

# Exploring esports as a platform to develop organizational teams: the case of Valorant

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to explore the potential of a team-based esports game, Valorant, as a platform for developing individuals and teams in organizations.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This work represents an auto-netnographic exploration of a team-based esports title from a consumer perspective through extensive diaries recorded through the initial 10 weeks of play.

**Findings** – Three key themes are identified that illuminate the experience of entering a new team-based game experience. The results illustrate that at the core of Valorant is the team experience, which suggests potential for the game as a platform to develop teams and enhance relevant individual and team-based skills in organizational contexts. Organizational teams should benefit from the use of esports as a team development tool, but any such organizational initiative requires a structured approach. Virtual teams may benefit more than their co-located equivalents from the affordances of online team-based play.

**Originality/value** – This study is one of the few auto-netnographic explorations of a team-based game in esports. Valorant, as an increasingly popular game, remains underexplored in academic literature.

**Keywords** Digital teams, Virtual teams, Esports, Valorant, Auto-netnography, Synergy, Learning, Sustainability

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Sustainable teams in organizations are made of individuals who can work well together to sustain performance levels despite emergent challenges and complexities (Houghton *et al.*, 2003). The evolution of sociotechnical platforms has enabled the emergence of new forms of teams across a diverse range of contexts and demographics (Freeman and Wohn, 2019). As the world becomes ever more interconnected, new organizational forms mean that effective collaborations between people across organizational boundaries have become increasingly important (Schrujfer *et al.*, 2024). The increase in virtual work teams has been driven by technological advances and necessity (Covid pandemic), yet effective cooperation in modern teams is increasingly demanding and complex for individuals (Kneisel, 2020). Despite the increased prevalence of virtual teams globally, co-located teams have been shown to



outperform them (Liska, 2022). Recent work has suggested that emergent digital technologies can be used to coach and develop team performance (Giusino *et al.*, 2023) while there is value in creative approaches to research on teams that untangle the “relational complexities of social life” (Schruijer *et al.*, 2024). One such creative approach is to consider the emergence of esports (competitive video gaming) and the increased engagement in team-based gameplay that is driven by an engaged, dynamic and youthful audience (Pizzo *et al.*, 2022).

While questions remain around a sustainable future for esports, there is huge potential for esports to act as a platform for understanding the digitized society (Nyström *et al.*, 2022), particularly given the interdisciplinary potential of the context (Brock, 2023). Both esports and contemporary organizations require talented individuals with the capacity to adapt and “synergize within diverse and multifaceted teams” (Lenke *et al.*, 2023). The sustainable high performance of individuals and teams can be enhanced by environments that support high performance in organizations (Jones *et al.*, 2009) and esports (Kleinman *et al.*, 2022). As “the competitive domain of video gaming where players and teams compete against each other in a formalized manner” (Brock, 2023, p. 3), esports are consumed/played through an extensive range of games and game genres (sports) that the audience can engage with online and in person. Many popular esports titles are team-based (Scholz, 2019) and provide a platform for individual characteristics (such as skill, personality, attitude and communication) to be realized as key component of team success (Freeman and Wohn, 2019).

Given the volume of teams competing in esports continues to increase at both amateur and professional levels (Gisbert-Pérez *et al.*, 2024), these teams represent an opportunity to develop new knowledge relevant to team performance in alternate contexts (Lin *et al.*, 2023). The team processes within esports show similarities to other groups in high-performance contexts (Gisbert-Pérez *et al.*, 2024) and the skills needed in esports are also transferable for work in the digital society (Scholz and Nothelfer, 2022). While understanding of the learning processes within team-based esports is crucial to unpacking the pedagogical potential of esports, research to date remains scarce (Kleinman *et al.*, 2022; Kong *et al.*, 2024). Team-based titles are characterized by a network of established practices within a community of experienced players, requiring new players to learn within often challenging environments (Huston *et al.*, 2023). These “noobs” (new players) may discontinue playing without guidance (Kleinman *et al.*, 2022) or due to negative experiences (Huston *et al.*, 2023), often before they can engage with the beneficial learning processes within esports teams (Kleinman *et al.*, 2024). Essentially, as with traditional sports, new players may stop playing due to a myriad of contextual factors. Consumer journeys are a consumer’s engagement with a firm over time across multiple touchpoints and interactions (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). In esports, such a journey is seen through continued engagement with a specific game (Huston *et al.*, 2021), and auto-netnographic (Kozinets and Kedor, 2009) explorations of such engagement represent an opportunity to develop new knowledge (McCauley, 2023). Unique insights can emerge through the study of specific games (Pizzo *et al.*, 2022), and this study explores a relatively new team-based esports title that has received little attention to date in literature, Valorant (Riot Games, 2020).

## Background

Since Valorant launched on personal computers in 2020, it has grown into one of the biggest esports ecosystems in the shooter genre (Šimić, 2024), with 35 million monthly active players in 2024 (Sacco, 2024). Valorant represents a “games as a service” business model where revenue from monetizable game content (e.g., virtual items) allows consistent updates

of the product offerings to keep consumers' engaged (Ashton, 2024). This results in an ever-evolving "meta" (Most Effective Tactics Available), the strategic and tactical knowledge needed beyond the basic mechanics to be competitive when playing (Thaicharoen *et al.*, 2023). While mechanical skills such as aim and reaction speed are important measures of player ability, understanding the meta can enhance a player's "game sense", the ability to respond and know what to do in specific match situations (Sharpe *et al.*, 2022). Players can "solo queue" to be matched up with random teammates or can add "friends" to play games together. Valorant also offers a competitive premier mode where five players register as a team to compete in tournaments, with the most successful online teams potentially winning the opportunity to compete in the stadium-based professional tournaments. For both individual players and teams, the platform seeks to optimize competition through matching players of similar skills based on their performances.

Valorant is part of the first-person shooter (FPS) genre of games where the player controls a character from a first-person perspective, specifically the sub-genre that are tactical FPS games (Hamer and Besombes, 2024). This is typified by teams alternating between attacking and defending objectives, an in-game economy that determines weapons and items each round and an element of realism in that movement impacts aim (Hamer and Besombes, 2024). In-game occurrences lead to advantages or disadvantages when purchasing weapons and equipment, and decisions around this economy are vital to team strategies, performance and outcomes (Sharpe *et al.*, 2022). Games can last between 30 and 90 min as:

Attackers are tasked to plant and protect a slow-detonating timebomb called a spike at the bases, whereas defenders are tasked to either defuse the spike or eliminate all attackers before the spike is planted. After the 10th round, attackers and defenders switch roles in the game, and the first team to win a total of 13 rounds is then declared the winner (Susanti, 2022, p. 109).

Games are played within a variety of game "maps", unique environments that influence how the game is played.

In Valorant, players choose specific agents with distinct hero abilities before a match starts, and "the characters that the players choose from are all unique with various abilities and roles within a team. Thus, teams are built around having certain team compositions" (Hamer and Besombes, 2024, p. 45). This is like another popular esports FPS title, Overwatch, where teams will consist of a mix of roles to optimize opportunities for success, and as a result, there are expectations concerning team composition and behaviours which players informally enforce (Tomkinson and Van Den Ende, 2022). Valorant which has four distinct roles dependent on agent choice: Duelist, Controller, Sentinel and Initiator, with teams of five optimally consisting of at least one of each role. Each agent has four distinct "abilities" that allow players to develop their own playstyle while seeking to negate the abilities of the opposition. Every match begins with 90 s for players to choose one specific agent from the 25 available, with each team composition representing 5 distinct choices. Valorant can represent an intimidating experience for beginners with the choice of 25 agents compounded by the need to understand the requirements of the four roles and the total of 100 abilities specific to the agents.

As with most games, players can engage in activities such as practicing, leveraging the knowledge of others and tracking performance metrics to improve (Kleinman *et al.*, 2022). One key route to improvement is through the social learning inherent in playing and reflecting as a team (Kleinman *et al.*, 2024). This socialization and subsequent knowledge creation in esports teams is comparable to how knowledge is created within organizations (Kong *et al.*, 2024). Within this deep and complex process, players engage with a variety of roles within dynamic scenarios that allow knowledge and skills to be obtained from various

perspectives (Kong *et al.*, 2024). As with organizationally based teams, this knowledge creation allows for team members to develop strategies that complement each other's strengths and weaknesses that optimize team performance and success (Kong *et al.*, 2024).

The European Union has recognized this potential in modern games as a platform to develop relevant professional skills for the modern digital society (Farreng, 2022). Organizations can provide the environment, culture and leadership to develop and enhance sustainable team performance in professional settings (Houghton *et al.*, 2003; Jamshed and Majeed, 2023; Jones *et al.*, 2009), and Valorant could represent a low-cost approach to this. Within Valorant, the choice of agents within a team can allow for unique strategies to be developed according to game state, map characteristics and the opposition's team composition. As a result, this study posits that Valorant has potential as a viable tool/platform to enhance team performance and team-based skills with potential for application within organizational settings. Through an auto-netnographic lens, this study seeks to answer the following research question:

RQ1. Is Valorant a viable platform to develop teams and team-based skills?

Three key themes are identified that constitute my "Consumer Learning Journey in Valorant" and highlight the factors that can sustain or inhibit continued engagement with a team-based game (Huston *et al.*, 2023). These findings allow for discussion of Valorant as a potential platform for developing individuals and teams within the increasingly complex organizational environment of modern employment (Kneisel, 2020).

## Method

Video games and esports are inherently embedded in modern technocultures, the various identities, practices, rituals and other sources and structures of meaning expressed through technology consumption and digital service platforms (Kozinets, 2020). Netnography (online ethnography) represents a methodology to explore consumers within the services and platforms underpinned by pervasive technologies (Kozinets, 2022). The basis of netnographic studies is that the experiences of a trained researcher in an online environment can provide valuable insights on the cultural nuances that other forms of analysis may miss (Kozinets, 2022). Netnographic methods and approaches are unique to the researcher and the context and are particularly useful when exploring immersive experiences such as service-based experiences in virtual worlds (Kozinets, 2020). Auto-netnography is an approach that highlights the role of the netnographer's own experiences online (Kozinets and Kedzior, 2009).

Unpacking the complex, multifaceted environments of esports can benefit from ethnographic methods, including gameplay as the primary platform of observation (Cote *et al.*, 2024). Exploring experiences of play as a consumer through an auto-netnographic lens can provide a "more nuanced appreciation of complex phenomena" within team-based esports titles (McCauley, 2023). Auto-netnographic writing can be written from a less formal first-person perspective to reflect the researcher's experiences of navigating the increasing digitality within society (Kozinets, 2020). This paper follows the style of work such as Howard (2020) and Schruijer (2021) in using a first-person and performative writing style that reflects the "auto" of auto-netnography.

The approach is individual to every researcher, allowing the author to choose their own journey within the specific digital contexts they inhabit (Howard, 2020). Researchers should practice a high level of self-reflexivity in terms of understanding their impact on the communities they observe and engage with (Cote *et al.*, 2024). In the case of my approach, I engaged with the experience of playing of Valorant as a normal consumer, recording my

personal experiences of playing. My work follows how [Howard \(2020\)](#) frames auto-netnography as subjective and reflexive insider-research. For reflexive narrative researchers every experience can be valuable, collected through the descriptions of “lived” experiences in diaries/journal. For netnographies, the period of study may vary by project but requires at least several months given the need for immersion ([Kozinets, 2022](#)). The current study was developed after 4,000 h of FPS play over a four-year period. My engagement with play as an auto-netnographic study began with Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO) in March 2020 ([McCauley, 2023](#)), and subsequently Valorant on October 31, 2022, until April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023. While recording subjective experiences in journals, it is necessary to emphasize the cultural characteristics such as rituals, language and meaning ([Kozinets, 2022](#)), and rigorous qualitative work in esports should acknowledge the researchers’ positionality and how it could impact results ([Cote et al., 2024](#)).

My previous study on CS:GO ([McCauley, 2023](#)) began during the pandemic, and the experience represented an important social outlet for both myself and those I played with during lockdowns. When playing initially, it was at times difficult to disentangle myself from the emotional rollercoaster of online competitive play. This previous work established my identity and experiences entering the esports ecosystem as a total “noob”, and here my diaries followed my previous approach. Every match experience was documented, totalling 760 h in competitive ranked matches (1,339 matches) and 311 h in unrated (654 matches). My Valorant experience has totalled 1,911 h of competitive and unrated play (3,549 matches), predominantly ranked just below the average rank of Gold 1. Given that the audience are reliant on commercial game publishers to provide the platforms of play ([Scholz, 2019](#)), any engagement with esports can be considered from the consumer perspective. Unique to the notion of the customer journey are “touchpoints” that emerge (often unexpectedly) over the course of time during customers experiences ([Lemon and Verhoef, 2016](#)). These touchpoints are situations, moments and interactions that matter and can be both positive and negative ([Muskat, 2020](#)). My own documented experiences of entering the Valorant ecosystem and beginning to play represent an account of the touchpoints I experienced through 248 games over 129 h of play during my first 73 days.

Before any analysis began, the total diaries for both CS:GO (495,000 words) and Valorant (153,000 words) were read through to familiarize myself with my full consumer journey in esports. While my total Valorant diaries encompassed 1,071 h of play over a period of 15 months, the 39,342 words analysed in this study represent more than 25% of my total observations in just 8% of the total time playing recorded as diaries. As with previous studies rooted in esports consumer journeys ([Huston et al., 2021](#); [McCauley, 2023](#)), this research adopted a hermeneutic approach. This allowed understanding of how my context shaped my consumer journey with meanings situated within my previous experiences ([Kozinets, 2022](#)). In essence, the author is “reinterpreting their reinterpretation” with ongoing play allowing me to reflect further ([McCauley, 2023](#)) during the writing, coding and analysis of this paper. Following the approach of [Howard \(2020\)](#), before commencing coding, the materials were read by an academic with expertise on the topic who provided ongoing feedback on subsequent codes and themes developed during analysis. Data analysis was developed through cultural interpretation of the examined technoculture ([Kozinets and Gretzel, 2023](#)), and thematic analysis ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#)) was used to identify patterns in the transcript through the identification of relevant consumer touchpoints. Specifically, “reflexive” thematic analysis where coding is more open and organic ([Braun and Clarke, 2021](#)) and in line with the characteristics of auto-netnographic approaches. During analysis:

[...] meaning and knowledge are understood as situated and contextual, and researcher subjectivity is conceptualised as a resource for knowledge production, which inevitably sculpts the

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knowledge produced, rather than a must-be-contained threat to credibility (Braun and Clarke, 2021, pp. 334-335).

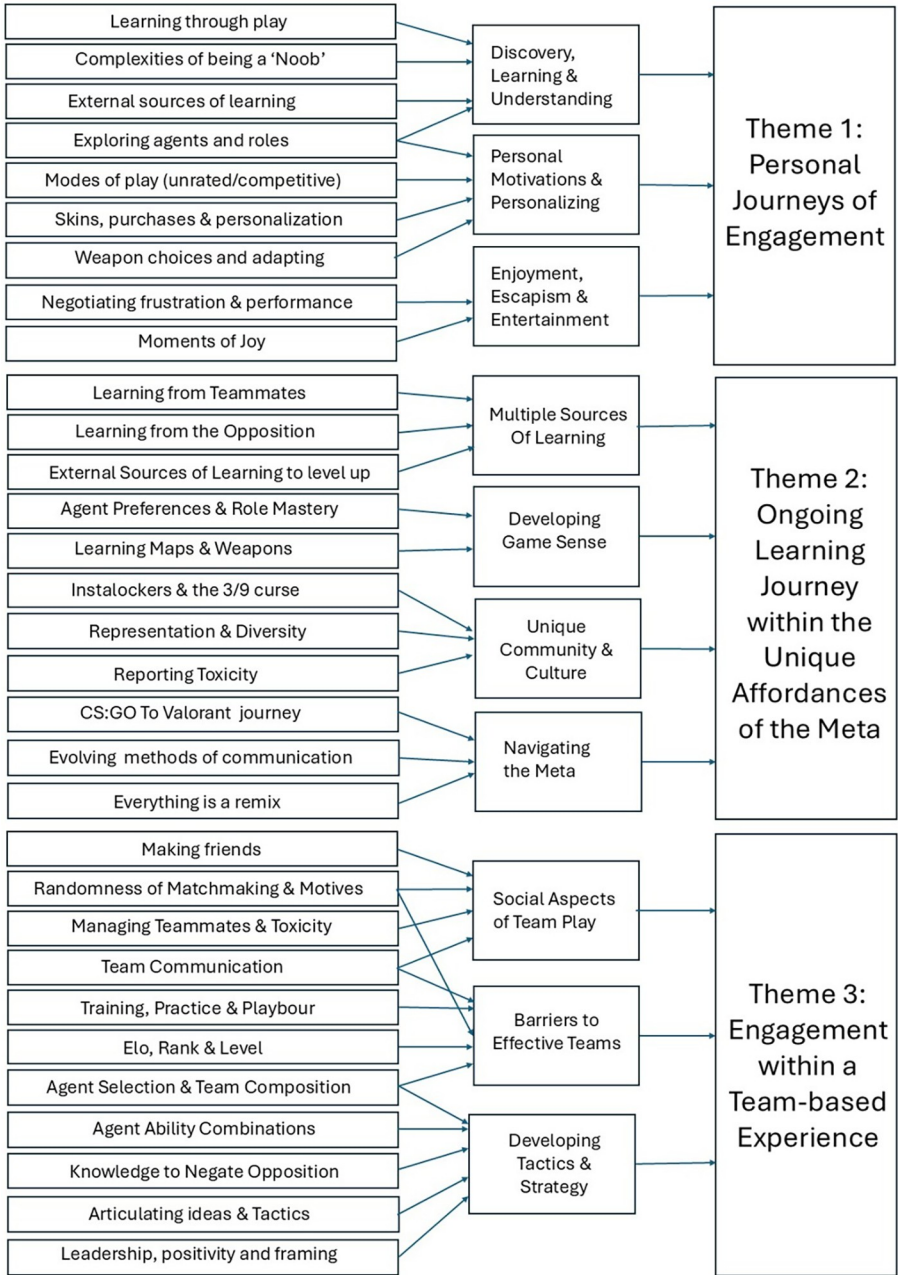
The analysis provided the resultant themes, while the hermeneutic approach allowed deepening of the discussions surrounding them.

### Findings

Three distinct aggregate themes emerged from the data, illustrated in Figure 1. The final themes evolved through ongoing discussions throughout the analysis with two academics of expertise familiar with the context and the study. While the resultant themes represent a sequence of experiences, there is also significant overlap throughout and can be seen as relevant throughout the entirety of a consumers' journey within Valorant.

Theme one, *Personal Journeys of Engagement*, represents the initial experiences of entering the game. I deliberately began the study on a Saturday morning, writing: "I have a full free day so now is my time to try Valorant and begin the study properly". This choice was well founded given that immediately after playing my first game, I felt compelled to read up on the basics through external websites. I continued to use external websites to fill in gaps as I learned through playing the game itself. In the absence of direct coaching, esports players can benefit from well design computational tools to provide much-needed guidance (Kleinman et al., 2022), an aspect of design I found lacking within the Valorant platform. My previous tactical FPS experiences had removed certain layers of complexity, such as game mechanics, basic match principles and how an in-game economy worked. Yet from the start, the game had me feeling like a "noob", particularly when it came to the unique characteristics of agents and the expected behaviours based on their roles. While Valorant does require commitment to learning and understanding the game, previous experiences in FPS games will be advantageous. The design athletics of both the game and the unique weapon skins you encounter in-game enable a consumer-based personalization of the game experience that also adds to enjoyment. Experimenting with the capabilities of the various agents can represent novel and enjoyable new play experiences. When you start to play a new game (alone), you must navigate the frustrations of your own personal performance within the dynamics and actions of random teammates.

Theme two, *Ongoing Learning Journey within an Evolving Meta*, represents the next step of the consumer journey once a player has committed to playing beyond their initial experiences. This begins as soon as you start playing, but there is a need for time to acclimatize to the game basics before you can begin to appreciate some of the higher-level, team-based play. I began to learn more from my random teammates through observations and social interactions, while observations of how the opposition played became more relevant for my personal learning. The process of knowledge creation between staff in organizational settings shares similarities with those found between players within esports teams (Kong et al., 2024). Observing and appreciating others' behaviours through social interactions allows users to acquire knowledge that they can then experiment with to gain experience and improve (Kong et al., 2024). Through applying what I had learned/observed, I was beginning to develop preferences regarding agents and roles. It took six full weeks of play until December 15<sup>th</sup>, when I wrote "I think that's the first time it's really become clear to me how the different roles actually operate". That it took so long is indicative of the challenges inherent in trying to improve within such a complex environment without coaching support (Kleinman et al., 2022) or a consistent set of teammates (Kleinman et al., 2024). Ongoing play/practice led to becoming more familiar with agents, game maps and weapons, which in turn developed my game sense.



**Figure 1.** Consumer learning journey in Valorant  
Source(s): Figure by author

Negative behaviours are a common issue when playing in teams of strangers (McCauley, 2023), and in Valorant the reporting of player toxicity feels impactful given that you will receive updates if action has been taken against players you reported. Riot's anti-cheat software ensures that cheating is far below the levels I had experienced in CS:GO (McCauley, 2023). However, toxic practices are within all esports communities (Huston et al., 2023), and in Valorant one prevalent practice is "Instalockers", those who immediately choose their agent with no consideration for team composition. This can often lead to frustration within a team before a match even begins, particularly as a team can end up unbalanced due to three or four duellists in a team, at the expense of team effectiveness. The duellist, Reyna, when instalocked, was often a source of shared and discussed frustration for myself and my teammates. Smurfing, where a skilled player uses an alternate account to play with lower skilled players (McCauley, 2023), can also disrupt the enjoyment of the experience. One key aspect of Valorant that negates potential negative behaviour is the lack of "friendly fire", meaning that teammates cannot shoot/harm each other, unlike in CS:GO (McCauley, 2023). In team-based shooters, the lack of microphone (mic) use for communication is a common barrier to effective engagement and can be considered a negative behaviour. Given how advantageous concise vocal communication can be in team-based shooters such as Valorant (Susanti, 2022), the lack of mic use can hinder effective team-based play. People may choose to not use voice communication for a variety of reasons. My female teammates often acknowledged their reluctance to use mics stemmed from gender-based toxicity. Valorant provides a range of button-based options that can facilitate communications relevant to game state and collective actions, which means players unwilling/unable to use mics can engage more effectively as a team. Representation and diversity can be seen through the range of agents with non-overly sexualized female agents representing half of all agent choices. The 15 agents available when I started play is now 26, and the continued addition of new agents impacts the meta, resulting in both novelty and a need to adjust as part of an ongoing learning journey.

"Theme three, *Engagement within a Team Based Experience*, is representative of what an optimal Valorant experience is. On November 11<sup>th</sup> I wrote "I feel like lower-level Valorant is less tactical than the CS:GO equivalent" which in hindsight was naivety. It is not less tactical; it is just that at lower-levels of ranked the variety of agents and abilities may make the comprehension and execution of team-based strategies more difficult for new players. This is compounded by the fact that many lower ranked players often lack the tactical nous to use the abilities of their chosen agent effectively within the team composition. In Valorant strategy and team tactics begin in the team selection screen, with (depending on agent selections) 20–40 of 100 total agent abilities being used in each match. As in Overwatch (Tomkinson and Van Den Ende, 2022), this is further complicated by how players perceive their roles, and often conversations are had around what a player "should" be doing. When playing alone and "solo queuing", this is further complicated by the various expectations and motivations of the varied teammates you experience.

Solo queuing within matchmaking platforms represents a teammate lottery that means each match is a unique experience (McCauley, 2023). Adding friends you meet through play can enhance your future experiences through common motives and clear communication. An optimal team experience is driven by positive communication within a shared teamwork-based heuristic. Communication is one of the key barriers and key facilitators of effective team play. When mics are used to discuss team composition at the agent select screen, it is almost always a positive play experience, regardless of results. I have certainly observed a correlation between my rank, my teammates' ranks and the level of team communication I have experienced. Those at the lower Iron, Bronze and Silver levels are much less likely than

those at Gold or Platinum levels to engage vocally. When players are learning esports titles, the end goal is often expertise (Kleinman *et al.*, 2024), which allows for game victories that allow you to rank up. Yet winning games requires a high level of team co-ordination that is often missing at the lower ranks. There is a certain irony in that as a solo player you need to successfully navigate fragmented team experiences to access the higher levels of team-based play available at higher ranks.

These fragmented team experiences can include how players perceive agent/role choice, how familiar they are with an agent's abilities and the suitability of their choice considering team composition and the map being played. During my first months of play, I attempted to play as a duellist, whose role is to enter the enemy site first and make the initial kills. As this role requires great aim and fast reaction times, I have since learned that this role is most suited to the "best" player on a team and almost certainly not me. Over the course of my full experience in Valorant I have instead familiarized myself with agents in each of the other roles: an Initiator (Breach), Sentry (Killjoy) and Controller (Brimstone). These roles rely slightly less on mechanical skills such as aim and instead encourage more use of abilities to facilitate team dynamics. This allows me to select an agent that can balance the overall team composition and hopefully allow for moments of complementary ability uses in-game. As my game sense developed, I learned to observe the opposition team composition to anticipate what they may do during the match. Optimal team experiences do require some form of in-game leadership, and often this is challenging when no one on a team wishes to communicate or respond to suggestions. However, a positive mindset and a soft approach to leadership can often open teammates to engaging more fully as a team. While playing during the analysis of this study, I made a key realization. When five members of a Valorant team use their mics to strategize and support each other, the result often does not matter. It was not the emotional high of a victory or a new rank that I continued to engage for after data collection was completed. It was (and continues to be) the optimal experience of teamwork that I was seeking when I engaged with the Valorant experience.

### Discussion

The three identified themes, my previous experiences in CS:GO and my ongoing engagement with Valorant allow for the following discussion on the potential of Valorant as a platform to develop teams and team-based skills. The 4,000 plus hours of considered reflective play within team-based esports allowed me to use the identified themes and discuss Valorant as a viable platform to develop teams and team-based skills. The accessible characteristics of the gameplay mean that it is an inclusive environment as a space lacking graphic realistic violence while featuring positive representations of gender, ethnicity and nationality. But as discussed below, it is designed around effective teamwork, which can be valuable to organizations at team and individual levels, while also being particularly useful for enhancing and developing virtual teams and their members.

The nature of the game is rooted in effective team dynamics. In esports, as in sports, it is not always the most talented player that brings the most value to the team, but instead it is often the dynamics and synergies of the team that matter most (Jenny, 2024). My experiences in Valorant (and CS:GO) have included playing with friends and known others, which has provided experiences that are more rewarding, both socially and strategically. In online team-based games, players obtain new knowledge and skills from others that can enable chemistry between players in different roles that enhances team performance (Kong *et al.*, 2024). The findings of this study indicate that the same is true within Valorant, particularly given the choice of agents and roles that distinguish it from other tactical FPS games. In esports teams it can be challenging to develop effective teamwork, but coach-led

structures and processes can be developed to enhance team synergy (Gisbert-Pérez *et al.*, 2024). Players should be coached through agent role expectations and the synergies that can be executed with their teammates agent choices to maximize team dynamics. Former professional soccer player Dennis Bergkamp discussed his formative years at Ajax in the Netherlands, where he spent time playing in all outfield positions as a youth despite his identity as an attacking player. He credited this experience as giving him a better understanding of how to operate in a team (Bergkamp, 2014), a concept that may have value in Valorant. Rotating the roles and agent choices of players could potentially enhance how teammates perceive the challenges faced in alternate roles within organizational teams. Valorant, as in Overwatch, represents an arena where team success is often based on how effectively players can synergize their agent abilities and roles (Lenke *et al.*, 2023). The defined roles, variety of agent choice and potential for strategic team compositions and interactions mean that Valorant has immense potential to be adapted as a training tool in line with organizational goals.

Second, it is valuable on both an individual and team level. Valorant also offers organizations the opportunity to identify and develop individuals within organizational teams. Within both gaming and professional settings, how an individual learns, communicates, leads and finds solutions are a key aspect of team synergy and success (Lenke *et al.*, 2023). New players to games can be socialized through toxic practices that risk being considered “normal” behaviours (Huston *et al.*, 2023), and such negative behaviours may already be part of an organizational teammates’ existing gaming identity. Structured coaching and guidance are needed to ensure that teammates communicate and behave within the realms of professional expectations while in gaming spaces. Conversely, early experiences of team play in games as a youth may have resulted in negative approaches to organizational teamwork later in life. Observing how someone plays games such as Valorant may provide insights on key areas of teamwork that need improvement in real-life organizational environments. For example, esports players who act as “In-Game Leader”, can motivate and inspire their teammates to achieve success (Gisbert-Pérez *et al.*, 2024), which can be challenging in fast paced and dynamic environments such as Valorant (Susanti, 2022). As such, the platform represents a space where leadership potential (among other qualities) could be identified, developed and refined.

The virtual characteristics of such games could prove particularly useful in terms of enhancing virtual team performance (Liska, 2022), particularly as Valorant has been shown to encourage the development of effective communication strategies (Susanti, 2022). Virtual teams need significantly more communication to achieve solutions on par with co-located teams (Liska, 2022), and effective teams benefit from knowledge-sharing behaviours within both formal and inform interactions (Jamshed and Majeed, 2023). Playing Valorant may allow organizationally based teams to develop more effective practices that transfer to virtual work practices, such as social learning and knowledge creation/sharing (Kong *et al.*, 2024; Kleinman *et al.*, 2024). Team cohesion is enhanced through a sense of unity and connectedness among team members (Gisbert-Pérez *et al.*, 2024), and many players engage with online esports titles as socializing spaces (Cestino *et al.*, 2023; Scholz, 2019). Playing in teams with professional connections can deepen and enhance the quality of relationships (McCauley, 2023), and for virtual teams, such a platform could provide an accessible and enjoyable alternative to the real-world socializing spaces that co-located teams can enjoy. Effective digital interventions to enhance team performance should be well-received quality experiences that ensure positive impacts are sustained over time (Giusino *et al.*, 2023), and Valorant could be used as such a digital intervention.

### Practical implications and future research

The European Union's resolution on video games and esports (Farreng, 2022) recognized the potential for leveraging the games people play within education, as it can enable individuals to develop important skills and capabilities (including teamwork). Valorant's inclusive characteristics as presented in this study indicate that it is suitable as such a platform for heterogeneous audiences in the contexts of work, education and civil society. Managers seeking to adopt esports within organizational structures should consider Valorant as a viable option. Given that "corporate leagues" are increasing, competitive esports titles can also allow team bonding within wider organizational networking spaces. To maximize the potential benefits of any esports interventions, there is a need for a structured approach to implementation and evaluation. Given the prevalence of esports experience in society, organizations should consider identifying such expertise and experience internally. Through leveraging current employees' capabilities and experiences within esports and games, organizations can lower costs and maximize engagement with any initiatives.

For researchers the intersection of organizational studies and esports represents a novel and useful opportunity to develop new practical and theoretical knowledge. New frameworks continue to emerge, such as the "Metaframe", "a robust and insightful framework for understanding, identifying and developing talent in the contemporary working environment" (Lenke *et al.*, 2023, p. 4). Recognizing the potential of esports, the Metaframe represents opportunities for a wide range of societal stakeholders to leverage the potential of teams inherent in games. Future work is needed that empirically examines Valorant (and other team-based titles) within such frameworks. Auto-netnographic methods may work within larger mixed methodological studies, given the need for creative approaches when researching teams (Schrujjer *et al.*, 2024). In Valorant such studies could examine the play experience within formalized teams (such as in Premier Mode), optimally by higher level players. Longitudinal studies examining learning journeys represent another interesting avenue of relevance for team management performance.

### Conclusion

Given the challenges for teams and individuals in modern organizations, esports represent an opportunity to develop teams and individuals in professional settings. Valorant has immense potential for identifying individual talent while enhancing team dynamics and synergies that are beneficial within organizational settings. Valorant's characteristics, such as defined roles, variety of agent choice and potential for strategic team compositions, mean it could be adapted as a training tool within a well-framed strategic approach. Given the initial learning requirements, any potential use of Valorant would require coaching and structures that shortcut learning processes to maximize benefits. Virtual teams may benefit more from the experience given the potential to enhance communication, team dynamics and social bonding that are more challenging for such teams. Crucially, engagement with Valorant may represent a more enjoyable learning and development experience than more traditional organizational tools such as workshops or meetings. Forward-thinking organizations can potentially gain competitive advantages through leveraging the potential of esports titles such as Valorant within their organizational settings.

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