

1 E-sports in the Entertainment Industry

Overview

*Andrea De-Santis and Luis Fernando
Morales Morante*

The debate is open. In the last decade the opinions and criteria in favor of its recognition as a sport discipline has meant the upcoming inclusion in the 2022 Asian Games, the development of an official event around Paris 2024 Olympic Games and a possible inclusion in the Los Angeles 2028 Olympic Games (Álvarez, 2019). E-sports have been subjected to an analysis on the relevance of their conceptual definition by the academic community and experts, in terms of whether their characteristics agree or are comparable with the characteristics of other sports. Specifically, critics of e-sports emphasize the absence of the physicality that defines the semantic nature of the term and its relationship with physical exercise (Coakley, 2008). Undoubtedly, like chess, e-sports require fine motor skills that allow the fast and precise use of muscles (Haibach et al., 2017; Jenny et al., 2016), and involve a brain effort capable of assuming 20% of a person's energy, even more so when he or she is a professional (Álvarez, 2019). Also, they are characterized by the competitive level of their events, the formal organization of leagues and collegiate bodies, as well as their operation in relation to an industrial, commercial and economic system very similar to traditional sports (Hou et al., 2020). Finally, it is not an individual sport, and its projection to competition has resulted in the highest revenues for professional players, organizations and sponsors (Newzoo, 2021).

Regarding the second question, Hamari and Sjöblom (2017, p. 122) define e-sports as “competitive video game structured around leagues and tournaments”; the concept is clarifying, although a bit reductive. The team in charge of e-sports at Newzoo further specifies the concept as “professional or semi-professional competitive gaming in an organized format (tournament or league) with a specific goal/prize, such as winning a championship title or prize money” (Newzoo, 2021, p. 6). The current and visible reality of the big leagues and their millionaire prizes, advertising, live-streaming events, the mythification of players

and fan communities make e-sports a great spectacle with global projection and converging interests of different sectors of society. Its popularity and the attention it has generated in different players is the result of its innate capacity to evolve with information and communication technologies (ICTs) and, above all, the synergy it has generated with the media. The first chapter of this book offers a reconstruction of the history of e-sports and its evolution toward the current recognition and performance in the world of sports and entertainment as a product of the relationship with the mass media and the audience, a growth that converges in the challenges of a sport discipline and its market.

The origins of e-sports and its relationship with the media

The e-sports industry was formally institutionalized at the beginning of the new millennium and has gained scientific interest in the last decade (Hou et al., 2020; Schubert et al., 2016). Its origins date back to the 1980s and the emergence of competitive video game events. Game journalist Tristan Donovan (2010) points to the Intergalactic Space Warfare Olympics held in 1972 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) as the first electronic gaming competition in history. According to Borowy and Jin (2013) the first official event was the tournament organized by the American company Atari in New York, which was able to gather more than 10,000 Space Invaders players (Polsson, 2012). The event had an important media coverage and, therefore, according to the authors, it originated the relationship between the world of video game competitions and the mass media. In fact, among the following events organized by Atari and other companies (Kent, 2001), there were initiatives promoted by television channels such as Starcade (1982–1984) and That's incredible! (1980–1984), in which players compete in front of the audience.

In their detailed historical reconstruction, Borowy and Jin (2013) show how the influence of the renewed and innovative media staging of the 1984 Olympic Games held in Los Angeles has revolutionized the way of conceiving the staging of sporting spectacle worldwide. In the same year, the Video Game Masters Tournament, the most prestigious national competition in the United States at the time, was held and, by coincidence, the Olympic escalation of e-sports could finish and there is a possibility that the Olympic escalation of e-sports will culminate in their inclusion precisely in the city of Los Angeles in 2028 (Álvarez, 2019). Whatever their destiny, the visibility that the media offer to video game competitions and the effect of their commercial proactivity will define the e-sports industry after 40 years.

Undoubtedly, the forming of a gamer culture contributes significantly to shaping e-sports. The boom in the interactive electronic games market benefited from the then consolidated where the main consumers of video games gathered (Burnham, 2001). The experience accumulated by younger generations has defined the characteristics of a gaming culture stimulated by the beginning of the computer age and a greater compulsion toward new forms of entertainment (Borowy and Jin, 2013). E-sports result from these cultural practices generated by the relation to the conceptual models of sport and media in which the experience can be both physical and non-physical. According to Toffler (1970), an experiential product can be constituted in live or simulated environments, and e-sports represent a synthesis of these two elements since they are live events that occur by simulated computerization, where the media is the space of competition (Borowy & Jin, 2013).

The key role of the gamer culture audience and the commercialization of video game competitions change the way both the product and the experience are consumed, stimulating the use of video game tournaments and events as complementary initiatives to other types of events. The powerful attraction of competition and the recognition of achievements by the winners increase the motivation of players and spectators, highlighting another characteristic of the sport. The appearance in 1981 of a media specialized in the collection and dissemination of information about tournaments, players and their results, such as the Official Scoreboard for Electronic Entertainment (Twin Galaxies), not only marks another historical fact symbolizing the importance of the media in the evolution of e-sports, but also evidences the growing interest of the audience. *Time* magazine's 1981 interview of teenager Steve Juraszek for his record in a 16-hour game (Kent, 2001), *Life* magazine's feature on the Twin Galaxies arcade and its star players (Burnham, 2001) and the inclusion of the best player of the year in the 1985 Guinness Sports Record are examples of the contribution of the media toward the professionalization of e-sports and its players, in addition to its appeal to the public and the interest of other industries in the entertainment industry (Kent, 2001).

The boom of the e-sports industry and its consolidation in the entertainment industry

Because of the Internet, the '90s were the correct scenario for the consolidation of e-sports. The possibility of transferring the gaming context to the digital world opened the doors for future competitions between professional and amateur gamers. Technological convergence

stimulated big tournaments and events with more recognition by society. Companies such as Nintendo and Blizzard Entertainment made their mark on the scene, with the former organizing two world championships (1990 and 1994) and the latter launching StarCraft (1998), which is considered the first e-sports game after *Wired* magazine in 1993 had recognized the free software Netrek as the first online video game sport (Kelly, 1993). The American industry is the first to show a real boom thanks to the staging of events capable of offering competitions, contests and online video games at the same time, as well as a space to promote business relationships with professionals and companies in the sector such as the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), a specialized event held in the United States since 1995, which allows access to the general public since 2017.¹

The new millennium is the beginning of the e-sports industry. In 2000, the expansion of this sporting activity began with the creation of the World Cyber Gamer, the international competition considered as the true Olympics of e-sports (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). In the same year, the first official international tournament of StarCraft was also held (Karhulahti, 2017), a real-time strategy video game that only two years after its release could boast the title of best seller in 1998 with more than 1.5 million copies worldwide, and 9.5 million in the following ten years (Olsen, 2007). The greatest acceptance for this video game (4.5 million copies of the total) is registered in South Korea, currently considered the homeland of modern e-sports (Taylor, 2012), a country in which professional players are influencers (Jin, 2010), and there is an institutionalized association dedicated to the regulation of all matters related to e-sports such as certification and organization of competitions (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010). The success achieved by StarCraft places it as a reference game in the world of e-sports in terms of defining the requirements and standards for the future development of games at the center of the e-contest, such as League of Legends (LOL), Defender of the Anciest 2 (DOTA2) and Fortnite, which are among the most popular (Goal, 2021; Hou et al., 2020; Marca, 2021; Newzoo, 2021).

The current industry leader is LOL, launched in 2009 by Riot Games, and it was able to supplant the supremacy of StarCraft in just two years because of the first world tournament conducted by it (Waigh, 2021). It is a video game typical of the multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) genre, a subgenre of real-time strategy video games that originated as a component for StarCraft and was subsequently positioned as a genre of its own, being successfully exploited by LOL. It allows team play while the individuality of each player can be maintained thanks to

the network connection, which has registered record numbers for the industry, connecting millions of players around the world at the same time (Tejera, 2013). In 2021, the LOL world championship registered 174.82 million hours of viewing by the multiplatform audience over the 134 hours of competition broadcast, approximately more than 67 million views with respect to the International 10 (TI10) of DOTA2, the second event with the highest views. This result is more relevant if considering that six of the events that complete the top ten of the most watched e-sports competitions in 2021 are LOL competitions, including three editions of the mobile version of the game (Table 1.1).

The leadership of MOBA games is evident with eight games out of ten in the ranking, while the remaining two are from the shooter genre. LOL and DOTA2 take the lion's share of the current industry revenues by capturing the largest audience and the highest economic values in terms of sponsorships. This means more significant prizes and economic profits for players and professional teams in these leagues that

Table 1.1 Most watched e-sport competences in 2021

<i>No.</i>	<i>Competence</i>	<i>Game</i>	<i>Views</i>	<i>Broadcasted hours</i>
1	League of Legends Worlds Championship 2021	League of Legends	174,820.000	134
2	Dota 2: The International 10	DOTA2	107,230.000	125
3	Mobile Legends: MPL ID Temporada 8	League of Legends	76,940.000	172
4	Counter-Strike: Stockholm PGL Major	Counter-Strike: Global Offensive	71,260.000	120
5	League of Legends: Spring LCK Split	League of Legends	67,640.000	290
6	Mobile Legends: Worldwide championship M3	League of Legends	62,610.000	103
7	League of Legends: MSI 2021	League of Legends	61,180.000	86
8	League of Legends: Summer LCK	League of Legends	60,520.000	295
9	Mobile Legends: MPL ID 7 Season	League of Legends	54,290.000	169
10	Valorant Championships 2021	Valorant	46,040.000	98

Source: Based on Borisov (2021)

receive salaries for their sporting activity that can reach up to 10,000 euros per month (Waigh, 2021).

Therefore, the e-sports industry is the result of different factors and interests linked to its relationship with the media. Its electronic identity projected and enhanced by the computer era, the commoditization of players' experiences, the transmission of competitions and the institutionalization process driven by media coverage and the growing interest of audiences created an industry capable of being compared to the sports disciplines that are part of the major leagues of the sports and entertainment industry.

Evolution and trends in the relationship between media and e-sports

The current status as a sport activity in the formalization and developing industry process drives e-sports toward a new change in the rules and in the way of presenting its value to the different stakeholders, repeating the history that began in the 1980s. As at that time, its relationship with the traditional media and the multi-platform and hyper-connected digital ecosystem of the information society (De-Santis-Piras & Morales Morante, 2019) assumes different roles, drawing a scenario of opportunities and threats for the future of e-sports. The perfect example occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a young industry that has suffered economic losses caused by the cancellation of events and the reinvention of tournaments, but that has once again been able to take advantage of its privileged connection with electronics and ICT, capturing part of the audiences of traditional sports totally blocked by prevention and biosecurity measures (Gando, 2021). There are some trends that should have the attention of experts and stakeholders in the sector, as well as be the subject of further study by the academic community. The following is a description of those that are more significant because of the interpretation of the results recorded so far by e-sports, and their possible projection toward their development.

Increased newsworthiness for the world of e-sports

The broadcasting of the first e-sports tournaments, the production of specific programs on the subject and live competitions have contributed to the creation of a specific audience composed mainly of teenagers and young people (Hou et al., 2020). The increased interest and recognition generated by official competitions and gaming leagues

have captured the attention of journalists and the media, expanding the range of opportunities for the general public to approach the world of e-sports. In the early '80s, a significant part in the media attacked e-sports for their negative influence on the youth (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). Gradually, the increased awareness and the relevance assumed by the increase of its audience motivated greater media coverage and interest deepening about this activity and its protagonists, including their careers and private lives (Hivoorde & Pot, 2016). The role of the media is to act as a bridge between the world of e-sports and part of an audience who lack information and knowledge to understand and appreciate it. Regarding the national and regional realities that have experienced a greater development of the industry, there is evidence of a central role of the media in the dissemination and greater acceptance of e-sports among citizens. In China, the traditional media have shifted their narrative toward increasingly positive positions over 17 years of coverage (Hou et al., 2020); the centrality of South Korea in the e-sports market has been aided by the creation of thematic channels with 24 hours of programming 7 days a week, promoting the expansion of a modern gamer culture in which players and professionals are socially recognized and have influence (Jin, 2010).

Role of live broadcasting platforms

According to projections made by Newzoo (2021), the global audience for live streaming of e-sports in 2021 reached 728.8 million with a growth rate of 10% over 2020, and with an increasing projection for 2024. The lock-in conditions determined by governments around the globe because of the pandemic have produced an increase in the adoption of streaming systems for e-sports tournaments and competitions (Newzoo, 2021). Undoubtedly, the trend toward the use of platforms for live streaming has been observed since 2011 with the creation of Justin.tv, better known by the renewed (2014) brand of Twitch.tv, the emergence of YouTube live accessible to the entire public since 2013 (Pires & Simon, 2015) and the creation of specialized services such as Huya.tv in 2012 and Douyu.tv in 2014 (Hou et al., 2020), until the most recent Facebook Gaming (2018).

These platforms revolutionize the e-sports industry by giving a greater role to the main stakeholder, i.e., the audience. It is mainly about participating in the game, being part of the sporting spectacle with more protagonism than a simple spectator, commenting on the plays in real time, giving or receiving suggestions, creating a market for fans that results in consumers of the experiential product predicted

by Toffler (1970), and shaped both by its physical dimension and by the experience, emotion and its memory for which the e-sports consumer is willing to pay.

Professionalization of e-sports in the entertainment industry

Since the first tournaments and championships, e-sports have gradually changed the way we understand both the competition and the contenders (Hilvoorde & Pot, 2016). The number of spectators that multiplied in and from arcades to the multiplatform media has meant a greater professionalization of gamers and a greater interest in their achievements, careers and personal lives (Hou et al., 2020). Awards make the gamer's career attractive, and the increasing fame and profitability give a prestigious status to this new professional sports figure. One of the oldest examples of professionalization is represented by the first official US video game team formed in 1980 with a marketing function for expanding the video game market to new audiences (Borowy & Jin, 2013). Also, the inclusion of gamers with the best scores in the 1986 Guinness Sports Records and the media coverage in magazines and newspapers has contributed to the institutionalization of the professional figure of the e-sportsman. One player identified as a pioneer gamer is the American Billy Mitchell, who in 1985 registered six Guinness records in arcade video games (Goal, 2021). Today, international championships of the most popular games award million-dollar prizes and players are superstars followed by millions of fans who praise or criticize them for their sporting performances. The group dimension has gained its place on the scene thanks to MOBA games that require the interoperability of coordinated and trained players. Each team specializes in one or more games; among the most famous are the Faze Clan (USA), Team Secret (Russia), Fnatic (UK) and Team Liquid, which has been active since 2000 with its participation in the first StarCraft tournament (Brand, 2019). The level of status offered by media visibility increases the public image of gamers just like in the case of stars in other sports and in the film and entertainment industry, with significant influence on national youth culture (Jin, 2010).

Development of online communities on streaming platforms

The interactivity of digital platforms and the live broadcasting of events have fostered greater participation of e-sports players and audiences. Likewise, the use of platforms such as Twitch has motivated the creation of online communities of fans who interact with each other

and with players and industry experts (Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017). The proximity offered by direct communication with the champions and idols of the various games has allowed the spread of gamer culture and the impulse toward the specialization of news coverage because of the evolution in the relationship between e-sports and media. On streaming platforms, strategies and criteria about the game and competitions are exchanged, focusing the attention of a group of consumers with low loyalty rates compared to the entertainment market, such as young people. Digital communities are generally composed of fans, mostly men and young (Hou et al., 2020). They prefer games of skill and strategy, attend face-to-face events and live streaming of competitions and 59% of them dedicate more than 15 hours a week to the game and participate in at least five events, with 60% of them under 18 years old (Macey et al., 2021). Undoubtedly, the adult-age audience has increased in the last decade, occupying a good part of the total audience (Deloitte, 2018). The existence of specialized thematic communities and specific interaction channels produces a network of influences in which players, media and institutions can modify the perception of e-sports, as well as provide a greater knowledge of consumers and their behavior.

Challenges of e-sports in the multi-screen society

E-sports are now the boom. Although the pandemic has hindered the conduction of international and face-to-face competitions in physical spaces, e-sports have taken advantage of the opportunities offered by an emerging scenario by transferring their competitions to the virtual environment whenever possible, being an entertainment alternative due to the suspension of competitions in almost all traditional sports. In a multi-screen society through which people access a hyper-connected world, e-sports seem to overcome challenges with the same value as their characters in the simulated or fantasy world of games. However, the e-sports industry demands the connection of concrete and organized responses.

The main challenge is to continue to maintain the interest in e-sports, as well as the effort toward a better understanding and appreciation by the public. Human beings learn from their environment based on direct experience or through other human beings who provide information and its possible interpretation. The public is not yet familiar with the world of e-sports, which is why the work of professionals and the media is essential, which must break their preconceptions and aim for greater specialization in the specific field. This is also a

challenge for the profession of sports journalists and an opportunity for specialization in favor of both the e-sports industry and the professional category.

The ability of e-sports to take advantage of the continuous technological development does not only encompass the characteristics of the “game”, as its value lies in the synthesis managed with the experience lived by the player or spectator, involving its stakeholders in the process, from sponsors as the driving force of the industry to organizers, consumers, media and fans. In these terms, a further challenge is to constantly contribute to the improvement of game mechanics, dynamics and aesthetics (De-Santis & Armendáriz González, 2020) and to entertain the spectator, offering the possibility of exploiting technological innovation in favor of a more efficient visualization, greater interactivity and understanding of e-sports. A possible key to action is to bet on information that takes advantage of multimedia as a language to reach the public.

In fact, the decisions made by the pioneers of this industry and the current leaders have driven the emergence of new national markets and the exponential increase of consumers and operators for its proper sporting, technological and commercial development. Undoubtedly, the internationalization process of e-sports finds obstacles linked to the regulatory reality of each scenario, the lack of market regulation and the institutionalization of e-sports in different national and regional contexts (Li, 2017). The main solution identified and promoted by experts and academics points to a greater institutionalization of the system and intervention by government bodies of the different states through the creation of centralizing bodies for the policy and administration of e-sports, to regulate tournaments and intervention areas of the different actors, as well as their rights and responsibilities (Hou et al., 2020).

Finally, the growing recognition of cyber athletes is a driving factor for the development of e-sports in that it minimizes the lack of constancy of entertainment consumers, thanks to the personalization of the relationship with the players, direct contact, the mythification of the champion and his achievements, a basic element of sports that reaches a relevant media dimension.

Finally, there are negative aspects linked to the practice and consumption of e-sports that have not been studied in this chapter and should be addressed scientifically and by experts and government agencies, such as gender discrimination caused by the masculinization of e-sports, the violence contained in the games and compulsive gambling as a modern disease.

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Note

- 1 Wikipedia (s.f.). Electronic Entertainment Expo. https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electronic_Entertainment_Expo#E3_1997.