
Do You Love It Already or Do You Still Ignore It? The Two Faces of the Phenomenon Spectatorship in Esports

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Abstract

The rise of interest in Esports and in spectating other people playing games increased over the years and has developed into a mass phenomenon. However, there still exists a big gap between people who love Esports and people who don't. This gap itself was probably just as big several years ago as it is today, only the number of Esports fans has increased. Nevertheless, there seems to be no grey area, either one stands on one side or on the other. In this paper we will discuss several possible reasons for this phenomenon with the goal to initiate a discussion for finding ways and strategies to close this gap.

Author Keywords

Esports, Perception, Rules, Media, Fan community

CSS Concepts

• **Applied computing~Computers in other domains~Personal computers and PC applications~Computer games**

Introduction

The rise of interest of Esports combined with the interest of spectating other people playing games has increased over the last years (cf. [1, 2]). For example,

according to a study conducted in 2019 on behalf of Austrian Entertainment Software Association, 5.3 million people currently play games in Austria alone, 2.6 million of them daily. The rapid developments in 2019 show that Esports is no longer a marginal phenomenon in society but has found its way into the middle of society. 50% of Austrians under the age of 25 are interested in esports and every 7th Austrian currently consumes esports content [3]. More than 38,000 registered players according to eSports Association Austria [4], numerous new teams and cooperations with the economy show that Esports is on the road to success - also in Austria.

However, the success of Esports depends strongly on the audience and communication with fans. Therefore, spectator friendly strategies are necessary to make Esports and the onboarding of new fans more attractive to a wider audience. In order to understand the motivation of Esports fans, several studies were conducted in the last years (e.g., [1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7]). These studies showed, for example, that the main motivations of Esports fans were self-improvement, learning different game strategies, and the interest in the game.

Nevertheless, an interesting observation and a big challenge is that not everyone shares the enthusiasm about Esports. On one side of the divide are those people who play digital games competitively and/or watch Esports events and on the other side are those people who are completely disbelieving when they are told about Esports [7].

There are several reasons for this, such as the way Esports is presented and broadcasted in the media and

the understanding of the rules of the respective digital game(s) used in Esports tournaments. This workshop paper aims to initiate the discussion on how to close this gap and raise awareness of Esports and its rules and practices.

Challenge

In order to be clearly perceived as a sport, Esports must not only be defined as sport from a sports studies perspective [8]. The medialization - which according to Müller Lietzkow [9] - represents one of the seven characteristics of sport - requires a representation that enables even people who have no affinity for Esports to perceive competitive play as a competitive sport. For this purpose, at least several of the following four criteria must be fulfilled:

1. Classical sport as the basis of the Esports discipline
2. Knowledge of rules by the spectators
3. Media implementation of the game similar to the classic television sports coverage
4. Media coverage in the sports section

Let us have a look at current Esports games. Games like FIFA (Soccer) [10], Formula-1 [12] or the former Austrian lighthouse project Ski-Challenge [12] are based on real world sport which is simulated in a detailed way within the gameplay. While games like Rocket League [13] or Overcooked [14], which is becoming increasingly popular in Austrian school Esports, are based on partly real-world scenarios embedded in fictional scenarios, but the rules and purpose are easy to understand. The same applies to shooters such as Counter Strike [15], but here the violent aspect in the games must be dealt with

separately with regard to the discussion. And then there are fantasy games with their own storyline and complex rules far away from the real world, for example League of Legends [16], DOTA2 [17] or Starcraft II [18].

All four criteria are rarely met. The big problem is the perception of Esports via the sports section of the popular media. In recent years, reports on Esports in the sports sections of magazines or TV programs can be counted on one hand in Austria and Germany.

Now one can rethink the criteria and disregard point 1 (a real sport must be the basis) and point 4 (reporting must be done through the sports section). That leaves the two points to focus on: (A) the viewers' understanding of the rules and (B) the staging.

And exactly at these two points there is a huge gap between the people who are already Esports fans and those who are unaware of the existence of Esports.

For Esports titles like FIFA, Formula 1 or even Rocket League it is relatively easy to gain fans outside the community and also a broadcast in streams as well as in classic TV is very easily possible. For games like Starcraft II or League of Legends the opposite is the case. In streams, the community watches their favorite Esportsmen and -women practicing or they follow big events. In streams moderators comment with the assumption that the audience know the rules already and therefore the special moves and tactics are discussed. In classic TV this is not yet working, because there is always an attempt to get non-fans into the boat and therefore the moderators repeat the basic rules of the game over and over again instead of going

into the complexity of the game moves. This makes it very boring for the community to watch and at the same time also quite uninteresting for newcomers. A solution would probably have to be found here, for example a transmission with 2 audio tracks. One for the newcomers and one for those who are already big fans of the respective ESport discipline.

Open Questions

Based on these arguments, how can the onboarding of new fans be made easier? How can we explain the rules of more complex games to these new fans, while constantly increasing the learning curve, with the goal of attracting new viewers and not only new players?

One possible way is to support new fans in becoming part of the community [19]. This can be the establishment with groups and communities in social networks, the organization of fan clubs as well as the founding of amateur competitions to reach out to a broad audience and foster the understanding of the games and their rules. Furthermore, using of tools [1, 20] can be a further way to enable first steps into the community and can serve help them communicate with each other (e.g., about the current match) or to learn more about the rules and the game by taking part in competitions and quizzes. However, which strategies and solutions will work, and also what other influencing factors exist, are critical aspects of making Esports more attractive to a wider audience and will need further research.

Conclusion

Although the interest in Esports has increased over the last years and has become a growing sector in the game industry, the development of the audience and

communication with fans is essential for the success of Esports. Therefore, research to close the gap between people who love Esports and people who don't, can help to identify strategies to make Esports more attractive for a wider community. In this paper, we briefly discussed potential reasons for the existence of this gap and highlight questions which show directions for further research in this area.

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