gamevironments

global network **player** authority PewDiePie guild god Let's Play angel undead wtf authentic mediatization Skill dungeon PVP contest
game rule system gameplay avatar WoW blessing noob kills demon race body fight pope ingame PS4 discussion digital
religion gamer analysis representation healing lore religo-scape Soul diablo class tradition experience twitch rebirth genesis clan gamer
simulation lol ludology The Last of Us death resurrection funeral runes virtual identity buff priest immersion community symbols salvation mage XBox 360PVE
narrative

Issue 16 (2022)

articles

reports

interviews

Interview with Chris *Bani* Benell, Professional Esports Player

The *Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies*. An Interview with Frans Mäyrä and Usva Friman

reviews

History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past (2020) edited by Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmermann. A Book Review

Game Development Research by Henrik Engström (2020). A Book Review

Interview with Chris *Bani* Benell, Professional Esports Player

Joey R. Fanfarelli

Abstract

Chris *Bani* Benell is a support player in the esport video game, *Overwatch* (2016). He played professionally for Team Canada and the Houston Outlaws, with time spent in minor, major, and premier leagues. This interview was conducted live, over the *Discord* (2015) software platform. It asks him about his time as a professional player, specifically inquiring about his habits in and surrounding play. Bani discusses topics such as his practice routines, the way he evaluates his personal performance, and what he believes are factors that contribute to success in *Overwatch*. He identifies communication, reflection, and general health practices, such as stretching and getting enough sleep, as keys to successful play.

This interview was conducted over *Discord* (2015) after the interviewer made contact with Bani via *Reddit* (2005). After posting a call for participants for a survey-based study on *Reddit*, Bani sent a private message to the interviewer, noting that he would be happy to provide more insight if it was desired. The interviewer confirmed Bani's identity via *Discord*, and a separate interview (unrelated to the original study) was conducted in a private *Discord* chat. The interview was conducted to better understand practice and habits of a professional player within the esport *Overwatch* (2016). Prior to this interview, the interviewer conducted research on expertise in

Overwatch based on an analysis of publicly available interviews (Fanfarelli 2018). The present interview provided a direct interviewing experience to build upon the findings of that research, giving insight into expert habits in an esports game.

How often do you play *Overwatch*?

Probably, I play it every day between probably about four to ten hours. Depends on the day. I'd say the average is probably like five hours, maybe six, with a one hour break and several five minute breaks during that time.

Does this change when you play tournaments?

Yeah, the average will probably go up a bit before a big tournament because we'll be scrimming six hours a day plus a little practice by myself, so the average would probably be close to six or seven hours a day. If the tournament is on that day, we do a one-hour warmup and then we just do the tournament.

What is your practice routine like?

I wake up, do a little bit of stretching, kind of just get into the groove, then start the scrim. We do a scrim for two hours. Then we do a break for an hour. Then we do [video] reviews for an hour. Then we do two more scrims back-to-back. Then we're done for the day.

Who do you scrim?

Just, like, other pro teams. Like, it can be just about anybody. Whoever we schedule with, essentially.

Do you play any modes other than competitive matchmakingmode?

Umm, yeah, so for scrimming other pro teams, we'll use custom games. We do our own preset custom games in *Overwatch*. And then, outside of scrim practice with pro teams, we just play competitive. I don't think anybody plays anything other than that for actual practice. Occasionally we play arcade and stuff, just for loot boxes.

What specific skills do you practice when you practice?

Umm, if it's in pro scrims, we'll be practicing team strategies, coordination, that kind of stuff. Like, communication is probably the most important part. And then, if I'm just playing on my own for practice, like competitive and stuff, I'll be much more focused on my own aim and positioning and stuff like that.

When you practice with your team, what does that look like? What sorts of things do you work on and consciously try to improve?

Yeah, we'll be talking and working on things during the scrim. Like, after a fight happens, if it's not a super important scrim or anything, we'll talk about what went wrong and what went right during that fight, and then we'll move onto the next fight.

Do you set goals before practice or assess your progress toward your goals after a practice session?

We just started doing that. I think most pro teams don't do that in general, but we brought in a coach who's really focused on that sort of thing – setting goals and focusing on reviews and stuff like that. It's more abstract, like mindset and teamwork goals. Like, communicating every time you're trying to throw an ult out or communicating when you're trying to make an engagement or start a fight – something like that.

Did you play any other FPS or other competitive games before *Overwatch*? Do you feel that the skills you learned in those games transferred to *Overwatch*?

Not really seriously, but I have played *Call of Duty* (2013-2021) here and there, *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (CS:GO) (2012), *Team Fortress 2* (TF2) (2007). Yeah, I would say so. I wasn't like super good at any of them, so I wouldn't say I had that much skill when I played those games compared to *Overwatch* but I would definitely say they transfer quite well.

Which skills would you say transferred over?

I'd say mostly aim and, probably not for me, but for other players, game sense, depending on where they came from. Like, I have a teammate who was a professional *Team Fortress 2* player before. He didn't need to work that much on his own game sense, because he already had that from *Team Fortress 2*. I'd say aim transfers very easily from First-Person-Shooter games.

Do you ever find times when you don't want to practice, but feel like you should? Do you ever have times where you're lacking motivation? If so, how do you motivate yourself?

Umm, I mean, I guess yes, but I think I've been so dedicated that I've actually wanted to practice, like almost always. So, I don't have that much trouble with it. Yeah, I think I'm kind of always motivated. After a day I'll set a goal of what I should be working on the most for tomorrow, and maybe that kind of motivates me a bit, but other than that it's pretty general.

Do you ever have issues playing over long periods of time?

Yeah, I'd say in tournaments I do. I don't have enough experience in tournaments that I kind of get nervous – I kind of get eye strains and I have kind of a wrist problem, but not really. It kind of, for some reason, accentuates during tournaments, probably due to nerves. Over long sessions... only in tournaments though. [Otherwise] I can be on the computer all day and I'll be fine.

149

How about outside of tournaments. Do you ever feel like it's time to stop playing for a little while? Do you get tired, feel *tilted*, or otherwise?

Yeah, especially when playing competitive. You just have to stop sometimes when it gets too tilting.

How often do you play competitive matchmaking mode? Do you play competitive matchmaking for fun, practice, or other reasons?

Umm, probably, I'd say like if I was to average it across days, maybe an hour a day. Maybe a little more, an hour to two hours a day, so not that much. I'd say either or [fun and practice]. I don't solo queue unless I actually want to, so, I would say that it's mostly for fun and practice on top of that.

Are competitive matches different from professional matches, in any way?

Yeah, it's way way different. There's a huge mindset difference. And the communication, there's no communication in competitive games, whereas in professional play it's all about communication. Everyone's very focused on themselves in competitive play, whereas in professional play everyone's focused on achieving something as a team.

How well do strategies used in professional play translate to competitive matchmaking?

Uh, I would say most very unique strategies won't work very well in solo play, but general game sense and strategy can translate pretty well. So, anything that requires your team to do something as six is pretty difficult, but you can translate things like knowing when the enemies have their ultimate abilities ready. Or, telling your team to go this way or that way. I think people can follow that pretty well. But, it kind of

breaks down when you start getting more complicated, like, somebody go here, use an ult here, stuff like that. I'd say, overall, it probably translates poorly, but there's still things that can help in solo queue that come from pro play.

Do you ever queue up [into competitive matchmaking] as a team?

Yea, we do. I usually duo or three queue with my team, every once in a while – not that often, but sometimes we do.

Do you warm up for professional matches? If so, what does that look like?

Umm, we just do like a warmup scrim. So, we find another team to play against and we just kind of play for an hour. We try our hardest, get the comms going, get all warmed up in terms of aim and stuff like that. We basically just simulate what the tournament's going to look like and try to keep that mindset going forward into the tournament.

I know that you play a support role on your team. Can you describe what your main responsibilities are for that role?

(1) Don't die, because I'm the focus of most of the enemy's strategies, (2) keep my team alive, obviously, (3), depending on the hero I'm playing, but I'm mostly playing a hero that requires me to call targets, like who I'm focusing, because the target I'm focusing will take more damage than anybody else. That's because I'm playing Zenyatta (a character that increases team damage), of course.

As a support player, what skills would you say are most important?

I would say (1), positioning – so knowing when you can be forward and when you have to back up, (2) just aim, because being able to one-versus-one a tracer, or something, makes a huge difference in what you can accomplish. And, (3), communication. Me, personally, I kind of have to narrate just about everything I'm doing, because it kind of dictates what the rest of my team does in response.

Do you ever play any roles other than support?

Yeah, I started as a DPS [damage-focused role], then I moved to an off-tank role, like Zarya and D.Va (characters that help the primary tanks sustain damage) and stuff like that. Those were kind of in the start of my pro career. So, I wasn't that serious about it yet. Once I moved to support is when I became serious, so kind of yes and no.

So you always play support now?

Oh yeah. I'm always support.

Do you ever switch in competitive matchmaking?

Yeah, I do in competitive, like solo queue, but other than that, no.

During a particular game, how do you assess if you are playing well? How do you know if you need to alter your playstyle or otherwise change the way you're playing in order to start doing better? Do you use any particular statistics, or is there something else?

I wouldn't say it's a statistic. You kind of get a feel for when you're... especially if you die... that's a good way to look at it. Every time you die, you have to look at why you died and what you can do better to avoid it. If you're dying entirely because of your own play, then that's something that you can adjust from. You know, start playing a little better in whatever regard is causing you to die.

Is there a particular mindset that a player should have in order to perform well?

Yeah, I'd say so. For us, on our team, I think the mindset to perform well is to be really energetic, excited, and hyped. Because, if we're not hyped then we're not communicating well. Communications flow easier when you're really excited and want to tell everything.

So, would you say it's better to be energetic than to be calm? Do you have issues maintaining that energy?

Yes. Definitely energetic, well for us. I think it's different between teams. So, for us, it's energy for sure. For other teams, maybe not. It's probably one of our bigger problems, keeping energy up. We're working on it. I think it's just about... keep yelling, you know? Even when we're losing, keep yelling (laughs). That's all we can do.

Do you do anything outside of the game to make yourself a better player? Sleep, posture, exercise, diet, or anything else?

I'd say I try and get enough sleep every day, like eight-nine, sometimes ten hours of sleep. And then, just like stretching arm, wrist, finger stretches. Other than that, I don't, but I'm sure it would help if I had a really healthy diet and I did some cardio every once in a while (laughs).

Aside from practicing in game, do you do anything out of game to learn? Do you have any other websites or resources you frequent to help you improve?

Outside of *Overwatch*, I do play one other game called *Aim Hero* (2016), which is an aim training game. It's just a game that allows you to practice your mouse to screen movement, helping with your muscle memory and stuff like that. I don't play it too often, but I think I'm going to start doing it some more, again.

What would you say is a skill that most professional players need to improve the most, and are constantly working on?

I guess the two main ones are (1) push the boundaries but never go past it. Try and take as much as you can, but never get punished. It's about learning how to balance aggression. That's the one thing I'd say. (2) is communicating and leading every time you need it and staying consistent with that. What would you say is a skill that most lower-level players need to improve the most? (laughs) They could improve a lot of things. I'm trying to think what would be the most important part. I feel there are a lot of players in that range who can still aim pretty well. I would say probably general

knowledge and game sense and thinking more than just the moment. Players at that level will run around and shoot whatever they see, and they're not thinking *is there someone over here. Could they kill me?* Stuff like that. They're not thinking past whatever's in front of them.

What would you say is the most important thing someone should do in order to become a professional player?

At the moment, the scene has matured enough that most people know each other in the pro scene. To be a high-level player I think you need to grind your way up through the ladder. If you can get the top 50 in North America, consistently, I think players will start to notice, and you can join a team almost immediately and start making your way up from there.

155

Do you feel like there's anything you do that really hurts your gameplay performance?

Yeah, sleep is kind of off and on. I feel if I don't get enough sleep, I play awfully. If I play a different game other than *Overwatch* before practice, I feel like that throws me off a lot. So, I try to play *Overwatch* and do whatever I want to do that day, first, and then I can relax and play some games or watch TV later.

What would you say is the most important thing you did to gain the skills required to get yourself to professional play?

I think it's just being very critical, always, and never having an overabundance of confidence. I always think unless I'm very clearly the best player in the world, which I don't think I am, I can't say I did everything well. Every time you die, every time something goes poorly, or even every time something goes well, I'm still thinking about what I did wrong, and I think that helps me improve a lot.

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