CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE eSPORTS PHENOMENON

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ABSTRACT. eSports (Electronics Sports or short for esports, e-sports) is the term used in multiplayer computer games competitions, most of them organized and dedicated to professional players. Nowadays, esports has become a real industry, generating profits for the hardware companies, for the event organizers, but especially for the players, who can reach record receipts from the awards given at different events around them. Esports has slowly evolved into a cultural phenomenon. Across Asia, North America and Europe, the best pro gamers are competing for a share in hundreds of thousands of dollars at each tournament, watched by thousands if not millions of people around the globe. The present paper aims to present some theoretical aspects regarding the connection between sport and society, and also the development of electronic sport in Romania.

Keywords: eSport; Professional video gaming; Competitive video gaming.

REZUMAT. *Consideraţii cu privire la dezvoltarea fenomenului eSport.* eSports (Electronics Sports sau prescurtare pentru eSports, e-sport) este termenul folosit în competiţiile de jocuri pe computer multiplayer, majoritatea organizate şi dedicate jucătorilor profesionişti. În zilele noastre, eSports a devenit o adevărată industrie, generând profituri pentru companiile de hardware, pentru organizatorii de evenimente, dar mai ales pentru jucători, care pot ajunge la încasări record din premiile acordate la diferite evenimente din jurul. eSportul a evoluat încet într-un fenomen cultural. În toată Asia, America de Nord şi Europa, cei mai buni jucători profesionişti concurează pentru o cotă de sute de mii de dolari la fiecare turneu, urmăriţi de mii, dacă nu chiar de milioane de oameni din întreaga lume.

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Prezenta lucrare îşi propune să prezinte câteva aspecte teoretice referitoare la conexiunea dintre sport şi societate, precum şi dezvoltarea sportului electronic din România.

Cuvinte cheie: eSport; Jocuri video profesionale; Jocuri video competitive.

Introduction

People have been competing since the beginning of civilization for gold and glory, the Spartans were competing on the hills of Greece and the Romans were facing the lions in the arena (Barbu, 2004). Today these competitions are called sports and we try to be civilized, so civilized that they happen in front of a computer (Hallmann and Giel, 2018).

What are esports really about? There are computer games so competitive that they have acquired the status of sports, and young people from all over the world are fighting for the title of best. Whether you believe it or not, millions of fans watch esports daily and support their favorite teams at stadiums more than traditional sports microbes do.

Esports refers to the practice of video games as part of a competition. These are games that thwart one or more players against each other. Esports have been in place since the 1970s. But the practice began to be more frequent in the 1990s at the LAN Party, but still on a small scale.

Today, it gathers millions of fans around the world. This madness encourages more and more investors (Razer, Roccat, Asus, Acer, Benq, Steelserie, Winamax or Orange) to take an interest in this environment. These investments are materialized by the event sponsor (esports tournament) and players, so that esports are considered a trend in a continuous growth.

Literature review

1. Factors leading to the development of esports

At no other time in history has sport played a dominant role in everyday life (Barbu and Popescu, 2018). Due to the prevalence of internet and television, adults and children consume sports at an amazing level.

When we are not physically involved in sports, we play them through video games or fantasy leagues and watch them on TV. The celebrity status of the top athletes speaks about the importance we attach to sporting events.

The first known video game competition was held in 1972 at Stanford University, where Spacewar was played. But esports became even more popular around 1980 through the Space Invaders Championship organized by Atari. The event attracted over 10,000 participants from the USA and also gave birth to bets on this type of sporting event.

The esports phenomenon was first popularized in South Korea. Here you can meet video games competitions since 1998. With the passage of time, the phenomenon has increased and tournaments, leagues, teams and superstars have been formed. With the help of fans, entire communities of gamers have been formed. The two games that made sense in South Korea are Starcraft II (RTS) and League of Legends (Brock, 2017).

Geographically, esports has its roots in Germany, but the best organized in the esports system are the South Koreans, who have been offering professional player licenses since 2000. In the 1990s, many games benefited from the increased quality of internet connectivity. The rise of esports in South Korea is believed to have been influenced by the mass emergence of broadband Internet networks that preceded the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

Nowadays, esports has become a real industry, generating profits for the hardware companies, for the event organizers, but especially for the players, who can reach record receipts from the awards given at different events around the globe. The sums are so large that the players (the most talented of them), will probably reach the near future, to win amounts similar to those won by footballers, tennis players, basketball players, etc.

Esports tournaments are organized almost always in public places (with spectators). The tournament may be part of a larger gathering, as is the case with Dreamhack, or it may be the whole event, as is the case at World Cyber Games.

Not all computer games are also electronic sports. Electronic sports are divided into several categories such as FPS (First Person Shooter), MOBA (Multipayer Online Battle Arena) and RTS (Real Time Strategy). Probably more familiar would be titles like Counter Strike, DOTA, Starcraft or League of Legends, competitive sports whose championships offer prizes worth millions of dollars, only last year's The International DOTA2 championship giving prizes up to 18 million of dollars.

These sports are played in teams of five people, usually young people up to 25 years old who have turned computer games into a profession. Being a cyber-athlete or gamer means moving to a gaming house to spend 8-10 hours in front of your computer training with the team to participate and win championships and sponsors. In other words, an activity similar to that of regular athletes (Tiedemann, 2004).

There are about 200 million viewers watching electronic sports. For example, the 2014 League of Legends finale was watched by 32 million people from around the world, 6 million more than the NBA Finals in the same year.

The most beloved fans of traditional sports will probably challenge the authenticity of electronic sports in the absence of their physical character. "Sports are not sports if you don't sweat", yet even traditional sports leaders gradually recognize electronic sports. Yes, these games require state-of-the-art equipment, perfectly built for the needs of professional gamers. Nothing is left to chance, because apart from the results of these sports competitions, the emphasis is on a transmission of impeccable quality. It is common practice in this segment for professional players to make available live sessions to educate and train a new generation of e-athletes.

Professional players are often part of organized teams, such as Evil Geniuses, Fnatic, Titan and Natus Vincere and, besides the prizes from competitions, they can receive salaries from the teams they belong to. Sponsorship of a team can cover the costs of transport or gaming hardware (gear). One of the best known esports sponsor is the company RAZER, a manufacturer recognized especially for its accessories dedicated to the gaming segment.

Most of the events are broadcast live on the Internet, a phenomenon that is increasing in size in recent years. Companies like Amazon or Google have even launched their own streaming services - Twitch.tv and YouTube Gaming.

As video games become ever more popular, so too do esports. The more people play games, the more potential fans of esports there are. And as games grow more advanced, they become more exciting for spectators (Wagner, 2006).

Esports has yet to achieve popularity in mainstream culture, but the phenomenon is fast approaching a tipping point where it will. esports tournaments continue to grow in size and viewership, and each year brings them closer to the level of popularity and acceptance enjoyed by physical sports. Take, for example, the activity known as BarCraft, where "StarCraft II" fans gather in bars to watch pro matches over a cold beer and some snacks. Esports evolution can be also based on the developments of shared activities in which people cooperate to participate in joint activities (Barbu et al., 2020). The further progress of esports will be conditioned by the achievement of sound management principles (Constantinescu et al., 2008).

2. Electronic sport in Romania

Electronic sports competitions offer millions of dollars prizes, and organizations (clubs) have turnover comparable to those of traditional sports clubs. Also, the community continues to grow.

In Romania, the emergence of eSport is in close interaction with the emergence of Professional Gamers League, an organization founded in 2002 by Silviu Stroe with the aim of promoting electronic sports in Romania.

Thus, the first professional Counter-Strike championship in Romania was created in a format similar to the one in football, where the teams were divided into divisions from A to D. LPG was the first organization that managed to offer prizes in Romania. Thousands of euros and that has attracted support from sponsors.

Fortunately, Romania is one of the countries that counts in the world of esports. The tournaments organized by LPG have placed Romania in a leading place in Europe and even in the world (Fromme, 2003).

Gradually, the number of teams registered in the LPG increased with each season, all due to the fact that the matches could be played online, both at home and online. Only the finals were organized in the city of Constanța.

They also managed to participate in events outside Romania such as Dreamhack Winter 2011, Samsung European Championship 2010, Electronic Sports World Cup 2010, being among the few Romanian teams that did so during that period.

PGL brought to Romania the Playzeek platform, where players could play 5vs5 competitive matches without having to belong to clans, thus giving the community a chance to grow further as you could play competitive matches anytime without having to plan a few days before a single match. It was the ideal platform for the Romanian players to grow as a level and to reach the European teams that dominated the stage at that time.

But things changed in Romania with the advent of Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, which was dropped by Valve in the summer of 2012 as more and more organizations refused to add Counter-Strike 1.6 to the tournament playlist, because of the outdated graphics compared to the other games. Thus in 2013 PGL dropped the Playzeek platform.

Also, with the third edition of the Romanian Esports Championship he made the switch to Counter-Strike: Global Offensive and started organizing tournaments for games like DotA 2, League of Legends, and later for Hearthstone. Unfortunately, in the years that followed LPG began to occupy less and less of the Romanian esports scene, eventually giving up organizing internal competitions only for the players in Romania and went on to organize major tournaments from the gaming world. Thus, to date he has organized tournaments such as Counter-Strike: Global Offensive Major in Krakow in 2017 which was probably one of the best organized tournaments in Counter-Strike history.

This is why at the moment the events dedicated to electronic games are attracting more spectators even than the football matches in Liga 1. The prizes are also very generous.

In 2019, in Romania, several major events took place under the PGL umbrella. Between January 25-27, in Bucharest, FIFA Champions Cup and between January 9-13, 2019 the DOTA 2 Bucharest Minor. In the autumn of 2019, between October 18-20 Hearthstone Masters Tour Bucharest, and in November other two competitions were organized FIFA 20 Major Stage I and FIFA 20 Major Stage II.

Not only professional players are attracted to these events, but also gambling fans. At each competition the halls are full, sometimes with thousands of spectators, which led to an unusual situation at least in Romania: more fans gathered at the esports competitions than at the matches in the first football stadium.

In other countries things are not too different. The important duels are televised and even dedicated electronic games have appeared. For example, the 2017 Starcraft Global League Finals drew 25,000 on-stage and 300,000 online viewers, and Major League Gaming had over 11 million unique visitors in 2017.

Romanian teams such as 7Sins, KnockOut, RedFear, SinnerS Gaming or Nexus participate in online tournaments that have become increasingly popular in recent years and have considerable prizes, but cannot cope with teams that can invest at least 8 hours a day to train. This is probably the biggest problem that draws the Romanian teams down, namely that the players are not paid enough to allow them to invest so much time in the game.

3. Esports: a trend in a continuous growth

Even though eports was not so popular in the beginning, in recent years it has turned into a billion dollar industry. It doesn't matter that it's video games, esports is treated as a professional sport, where players are paid, there are millions of fans, sponsors and tournaments around the globe. The esports audience increased from 395 million viewers in 2018 to 454 million the following year, expecting that by 2022 the audience will exceed 645 million viewers (figure 1).

As the number of spectators increased, the revenues of this industry also increased. Becoming a popular industry, they were noted by different investors and different brands, reaching the amount of $ 400 million, earnings only from sponsorships, in 2019. According to Newzoo, which analyzes the gaming industry, in 2018 earnings from esports amounted to over $ 865 million, reaching $ 1.1 billion in 2019 and projected to increase to 1.8 billion $ in 2022 (figure 2).
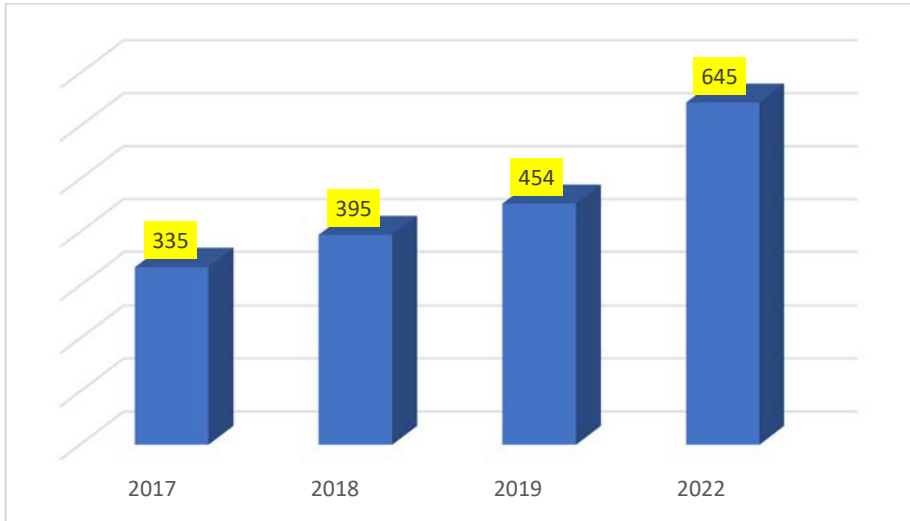
Figure 1. Projected growth in esports audience (million viewers)

Source: Adapted from https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/newzoo-global-esports-economy-will-top-1-billion-for-the-first-time-in-2019/
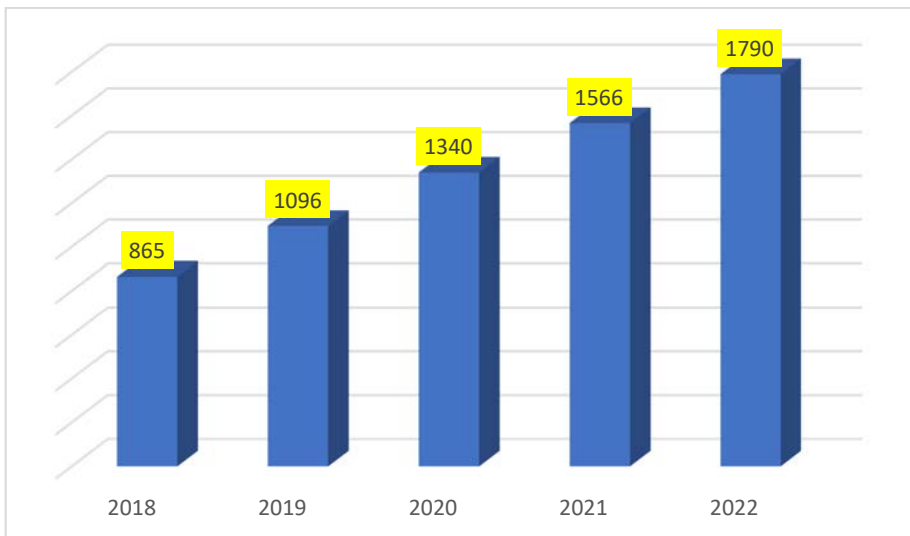

Figure 2. Increase in esports revenues (millions USD)

Source: Adapted from https://newzoo.com/insights/articles/newzoo-global-esports-economy-will-top-1-billion-for-the-first-time-in-2019/

With the growth and popularity of this industry, the number of professional players has increased more than ever, their earnings from 2019 exceeding $ 195,000,000 million. The games which made the biggest wins in 2019 were:

- *Fortnite*, with winnings of $ 54,815,883 million, 2093 professional players and 249 tournaments;
- *Endowment 2*, with winnings of $ 43,373,966 million, 1003 professional players and 132 tournaments;
- *CSGO*, with winnings of $ 11,800,867 million, 2905 professional players and 421 tournaments;
- *Call of Duty*: *Black Ops 4*, with winnings of $ 6,514,307 million, 342 professional players and 37 tournaments;
- *Overwatch*, with winnings of $ 5,551,298 million, 1010 professional players and 46 tournaments.

It's also worth noting, for those less familiar with esports, that the most popular games are not traditional sports-related video games such as Madden or FIFA (Goldstein, 2005). Rather, the popular esports series include multiplayer online battle arenas (where a player controlling a single character is part of a team that must destroy the opposing team's main building), real-time strategy (where a player builds an army to gain dominance over a map), or first-person shooter games (where players take part in a firefight across a map).
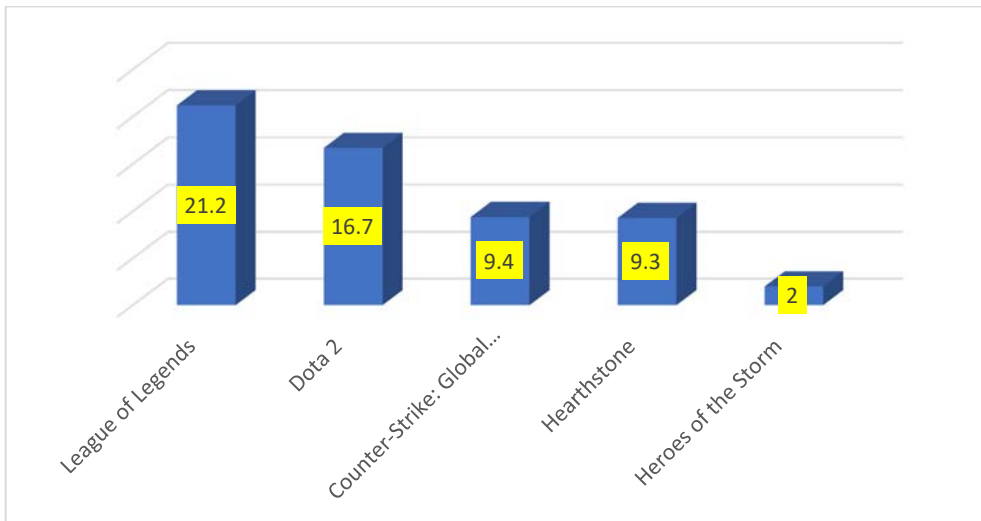

Figure 3. Top-five esports on Twich (millions hours)

Source: Adapted from https://newzoo.com/insights/rankings/top-games-twitch/

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Most fans are in Asia, North America, and Europe: In the past, people thought that the craze of competitive video gaming was primarily an Asian phenomenon, yet today only 51% of esports enthusiasts are in Asia. In fact, North America and Europe have taken a prominent place in the global esports and gaming ecosystem (Hollist, 2015).

We appreciate that eports has the potential to become a global phenomenon. Stared as a niche competition, eports is getting wider acceptance and this is due to younger generations that are digitally oriented. As the possibility to transmit the games in a spectacle like manner increases, so the audience of the esports will continue to expand. We consider that another element that can lead to increased fans audience will be the possibility to play in teams and the creation of year-long competitions (like football championships) instead of isolated tournaments.

Conclusions

Electronic sport has grown enormously in recent years, and the speed at which it continues to expand is amazing. In just a few years, electronic sport has crossed the borders of video games, becoming a mass phenomenon that attracts millions of fans, but also substantial amounts of money. The esports industry is the most technologically driven sport the world has ever seen. There's a strong possibility it will overshadow traditional sports within the next 5-10 years.

More and more important names are associating their image with this new industry. Coca Cola and Red Bull are just two examples. Often, teams have their own smaller sponsors who support their activity. Teams and players have a big opportunity to become strong brands (Florea et al., 2018).

Investors in the gaming segment also understood the potential of this industry and began to enter this market. In Beijing, there is already an arena dedicated to esports competitions, and Ourgame, the owner of the World Poker Tour, has announced that it plans to invest in a similar arena in Las Vegas. So far, most competitions are held in rented spaces, so this is a new step for the esports industry (Seth et al., 2017).

According to analyses published on the American websites, the e-sports industry has surpassed it in terms of revenues on the music one. Annually, esports competitions and events around the world produce net revenues estimated at $ 20 billion in excess of the music industry. A figure that can no longer be ignored by investors. Nowadays, esports has become a real industry, generating profits for the hardware companies, for the event organizers, but especially for the players, who can reach record receipts from the awards given at different events around the globe. Esports has slowly evolved into a cultural

phenomenon. Across Asia, North America and Europe, the best pro gamers are competing for a share in hundreds of thousands of dollars at each tournament, watched by thousands if not millions of people around the globe.

Acknowledgements

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