Can Some Computer Games Be a Sport?  
Issues with Legitimization of eSport as a Sporting Activity

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the problem of social legitimization of eSport in the context of traditional sports. Its objective is to investigate knowledge and attitudes towards eSports, as well as their recognition as legitimate sports. The first part of the paper consists of the definition and differentiation between eSport and eSports. The second part provides an analysis of various definitions of sport and comparison of main qualities of eSport and sport. The third part includes identification of the most problematic features of eSports in public opinion and their analysis.

KEYWORDS

Competitiveness, Counter-Strike, Culture, Hearthstone, League of Legends, Media, Physicality, Professionalization, Society, Technology

INTRODUCTION

Sport is a universal language. At its best it can bring people together, no matter what their origin, background, religious beliefs or economic status. And when young people participate in sports or have access to physical education, they can experience real exhilaration even as they learn the ideals of teamwork and tolerance. (Kofi Annan, UN press release SG/SM/9579, 2004)

As a fairly new phenomenon, especially in Europe and Americas, eSport is not a profoundly researched subject. There are few academic works addressing eSport as a whole (Taylor, 2012; Wagner, 2006), its spectatorship (Cheung & Huang, 2011; Ditmarsch, 2013) or eSport in relation to sport (Ferrari, 2013; Witkowski, 2012) and business (Sjöblom, 2011), but there are still many unexplored areas within the subject, one of them being the social perception of electronic sports. The scene is growing in popularity every year (according to the 2016 Global eSports Market Report, the eSports audience in 2015 exceeded 226 million viewers worldwide and is estimated to reach 345 million viewers by year 20191), attracting spectators, sponsors and media, exposing the niche gaming and eSports community to the world, and causing controversies. As a product of fusion between sport, media, gaming and technology (Hutchins, 2008), the idea of electronic sports is a new and unfamiliar one, and is not necessarily perceived seriously or positively within the society, especially considering gaming’s struggles with acceptance as a “normal” leisure activity (Crawford, 2005; Taylor, 2012).

This paper aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the issues that arise from the comparison of eSport to traditional sport. This analysis is achieved through three discussions: firstly, the definition and separation of the terms eSport and eSports. Secondly, the interpretation of multiple definitions of sport, with the aim of isolating a list of its important characteristics in order to facilitate the comparison in mind. Lastly, the observation of social perception of eSport in order to identify a number of problematic features that seem to adversely affect the regard of eSport as a sporting activity.

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DEFINING ESPORT

When talking about a phenomenon so recent and relatively unknown as electronic sport, it is important to specify what exactly it is, especially considering ambiguity of the term for people unfamiliar with it. The origin of the term eSport is not clear — according to Michael G. Wagner, one of the earliest reliable sources using the term is a press release from 1999, commenting on the launch of the Online Gamers Association (OGA), where Mat Bettington compared eSports to traditional sports2 (Wagner, 2006, p. 1). In fact, the most basic, general definition of eSports — electronic sports, is competitive computer gaming (Borowy & Jin, 2013; Hutchins, 2008; Wagner, 2006).

Attempts at defining the term are infrequent, one of the first interpretations being that of Michael G. Wagner (2006) in his monograph On the scientific relevance of eSports: “eSports is an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies” (p. 3), in which he adapted and rewrote a definition of sport provided by sport scientist Claus Tiedemann.3

Similarly, Korean eSports Association describes eSport as “recreational activity involving competition using mental and physical abilities in a virtual online environment similar to the reality” that includes “various competitions and leagues involving network games” (Lee, An & Lee, 2014). This definition is more specific, as it takes into consideration every aspect of eSports — their recreational nature, use of both mental and physical abilities, existence of a virtual online environment, and competitive and professional character.

When reading this paper, it is important to note that the author makes a distinction between the term eSports in plural and eSport in singular, as this differentiation is crucial in order to fully understand the concept of eSport in the context of sport. Just like in the case of sport, eSport refers to a certain abstract idea — the phenomenon of competitive computer gaming as a whole, as a product of culture and society, carrying particular values and meaning. On the other hand, analogously to sports, the term eSports would suggest a set — a collection of concrete, specific, distinct sporting activities.

In this light, it is accurate to refer to eSport as an organized, professional approach to playing computer games. That said, it is important to note that professionalization does not exempt the activity from the potential of it being recreational. Analogously to traditional sports, being recreational and being professional are not antonymous, but refer to two levels of practicing the same sport.

Following these notions, the next part of this paper will provide an analysis of eSport on the basis of various definitions of sport, as well as their features and characteristics.

THE MEANING OF SPORT

The biggest problem that eSports have to face since their emergence is the issue of their actual “sportiness” (Witkowski, 2012) — their legitimacy and right to be called electronic sports. Sport, however, is a broad, general term and its definition may vary depending on the time, place and context:

People in England who played cricket and hunted foxes during 1870s would be astonished that Americans define NFL football as a sport when the oversized players spend nearly 45 minutes of every 60-minute game walking to and from and standing in huddles, where they receive directions from a coach who does not play the game. Similarly, Americans today looking back at nineteenth-century British sports might say that they weren’t “real” sports because the participants did not strive to set records or win championships. Looking ahead one hundred years, people might be playing virtual
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