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ÚSTAV JAZYKŮ

**CULTURAL EVOLUTION OF E-SPORTS:  
CONTENT, CONTEXT AND CULTURE**

KULTURNÍ VÝVOJ E-SPORTŮ: OBSAH, KONTEXT A KULTURA

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# Bakalářská práce

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## Kulturní vývoj e-Sportů: Obsah, kontext a kultura

### POKYNY PRO VYPRACOVÁNÍ:

Charakterizujte fenomén elektronického sportu. Popište jeho vývoj, současný stav a typické rysy. Na základě vašeho zjištění prokažte, že elektronické sporty jsou součástí plnohodnotné a funkční herní kultury.

### DOPORUČENÁ LITERATURA:

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## **Abstract**

This bachelor's thesis deals with issues of eSports and cultural expressions associated with them. eSport is a term describing playing video games on a professional level. The aim of this thesis is to describe the evolution of the eSport community and the current status of this community in countries where eSports are the most popular. The introductory chapter focuses on the historical development of eSports and the subsequent creation of the professional player base as it exists now. The following chapter describes the status of eSports and the public attitude to them in countries where professional gaming is popular. The next chapter specifies genres of video games that are played as an eSport. Each genre is characterized by its development and features including the examples of the most popular games. Subsequently, the thesis discusses the current profile of a professional eSport player as well as the process of becoming one. It further delves into the representation of gender and race when talking about the eSports industry. The last part of the thesis deals with the cultural framework of video games and the categorisation of eSports.

## **Keywords**

eSport, fan base, professional player, arcade, tournaments, league, online games, community, MOBA

## **Abstrakt**

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá problematikou eSportů a s nimi spojenými kulturními projevy. eSport je pojem popisující hraní videoher na profesionální úrovni. Cílem práce je popsat vývoj komunity eSportů a současný stav této komunity v zemích, kde jsou eSporty nejpobulárnější. Úvodní kapitola se zabývá a historickým vývojem eSportů a následným vznikem profesionální hráčské základny. Následující kapitola popisuje stav eSportů a přístup veřejnosti k nim v zemích, kde je profesionální hraní pobulární. Další kapitola pojednává o žánrech videoher specifických pro eSporty. Každý žánr je pobulbně charakterizován na základě specifických znaků včetně uvedení příkladů konkrétních pobulárních her v daných žánrech. Práce dále pokračuje popisem profilu profesionálního hráče a procesu, jak se stát profesionálním hráčem. Kapitola také analyzuje generovou a rasovou problematiku v eSportech. Poslední část práce se zabývá kulturním rámcem videoher a kategorizací eSportů.

## **Klíčová slova**

eSport, fanouškovská základna, profesionální hráč, herna, turnaje, liga, online hry, komunita, MOBA

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V Brně dne .....

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Václav Straka

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# 1 Introduction

The reason why I chose the topic dealing with cultural evolution of e-sports is that I have been closely following the development of video games for ten years. As video games became more and more popular, the professional gaming scene has grown more prominent alongside with the number of players and fans of video games. But still when the topic of professional players is discussed in public, people seem to think that what the players do is just a hobby or even a waste of time. The goal of this thesis is to prove that being a professional eSports player is now a perfectly valid and acknowledged profession, and to demonstrate that eSports are now a multimillion business. Teams or even individual players can earn cash prizes numbering in millions. These prizes are contributed by sponsors which are predominantly companies developing software or hardware. Furthermore, I would like to demonstrate the creation of the community following professional gaming and its specific traits and features. Besides, my aim is to provide general information regarding the specific games and genres that are being played currently on the professional level and the services created to allow players and viewers to watch tournament and conventions globally.

In the first chapter, I try to trace the historical development of competitive gaming which consequently has led to the creation of professional gaming. The chapter provides information about the beginnings of leader boards and different kinds of entertainment and gambling machines. Moreover, I mention technological advancements which have moved gaming forward, such as the personal computers, Internet and consoles. The description of the historical progress is important for many reasons show not only how professional gaming changed together with technological progress, but also how it branched out in different ways to please different social groups and demographics. New establishments and events have been created catering to these audiences as they gradually grew. With cafés and clubs built for the specific purpose of online gaming and competing, the logical step forward was to hold major events bringing players from different areas together. This idea lead to the creation of tournaments which started as small businesses but currently they provide large cash prizes and publicity for all players and sponsors.

In the second chapter, I take a closer look at the current state of professional gaming in the countries where they are most played. It is understandable that certain countries do not have any place for professional gaming or even gaming on their market. But in some countries professional gaming has gained a considerable following. I will dedicate most of this chapter to South Korea because gaming is a part of the everyday life in this country, and professional players have adopted the role of celebrities here. However, the government has to deal with the issues connected to the general popularity of gaming among children and young adults. Therefore, South Korea is a perfect example of positive and negative aspect of professional gaming. The second part of this chapter summarizes the state of professional gaming in other countries where number of eSport followers has increased significantly. This rise in the number of followers has led to different approaches to eSports by their corresponding governments.

The following chapter introduces the genres most closely connected to eSports. MOBAs<sup>1</sup> are currently the dominant genre of played but also watched eSports, but the popularity of this genre is also followed by adversities. I also mention collectible card games which are currently gaining increasing prominence, especially because of the possibility for casual playing. The genre of shooters is well known to the general public, but it has suffered from the rise in popularity of the other genres. The latest development in this genre is drawing in new fans with the change of some core concepts. The next subchapter discusses fighting games which are unique in their unchanging format and the community that is differentiated from the rest of the eSport community. Finally, the real time strategies could be considered the most demanding genre of professional gaming, but it has lately lost many of its followers and the genre itself is stagnating and lacks any serious development on the current eSport scene.

The fourth chapter describes the current profile of a professional player. The general public opinion regarding the professional gamers is changing along with the rapid technological progress. The next part of the chapter addresses the gender and race issues associated with the professional gaming scene. With the relative novelty of eSports and the community connected to them, there are many issues regarding representation of race in professional teams or the matter of female players and the inequality they suffer from.

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<sup>1</sup> MOBA refers to a multiplayer online battle arena (Computer Hope, 2017).

The final chapter is devoted to the cultural framing of video games in the current world and the place of eSports in this framework. It begins by describing how culture is defined and the researchers' opinions of video games as a cultural representation. The next part explains the relation between the current generation of children and the games they grow up with. It deals with social connotations connected to video games and their validity. Finally, the last section explains how eSports have developed gaming in the cultural context as they are the fastest growing part of video game industry and contribute to how video games are perceived.

The last chapter outlines the current status of video games on the cultural level, as there are many opinions whether video game culture exists or if it is just a subculture that is part of greater cultural framework. Following subchapter explains the social issues related to gaming and the current generation because it is necessary to accept that a new generation will have different needs due to the gradual technological development. The last part of the chapter analyses and discusses the findings from the previous chapters and explains how eSports further develop the cultural perception of video games.

## **2 Historical development of eSports**

To explain the current development of gaming and professional gaming specifically, we must first return to the beginning of videogames themselves and the subsequent creation of the gaming community and fan base. In order to clearly distinguish the growth of video games as a whole from the professional scene, which will be our area of research in this thesis, we must start with the formation of the gaming community.

### **2.1 Arcades**

#### **2.1.1 Creation of arcade machines**

The first aspect of gaming which could be considered as the beginning of eSports would be the creation of the arcades. Before the arcades appeared, video games had mostly appealed only to true aficionados who played at home, which hardly encouraged the creation of community. Thus the idea of the arcades was generated. As the appearance of arcade machines indicates, it is obvious that they were inspired by pinball machines. By transforming the mechanical machine into an electronic one with a built-in display the first arcade machines were created.

##### **2.1.1.1 First company and machines**

The first commercial arcade game called *Computer Space* was released in 1971. Syzygy was an engineering firm that released this machine together with the game enclosed in a fibreglass cabinet (see Figure 1) in one of four futuristic colours (red, white, blue, and yellow). The game was designed by two friends Nolan Bushnell and Ted Dabney. In the game the player controlled a spaceship and tried to destroy as many flying saucers as possible within a time limit. The idea might seem simple, but let us realise that in those days stationing over 1,500 units of this machine across the United States did not lead to the commercial success the creators had envisioned. Whether it was caused by the foreign concept of videogames as a form of entertainment in the bars or by the outlandish design, the machine was not commercially successful.



*Figure 1.* Computer Space's futuristic cabinet. Reprinted from Dillon (2011, p.10).

The two friends founded a company Atari Inc. and hired Allan Alcorn as their design engineer. Learning from their previous mistakes and trying to design a game that would attract a regular consumer in a bar or a shop, they began to draw inspiration from sport and released one of the earliest arcades called *Pong*. They commenced their playtesting in a small pub. The game in the bar soon stopped working not because of a malfunction, but because of too many coins in the machine preventing it from working properly. The creators were ecstatic and turned to the company Bally that owned the rights to this game. Unfortunately, the representatives of the firm lacked the foresight needed to see the full potential of their creation. When Ted Dabney talked about their beginnings, he said in an interview with Roberto Dillon (2011):

We built 12 *Pong* games on our own. We sent one of these to Bally. Bushnell went to Chicago several times to get Bally to accept it, with no success. We then put 10 of these games out in several locations. The results were outrageous. We put an income report together to send to Bally. The numbers were so big that I decided to submit only one third of the numbers. They still thought that we exaggerated the report! (p.16)

With Bally refusing to be their seller, they decided to assemble and sell the machine on their own. Luckily, the same problem as with *Computer Space* did not appear, and shortly after they started the production, the demand for the arcade units surpassed their capabilities of production from their garage, which also became sort of a First Arcade prototype for people to try out their games. Even though this facilitated the rapid development of the arcades in the United States, the games following the release of *Pong* appeared to be mere copies trying to take advantage of the success of the popular game.

#### **2.1.1.2 Evolution of hardware and competitive aspects**

In the following years the development of hardware, software and game controllers took place. Games started using ROMs and microprocessors for better graphics. Joysticks were introduced and even steering wheels to support racing games.

The game *Sea Wolf* made in 1976 introduced the possibility of a high score carrying over from one instance of the game to the other. This laid the foundation for players competing for the highest score. Two years later the official Golden Age of video game arcade history started. The pioneering game, which is remembered to this day, became the game *Asteroids* released in 1979. It utilized simple concepts in order to capitalize on the strongest features in the arcades. The premise was simple to destroy as many asteroids as you can and simultaneously prevent your spaceship from being destroyed by them. The part which was ground-breaking is the presence of the high score list where you could also sign in your achievements with the help of a three-letter code. Players were already meeting in the arcades trying to beat the highest score among themselves, but this allowed for the competition over longer periods of time as well as the possibility of being remembered forever for their achievements.

#### **2.1.2 Beginnings of eSports and related media**

This creation of leader boards in particular could be considered the beginning of eSports. With the rise of the phenomena of competitive playing of videogames, the most successful players' need for recognition grew. Having your name on one screen, in one arcade was not enough, players started taking pictures of high score lists to compare with the players from other areas. This culminated in the establishment of the organization called Twin Galaxies. This organization collected top scores and

distributed this information to players all over the United States, and they even held competitions.

### **2.1.3 Current state of Arcades**

Over the span of the Golden Age many cult classics were created (*Pac-man*, *Dragon's Lair*, *Gauntlet*, etc.). As graphics and game design vastly improved, the market started to inline towards personal computers and console playing. From the end of the 1980s to the present the arcades have changed, now hosting mostly fighting games or dance games, focusing on serving the casual players. The exception is Asian countries, such as Japan, South Korea and China, where the arcades remain extremely popular not only among children but also among adults. Game developers in these countries still develop new games and arcade machines with new games, but these are also released on personal computers or consoles (e.g. *Tekken*).

## **2.2 Online play**

### **2.2.1 Beginnings of online gaming**

The rapid spread and immediate availability of the Internet in the 1990s marked the end of the Golden Age of arcades. With the technological advancements the focus of the game development companies to try new things moved to personal machines in player's homes. This marks the true beginning of eSports competitions. The early era of gaming over the Internet involved playing through a LAN<sup>2</sup> network. Later MUD<sup>3</sup> and BBS<sup>4</sup> were created, but these network services provided mostly role-playing features where groups tried to reach a common goal or have adventures.

### **2.2.2 First games with features focused on competitive play**

The origins of the online competitive system as we know today began after the DWANGO<sup>5</sup> came into existence. A paid service providing servers for players was a new experience not only for players, but also for developers. Under normal circumstances, players battling each other would not probably ever meet. Playing against each other without a need for any further complications was just what many

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<sup>2</sup> LAN refers to a Local Area Network (Computer Hope, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Originally Multi-User Dungeon with its later variants Multi-User Dimension and Multi-User Domain is a multiplayer real-time virtual world, usually text-based (Computer Hope, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> A bulletin board system or BBS is a computer server running software that allows users to connect to the system using a terminal program (Computer Hope, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> DWANGO refers to Dial-up Wide-Area Network Game Operation (*Webster's dictionary*, 2017).

players demanded– a real challenge. An interview with John Romero illustrates this situation (Taylor, 2012):

Because everybody, you know, they wanted a deathmatch experience, which is super, super intense. Playing against the computer is nothing compared to playing against someone else. And when you are playing at the very beginning when you don't know that much, it's really fun and everyone's laughing and all that kind of stuff but as soon as you start gathering skill, you start gaining a lot of skill, it starts to get more serious and it's more rewarding. (p. 6)

The first games created in this era maintained their cult following due to their constant popularity and fan base. The fan favourite concept is “deathmatch”. The genre that started this trend is a simple shooter. Taking place inside an arena going head to head against the other player controlled enemies, it seems only logical this style of games launched the era of professional gaming which has prevailed up to the present day with new games including new features being released every year. However, there are still the same core designs present, such as modes and intuitive key bindings with mouse and WASD<sup>6</sup> keys.

### **2.2.3 First online console generation**

At the beginning of the 1990s console online gaming was overshadowed by personal computers, although new consoles with network access were still being created (e.g. Sega Meganet, 1990; Satellaview, 1995; SegaNet, 1996), but these machines are now more or less forgotten. The true success and rise in popularity came with the sixth generation of consoles. The sixth generation consists of Sega Dreamcast, Sony PlayStation 2, Nintendo GameCube, and Microsoft Xbox. But each developer took a different stance on online gaming. The Dreamcast was equipped with a built-in modem, thus providing an Internet browser and a possibility to play supported games online. The Xbox was equipped with the broadband Internet connection to the Xbox Live service, paid yearly. The service allowed connection to multiplayer games which boosted the popularity of this console greatly, in particular due to the military science

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<sup>6</sup> WASD keys on the computer keyboard are used in place of the arrow keys to allow the gamer to have access to more of the keys around them, which means more keys may be assigned to other tasks in the game (Computer Hope, 2017).



fiction first-person shooter *Halo* (series). Sony's Playstation left the possibilities of online gaming on game developers, which understandably resulted in various positive and negative aspects. Lastly, the GameCube did not provide online support to any of their main titles and connecting to the Internet was possible only by buying an additional adapter.

## **2.3 Tournaments and leagues**

### **2.3.1 First tournament**

The above-mentioned competing among players had already existed, but with the development in the 1990s, the gaming community moved a step forward creating events where they could share their enthusiasm. The first specific event representing this phenomenon is QuakeCon (named after the classic game *Quake*). It was first held by the game creators, John Romero and John Carmack, in 1996 as a meeting place for like-minded players providing them with the opportunity to play against each other in a LAN setup deathmatch. It still exists today as it has gradually started to lure international competitors and gained quite a cult following.

#### **2.3.1.1 First official tournament with a significant prize**

Contrary to QuakeCon where winners received T-shirts, only a year later a different event called Red Annihilation offered a more substantial reward— 1987 Ferrari belonging to the popular game creator John Carmack. Later as an answer to these tournaments the first professional league was founded.

### **2.3.2 eSport leagues**

#### **2.3.2.1 The CPL**

The Cyberathlete Professional League (CPL) was created in 1997 by an investment banker Angel Munoz. The same year this league hosted the first event called FRAG<sup>7</sup>, with the prize pool consisting of merchandise provided by sponsors with a total value of 4,000 USD. While the following year, proving the rise in popularity, the prize was 15,000 USD in cash. The CPL gradually not only offered bigger prize pools, but also formed partnership with the world's leading companies such as Intel or Nvidia. Finally, the company was bought out in 2008 and shortly after stopped functioning. Fortunately,

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<sup>7</sup> FRAG is commonly used term in shooter games. It refers to "killing" another player (Computer Hope, 2017).

other tournaments started taking place at the same time as the CPL, but the great expansion came with the dot-com bubble. Despite serious repercussions for the economy, it spread the notion of the Internet and eSports.

#### **2.3.2.2 The MLG**

One of the leagues, Major League Gaming(MLG), created in 2002 in New York is one of the biggest competitions in the United States. The idea behind this league is to provide competitions for professional players in games of unspecific genre.

#### **2.3.3 Current state of the professional tournament scene**

After the year 2005 the eSport competitive event scene started booming together with the seventh generation of consoles. It involved the developers creating their own eSport tournaments at their conventions (e.g. Blizzard, Capcom, etc.) and even private investors supporting these events. The genre of MOBAs emerged and expanded the eSport culture to the point where at present gigantic tournaments are dedicated to a single game. With thousands of people watching in sport arenas (see Figure 2) and many more people watching through livestreams at home, these tournaments can boast with a similar number of viewers as other sports. Nowadays, the two tournaments are the International (TI) and the League of Legends World Championship. The League of Legends World championship held by the company that developed this game is currently the most popular game in the world boasting with the prize money over 5 million USD. Unexpectedly, the second most played MOBA game *Dota2* provides their professional players with much bigger compensation. Last year the tournament simply called the International (2017) presented their prize pool to be \$24,687,919 with the winning team getting over 10 million dollars. These figures conclusively prove the influence and expansion of eSports in the course of time and their growing importance at present.



*Figure 2.* League of Legends Worlds 2017 group stage preview. Reprinted from Zhao (2017).

### **3 Current professional gaming scene**

As of now, eSport can be considered a global sport. This status is not held by many other sports and most of them have existed for a much longer time. Nevertheless, in the eye of the public, gaming is still perceived as a waste of time or a hobby.

#### **3.1 South Korea**

##### **3.1.1 Historical development**

South Korea is considered as a kind of “holy land” not only for professional gamers but also for other gamers. Video games have been strongly embedded in their culture since 1980. The game that truly sparked the eSports scene was *StarCraf* – a strategy sci-fi game with advanced graphics for the time, equipped with impressive support from developers (Blizzard). What made this game popular among professional players was the skill needed for effective playing, more specifically so-called Micromanagement. This term describes the ability of a player to control hundreds of specific unique units while simultaneously managing your resources and battling your opponent. Later, around the year 2000 Korea eSports Association was founded. This organisation diverges from the organisations mentioned before by being officially approved by the South Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. Their goal is management of South Korean eSports and turning eSports into an official sport acknowledged globally.

##### **3.1.2 Current state**

Game developers hailing from South Korea have learned to capitalize on their unique economic situation further proved by the fact that games developed by South Korean companies are preferred by the countries citizens. Mobile gaming is intertwined with everyday life of most young people in South Korea and because the nation prides itself on great Internet connectivity, mobile and online gaming are available virtually everywhere. Console gaming follows closely in popularity as gaming itself is a very popular free time activity even for casual players. Furthermore, it is regarded as an effective stress relief. Despite the fact that it is possible to play games at any moment almost anywhere, majority of Koreans frequently visits so-called “PC bangs”. They are gaming centres based on a simple LAN connection which provide various popular multiplayer games to patrons for an hourly fee. One of the top players called “Faker” points out in an interview that the PC bangs are where he spent most of his time before

becoming a part of a professional team. Moreover, PC bangs were the only place where he could behave uninhibited as he felt awkward during social interactions (Jenkins, 2017). As mentioned above in this thesis, the South Korean professional gaming scene is quite a unique ecosystem. According to the answers given by the current Korean population (Pasquier, 2016), more than fifty percent of them consider themselves gamers. Gaming clubs are the most sought-after place to socialize and fan clubs dedicated to professional gamers have more members than famous actors or other entrepreneurs.

### **3.1.3 Negative consequences**

As a consequence, video game addiction became more relevant in South Korea than in any other country. Professional players play twelve up to fifteen hours a day before a major event. As non-professional players try to achieve the professional status they are pushing themselves to play more often to the point where they are unable to stop playing. The addiction started to influence younger and younger players, until the Korean government had to intervene. In the year 2011 the Cinderella law (Shutdown law) was introduced, forbidding children under the age of sixteen playing video games between midnight and 6 AM. Since the year 2014 it is possible to ask for exception from the law based on a request form the parent of the child. The law proved to be ineffective and goes against what eSports stand for as said by the chairman of the Korean ESports Association Jun Byung-hun: “The Cinderella law is anachronistic. I’ve been vigorously campaigning to eradicate it. Games should be established as a leisure culture within family. Trying to restrict them creates bigger side-effects” (Jenkins, 2017).

## **3.2 China**

China, officially the People’s Republic of China (PRC), might not have achieved the same status in the field of eSports simultaneously with other countries, but it changed its policy drastically in the beginning of the twenty-first century. The Chinese Ministry of Culture officially recognized eSports as a sport in 2003 (Zhouxiang, 2016). The support of the government proved to be crucial in the specific political environment. The representatives of the government indubitably meant to seize an opportunity to facilitate the necessary growth of the IT industry and the following economic expansion.

Presently, professional gaming is accepted by the general public. However, some differences from the “ordinary” eSports scene are still present due to the political climate in China. The most noticeable one is the censorship. This is a very sensitive subject that has been mentioned many times in the media not only concerning video games but also movies or shows. Chinese censorship laws are very broad, thus to avoid any problems with distribution, the developers themselves remove graphic content in order not to miss out on a sizeable portion of the market. Tournaments held in China are held under the same conditions. The censorship laws also strongly reflect on the streaming services present. Twitch which is the most popular streaming service is not used in China, instead they support domestic services. In China the main provider is Douyu TV with a rival platform called Panda TV (Russel, 2017).

### **3.3 America**

The situation in America is directly opposite to Asia. eSports themselves started in America and continued their steady growth as a result of the free market and the oncoming technological and digital era. Even though the revenue is still growing there are numerous issues inside the community. The players shy away from Internet cafés and similar venues and the fan base appears to be much more fragmented. The reason for this may be that eSports originated in this country and the community and culture had more time to evolve and develop, thus creating multimillion businesses such as Twitch. Ironically, a part of the core gaming community resents popular streamers and creators of gaming content claiming they have “sold out” favouring sponsored content at the expense of traditional gameplay.

### **3.4 Europe**

#### **3.4.1 Scandinavian countries**

Professional gaming in Europe is still not as publicly recognized as in America or South Korea. Video games are usually mentioned in media only when being blamed for violent crimes. Nevertheless, the situation is changing albeit slowly. Scandinavian countries have a significant eSport community focused mainly on MOBAs and shooters. These countries well-known for their advanced educational system have implemented eSports into their curriculum. In Sweden and Norway five hours each week are allotted to eSports in selected schools. The children do not spend all this time

in front of the computer at least two hours are spent on physical training such as yoga and they even receive information on proper eating habits when playing. The teachers themselves play together with the children and they claim it teaches them multitasking, proper teamwork and strategic thinking. As professional players peak in their mid-twenties, the children are taking advantage of their uninhibited cognitive functions. In Denmark and Sweden special interest clubs are provided with public funding. eSports have been acknowledged as eligible for this funding creating the means needed for creation of many clubs (DW Made for Minds, 2017).

### **3.4.2 Germany**

In Germany the situation is much more complicated. Although the eSports community is rather large (the 6<sup>th</sup> in earnings), given the history of the country, there has been a significant backlash against this “violent trend” as the government officials call it. The stance might change in the following years as demonstrated by Angela Merkel’s conservative party (CDU<sup>8</sup>) manifesto from this July stating “Video games are an important cultural asset,” and they promise to “positively support the development of eSports and take care of suitable conditions” (Brautigam, 2017). Even though it is only mentioned in a single sentence it might present a turning point in the attitude towards eSports in Germany.

### **3.4.3 Russia**

The Russian eSports scene originated shortly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Russian players started to attend tournaments mainly in Seoul at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Russia has very quickly become a major participant partly thanks to its population. Russians share many characteristics with Scandinavian countries. MOBAs and shooter are preferred and gaming has gained its popular status because of the colder climate and the need for an activity when staying indoors. The professional scene developed very slowly, because of no financial support. Recently the situation has changed because of investors mainly from the private sector. In the year 2015 the Russian government acknowledged eSports as a sport. Shortly after Russian government formed so-called Russian eSports Federation (RESF). The organization quickly initiated the advertising eSports events in Russia subsequently announcing the

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<sup>8</sup> The abbreviation stands for the Christian Democratic Union.

Russian eSports Cup 2017 (Russian eSports industry analysis, 2017).

## 4 Specific game genres

### 4.1 MOBAs

This genre is currently the most popular one in the sphere of professional gaming. The roots of this game mode go back to the year 2002 when *Warcraft 3* was released. Although a very successful game in itself, fans were very excited because of the complex map editor which the game provided. Shortly after a game mod<sup>9</sup> *Defense of the Ancients* based on a typical tower defense genre was released, it immediately gained popularity. The mod itself originated from a mode made previously for *Starcraft* called *Aeon of Strife*, but it developed all its features (Altay, 2015). The concept is quite simple: Defend your core structure together with AI controlled towers, while trying to destroy the core belonging to the other team. A typical game had ten players, five in each team. The players themselves control so called “heroes” that level up and can be equipped with better equipment throughout the game. *Defense of the Ancients*, or *DotA* as it was later called, gained a huge amount of followers and its consistent updates kept it strong.

Following the success of this game mode, the first wave of standalone games was released in 2009 working on the same principle. The most successful of these games is obviously *League of Legends* created by Riot Games. The game studio Riot Games was founded by an indie game developer in 2006 by Brandon “Ryze” Beck and Marc “Tryndamere” Merrill in Los Angeles. According to the interview with Kollar (2016), they immediately hired some of the creators of the *Defense of the Ancients* mod and also some former Blizzard employees. Then they facilitated the development of a game that was supposed to function as a spiritual successor to the mode. The core premise of the game is to battle against real people in a team consisting of real people. Thus they do not waste resources by creating any of single-player experience or a campaign, which is to be expected in other game genres. What also led to an increase in popularity of this game was the fact that it was free to play, which is certainly nothing special at the

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<sup>9</sup> A modification or add-on that an individual or group of individuals create for a game (Computer Hope, 2017).



present. However, nine years ago it was a clever business move ensuring a greater number of players. The free to play model was later adapted by many games in a wide variety of genres. The system is based on the fact that the game itself is free and you only need to register an account that you use when playing online. Players can spend real money in order to buy predominantly cosmetic items. Thus ensuring popularity for the game and also surprisingly high income for the development company.

At the beginning of the game, each member of the team picks a specific character with unique abilities while the other team attempts not only to counter<sup>10</sup> their pick but also to pick their preference. Teammates have special roles, such as a damage dealer, support or a tank. One game is approximately one hour long and when playing professionally the team needs to win two out of three games. This genre is currently most popular among players and streamers as it is relatively new. But the development of these games is a rather complex and long process. Lately there have been news that MOBA games in development have been cancelled. One of these games was *Paragon*, a game being in development since 2016 by the renowned studio Epic Games, which had its development shut down because of the minimal player count. Another game that showed great potential was *Gigantic* but developers announced that it would receive its last update and shut down on July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018. (Summers, 2018) points out that the market for MOBAs is oversaturated. The players do not need to look for new games when there are games with an established game player base and constant updates.

## 4.2 Collectible card games

This genre emerged rather surprisingly a couple of years ago. Originating from the popularity of the table top card game *Magic the Gathering*. The games are based on a complex system of cards of different types and abilities. Players create their own decks, each with unique strengths and vices. The *Hearthstone* game was developed by *Blizzard* that framed this concept and transferred it to a digital environment. Players can choose one of nine heroes with a unique ability and specific class cards. Together with these unique class cards and cards accessible to all heroes, players create unique decks and battles. The game is also free to play, after finishing particular quests; you can be awarded gold which you can spend on a pack that contains cards of different rarities.

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<sup>10</sup> To choose a particular champion during the selection phase in order to oppose a particular enemy champion (leagueoflegends.wikia, 2017).

Certainly, there is a possibility of spending real money on the packs in order to obtain as many cards as possible. The developers provide events and expansions that introduce new cards and mechanics in order to prevent the game from turning stale. There is a ranking system integrated in the game where players battle and it is based on their victories when they gradually rise to their rank. Following the breath-taking success of this game that mixes casual gamers together with competitive ones, many other companies started developing “clones” with card collecting but different mechanics. The strategy they implement seems to be that instead of creating all new games they acquire existing franchises and implement the character and setting in these card games. Thus avoiding the problem of low publicity for games. This genre of games is well suited for a tournament play and with its popularity it is frequently streamed. As Duran (2017) states: “Eighty-six percent of worldwide digital CCG players watch online videos about CCGs and 59 percent of viewers tune in to learn about new strategies.”

### 4.3 Shooters

One of the most popular genres (perhaps the most popular genres) are shooters. The first person shooters have reached their top viewer count until recently. As stated in the previous chapters, games such as *Quake* were instrumental in creating eSports; and other shooters have maintained this status for a very long time most notable being *Counter-Strike* and *Call of Duty*. Shooters are very easy to take in for new players and are accessible to viewers. But the genre suffered from the lack of innovation and it seemed that first person shooters would lose much of their popularity, which changed with the arrival of *Overwatch*. The game created by *Blizzard* is currently at the top of streaming charts and is extremely popular. It combines the basic elements from shooters while adding some from MOBAs. There is a set amount of characters; each of them with specific abilities and equipment. Characters are created specifically for different playstyles. This design choice proved to be extremely successful. Furthermore, there are numerous characters catering to the current “liberal” target generation as well as to global markets. *Blizzard* also introduced *Overwatch* league, providing salary to its players, in order to ensure that the game becomes a popular eSport.

The most current trend is arena games such as *PUBG* (PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS) or *Fortnite*. The games are based on gathering resources and

finding weapons on a large map where players are spawned randomly in large numbers. These games are defined as shooter games but they are played from the third person's view. What follows is something called "Battle Royale", where players battle each other to the death using all available means and the last man standing is the victor. The games are currently booming on streaming services. And their format promotes a tournament play. The process of this subgenre becoming an eSport might prove difficult not only because the market is already full but also because of the gameplay mechanics. The core mechanic is collecting loot that is randomized, thus making it more of a game of chance where the victory might depend on luck more than on player's skills. Jeon (2018) in his article describes the quick rise in popularity as well as the need for unified structure of tournaments for this specific subgenre.

#### **4.4 Fighting games**

This genre seems to be clearly separated from the rest because it has its own structure and dedicated fan base that have developed over decades since the emergence of fighting games. The games changed only in appearance following the age of the arcades. One major difference is that whereas other genres played at the professional level are mostly played on a computer with a keyboard and a mouse, fighting games use a gamepad or special arcade sticks (see Figure 3). Players must remember specific combos and chain them correctly. A different combination sometimes differs only by the degree in which you move the joystick. The reason for the separation of fighting games from other eSports is also EVO (Evolution Championship Series). This championship dating all the way back to the year 2000 is a huge event for all fighting game players. There are many fighting games represented in this tournament, such as the most notable *Tekken*, *Street fighter* or *Mortal Kombat*. Many of these games have numerous continuations because of their popularity. All this cumulates into the notion that fighting games have a unique position among eSports. The truth is that some fans of fighting game even refuse the term eSports being used to describe this genre. They claim that playing and watching is a unique experience not comparable to other eSports (Murray, 2018).



Figure 3. Razer Atrox arcade stick for Xbox one black. Reprinted from amazon.co.uk (2017).

#### 4.5 Real time strategies

Although professional matches in this genre usually consist only of two players competing against each other over the LAN network, at one point these matches were watched by a great number of fans. As mentioned before in this thesis, real time strategies sparked a rapid development of the South Korean gaming scene that is still noticeable up to the present day. *StarCraft* franchise is the most popular in this genre, even though the first edition is over two decades old. However, most recently, this genre has seemed to be failing not only on the professional scene but overall. The development of these games is extremely difficult and only the most loyal fans of the genre buy them. Casual players do not want to play a game that is built on strategic thinking and might take hours just to finish one session. What is more important is the fact that in this age when the game streaming services and tournaments provide much more action oriented content. Most of the companies seem to have realized this and started to create remastered editions of their old games. They provide fans with updated graphics for their old games but lacking any innovation. The modding community produces some new content and updates, but real time strategies seem to lack interest for the current video game community

## **5 Professional players**

The depiction of professional players in mainstream media is one of the reasons that eSports are not taken seriously. Describing players as introverted individuals who are addicted to energy drinks, eating snacks with one hand and playing games with the other, while screaming obscenities into the microphone. This notion has changed lately with professional players gaining more fame and exposure. As Taylor (2012, p. 87) states, it seems that the need to win is what distinguishes a professional player from an ordinary one. Most professional players describe their beginnings similarly: They are playing a game and investing more and more time into it, competing with friends. After some time, some players decide to train further in search for a greater challenge. These players usually start to play daily in order to develop their concentration and strategic thinking alongside with mastering the specific game mechanics.

### **5.1 Socialization**

Reading the previous paragraph, it might seem that there is no need for socialization and communication when pursuing the career of a professional player but the complete opposite is the truth. Although there is much less face to face communication, the sheer number of forums with information helpful for mastering each specific game is astonishing. Furthermore, there are videos providing useful information and comments sections related to these videos are filled with additional notions. When a player actually “goes pro” there is usually also a significant backlash from their parents and those close to them, who do not understand or do not believe that this profession will be enough to support them. Finally, when a player actually reaches the ranks of professional players it becomes necessary to be prepared for numerous cameras, photos and sometimes even less than stable fans. This comes as a shock to some players when they realise that not all things about being a professional player are positive. There have been scandals involving illegal business practices, racism and sexism. The process of catching the culprits is relatively easy because all the incriminating evidence is saved in chat logs; however, each of these incidents damages the eSports scene.

### **5.2 Representation of gender and race**

With the growing representation of eSports in media the issues of gender equality and race are often mentioned even in this area. But let us also not forget the stereotype

surrounding men playing video games. The concept of masculinity is a touchy subject in the eSports gaming community. Professional players are usually smaller and classified as “geeks” or “nerds” for spending so much time on computer by their peers. These labels also lead to ridicules based on their sexual orientation. This might seem like a stretch but to this day using the word “fag” is guaranteed ban in some games and is sure to start some trouble whenever it is used. It is no wonder then that some players together with the members of the community fight for the recognition of eSport as a sport and the players as being athletes.

Women and video games is a popular subject as of late. With the boom of streaming services, the repeated notion that women do not play video game has been disproved, but the situation in eSports is a bit more complicated. Women face additional challenges when playing online games and trying to become a professional. In games using voice chat they are often ridiculed and this might also be the reason for less female professional players stemming from the fear of the comments from fans and viewers. Some dedicated players become commentators or cosplayers instead of “fighting a losing battle” trying to become a professional. The final barrier is the fact that even when there are professional tournaments where women participate, they are put in separate leagues rather than being mixed in with the male players. The arguments are that in other sports there are the same practices and as one professional player points out: “Women just aren’t good enough at Counter-Strike to play against men, so that’s why they have the tournaments for them.” (Taylor, 2012, p. 126). This seems like an unfounded claim but the fact is that gender equality in eSports still has a long way to go.

The lack of racial diversity is clearly visible when watching any MOBA or RTS tournament. One of the reasons for this according to Taylor (2012) is the fact that a relatively high performance computer is necessary to train and develop skills in order to become a professional player. The community where all races are represented on normal basis is the fighting game community as Taylor (2012, p. 131) claims, “Some of the top players in the scene are Asian and Asian American and you can find other players of colour in highly ranked positions. That the fighting game scene originates in the arcades, and is not centred around the home PC, is crucial”. Furthermore, black professional players might feel threatened by the community where in the already

hostile environment as mentioned above they might be addressed by racial slurs and otherwise humiliated.

## **6 Cultural framework of video games**

### **6.1 Defining video game culture**

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century scientists started conducting research on video game culture and its features. Currently the generation that was strongly influenced by video games since youth is reaching its 30s. Individuals from this generation who remained in the community contribute to the effort of spreading the knowledge about video games among the general public. Usually when game culture is mentioned in mainstream media it is just a brief description of the specific game and its players. As Shaw (2010, p. 404) says, “They still define ‘video game culture’ as something very distinct and very different from mainstream U.S. culture”. The complexity of cultural studies certainly does not help the process of defining video game culture and its aspects and expressions. Indeed, the fact that culture itself is defined differently by many people complicates the matter significantly. Some experts claim that culture is a way of life, whereas others define it as a form of criticism. The most comprehensive definition comes from *Webster’s dictionary* (2017) that defines culture as “the set of values, conventions, or social practices associated with a particular field, activity, or societal characteristic”. Based on this, we can define video game culture in the framework of its social practices and a shared identity or community. Shaw (2010, p. 413) mentions that games are considered by some to be highly social, while others disagree claiming the exact opposite and stating that playing video games alone is a solitary act that requires no social interactions.

Video games are very quickly becoming a part of the “mainstream” with growing representation in classical media such as books and movies. The number of websites, podcasts and overall content on the Internet targeted towards the video game community fluctuates. The state of video game culture is also heavily influenced by the nationalities. As mentioned above in South Korea where video games and especially eSports are the defining point of the nation’s culture, citizens face very specific issues and even laws. In the other countries, the classification of video game violence or

insufficient technological development stands in the way of creating functioning video game communities and subsequently specific video game culture groups. The video game violence is one of the major reasons why people have negative opinion on video games. Shiratori, Arai and Kato (2005, p. 119) imply that “If the video game industry does *not* want children or adolescents to increase their aggression, some changes can be made. There should be less violence, which should be less justified; less rewarded; and punished more”. However, this presents an issue in marketability of the game as players seek to have absolute freedom when playing.

## **6.2 Current generation**

The current cultural framing of video games also changes together with the state of the new generation. Whereas in the past video games existed for the sole purpose of entertainment and relaxation, the current young generation of in technologically advanced countries uses video games for education. There are of course educational games designed specifically for that purpose, but more importantly they develop their social skills. In the most recent years extensive research has focused on the influence of violent video games on the psyche of children and teenagers. The latest studies claim that there is no visible correlation between the two. On the other hand, new studies are emerging that claim, based on their findings, that a healthy amount of time spend on gaming is helpful when children seek to integrate into social groups or communicate with their peers (Smith, 2016). These studies suggest that video games are a part of life for the children and teenagers. This fact needs to be accepted also because of what Squire (2002, p. 1) reports that some researchers claim: “Developing educational games is a moral imperative, as kids of the "videogame generation" do not respond to traditional instruction”.

## **6.3 eSports**

Video games are constantly evolving in various directions. eSports further develop the social aspects that used to be represented in online games because nowadays specific communities meet in person when attending tournaments, exhibitions or other events associated with eSports. It results in strengthening their social connections or showing their devotion to a certain game or player. The players and members of the community also claim to battle the opinion of the public regarding the stereotypical perception of



video game and players. Professional players represent a departure from this stereotype by demonstrating that computer games are much more than a hobby for some. The argument that no one will ever be able to make a living by playing video games is also no longer valid, which the previous chapters of this thesis support as well. The situation is similar to other sports: The best players earn a great deal of money in exchange for their hard work.

## **7 Conclusion**

The main problem professional gaming faces is that its representation in general media rarely comes out as positive and the followers are struggling to create a legitimate fan base that would not be ridiculed. The goal of this thesis was to prove that professional gaming is not an insignificant temporary trend that will disappear. The first chapter of this thesis has showed that professional gaming exhibits a steady growth together with the whole gaming business providing new jobs and creating venues for new organizations and sponsorship deals for players and organisers.

In the second chapter, I have evaluated the social and cultural impact of professional gaming on particular countries all around the world and examined how these specific cultures adapt eSports for their unique cultures. Furthermore, I have proved that being a professional player is now a legitimate career in some countries where professional players are treated as celebrities. General insights into the genres of professional games which are played on the competitive level have been offered. These insights are further developed in the following chapter where more specific characteristics of the most popular eSport genres and the state they are currently in are explored. This contributes to a reader's understanding of the eSport scene and provides an introduction to the specifics of each individual genre. By characterizing the profile of the professional player, the process of becoming a professional player was analysed. Furthermore, racial and gender issues inside the community have been discussed. These issues are present everywhere in our society but there is an added problem of anonymity related to computers and the Internet. The inclusion of minorities seems to directly correlate with the fact that eSports are still a relatively new concept drawing the attention of a specific group of people, which prevents the community from becoming diverse.

Finally, I have classified video games in relation to culture and informed the reader about different topics related to the subject. As demonstrated, video games are becoming an integral part of life for those who are currently growing up in the environment where video games are available. Based on the previous findings, it can be stated that eSports gradually evolve video games and focus on their positive representation, in particular considering communication and socialising which, in the eye of public video games lack.

Some issues raised in this thesis could be further researched in greater detail considering the individual topics. The community surrounding eSports could be examined in depth with regard to the specific genres or the language used, particularly considering the fact that players have created unique expressions and means of communication in order to make the transfer of their messages as quick and effective as possible. The relationship between education and videogames could also be explored as it is becoming more and more relevant in the current era.

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