

Tom Brock
Manchester Metropolitan University

Can computer gaming generate good leadership?

This paper applies Richard Sennett's (2008, 2012) theory of 'craft' to the practices of electronic sports ('Esports') players to identify the leadership skills that emerge through play and teamwork. In particular, it draws from ethnographic research with esports organisers, players, and team captains of UK Universities, to argue that organised, competitive gaming shares characteristics with Sennett's description of the 'workshop': a space of making, and of inclusive social relations, where craftspeople develop physical skills that can apply to social life. The paper examines the ways in which professional-amateur players navigate issues of competition, cooperation, friendship and social solidarity in Esports. It shows that the practical and political organisation of competitive gaming facilitates what Sennett calls the 'rituals of the shop': a space of habits, and of informal gestures, which promote either closed ('dialectical') or open-ended ('dialogical') exchanges between players. These exchanges are drawn out through case studies of esports matches to highlight the difficulties that players can have in maintaining a 'social triangle' (Sennett, 2012, p.148) online. Indeed, it shows that anonymity, zero-sum competition and invidious comparison plays a crucial role in embittering social relations between skilled esports players, particularly as their expertise leads them to withdraw from those considered 'unworthy'. But it is also here that evidence of good leadership emerges: of those players who make diplomatic exchanges possible through conflict management and the expression of what Sennett calls the 'subjunctive mood'. Indeed, this paper considers examples of player empathy and humility in esports: those who face the challenges of problem-solving with poise, and who encourage others to craft an expressive social distance from their play. This is evidence of what Sennett suggests is a defining attribute of good leadership: of looking outward, beyond instrumental ends, to understand and teach others of the value of community.