

## Smurfs, Silvers & CS:GO: Understanding Smurfing as Prosumers

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### Abstract

*Esports games can be seen as platform based prosumption experiences as players co-produce their media experiences through play. This can be viewed as peer-to-peer prosumption where users create value between themselves for emotional and social outcomes. Smurfing represents a form of play where higher skilled users compete with lower skilled players through an alternative account that ensures a mismatch in skill abilities. Through an auto-netnographic approach augmented with interviews on the CS:GO matchmaking platform, this paper provides new insights on a common practice that has received little attention to date. Three key themes were identified that illustrate that this complex phenomenon should not always be framed in a negative fashion. Smurfing should be understood as embedded within peer-to-peer prosumer platforms, driven by complex motivations and framed as cheating according to perspective. The concept has value for further study in gaming and esports with wider implications for the digital society.*

**Keywords:** CS:GO, esports, prosumers, peer-to-peer prosumption, smurfs

### 1. Introduction

Esports, is characterized by consumer led platform-based innovations (Scholz, 2019) that represent a rich paradigm for extending our theoretical understanding the experience economy (Seo, 2013). Consumers engage in a variety of roles and social practices (Seo & Jung, 2016) which occur through a variety of co-creation activities existing between the professional scene and the audience but also within the game based communities and platforms (Huston et al., 2021). These communities are multifaceted transmedia concepts driven by peer-generated content across a multitude of platforms (Cranmer et al., 2021). As research in esports continues to progress there is a need for more specific case studies on game titles, which operate as both an esport and general entertainment product (Ruotsalainen et

al., 2022). Players often play multiple games with a diversity of play styles (Vahlo & Karhulahti, 2022 ) representing unique consumer segments that can be understood in terms of psychographic and behavioral characteristics (Hedlund, 2021). As consumers in esports co-create value, they act as prosumers, those that both produce and consume content (Huston et al., 2021). Players engage in one form of prosumption through the act of play itself with each game representing unique media experiences co-created by the users (Andrews & Ritzer, 2018).

Game based platform economies that enable consumer culture as gameplay activities are increasingly distinct forms of prosumption (Thorhauge & Nielsen, 2021). The audience is the most important active stakeholder within esports (Scholz, 2019) as they have been the primary driving force for its development at grassroots level which evolved into the professional competitive scene (Taylor, 2012). Prosumption can still be found in current professional esports with Nintendo's Super Smash Brothers competitive scene driven by users who produced the competitive scene in the absence of involvement from the developer (Koch et al., 2020). The esports market is increasingly shaped by the audience in both offline and online environments (McCauley et al., 2020) representing an exemplar of the convergence of online and offline environments that drive increasing prosumption behaviors (Andrews & Ritzer, 2018). Engagement with others within games and associated communities can be seen as a form of peer-to-peer prosumption where social value is generated through collaboration between users on digital platforms (Alhashem et al., 2020). Counter Strike Global Offensive (CS:GO), represents one of the dominant titles in the competitive scene (Ruotsalainen et al., 2022) where player prosumption activities co-create value with the game publisher Valve, as part of revenue generating market strategies (Thorhauge & Nielsen, 2021). CS:GO as a free to play title, represents an exemplar of esports as a fluid and multifaceted platform-based consumer experience that is characterized by social interactions (Huston et al., 2021; Reitman et al., 2020; Seo, 2013; Seo & Jung, 2016). As a prosumer-generated phenomenon, esports incorporates a variety of prosumption

behaviors (Andrews & Ritzer, 2018) and this study posits that the co-created value of the play experience can be viewed as a form of peer-to-peer prosumption, where value is created between users (Alhashem et al., 2020). Ethnographic methods are rooted in an understanding of culture, extending our knowledge of theory through exploring experiential consumer behavior within varied cultural contexts (Goulding, 2005) including esports (Huston et al., 2021; Karhulahti, 2020; Seo & Jung, 2016). Auto-netnography is defined as an “approach to netnography that highlights the role of the netnographer’s own experiences of his or her own online experiences” (Kozinets & Kedor, 2009). This project began amid pandemic lockdown with the simple purpose of enhancing my understanding of the esports experience as a player. The concept of peer-to-peer prosumption is one where value is created between consumers and not between the consumers and the firm. As my experiences were shaped by random players it became clear that we were co-creating each match experience. Given that matchmaking is designed to match players of relatively similar skill levels it would be expected that matches would be close in terms of outcomes and players would score somewhat similarly. Yet often some players would be exceptional, clearly outperforming the other players in numbers of frags (kills) and determining the result of the game. There were three possible reasons for this; an exceptional performance, using external software to cheat or that someone was using an alternate playing account lower ranked than their actual ability would dictate. Using alternate lower ranked accounts refers to the act of ‘smurfing’ which is commonly perceived as a form of cheating or toxic behavior (Cavadenti et al., 2015; Conroy et al., 2020; Kou, 2020).

Smurfing is a complex and controversial concept within CS:GO and other competitive games. Smurfing as a mode of play is beyond the capabilities of the average player and happens for a variety of reasons (Conroy et al., 2020). Perceived as unfair (Behnke et al., 2021) and as a form of cheating (Kou, 2020) it can be viewed as toxic behavior, an umbrella term for negative behaviors such as griefing, harassment and cheating (Adinolf & Turkay, 2018). The etymology remains unclear, yet anecdotal evidence points to two skilled players in the late 90s playing Warcraft 2 with alternative accounts as PapaSmurf and Smurfette, indicating that the term originates in the name choices of two players engaged in the act. People who smurf do it for a host of cognitive, functional and emotional benefits. It is often linked to the act of boosting a form of cheating where high-skilled players will play using lower-skilled players accounts in order to rank up the lower-skilled player, often for monetary gain (Conroy et al., 2020). Competitive players may use alternative accounts to prevent opponents developing insights on their tactic or playstyles

(Cavadenti et al., 2015). Often higher skilled players engage in smurfing to play with friends at lower ranks which the system prevents due to ranking disparity (Conroy et al., 2020).

Smurfing has a negative connotation within gaming culture through being deceptive and the being associated with a desire to win unfairly (Morstatter et al., 2021) Smurfing is difficult to detect, and creates unfair game experiences as non-smurf players have less impact on the match result (Kou, 2020). These players often experience a sense of powerlessness and frustration and view the act of smurfing as destructive (Kou, 2020). As in conventional sports, players in CS:GO experience ‘unsportsmanlike behaviors’ and in game rule breaking (Irwin & Naweed, 2020) and smurfing is perceived as unfair by gamers, leading to anger and other negative emotions (Behnke et al., 2021). Griefing in online multiplayer games is when a player intentionally disrupts the play experience of others (Foo & Koivisto, 2004). Smurfs engage in griefing through ‘power imposition’ when dominating other players (Rubin & Camm, 2013). Another example is ‘hostage holding’ where smurf players refuse to surrender in a game that their non smurf mates are not enjoying, effectively holding them hostage in match they no longer want to engage in (Kou, 2020). Despite acts of griefing representing an antisocial and disruptive mode of play, those who engage in griefing have been found to enjoy games similarly to those who engage normally (Paul et al., 2015).

Smurfing to date has only been partly examined within of wider studies on toxicity, sportsmanship, cheating and player emotions (Behnke et al., 2021; Conroy et al., 2020; Irwin & Naweed, 2020; Kou, 2020; Morstatter et al., 2021; Paul et al., 2015). Given that toxic behaviors in esports remains relatively underexplored (Kordyaka et al., 2020) and the importance of addressing such issues for a sustainable future for esports (Nyström et al., 2022), the following research question underpins this study: *How can we understand smurfing on the CS:GO matchmaking platform from the perspective of prosumers?*

## 2. Background

Within the games industry consumers are increasingly part of the production and decision-making structures as prosumers (Jose Planells, 2017). The marketing strategy of CS:GO publisher Valve extends the market beyond the game with prosumers acting as player-entrepreneurs informing the economies of game and dissolving the boundaries between game economies, platforms and marketization (Thorhauge & Nielsen, 2021). These forms of prosumerism are what (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010) label as a new form of capitalism, ‘prosumer capitalism’ where the companies benefit from allowing the

users to co-create and co-produce within the platform economy. Conversely the concept of use value in prosumption can be seen as the prosumer primarily working to co-create their own value rather than for the benefit of the firm (Alhashem et al., 2020). This is distinct from the concepts of co-creation or co-production in that rather than collaboration with firms, prosumption occurs between consumers for social and use value creation (Alhashem et al., 2020). Traditional prosumption creates value for the firm such as the market economy of CS:GO (Thorhauge & Nielsen, 2021), and peer-to-peer prosumption always takes place within the context of commercial online platforms with these prosumers routinely connecting with the market (Alhashem et al., 2020). Central to understanding peer-to-peer prosumption is that personal benefits are central and may be hedonic, functional or cognitive and are rooted in self-identity. To achieve these benefits prosumers must reconstruct the symbolic meanings and use value offered by the firm within their own collaborative terms (Alhashem et al., 2020).

Even though esports has thriving professional scene and active amateur grassroots, the motivations of players remain diverse. A recent typology of those who play esports games, is characterized by the majority playing for casual reasons such as socializing, escapism or fun (71.8%) while the remainder (28.2%) engage for competitive reasons (Hedlund, 2021). While all esports games feature some forms of comparative measures to determine a player's level of performance (Seo, 2013) increasingly players play games such as CS:GO recreationally to achieve positive social outcomes (Behnke et al., 2021). The game play experience can also socially be shaped negatively with behaviors by other players such as smurfing, but also trolling, griefing, cheating that creating negative emotional impacts (Behnke et al., 2021). Through their multitude of roles within streaming and associated gaming, the esports audience represent 'prosumption-as-consumption' and are crucial to the base economics of the esports ecosystem (Andrews & Ritzer, 2018).

The original Counter Strike game was itself an act of prosumption, starting out as a modification of an existing game, Half-Life, by consumers Minh le and Jesse Cliffe before being acquired by Valve, the developer of Half-Life in 2000 (Scholz, 2019). The first version of Counter Strike allowed players to develop new and innovative methods of interaction to shape the media experience (Wright et al., 2002) while the next two iterations, Counter Strike 1.6 and Counter strike Source, continued to allow consumers to produce new practices and cultures, albeit within two separate communities. In 2012, Valve released the current version CS:GO which unified the two disparate audiences (Scholz, 2019). At

this stage Valve got engaged with the esports community and introduced the weapon skin system and marketplace allowing players to further shape their experiences through customizing their in game appearance (Scholz, 2019). The revenue generated through the marketplace acted as a fundraising concept that allowed Valve to increase the prize pool for CS:GO, elevating the prestige and visibility of the professional scene (Scholz, 2019). The success of CS:GO can be seen as driven by prosumption behaviors between users and the firm. The 2018 relaunch as free-to-play represented a radical strategy in that it further positioned the player as a prosumer acting as a 'consumer/market speculators' and 'player-entrepreneurs' (Thorhauge & Nielsen, 2021).

In its current iteration CS:GO is an FPS game that requires require a high degree of sensori-motor control and is characterised by a player base of varying levels of skill and abilities (Toth et al., 2021). CS:GO exists as a relatively simple premise with a complexity that is similar to traditional team sports in terms of tactics, playing to the team's strengths and negating the opposition (Witkowski, 2012). The matchmaking platform within the game itself seeks to match players with others of similar rank with this ranking carrying inherent social and skill status within the game (Conroy et al., 2020). Some players prefer to play with known teammates while others prefer to solo queue in matchmaking to play alone with strangers. Gold Nova 3 and below can be classified as lower skilled (58.5%) while Gold Nova 4 and above can be viewed as higher skilled (41.5%) (Toth et al., 2021). The culturally specific perceptions and meanings assigned to these ranks are part of the wider complex culture of practices within a wide range of titles within esports (Seo & Jung, 2016). Those who engage in smurfing are not concerned with their rank within matchmaking (Conroy et al., 2020) as it has no impact on their 'main' account.

### 3. Method

Ethnography as a method can provide insight on identity and community in virtual worlds through an examination of a large range of social processes and cultural elements (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Ethnographic methods and approaches are unique to each researcher and the context being investigated (Goulding, 2005; Kozinets, 2015; Kozinets, 2020 ). The netnographic approach is a convenient and unobtrusive approach to understanding consumer cultures (Kozinets, 2002a, 2002b), applying a technocultural lens to explain the increasing pervasiveness of digitality within society, written from a less formal first-person perspective (Kozinets, 2020 ). Auto-netnography is defined as an "approach to netnography that highlights the role of the

netnographer’s own experiences of his or her own online experiences” (Kozinets & Kedzior, 2009). Research methods cannot be considered inherently superior to each other but instead as better for studying a particular context in answering a certain question (Kozinets, 2015). Interviews and journal methods are appropriate for research on online social experiences with varied sources of data adding depth to datasets (Kozinets, 2015). While ethnographers may affect a community, for the most part they are simply one of a multitude of actors within a culture and the presence of an ethnographer is rarely the driver of change (Boellstorff et al., 2012).

My approach to this project was to simply play, communicate and act as I would have sans research project. As I connected with players as friends to play again, I would identify myself and tell them about the project, offering to share any more information if they wanted. Any embodied participant work is shaped by the perspective of the researcher who should be considered a valuable actor within the research process as participation and making mistakes allow us to learn about a culture (Boellstorff et al., 2012). The researcher’s position and status in regards to the research is a key element to consider yet their identity is often blurred between ‘native and immigrant’ (Villegas, 2018). I had 30 years of game playing experience primarily with single player games on consoles. I am engaged with the esports research and industry communities, having spent time at several professional CS:GO tournaments. Kozinets (Kozinets, 2015) warns that you must realise those you observe are superior to you in their knowledge of the environment and this was clear to me from my first games. There is danger in the first-person writing approach of auto-netnographies being misinterpreted as self-congratulatory (Howard, 2020) and after more than 1600 hours, the highest rank I briefly achieved in game was Gold Nova 2, a lower skilled player (Toth et al., 2021). This puts me in the bottom 50 % of players while for my interviewees the rank of Global Elite is only 0.75% of players and Supreme are among the top 3.4% (TotalCSGO, 2021). Playing competitive games as research is an intense experience and I experienced a host of positive and negative emotions throughout. Realizing your own limitations and being humbled on a consistent basis is both a chastening experience and an engaging personal challenge. When I played badly and my team lost, I was acting as a prosumer and negatively impacting my teammates’ media experience.

Between March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020 and June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2021 I spent 1660 hours active in the game. Most ethnographies take place over a year and certainly no less than six months (Boellstorff et al., 2012). I kept active notes and screenshots of the results of every match with notes

documented my training, practice, websites visited, conversations, other platform experiences, and my progress in game. Over fifteen months I completed 1159 competitive matches. The resulting data set totaled over 350,000 words and 2500 screenshots. At this point answers and practices could be anticipated and as such that phase of data collection was complete (Boellstorff et al., 2012). During May and June 2021, I conducted 8 in depth semi-structured interviews with CS:GO players (Table 1). The interviews coincided with later analysis of my fieldwork diaries allowing me to develop the ongoing findings and adjust interview questions as required. These interviews included two experienced existing esports contacts (P#1 & P#2) and 6 with players I connected with randomly through playing on the matchmaking servers. I found all interviewees to be intelligent, friendly and helpful people and that we had become steam friends and played consistently together before any requests for an interview was made. Three of these interviews were with high-ranking players I met through their smurf accounts while the remaining three represented players who I met at approximately equal ranks and on a similar trajectory to me. Interviews were held though voice chat on a private server on Discord. In every interview we began to play the game after an hour. While this is acknowledged that it may be difficult yet can provide benefits through engaging in both the modality of player and researcher (Boellstorff et al., 2012). On average interviews exceeded two hours in length.

#	Age	Highest Rank	Rank at the interview	Smurf
1	29	Supreme	Master Guardian	Yes
2	37	Supreme	Legendary Eagle	Yes
3	20	Global Elite	Unranked/inactive	Yes
4	26	Global Elite	Unranked/inactive	Yes
5	39	Gold Nova 1	Silver Elite Master	No
6	34	Gold Nova 4	Gold Nova 3	No
7	24	Supreme	Legendary Eagle	Yes
8	23	Gold Nova 2	Gold Nova 1	No

**Table 1. Interviewee profiles**

Data analysis occurred in two stages. A hermeneutic interpretive framework (Thompson, 1997) guided the analysis of the fieldnotes and has previously been identified as a useful framework for examining marketing, consumer culture and esports within practice based and ethnographic research (see: (Seo, 2016), (Huston et al., 2021), (Wohlfeil et al., 2019). Hermeneutic interpretation allows understanding of meanings within a broader context (Huston et al., 2021), through reading and interpretation to the extent of the author ‘reinterpreting their reinterpretation’ (Kozinets, 2015). Playing and

replaying of games acts as a double hermeneutic as players affect the interpreted information (Karhulahti, 2012). In this case it is the playing and replaying of the game, reflecting on each event through fieldnotes and then summarizing on my experiences and performances each month (Goulding, 2005). Further as questions or issues occurred to me I could ask within my extended network of esports contacts, with expertise in CS:GO, for clarification through social media platforms such as Discord. Over time central topics emerge within diaries and fieldnotes (Bartl & Casper, 2020) which were utilized to develop semi structured interview questions around the concepts of game experience in terms of game, culture, modes of play and usage, social aspects and benefits gained through their play experiences.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify patterns in the interviews that reflected the research question. After familiarizing myself with my notes and the interview transcripts, one was selected and a set of codes were developed. Following the approach of (Howard, 2020), before commencing the coding with the remaining transcripts, an intercoder agreement was discussed with academics familiar with the context and methodology based the coding scheme was inductively developed from the first transcript. My experiences as a participant allowed a deeper insight as the researcher is part of the co-creation of participants' meaning-making (Love et al., 2020). Continually cycling between the codes within the interview transcripts, literature, and fieldnotes a set of themes were developed that were internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a final concern I conducted member checks, as they allow for additional insights and ameliorate contentious ethical concerns (Kozinets, 2002a) presenting the results of the analysis for discussion and feedback to five of my interview participants and several academics engaged in the context. This feedback allowed the final phase of defining and naming themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) resulting in three themes; '*Smurfing as embedded in the Prosumer Experience*', '*Complex Motivations to Smurf*' and '*Smurfing as Cheating?*'.

#### 4. Findings

The first theme '*Smurfing as embedded in the Prosumer Experience*' reflects that peer-to-peer prosumption behavior within the matchmaking platform primarily occurs during the game play experience itself where players co-create the media experience of each match that allows the player to gain emotional, cognitive, and functional benefits. This experience is shaped by the players that join you within games and these influences can often be positive or negative. Through positive peer-to-peer prosumption, friended strangers are

the resultant social outcome that ultimately enhance your engagement with platform. The benefits users gain from play vary according to the player, the specific match and those they play with.

The concept of smurfing represents a particular gray area that varies between positive and negative effects. The act of smurfing is situated within a broader experience of peer-to-peer prosumption. The characteristics, motivations, and contextual influences of the other nine players in any one game are key to every play experience. Given that CS:GO is free to play through Steam and works on lower performing PCs, it is accessible for a broad audience. These factors mean that those you co-create value with, vary by who they are and why they play. The randomness of who you play and co-create experiences with is perhaps best summarized by P#2. "Matchmaking is just like some kid in his room that just presses the play button. And that's how you play CS:GO. He doesn't want to learn like tactics and call outs, stuff like that." (P#2)

Each time you start a game alone (solo queueing) or with friends, the experience is shaped either positively or negatively through your team and the opposition with CS:GO players experiencing a range of both positive and negative emotions through play (Behnke et al., 2021). As a player you can influence this through a range of actions to give you maximum benefits. My own experiences reflect that the playing is ultimately unique each time you play, no matter who you play with. Every game is a negotiation with strangers of potentially unknown characteristics beyond 'playing CS:GO'. Every match that gives you emotional lows or a negative experience is far outweighed by those where you have fun and co-create a positive experience with a team of friends or strangers. Each game represents a learning experience through observing your teammates, reflecting on your own performance, or though understanding how the enemy defeated you. Winning games is key to ranking up so positive peer-to-peer interactions will provide the optimal route for those who seek to achieve a higher rank. Playing with a smurf will give you an advantage which some may enjoy but others may not. Playing against a smurf is a barrier to ranking up and a negative experience. Users experience a wide range of hedonic, functional, and cognitive benefits through peer-to-peer prosumption (Alhashem et al., 2020) and often smurfs prevent this within CS:GO.

My experiences with other players within the matchmaking system are mostly positive but I certainly have experienced negative emotions and frustrations within my progress through the actions of others. While cheating, griefing and trolling can be an issue, the fact that CS:GO and the competitive experience is exhilarating, intense and arousing perhaps exacerbates how negative acts are perceived in the game. Accusations of

cheating such as wall hacking (where a player uses a mod to see the enemy through walls) are common yet often the enemy simply hears you or has a good game sense. Understanding that it is a game and that players are all seeking their own benefits from play is key to negotiating your own experiences. The culture is driven by players and perceptions of certain acts, ranks and behaviors differ. One common acceptance is that rank of silver is associated with being of lesser skill with this perception acting as a motivation to improve both for myself and Participants 6,7 and 8. Realistically rank doesn't matter yet reaching the gold ranks and no longer being a silver was a relief. Partly this is perception, but also the gold rank does indicate a certain level of game knowledge and ability that will allow you to engage in play with others more confidently. However, the gap between the abilities of those at the higher ability level who smurf and lower skilled players (such as myself) is often vast. Comparisons can be made to the average person playing any traditional sport against professional athletes. No matter what level of amateur player you may be, the gulf in class will be too much to enjoy any experience. No matter your rank of silver or gold, playing against a smurf can result in a sense of frustration and also wasted time. Yet smurfing is pervasive across CS:GO and most other competitive game titles. It is simply embedded and part of the experience.

The second theme '*Complex Motivations to Smurf*' reflects that the act not simply an act of disruption, boosting or griefing. While the motivations for smurfing previously identified in this paper, were clear from literature, my experiences and the interviews, smurfing is not necessarily always a toxic behavior, at least as perceived by those that engage in it. Participant 5# explained that while many may do it to dominate lower ranked players as a form of griefing, his motivations to 'smurf' are based on the pressures of high-level performance at his main rank. "And in my current rank and ranks above me, people don't play to have fun. It's way too serious. And yeah, that's not for me. At my current rank in legendary master and Supreme, it's not that's it's hard. It's not easy. It's, well, it's my level. But it isn't a game for playing at home. It's too 'try hard'. I come home, do the groceries, make dinner with my girlfriend and then I go into play and I sit down and it's been a long day and I just want to have fun. I don't want to get yelled at because I'm on the wrong side or why didn't you shoot him." (P#5). When asked if he ever felt guilty for smurfing P#5 replied that: "When I play at Gold Nova 2, maybe sometimes if I get like 60 kills or something yeah, but normally I just sit back and enjoy myself so I don't really outperform people. I understand the people who hate Smurfs. Like it can be really annoying, but I'm not doing it to piss people off. Like hackers do it to piss

people off. I want to enjoy the game and the hackers don't." (P#5)

Similarly disillusioned regarding performing the game at the highest level, participants 3 and 4 actively smurf as an alternative mode of play. 'De-Ranking' is what they label their goal to find the fastest way to lose, interspersed with occasional normal games where their achievements ensure they rank up quickly, leading to the need to lose again to de-rank to lower levels. Part of this game was to try enraging players on their own team into damaging them, for those players to be kicked from the game and receive a ban. Through a variety of techniques that would be beyond lower-level players they started to document their experiences. "So we took an excel sheet. And we started to look for how many players have we actually kicked out from the games? Basically, a spreadsheet, you know, where the game mechanic when you would purposely lose. And the fastest way to lose is to ban players. And it's even a very funny YouTube channel, which does the same thing." (P#3) The YouTube channel they identified, Failure57, with 77,000 subscribers features a host of smurfing behaviors that are considered acts of griefing, yet showcase the players having fun disrupting other players' experiences. While it was found that many players disapprove of the impact of such content (Kou, 2020) it demonstrates how negative use behaviors are modelled through the external ecosystem. Participants 3 & 4 found themselves facing others engaged in a form of 'De-Ranking'. "We started to see people doing the same shit. And we actually were in, in a rush against them. So it became a competitive game for who loses first." (P#4) When asked whether he felt any guilt, P#4 replied "It is a morally vague thing. I mean, you are doing a sort of destruction of other people's play experience - I even wonder sometimes. How many of those actually play the game anymore?" (P#4)

Perhaps, surprisingly smurfing may also be motivated by social reasons beyond 'boosting'. Social interaction in game are between strangers, friends, and 'Friended Strangers' with distinctions between them vague by nature (Karhulahti, 2020). Strangers join us in a match only to be forgotten almost immediately while friends are real world friends who we socialise with through play. Friended Strangers are those you meet in-game and you may or may not know them as individuals, but they end up as part of your social network (Karhulahti, 2020). I regularly played with P#3 and P#4 alongside a Norwegian female teacher while sharing a Discord server to communicate. This was enjoyable on a social level and they provided me with insights as part of the project throughout these sessions. They also consistently coached and sought to improve both of us in terms of our gameplay ability. Further complicating the ethics of smurfing P#3 & P#4 originally lost touch as

players with their main accounts, but reflecting the perennial or ephemeral nature of friending people, reunited by chance through smurfing. One of my friends actually had him (P#4) in his friend list. And in one game, I was invited to play with those guys together and we just met up again and we had a blast with was really random because we both met the guy from smurfing. So far he is a CS:GO friend, but we have actually planned to meet up in the closest summer depending on Covid, so yeah, we're gonna meet up." (P#3)

The final theme identified is phrased as a question '*Smurfing as Cheating?*' as it's a matter of perspective. Underpinning many of these smurfing behaviors is potentially that matchmaking servers for CS:GO are not considered legitimate by skilled players. Serious players play and compete on premium platforms that offer more anti cheat protection and opportunities for tournament play. "You're one of the few people that asked me what your rank is on matchmaking. Because that doesn't matter to any of the other people I talked to in the scene. They always go like, oh, do you play on Faceit? If you play Esportal, do you play these places? Because those are more valid, like stipulations of skill." (P#2)

More frustrating and viewed more negatively than smurfing is those who cheat using software to augment their abilities. "What's my least favorite aspect of the game? I would say cheaters. Cheaters is one of the least nice things about the game. In a multiplayer game, what's there to gain? You will not become better. And you will just sour it for everyone else." (P#1) The matchmaking platform allows you to report people you suspect of cheating and there is also the Overwatch system where you can watch matches and pass judgement on whether someone was cheating to build a more secure community. Cheating is frustrating as the opposition and playing on a team with one. But cheating can also occur as a form of peer-to-peer prosumption when a group of friends decide to activate cheats as retribution or as a form of play. "Some of my CS:GO friends are also cheaters. They have an intense match. And they realize that someone is cheating. And they have this already installed, installed program. So just they activate like, aim cheat. They are good players, they are global elite, but sometimes they just want to use hacks for fun." (P#8)

Smurfing is one of several 'unfair' situations including cheating, hacking and rolling that have been identified as inducing anger and other negative emotions CS:GO (Behnke et al., 2021). In my early play experiences, playing against smurfs was more frustrating for me, particularly as sometimes the capabilities of smurfs often create the perception of hacking or cheating. Smurfing is not perceived as badly as those who hack and openly don't win through skill in the game. As people I found participants 3,4 and 5 all helpful, intelligent

and personable. P#3 and #4 agreed not to engage in destructive alternative modes of play while playing with me. While I experienced value in playing with them through learning and enjoying their company, the actual competitive experience itself was less enjoyable as they dominated, and any victories were a result of their capabilities. Despite an increasing understanding that rank does not necessarily matter, determined by the randomness of the strangers you play with, earning rank through being boosted was not something I wanted. Cheaters using mods to hack the game are generally perceived as far worse than those who are smurfing. Smurfs often compound the frustration felt with cheaters as often the gap in playing ability creates the illusion of someone using software to see through walls or automatically get headshots.

## 5. Discussion & Future Research

The three identified themes '*Smurfing as embedded in the Prosumer Experience*', '*Complex Motivations to Smurf*', and '*Smurfing as Cheating?*' underline the complexity of the phenomenon. Smurfing is a common occurrence as peer-to-peer prosumption within CS:GO. Each game is shaped by a variety of factors that constitute the motivations and characteristics of the other users and the use value they seek, within the affordances of the platform. The outcomes of the experience are a host of potential benefits that can be functional such as learning but most commonly it is the hedonic and affective outcomes associated with traditional team sports such as enjoyment, escapism and achievement. Reflecting previous work, (Paul et al., 2015) those who engage in smurfing enjoy similar outcomes yet may engage with the game in more complex ways than previously realized. Prosumption between users is seen as an act of value co-creation yet in the case of smurfs it can be seen as value co-destruction, a failed interaction process that has a negative outcome (Plé & Cáceres, 2010).. Players evolve cognitively, emotionally, and physically within their esports pursuit (Karhulahti, 2020) through engaging with a diversity of player types (Hedlund, 2021). As demonstrated in this study, engagement between a mix of player types occurs within the same platform with experiences varying in term so benefits. The free to play nature of matchmaking provides a valuable entry point the franchise yet at the same time the low barriers to entry and low cost for transgressions increases the potential for negative peer-to-peer interactions that may impact whether a player continues to play. Matchmaking represents the entry point for players to start playing, and smurfing as part of a wider range of negative actions may negatively impact adoption of what for many may have been an enjoyable leisure pursuit.

Investigating peer-to-peer prosumption and relevant aspects such as smurfing can add value to current theoretical understandings in esports, such as the consumer journey (Huston et al., 2021) and how esports brands become part of an individual's identity (Wang et al., 2019). There is a complex interplay of work and leisure inherent in progressing within the game (Seo, 2016) which is often disrupted by smurfs. The impact of national culture on esports culture represents an important avenue for future research (McCauley et al., 2020) with indications that cultural differences may create issues within games such as CS:GO (Adinolf & Turkay, 2018). It is suggested that future work examine the possible effect of norms on the expression of values and traits which facilitate negative and co-destructive behaviors (Ogunbodede et al., 2022). This reflects the need to maintain ongoing evaluation of esports player typologies (Hedlund, 2021) which potentially could include those who smurf.

This paper is limited through only reflecting the male perspective based on my fieldnotes and the interviewees. FPS games in general have been a genre dominated by men with a culture that can be perceived as being hostile toward women (Friman & Ruotsalainen, 2022) as extant research has demonstrated barriers to female engagement with esports yet with solutions to overcome this are still needed (Cranmer et al., 2021). Studies focusing on the female experience of peer-to-peer prosumption and associated aspects such as smurfing may allow progress on these issues. Addressing issues in esports such as diversity and inclusion are important for the future of esports in terms of both social and economic sustainability (Nyström et al., 2022). Further the potential of esports to provide a setting for the examination of issues relevant to the modern digital society (Nyström et al., 2022; Pizzo et al., 2022; Scholz, 2019) means that concepts such as smurfing and the underlying mechanisms behind them, can have value and relevance beyond games. The questions of ethics, morality and empathy within the act of smurfing are intriguing and may be of relevance for understanding social interactions within the wider digital society. Given that complexity of the topic and its prevalence across all competitive game titles there is a clear need for more focused research to unpack the complexities of the act, those who engage with it, and the impacts on the wider community. Such work would also be of value in terms of developing practical implications and solutions.

## 6. Conclusion

Smurfing can be understood as being perceived differently by players/prosumers as one that generates positive outcomes for those who smurf yet has a negative impact on most platform users that do not engage. My

experiences within the platform presented me with insights and perspective I could not have gained without engaging directly with the platform as a prosumer. The value in auto-netnographic experience lies in that it allows a more nuanced appreciation of complex phenomena. Negotiating the experience of playing against smurfs was challenging. Smurfing is a negative behavior and for many, a form of cheating. It impacts others through negative emotional outcomes (including myself) and across all esports titles it is a common occurrence that publishers struggle to manage. Grassroots initiatives within esports provide one solution through creating positive shared cultures around esports (McCauley et al., 2020). A sustainable esports future must focus on both business models and movements to ensure inclusivity, education and positive gaming environments (Nyström et al., 2022). Smurfing can be considered a barrier to these goals.

Yet smurfing as presented here is more complex than some may have considered. The pressures and expectations at higher levels of competitive gaming even at casual levels can be viewed as a form of work. Even at lower levels of play I experienced frustration from teammates when not performing well personally. I played approximately 20 matches on the Faceit platform for comparison and found that teammates had higher expectations of performance than on matchmaking, despite being the lowest level there. It's hard not to acknowledge that those who develop higher skills in a leisure pursuit they are passionate about should be able to enjoy it. This may be a more pervasive issue than realized throughout all levels of engagement with competitive gaming. The pressure to perform and the status associated with rank may prevent many from enjoying fully their pursuits, particularly those experiencing the peer pressures of youth. Given that the majority who play esports titles do so for socializing and fun (Hedlund, 2021) there may be important issues to address with smurfing as a potential 'canary in the mine.' Despite my experiences, opportunities within the context and the cushion of framing my play as research, I was not immune to experiencing pressure from myself and others. Smurfs were a constant source of personal frustration, and it took conducting the interviews in this study to be able to fully view the experience analytically. For my own continued engagement with playing as a prosumer I now realize how I can add value to other's experiences through positive interactions beyond playing well. One key, especially when playing with younger teammates frustrated through negative occurrences such as smurfing, there is one simple piece of advice that can be of value: It's only a game.



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