and digital games,"

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[6] According to recent market research conducted by British game retailer Green Man Gaming, eSports had a larger following than American football in 2019, and it is projected to eclipse baseball by 2022 (Green Man Gaming 2019).

[7] For example, wedding (marriage) ceremony can be experienced within video games, with guides created by players on how to get what you need within the respective game. A great example is the guide for World of Warcraft (WoWWiki 2021).

that video games are unlike any other form of digital media. Video games combine communication and entertainment into a mix that influences individual identities and their formation through social interaction.

The cultural perspective (Dini 2012; Shaw 2010; Šisler et al. 2017; and Muriel and Crawford 2018) focuses on gamers' experiences as generated through their interactions with the global gaming system. Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford (2018) approach video games through a Geertzian (Geertz 1973) perspective on meaning and build on Latour's (2005) and Law's (2004) actor–network theory. They define video game culture as "the institutionalization of video game practices, experiences, and meanings in contemporary society, which places video games and video gaming as an important part of our social imaginary" (Muriel and Crawford 2018, p. 18). Video gaming is to be understood as a culture that extends "far beyond the sight of a video game machine or screen" (ibid., p. 19). Crawford argues that video games have agency and the act of playing video games is to be understood culturally. I build upon this emerging cultural approach in video game studies with cultural-sociological theory, following the strong program in cultural sociology. I want to present a different approach to studying video games as part of a gaming sphere encompassing all actors—players, publishers, developers, and journalists.

Regarding the literature on sport protests, I have identified two main groups. The first group is focused on the ideology and political climate of specific country-level events, particularly the role of countercultures and sustainability in sport (Grix 2015; Bairner et al. 2016). Some scholars in this group see sports protests as a form of action but pay little attention to the actors themselves, the individuals of the social movements, and audiences, apart from the state.[8] Their explanation thus focuses more on the instrumentality of sport in protests rather than reflecting the conflicts within the realm of sport and how they came to be.

The second group of scholars view sports protests as social change—a consequence of reflexive processes where social movements promote their agenda (Numerato 2018; Butterworth 2020). They focus on the symbols and rituals during football matches or when a sport-related conflict needs to be resolved. The explanation is then delivered through the lens of relational realism (Numerato 2018) or democratic theory (Butterworth 2020). I follow this reasoning but through the lens of cultural sociology. While Numerato (2018) investigates symbols and rituals during conflict resolutions, he does not pay enough attention to the cultural backgrounds that inspired and allowed such actions to occur. When Butterworth (2020) argues that "claims to unity are rooted in the logic of consensus, a value in democratic theory that offers an illusion of peaceful cooperation while denying important conflicts and differences" (ibid., p. 452), I see an opening for Alexander's (2006) civil sphere theory. This binding moral collective imaginary of what is wrong (evil) and what is right (good) is a centerpiece of Alexander's theory (ibid., p. 60).

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[8] More in the sense of increased involvement rather than as a presence with its own agency that is being reflected within the society.

Theory

The civil sphere

The civil sphere is a solidaristic sphere in which people share ideas, symbolic commitments to what and how people speak about things, and democratic social life (Alexander 2006). It is a sphere in which community comes to be culturally defined, and to some degree, this cultural definition is institutionally enforced (ibid., p. 59). Democratic culture grows from binary cultural codes that are deeply rooted in social life; civil society is regulated by an internally complex discourse that allows us to understand how universalistic ideals have been institutionalized (ibid.). Alexander (2006) identifies two major discourses when it comes to civil society: (1) the discourse of liberty and (2) the discourse of repression. These discourses exemplify the binary cultural codes that govern motives, relationships, institutions, and actions (ibid., p. 53). Each member or institution strives to be on the sacred side of the binary oppositions (ibid., p. 57), and they engage in dialogs and performances (Alexander 2018, p. 12) that allow them to be perceived as sacred or morally pure. The main agents of the civil sphere are its regulative and communicative institutions (ibid. p. 103). The communicative institutions consist of mass media journalists, large associations, and public opinion influencers. The regulatory institutions of the civil sphere engage in a constant struggle to regulate "how are the levers of government pulled" (Alexander 2006, p. 133). The most important regulatory institution is what Alexander (ibid.) calls "office"—the institution through which people representing civil power are elected to push against and regulate the power of state control. In summary, the civil sphere is a sphere of solidarity shared across nation(s), where the battle for civil repair—the process of reevaluating and reestablishing a sacred ideal—is fought. This performative battle takes the form of a social drama that can erupt into a social crisis (Alexander 2018, p. 10); it is a clash between the civil sphere and non-civil spheres and/or institutions. So, what are the non-civil institutions, and how do they interact with the civil sphere?

Non-civil institutions are institutions outside civil society; they may belong to other spheres, such as the economy, sports, or gaming. An example of such an institution is a gaming company that has recently, through their actions, threatened sacred ideals of the civil sphere such as the freedom of speech. As such, this company could be called out when doing something that threatens the sacred ideals of civil society, and when that happens, the process of societalization (Alexander 2018, p. 7) begins. Non-civil spheres usually sustain reciprocity with other non-civil spheres and the civil sphere, and the performative battle is fought only on occasions that Alexander (ibid.) identifies as a social crisis. I do not believe the Blitzchung controversy can be described as a process of societalization; at best, it constitutes a case of failed societalization. The Blitzchung controversy was a drama within the gaming and the civil spheres but there was no significant civil repair—no new laws or regulatory actions preventing companies such as Blizzard Entertainment from suppressing the expression of political opinions in their eSports events.

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The gaming sphere

The gaming sphere is a non-civil sphere that encompasses (1) the world of gaming—the act of playing video games of any kind, (2) video game production, (3) video game distribution, video game-related (4) content consumption. and (5) content production. I argue that gaming culture has autonomy and thus constitutes the autonomous sphere of gaming. I argue that the gaming sphere is transnational, not local; similar to Shaw (2010) and Muriel and Crawford (2018), I think that the cultural approach will help us understand gaming as a social phenomenon better than focusing on video gaming cultures.

Regular gamers and the act of playing video games (1) are the parallel to Alexander's (2006, p. 71) citizens living their everyday lives. I define gamers as people who engage in the act of playing video games or consume gaming content—walkthroughs, let's plays,[9] podcasts, streams, etc. They make up the largest part of the gaming sphere and are one of the carriers of its ideals and sacred values. It is important to note that all gamers are at the same time members of the civil sphere. This boundary tension of dual membership is where "professional spheres create pressure for redefining where civil obligations stop and more specialized interests begin" (ibid., p. 233). When gamers start to deepen their engagement with the gaming sphere by modifying games, writing articles, or recording footage to be shared with the community, they become part of communicative institutions (see Alexander 2006, p. 69) of gaming—sharing and creating opinions about the gaming sphere.

The communicative institutions of gaming (4, 5) consist of a diverse range of actors producing video game content and sharing it with gamers. This wide range of content can be divided into two categories. First is the more professional gaming journalism in forms of critical or analytical pieces written by professional journalists, and partnered or sponsored content in forms of articles, videos, or streams. Second is the more democratized content of professional and non-professional gamers[10] sharing their opinion, gameplay, tutorials, top-ten lists, blogging, and streaming. This duality of professional journalists vs. regular and professional gamers creates a tension within the gaming sphere regarding the question of politics in video games. I will explore this tension shortly, when I engage with the apolitical vs. political binary of the gaming sphere. For now, let us move to the constitutive institutions of gaming.

The constitutive institutions of gaming (2, 3) are the game developers and game publishers. They are companies or small businesses that create and market video games. As such, they are constitutive of the gaming sphere; without video games, there would be no gaming sphere. Constitutive institutions play a similar role in the gaming sphere as the regulative institutions of office, law, party, and voting in the civil sphere (Alexander 2006, p. 110). They also regulate the gaming sphere by providing rules for the games and game-related events, thus mandating that gamers

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[9] Let's plays are recorded experiences of (often first) playthroughs of games by gamers who usually provide a commentary, thus adding a value to the playthrough itself.

[10] I define professional gamers as gamers engaging in playing video games as a main source of income, either by competing in tournaments or by providing paid coaching. But they are not professionals in terms of communicative institutions of gaming, as they are not journalists.

maintain fair play while reducing toxicity.[11] But they are at the same time constitutive because they "open and close the gate" (ibid.) to the gaming sphere—providing venues for eSport tournaments and facilitating sportification.[12] I follow the grand spectacle that sport events and, through sportification, video game events provide. These spectacles are the ground for multiple performances by gamers and constitutive institutions of gaming. In my case, the Blitzchung controversy started on such ground when the performances of the constitutive institution Blizzard Entertainment failed in defending their expression of regulatory power—banning Blitzchung and providing sufficient reasoning. During the analysis, Blizzard Entertainment will be called out on being greedy and putting its financial interests first. Thus, while defining constitutive institutions of gaming, I must also consider the role of video game developers and publishers in the economic sphere. As Alexander (2006, p. 203) says "The goal of the economic sphere is wealth, not justice in the civil sense; it is organized around efficiency, not solidarity, and depends more upon hierarchy than equality to meet its goals." Video game developers and publishers create facilitating inputs between gaming and economic sphere. These inputs are not just the games, but also DLCs[13] and microtransactions, often called out as destructive by the communicative institutions of gaming. As Dr. Ellen Evers told NPR:

> "The implicit assumption is that by playing the game and building up your character, you're supposed to get better. Microtransactions basically make the game easier. They violate those rules and norms that are part of the game"

> (Gordon 2021)

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[11] To what extent the requirement of a pleasurable and safe environment is met is debatable in regular sports, and even more so in eSports, where problems of toxicity in a hostile online environment are rampant (Euteneuer 2019; Deslauriers et al. 2020; Märtens et al. 2015) despite the efforts of game publishers and gaming communities. Toxic behavior includes, but is not limited to, harmful or threatening messages and degrading, sexist, or racist attitudes (ibid.). In the context of gaming, women have been "consistently and specifically targeted with toxicity, this can have long-lasting, and ultimately terminal effects on their relationship with gaming" (Türkay et al. 2020, p. 64).

[12] According to Heere (2018, p. 1), sportification is "to view, organize, or regulate a non-sport activity in such a way that it resembles a sport and allows a fair, pleasurable, and safe environment for individuals to compete and cooperate." I argue that both Hearthstone and Overwatch have been sportified regardless of the toxic environment present in the games themselves. The eSports part of Hearthstone and Overwatch is organized and regulated, thus preventing and/or punishing such behaviors. Following rules is important, as CEO of Blizzard Entertainment Brack (2019) points out in his defense of the sanctions against Blitzchung: "We have these rules to keep the focus on the game and on the tournament to the benefit of a global audience." All Blizzard-held competitions must conform to these rules, although the Blitzchung controversy raised doubts about Blizzard Entertainment adhering to its own rules. Other requirements are also met; in order to enable competition between players, their performance needs to be made comparable, for example, through Hearthstone's leaderboards and Overwatch's scoreboards. The high-skill performance of, and competition between, professional players in games like Hearthstone draws large crowds of spectators, which makes eSports events comparable to regular sports events. These players have distinct playing styles and public personas that make them unique and recognizable to the audience. The audience can cheer for their favorite players and engage with each other through chats on livestreaming platforms such as Twitch and YouTube, or in-person in eSports arenas. The sportification of video games leads to spectacles similar to those found in regular sports events (Heere, 2018).

[13] Downloadable content—and additional content for a given game, such as new quests, items, or story.

This tension between the goals of the economic sphere and the sacred value of skill leads to constant struggle between constitutive institutions of gaming and the communicative institutions of gaming. The gaming sphere is refined and redefined by this constant performative battle, and to elaborate this battle. Their positioning between the economic and the gaming sphere often leads the constitutive institutions of gaming into conflict with the communicative institutions of gaming and the gamers themselves (creating an intra-sphere drama) about the constitution of video games—what should a video game be and how should it be made? What topics are appropriate for video games? What is forbidden to be talked about in the gaming sphere? This dynamic and ongoing tension between the democratized and professional communicative institutions of gaming and the constitutive institutions of gaming is what animates the gaming sphere. While Alexander defines the civil sphere as an ongoing project (Alexander 2006, p. 549), the gaming sphere represents a project of its own—a normatively and empirically autonomous sphere. The project of the gaming sphere can be defined using binary oppositions (ibid. 54) that refer to skill, fair play, the political agenda, and toxicity.

I have reconstructed the gaming sphere's binary oppositions, the sacred and profane values, to help analyze such intra-sphere dramas. To be truly transnational, namely, encompassing all gamers, the gaming sphere requires its members to have a collective moral idea about which values are sacred and which are profane. These binaries are embedded in the actors' moral decision-making processes and communications populating the gaming sphere. Threatening one of these values can lead to a breach and consequently develop into a social drama (Turner 1980). I have reconstructed these binaries based on my analysis of news articles and social media comments made by the members of the gaming sphere regarding the Blitzchung controversy, while also drawing on my personal experience as a gamer and member of the gaming sphere. I argue that these binaries are unique to the gaming sphere, and through their definition, the Blitzchung controversy can be understood and interpreted (Table 1).

Fair play vs. cheating and skill vs. P2W time-savers

To play fair is to eschew any means that would be considered cheating. Playing fair means obeying the rules that are collectively understood and accepted as the way to play a specific game. Some rules fall outside of the ingrained perception of fairness and fair play in video games, and breaking such rules (e.g., by "trash-talking" an opponent) is not perceived as cheating. To bring my definitions closer to this case, Blitzchung won the tournament without cheating—he won through fair play. He did not use any software to give him an advantage over his opponents, nor was he scrutinized for breaking the Hearthstone game-rules. Thus, according to the collective perception of those who uphold fair play, he should have received his title and winnings. In his response addressing the backlash from the gaming community when Blitzchung was banned, and his title and winnings removed, the CEO of Blizzard Entertainment, J.A. Brack, said:

> We want to ensure that we maintain a safe and inclusive environment for all our players, and that our rules and processes are clear. All of this is in service of another important Blizzard value—Play Nice; Play Fair. In the tournament itself Blitzchung *played* fair. We now believe he should receive his prizing.
>
> (Brack 2019)

We can see that Brack employs the code of fairness to assure everyone that Blitzchung indeed played fair; thus, Blizzard Entertainment believes he should (not must) receive his prize. Blitzchung did not use any means of cheating, nor did he "buy" power. This quote leads us to a contradiction in the gaming sphere that must now be clarified. Blitzchung probably did buy packs of Hearthstone cards for real money, but that is usually not considered buying power. If there were ways to buy more health points (to be in the game longer) or the ability to draw more cards, then that would be considered buying power. Hearthstone and other trading card games are part of a heated debate (O'Brien 2021) within the gaming sphere about the perception as either games that require only skill (all tools are available to all gamers equally) or games that are P2W.[14] The point is to win through skill, not buying power. As Lisa McCormick (2009, p. 10) explains, regarding the symbolic production of musical competition organizers: "on one level […] the event is carefully designed to test skill and endurance by placing extreme demands and intense pressure on the performer. As such, it offers a mechanism for identifying 'the best'." On the second narrative level, the organizers downplay skill and emphasize the event as a transcendent musical experience (ibid., p 11). Video game competitions are designed in a similar manner. They first and foremost test the skill to determine the best gamer(s). Second, they are a spectacle, a transcendent gaming experience. Cheating would break this competition's event and threaten the sacred value of fair play and skill.[15] Since the match was broadcasted online and no tomfoolery was called out, Blitzchung was a winner who played fair and using only his skill without buying power. What he may have done was to bring "politics" into video games or even exhibit "toxic behavior" toward audiences.

Apolitical vs. political and non-toxic vs. toxic

I will not argue here whether games are political; that is its own topic (Bown 2018; Muriel and Crawford 2018; Foust 2021). This binary is about shared values and the perception that games and gamers' performances are somehow devoid of political agenda of any kind. Inside the gaming sphere, connecting games to political opinions is sometimes considered profane and sometimes not. This binary of apolitical

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[14] Pay to Win—when you can directly buy more power with real money in a video game. For example, buying ammunition for your guns that create more damage than the regular ammunition obtainable in game.

[15] In Hearthstone, you must buy packs of cards to have "all tools available." You cannot, however, buy a better version a given card; thus, I do not consider Hearthstone P2W. It simply requires a considerable investment (using real-world money or your time to farm in-game money to buy packs) to be on a competitive level—similar to an expensive golf club or a mountain bike.

Table 1 Gaming sphere binaries of sacred and profane. *Source* Author's research.

Sacred	Profane
Fair play (Fairness)	Cheating (Unfairness)
Skill	Paying for power (P2W)/Time-savers
Apolitical	Political
Non-toxic	Toxic

and political shows different perceptions of the actors in the gaming sphere as to what is "political." As Erik Kain (2019) wrote for Forbes: "Many people take a side in this debate that sounds something like this: 'Keep your politics out of my games!' or 'Of course games should be political!'" When the game or gamers' performances are portrayed in a way that does not threaten the gaming sphere with legislative restrictions (e.g., age restriction, mandatory labeling of explicit themes), then the video game or actions are "apolitical." A fitting example is the Extra Life[16] initiative. An opposing example is DOOM, a game with first-person violence using guns, gore, and satanic themes that was once blamed for the Columbine High School massacre in the US. (Radford 2000). I argue that those actors connecting DOOM and the massacre would be seen as those responsible for bringing "politics" to video games, and thus be seen as profane. This creates a boundary between the civil and gaming spheres based on the positive perception of how gaming is portrayed as a source of entertainment and fun devoid of politics that at best helps with noble causes. But what is a noble cause? This perception is very much shaped by the civil sphere shared values. The perception of what is good and what is bad, what is sacred and what is profane translates into the political binaries of the gaming sphere. I do not argue here what is and what is not politics; these debates are constantly evolving (Bown 2018; Muriel and Crawford 2018; Foust 2021). I argue here that there are meaning inside the gaming sphere that are assigned to political and apolitical behavior. The distinction may seem simple but apolitical actions are actions that are good—meaning the collective values that are being used to interpret some actions within the gaming sphere consider these actions to be good. Such as raising money for disabled children or promoting breast cancer awareness (Boom 2018). Considering the breast cancer awareness example (ibid.), Blizzard Entertainment is considered as the good apolitical actor here because they are not "bringing politics into video games" as politics are always perceived as bad (oppressive) by the gaming sphere. Thus, a noble cause is a cause that portrays video games as being good. Good for children, good for health, good for society. When the opposite happens, actors are called out for being political and "bringing politics into video games." Being called political in the gaming sphere means to threaten or to display video games, gamers, and other actors in a bad light. To show that video games are bad

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[16] Extra Life unites thousands of gamers around the world to play games in support of their local Children's Miracle Network Hospital. Since its inception in 2008, Extra Life has raised over $87 million USD for sick and injured kids (ExtraLife 2021).

for children, bad for health, or bad for society. I've chosen the naming based on the meaning actors from the gaming sphere associate with "being political" which is being bad or threatening to the gaming sphere actors or video games. Based on this differentiation of "political" and "apolitical," we can return to Blitzchung's protest and argue that he did not bring politics into video games: the Hong Kong protests were perceived as a noble cause and therefore "apolitical." Therefore, I conclude that the gaming sphere's boundaries are not fixed but negotiated on a case-to-case basis.

When it comes to toxicity, this binary is entirely about how gamers behave. Toxicity is not so much about ideals as it is about the gaming environment. To have a toxic gaming environment means to be exclusive and hostile. Even though toxicity is present in online video games (Euteneuer 2019; Deslaurier et al. 2020; Märtens et al. 2015), in this case, it is not an important binary as Blitzchung was not called out for being toxic nor did toxicity play any role in the Hearthstone tournament in question. Important for the gaming sphere is that toxic behavior is collectively viewed as "bad" (profane), and communicative institutions portray toxic behavior as something to be remedied while constitutive institutions seek to combat toxicity in their games (Moore 2018).

Both binaries of political vs. apolitical and toxic vs. non-toxic can be explored further, especially in the #GamerGate (see Chess and Shaw 2015). Since Gamer Gate is an elaborate and complex topic of its own, I will only cover one aspect of the Gamer Gate scandal's core problems. That aspect is about a "substantial, vocal movement that believes the generally left-leaning online gaming press focuses too much on feminism and the role of women in the industry, to the detriment of coverage of games" (James 2014). This struggle within the gaming sphere between the professional gaming journalists and the non-professional gamers, both together composing the communicative institutions of gaming, is what maintains the strong binary of political and apolitical. This struggle also explains why something that may deal with political issues but shows video games as a good and helpful to solve these issues is thus seen as apolitical and sacred, and something that shows video games as the source or culprit of these issues is thus seen as political and profane. Coming back to my case, Blitzchung did not bring politics to video games to restrict them; he brought video games to politics to help—supporting a noble cause.

Methodology

First, I want to clarify that I am a semi-professional gamer—I have earned money by playing video games. However, I have not attended any major international competitions. I have played both Hearthstone and Overwatch, from Blizzard Entertainment, since their release, and World of Warcraft for eight years, apart from hundreds of other games. I am also a cultural sociologist and know the importance of bracketing. Nevertheless, I believe that my now more than 20 years of experience as a gamer, and being an active member of multiple gaming communities, is not an obstacle but a valuable resource in reconstructing the social meanings of gaming culture and the construction of the gaming sphere.

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Second, it is important to clarify what Hearthstone is. Hearthstone is a free-to-play[17] (F2P) online digital collectible card game developed and published by Blizzard Entertainment. Readers may be more familiar with the non-digital trading card game *Magic: The Gathering*, released in 1993 (MTG 2021), in which players buy randomized packs of printed cards (booster packs), thus increasing their card pool, from which they construct the specific decks they wish to play. Hearthstone replaces the physical booster packs with digital ones bought in the in-game store with either game currency (gold) earned in-game or real money. Currently, the price of a complete set of Hearthstone cards is estimated to be around $6000 (Stanton 2021), although this figure changes as cards are added and removed from the legal (allowed cards) card pool. Most tournaments reduce the card pool to the last six card sets published, reducing the steep fee for entry into professional play to around $900 per year (Stanton 2021). Despite the game itself being free, spending money allows players to be flexible, granting them access to the entire card pool, while saving them time that they can spend on practicing the game itself (Makedonski 2020)—otherwise, they are not able to keep up with their competitors. The prize money won in competitions, such as the $4000 Blitzchung initially lost with his title, is partially used to recuperate the cost of being a professional player.

Following the strong program (Alexander and Smith 2001), I also treat culture as relatively autonomous; through this paradigm, I can look at "gaming cultures" and see gaming as an autonomous entity that shapes cultural meanings. Alexander and Smith (2001) advocate the use of qualitative investigation using the Geertzian concept of thick description (Geertz 1973). Thick description is a methodological approach that Geertz (1973) describes as the interpretative reconstruction of meanings—our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions. Constructing a thick description means creating complex, rich, and detailed interpretations of the meanings within the subject of inquiry, which is, in this case, the "gaming sphere." So, the thick description is a process of describing the observation of behaviors and processes and the underlying deep meanings and signs that add context to the observed. Through thick description, we can understand culture as a system of meanings. I will be offering a thick interpretation of the Blitzchung controversy using the concepts of the civil and the gaming spheres.

The sources for my interpretation were online articles and videos with their corresponding comment sections and social media posts. I used a purposive sampling approach when creating the bulk of the data, using three common search engines (Google, Bing, and DuckDuckGo), each in a vanilla[18] configuration. I collected 105 articles with over 1000 comments. The dataset was saturated when I could not find new repeating patterns and deep meanings during my analysis. The search phrases

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[17] According to Technopedia (2021), "Free to play (F2P) refers to a business model for online games in which the game designers do not charge the user or player in order to join the game. Instead, they hope to bring in revenue from advertisements or in-game sales, such as payment for upgrades, special abilities, special items, and expansion packs".

[18] As if they were first installed and without profiles to avoid biased searches inside Google and Bing based on user tracking data and targeted search results; DuckDuckGo does not track user data and search history, thus there is no need to restore to the default state.

revolved around variations on keywords: "Blitzchung," "Blizzard Entertainment," "Hearthstone Grandmasters 2019," "#boycottblizzard," "Hong Kong," and "Pro-Hong Kong Mei." These terms evolved over the data collection phase as the Blitzchung controversy progressed, following the trends from older to newer articles and social media posts. Using thick description and my concept of the gaming sphere, I then reconstructed the narrative of the Blitzchung controversy in the analysis chapter.

Analysis

I will interpret the Blitzchung controversy using the concept of the gaming sphere and Alexander's (2006) civil sphere in four steps: (1) the case of American students' protest, (2) the remedy response from Blizzard Entertainment CEO J.A. Brack, (3) the symbolic transformation and performative appropriation of the video game character Mei, and (4) the open letter to R.A. Kotick. These parts are not chronological in the sense that they followed one after the other. They are major events that transpired over a period of several weeks after the Blitzchung controversy took place. The events were short-lived, and the interference from the civil sphere did not have a restorative effect—there was no civil repair, with no new laws to prevent such a situation from happening again (Alexander 2018). Thus, I argue that it is a failed project of societalization (ibid.). The only repair occurred near the beginning of the controversy, and that was the intra-sphere restoration of Blitzchung's winnings and the reduction of his ban on playing.

The case of American students' protests (October 9)

A group of American students participated in another Hearthstone competition while also supporting the Hong Kong protests (Park 2019a), and they did it openly on stream as Blitzchung did. Unlike Blitzchung, these students lost their match, but when the opportunity arose, they held up a sign[19] with the words "free Hong Kong" and "boycott Blizz" on it. The stream was immediately cut and transitioned to the winners, while casters ignored what had happened. One of the students told the *Washington Post*: "We just wanted to keep the pressure on them," Dark (a team member) said. "If you're going to censor that message, use those same rules to an American audience and see how that goes" (Park 2019a). Blizzard was accused of discriminating against Blitzchung as a Hong Konger. Days went by with no response from Blizzard Entertainment (or Activation Blizzard). Tespa[20] even scheduled the next match for the team, which Chamber (a team member) said they intended to forfeit. He said that: "He (Blitzchung) risked real things, we risked getting banned from a tournament structure we do not intend to compete in anymore. He lost his

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[19] A picture of the sign from the stream can be found at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/esports/2019/10/09/blizzard-wont-ban-american-players-after-hong-kong-protest-team-plans-forfeit-over-boycott/.

[20] Tespa is the world's largest operator of collegiate eSports leagues; their website is https://www.tespa.org/.

permanent Grandmasters spot, which is a money printer. He risked getting arrested by security services in Hong Kong. He actually is the hero here" (ibid.). The ban eventually happened one week later (Liao 2019), in contrast to Blitzchung's, which happened moments after his final tournament interview. Joost van Dreunen, the co-founder of SuperData, a Nielsen company that analyzes the video game industry, stated of the situation: "The trouble is that by responding in this manner, Blizzard is practically inviting other streamers to do the same. Long term, however, Blizzard should do some soul searching" (ibid.). Chamber responded that it is "good to see equal treatment" (ibid.). The equal treatment—fair play—was what they were testing. I argue that Blizzard failed this test and, in turn, lost another performative battle in the Blitzchung controversy. Not only did the ban occur a week after the transgression, but it also fueled other protests, as it was again perceived as the suppression of free speech, now on American soil. This shock of American company doing these actions that can be considered un-democratic and pro-totalitarian is best illustrated by a quote from Joe Vargas in his video report on Blitzchung controversy:

> "[…] obviously we here in America are used to our freedoms we are used to speaking our minds and so when something like this (Blitzchung censored) comes along, that just scares me because it is like wait a minute, wait a minute, that is not Chinese company that is our (American) company, our company is literally changing things, erasing wins, and erasing, you know, champions."
>
> (Vargas 2019)

The voice Blitzchung, voice of a Hong Kong gamer supporting a pro-democratic movement was immediately suppressed and the stream removed (as if that is possible on the internet). The voice of the American students took time to be punished as if their voice was stronger and harder to suppress—or their voice mattered more to Blizzard. This uneven approach to punish offenders doing the same offense did not help Blizzard establish their ground as a company protecting the sacred values of the gaming sphere. Nor did their follow up response. Ignoring this American case in the official response, Blizzard's CEO, J. A. Brack addressed the situation a few days after the Blitzchung ban.

The response from Blizzard Entertainment (October 12)

Let us consider J. A. Brack's letter, which addressed several issues regarding the situation and sought to remedy the situation within the gaming sphere. This letter was published on October 12, six days after the initial ban of Blitzchung, as the first official response from Blizzard Entertainment. Brack wrote:

> At Blizzard, our vision is "to bring the world together through epic entertainment." And we have core values that apply here: Think Globally; Lead Responsibly; and importantly, Every Voice Matters, encouraging everybody to share their point of view.
>
> (Brack 2019)

To unpack and understand these statements, I will return to my concept of the gaming sphere. Blizzard Entertainment is part of the gaming sphere as a game

developer-publisher—a constituting institution. Brack's response is to the intra-sphere problem, to be solved by the gaming sphere itself. To do so, they must prove that they are right, and show through their performance that they are pure in intentions and there is no need for drama. Brack stresses the importance of the value "every voice matters" to show that the company is not exclusive, and every voice has the same value. But the drama started when Blitzchung's voice mattered less, and he was punished for speaking up about his "point of view." Brack follows with:

> Over the weekend, Blitzchung used his segment to make a statement about the situation in Hong Kong—in violation of rules he acknowledged and understood, and this is why we took action. Every Voice Matters, and we strongly encourage everyone in our community to share their viewpoints in the many places available to express themselves. However, the official broadcast needs to be about the tournament and to be a place where all are welcome. In support of that, we want to keep the official channels focused on the game.
>
> (Brack 2019)

Here Brack tries to position himself and Blizzard as the protectors of the rules they constituted. The broken rule in question is that the "official broadcast needs to be about the tournament and to be a place where all are welcome." Brack says that "everybody is welcomed," but Blitzchung was clearly not welcomed, so Brack continues to specify the situation and position Blitzchung as a rule breaker that was pardoned because of their good will:

> The specific views expressed by Blitzchung were NOT a factor in the decision we made. I want to be clear: our relationships in China had no influence on our decision…If this had been the opposing viewpoint delivered in the same divisive and deliberate way, we would have felt and acted the same.
>
> (Brack 2019)

Brack positions himself as an actor that is keeping politics out of the video games. He states that their "relationship to China had no influence" on their decision. As game journalist Jim Sterling (2019) said: "Blizzard, in a truly cowardly display, hid behind a broadly and vaguely written clause of in its rules of conduct […]." Thus, Blizzard statements were called into question, as people found it unlikely that a company with the purpose of making money would not take China into consideration, as Tencent, a Chinese tech company, holds shares in Activision Blizzard. Communicative institutions called out the "vaguely" written rules that should be there to ensure fair play and punish those who cheat or are toxic, not to punish gamers for supporting their beliefs. Joshua Foust (2021) wrote an engaging news article for TechStream where he concluded that video games are not just video games, but rather: "They are the site of political contention, of negotiation over social boundaries, and of free speech itself" (ibid.). I agree with his conclusion and believe that the case of Blitzchung shows that video games are not free from politics but are part of them, regardless of how much the gaming sphere wants to keep politics out. Brack correctly tries to tap into this value of games as apolitical and present Blitzchung as being the polluter with political agenda. He fails to understand that the Hong Kong

protests were perceived by the actors within the gaming sphere as a noble cause, and thus were not interpreted as bringing politics into video games. Blitzchung helped to support democracy and free speech—he did a "good" apolitical action. Blizzard was called out on prioritizing money over the gamers—a "bad" political action. I want to stress that political/apolitical binary only refers to the interpretation the actors of the gaming sphere—what they consider the shared values and good or bad actions. There are no good political actions because then these actions are not called political or being associated with political agendas inside the gaming sphere. I concede that from an outside view the protection of democracy and free speech is a heavily politically charged action. But from the perspective of the gaming sphere, it is a "good guy Blitzchung doing a good thing with video games and gamers." Through the same perspective, Blizzard through their failed performances, became the "bad guy doing bad things to video games and gamers." I argue that, from this gaming sphere perspective, Blizzard is the one bringing politics into video games.

Blizzard's relationship with China was called out. The critical response within the gaming sphere to Brack's statements can be summarized by Tomasz Michalski's tweet (2019): "Blizzard thinks we are idiots..." He also included a popular meme from the video game L.A. Noire, "press X to doubt."[21] Doubt was indeed spreading, not only among gaming sphere members but also in the civil sphere, as headlines about Blitzchung's punishment hit the web. Blitzchung was perceived as a gamer that played fair and who had shown skill by winning the tournament, and his actions were not considered "political." Blizzard, on the other hand, lost this performative battle and emerged as a company bringing politics into video games while punishing a skilled and fair playing gamer.

Gamers were not the only ones who demanded the restoration of Blitzchung's fairly won prize; actors and institutions of the civil sphere also took an interest in the affair as a threat to freedom of speech. Blizzard was chastised as a "cheater" and oppressor of freedom of speech on social media. With BlizzCon—a convention made to celebrate all things Blizzard run by Blizzard Entertainment—approaching, the protesters began to cooperate and connect via social media and plan protests on a large scale.

We can see that Brack's statements could also be targeted outside the gaming sphere, toward the civil sphere. He tries to keep the company pure to avoid the interest of civil sphere agents (Alexander 2006). If Blizzard's performance fails, the meaning of what it is to be Blizzard will change. The company's integrity will be called into question, and civil sphere agents will take an interest and demand an explanation for their actions as an American company. Since that is what happened a few days after this response, I think it is safe to say that Brack's letter did not remedy the situation but instead made it worse for Blizzard. Following Sterling's (2019) video report: "They deserve this criticism because Activision Blizzard in no uncertain terms, is run by craven, boot licking worms, who have literally sold-out human rights and human dignity, much less their own dignity […]." Activision Blizzard

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[21] The meme (image) can be found in his Tweet: https://twitter.com/tmheadnail/status/1182996977 925185538.

was clearly losing this performative battle and communicative institutions of gaming were pushing hard against one of the constitutive institutions of gaming.

As an anecdotal side note, Blizzard Entertainment is currently (in 2022) under investigation for extensive workplace sexual harassment (Allsup 2021), so perhaps they should carefully rethink their core values. While reading the reports, I noticed that their representatives "keep listening," but there have been few noticeable improvements.

During this brief time, two iconic characters emerged. The first was Mei, a Chinese hero-character from Blizzard's game Overwatch. The second was Winnie the Pooh, a famous cartoon character associated with Xi Jinping, the president of the People's Republic of China (Gonzalez 2019). The likeness of Xi Jinping and Winnie the Pooh[22] is a recurring theme, not just in the gaming sphere but also in media worldwide, except for China. The Chinese government banned the Winnie the Pooh movie in 2017 because bloggers had been comparing China's president to the iconic main character (McDonell 2017). Although Pooh and his likeness to the Chinese president is a recurring theme when it comes to criticizing China, as apparent from the video report on Blizzard's practices by Jim Sterling (2019) where they say: "which he (Xi Jinping) famously hates to the point of banning the friendly yellow bear image in the country, like a mature and secure person would do." I will focus on Mei, as she is a video game character and thus more relevant to the topic of this paper.

The transformation of Mei

Overwatch is a team-based first-person shooter (FPS) developed and published by Blizzard Entertainment. In Overwatch, teams of players compete in arena-style maps where they try to complete objectives, such as holding a point for a certain amount of time or escorting a payload through the map while the other team tries to stop them. Overwatch League (2021) is an international eSports league comprised of twenty city-based teams with a prize pool of $4,200,000 split into tournaments and playoffs, with the first place getting $1,500,000. The main thing I want to stress about Overwatch is the image it created for itself as a cultural melting pot and a game that strives for diversity and fights against stereotypes (Campbell 2017). The range of characters (heroes) available includes imaginary characters such as Lúcio Correia dos Santos, an international celebrity who inspires social change through his music, and his fan, Dr. Mei-Ling Zhou, a world-renowned Chinese climatologist (Blizzard Entertainment 2021). All characters have a unique set of abilities and iconic voice acting (Osborne 2021), which helps to bring them to life. The character of Mei, in particular, is of interest to me in the analysis as I argue that she has become an icon of the protests.

With trending hashtags #MeiWithHongKong and #MeiSupportsHongKong, the popularity of Mei as a hero that fights for Hong Kong skyrocketed. Gamers were creating art and in-game skins for Overwatch (Gwilliam 2019a) for others to play

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[22] The image can be accessed at https://i.kym-cdn.com/entries/icons/mobile/000/031/452/cover7.jpg

using modified game files. Reddit user Omegalulit (2019) even posted a new Mei character trailer where they depicted her as a hero fighting for Hong Kong against China: "If we are gonna do it, we are gonna do it big: Mei becomes the icon of Hong Kong revolution!" (ibid.). Gamers were starting to embrace Mei, and they became Mei. User HK Mei Cosplay (2019) posted a picture of herself in cosplay as Mei, with the freedom fighter holding a black Hong Kong flag on Twitter. An iconic quote from Mei, "The world is worth fighting for!", accompanied several posts. The art, costumes (cosplay), and in-game skins (also costumes, but virtual) allowed gamers to express their support for Hong Kong while at the same time accusing Blizzard of having preemptively intervened on behalf of China. Plenty of images depict this relationship; for example, user MonsieurDisastr (2019) tweeted a picture[23] of Mei slapping Xi Jinping, who was portrayed as Winnie the Pooh, with a table tennis racket with Hong Kong's flag printed on it. Mei was a perfect choice as an icon for the protests, being a Chinese scientist and world-saver in Overwatch. Her nationality made her an appropriate symbol, but it was also believed that Blizzard would not dare to touch a Chinese character, for example, by removing her from the game, in response to her appropriation by the protesters.

Another example is a video[24] posted by a Twitter user TLHK (2019). TLHK edited the Mei introduction trailer to tell a story of Mei as a hero of Hong Kong fighting against the oppressive China. Mei is seen here literally carrying "universal values" with her on her journey to save Hong Kong after learning about the violent suppression of peaceful protests in Hong Kong. The emotional subtones of the original trailer[25] are amplified with the images and videos of the protesters fighting against the police enforcement units with messages calling for support and help flash around. Authors of the video encourage others using Mei's iconic opening line that "Our world is worth fighting for" (ibid.) specifying that Hong Kong and human rights are worth the effort. The communicative institutions of gaming also joined in with articles covering Mei as an icon of the protests (Carpenter 2019; Webb 2019). I argue that this is all the immediate reaction to Blizzzard's punishment of Blitzchung that prompted the use of their character and using her to embody the values they claim to support. Mei was always fair and non-toxic; the opposite of what Blizzard has become in the perception of the gamers and communicative institutions of gaming. This projection on a Mei as a survivor and a Chinese character was a successful rally for thousands[26] of people to meme, tweet, comment,—spreading the message across social media and inciting more protests.

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[23] The picture can be seen in their Twitter post at https://twitter.com/MonsieurDisastr/status/1183807173228408832.

[24] The video can be seen at https://mobile.twitter.com/HongTruth/status/1185066034685861888.

[25] In the original trailer, Mei wakes up years from a Deep Freeze Sleep to find that her colleagues are dead. Mei is the last survivor at Ecopoint: Antarctica. With limited resources and time, Mei must figure out a way to get help to survive. She manages that and calls for help, rejoining Overwatch team.

[26] Most trending hashtags were: #MeiWithHongKong, #MeiSupportsHongKong, and #MeiStandsWithHK

Mei quickly became the hero[27] of the Blitzchung protests inside the gaming sphere and also the Hong Kong protests. This shows how supporting the Hong Kong protests is not viewed as "political." Within the gaming sphere, a noble cause, such as the fight for freedom, is not "political" but the right thing to do, and as they are in the gaming sphere, they expressed it using a video game character. What was Blizzard's response to this? Blizzard removed the Mei statue from their e-shop (Cano 2019). Blizzard also suppressed attempts to bring Hong Kong protests anywhere near the official game or stream channels by banning users who mentioned the protests or Blitzchung (Bijan 2019). This action only motivated both groups of protesters more, and, more importantly, it made headlines. The goal of winning justice for Blitzchung (a complete removal of his ban) aligned with the ongoing Hong Kong protests. The Blitzchung controversy outgrew the gaming sphere, even though the cosplaying, images, and quotes used were incomprehensible to the broader public. This attention from the civil sphere climaxed with the open letter by US senators and members of Congress that was sent to the CEO of Activision Blizzard, the parent company of Blizzard Entertainment, Robert A. Kotick.

The open letter to R. A. Kotick (October 18)

In the letter,[28] United States Senators Ron Wyden and Tom Cotton, and Members of Congress Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, Mike Gallagher, and Tom Malinowski condemn Blizzard's actions and suppression of free speech:

> We write to express our deep concern about Activision Blizzard's decision to make player Ng Wai Chung forfeit prize money and ban him from participating in tournaments for a year after he voiced support for pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong. This decision is particularly concerning in light of the Chinese government's growing appetite for pressuring American businesses to help stifle free speech. Activision Blizzard benefits from China's growing market for e-sports, along with an investment from Tencent, one of China's largest technology firms. As you and your company are no doubt aware, the Chinese government uses the size and strength of its economy to suppress opinions with which it disagrees.
>
> <div align="right">(Congress of the United States 2019)</div>

Here the agents of the civil sphere (lawmakers) supported the agents of the gaming sphere to demand purification of the American (sacred) value of freedom of speech, polluted by the prioritization of money over free speech. Money pollutes both the civil and the gaming spheres (buying power is profane), and thus is external to both and can be used as a shared profane value. This outcome solidifies Blizzard's loss on the performative battlefield so far as their defense was deemed insincere and warranted doubt.

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[27] Depictions of Mei as a hero of Hong Kong can be accessed here: https://i.kinja-img.com/gawker-media/image/upload/t_ku-large/onlooi9lbhsfq73hv0m6.jpg.

[28] The full letter can be found on the official .gov site at https://www.wyden.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/101819%20Wyden%20Letter%20to%20Activision%20Blizzard%20RE%20Hong%20Kong.pdf.

Your company claims to stand by "one's right to express individual thoughts and opinions," yet many of your own employees believe that Activision Blizzard's decision to punish Mr. Chung runs counter to those values. Because your company is such a pillar of the gaming industry, your disappointing decision could have a chilling effect on gamers who seek to use their platform to promote human rights and basic freedoms.

(Congress of the United States 2019)

The line "Your company claims to stand by 'one's right to express individual thoughts and opinions, yet many of your own employees believe that Activision Blizzard's decision to punish Mr. Chung runs counter to those values" refers to an incident during the protests in which anonymous Blizzard employees covered the plaque with the words "Every voice matters" in front of the Blizzard HQ (Smith 2019). They stress that Activision Blizzard is "a pillar of the gaming industry," and as such they have a significant impact on gamers. Activision Blizzard is one of the constituting institutions of the gaming sphere, and these actions are exactly what is debated in the gaming sphere repeatedly—what do gamers (through the extension of the communicative institutions of the gaming sphere) want their constitutive institutions to be like? This time, the agents of the civil sphere reminded Blizzard of their importance and that their actions are not accepted. Same call for justice and to amend the situation that was heard from gamers and the communicative institutions of gaming in the beginning of the controversy, just using different sets of sacred values.

As China amplifies its campaign of intimidation, you and your company must decide whether to look beyond the bottom line and promote American values—like freedom of speech and thought—or to give in to Beijing's demands in order to preserve market access. We urge you in the strongest terms to reconsider your decision with respect to Mr. Chung. You have the opportunity to reverse course. We urge you to take it.

(Congress of the United States 2019)

Blizzard was urged to sacrifice the "bottom line" and to "promote American values like freedom of speech." This instance shows that the gaming sphere invited the civil sphere to help with its restoration—to restore Blizzard, a constitutive institution of the gaming sphere. The protest against Blizzard's actions and justifications was loud and clear. This response did not succeed in removing the Blitzchung punishment altogether (the remaining ban), as the protests shifted to be more about Hong Kong and less about Blitzchung himself. This is why I argue that this social drama did not finish the process of societalization (Alexander 2018). There were no interventions (laws to prevent such behavior), no penalty for Blizzard. Blitzchung got his prize money restored, but the ban from competing in the professional leagues remained on the six-month period. The strength of the cause for Hong Kong shifted the attention from Blitzchung and ended the controversy. Gamers and the communicative institutions of gaming remained active in the protests (Kix 2020) with the new heroic icon of Mei to rally behind. The controversy could have had panned out differently for Blitzchung if it happened few years later as he himself admits in

interview from 2021: "Yes, luckily, there wasn't much issue with my action. […] And I can say that, If I did the same thing now, I would 100% be arrested" (Lee 2021). We can now only speculate if the gaming sphere would remain engaged longer if Blitzchung, a gamer, would be arrested because of Blizzard, a constitutive institution of gaming. The fact is that the controversy ended, and gaming sphere was left alone (at least in the context of Blitzchung and Hong Kong) thus returning to the regular non-invasive interactions with the civil sphere.

Conclusion

The gaming sphere as a concept will help others who want to study video games for their social and cultural meanings. The study of video games is crucial to understand contemporary society, as video games have become part of our everyday lives (Green Man Gaming 2019). They are not only an arena for competition but also a stage for protests, with in-game and out-game performances being an important part of political controversies and social dramas. Through them, we can understand the motivations of gamers and other actors in the gaming sphere, how meaning-making works within the sphere, and how it is understood outside of it. Using the gaming sphere, we can understand social dramas such as the Blitzchung controversy.

During BlizzCon's[29] 2019 World of Warcraft Q&A panel, many attendees who came to the microphone shouted phrases such as "Free Hong Kong" and "the revolution of our times" (Gwilliam 2019b). The protests had entirely shifted from Blitzchung and his punishment to the Hong Kong protests. Blitzchung's winnings were restored a few days after Brack's (2019) blog post, and his ban was reduced from one year to six months (Park 2019b). Despite winning fairly by using only his skill, Blitzchung's punishment was not lifted entirely and is still in effect as I conclude this article.

I asked: why did the Blitzchung controversy spark such outrage in the gaming sphere? My first answer is empirical. The Blitzchung controversy started as an intra-sphere problem. Blitzchung won the tournament fairly. Blitzchung presented his skill, fair play and was not toxic or, most importantly, perceived to bring politics into video games. These values are considered sacred, and a perceived breach of this sacredness presents a threat for the collective solidarity which is specific to the gaming sphere. Blizzard Entertainment tried to portray themselves as protectors of these values when they banned Blitzchung for bringing politics into video games. They failed in their performance and instead were called out themselves for bringing politics into video games through their relationship to China. Together with their perceived insincerity and the differential treatment of the American students, this led gamers and communicative institutions to engage in a battle within the gaming sphere. Blizzard restored Blitzchung's winnings and reduced his ban, which can be considered a partial victory. He was never pardoned. The protests gained traction and the case for Blitzchung was slowly replaced by the movement to keep Hong

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[29] BlizzCon is an annual gaming convention held by Blizzard Entertainment to promote their major franchises.

Kong free. This moment was when gaming sphere agents invited the civil sphere to help them restore their constitutive institution of Activision Blizzard, as politics and money had clearly polluted them—helping to restore the gaming sphere as apolitical.

I argued that the Blizzard's performances were not about keeping the games clean but rather about keeping certain politics out of video games to keep China happy and the money flowing. Blizzard's performance also failed to address the issue of suppressing freedom of speech and was therefore called out by civil sphere agents. Neither the gaming nor the civil spheres believed that their intentions were pure. Blizzard was called out on putting profits over the people of Hong Kong and the integrity of the video game competitions. I have argued that, through an intervention by the civil sphere, the rift within the gaming sphere was partially mended. It is important to study different spheres, as they have the power to change things with the help of the civil sphere (Alexander 2006), constantly negotiate their boundaries vis-a-vis other spheres.

The gaming sphere is my theoretical answer to the gap in the cultural-sociological literature on the analysis of video games and (e)Sport protests. Taking the perspective of the strong program in cultural sociology (Alexander and Smith 2001), sport protest analysis has not paid enough attention to culture and cultural actors themselves (Grix 2015; Bairner et al. 2016; Numerato 2018; Butterworth 2020). Following the cultural perspective in video game analysis (Dini 2012; Shaw 2010; Šisler et al. 2017; Muriel and Crawford 2018), I have constructed the concept of the gaming sphere to help answer questions about the meaning-making process in the world of gaming and to fill this gap in literature on video game protests. I have defined its constitutive and communicative institutions and how they engage in an ongoing project to reestablish the gaming sphere. This dynamic and ongoing tension between the democratized and professional communicative institutions of gaming and the constitutive institution of gaming is what animates the gaming sphere. I have demonstrated the interactions and constant renegotiating of boundaries among the civil, the economic and the gaming spheres and shown how understanding these interactions through the concept of the gaming sphere will help us understand gamers and video games through the meanings they produce.

I wanted to end on a positive note, but we all know how the Hong Kong protests have fared. In addition, Blizzard Entertainment is being sued over their "frat-boy culture" and the sexual harassment of its employees (Allsup 2021). This shift in importance (one banned player vs. dozens of harassed employees) quickly ended the Blitzchung controversy, which lost traction. However, this new social drama opens a new topic for further video game analysis using the concept of the gaming sphere. Right now, protests are being held inside World of Warcraft (Messner 2021), with thousands of players attending. To analyze such events, I introduced the concept of the gaming sphere. Through the gaming sphere, we can understand intra-sphere problems and how they become dramas before some of them start the process of societalization (Alexander 2018). The concept of the gaming sphere will help us interpret gamers' performances and how they are, together with communicative institutions, fighting against the constitutive institutions of the gaming sphere thus reproducing it.

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