THE RISING WORLD OF E-SPORTS

The Revelation of the Unknown World of e-Sports and its Influences on the Western Society

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Abstract

This paper is the result of a theoretical examination of a new type of media which is becoming a worldwide growing phenomenon and having a significant influence amongst today’s youth and its culture. In this paper I will emphasize on the impact of e-Sports in a social and cultural context and how our western society can take these developments into account.

It is written in an accessible manner and provides an insightful examination of the growing world of e-Sports. The paper is broken up in to several chapters; introducing a proper definition of ‘e-Sports’, a theoretical approach on e-Sports being a ‘real’ sport, a brief history on e-Sports and a case-study of the most successful e-Sport of all time: *StarCraft*.

The cultural differences between the eastern and western world are being compared, showing the a correlation between the success of e-Sports in South Korea and the rise of internet café’s, economical welfare and a wandering youth looking for entertainment. Further, a view on successful e-Sports environments is given, explaining the importance of gaming communities in order to attract more sponsors, as today’s sports are aimed on the spectator rather than the participants.

Finally, a conclusion is given on the issues revolving around the development of e-Sports in the western world. Through E-Sports, a new kind of intimacy with machines evolves which stimulates new ways of thinking and new ways to identify ourselves. Even though it is a niche market, this phenomenon should certainly not be overlooked. The industry spreads itself significantly on a worldwide level and has started to get a growing attention in our pop culture.
1.2. Introduction

Fingers typing on a keyboard fast as lightning; eyes staring at a screen totally concentrated. Headphones smother war sounds. The movements are minimal; silence reigns. The world championship of the WarCraft computer game progresses in seeming stillness, while in the virtual environment players fight out hyperactive battles.¹

A new phenomenon is on the rise, which to many is an invisible world but at the same time is practiced by a huge part of today’s youth; the world of e-Sports.

Electronic sports, abbreviated e-Sports or eSports, is used as a general term to describe anything related to competitive gaming in virtual worlds. In a very similar way to sports there is only one goal: winning.

The origin of modern e-Sports dates back to the mid 1990s. A new culture had grown tremendously and gained a lot of popularity, especially in Asia where big crowds of fans cheered on their favorite players. E-Sports have profiled themselves to be a fanatic sport with millions of viewers and attendees.

The industry is still so young and unknown that hardly any studies have yet been done on this subject. With this paper I will try to take an appropriate academic approach to reveal various issues, as well as potential solutions to these issues, that revolve around the development of e-Sports and its impact on our society.

Welcome to a world of sacrifices, goals, failures and success.

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¹ Buyvoets, 2008.
2. EVOLUTION OF E-SPORTS

2.1. What Defines a Sport?

There is a lot of controversy whether e-Sports is supposed to be considered a real ‘sport’. To find out, we first have to examine the definition of sports. Remarkably, attempts to define sport have engaged the energies of many writers but have never resulted in one definition that all parties have agreed upon. Some suggest that the pursuit of defining sport is fruitless as the concept defies definition. Whereas some make a distinction between sport, mind games and physical recreation, others see all three as sport.

A general and neutral definition of sport is given by sport scientist Claus Tiedemann:

“Sport” is a cultural field of activity in which human beings voluntarily go into a relation to other people with the conscious intention to develop their abilities and accomplishments - particularly in the area of skilled motion - and to compare themselves with these other people according to rules put self or adopted without damaging them or themselves deliberately.  

This definition of sports also applies to the very similar nature of e-Sports. In 1992, The Council of Europe’s Sports Charter adopted a different definition:

“Sport” means all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organized participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competitions at all levels.  

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1Wagner, 2006, p2.
2Council of Europe, 2001, p3.
One could say e-Sports fit to this definition as well, but whether e-Sports include the improvement of physical fitness is questionable.

Even though e-Sports do not require any sort of excessive state of physical athleticism, still a specific type of physical endurance is required. Hand-eye coordination and fast mouse and/or keyboard movement are important factors which can drastically change the outcome of a match. Next to that, to build up more stamina professional gamers can often be found at the gym.

In my opinion a game is considered a sport when the great collective accepts a certain activity as a sport. Sports are not a static entity but constantly evolving. We see new sports taking their share in the market constantly. Darts, which for a long while has been considered as a subculture and a competitive activity, have evolved into a competitive sport with professional leagues. Another example would be chess, which has been recognized as a sport by the International Olympic Committee in 1999.

E-Sports do fit various definitions of sports but have not yet been accepted by society. When e-Sports will start to get more media attention this process will go through an enormous boost. At the same time, e-Sports would generate a lot of attention from the business world when it would be recognized as an official sport. Even though e-Sports will probably never come close the same status soccer has within the upcoming 50 years, it still has a lot of potential to grow as, what I would consider, a ‘minor sport’ or niche market, like darts or poker.

2.2. Defining e-Sports

When talking about e-Sports we are referring to the term ‘Electronic Sports’. One of the earliest reliable sources that use the term “e-Sports” is from a 1999 press release on the launch of the Online Gamers Association (OGA) in which Eurogamer evangelist
Mat Bettington talked about an independent governing body for everybody involved in online gaming to come together and help online gaming through its growth period.

Even though the term has been used for almost ten years, currently there is still no accepted definition of the term. When searching for a definition online, the closest available result comes from Wikipedia, which describes e-Sports as follows:

Electronic sports, abbreviated esports or e-Sports, is used as a general term to describe the play of video games as a professional sport. Other terms include competitive gaming, cybersports, cyberathletics and V-Sports.

Games which are considered electronic sports normally belong to the first-person shooter, real-time strategy, or sports game genres. They are played competitively at both amateur and professional levels. The biggest e-Sports nation is considered to be South Korea. (‘e-Sports’ comes from South Korea).  

This is hardly a definition, but rather a vague description that gives us a lot of room for our own imagination. The sole scientific article on e-Sports to date, written by Michael Wagner, tried to lay a foundation for a proper academic treatment of e-Sports, addressing the same issue.

An often used term to describe ‘electronic sports’ is ‘professional gaming’, a competitive way of playing computer games within a professional setting. As Wagner says, this term has a far too narrow point of view, as the most dominant influence of competitive computer gaming is to be found in private homes on family computers.

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\(^4\)Wikipedia.com.
Wagner then leaves us with his definition derived from the definition of ‘sports’:

“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.”

Even though this definition is more open towards the practicing of any sort of ‘digital’ sport, it still doesn’t really put a finger on the exact meaning of e-Sports, as this definition could also include playing computer chess or solitaire. Also, within the world of e-Sports a competitive element always plays a central role.

Taking this in mind we can create our own, more precise, definition:

“e-Sports” is an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies to compare these with other people within a virtual world with a particular set of rules.

2.2. Sport or Subculture?

Our new definition of e-Sports implies that they are in fact an area of sports. E-Sports as we know them at this moment are definitely not considered a sport in our culture, but usually are described as a subculture which belongs to a younger generation. The issues involving the comparison of e-Sports to sports are found within the generation gap.

E-Sports is a world of a new generation and a rather hard concept to grasp for older generations. It is an invisible world to outsiders but at the same time it’s growing so fast that perhaps we are facing a revolution in sports.

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Sports have been a part of human culture for thousands of years. People have been kicking balls around for thousands of years in games similar to soccer. There are records of such a game, called Cuju, being played in China almost 2500 years ago. In the middle ages, villages would play against each other in violent matches involving thousands of players over several days. It has evolved a lot from that point and eventually, when people agreed over a certain set of rules, soccer had emerged during the 19th century.

When most people think of sports, the first things that will cross their minds are the obvious ones: soccer, tennis, basketball and so forth. Even though such activities have existed for years, sports as a whole are not so easily defined. Sports are not a static entity but are an evolving form of art. It is all about the evolution of the game, with the most influencing aspect being the collective market taking control over a certain game. If certain rules are being set in a near future by the collective market, you can be sure that every player and team will hold themselves to these rules.

The market is a powerful tool. Over the last decade video and computer games have jumped in sales and popularity. Generational gaps reveal these distinct differences that are unique to our culture. When asked about what kids did to pass their time in high school in the 1960s, most likely ‘playing sports’ will often be the returned answer. If one were to ask that same question again in today’s age, ‘video games’ would be a strong rival.

Video games offer a similar element that was formerly monopolized by sports: relative competition. There is no specific participation level to be able to play any sort of sport; anyone can gather some friends and play. However, compared to other cultural activities, this is very different. Looking at music for example, it is highly unlikely that a member of a band isn’t genuinely interested in to learning to play an instrument and keep on getting better. For sports this is different. It is fairly easy to find someone who has played a competitive game of soccer without harboring any illusions of becoming the next Diego Maradona. Usually they want to be the best amongst their friends and are satisfied with that. It is the relative competition that makes sports so enthralling for kids.
Now that video games are becoming more and more entangled within our culture, it is hard to overlook the fact that most of these games offer a competitive element strangely reminiscent of that of athletic sports. It started small, with friends coming over to play a couple of friendly console games in the family room, and has now evolved into a worldwide competitive scene in which the whole world is connected through the internet to play against each other.

The physical skill sets required are not entirely the same compared to those of traditional sports, but they are also merely a reflection on what society has deemed important. But even these boundaries are starting to break, with games such as darts, poker and chess being generally accepted as sports. E-Sports carry a lot of similar characteristics of a sport, and not all were created simply in emulation. Whether this proves if e-Sports are in fact considered a sport or not is still a question, but it does show that the evolution of e-Sports will not stop at an annual gaming contest.

2.4. e-Sports History

E-Sports, as a competitive sport, have existed since 1995 when the first big tournaments were organized. In this period the Cyberathlete Professional League (CPL) emerged, the very first league of video games, whose business concept was modeled after the major professional sports leagues in the USA. Ever since then, the CPL has organized over 45 international tournaments with over 50,000 gamers attending.

A few years later, other leagues came to rise such as the World Cyber Games (WCG) and the Electronic Sports World Cup (ESWC). These were important organizations that helped the evolution of e-Sports tournaments.
Various companies and sponsors saw the profit of investing into this growing industry, which were mainly shown in the shape of prize money for the winners of the tournaments. Most of the investors were technology related companies who had interest in the gaming target group.

In 1997, the first big tournament featured a Ferrari as prize reward for its winner. These days the prize money in some tournaments has grown excessively and has passed the $1,000,000 milestone.

In the USA and Europe, the history of e-Sports is usually associated with the first networked first-person shooting (FPS) games; a video game genre which centers the game play around gun- or projectile weapon-based combat through the first person perspective (i.e. the eyes of the player). During that time the players gathered to set up teams (also called “clans”) to compete in online tournaments. A popular example of this type of gaming genre would be ‘Counter-Strike’, a first-person shooter game released in 1999 by a game development company called Valve. This game has since remained one of the central elements in western e-Sports events.

Screenshots of a first-person shooter game (CounterStrike) on the left, and a real-time strategy game (StarCraft) on the right.
The eastern e-Sports culture started out in South Korea. The advanced Korean telecom systems caused a rapid growth of digital television and online gaming. As opposed to the USA and Europe, the Korean public preferred real-time strategy (RTS) games over first-person shooter games. Real-time strategy games are war games in which the participants position and maneuver units and structures under their control to secure areas of the map and/or destroy their opponents’ assets.

In 1998 a California-based game development company, Blizzard Entertainment, released a real-time strategy game called ‘StarCraft’. This game has been dominating the Korean gaming and e-Sports market ever since.

The game is particularly well suited for competitive play, which resulted in a serious gaming culture in which individual StarCraft players are able to gain a celebrity status similar to professional athletes competing in major sports leagues. These celebrities could be seen daily on Ongamenet and MBC Game, two South Korean TV-channels devoted to televising StarCraft matches. For any other player, playing StarCraft in the Korean leagues is often seen as a gamers Valhalla.

Later on in 2000, the first World Cyber Games event was held in Seoul, South Korea. Featuring competitions for various games, the competition initially had competitors from 17 different countries and a total prize purse of $20,000. Since then, this has grown to offer a total prize purse of $470,000 as well as participants from 70 different countries.

Even though the e-Sports evolution in Europe and the USA are farther behind as compared to South Korea, it is slowly experiencing the same sort of shift; online e-Sports TV channels, media attention on regular TV channels, occasional reports in newspapers and magazines. National Geographic had televised a documentary in 2005 on StarCraft and follows the life of a gamer in Korea; In 2008, Dutch film and documentary maker, Jos de Putter, had also made a documentary on Warcraft 3, another real-time strategy game, which follows the lives of two top contesters.
In the western world the main medium for e-Sports coverage is the Internet. Electronic sports websites generally focus on professional tournaments and the top level amateur games, leaving the other games to be covered by the leagues themselves or smaller game-specific community websites if at all.

2.5. The Most Successful e-Sport: StarCraft

*StarCraft* in Korea is probably the only example of a truly successful e-Sport. The game has received a numerous awards, including game of the year, game of the decennia and best real-time strategy game of all time.

In a similar fashion to sports, clans and teams have become signature elements of the gaming industry as games became more and more competitive. Tournaments became common occurrences and South Korea and *StarCraft* evolved into a major professional and televised sport.

While tournaments have been important in sports, league play has always really defined competitive sports. And to no surprise, *StarCraft* followed in those footsteps. Having pro-leagues and individual tournaments, the Korean *StarCraft* scene seems almost like a perfect emulation of athletic sports. Joined by commentators the similarities between *StarCraft* and traditional sports are astounding; statistical analysis of the players, their strengths and their weaknesses, televiding matches, the idolization of the best of the best (and sometimes even the not so best), and so forth.

Let’s take a closer look at the game. The game is set up in a sci-fi future world in which three races dominate the world, the Zerg, the Protoss and the Terran. The game starts by the player choosing one of those three races and then the gathering resources in order to build an army. The goal is simply destroy your opponent.
The game however is not as easy as it sounds; learning the brief basics can be achieved within a day, but it takes several years of practice to master all aspects of the game.

The game requires lightning dexterity on the keyboard and the ability to make dozens of tactical decisions every moment. The ‘quickness’ of a player is measured in actions per minute (APM) which is very similar to the serve speed in the game of tennis for example. An average player may barely reach an APM of 120, while those who are considered to be true masters of the game have recorded APMs of over 300.

The way the game has turned into a successful e-Sport and has been quite exceptional. With a unique set of circumstances StarCraft has been able to gain a lot of popularity. There were many catalysts that helped this to happen, such as the popularity of PC bangs (internet cafés) in South Korea. Through time, StarCraft and PC bangs grown a mutually beneficial relationship; the game’s popularity caused twice as many PC bangs to be opened.

Even though e-Sports is still fairly unique to South Korea, it is only a matter of time before this expands to the western world. The gaming market has shown no signs of slowing down. However, while there have been various competitions all around the world, no other game than StarCraft has ever reached the success of its most prestigious league, the Starleague, in Korea.

StarCraft has the one element which so few e-Sports have: the ability to watch a match. First-person shooter games by its very nature are difficult to watch as a spectator, yet they have generally been the preferred e-Sports in the western gaming culture due to its early popularity by the players.
First-person shooter games, especially in team-based formats, fall far below real-time strategy games in terms of spectating as it is impossible to get an overall perspective of the surrounding environment. From a first-person view, the spectator is unable to get direct knowledge of the enemy (or enemies) movements and strategies. A third-person camera viewpoint controlled by an observer would fix this, but it removes the most enjoyable part of the genre: watching the player's movements themselves.

On the other hand, with real-time strategy games an observer can see what all players can see. Even though you might not directly see the mouse movements that the players are making, but you can see the results of their actions which allow you to follow their strategy, control and mind games. *StarCraft* is also ever-evolving. With each season of the Korean leagues, the meta-game is changing; sometimes subtly, sometimes considerably, but in most cases caused by the introduction of new playing maps. By enforcing the players to compete on these new maps they will have to adapt their playing styles, which keeps the game from being repetitive and predictable.

Also, the effects of sponsorships are undeniable. Korean leagues have been well sponsored by companies with no affiliation to any particular game, which has resulted in companies not pressuring gamers into playing the publisher's latest game or ensuring that certain games will be ones that are able to show off the sponsor's hardware's full graphical features. Such cases have definitely been influencing first-person shooter games and the western e-Sports market.

Most likely the most important success factor of *StarCraft* is its game mechanics. While in first-person shooter games certain complex movements with some luck can occasionally be executed by a beginning player, in *StarCraft* it requires a huge level of skill in order to perform the same sort of actions executed by a professional gamer.

All-in-one, *StarCraft* presents some interesting comparisons with other e-Sports as to its success where others have failed. While Korean culture itself has had various influences to prolong and keep its success, in Korea *StarCraft* has eclipsed all other e-Sports.
2.6. Asian Popularity and Influences

Looking at how *StarCraft* has grown into a cultural part of South Korea, we could argue that the nature of Korean culture is a perfect environment for the evolution of e-Sports. While *StarCraft* dominates the South Korean e-Sports industry and to this point is its only true successor, there are multiple examples of other well developed e-Sports. To find out which circumstances have ignited the growth of e-Sports, we have to dig back in Korean history.

South Korea has a recent history of Japanese colonial rule which has lasted for 35 years until 1945. It then has had a turbulent period of military dictatorship ending in a more democratic rule in 1987. Even though South Korea has a strong prehistoric culture and a long history, as an independent modern state it is relatively new. The historical turn of events might be important in such ways that because of its colonial rule, the country is more prone to import and assimilate forms of mass media than the previously ruling countries.

In 1990 the Korean government initiated an experimental multi-channel and multi-purpose cable television service. South Korea, being a small and densely populated country, had very good conditions for effective cable distribution. The advanced Korean telecom systems made use of these conditions in an early stage and created a cable network on which special games broadcast channels have been established.

In addition to that, in 1990 the Korean prime-time television was significantly aimed onto adult target groups. TV programming for children and adolescents were heavily under-represented. This is where a correlation can be detected. Since, in South Korea, *StarCraft* is played mainly by young people from the age of 10 to 25 one can reason that there is such a large market for broadcasting computer games competitions on TV in South Korea. With relatively infrequent TV programming for this age group there would be a large number of youth with interest in the gaming channels.
It seems that advertisers have paid close attention to the demographic profile of audiences. The core customers are boys and young male adults aged 10-25. Even though StarCraft has a broad cross-generational appeal, it is mainly a phenomenon amongst male youth. The professional players are heroes among their own generation. Considering the game’s ‘broadcast’ viewers are the same age and have the same interest in the game as the professional players, utilizing constructed online nicknames instead of the players real names would ruin a great potential for identification. Their real names are used and their popularity is comparable to western celebrity status. The players compete to win various titles, which in their turn give social status within the Korean society. In a similar fashion as western celebrities are often supported by their fans through fan sites, there are also fan sites of a great amount of StarCraft players. The top Korean contesters have fan clubs with over 300,000 members.

When looking at the elements of most video games we can detect a lot of popular and mythical figures and symbols. In StarCraft, the imagery and setting used are based on pop culture, particularly the sci-fi genre. The structure which the story runs through is familiar to any sci-fi fan. The concepts of the game are influenced by the movies Alien (1979) and Aliens (1986). Being a product of popular culture, the movies themselves draw symbols that are already settled within the youth culture. In its own way it creates a recognizable setting for the games main audience of young men.

Another important cultural influence are the Korean gaming rooms, also known as PC bangs which are comparable to western internet cafés. During the late 1990s, relatively only few families owned a computer at home, which resulted in games mainly being played in one of the many gaming rooms. In Korean culture, people often go out to meet and the game rooms have become a natural hang-out place for younger people.

While in 1998 there were less than 100 gaming rooms, the economic recovery and Korean debut of StarCraft boosted that figure immensely. During 2000, the capital city of South Korea, Seoul, had over 15,000 gaming rooms. Besides creating over 150,000 new jobs, the industry had recorded an estimated $3.5 billion in revenues during this year.
The gaming rooms, and growing competition between them, have served as a basis for organizing computer games competitions with prizes. It is in these rooms that the first official professional teams had emerged. The PC bangs started to organize their most talented customers. The players that weren’t able to show off in their own neighborhood most likely weren’t suitable enough to eventually turn into real professional gamers.

The local PC bang teams didn’t go unnoticed by businessmen and mass media. The international economy had gone through a steady growth during 1999 and 2000 and growths in investments were particularly strong within the technology and internet businesses. These investments then generated revenue from sponsors and advertising. As a result, more and more money had been directed into the system, creating a foundation for professional computer game players on a large scale in Korea. Official professional gaming teams had emerged and were sponsored by various companies. These companies would buy a team, pay them, house them and pay for their education. The players receive a monthly salary and live off prize money from tournaments they have won. Bigger competitions have resulted in more investments, and by the use of prize money the arrangers have now been able to attract the best players from around the world. This seems to be one of the key elements in the business of professional e-Sports in a comparable way as we know this in traditional sports.

2.7. Acceptance of e-Sports in the Western World

As opposed to Asian culture, in the western world people often feel a lot of shame around playing computer games. The game-industry is a young industry. Whenever it is pictured by the old industry, the traditional media, we see a typical approach: one of concern. The game industry is stereotyped as a menace, a kind of new drug that will affect the behavior of a new generation in a negative way.
The often ‘detached moralistic rejection of the gaming culture as a whole stance’ by the media, contribute heavily to the ideas the public gets. Where as to older generations, chess players may be heroes, the top contestants in the virtual worlds are the heroes of a new generation. People never question the fact whether Gary Kasparov is addicted to chess, or whether Rafael Nadal is addicted to tennis.

In a research on the addiction to computer games, Psychiatrist Dr. Jerald Block has stated that people feel that it’s socially more acceptable to have a significant pornography problem rather than a computer related one.

Some people come in for trouble with Internet porn. But the computer gamers tend to be harder to treat. People feel a lot of shame around computer games.  

This shows that even though casual gaming has become a lot more popular and is generally accepted within society, excessive gaming, let alone making a living of gaming, is not. People are having a hard time explaining their situation to friends, especially adults, which seems to be a specific group that tries to hide their affiliation to video games.

E-Sports are no different from playing chess, but involve practicing a game that sets new standards, new borders and a new level of intellectual creativity. At the same time, one wonders about the balance between sacrifice and goal, or even success. The top level of professional gamers are able to make a living out of it, but what about the life after their gaming career? What about those that are close to the top but are not able to make it? While these are genuine concerns, they also very much apply to all other sports.

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6 Block, 2008.
The same goes for concerns regarding physical activities and playing computer games. In a speech on health issues, the American President Barack Obama stated:

The second step that we can all agree on is to invest more in preventive care so that we can avoid illness and disease in the first place. That starts with each of us taking more responsibility for our health and the health of our children. It means quitting smoking, going in for that mammogram or colon cancer screening. It means going for a run or hitting the gym, and raising our children to step away from the video games and spend more time playing outside.  

While he expresses certain concerns regarding playing video games, the very same arguments could be put towards any other sports. While a certain amount of physical movement is recommended to maintain a healthy physical shape, any other sport has its own physical recommendations that need to be taken into account in order to keep a good healthy balance.

Even though e-Sports keep on making more appearances in pop culture, our society at this point still doesn’t seem ready. However, an interesting development occurred in March 2009, when the American Sci-Fi Channel hosted WCG Ultimate Gamer; a reality TV show sponsored by Samsung and the World Cyber Games (WCG). In this show a selection of the best American gamers were put together in a competition to battle it out for the “Best All-Around Gamer” title. The winner of the show ended up winning $100,000 and an electronics package featuring Samsung’s most advanced technology products.

*World Cyber Games opening ceremony*

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7 Pear & Calmes, 2008.
Filmmaker Jos de Putter, who made a documentary on *WarCraft 3*, said his inspiration for his documentary came from a book which he read as a student. ‘Fatal Strategies’, a book written by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, described a virtual world that was yet to come.

Baudrillard’s theories are about the way we perceive reality and the realness of this as we think we know it. His theory describes that human kind lost touch with the real world, caused by the fake image we see in the media. We keep on distancing more from the real truth and base our reality on ideas that other people have made up in film and media. Basically, Baudrillard analyzed the loss of the scene in our culture and the coming of the simulation.

He foresaw the replacement of system and logic by coincidence and chance and claims that the future belongs to virtual worlds. He described them as essentially solitary.

“25 years later, the gaming culture, which could be called the dominant culture of a new generation (that grew up with computers) shows many of the characteristics Baudrillard describes. This culture could be compared with the rise of cinemas 100 years ago; “new stories, new heroes, new role models and idols, new ways of playing out our roles in society, or re-creating our identities. Thus, gaming influences mankind and through them, new stories,” as de Putter says.  

When we look at the fundamentals of the gaming culture and its ongoing trend it seems only a matter of time until e-Sports will gain massive popularity in the western world as well.

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*Putter de, 2008.*
2.8. Comparing e-Sports to Poker

While doing this research I came across various comparisons between poker and e-Sports. Since poker has recently become very popular in the western culture, especially in the online world, this lead me to do further investigation to see what we can learn from the evolution of poker.

A very interesting evolution can be seen in poker, which has a good deal of comparable characteristics of e-Sports. Moral issues concerning the addiction to poker and the problem whether poker is a gambling game have stalled the popularity of the game for quite a while. A lot of countries have strict rules on the practice of poker, but nevertheless it gained more popularity both in online platforms as well as in real life. Slowly there became more media attention and investments into this new phenomenon.

Another issue that stalled its popularity was the fact that poker has a variety of ways to play the game. For poker to become mainstream, one particular set of rules had to be picked, which turned out to be “Texas No Limit Hold’em”. This format appeared to be the most exciting one, especially for its audience and spectators.

The World Series of Poker (WSOP), an annual poker tournament hosted in Las Vegas, became more popular and gained the status of the Olympic Games for poker. To this day a World Series of Poker bracelet is considered the most valuable trophy a poker player can win.

Then, during 2003, a ‘regular’ guy named Chris Moneymaker won an entrance to the WSOP by playing in an online “satellite” tournament for $40. Moneymaker ended up winning the event, earning $2.5 million and a lot of respect from all professional poker players. The concept of anybody being able to play and having a shot at winning this tournament caught hold of the American public in no time, and soon after tons of businesses invested into this market.
When comparing this evolution to e-Sports, it shows us that e-Sports are struggling with similar problems that are stalling its popularity and prevents it from gaining a same sort of status in the western world as it has in South Korea.

E-Sports is a term for a sport of which a lot of different types and rules are available. Until this moment all gamers are too widespread and supporting a lot of different games. In Korea a choice has been made for this game to be *StarCraft*, even though multiple games are still being played on professional level aside of it.

There are various big e-Sports tournaments, of which the World Cyber Games already has received the Olympic Games status by its participants and spectators. So there already is one governing body for a main tournament to focus the spotlight on to. Also, anyone can participate in this tournament and various success stories have taken place already even though the tournament’s amount of media attention doesn’t do it much justice.

If both participants and spectators could come to an agreement on what the most important game and title would be in the e-Sports world, it would become much easier for the media to give more thorough coverage on the industry by focusing on the ‘most popular’ game. This automatically would make the whole e-Sports industry easier to understand and accept for the masses, and perhaps it would result in to a hype in which the business world will start to invest more vastly into the electronic sports market.
3. COMMERIALIZATION OF E-SPORTS

3.1. Designing an e-Sports environment

As we concluded out of earlier research in this report, in order to make e-Sports more acceptable and understandable in the western society there are various external factors that could be contributing to this cause. It is however also important to look at internal factors, such as a game’s format and set of rules, with in particularly keeping the spectator in mind. Only a well designed game will make a potentially good e-Sport with a longer than average lifespan. An ideal e-Sports game would have an appealing design with an easy learning curve that allows anyone to participate.

Let’s take a look at the current e-Sports game selection. Just like in any other industry, the current e-Sports selection is based on the agenda’s of the sponsors and other involved businesses. In the history of the World Cyber Games, we can see an annually changing list of games that are being played. Even though video games in general have a way shorter lifespan than a sport has, four games have consistently been present throughout the years.

There are a few factors which seem to weight more than others in the decision making process of the game selection. Ultimately, maximizing the return of investment seems to stand out for most companies. Also the community support of a game plays a central role in this. This does not necessarily refer to the size of a game’s total amount of players, but rather the activity of a game’s community. From a sport’s perspective, the lifespan of a game is dependent on its fans and spectators. If there is no interactivity between the top contestants and the community, there is no place for the game in an e-Sports environment. This can be measured by searching for high-traffic third party websites that focus on the game and its community and have their own competitions running. Usually the fan base should be paying attention to the community and distinguishing the top players from the fans.
Another undeniably important factor is the media coverage. The more media coverage (both online, offline & community efforts) there is on a specific game, the easier it is to maximize the return of investment. Do people follow the game's scene? How big is the audience and how much media is already active? Is its community spreading videos and information online at various media-sharing websites such as YouTube?

We see different games come and go because of the periodical media coverage they get. Many of these games miss the fundamentals of a good e-Sport and thus make the industry look like an unstable market.

From an e-Sports point of view, the most important factor is the competitive viability of a game. This is however a highly debatable subject. Usually people search for a widely accepted competitive format and a viable rule set for competitive play to determine this. Another good proof are leagues and competitions in which also casual players are taking part in.

A lot of key elements that a game should have can be found back in the earlier discussed game StarCraft. The game mechanics allows one to fairly easily play the game, yet forces one to invest a lot of time to truly master the game. The depth of the game allows the player to combine the strategic brilliance and creativity of a chess player with high accuracy and mouse control which can impress the spectators in the same way as Roger Federer pleases his fans by showing his close to flawless tennis performances. Real-time strategy seems to be a perfect game type for players to show off more than just high accuracy and fast reflexes. The game’s strategies can be so complex that commentators are used to explain to the average spectator what exactly is going on.
The most important factor of all is the ability to watch a game, as mentioned earlier. The spectator should be able to catch all movements of all players involved in a game. When a game allows the emotion of the players to be caught on camera as well, then all aspects of a spectator sport are present. After all, in today’s sports it is all about the spectator, rather than the competitors.

3.2. e-Sports and commerce

Imagine the Olympic Games, the world’s most prestigious sport event, without any sponsorship. Try to imagine sponsorships without any media. Sponsorships are a lot more than just writing out a couple of cheques. The co-operation of sportsmen and businesses bring in a lot of money for society, but also cost society a lot of money. Commercial interest in traditional sports is huge.

People spend tons of money on sports; merchandise, sport shoes, clothing, sport drinks, membership cards, and so on. Sports are a perfect way to keep your body in mental and physical fitness, but it does cost a lot of money. While big companies like McDonald’s and Coca Cola invest a lot into sports, mainly because they get a lot of media attention, a non-commercial relation between these companies and sports are hard to find.
The more commerce is involved, the more TV spectators are needed; the better participants have to perform, the more the participants get paid from their sponsors. Sponsoring companies hardly ever turn their backs on their representing role models, unless they somehow are associated with such bad publicity which could harm the companies’ image. In today’s culture, companies hardly care about morals and sport ethics; the return of investments is their only focus.

So basically, sports and commerce exploit each other. Top athletes are dependent on money coming from sponsors; while companies are using the top athletes’ identities to make their companies look better. These days all tournaments and events need the support of companies. Companies can offer financial and material support, which are needed for the athletes in order to perform better and next to that for the growth of sports. Their support allows for better conditions for the athletes and better services for the spectators, both on scene as well as at home.

It is also important however, to keep commerce from taking over sports. TV and broadcasting times have come to rule today’s sport events. TV tells the athletes when and what they are allowed to do. This works in two ways, since TV will cause the athletes to make more money at the cost of having to work with the rules of TV.

So how can e-Sports be used for commercial goals? These days sports tend to focus itself on its viewers, rather than the athletes. The commercializing of sports gave the development of sports a lot of possibilities, but when commercial values and interests are pushing in too much things go wrong.

Under the influence of growing commerce and the income of broadcasting rights, sports are evolving into a full business. The influence this has had for sports such as tennis or soccer is huge. These exact same marketing mechanics will help e-Sports develop itself. With tons of spectators across the world, e-Sports has a very interesting market and a lot of potential for revenue.
For a lot of companies, engaging in any kind of sponsorship in the e-Sports business is still seen as risky. Because the industry is so young and evolving so rapidly it is hard to determine the longevity of an e-Sports game.

In the western world we see a lot of teams being created, but there is a lack of professional team management and professional coaches, if there even exists any. There are no qualifications or requirements for any team to arise. The majority of the western e-Sports teams are made up out of friends and could cease to exist at any given time. Players join and leave their teams whenever they feel like and for companies it is too hard to determine which players and teams are the most successful ones.

Next to that, the distribution channels are too vague. There is not enough media attention and there are no live broadcasts on television. Even though certain tournaments have live online broadcasts, the number of spectators falls far below the ones of traditional television.

While because of the cultural background in western society we might never see e-Sports dedicated TV channels, its popularity is certainly is growing. At this stage most companies seem to be very careful when setting foot in this world, but this niche market is certainly profitable. While commerce plays a key role in the development of sports and could very likely help e-Sports to develop itself majorly as well, it is up to the western e-Sports community to mature into a more professional scene.
4. FINAL NOTES

4.1. Summary

“E-Sports” is an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies to compare these with other people within a virtual world with a particular set of rules.

Even though e-Sports aren’t recognized as sports in the traditional way of the word, they do carry a lot of the same characteristics. By developing and training mental and physical abilities a lot of digital sportsmen are competing against each other in virtual worlds. E-Sports within the western society are still a good distance away from being accepted as a real sport. They are still evolving and the phenomenon is trying to find its place within our culture, as they keep on growing and taking a bigger share in the global market.

While chess has been recognized as an official sport by the International Olympic Committee in 1999, and the sport is often compared to e-Sports due to a set of very similar characteristics, e-Sports might possibly never officially be recognized as a sport. Arguments against this are the moral concerns related to violence in games or the addiction of games and the overlapping issues that e-Sports have with playing games for money being perceived as a form of gambling. Because of these reasons, e-Sports might never get support from official governmental organizations like the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport.

This doesn’t mean that e-Sports, as a niche market, can’t gain a publicly popular status in our culture in a same fashion poker or darts have been able to develop these. Especially when looking at how the reputation of poker is often paired together with a negative image of gambling, and darts is a sport that stereotypes the involvement of alcohol while practicing the sport. Yet, through commercial interest in these industries these sports have been able to develop themselves up to a generally accepted professional sport.
Currently, the most successful e-Sport is StarCraft. The game evolved into a full professional and televised sport in South Korea. There are many factors that influenced the evolution of StarCraft into an e-Sport, but the most important one has been its ability to watch as a spectator. Today’s sports are all about the spectator, rather than the competitors. Every sport needs its spectators, in order to draw enough media attention to make the sport attractive for businesses.

While playing StarCraft in the Korean leagues is often seen as a gamers Valhalla, e-Sports in western culture is still far behind in development. The main medium for e-Sports coverage is the Internet. The cultural background of the western society might prohibit e-Sports to develop as far as it has in Korea, but its popularity is certainly growing.

At this stage most companies seem to be very careful when setting foot in this world, but this niche market is certainly profitable. Commerce plays a key role in the development of e-Sports, but at this moment the western e-Sports community might not be ready for this yet. It hasn’t matured in a same way it has in Asia. Next to that, companies also haven’t figured out how to build a successful competitive gaming business yet on a global scale.

It is a niche market, and often investments made are not having a very attractive return of investment. The world of e-Sports however, is on the rise and going through a significantly fast growth. It is just a matter of time until competitive gaming will be part of western pop culture.
4.2. Conclusions

The rise of electronic sports are a fact. This new type of media is gaining more popularity within the western culture rapidly, but still is far behind compared to the way it settled itself in South Korea. The two main factors that are preventing e-Sports to gain a similar status in western culture are the fact that e-Sports communities in the western world hasn’t matured far enough yet and western businesses haven’t figured out how to make a profitable business out of it yet.

We could argue that the reason that e-Sports communities aren’t professionalizing that fast is because playing games, by its nature, is a fun activity, and there’s not enough commercial interest into the industry for the communities to take it all too serious. Only a very few have gotten the opportunity to build a professional gaming career. So for e-Sports to be successful we should try to improve its commercialization.

In order to stimulate the process of e-Sports becoming successful and profitable in the western society, a few things can be done.

- By acknowledging one, or perhaps a few games as the ‘flagship’ game of e-Sports, it will become much easier for the media to give a more or perhaps a few thorough coverage on the industry by focusing on its ‘most popular’ game(s). If both participants and spectators could come to an agreement on what the most important game and title would be in the e-Sports world, it automatically would make the whole e-Sports industry easier to understand and to accept for the masses. The selection of this flagship game would not be an easy process, especially when taking into account that only a few games have a longer lifespan.

- While the World Cyber Games do carry an Olympic-like status for e-Sports, there hardly is any coverage for this annual event on traditional media. The sought-after sponsorships for this event are often game publishers who are merely investing into the event in trade for the selection and advertising of their own game titles.
More independent sponsors should be searched instead, which focus on influences the industry rather than the sport itself.

- Businesses in the e-Sport industry should try harder to draw more media attention. It seems that return of income is the only thing that matters for these businesses, while there is so much more to gain when the industry grows to its full potential. The industry should try to work together with traditional media and work towards broadcasting deals, rather than just sponsorship in cheques.

The evolution of e-Sports would benefit greatly when there would be more media attention for the industry. The growth of this industry also influences our society, but these social influences of this movement are often overseen. As e-Sports is gaining popularity within our pop culture, there definitely are a few developments to be wary of:

- E-Sports play an important social role within today's youth culture. Our sense of belonging to social groups which extend beyond the boundaries of a specific place is often underestimated. Even though for the wider public it is hard to understand the new emerging ways of social interaction, it is important to take in account that these do shape a new culture within the new generation. Within this generation certain role models step forward and whether this happens within our awareness or not, these people are seen as the heroes of this new generation.

- When engaging into e-Sports one enters a virtual reality. The experience of being inside a world of a constructed image creates a new way of sports, new ways of thinking and new ways to identify ourselves. Ways that are especially very attractive to younger public. As philosopher Baudrillard describes, this culture could be compared with the rise of cinemas 100 years ago: “new stories, new heroes, new role models and idols, new ways of playing out our roles in society, or re-creating our identities.”
It can be said that videogames bring a new kind of intimacy with machines that is very characteristic of the computer culture. When we look at videogames as a cultural development we can see that they mark a significant new media: mass media as games. The structure of videogames however, creates a difficult relationship between the medium and the spectator outside of the field of direct participation. This could prevent it from being an adequate medium.

There is no question whether the e-Sports industry is a rapidly growing business. While the western society has failed to do so, in South Korea advertisers and marketers have acted smart on these developments and they have been able to create a successful gaming business. A great potential industry is out there, waiting for the right businesses to stand up and make the right investments. There is enough interest worldwide, but the target groups and their interests have to be researched. Taking the ‘risk’, stepping forward and acting smart can only turn out to be very rewarding.
5. FINAL NOTES

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