Sport Management Review xxx (2017) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Sport Management Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/smr

Review

eSports – Competitive sports or recreational activity?

Kirstin Hallmann*, Thomas Giel

Institute of Sport Economics and Sport Management, German Sport University Cologne, Am Sportpark Muengersdorf 6, Cologne, 50933, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 15 May 2017
Received in revised form 24 July 2017
Accepted 24 July 2017
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Physical activity
Gamification
Experiences
Trend

ABSTRACT

eSports is growing around the globe, with more and more individuals are engaged as players or spectators. In this paper, the authors reflect on whether eSports can be considered as sport based on evaluating five characteristics of sport and assessing them for eSports. Currently, eSports are not a sport but there is the potential that eSports will become a sport. Different opportunities how marketers and managers can attend to eSports are outlined.

1. Introduction

"eSports to be a medal event at 2022 Asian Games" – the British daily newspaper *The Guardian* reported in mid-April 2017 about the decision of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) to include eSports, which is also known as electronic sports or competitive gaming, to the official programme at the 2022 Asian Games in China (Graham, 2017, n.p.). According to the OCA (2017a), the Asian Games are "the biggest multi-sport games after the Olympic Games" (n.p.) generally following the Olympic Games' sports programme. Therefore, this decision, reflecting "the rapid development and popularity of this new form of sports participation among the youth" (Olympic Council of Asia, 2017c, n.p.), could constitute a milestone for eSports to be officially and worldwide recognised as a sport. However, the question if eSports really should be perceived as a sport is highly arguable and needs a more detailed appreciation. It is an important question because, for example, in Germany the state promotes sports by means of subsidies (Breuer, 2011) as well as tax exemptions for sport organisations. The tax exempt status is common for many sports within the European Union: For instance, Austrian, Danish, French, Dutch and Belgium tax authorities recognise even bridge ('duplicate bridge') as sport (Miles, 2017). This implies that a potential eSports federation and their member organisations could get substantial economic benefits if eSports would be officially accepted as a sport. In addition, eSports has grown to an important industry: Spectator-events, which are often sold out, are hosted (e.g. ESL, 2016) and the events are also sponsored indicating an economic dimension. Also prize pools for the players are highly increasing. The eSports tournament 'DOTA 2 International' had the highest prize pool for its 2016 tournament in Seattle, with more than US$20 million. The prize pool for the 2017 tournament will even surpass this amount (Craddock, 2016; Keefer, 2017). Furthermore, eSports especially fascinates adolescents and young people (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). eSports illustrate one possibility to reach the youth and connect them to at least virtual sporting activities, which again might induce growing interest to practice sports themselves.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: k.hallmann@dshs-koeln.de (K. Hallmann), t.giel@dshs-koeln.de (T. Giel).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2017.07.011
1441-3523/

2. eSports as sport?

According to the Council of Europe's European Sport Charter originally adopted in 1992 and revised in 2001, sport "means all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organised participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels" (Council of Europe, 2001, n.p.). This definition has also been used by the European Commission in their 2007 White Paper on Sport (European Commission, 2007). Rodgers (1977) argued that two factors should always be present in a sport: it should (a) involve physical activity and (b) be practiced for recreational purposes. Ideally sport should include two more factors: it should (c) involve an element of competition and (d) have a framework of institutional organisation (Rodgers, 1977). In addition to these four criteria, Gratton and Taylor (2000) named general acceptance (e.g. by the media or sports agencies) as another important criterion for an activity to be considered a sport. These five criteria are used to discuss whether eSports go beyond a sole recreational activity and will be used within the chapter as sub-headings.

2.1. eSports and physical activity

Both, the sport definition of the Council of Europe (2001) as well as the one of Rodgers (1977) primarily refers to physical activity as a core element of a sport. The physical activity element leads to divergent opinions regarding activities like chess, darts, poker, snooker, or eSports, and several debates about their claim to be a sport are on-going. Physical activity itself has several definitions. While the American Heart Association (2016) defined physical activity very broadly as being anything that leads people to move their body and burn calories, Pate et al. (1995) used a more detailed definition: "Moderate physical activity is activity performed at an intensity of 3–6 METs" (p. 402). The metabolic equivalent of task (MET) is a physiological measure for the amount of energy that physical activities take. The energy needed to sit quietly is defined as one MET, which is the so-called resting metabolic rate. For most healthy adults, 3–6 METs are generally equivalent to walking at 5–6 km per hour (Pate et al., 1995). The definition of the World Health Organization (2017) is in between the two earlier mentioned: "Physical activity is any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure" (n.p.).

Turning from sport and its core element physical activity to eSports, Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) defined eSports as "a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the eSports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces" (p. 211). Also the definition of the OCA (2017b) explained that eSports "describe the playing of video games competitively [while] the games themselves can vary in nature and clued [sic] shooting, strategy and sporting games" (n.p.) calling it "a relatively new form of sports" (n.p.). Other definitions do not describe eSports as a form of sport; for example, the Cambridge Dictionary (2017) defining it as an "activity of playing computer games against other people on the internet, often for money, and often watched by other people using the internet, sometimes at special organized events" (n.p.).

None of these three definitions mentions physical activity as any component of eSports. Only playing computer games is mentioned as an activity in the context of eSports. Referring to the sports definitions of the Council of Europe (2001) as well as of Rodgers (1977), it would be easy to conclude at this point that eSports cannot be a sport, as it does not include any particular physical activity. However, some governing bodies officially accept as sport other activities in which physical activity does not play a major role either—the German Olympic Sport Confederation's (DOSB) acceptance of chess represents one such example.

The DOSB is the largest citizens' movement in Germany, with more than 27 million members in approximately 90,000 sports clubs (DOSB, 2017), and it generally has the decision-making power to define if an activity is officially recognised as a sport in Germany. Its admission regulations involve both athletic as well as organisational requirements for sports. Generally, three essential conditions have to be fulfilled to be accepted by the DOSB as a sport: (a) a sport has to include some form of physical activity; (b) it should convey ethical values, such as fair play, equal opportunities, as well as a person's inviolability; and (c) clear organisational structures need to be existent (DOSB, 2014). Apparently the physical activity in chess is sufficient to comply with the requirements of the DOSB, as it is officially accepted by the DOSB just like, for instance, billiard, boules, bowling, curling, darts, equestrian, or mini-golf (DOSB, 2016). In contrast, the DOSB does not recognize professional boxing, as it violates the condition of conveying ethical values (Spiller, 2010). On the other hand, amateur boxing is accepted, as are shooting and fencing (Kühl, 2016). Currently, eSports is not accepted by the DOSB as a sport. However, there are discussions going on about the handling of eSports in Germany (Reuter, 2015).

Some researchers have already dedicated their interest on the phenomenon of eSports and analysed its different components, taking into account several perspectives. Witkowski (2012) argued that eSports players are physically engaged in different ways, as professional players, for example, have a balanced body which is not mimicking the movements of their virtual avatar and are haptically engaged through the use of their keyboard and mouse to steer their avatar. Rudolf et al. (2016) have shown that eSports players are exposed to physiological stresses and strains during competitions, which are to some extent comparable to the ones of top athletes from other sports. Bearing in mind the small sample size of the study, the analysis of the stress hormone cortisol and the heart rates of eSports players points at the existence of acute stress during competitions. While their level of cortisol during competitions is comparable to the one of racing drivers, their average heart rate during competitions is over 100 beats per minute with peaks of up to 160 to 180 beats per minute. Based on their own subjective perception, eSports players are not exposed to chronic stress. The researchers concluded that in combination with

Please cite this article in press as: K. Hallmann, T. Giel, eSports – Competitive sports or recreational activity?, Sport Management Review (2017), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2017.07.011

the players' high motor requirements eSports is on a par with some other sports regarding the physiological stresses and strains (Rudolf et al., 2016).

2.2. eSports as part of recreation

Analysing the motivation of players to be active in eSports, Weiss and Schiele (2013) identified competition, challenge as well as escapism to have a positive effect on the use of eSports. Interestingly, escapism refers to striving for a highly skilled online avatar, which is representing a person's real life behaviour with some kind of competitive advantage and not the ability to emerge into an avatar behaving differently to the person's real life. Martončik (2015) showed that for professional players eSports is not only about fun and playing games, but it can serve as a means to satisfy other needs, such as forming relationships with team partners and achieving life goals. Team leaders had significantly higher scores on power as a life goal compared to other players not belonging to a clan, and professional players scored significantly higher in diversion and affiliation compared to casual players (Martončik, 2015). Additionally, eSports players neither saw their activities as leisure time nor work, but something in between and a platform for carrying out identity projects (Seo, 2016). Taylor (2012) found that in a growing eSports business, gamers are torn between wanting to keep to themselves and trying to set themselves apart from others, on the one hand, and opening up to the public to increase awareness, interest, and legitimisation for eSports, on the other hand. But generally professional players were interested in sharing their passion and making it attractive to a wider audience, which is also important for event organisers and sponsors increasing the financial values of eSports.

The different roles of eSports players have also been the research interest of Seo and Jung (2016), who stated that eSports have been developed and professionalised through the interrelated nexuses of the different consumption practices of playing, watching, and governing. This led to players being torn between and able to concurrently adopt different roles. Trepte, Reinecke, and Juechems (2012) found benefits of eSports, namely that players create offline social capital in the real world through online social capital acquired for example by engaging in online team relations. This finding scientifically contradicts the prejudice of gamers to be lonely nerds without any social environment.

2.3. eSports and competitive elements

Generally, eSports is all about different teams or individual players competing with each other and trying to be the best in a specific game. This is also a core attraction for spectators to follow eSports, shown by the substantial visitor numbers at eSports events. Just to name one example, the Electronic Sports League (ESL) attracted three days in a row 14,000 spectators during the World Championship 2016 of the shooting game *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* in Cologne. The event was sold-out one week before it actually began, and the championship has also been transmitted online all over the world (ESL, 2016). The organisational structures of eSports with the different established leagues and tournaments clearly display its competitive character.

2.4. eSports and organisational structures

Thomas Bach, president of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), commented in April 2017 that the IOC is not certain if eSports is really a sport as it lacks physical activity elements (Eberhardt, 2017). He mentioned missing organisational structures as another obstacle for eSports to be accepted by the IOC as a sport. Organisational structures could guarantee that Olympic values and rules can be observed and controlled all over eSports. An international umbrella organisation combining the different movements in the area of eSports is currently missing, but represents a very important element for the IOC's assessment to incorporate a sport (Eberhardt, 2017).

Focusing on the structures of eSports, eSports tournaments mirror traditional sports tournaments. For example, one can compare the World Cyber Games to the Olympic Games, as they are organised similarly regarding tier sponsors, and have national ranking, medals, and values (Hutchins, 2008). Breuer (2012) identified that eSports, as a professional sport, does not really fit into the two well-known major sport systems of American and European sport leagues. While teams in eSports can be seen as profit-maximisers like American sport teams, similarities between eSports and the European sport system can be observed as well – examples are the trade of players, the open leagues system, or the possibility to participate in multiple competitions. In contrast to these similarities, other aspects are unique for eSports and not comparable to the two established sport systems: For example, the limited importance of federations, or eSports' reliance on online broadcasting and sponsoring revenues. Therefore, eSports should develop its own league model (Breuer, 2012).

2.5. Acceptance of eSports

Gratton and Taylor (2000) explained that the general acceptance of, for example, the media or sports agencies is relevant for an activity to be considered as a sport. This implies that TV coverage of an activity in a sport programme as well as news coverage in the sport section of a newspaper are both indicators for an activity to be considered as sport. The activities are also competitive with coverage on, for example, world championships. Additionally, these activities are also often included in national sport participation surveys (Gratton & Taylor, 2000).

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In the following, examples especially from Germany will be presented to show the growing acceptance of eSports. The two German professional football Bundesliga teams, FC Schalke 04 and VfL Wolfsburg, have their own eSports team. While FC Schalke 04 generally participates in eSports competitions, VfL Wolfsburg is specialised in the football video game FIFA. The leading German sport magazine, *kicker,* established its own page dedicated to eSports (esport.kicker.de). The German sport platform Sport1 includes on its webpage eSports just next to sports like basketball, ice hockey, tennis, and winter sports. Importantly, other sports, such as track and field or swimming, are not listed but only to be found by navigating other sections of the site. Furthermore, Sport1 is broadcasting eSports events live on its television channel. SPONSORS, which is the leading German information provider in sports business and is regularly hosting the biggest sports business congresses in Europe, held for the first time the *SPOBIS Gaming & Media* Congress in August 2017 due to the rapid development of eSports trying to connect the fields of eSports and traditional sports business.

All these developments are not restricted to Germany or Europe. Asia is generally the leading continent regarding eSports, but the United States of America are absolutely aware of eSports and its growing popularity: In 2013, a famous Canadian player of the online game *League of Legends* was first to be granted a visa from the US immigration services, which acknowledges him as an internationally recognised athlete and thereby treating him equivalent to athletes from other sports (Dave, 2013).

In 2016 a request of accepting eSports as a non-profit sport has been discussed in the Berlin House of Representatives. The request has been rejected referring to the statement by the sports associations that eSports does not fulfil the conditions to be officially recognised as a sport (Berlin House of Representatives, 2016). One year later, in April 2017, a panel session took place in the German Bundestag discussing potentials and prospects of eSports in Germany (Eberhardt, 2017). This portrays that also politics is discussing eSports.

One could also argue that a research interest in eSports spectators and their motivation indicates a certain degree of acceptance. Analysing *EVE Online*, a game characterised by its loose moral code of conduct, (Carter & Gibbs, 2013) found that a game's unbounded nature due to missing set of rules makes it unique and interesting not only to players, but also to spectators. Further investigating eSports spectators, Cheung and Huang (2011) have identified nine types of spectators based on an analysis of spectators of the real-time strategy computer game *Starcraft*. They differentiate between the *bystanders*, the *curios*, the *inspired*, the *pupil*, the *unsatisfied*, the *entertained*, the *assistant*, the *commentator,* and the *crowd*. The spectators' intentions range from watching the game casually to being a fan at competitive gaming tournaments and the key stakeholders being important for the experience of eSports are obviously the players, but also the commentators and the other spectators (Cheung & Huang, 2011).

3. Conclusion

Although most research focusing on eSports has been qualitative and therewith so far rather exploratory and not ultimately generalizable, it is obvious that eSports also has become a scientific topic portrayed from different perspectives. Based on the definitions of sport and the ones of eSports, a fit is not identifiable, especially because of the missing physical activity in eSports. Although outstanding visible movements cannot be ascribed to eSports players, they require some gaming skills including hand-eye coordination and speed of (responsive) action, as well as strategic and tactical understanding. As indicated in several interviews, eSports players in their mid-twenties are often not capable to compete at the highest level anymore as especially their speed of responsive action is decreasing (e.g. Hilgers & Mülleneisen, 2017; Jaax, 2015; Schütz, 2016). However, there is no empirical evidence for this circumstance yet.

Recapping all the previous developments of the eSports business, one can argue that eSports is close to but not yet equivalent to sports. However, referring to other sports, which are comparable in regard of their physical activity, such as darts or chess, and to the growing general acceptance of eSports in the sport business, eSports will likely be officially accepted as a sport and eventually even included to the Olympic programme if it will have established the necessary organisational structures, including a strong umbrella organisation. However, there is also a strong commercial focus of eSports, which can be a drawback to be considered as sport by the sporting community (SportTreff, 2017).

3.1. Implications for sport management and marketing and future research

Considering its potential, sport managers and marketers alike should consider how they attend to eSports. It represents gamification in its purest form and can render, thanks to its unique setting, memorable experiences. These experiences should be leveraged and strengthened by sport managers and marketers to increase loyalty. Experiences and authenticity have been conceptualised previously (Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 1999) and this might be useful knowledge for practitioners. Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999) proposed the progression of economic value from commodities, via goods, services, and experiences towards transformations. They introduced the term "experience economy" to marketing and suggested a conceptual framework consisting of the poles active and passive participation on the one hand and the poles immersion and absorption on the other hand. This leads to a four-cell matrix which is comprised of the elements entertainment, education, aesthetic, and escapism. The elements are not considered as mutually exclusive. Following Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999), experiences and transformations can be regarded as distinct economic offerings that go beyond being add-ons to services. Taking an organisational perspective, the purpose is to deliver a series of extraordinary moments creating an experience in which the consumer is emerged in her or his individual way. The growing customisation and

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commodification is reflected by this model. Although there is no explicit theory nurturing the model, it has been widely applied in research (e.g., Hosany & Witham, 2010; Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012).

Seo (2013) applied this model to eSports and concluded its applicability. He provided examples how eSports can be categorised along the four elements: (a) entertainment is reflected by broadcasting channels and eSports communities; (b) education is depicted through governing bodies; (c) escapism relates to Internet cafes, gaming companies (which are, according to Seo, also educational); and (d) aesthetic is reflected by eSports tournaments. Seo (2013) argues that eSports players are influenced by all four realms. Comparing the way the four realms of an experience have been applied and the notion that the players are influenced by the four dimensions, differences to previous research using the four realms of an experience become obvious. So far, the realms have been used to describe the experience as perceived by the consumer (Hosany & Witham, 2010; Loureiro, 2014; Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011; Oh et al., 2007). This differs slightly from the approach chosen by Seo (2013) who has tried to fit the industry into the conceptual model as well as the consumers (eSports players and eSports fans) with their perceptions.

Perception is a process by which the player or fan selects, organises, and interprets stimuli provided by eSports into a meaningful picture. This is steered by information processing and mental activities which can lead to learning. The engagement in eSports can also stir emotions, which relate to a mental state of arousal based on the evaluation of an occurrence or consumer's thought (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999). This can lead to attitude formation (Bagozzi, 1996). A favourable attitude towards eSports leads likely to consumption, as general consumer behaviour theory suggests (Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard, & Hogg, 2013). Considering the growing market, the evolution and the prospect of eSports, it should therefore be attended by marketers. Yet, the question arises how it should be attended.

One option would be to apply the four realms of an experience to eSports consumption, as it creates memorable moments that endure and can increase future intentions (i.e. future eSports consumption) as suggested by research in other areas using the four realms of an experience and future intentions (Hosany & Witham, 2010). Seo (2013) advocates that management and marketing should move forward and not only cater the computer game but create an eSports experience. As there has been no research yet which of the four realms explain the eSports experience best, we do not offer a recommendation with regard to the focus of activities on, for instance, just escapism or a mixture of education and escapism or any other mixture. Future researchers should investigate using a second order model which dimension(s) is most important for players and which dimension(s) elevates the consumption of fans.

A second option available to sport managers and marketers is applying the concept of authenticity to eSports in communication and the presentation of the products and services related to eSports. This would yield the rising demand for authentic brands (Fritz, Schoenmueller, & Bruhn, 2017), on the one hand, and strengthen the brand relationship, on the other hand. Perceived brand authenticity influences brand relationship quality, which subsequently has an impact on consumer's behavioural intentions (Fritz et al., 2017). Gilmore and Pine (2007) propose – based on their rationale of the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1998) – five types of authenticity: (a) natural authenticity relates to commodities and refers to anything untouched by human hand; (b) original authenticity describes the product's uniqueness in design respectively being the first of its kind; (c) exceptional authenticity refers to services and the extraordinary quality of their delivery; (d) referential authenticity communicates about experiences which tap into shared memories, might be related to rituals (i.e. experiencing the Haka in New Zealand or enjoying a Siberian 'Banja' (sauna)) and provide inspirations; and (e) transformational authenticity relates to transformations guiding consumers to change the self (Gilmore & Pine, 2007).

Of these dimensions, all but the first one can be applied to eSports. Managers and marketers alike can stress the originality of, for instance, the games, tournament, or events. At tournaments exceptional authenticity can be rendered and through creating a unique atmosphere referential authenticity can be developed over time. Transformational authenticity can be experienced by the players when slipping into various characters. This corresponds to the findings of Seo (2016) that eSports provide a platform for players to carry out identity projects. Yet, the idea of transformational authenticity relates to promoting good causes and aspirations. Using other identities as part of the game does not imply that the players strive to transform into better humans; indeed they can also take on bad characters. However, in drawing from Seo (2016), there is potential for transformational authenticity. Future researchers should operationalise the five authenticity types and test their importance among players. Focus groups with players and fans could shed additional light on what they appreciate so that marketers can pick this up and create unique and authentic experiences for all eSports consumers.

A third option relates to sponsorship opportunities in eSports. Managers and marketers alike could use in-game marketing, such as product placement in a game or buy the naming rights of a tournament, and become a sponsor to place their products and services (Mazari, 2012). As betting is already an integral part of eSports (Schneider, 2015), similar to other sports, this is also an area where sport managers could draw their attention to. However, these two areas are not well-researched yet.

Though eSports focuses on games and is not equal to gamification, there is a trend that the service industry takes inspiration from video games. This leads to employing gamification (using game elements in a non-game context) elements (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, & Nacke, 2011) representing a fourth option for sport management – though not based on eSports itself but game elements. Marketers envision using gamification more frequently in the future (Lucassen & Jansen, 2014). This warrants considerable potential for sport marketers and managers, as involvement can be strengthened through gamification elements and it sets a different stimulus.

In summary, there are several areas within eSports providing opportunities for sport managers and marketers alike. This is also true for research as eSports represents an emerging field and practitioners need to have additional knowledge about

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the players and fans as consumers so that they know how to target them. Further research is required to fully understand the phenomenon of eSports and its relevance for the sporting industry. This should include initially research on potential benefits of eSports and whether they correspond to the benefits which derive from other sports. This is irrespective of it being officially accepted as sports or not. eSports warrants scholarly attention, as it encompasses sociological and economic dimensions which are of interest to various stakeholders such as individuals playing, the gambling industry, potential sponsors, media, or sporting goods manufacturers. The potential research areas have been identified in this chapter.

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Please cite this article in press as: K. Hallmann, T. Giel, eSports – Competitive sports or recreational activity?, Sport Management Review (2017), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2017.07.011

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Please cite this article in press as: K. Hallmann, T. Giel, eSports – Competitive sports or recreational activity?, Sport Management Review (2017), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2017.07.011