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UWS62A: Video Gameplay, Players, and Styles

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How Wide is the Wide World of eSports?

Introduction

As video games become ever more popular, a new form of entertainment is finding a foothold in the industry. Electronic sports (hereafter referred to as eSports) is a form of competitive video gaming in which players compete at a professional level, often in organized leagues with considerable prize pools. eSports range across a wide variety of games, including first-person shooters such as Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, side-view fighting games such as Super Smash Bros. Melee, and even unique titles such as Rocket League (super-powered car soccer). More and more people are tuning in across the globe, from the Americas to Europe to Asia, to watch their favorite players and teams go for headshots, team plays, or nasty kills. So why have eSports become so popular, so suddenly? And why are they taking hold in certain world regions more than others? This research aims to explore both why viewers are drawn to professional video gaming in the first place and the reasons for the uneven worldwide popularity distribution of eSports.

Preliminary Literature Review

There is little question that eSports have seen a rise in popularity in recent years. What level of popularity, though, is in question here, and what are the reasons behind this rise? In their study “What is eSports and Why Do People Watch It?” Juho Hamari and Max Sjöblom seek to answer these questions. In terms of the level of popularity, the authors cite the statistic that “[an estimated] 70 million people watched eSports during 2014” (Hamari and Sjöblom 211). The study provides multiple reasons for why there exists such a large viewership base, reporting that increased eSports

viewership is positively correlated with desires for escapism, acquisition of knowledge, novelty, and aggression (Hamari and Sjöblom 221). This study then confirms the rise in popularity of eSports and explains the viewer desires that contributed to this rise.

The study “Shaping a Regional Offline ESports Market: Understanding How Jönköping, the ‘City of DreamHack,’ Takes URL to IRL” by McCauley et al. approaches the issue from an alternate perspective, exploring what tactics are employed to facilitate interest in eSports among a potential audience. The researchers find that the methods employed include connecting to a grassroots base, legitimizing eSports, and building up gaming institutions (McCauley et al. 37). This study builds on the findings of Hamari and Sjöblom, as these tactics exploit the potential eSports viewer’s desires for escapism, acquisition of knowledge, and novelty, although the desire for aggression is understandably not targeted. The research by McCauley et al. confirms that interest in eSports is at least in part facilitated by the actions of those in the eSports industry to attract potential viewers.

However, pre-existing factors may also determine the level of popularity of eSports in various world regions, and these factors may also explain any uneven distribution in popularity across these regions. Belvaeya et al. discuss these factors that affect regional growth of the video game industry in their paper “Stakeholder Data Analysis in the Video Gaming Industry: Implications for Regional Development.” The study finds that the most important factors that determine the growth of the video game industry in any region are demographic spread and the level of technological development (Belvaeya et al. 345). The same factors that determine the popularity of video games are likely to also determine the popularity of the professional level of those video games. It follows that if these factors differ across regions, then those regions may have corresponding differences in eSports popularity.

In “An Overview of the Gaming Industry across Nations: Using Analytics with Power BI to Forecast and Identify Key Influencers,” Palma-Ruiz et al. look into the evolution of the gaming industry in three regions: North America, Western Europe, and Eastern Asia. They find that interest

in eSports is strongest in Eastern Asia, while the populations of North America and Western Europe have a similar, albeit smaller, interest (Palma-Ruiz et al. 5). Based on the previous research discussed, this is possibly either due to better work by those in the East Asian eSports industry to attract viewers, similar to the methods discovered by McCauley et al., or due to static factors such as those outlined by Belvaeya et al. In any case, this study legitimizes the research done by these groups of scholars.

Library Research Method

I will research for my topic using several resources: Brandeis Library OneSearch, select library-accessed databases such as ABI/INFORM, and potentially Google Scholar. I may also pull sources from a website called the eSports Research Network; while these sources are not scholarly, they are more likely to relate to my topic, and I may use research found here to fill a more supplementary role to the major citations. I am currently and will continue to look through the references of my current sources to see if there is similar literature that is relevant to my research. This method has already been successful in finding one source, and the hope is that it will continue to produce results. The main keywords I am using are “eSports” (obviously), “region/regional,” and “popularity.” I have been experiencing some issues with the fact that there is a limited amount of research on my topic, and this may affect the scope of the paper as I tailor my discussion to line up with the sources that I find. Because of this, I am open to using lens from multiple disciplines in my paper; I will work with whatever I can get. I am finding, interestingly, that many sources that have a chance of being useful are economics-oriented in nature. In the future, I may also try to find sources that are focused on specific eSports games or specific world regions (North America, Europe, East Asia, etc.).

Significance/Motive

With this research, I hope to explain the growing popularity of eSports, both in general and in specific world regions. There is also an opportunity to fill a gap in the literature, as little previous research exists on the specific topic of eSports regional popularity. My initial motivation for researching this topic was to explore the regional popularity of Rocket League specifically; the RLCS (Rocket League Championship Series, the game's premier eSports league) is very strong in North America and Europe but oddly weaker in East Asia. I broadened my research to eSports in general out of necessity, as there exists virtually no scholarly work focusing on Rocket League itself. I believe that this research is important because of professional video gaming's cultural role in the future. eSports are slowly on their way to replacing the place of traditional sports in the entertainment industry, and understanding the popularity of eSports will be crucial in the event that they become the dominant worldwide form of sporting entertainment.

Weekly Timeline

The due dates for this timeline are pulled from the syllabus, and I am aware of the fact that these due dates may change at the discretion of the professor.

November 5-16:

My research proposal will be submitted on November 4. In the following period, I will find any additional sources that I feel the paper will need, and I will write the introduction that is due on November 16. I may start putting together an outline in this period.

November 17-21:

This time will be spent formulating the outline for the paper that is due on November 21. By this point, I anticipate that the panels and their presentation dates will have been assigned, and based on the date I am given I may begin preparing for that as early as this period.

November 22-27:

This is Thanksgiving Break, and realistically I will not end up getting much work done during this period, if at all. I think it's important to be honest with myself and just accept that now rather than when it inevitably happens.

November 28-December 1:

I will spend this period writing the rough draft and cover letter that are due on December 1. This may seem like a lot of work in a short time, but I write detailed outlines so some of the heavy lifting for the draft will have already been done by this point.

December 2-10:

This time will be firstly spent working on the peer reviews for other papers, due on December 4. I will use the rest of this period for the final draft of the research paper and the portfolio. Again, I write detailed first drafts so there will not be quite as much work for me as it seems.

Annotated Bibliography

Belyaeva, Zhanna, et al. "Stakeholder Data Analysis in the Video Gaming Industry: Implications for Regional Development." *EuroMed Journal of Business*, vol. 17, no. 3, May 2022, pp. 333-49. *Emerald Insight*, <https://doi.org/10.1108/EMJB-10-2021-0150>.

In this journal article, Belyaeva et al. discuss the factors that contribute to the development of the video game industry in various world regions. This source contributes to my research by providing the rates at which the industry is growing in these regions, which may be correlated with the growth of eSports popularity.

Hamari, Juho, and Max Sjöblom. "What Is ESports and Why Do People Watch It?" *Internet Research*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2017, pp. 211-32. *ProQuest*, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IntR-04-2016-0085>.

Hamari and Sjöblom outline in this journal article the motivations that people have to watch eSports. This source contributes to my research by explaining in detail why viewers are drawn to professional video gaming.

McCauley, Brian, et al. "Shaping a Regional Offline ESports Market: Understanding How Jönköping, the 'City of DreamHack,' Takes URL to IRL." *International Journal on Media Management*, vol. 22, no. 1, Jan. 2020, pp. 30–48. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14241277.2020.1731513>.

In this journal article, McCauley et al. reveal an example of how a regional eSports market is shaped by various actions. This source contributes to my research by proposing the factors that may attract viewers in a specific region to watch eSports.

Palma-Ruiz, Jesús Manuel, et al. "An Overview of the Gaming Industry across Nations: Using Analytics with Power BI to Forecast and Identify Key Influencers." *Heliyon*, vol. 8, no. 2, Feb. 2022, p. e08959. *ScienceDirect*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e08959>.

Palma-Ruiz et al. provide an overview in this research article of the recent evolution of the video game market in North America, Western Europe, and Eastern Asia; this data is then extrapolated on to predict the future growth of the market in these regions. This source contributes to my research by highlighting the respective levels of popularity for video games in these regions.