As I sit down to polish this introductory chapter with the hope of providing an overview for you, the reader, I am faced with interesting narrative challenges. The first draft of this chapter was written in 2009 amid a global financial crisis whose effects were, perhaps not surprisingly, reverberating down the line to this most niche of activities, professional computer gaming. Though a television show (WCG Ultimate Gamer) focused on competitive gaming had recently debuted on the SyFy channel and a new national initiative (the United Kingdom eSports Association) had just elected its Community Council, within the same few months a major global pro gaming team—Meet Your Makers—lost their financial backing and found themselves dropping players. This setback came relatively close on the heels of one of the most well-funded televised league initiatives ever—the Championship Gaming Series, sponsored by outlets like DirectTV and British Sky Broadcasting Group (BSkyB)—shutting its doors in November 2008. For many the succession of events was a powerful blow to their faith in the inevitable emergence of e-sports as a serious venture.1 People who had staked nascent careers on professional gaming expressed real concern. Many had to go back to jobs outside of e-sports.

Other trends, however, seem to be rising after a period of real upset in the scene. Fighting games (seen as much more accessible to a general audience) are lately being hailed as professional gaming’s breakthrough genre. People who had not previously paid much attention to competitive console play were now taking notice of the way the premiere console league, Major League Gaming, has weathered the financial storm. The 2010 launch of StarCraft II, a long-awaited follow-up to a hugely popular game by the successful developer Blizzard, brought hope for pro gaming to a new wave of fans and players. And finally, if nothing else, the financial upset of the past several years strengthened calls for the scene to get back to its roots, its passion, and focus on building from the core out. The question I am most
directly facing at this moment, then, is whether or not this is a story about a phenomenon in ascendance, a wave of the future for media, leisure, and indeed sports in general, or if we are witnessing a significant downturn in a domain that will pretty much always remain a niche activity for a small portion of gamers.

Of course, such a formulation is a bit of a set-up. Answer in favor of “emerging global phenomenon” and it is hard to not say serious consideration is warranted. Answer in favor of “niche” and perhaps research time might be better spent on larger, more supposedly important things. Indeed, writing a book about professional computer gaming at the same moment in which casual and Facebook games are all the rage is perhaps wildly out of step with our cultural moment. Not surprisingly, I’m going to suggest a third option. No matter which way pro gaming goes, it warrants our serious consideration because it not only represents a fascinating slice of game culture, but it leads us into the heart of questions about the nature and status of play in computer games, the possibilities for (and limitations of) new forms of sport in this digital media age, and the challenges faced by gaming subcultures as they (often ambivalently) find themselves sliding into the mainstream.

This book is intended to be a kickoff contribution into a conversation and a body of research that look seriously at competitive high-end computer gaming. My goal is two-fold: to understand it as a phenomenon in its own right, but also to situate it within our culture at large. While some of the issues that follow will be of particular interest to those in the scholarly game studies community, it is my hope that the work also finds places where it speaks to not only e-sports professionals, but to a broader readership interested in exploring some of the details of this emerging area of computer gaming.

Playing against Each Other

In the last few years there has been a rising fascination with the guys—and in the standard narrative it is always “the guys”—who manage to take video game play to a level most of us never achieve. Whether it is a full-length article in the computer game magazine Edge detailing the by-gone era of arcade competition (complete with two-page photo spread reprinting Life magazine’s infamous 1983 shoot of top arcade players) or any one of the number of independent documentaries produced in the last few years chronicling all manner of high-end competitive play (King of Kong, Chasing Ghosts, Frag, King of Chinatown, Beyond the Game, E-@thletes, I Got Next),
there is real fascination with the players who transform video game play into something more than a casual leisure activity. These stories draw us in by describing guys who have converted something most of us do for fun into a deeply instrumental and serious endeavor. We see them train: the old arcade players notate the machine’s screen with grease pens and tape to help them remember moves while the new cadre of PC gamers attend bootcamps at each other’s houses and practice around the clock. We watch them focused on a video screen, battling it out with fellow players, displaying all the emotions we associate with serious competition (“the thrill of victory, the agony of defeat”). While many of these documentaries tread similar ground, they lend important details to what is an otherwise hidden slice of game culture. Taken together, they help build a story in which e-sports are not unique to this current historical moment, but can be traced back to even the earliest days of computer gaming.

Competition between players—and not just player versus machine—goes back many decades. Stewart Brand’s 1972 account of the “Spacewar Olympics” for Rolling Stone magazine stands out in this regard. In the Stanford Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, a number of computer scientists (some of the best in the business) gathered around the infamous PDP-10 computer for a playful, and apparently raucous, evening of Spacewar. Brand’s description of the event would probably bring a smile of recognition to many contemporary gamers, “Four intense hours, much frenzy and skilled concerted action, a 15-ring circus in ten different directions, the most bzz-bzz-bzz-busy scene I’ve been around since Merry Prankster Acid Tests…” (Brand 1972). From the start, computer game players seemed drawn to not only their interaction with the machine but to the competitive space against one another it could facilitate.

While the earliest days of computer gaming were confined to scientific and university labs (with faculty, students, and research scientists as the prime players), the migration of digital gaming out into the arcade opened new worlds of possibility. As Burrill (2008) argues, arcades are spaces of activity and performance. Building on a tradition going all the way back to pinball and analog arcade machines, Sea Wolf in 1976 offered the first high score notation that carried over from game to game (Medler 2009) and, depending on who you source, either Asteroids or Star Fire in 1979 brought the personalized (typically via initials) high score list to the platform.² While some games allowed head-to-head competition, the majority of the contests between players took place asynchronously, via a high score list maintained by the arcade game itself. This simple design decision proved to be a powerful component in shaping arcade culture. Though
players would often have close contact with each other at their local arcade, the ability of the high score list to facilitate competition across time was revolutionary. You no longer had to be present to witness someone else’s achievements and they did not have to be standing behind you looking over your shoulder to see yours. The machine and its high score list provided continuous competitive play between gamers.

Space, of course, was another barrier of competition to be broken. While you might be the best Pac-Man player in your local arcade in some small town, the highest ambition was to be the best in the world. Taking a picture of your local machine’s high score list—with you on it—became one way of documenting local achievements for distribution more broadly. In a pre-Internet era, however, the challenges of dealing with thousands of players spread across the country and world were not trivial.

The documentary King of Kong (2007) follows the attempts of Steve Wiebe, an avid Donkey Kong player, to beat the all-time high score on the classic arcade machine. One of the striking aspects of the story, beyond the personal drama, is the way the struggle, personalities, and final validation of achievement are mediated through the organization Twin Galaxies. Acting as a hub for competitive arcade game play going back to the 1980s and the heyday of old-school stand-up machines, Twin Galaxies served as a repository and vetter of scores within a competitive player subculture. Founder Walter Day was deeply committed to sustaining the scene by using his organization to collect and record top scores, hold competitions (the Video Game Masters Tournament being notable), and distribute information about the best gamers. While Twin Galaxies never made any real crossover into current e-sports, it does provide us one of the earliest glimpses of the ways digital gaming was taken quite seriously as a competitive activity.

The organization was also key in helping publicize high-end play to a broader audience. Even in Day’s early promotional activities—securing the infamous Life spread or the quirky That’s Incredible TV show special episode on competitive video games (complete with the winner running to break a paper finish-line tape)—we can see the attempts to nudge this niche slice of game culture out to the mainstream. When you listen to early promoters like Day you hear echoes of the current ambitions, where competitive digital gaming is seen as an inevitable future of sports and play. The feeling is often “The public just needs to see it done right and they’ll be hooked!”

One of the most interesting examples of this fascination with competitive arcade play and attempts to bring it to a larger audience was the television show Starcade, which ran from 1982 to 1984 (including syndication)
Playing for Keeps

on U.S. television. Boasting Alex Trebek of Jeopardy fame as a one-time host (it was eventually taken over by Geoff Edwards, another familiar face in the television game show genre), the series brought competitors together to battle it out across several different arcade games, accumulating a total number of points along the way.

The episodes (many of which are available online at the Starcade archive at http://www.starcade.tv) are terrific fun, examples of both the excitement surrounding this new activity and also the challenges of trying to make it broadcastable and spectator friendly. Throughout the show you can see the producers tweaking the form; shots of the arcade game’s screen with the player’s face inset and juxtaposed to the game imagery, the host trying to give a overview of how to play the game and perhaps a tip or two (sometimes bemusedly taken by the player), the delightful “everyman” (and sometimes woman) quality of the contestants. Starcade is a great glimpse into one of several attempts in the 1980s to integrate a new form of leisure, video gaming, into an existing one, television.

As the arcade scene went bust alongside the rise of home gaming machines like Nintendo’s Entertainment System or various Atari consoles, competitive gaming adapted and shifted. Though companies like Nintendo sponsored some live tournaments, for the most part the shoulder-to-shoulder competition with strangers at the arcade waned. Eventually the sofa (and the floor in front of it) became the primary spot where gamers played against their friends and family, and the multiplayer experience began to move into the game world (Newman 2004). The tradition of
documenting high scores through photos remained. Companies such as
Nintendo collected these by letting people send in snapshots of scores on
their television screen, often awarding special certificates or patches for
their achievements (Jakobsson 2011). Magazines, including Nintendo Power
and Sega Visions, provided regular printed lists of high scores so players
could compare their performance with those outside their immediate net-
works. As video gaming grew and transformed from an on-site arcade
activity to something that took place in the home, its competitive aspect
morphed.

While home consoles are a key part of the story of video gaming (Kline,
Dyer-Witheford, De Peuter 2003, Herz 1997), it is in the realm of PC
gaming that one of the next important nodes in e-sports history is found.4
We can locate a key breakthrough for pro gaming in the development of
first person shooters on the personal computer. Though Wolfenstein 3D's
(1992) shoot-outs with Nazis had injected full-out mayhem into an emerg-
ing first-person shooter (FPS) genre, Doom (1993) and then Quake (1996)
stand as definitive titles that provided a solid base for competitive FPS
gaming to grow owing to their network capabilities.

Developed by id Software's famous team of John Carmack and John
Romero, these games played an important role not only as games, but in
the development of robust player communities around them. Doom,
though primarily a local area network (LAN) game for most players, did
become available for larger network play via DWANGO (Dial-up Wide-Area
Network Games Operation), which, for an hourly fee and dial-up costs,
provided servers that players could log into and initiate games from. As
King and Borland chronicle, "With Doom, and even more so with id's later
games, the digital playing field moved from the machine underneath a
player's fingers into cyberspace itself, as players increasingly learned to
battle each other online" (2003, 89). This turn to multiplayer gaming was
taking place not just within FPS titles like Doom and Quake, but was a
growing feature of PC gaming. Internet-based environments—from textual
multi-user dungeons (MUD) to games hosted on bulletin board systems
(BBS) and national Internet service providers like CompuServe—offered
people a way to play, and compete, against each other.

When I spoke with John Romero about this period, his enthusiasm for
the multiplayer component of the games was clear. He recounted how,
despite the time and hassle it could take to pull off, people were from the
first moments hooking their machines together.

Because everybody, you know, they wanted a deathmatch experience, which is
super, super intense. Playing against the computer is nothing compared to playing
Playing for Keeps

against someone else. And when you are playing at the very beginning when you
don’t know that much, it’s really fun and everyone’s laughing and all that kind of
stuff but as soon as you start gathering skill, you start gaining a lot of skill, it starts
to get more serious and it’s more rewarding. (Personal communication, 2010)

Playing against others was the real draw. The value of multiplayer
gaming, and the success id Software had with Doom and then Quake (still a
mainstay in the e-sports scene), can be seen as not only rooted in the prod-
ucts themselves but in the energy of the game community and their
involvement. Quakecon, launched in 1996 by a group of enthusiasts,
became an important home for face-to-face (F2F) competitive gaming.
Originally held as a community-driven and volunteer-run event every year
in Texas, Quakecon provided avid gamers an opportunity to come together
for one big LAN party. Gaming competitions were a part of the event from
that very first year, and as Quakecon grew (reaching upward of seven thou-
sand participants one year) it began to draw international competitors.5

The influence of id Software on the e-sports scene is perhaps best dem-
onstrated via a now infamous tournament, Red Annihilation, held in May
1997 at the E3 Expo. The grand prize for the Quake competition? John
Carmack’s 1987 Ferrari. King and Borland (2003) note the significance of
the event in that it provided a high-profile stage for a growing East Coast/
West Coast rivalry. While we often hear a lot of hype about how the Inter-
et makes our offline locations irrelevant, geography does matter in com-
petitive gaming, where ping times and the ability to get to a F2F tournament
may pose challenges. The winner of Red Annihilation, a famous Bay Area
player named Dennis “Thresh” Fong (who was well established in the
DWANGO system and LAN scene), went on to display the car in the offices
of his start-up game company, Gamers Extreme. The event has gone down
in e-sports history as one of the most famous, for the prominence of the
venue, the sponsors, and the prize.6

A final piece of history worth mentioning, highlighting the activity
level around the launch of e-sports is the Cyberathlete Professional League
(CPL).7 Also located in Texas, former investment banker Angel Munoz
launched his influential organization in 1997. It went on to become one
of the most high-profile venues for e-sports, covering a range of titles and
setting new standards for prize winnings, sponsorships, and corporate
partnerships. Munoz described that early period to me as a heady mix of
innovation and charting new territory. He spoke about being given a copy
of one of id’s titles very early on and how it inspired him:

I had a laptop that was, I think it had sixteen colors, which was enough for Doom
and it had no sound. But when I powered it and started playing Doom, it really had
a major impact on me. I felt transported to a different reality. And that combined with the fact that at that time I was reading books like Neuromancer and Snow Crash, it just gave me the sense that I had just previewed what would be a compelling future. (Personal communication, 2010)

The future he imagined was one in which elite gamers, demonstrating their skill, would figure prominently. He said, “At that time all of the press was completely focused on game developers and on games. Gamers were just consumers and there was really no recognition for their talents or anything like that.” It was in this atmosphere that he began evangelizing about the notion of the “cyberathlete.” Not unlike those early ambitions Walter Day had for arcade players, Munoz envisioned putting a spotlight on the players to “gain recognition and create stars” out of them. His CPL tournaments quickly became the go-to examples for popular press coverage of professional computer gaming and without a doubt he helped launch the careers of many top players. The first CPL tournament, with about four hundred participants, was held in Dallas in 1997 and offered $3,500 USD in cash and prizes (King and Borland 2003). The league continued to host regular tournaments, at its peak supporting hundreds of competitors and tens of thousands of dollars in prizes.

King and Borland (2003) note that the growth of the CPL was closely tied to the rise of Counter-Strike (2000), another hugely popular FPS title that was a mod of Valve’s Half-Life (1998) game. Munoz’s tournaments were able to secure some mainstream coverage via outlets like ESPN and MTV, where the novelty and spectacle of teams of young men animatedly competing for prize money by playing computer games held fascination. The CPL in those earliest years became the face of competitive gaming to the outside world. International players made treks from Europe over to Dallas to compete and eventually the league formally expanded beyond North America to have a worldwide presence via local partners in places like China and Brazil. The organization also developed the Cyberathlete Amateur League (CAL), one of the few formally organized outlets for aspiring e-sports players.

Though the CPL embodied many of the aspirational qualities of e-sports it was also decidedly a business, complete with economic ups and downs. In 2008, after a year of decreased activity and many rumors, it was announced that the CPL had been purchased by a new ownership group in Abu Dhabi. The return of competitions was announced, though CAL was shut down in 2009 to the dismay of some who saw it as an important amateur league for developing new talent. As of 2010 no new CPL competitions had occurred. Indeed, over the years the organization has been hit
with accusations of unpaid prize winnings, and the property’s purchase left some confused about its status. However, despite this somewhat shaky posthumous status, it can’t be denied that it and Angel Munoz were an important and influential part of the e-sports scene in the earliest days, helping shape not only how tournaments work but the public face of pro gaming.

While competitive arcade play and the advent of consoles are an important part of the story, it is really in the rise of network gaming that e-sports found its strength. The early Quakecon and CPL events were possible because game culture was transformed by the ability to create shared virtual playfields within computer game worlds. While local area network games are a powerful tool in building an e-sports community, the growth of broader networking opportunities (via early systems like DWANGO and later Internet capabilities) proved powerful. The Internet makes scaling niche activities possible. Even though you may be one of only a handful of players in your town who is interested in competitive gaming, by being able to go online and connect—and compete—against others, a nascent e-sports community is able to form. As support technologies (websites, real-time chat, streaming audio, and video) developed, the community was bolstered outside of the actual game itself. Network play proved to be a fundamental lynchpin in the history of e-sports.

While much has happened since the arcade days and the PC-based competition boom of the late 1990s, it’s worth keeping some of these early histories in mind for the ways they shaped the scene’s development. They also highlight that contemporary e-sports are embedded in a much longer and rich tradition of organized competitive play. The roots of e-sports in F2F competitions, LAN parties, and avid player engagement are key. While pro gaming is still very much under development and its final form is unclear, the earliest stories about an arcade or Quakecon tournament echo themes we still see today in e-sports: fascination with high-end competition, getting paid for playing computer games, and an emergent formal structuring of gaming as a sport. While our contemporary version of e-sports certainly looks different than an early arcade match, many of the same desires and challenges remain.

**Starting in Aarhus**

Though not going back to the 1980s (despite my time spent at the arcade then), this project is fairly long in the making. In fall 2003 I traveled from my new home in Copenhagen to Aarhus, the second-largest city in
Denmark. In the course of completing a research project on the popular massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) *EverQuest* (1999) I had come in contact with a type of player dubbed a “power gamer” (Taylor 2006a). Power gaming is a unique style of play grounded in intense focus and instrumental orientation. Very often power gamers are thought of as taking the game too seriously. They can appear to outsiders (and indeed sometimes even to themselves) like people who have converted their leisure into work. This mindset is often deemed odd by fellow players, and some theorists have pronounced it corrosive to play. As the sociologist Roger Caillois wrote about the “contamination” of play by reality, obligation, and professionalism, “What used to be a pleasure becomes an obsession. What was an escape becomes an obligation, and what was a pastime is now a passion, compulsion, and course of anxiety. The principle of play has become corrupted. It is now necessary to take precautions against cheats and professional players, a unique product of the contagion of reality” (2001, 45). Yet I knew from spending time and talking to power gamers that things weren’t so simple; that the line between work and play, pleasure and painful progression, was often blurred. Their experiences couldn’t be so easily categorized or dismissed, bundled into the same category as cheaters and set outside the realm of “real” play. Power gamers help us understand something about the nature of leisure, the different orientations people can take to the same ludic object, the creative emergent qualities of play, and the social embeddedness of even the most instrumental player. It’s always tricky to try and trace the sparks that lead you down one research path versus another, the things that catch your eye and ear while many other potential subjects simply go by, unnoticed. In this case, my experience with power gamers brought into my field of view another group of players for whom the line between work and play, pleasure and the struggle to progress, repetitive practice and spontaneous play, collided—professional computer gamers.

I was traveling to Aarhus because I had been invited to come watch the World Cyber Games Danish National Final. The World Cyber Games (WCG) were started in 2000 as an international tournament sponsored by Samsung and the government of South Korea (via its Ministry of Culture and Tourism and Ministry of Information and Communications) as a way of recognizing and encouraging technology development and innovation. National finals are held around the world and winners attend a Grand Final in a host city for three days of competition that culminate in the awarding of bronze, silver, and gold medals in a variety of computer games, as well as cash prizes.
The World Cyber Games are unique compared to other tournaments in that they are fashioned as the Olympics of computer gaming. I had read up on the event and was struck by ambitious language describing bringing people together to “lead the development of the digital entertainment culture by promoting harmony of humankind through e-sports and its embodiment in the Cyber Culture Festival” (WCG 2008). And yet, as my
first pro gaming tournament experience unfolded, my image of this emerging scene changed shape.

Rather than any high-end venue with fancy equipment and polished marketing, I found myself attending a sort of hybrid event. Half mini-LAN party, half tournament, the venue was an old building on the outskirts of town near the docks. When I arrived Friday afternoon preparations were still under way. Cables were being taped down, machines set up, a frantic search for more power outlets was ongoing, and the sponsor banner lay on the floor. The organizers greeted me warmly and we chatted a bit but they were quickly off hustling to get things set up. The network, the backbone of any gaming tournament, was still being sorted and was one of their biggest concerns. Young people, mostly boys and men but a handful of women as well, came trickling in, all tentatively looking around. Some brought machines to set up in the LAN area for the duration of the event, others just milled around talking with friends, going out for a cigarette, or looking over the shoulder of someone sitting at a machine playing.

The event was a bit of a combination in terms of orientation, being both the national final for the WCG but also co-branded as a Danish e-Sport Union tournament (a newly founded national organization). The space was divided, with the LAN party area in front and the tournament machines in the back, cordoned off by a rope. The LAN section consisted of about sixteen computers, some clearly marked with team names on desktop wallpaper or signs near the computer and others brought in by local gamers. Friday continued to have a very in-progress feel to it even though the official tournament had actually begun and play-offs were happening. When I finally left at ten o’clock that evening things were still being pieced together but, as I learned the next day, matches had gone on well into the early morning hours.

When I arrived Saturday morning music was playing outside the venue and there seemed to be a lot more energy than on the previous day. The opening ceremony was scheduled to take place at 12:30, but matches were already being held in the back room and simultaneously broadcast on a large screen in the LAN area, where seating had been set up for spectators to watch the action. For someone like myself who was pretty unfamiliar with the games at the time, there was a fairly steep learning curve to watch matches. The popular game Counter-Strike (CS), which is played with two teams of five all outfitted with weapons and moving across a constrained landscape (the “map,” typically holding a variety of buildings, large boxes, oil tanks, and the like) looking for opposing members to kill, was fairly easy to understand at the most basic level without much help. Its last-man-
standing mechanic (and an additional layer of play in which one team’s goal is to plant a bomb somewhere within the map and the opposing team’s goal to defuse it) was easy enough to grasp visually, at least when someone was shot. You see players get killed and remaining ones hide, run, shoot, and attempt to plant or defuse the bomb. As the numbers tick down you can spot a clear end point. Though the intricacies of various maps and tactics can easily be lost on a novice spectator and the aesthetics of the game aren’t terribly engaging, the basics can be seen.

Two other hugely popular titles though, *StarCraft* (1998) and *WarCraft* (1994), proved a bit of a mystery to me in terms of tactics and who was winning, despite my finding them much more visually compelling. As complex real-time strategy (RTS) games involving both combat and resources, they can be quite difficult for nonplayers to interpret. Win conditions are dependant on a variety of factors including the deployment of varying types of characters and the management of resources being harvested from the virtual land. In addition, the gameplay takes place over a large map, complete with fog of war, that players constantly zip around on by dropping their camera view into that of various characters they control, all with lightning fast reflexes.

As I watched the matches I could follow a bit simply by the crowd’s reaction of cheers, gasps, and groans. This experience of sitting in an audience and collectively watching a match was exciting. I had never had this large group spectator experience when watching a computer game and even though I did not always understand what was happening on the screen, its collective quality was energizing. For the spectators there who actually knew the people competing, it seemed to be an even more powerful community experience. They were following matches with players they not only knew about, but often had themselves competed against or were on teams with.

Saturday night culminated in an incredibly tense final for the *WarCraft III* competition. The match was a very close 2–2 going into the fifth round. In an unforeseen twist the broadcast server, which was piping the video out to the spectator area, broke down, prompting people to go back to the cordoned-off competition area so they could continue to watch. With that technical failure the symbolic power of the rope separating the official athletes from the audience dissolved and people simply crowded around, craning their necks to get a glimpse of the action on the players’ screens. The odds-on favorite to win the game ended up losing in a surprise defeat. Despite the spirit of playful competition permeating the match up until that point, the mood in the crowd took a downward turn. Having been
seen by many players as Denmark’s best chance to take home a medal at the worldwide Grand Final, his defeat also dealt a blow to the nationally rooted ambitions many had.

When I arrived back on Sunday morning I was a bit surprised to see some equipment was already packed up and only a few players remained in the LAN area. Far fewer people were in attendance and I wondered how much last night’s tough battle and upset infused this final day. There was supposed to be a closing ceremony around lunchtime but as with other aspects of the event—where matches ran late and technical difficulties proved a challenge—it was hard to get a firm sense of if and when this would actually happen. With the schedule running late each night and the event now winding down, clear closure was hard to find.

The rope barrier that had kept spectators out of the back competition area was now completely gone, having never been replaced after the technical breakdown the previous night, even though a few remaining matches remained. What was once the special tournament area became just a room,
filled with empty soda bottles and wadded up papers. Another makeshift divider was being used in the final match area to try and cordon off the two remaining CS teams, but for the most part any pretense of formality had dropped and the spectators simply gathered behind the players, watching over their shoulders. The broadcast screen was blank and the audience area was empty.

When the match ended I didn’t quite understand if it was the final one of the event or if there were more to come. There were never any official announcements of what was happening next. Throughout the event matches simply started and stopped, moved along by the organizers who would often have to seek out players and teams to tell them they were up. It seemed that the players themselves knew the status of things but an outsider like myself was often left wondering what would happen next. As the day wound down I caught one of the organizers and asked for an update. Apparently the team that won the CS match had been the expected winner so there was no real surprise to be had. He played down the final ceremony listed on the program—it would simply be the handing out of a few certificates. As the afternoon drew to a close remaining cables were wound up and machines were packed away. The ending of the event felt more like the morning after a large party where perhaps a few guests linger, but everyone knows the real fun is over. It was hard to reconcile the anti-climactic tone with the fact that it was the national final in one of the most active e-sports regions for one of the biggest professional gaming competitions in the world. Most of the winners and losers had already gone home and I was left wondering if the certificates would simply get dropped in the mail.

In the midst of all this activity, however, I began to see the outline of the pro gaming world in ways I hadn’t thought of before. I had gone intending to interview players and see a tournament first-hand. As I began to talk to the competitors, though, our conversations got interwoven with other issues—the way the scene was changing and growing, how some players would act as referees, admins, or informal coaches at other competitions, the complicated mappings of the various teams they had been on, the contracts they dreamt of, or, for the lucky few, had signed. As I looked around I noticed all the other people involved in this event who weren’t players but were crucial to its success. The organizers were a couple of older men who were keen on seeing e-sports grow, were building a national organization, and were ultimately interested in finding a way to maintain a business around their gaming passion. They had gotten the contract from the WCG to host this national final but were also launching
their own initiatives (the Danish e-Sport Union) with the goal of fostering e-sports locally. The referees and administrators—current players who did not qualify for the final as well as “retired” pro players—spent long days doing everything from keeping the network up and handling disputes to distributing information back out to community members who couldn’t be at the event but were participating via the net and various gaming websites. Indeed this invisible online audience was the main one. And I met for the first time a pro gaming team owner who gave me some early insight into the issue of management, contracts, recruiting players, and building a fan base.

This regional event continues to highlight for me some of the attempts, successes, and struggles of the pro gaming scene that we still witness. While much has changed in the years since I attended that first event, there remain core issues and tensions I saw even back then. Young men (and unfortunately rarely women save a few exceptions) competing for high stakes—and peer approval—but still on unsure footing when it comes to their being “professional.” Businessmen, sometimes gamers or retired players themselves, trying to nurture a nascent scene of tournaments and leagues. Owners and coaches carving out for themselves some kind of mediating role between the players, teams, and sponsors and trying to create a new career for themselves. Referees and administrators working to uphold standards, make judgment calls, and systemize otherwise-unruly play. And, amid it all, a dedicated groups of gamers and friends collectively creating a new spectator and fan culture as they watched matches, cheered, and debated moves and wins.

As I continued to attend tournaments this cast of actors multiplied. I came to see that the emerging world of pro game broadcasting played a powerful role in not only distributing information to fans, but in interpreting and translating complex game action. Tournament organizers took on increasingly prominent roles. Sponsorship became much more widespread and the number of companies throwing financial support behind teams and players expanded (and sometimes contracted). And while that rough-edged local Danish final represents one small branch of the pro gaming scene, there is another that has emerged in the last few years—tournaments and leagues backed by high-profile investors and partners, often with traditional media distribution outlets, who see huge potential growth and revenues that will come from the emergence of e-sports and professional gaming.

While there has been sporadic journalistic coverage of professional computer gaming—perhaps you saw the 60 Minutes television show piece
on one of the most famous players, Johnathan “Fatal1ty” Wendel—the stories tend to focus on just the players or the team. This is only one piece of the puzzle. Certainly the players themselves are a crucial component to understanding what is happening with this emerging phenomenon, but I will argue that there are a number of important factors, and actors, we should pay careful attention to as well. Professionalization is happening within broader structural, institutional, and social contexts, and includes tournament organizers, broadcasters, owners, referees, coaches, sponsors, and fans. It is also happening in the midst of debates about the nature of computer game play in our contemporary lives and what role, if any, e-sports should have there.

Korean Roots

When you talk to North Americans and Europeans involved in pro gaming about the development of e-sports, it does not take long for South Korea to come up in conversation. Though other Asian countries have launched their own experiments with pro gaming (China being a notable newcomer), for many South Korea is seen as a kind of promised pro gaming land. Quite often infused with a utopic-inflected “techno-Orientalism,” tales are told about young men who have ascended to the level of national hero by playing computer games. The stories circle around the rise of a professional scene whose players have fan bases comparable to that of American mainstream sports stars. They hold contracts and sponsorship deals, wear the latest in sport gear from Nike and Adidas, and play in competitions that regularly draw thousands and are broadcast on major television channels.

South Korea is regularly spoken of as the place where your taxi driver plays StarCraft and the geeky skilled kid can become a star. As one popular press article titled “Geek Heroes” detailed,

Mr. Woo of the federal game institute estimated that 10 million South Koreans regularly follow eSports, as they are known here, and said that some fan clubs of top gamers have 700,000 members or more. “These fan clubs are actually bigger in size than the fan clubs of actors and singers in Korea,” he said. “The total number of people who go spectate pro basketball, baseball, and soccer put together is the same as the number of people who go watch pro game leagues.” (Schiesel 2007)

In Dal Yong Jin’s book about online gaming, he presents a more nuanced picture of the celebrity e-sports player in South Korea, pointing out that while there are certainly a handful who reach these mythical levels, “the majority of pro gamers and semipro gamers live a much less glamorous
life, confronting hardships such as salaries lower than the national average and 14- to 16-hour days of training for two to three years” (2010, 82).

Yet the allure of playing computer games for a living is compelling for many South Korean youth. With 225 professional players in the Korea e-Sports Association (KeSPA) and 11 pro clubs (owned by companies like Samsung, SK Telecom, and AMD), South Korea is a powerful node in the story of pro gaming, both for the way it paints a picture of what a professional scene that has entered the cultural mainstream can actually look like, but also for the imaginative (even mythical) power it holds for those trying to foster pro gaming in North America and Europe (Korea Times 2007, Korea Times 2004a).

The story of South Korea holds an interesting place in North American and European pro gaming because it is regularly held up as a model for the future of e-sports worldwide. It works as evocative fantasy. The refrain around it often seems to be “If they can do it there, we can do it here!” Whether South Korean e-sports are, indeed, the model for a global future or just a regional phenomenon, we can still benefit from understanding a bit about them. There is something to be said for looking at South Korea’s gaming history, though often the details of its success are not explored enough outside the region.

The strength of South Korean pro gaming has its roots in something much deeper than the enthusiasm of the players and pro community. Jin highlights that important structural factors are at work in the rise of the South Korean model “including favorable government policies, a competitive market structure, a swift development of ICTs [information and communication technologies], the transnationalization and globalization of the game industry, and people’s mentalities about accepting new technology and online gaming” (2010, 35). Hjorth and Chan additionally signal that the “Korean Wave” of the early 2000s is not constrained to technology and gaming but includes broader “cultural products, especially in the form of television soaps and family dramas” (2009, 6; see also Chung 2009). For example, the complex relationship between Japan and Korea, with struggles over colonization, national policing of cultural influence, and competition, has played a powerful role in the accelerated growth of the South Korean market (Jin and Chee 2009). The South Korean case is situated within a larger intraregional set of relations that go well beyond the scope of gaming. The story of South Korean e-sports highlights the ways culture, larger infrastructural developments, policy decisions, and economic activities have intersected in a fortuitous way at a particular historical moment to support the formation of a new form of leisure and sport.
Game Culture
Most pro gaming aficionados have heard about the widespread popularity among South Koreans of the real-time strategy game StarCraft, which has sold more than half of its total copies worldwide in that country alone (Hunh 2008, Jin-seo 2008a). Beyond widely known games like Starcraft, however, the annual scale of the games market there comes in at about 5 billion U.S. dollars, or approximately $100 per person, “more than three times what Americans spend” (Schiesel 2007). Dal Yong Jin and Florence Chee note that in 2005 the South Korean online game market alone accounted for “56% of the entire Asia Pacific market share” and that “the Korean online game market is expected to continually grow about 20% annually, reaching $2.6 billion by 2008” (2008). The sheer size and number of people playing computer games in South Korea is a key part of the success of e-sports.

In Florence Chee’s (2006) ethnographic work on game culture in South Korea she paints a compelling picture of a population for whom computer games are fairly well integrated into everyday life. She points out, for example, that 54% of the population plays online games. The widespread availability of PC bangs—a kind of 24/7 Internet and gaming café with fairly low hourly rates—helps facilitate a culture in which, “For many young Koreans, their participation in online games represents one facet of a whole community and way of life. The activities surrounding this media ecology determine how its members navigate within their vital orientations and make choices about how they take nourishment, spend money, earn money, and even partake in courtship rituals” (Chee 2006, 232).

Sang-Min Whang (2005), in his research on these game players, similarly discusses the integration of massively multiplayer online games into youth culture. He notes that these games, and the activities within them, become a part of people’s daily routines. In this context, playing games and being in spaces in which game culture is fostered is a core part of teen and young adult lives. Playing games, looking over the shoulders of your friends playing, and in general having games as a central cultural touchstone is simply part of young people’s everyday experience in South Korea.

Governmental and Infrastructure Support
The foundations for this extensive multiplayer computer game culture lay at least partially in a number of basic infrastructural and institutional facilitators (Chung 2009). Broadband penetration has played a powerful role in the growth of game culture and physical sites for play. South Korea
continues to boast strong and ubiquitous high-speed net access, with 89.4% of households connected (Schiesel 2006, Jin and Chee 2008). Domestic net connections have steadily grown over the years, but one of the most important nodes in the story of South Korean game culture is the place of PC bangs, of which there are somewhere around twenty thousand, attracting “more than a million people a day” (Schiesel 2007; see also Hunh 2008).12

The growth of the PC bang industry is itself deeply tied to important economic factors with regards to the cost of playing. Huhh (2008) explains that online game subscriptions in these venues are not set up as they typically are in North America and Europe, where individual players purchase a game and maintain an ongoing monthly subscription. In South Korea online games have regularly been handled via “Internet Protocol pricing.” In this model the net café holds a site license for a fixed number of network addresses and individual users do not have to buy the game subscription themselves.13 Their playtime is tied to the machines that have been authorized for access. As Huhh notes, “The charging policy of PC bangs encouraged their visitors to play longer; the more you stayed at a PC bang, the lower the hourly charge became” and while overall costs of this model to the player were perhaps higher than their maintaining a monthly subscription, it offered much more flexibility for the user (2008, 28).

Into this context we see the emergence of additional support mechanisms from the government and industry. Starting in the 1990s, the government recognized the role of games in the lives of its citizens and sought to make developing and supporting the game industry in South Korea one of its initiatives.14 This cultural basis is also tied to a governmental agenda in which technology would become an important part of the country’s economic and development plans. In a report by the Korea Game Development and Promotion Institute, a part of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the authors wrote:

Over 90% of the total population has experienced playing games as of March 2003, with 83% currently enjoying them. The game-playing population will continue to increase as various game contents are developed. To keep pace with such trends, the government has implemented systematic and comprehensive policies to develop the game market into a strategic industry. To this end, the Korean Game Development and Promotion Institute was established in 1999 as a key institution to promote game policies. This institute is in charge of various services to advance the domestic game industry and establish the game culture by setting up a one-stop support system involving all game-related fields, including export promotion, creation support, cultivating talented personnel, and R&D. (2003, 6)
What is striking about this initiative is the variety of ways centralizing the growth of game culture was handled. While we are certainly seeing more and more governments recognize the potential in fostering local game development, South Korea went well beyond the usual initiatives by actually addressing everything from legal frameworks to the creation of more Internet cafés. For example, looking at the following table from one of the government reports on the subject, we can see a wide variety of initiatives enacted to support this development.

This was widespread public policy in action, covering not simply legal changes or support for private investment, but also specific directives taken

### Table 1.1
Game Industry–Related Policies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Promotional activities</th>
<th>Contents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legal and systemic improvements</td>
<td>Enact the Cultural Industry Promotion Law; classification of the game industry as a cultural industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Revise the Sound Records, Video, and Game Products Act: Change from regulation to active support and post management [sic]. Simplify into two grades, i.e., all ages over 18 (Amendment to SVG Act took effect as of September 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private investment promotion</td>
<td>Promote professional game investment associations led by private investors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Securing of key points</td>
<td>Designate game specialization complex in each local area for local cultural industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Created game-related cultural industrial complex in Chongju and Daejon in April 2001 to be in charge of planning, creation, production, equipment, exhibition, logistics, tourism, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operation of Korea Game Development and Promotion Institute</td>
<td>Integrate the game developing companies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develop game technology development and provide information</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Established the integrated Game Support Center (the former body of the Korea Game Development and Promotion Institute)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Korea Media Rating Board</td>
<td>Publish reports on the gaming industry</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Operate the Game Academy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classified under the SVG Act to classify the grades of game products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classify the game products as all ages and above 18 (Article 20-2) and unavailable (Article 20-3) under the Amendment to SVG Act</td>
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*Source: Korea Game Development and Promotion Institute 2003.*
to foster game tournaments in four major cities (Seoul, Incheon, Jeonju, and Cheonan) and the building of physical game complexes in various parts of the country, including the development of an “advanced arcade game zone” (G2ZONE). Underlying this all is the foundation of the Korean Information Infrastructure Act and intensive government investment in high-tech initiatives (Jin and Chee 2009). These strong governmental and infrastructural supports were joined by the commercial sector also stepping in to leverage an emerging game culture.

Corporate Initiatives
The World Cyber Games (WCG), still one of the largest and most influential e-sports tournaments, began as a partnership launched in 2000 between the government of South Korea and private sponsors, most notably Samsung. It is often dubbed the Olympics of professional computer gaming. It represents one of the oldest and strongest tournaments thus far in global pro gaming. Having grown significantly since its first trial event in 2001 under the name “World Cyber Game Challenge” in Seoul, South Korea, the Grand Final now rotates locations worldwide. The WCG remains one of the more robust tournaments on the pro scene. While I will discuss several aspects of it later in the book, a short introduction is warranted here as it is an important node in the South Korean model of interweaving game culture, government support, and industry investment.

Reaching out to a youth market, and a global one at that, has long been a part of the WCG mission. Strongly informing the collaboration between International Cyber Marketing (ICM, the private organizing body for the tournament), the government (via the Ministry of Culture and Tourism), corporate sponsors, and the Korea Game Promotion Center has also been the promotion of South Korea as a front-runner in digital media and interactive entertainment. As Kim Dae-jung, president of South Korea in 2001, remarked, “I hope that the first WCG will help our nation to become recognized as one of the leaders in game, knowledge industry and IT infrastructure, as well as help the world’s game-loving young people exchange information and build friendships” (Sung-jin 2001). Such symbolic and concrete government support around computer games is notable. The country has been explicit in tying leisure culture through computer games to its overall economic development. The level of national support and attention to this initiative is worth considering.

This governmental initiative has been equally matched by serious industry sponsorship. While the WCG has over the years drawn in smaller
technology companies as sponsors, larger brands have stepped in to participate from the very beginning, including Coca-Cola, Microsoft, and its longest-running big industry partner, Samsung Electronics. Yun Jong-yong, a Samsung vice chairman, noted in 2004 that “Every year we pay more than half of the total cost of the WCG, but we are not doing it expecting an immediate rise in sales […] Mostly teenagers, more than 1 million people who participated in this event from over 60 countries, will remember our brands for the rest of their lives” (Korea Times 2004b). Samsung’s strong corporate representation in the event can also be seen in the makeup of ICM, where positions like president and CEO have been filled by Hyoung-Seok Kim, longtime Samsung executive involved in overseas sales and marketing, or Jong-Yong Yun, co-chairman of the World Cyber Games Committee and vice chairman and CEO of Samsung Electronics. In the North American and European tournament world it is very rare to see this level of top-tier corporate (not to mention executive) support for e-sports, either from government or industry.

Beyond large scale international events like the World Cyber Games, South Korea boasts a vibrant national league culture strongly supported by a variety of corporations who sponsor teams. From mobile phone companies to financial services, computer gaming teams and leagues have received support from organizations beyond the narrower band of tech companies and computer peripheral makers we generally see tossing their hat into the ring in North America and Europe. As Kim Byung Kyu, a senior manager at Shinhan Bank noted, “We’re not just the sponsors of this league […] We’re the hosts of this league. So we have a bank account called Star League Mania, and you can get V.I.P. seating at the league finals if you’ve opened an account” (Schiesel 2006).

Linking a national pastime, computer gaming, to creating new customers for a business has been an important factor in corporate support for South Korean e-sports. This has been particularly powerful in the mobile phone market where major companies such as KTF, SK Telecom, and Pantech sponsor their own popular and well-regarded teams, seeing them as valuable advertising outlets.

Analysts say the mobile phone-related companies have jumped onto the gaming bandwagon to jazz up their image by exerting a strong pull from online game fans, who are typically in their teens and early twenties. “The game fan demographic attracts handset makers and wireless operators since the young fans are also the mobile phone outfits’ main customers,” Hyundai Investment & Securities analyst Han Ik-hee said. (Schiesel 2006)
While North American and European organizations still primarily draw sponsors from computer-related companies, South Korean sponsors have found a viable overlap between a desired youth demographic and the larger game culture.

In the popular Pro League alone eleven companies participated in “spending around $1.5 million per year on average” supporting Korean e-sports (Jin-seo 2008a). Apparently executives and advertising managers—not just of mobile companies but other lifestyle products—see sponsorship of professional computer gaming as a good investment, an opportunity to reach the huge numbers of young people spending money on services and products. Often citing return-on-investment ratios of 500%, sponsors have come to value the promotional opportunities that pro gaming offers South Korean businesses.

SK Telecom, which operates T1 club, agrees on the high effectiveness of e-sports marketing. “It seems that fans want to thank the company for making the T1 team,” said Cho Man-soo, manager of the T1 club. “It’s not just a brand awareness. It’s more like loving the team, loving the company. They have loyalty to the company.” [...] SK Telecom manager Cho said that it estimates its promotional effects through media coverage to be 15 billion won ($16.5 million) and that is only counting traditional offline media such as newspapers, magazines and cable and satellite TVs. (Jin-seo 2008a)

It’s not simply private corporations that are piggybacking on the role of game culture in South Korea. The Korean Air Force also got into e-sports with their sponsorship of Air Force Challenges e-Sports (ACE), a profes-
sional team for the military branch (conscription for males is still active in the country). As Jin-seo (2008b) notes, “The Ace [sic] has been the only place where young professional gamers can continue their career while completing the mandatory military service—an inevitable choice for most players because their peak time as a gamer overlaps their military conscription age.”

Following on their heels the South Korean Navy announced its own Starcraft team, Aegis. As one article described it, “The Korea e-Sports Association (KeSPA) said it expects to see gamers in Navy uniforms playing in Starcraft pro competitions in the second half of this year. The order to create the team came from Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Song Young-moo, a Navy official said, after it was concluded that a gamers team could be an excellent low-cost publicity move” (Chosun 2007).

KeSPA
One of the best examples of an organization that unites the government and corporate efforts to foster e-sports is the Korean eSports Association (KeSPA). Launched in 2000 with the approval of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and managed by top corporate executives within the technology and gaming sectors, KeSPA is involved with the ongoing regulation and organization of South Korean players and various tournaments. Though I will discuss KeSPA in more detail later, it is worth briefly mentioning here as it has historically formed an important part of the South Korean scene.

While most countries struggle with ad hoc affiliations and have no broad policy decisions helping them develop e-sports regionally (and no mechanisms to enforce them even if they did), KeSPA has been actively involved in everything from maintaining player statistics and rankings to managing broadcast licenses and organization details for tournaments. Its power as a regulating organization, though often contentious, has been important in stabilizing a fast-growing scene in which the boundaries between amateur and professional are still shifting.

Media Outlets
This vibrant competitive gaming culture is also supported by a wide variety of media dedicated to covering and broadcasting South Korean e-sports. With television stations, online broadcasters, publications (online and print), and a huge number of websites for the emerging sport, pro gaming in South Korea gets ample media attention and distribution. According to some estimates teenagers watching computer game competitions
outnumber those watching baseball, a popular sport in South Korea (Korea Times 2004a).

Given the ways gaming has entered mainstream television culture, and indeed the attention to promoting players, the synchronicity between industry sponsors and target demographics is apparent. Media outlets are adopting some of the frames we find in traditional sports coverage. While games are certainly a key artifact, the focus on players provides a frequent narrative hook. As Hyong Jun Hwang, the general manager of OnGameNet (a major cable channel for e-sports) put it, “We realized that one of the things that keeps people coming back to television are the characters, the recurring personalities that the viewer gets to know and identify with, or maybe they begin to dislike [...] In other words, television needs stars. So we set out to make the top players into stars, promoting them and so on” (Schiesel 2006). The crafting of a fan and spectator culture for computer games takes place in a variety of venues. Websites are certainly one of the key outlets for the production of a pro gaming scene, with places like FighterForum, Gom TV, Pandora TV, and Hana TV offering robust online coverage of players and tournaments, including everything from replays to interviews and photos.

In addition, television channels OnGameNet and MBC Game provide regular coverage of computer game tournaments, as well as maintain their own fairly extensive online presences offering interviews, fan hubs, and video on demand (VoD), which are captured replays of matches—a mainstay of the competitive gaming scene. With primetime viewership in the millions, it is not a marginal market (Jin and Chee 2009, Whang 2005).

This large audience is not simply watching raw footage. South Korean e-sports media have paid careful attention to developing game commentating, ongoing player and team narratives, and visualization to help viewers get into the games. While North America and Europe have experimented with bringing professional tournaments to television, South Korea has been a strong front-runner in integrating the consumption of game tournaments into mainstream media. In this regard it represents a fascinating emerging model of spectatorship in a medium that is often thought of as singularly interactive and not spectator friendly.

Transitions and Changes in the South Korean Scene
The fascination with South Korean e-sports that one finds in the North American and European pro gaming world is not unwarranted. The South Korean model is one in which the interweaving structures of government support, technology infrastructure, broad industry sponsorship, strong
organizational institutions (like KeSPA), legal and market accommodations (such as IP pricing in net cafés), and a mainstreamed game culture have created a powerful milieu where professional computer gaming has thrived for a number of years. As HanbitSoft (the company that brought StarCraft to the country) CEO Kim Young-man put in 2007, “Korean online games has extended its ideals from being a toy to becoming part of a cultural enterprise as the market becomes larger everyday” (Jin-seo 2008a).

Though there have been some signs of downturn and stagnation in the South Korean pro world—Hanbit was looking to sell its team in 2008 and OnGameNet’s viewership has dropped it from ninth to sixteenth in overall cable channel rankings—we would be remiss to not keep the South Korean e-sports model in our minds as we proceed (Jin-seo 2008b, Jin and Chee 2008). It helps situate broader structural features that the growth of a new form of play, and sport, can require. E-sports has clearly established itself there as a viable leisure and professional activity, weaving together a cultural inclusion of video games with elite competition and spectatorship.

Researching E-sports

As is perhaps apparent from the previous discussion of South Korea, the domain in which e-sports circulates is a decidedly global one, which provides interesting challenges for an author setting out to write a book dealing with its emergence. My field site for this work thus encompassed a range of countries and tournaments, all involving not only a set of globalized e-sport practices but a variety of activities and meanings simultaneously situated in very local contexts. Given the scope of the potential domain I had to make some hard choices and face up to real constraints in the work. While I was able to make one trip to Seoul, got a chance to visit the offices of International Cyber Marketing (organizers of the World Cyber Games), and talked to someone from KeSPA, the research in this book is primarily drawn from my experiences in the European and North American scene and it should be seen through this lens.

Given that constraint I have, however, attended a fair number of tournaments over the years, ranging from several WCG Grand Finals (one in the United States and one in Italy) to very small invite-only tournaments like the Arbalet Cup in Stockholm. When possible I would with permission “shadow” a player or team, a tournament commentator, or an organizer or administrator, simply following along and taking in the range of their activities and conversations during an event (where language permitted). Generally while at tournaments my days began with early start times and
often ran late into the night. This typically lasted for several consecutive
days. During such events I’d have numerous informal conversations with
the range of participants you encounter at a tournament. I became a fairly
avid amateur photographer as a way of documenting the field, and most
of the images in this book are drawn from my own collection.

I’ve also had the privilege of running two separate day-long public work-
shops on e-sports (with collaborators Henry Lowood, Emma Witkowski,
Matteo Bittanti, Henrik Bennetsen, and Susan Rojo) where we invited ten
to twelve working e-sports professionals (players, team owners, tournament
organizers, commentators) for extensive conversations about their work.¹⁸

In addition to this fieldwork, I’ve conducted a number of formal inter-
views over the years with everyone from commentators to players to team
owners. In several instances I was fortunate enough to visit the offices of
a team, tournament, or league organizer and interview several members of
the staff on site. At other times interviews were conducted tucked in a
corner at a tournament, at a café, via email, or online through Skype. Aside
from a couple instances in which I’ve interviewed a very public figure
whose identity could not easily be hidden, I’ve chosen to anonymize my
respondents. I must admit I struggled with this decision since this book is
as much a historical account as a traditional case study and indeed, it
might benefit some interviewees professionally to be clearly represented
here. But given that some of the issues at hand were fraught, or dealt with
conflicts, I’ve decided the overall protection of people’s privacy outweighed
the benefits of any single person’s individual identification.

As with much of my previous work I have also used the online construc-
tion of the e-sports and pro scene as a valuable resource for understanding
what is happening. This includes following blogs, reading forums, watch-
ing videos, and listening to podcasts. The rise of professional computer
gaming cannot be understood without a full accounting of its online com-
ponents and I consider the material I’ve gotten from these venues key in
documenting it.

This project has not always been an easy one. As is perhaps apparent
from the various events I’ve gone to over the years, the research has been
long in the making. The first event I attended was in 2003 and as I finish
this manuscript it is 2011. In large part this has been due to two factors:
the scope of the project and the vastly changing nature of the scene over
these years. In most research you go until you reach a kind of saturation
point. You start hearing the same things in interviews, seeing the same
things in the field. Because I ended up not simply doing a study of one
particular league or team, reaching this point has taken much longer than
Playing for Keeps

if I had focused more narrowly. The dynamic nature of the field has kept saturation always just out of reach. Leagues, tournaments, and teams have radically altered in just these past few years. Several major outfits that at one time seemed to have real longevity and stability suddenly folded, often leaving people scrambling to find new gigs and make sense of what was happening. It has also been an incredibly experimental decade for e-sports, with mainstream media attempts ascending and receding, financial fortunes rising and falling. It has additionally been a decade in which the real rise of computer gaming in our culture more generally has occurred, a shift from being seen as just for geeks to something for the mainstream. Truth be told, I have probably only still reached partial saturation. There is simply still too much happening in professional e-sports to call the fieldwork complete, the case nicely wrapped up in a tidy single volume. So this is, with eyes wide open, as much a conscious claim of provisional saturation and documenting things where they are at now, as anything. It is my hope that other researchers’ accounts of various aspects of the scene will help fill in gaps and broaden the story.

This work has also been challenging in terms of my own relationship with the field. Unlike my prior research on virtual worlds and massively multiplayer online games, I never felt myself become a natural inhabitant of the e-sports community. If you, the reader, have noticed the omission of the term “ethnography,” you have spotted a key break in my own practice. By virtue of the games played (I have never been a FPS player and RTS games come with some work), its often misogynistic culture, and its deeply insider nature (which is largely only broken by being an avid player and fan), I was always fairly outside what I was studying. At live events I always felt my otherness. I was a noncompetitor, a woman, and a bit older than most attendees. That the people I have interviewed over the years were as gracious as they were given these invisible boundaries is something I’m very grateful for. From a methodological perspective this outsidership, of course, has a double nature. Things that were otherwise obvious for the insiders generally weren’t for me. When claims were made about how one game was naturally easier to watch than another, for example, I felt the unspoken assumptions all too clearly. I perhaps sensed the gap moments and breakages more acutely because I often lacked any easy internalized interpretive schema. Yet my otherness also sometimes kept me at a distance from the people I encountered. I recall reading with some envy about the mundane hanging-out time Michael Kane, author of the book Game Boys (2008), spent with the e-sports teams he was writing about, or the easy conversational rapport he had managed to achieve when at a bar with the
guys after a match. These kinds of moments remained elusive to me. For a variety of reasons, some I’m sure I’ll never know, access of the sort I’d been used to in my prior ethnographic work was always a struggle. While some would suggest marginality should be maintained in fieldwork (Traweek 1998), I am ultimately quite ambivalent about the degree to which it occurred in this project compared with my own prior ethnographic research.

I should perhaps come clean about another aspect of my otherness in relation to this subject—I am not a big traditional sports fan. I came to e-sports not because it resonated with my own experience with baseball or basketball, but because it hooked into my curiosity about what I’ve in the past called instrumental play. My interest came from being a gamer, not a sports fan. Again the nonnaturalized aspect made me ask the “dumb” questions but, I would hope, those were often useful interventions for the research. The downside, of all this otherness is that I’ve probably had to work three times as hard to make sense of things that might otherwise easily come to mind if you’re a sports or FPS fan. And I’ve surely overlooked some key links or examples that will immediately spring to mind as fans read this book.

Far too often in research we leave hidden the difficulties of our work, the things we struggle with. Our efforts reside in some isolated box that we end up writing around, and young scholars can find themselves hitting walls no one ever told them about. I certainly did earlier in my career. In this work, rather than hiding from the struggles it took to complete it, I want to put them on the table as part of what shapes the book you hold in your hands. The story, and history, I am constructing here, are—indeed can only be—partial and deeply informed by my own position. Ultimately a complete story of e-sports will unfold through a collective production of various works on the subject. My modest hope is that this book provides an early contribution—both in terms of its analysis but also by just laying down some basic documentation—to what will hopefully be an ongoing collection of research, including perhaps not only game studies, but fields like leisure studies or even the sociology of sport.19

Structure of the Book

Much like the way North American and European participants turn to it, I use the South Korean case study above as a referent point in the framing of this project. It reminds us to not only take a look at the players, whose stories understandably so captivate us with their vision of what the future
might hold for play and work, but to take into account larger structural mechanisms and other activities (teams, leagues, broadcasters) as central mechanisms in the formation of a pro culture. The South Korean pro gaming scene prompts us to consider the ways structures and actors beyond the sole computer game player have influenced and shaped a professional game culture. Whether it is through sponsorships, team management, broadcasting, or a myriad of other factors, fully understanding professional computer gaming requires a larger, more sociologically informed eye to fully make sense of it.

In this regard the remainder of the book will pick up on such angles in the hopes of painting a larger picture of this emerging, albeit precariously situated, slice of game culture. This chapter has sought to lay out some basic structures and provide an initial setup for understanding the pro world, giving an early glimpse into a tournament and juxtaposing it against the South Korean model.

Chapter two explores debates about whether or not computer game play can indeed be considered sport. This question is something that players and the pro gaming community themselves regularly wrestle with. Mapping the contours of the debate provides useful insight into how participants understand the nature of play, sport, and even work. Drawing on the language of sport, and e-sport, is a powerful rhetorical tool for legitimating elite computer game play within the community. Beyond the more philosophic or phenomenological issues around sport are fascinating issues that arise with the regulation of matches and rule sets. At the heart of this discussion is a consideration of computation’s role in constructing play, something that goes well beyond the domain of just e-sports. I recount several stories of contentious and widely debated instances in high-end tournament play in order to discuss the complex nature of rules and how the professional community is negotiating computational boundary making, human action, and agency.

Having tackled the nature of rules and sport, chapter three examines the most commonly heard angle into pro gaming, the players themselves. The focus in this chapter is less on telling individual stories of particular players and more on presenting an overall picture of the development of an e-sports career. Rather than assuming one seamlessly advances to elite status, the analysis here takes a more sociological approach in asking how someone becomes professional. The model suggests that the career path from amateur to professional is quite bumpy and often unsuccessful. It is also heavily dependant on being actively socialized into a professional identity by a range of actors and forces. This chapter tracks the ways players
regularly start in the world of LANs and online play as they move into professionalization. One of the central questions arising in this study is that of the line between work and play, certainly not unfamiliar territory for any serious sports player. An examination of how hobby gets transformed into work, a consideration of “serious leisure,” and the complicated nature of professional play are all themes in this chapter.

Also in this chapter I explore how gender is being constructed in the pro scene, with debates concerning the viability of women as top competitors. And rather than simply equating the issue of gender in games with women and femininity, this chapter looks at how masculinity is being formulated in e-sports. Hegemonic masculinity constructs a very particular model of the “ideal man.” It intersects the notion of an athlete in complicated ways. Yet how this construction of masculinity (in which whiteness also plays a role) aligns, if at all, with what is often seen as a fairly “geeky” pastime is important in thinking about gender and e-sports.

Chapter four moves from focusing on players to focusing on the enormous amount of work sustaining the pro scene, what we might think of as the business of e-sport. Leagues, teams, owners, referees, competitions, sponsors, and a variety of other infrastructures are explored. This chapter gives the reader a picture of the range of actors behind the scenes and also helps tell the story about the kind of money involved. I present several institutional models for organizing e-sports and how competition is actually managed by some of these companies. Discussion of sponsorship and contracts, as well as skirmishes around issues of intellectual property and e-sports, is in this chapter.

Chapter five tackles the crucial issue of the possibilities for spectatorship and fandom in pro gaming, two angles rarely considered in game studies in general. Competitions and tournaments go back to early LAN days and I present an overview of the main competition venues (with a particular emphasis on offline matches). Though often quite unknown except to the most diehard fans, game journalists and commentators are introduced as providing powerful explanatory work for audiences. Breaking down the components of fan culture, this chapter discusses how websites, forums, podcasts, video on demand, and a variety of media help foster a growing community centered around the pro scene. This section looks at tournaments and events from the eye of a spectator and addresses some of the remaining big challenges in this domain.

Chapter six concludes the book with a discussion about the latest developments on the horizon and the role of globalization in e-sports. In particular, it notes the high degree of commercialization we are starting to see
in the North American and European market. It provides a glimpse into the emerging state of pro gaming in countries new to the domain, such as China, and the rise of professional console gaming. I turn a final eye toward the mainstreaming of e-sports as it grows and provide some consideration as to future possibilities for the professionalization of computer game play.

While the story of professional gaming may at first glance strike some as a niche past time, it leads us into the heart of many questions we ponder in the face of computer gaming’s growth as a mainstream leisure activity. It asks us to confront our notions about what play, work, and sport are. We must consider what the nature of our activity is exactly when we are looking over the shoulder, or at the television channel, of another gamer playing. We also find ourselves in the thick of a debate about the nature of rules, computation, and emergent play. High-level competitive gaming also leads to debates about the relationship between the construction of gender, sport, and competition. Ultimately, thinking about e-sports helps us analyze the transition many groups face as they struggle to convert their leisure time and playful passions into serious play, where the stakes are high, reputations built, and money gained (and lost).