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~ Storytelling in Esports ~

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The purpose of this paper is to investigate what the role of storytelling in esports is and how it influences esports viewing consumptions. Storytelling in esports is complex and multifaceted; it ranges from live broadcasts to single tweets and constitutes to the narrative identity of players, teams and organizations. There is a clear relation between viewing consumptions of esports and esports storytelling content. It was investigated whether scales of motivation, gameplay motivation, escapism, community and identification could explain the amount of esports storytelling content people watched in the previous month, but no significant results were found. The paper begins with a theoretical framework on esports, storytelling and the formation of scales based on previous research on esports viewing consumptions. As a pre-study, an interview with a social media manager was conducted and an expert panel discussion on PR in Esports was attended. The main research method is an online survey (n=108) with participants from gaming and esports communities on Reddit and Discord. Data collection was done mainly through the use of a 5-point Likert scale on statements and data analysis was performed in terms of correlations and linear + multiple regression. The discussion of this paper goes into analysis of the results, explanations for the results, limitations of the research and implications for future research. In the concluding parts of this, paper the research questions are answered and practical tips for esports organizations on the use of storytelling are given.

Introduction

Esports (Electronic sports) has seen a significant growth in terms of attention, viewers and revenue over the past decade. For instance, the League of Legends World Championship reached a peak viewer count of 3.9 million and the prize pool for the Fortnite World Cup 2019 contained 30 million dollars (EsportsInsider, 2020, and Escharts, 2020). Academic attention on esports has also increased over the last decade, as it can be seen as an increasingly fruitful field for research opportunities. According to Scopus, the amount of scientific articles containing the word "esports" has even doubled from 40 in 2017 to 93 in 2018. Further, esports organizations have been popping up left and right and the estimated global market revenue of the esports industry amounts to 1.1 billion dollars in 2019 (Newzoo, 2019). Approximately 82% of the revenue came from brand investments, such as in media rights, advertising and sponsorships.

Large multinational organisations have become keenly aware of the opportunities that lie within esports marketing for reaching millennials and Gen Z audiences. Take for instance the 'Level Up' partnership between Honda and Team Liquid, about which Honda states in a press release on their website: "the partnership with Team Liquid and Twitch will provide significant access and value to gaming fans, while growing Honda's engagement with critical millennial and Gen Z audiences" (HondaNews, 2019). Honda's aim for engagement with gaming audiences is seen as 'critical', because they are looking to persuade first time car buyers and see it as a gateway to further Honda purchases. Yet, how does one successfully engage with gaming audiences? Most of the time, as this paper will indicate, engagement is done through telling the stories of the players and teams that are present within the esports ecosystem; storytelling in esports. There is little to no research done about this topic specifically, the closest examples are Xue, Newman & Du's (2019) paper on narrative, identity and community in esports as well as the whitepaper 'Beautiful Weirdos: telling the stories of esports heroes' done by esports communication consultancy The Story Mob (2019).

While the academic field of esports is still in an early phase, the growth of the industry offers many opportunities in terms of marketing, research and public relations. One of such opportunities, uniting these aspects, can be found in the field of storytelling. This thesis aims to uncover the state of the art knowledge within the academic field of esports. It seeks to identify key reasons for watching esports and storytelling content, reflect on the effectiveness, and give recommendations towards practical forms of storytelling strategies for esports organizations to use. Qualitative data was gathered as a pre-study, by interviewing an expert on social media within esports, attending a PR in esports panel discussion and analysing papers surrounding the subject. Quantitative data makes up the main form of research, through conducting a survey under gamers and esports audiences on how much esports they watch and whether storytelling elements influence their viewing behaviour. This paper will include: an introduction, background research, methodology, results, discussion, conclusion and practical implications for organisations as well as future research prospects. Based upon the angle of the scientific communicative field, the following research question and accommodating sub questions have been formulated:

What is the role of storytelling in esports and how does it influence esports viewing consumption?

What is the role of storytelling in an esports context?

How does storytelling influence esports viewing consumption?

How can esports organizations make use of storytelling?

Theoretical Framework

Esports has seen a significant growth of interest in terms of viewership and market revenue during recent years (Albrechtslund, 2010 and Newzoo, 2019). Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) are two of the most prominent researchers in the field and define esports as:

"A form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the esports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces" (p.211).

The mediation is where information and communication technologies are most apparent. As background information on how esports differs from traditional sports, it is added that: "player competence is not measured via either their physical prowess or finesse" (p.212). That does not indicate "that esports cannot be physically taxing for players" (p.212), but in general it is less than in traditional sports. Further, there are multitudes of subcultures present within esports, for instance communities surrounding a specific game, team, or person. Another, more descriptive definition of esports is given by Taylor (2016, in Reitman et al. 2019):

"E-sports involves the enactment of video games as spectator-driven sport, carried out through promotional activities; broadcasting infrastructures; the socioeconomic organization of teams, tournaments, and leagues; and the embodied performances of players themselves" (p.10).

This definition is more useful because it highlights the larger scale on which esports take place beyond being a competitive videogame, it has become a "consumer focused, capital driven, spectacularised, corporatized and marketed sport" (Conner, 2009 in Witkowski, 2019, p.955). As it stands, both of these definitions will be used as working definitions for this paper, the first one as a description of the act of playing videogames professionally, the second one as an additional indicator of the larger ecosystem which surrounds esports.

In general, literature on esports is scarce and the academic field is still in a stage of development. One of the earliest publications describing the phenomenon of esports dates back to 2002, in a paper on the social environment of FPS game Counter-Strike (Wright, Boria,

and Breidenbach, 2002). Yet, the term 'esports' was not used yet and the word 'sports' was only used once in relation to gaming in this paper. It took until 2006 for a first academic outline on esports to appear in a paper by Wagner (2006), who gave an early definition as: "*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*" (p.28). This definition is useful in highlighting the presence of information and communication technologies in the early stages of esports, but lacks the specificity of the first definition given, or the broader picture of the esports scene in the second definition (which naturally was not developed as much back then). Slowly, but steadily, esports research gained an increased amount of attention and it started to get momentum in publications around 2012, for instance in the field of business, law, sociology, sports science or informatics (Reitman et al., 2019).

Research on esports consumption or viewership motivations has gotten the most attention so far. Hamari & Sjöblom (2016 & 2017) conducted a 'uses and gratification theory' approach combined with an online survey method, which indicated that viewing motivations of esports are similar to those of traditional sports. Some specific factors influencing esports consumption have been found, such as: escapism, acquiring knowledge about games and the aggressiveness of players (p.211). Furthermore, a similar study by Xiao (2019) using the 'theory of reasoned action' found a correlation between drama, escapism and aesthetics in relation to watching esports. The article further states that while viewers of esports are typically gamers, there is a distinction between the active process of playing games and the more passive process of watching other people play games. Despite that watching is more passive than playing in most scenarios, Cheung & Huang (2011) note that watching esports can also be a way for people to actively engage with a community or "fuel a desire to play" (p.771).

Storytelling

Storytelling or narrative is a concept that has been practiced by mankind for a long time. It might have started with early humans telling stories around a campfire or singing songs. Technology evolved and thus it became possible to write books, produce theatre, create movies and so on. Now we live in an age of social media, YouTube, Twitch livestreaming and more. The choice of mediums through which to tell stories in the digital age is large and diverse. The narrative concept is important for present research, as it describes the way in which people interact with each other and construct meaning to the world (Albrechtslund, 2010). As Green and Brock (2000) put it: "a narrative account requires a story that raises unanswered questions, presents unresolved conflicts, or depicts not yet completed activity; characters may encounter and then resolve a crisis or crises. A story line, with a beginning, middle, and end, is identifiable" (p.701). The attachment that people have to stories or characters plays an important role in its (potentially persuasive) effectiveness. For instance when trying to transport a person to a fictional world or trying to persuade them to buy something or start making use of a service. Getting people engaged in stories usually requires a perceived amount of credibility, sympathy and being able to relate.

Storytelling in esports

Within Esports, there are multiple appearances of storytelling. Usually, these stories revolve around the players: historical background, progression of skill, anticipation of events to come or more entertainment focused stories. There are also examples of highlighting rivalries

between teams, for instance facing off during a finals match where the stakes are high. An article by Wolk (2017) indicates the use of storytelling in esports to create compelling back stories of players and connect with fans, which creates emotional investment for the fans with the player. Furthermore, he notes, there lies an opportunity in esports for connecting with specific subcultures, such as people who enjoy the act of cosplaying or people who create any type of art surrounding a game, team or person. Additionally, an article by Auxent (2016) argues that storytelling can be useful for explaining the complexity of a game, but that this is not necessary to engage the audience; "Storytelling and the focus on players can make esports accessible, too. Casual viewers don't have to understand every single rule in a game to feel the drama of esports. The only bad move is to ignore the storytelling element of a league or tournament." Both articles stress the power of storytelling and belief it can be a useful tool to bring esports towards a larger mainstream audience or create a deeper connection with existing fan bases.

The narrative identity approach on esports by Xue, Newman and Du (2019) dives deep into the continuous building of a persona in the digital world. This concept is useful to highlight the inter-connectivity players have with media to showcase their identity. Players have a plethora of social media to choose from for connecting with each other and the community. In their article, it is argued that "it is certainly the case that the construction of community identity is bounded to narrating process. That is, these public stories of belonging and being in the realm of esports not only refer to individual experiences, attitudes, or identities, but link the narrator to the collectivising potentialities presented by the emerging esports modalities (the commercial possibilities of professional gaming, the social possibilities of an immersive and integrated digital media environment, the cultural possibilities of a new, faceless world of digital actors looking to map out the cultural norms of the realm)" (p.12-13).

Storytelling methods often contain a protagonist and antagonist; hero and villain. However, within esports, the line between who are the heroes and who are the villains are much less clear, as both parties of a match are striving for the same goal: to win and be the best out of the competition. Yet, how do we people pick a side or create a narrative out of the situation? In Cunliffe & Coupland's (2012) article on embodied narrative sensemaking, they conclude that "we make sense in everyday narrative performances, evolving accounts and struggles to create meaning from fragmentary, multiple and contested narratives. Sensemaking is temporal in at least two ways: in the moment of performance we draw on past experiences, present interactions and future anticipations, and second, we plot narrative coherence across time" (p.83). Especially the latter sentence of this quote is useful to gain insight on what goes on in a person's mind before they pick a side.

In contrast to traditional sports, most esports organizations do not have a clear geographical based location (e.g. New York Yankees or LA Lakers), thus it might be less straightforward to decide who to root for, based on where you live. Usually, there is a favourite to win a match; this is the team or player that has a higher perceived chance to win, often dependent on their previous performances and statistics. Naturally, there are other things to take into account, such as how a competitor performs under pressure and what kind of flow they are in at the moment of the match. There can also be 'underdogs', competitors that are less likely to win based on statistics, but still have the possibility to upset a favourite (Van Huynh, Rosen, and Bury, 2018).

Broadcasters are usually firmly aware of a term like underdogs, and there exists a large range of other esports terminology, which might be confusing to an outsider (McVean & Sacco, 2019). Further, they have statistics to frame competitors against each other to make it more entertaining, or as they like to call it: 'Head to Head' (Vera, 2019). These statistics are often presented with the help of application program interfaces (API), which give detailed live information on players, teams and even leagues as a whole. Block, Hodge, and others (2018) wrote a paper about data-driven content production in esports and how it can help creating narratives (specifically in live broadcasts). They concluded that there is an "appetite of esports fans to engage with data as a creative tool – involving not only large production companies, but millions of individual content producers that could share data-driven stories peer-to-peer. In many ways, one could conceive data-driven storytelling as a tool for millions of esports fans to connect with each other creatively" (p.38).

In Summary, storytelling in esports is a multifaceted subject. It appears in many different forms, for instance: articles, videos, statistics, live broadcasts or even a single sentence on Twitter. Through an inter-connectivity of media, players form their narrative identity. This identity is not bound to the players exclusively, but also links the players to the formation and continuous shaping of the esports community and culture. Esports viewers make sense of these narratives through considering the past experience, present interaction, performances and future anticipation of players and teams. The presence of narrative and storytelling within esports is apparent, but how does it resonate with the audience? What kind of motives does the audience have for watching esports and storytelling content, and how do these motives influence the viewing consumption?

Research model

In order to answer these questions, relevant motives in terms of variables, measurements and scales must be identified. First and foremost, the article by Hamari & Sjöblom (2016) on the motivations of Twitch users has scales on: enjoyment, information seeking about the game products, learning about game strategies, recognition, companionship, shared emotional connection, escape, distraction and relaxation (p.994). Their article on why people watch esports has significant results in relation to aesthetics, escapism, acquisition of knowledge, novelty, and enjoyment of aggression (p.221). These articles form the foundation upon which present research is build, but some adaptations have to be made in order to make them more specified to the added element of storytelling or narrative.

Demographics

Demographics are quite common in quantitative research. Both articles by Hamari & Sjöblom (2016 & 2017) looked at gender, age, education and employment. Therefore, present research will be no different. These independent variables will be used to give a description of the sample, but will not have a direct hypothesis related to them, as that is not the main objective of this research. The goal of this is to describe the sample more specifically and in order to compare it to previous studies of esports viewing consumption

Time spent watching

In a quantitative research on viewing motivations, the amount of time spent watching will be the main dependent variable upon which regression will be tested (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2016 and 2017). In present research, time spent watching will be specified to two variables: time spent watching esports and time spent watching esports storytelling content. As it is difficult to give a precise definition of what storytelling in esports is, participants will be given a short description and example of how storytelling manifests itself within esports. The aim is to make participants familiar with the concept, which the research is focused on, while also allowing them to recall how much time they spent watching this type of content within a set period of time.

Motivation

The first scale of combined independent variables is named motivation; it contains eight different variables about the enjoyment, excitement, fun and entertainment of watching esports and esports storytelling content. The scale is almost directly imported from Hamari & Sjöblom's (2016) research, except that the words 'Using twitch' have been changed to 'watching esports' and 'watching esports storytelling content'.

Gameplay Motivation

The second scale focuses more on if watching esports causes people to perceive they are picking up new skills, strategies and motivation to play the game. This construct contained 4 questions, loosely combing Hamari & Sjöblom's (2016 & 2017) scales on 'learning about game strategies' and 'acquisition of knowledge'. This scale differs from the first one, in the sense that it relates more to watching esports as fuelling a desire to play games (Cheung & Huang, 2011).

Escapism

The third scale is about whether esports storytelling content specifically is relaxing, reduces stress and generally allows for escapism of daily life routines. This scale is based upon an interpretation and combination of Hamari & Sjöblom's (2016 & 2017) scales of escape, distraction and relaxation. In one of their papers, they note: "escape has been shown to be a strong motive for use within prior research on uses, motivations and gratification related to media viewing" (Lin et al. in Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017, p.216).

Community

The fourth scale dives into the community aspect; are people browsing esports community pages, do they create posts or content and generally consider themselves an active member of these communities? This scale is founded on an interpretation between the 'shared emotional connection' and 'social interaction' scales (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2016 & 2017).

Identification

The final scale is the largest of them all, containing 9 questions about feeling related to esports athletes, identifying with them and whether storytelling content boosts the perceived connection people have with esports athletes as well as the community. The roots of this scale lie within the narrative identity theory and the questions were constructed to be in line with the simple phrasing of the previous scales. As the paper by Xue, Newman and Du (2019) did not

give any examples of questions to be used for quantitative research, this could be considered as the main literature gap in present research. The construction of this scale is relevant because it aims to test the effectiveness of storytelling.

Hypothesis:

Based upon background research and the identification of relevant variables in the theoretical framework, the following hypotheses have been made:

H1: Time spent watching esports is related to time spent watching esports storytelling content

H2: The scales of motivation, gameplay motivation, escapism, community and identification are related towards time spent watching esports storytelling content.

The first hypothesis is a straight forward test to uncover if people who watch esports also watch storytelling content. The interesting aspect in this regard, is seeing how strong the relation is between the variables and which type of content is being watched more. The second hypothesis contains a multitude of variables and scales. The main idea behind the hypothesis is to find out why people are watching esports storytelling content, whereby the time spent watching is the dependent variable and the constructed scales are the independent variables.
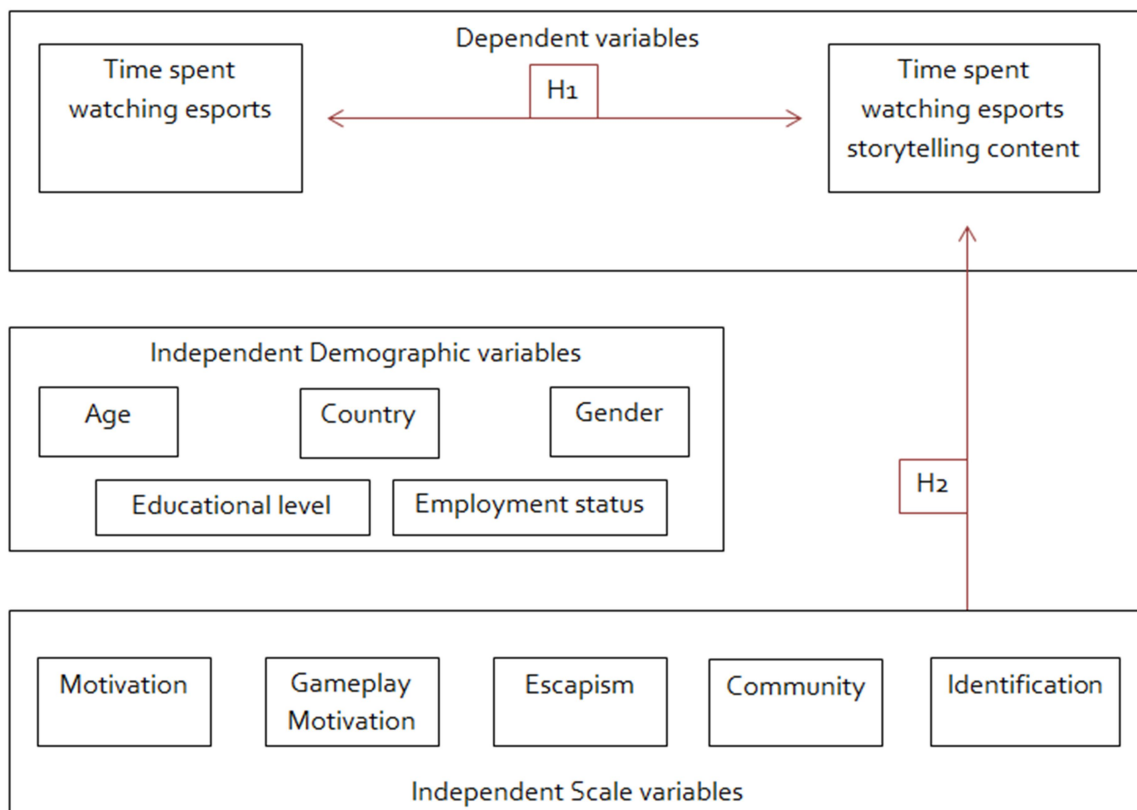

Fig 1. Research Model.

Method

For the method section of this paper, the aim is to describe the: pre-study, design, scales, sampling, data collection and analysis of the research. Next to this, the validity and reliability of measures and protocols will be discussed. The main form through which data has been collected is an online survey (*n*=108) amongst gamers and esports viewers. The data collection was done using Qualtrics and analysis of the survey data was done through SPSS.

Pre-study

Expert interview

Two steps have been taken before conducting the main survey. The first one being an interview with a social media manager of a team playing in the North American League of Legends Championship Series (NA-LCS) during its 2019 spring season. The aim of this interview was to gain industry perspective on how storytelling in esports is operationalized as well as potential input for identifying variables that should be included in the online survey, which have not been identified in the theoretical framework yet. Contact with this person was made by going into a LCS teams discord channel and inquiring if any of the staff members could answer some questions about the storytelling content of the team, to which this person replied and a video-call meeting was set up a few weeks later. The interview was conducted in a semi-structured setting, with four main topics to be discussed and some potential follow-up questions:

1. What is storytelling to you?
   a. What does it mean?
   b. Is it important (for you and your organization)
2. What are the aims/goals with storytelling?
   a. Are they realistic?
   b. Are they in line with your organizational values?
3. How do you use storytelling?
   a. How have you made use of it in the past?
   b. How do you find a (potential) narrative/story to tell?
   c. Can a narrative/story naturally come forward itself?
   d. How do you create a narrative?
   e. How does the narrative/story get presented?
   f. Does it paint a realistic picture?
4. Do you believe storytelling is effective?
   a. Within your aims/goals?
   b. How do you measure its effectiveness?
   c. How does it connect with the audience?

The recording of the interview marked 40 minutes, of which a rough transcript (ensuring the anonymity of the interviewee and mentioning only the most relevant answers) are given in the appendix. The main take away from the interview is that personality-driven storytelling on social media is what resonates most with the audience: behind the scenes videos, jokes or memes which involve the players and interactions between the players.

Attendance of the Esports Insider Summer Forum Brighton 2019
The second step which has been taken as a pre-study, is the attendance of 'the ESI Summer Forum Brighton 2019'. The aim was to learn more about the public relations of esports and the role of the communication professional in the esports environment. The forum contained a 40 minute panel discussion on 'PR in esports' between four experts in the field (EsportsInsider, 2019). During this discussion, some notes where taken, of which the most relevant are listed below.

- The esports audience is approximately between 16 to 25 years old.
- The main communication channels of esports are:
  - Twitch   - live broadcasts
  - YouTube   - videos and clips of broadcasts
  - Reddit   - community channel
  - Forums   - community channel
  - Twitter   - personal + team channel
  - Facebook   - personal + team channel
  - Instagram   - personal + team channel
  - Snapchat   - personal + team channel
- There is a fine line of balance between appealing to core and mainstream audiences; storytelling about teams and players generally does well with both.
- Behind the scenes footage generally appeals well with the core audience.
- Professional players have a high level of interaction with the community and especially their own fan-base (much higher compared to traditional sports).
- Crisis management needs to happen very fast in esports, due to how quickly news can come out online.
- Video content created by influencers could be considered as free advertising, which spreads rapidly.

Although no additional variables for the survey were identified in these pre-studies, they did offer notable industry perspectives on how esports organizations make use of storytelling, which will be further discussed in the conclusion.

Measurements

The main body of the survey consists of multiple scales, each of which has multiple questions linked together. The variables are: demographics, time spent on esports, (gameplay) motivations for esports, escapism through esports, community in esports and identification within esports. Apart from the demographics and time spent watching, each question is measured on a 5 point Likert scale; statements to which respondents can indicate to what extent they disagree or agree. Most scales are based upon similar previous research by Hamari & Sjöblom (2016 and 2017), who made use of the motivation scale for sport consumption (Train & James, 2001). The exception in this research is the inclusion of an identification scale, which was based up the theory of narrative identity (Xue, Newman and Du, 2019). A full list of the questions and chronology can be found in the appendix.

Table 1: Formation of scales

	N	Mean	SD	Cronbach's Alpha
Motivation	108	4,16	,70	,91
Gameplay Motivation	108	4,17	,67	,74
Escapism	108	3,32	,83	,80
Community	108	2,87	,86	,84
Identification	108	3,58	,75	,90

Table 1 shows the formation of scales; how the results of each question got linked together into a single scale variable. The minimum *CA* for each scale is ,70 and the Pearson Correlation is required to be significant at the ,05 level.

Sampling

Gathering respondents was done through posting a survey link on esports communities within Reddit and Discord. Reddit is a large online forum which hosts a range of communities and Discord is a voice & text chat application that hosts a variety of (mostly gaming) communities. Many esports teams and organizations have their own Reddit page and/or discord server. For each post on Reddit, a small introduction was written about the identity of the researcher, why the research was being conducted and why the community contained relevant participants. The Reddit communities on which a post was made are the following: r/RocketLeagueEsports, r/GlobalOffensive, r/FortniteCompetitive, r/DotA2, r/CompetitiveOverwatch and r/CompetitivePUBG. Post on Reddit resulted in ~160 responses. The Discord communities on which a post was made are: Clutch Gaming, Benelux LoL community, Blueshell E-sports, Paradise and Rendezvous Gaming. Post on Discord resulted in ~50 responses.

Procedure

The first thing participants encountered when opening the survey link was the following introduction: 'This survey is about storytelling in esports, which are the stories or backgrounds of players, teams or organizations. These stories can be told in many different ways, for instance through youtube videos, reddit posts or during live broadcasts on sites like Twitch.tv. This survey will take about 10 minutes to fill out. All data will be kept anonymously and is used only for a research purposes'. Participants were required to choose the option 'I have read above text and agree to continue to the survey' in order to follow through with the survey. Following, participants had to fill in the demographics section: year of birth, country of residence, gender, educational level and employment status. Next, participants had to indicate in an open answer the amount of hours they had spent watching esports and esports storytelling content within the last month. From this point on, participants encountered 31 different statements, and had to indicate one of 5 options: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree

Data collection

In total, 218 responses have been collected of which 108 responses completed the survey. Gathered data was exported from Qualtrics to SPSS for data analysis. The data collection period ranged from the end of November 2019 to the beginning of April 2020.

Data analysis

Data analysis was done by the use of SPSS. First, all incomplete responses have been removed, which shrunk the data set from 218 responses to 108. Secondly, sensitive information about respondents was removed from the data set to ensure anonymity, such as their IP address or location. Following, the general demographics of the data set were analysed in terms of frequencies and descriptives. Next, the first hypothesis was tested by conducted a linear regression between 'time spent watching esports' and 'time spent watching esports storytelling content'. Furthermore, the strength of the scales was measured by looking at the Pearson's correlations between the questions in the same scale. Additionally, for the reliability of each scale, the Cronbach's Alpha was required to have at least .7 or higher. Finally, to test the second hypothesis, the scales were compared to the time spent watching esports storytelling content by means of a multiple regression.

General Demographics

Out of the 108 complete responses, 22 different nationalities have been found, including some unique responses from people out of Belgium, Finland, Lebanon, Mexico and New Zealand. The most represented nation is the Netherlands with 23% of the total responses. In terms of gender, the survey was filled in predominantly by males (90%) while females made up only 7.5% and the remaining preferred not to answer. Age of respondents ranged between 14 and 39 years old with the average respondent being 23 years old. The employment status showed that 58% of the respondents were still students while 34% was employed full time. The remaining 8% was either unemployed, part time employed or preferred not to answer. The average time for the survey to be filled out was 6 and a half minutes.

Time Spent Watching

On average, respondents watched 25 hours of esports and 13 hours of esports storytelling content within the last month.

Results

H1: Time spent watching esports is related to time spent watching esports storytelling content

A linear regression was conducted to see if time spent watching esports storytelling content predicted time spent watching esports. Results indicate there is a strong relation between the two variables: (F(1, 101) = 126,90, p<.001, β = .75, p<.001, R^2 = ,55).

H2: The scales of viewing motivation, gameplay motivation, escapism, community and identification are related towards time spent watching esports storytelling content.

In order to test the second hypothesis, first the correlations between the scales as mentioned in table 1 had to be tested. As is visible in table 2, all scales had significant correlations with each other, except escapism and community. Reason for this might be that people who watch esports and storytelling content as a way to escape daily life, do not want to be involved with the social aspects of interacting and being part of a community. Despite this, the strength of the model is still sufficient with a Cronbach's Alpha of ,80. Following, a multiple regression analysis was conducted with the scales as independent variables and time spent watching esports storytelling content as dependent variable. The results of this are presented in table 3, 4 and 5. The ANOVA table 5 shows that the models p-value is above the critical .05, indicating that it is not possible to reject the null hypothesis that the scales of motivation, gameplay motivation, escapism, community and identification are not related towards time spent watching esports storytelling content: (F(5, 96) = 1.29, p = .27). Reasons for this could be that there are other variables also influencing time spent watching esports storytelling content, which were not included in the model.

Table 2: Correlations between scales

Scale		1	2	3	4
1. Motivation					
2. Gameplay	Pearson Correlation	,66**			
Motivation	Sig. (2-tailed)	,00			
3. Escapism	Pearson Correlation	,53**	,41**		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,00	,00		
4. Community	Pearson Correlation	,37**	,39**	,17	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,00	,00	,067	
5. Identification	Pearson Correlation	,69**	,55**	,62**	,30**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,00	,00	,00	,002

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Cronbach's Alpha = ,80

Table 3: Model Summary Multiple Regression Analysis

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	,25[a]	,06	,01	26,31

a. Predictors: (Constant), Identification, Community, Gameplay Motivation, Escapism, Motivation

Table 4: ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	4471,57	5	894,32	1,29	,27[b]
	Residual	66497,21	96	692,68		
	Total	70968,78	101			

a. Dependent Variable: Time spent watching esports storytelling content
b. Predictors: (Constant), Identification, Community, Gameplay Motivation, Escapism, Motivation

Table 5: Coefficients

	Scale	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-22,91	18,29		-1,25	,21
	Motivation	2,42	6,01	,064	,40	,69
	Gameplay Motivation	3,05	5,44	,076	,56	,58
	Escapism	4,93	4,28	,150	1,15	,25
	Community	-2,70	3,35	-,089	-,81	,42
	Identification	1,17	5,35	,032	,22	,83

a. Dependent Variable: Time spent watching esports storytelling content

Discussion

In a discussion of the research, some things went according to plan, others did not and some could have been improved on for further research. Of the things that went right, the identification of relevant theoretical articles has been profound; the articles by Hamari and Sjöblom (2016 & 2017) on esports viewing motivations were very relevant to the research plan and construction of the method. Xue et all's (2019) research on narrative identities highlighted the complexity of the social domain, in which storytelling in esports takes place. Further, the survey response rate coming from esports communities was sufficient (*n*=108). The demographic similarities between present research and that of Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) are apparent: the mean age (23), distribution of gender (90% male & 7,5% female) and part of the sample being students (58%) was almost exactly the same (p.989). Beyond similarities, there were some differences with the previous research as well. Results indicated that respondents watched an average of 25 hours of esports within the last month, which is less than the average 11 hours per week of previous work (p.988). This discrepancy can be explained by the fact that previous work looked at how much people watched gaming streamers (of which there is always multiple online) and not esports broadcasts specifically (which are less frequent and require more production value).

Results indicated that time spent watching esports storytelling content can be used as a predictor on time spent watching esports for 55% variability of the response data. This shows that both types of content are being watched and that storytelling content could be considered as an interesting field of research for potential viewing motivations of esports. In regard to viewing motivations, no significant results could be identified between the constructed scales and time spent watching esports storytelling content. This could be due to the model containing a large amount of variables or other variables having an effect, which were not included in the model. The scales itself on motivation, gameplay motivation, escapism, community and identification did have significant strength in accordance to previous research, even though they were slightly adapted to include the element of storytelling (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2016 & 2017). This shows that similar scales can be used for future research on esports viewing consumptions.

Limitations

The first limitation of the study is related to the concept of storytelling in esports. As was highlighted by the theoretical framework, it is a multifaceted and complex concept. It would be impossible for all respondents to have the same idea of what this concept is. Giving a description of the concept at the start of the survey might have helped to get participants somewhat on the same page, but it could also have limited their views as to what storytelling in esports is. Having respondents give their own interpretation of what storytelling in esports is, could be very helpful in setting up a proper definition, which can be used for future research.

The second limitation of the study is that participants had to recount the amount of hours they watched esports and storytelling content within the last month. It is highly unlikely that the numbers participants gave in the survey was exactly how much they watched in reality.

Potential solution to this could be to shrink the time participants have to recall from a month to a week. Yet a potential problem that occurs here is that esports events do not occur weekly for every game, some games have a set time of competition (e.g. League of Legends spring, summer and winter splits) while other games only have a few major tournaments once or twice a year (e.g. Dota Invitational or Fortnite World Championships). Further limitation is that a 5-point Likert scale was used instead of a 7-point Likert scale. A 7-point Likert scale would allow respondents more nuance and more dispersed data. This would likely increase the survey response duration, which was approximately 6 and a half minutes on average, compared to the expected 10 minutes in the method. Another practical implication for future research, which would increase the survey duration and give more data, is to add more variables. There are several variables included in previous research, that were not included in this research, such as: vicarious achievement, aesthetics, physical attractiveness of players, drama, perceived skill of the players, novelty and enjoyment of aggression (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017).

In retrospect for future research, focusing on the use of storytelling to reach minority groups, such as females or older audiences, might be a fruitful topic for investigation. As these groups only make up a small part of respondents being reached by current research, it would be interesting to see research that is focused solely on seeing if and what type of storytelling content engages these groups most. Maybe some type of storytelling method can be identified, which makes them more interested in esports as a whole. Additionally, while female esports viewers are a minority, there are plenty of female esports professionals behind the scenes, as the pre-study interview was with a female and the expert panel discussion of the pre-study contained 3 of the 4 experts being female. Extensive interviews with these professionals could give information on how it feels to be a female professional in a mainly young adult male dominated field, what kind of potential struggles this brings and what needs to change in the esports scene to make it more welcoming to outside audiences. Additionally, research on storytelling in esports can be specified to game scenes. There might be differences between storytelling methods that work best to engage the audience of a specific game, for instance the younger audience of a game like Fortnite or the console fighting game communities.

What is the role of storytelling in esports and how does it influence esports viewing consumption?

What is the role of storytelling in an esports context?

In conclusion, storytelling in esports is the story of a professional player or a team and their dream to become the best. These stories can be told in many forms, ranging from an interview with a player about their historical background to statistical performance in a live match or even a single tweet a player sends out. It all accounts to the narrative identity a player or team is continuously building in the digital world, which in turn influences how esports communities emerge and constantly change by (Xue, Newman and Du, 2019).

How does storytelling influence esports viewing consumption?

There is a clear relation between watching esports and watching esports storytelling content.
This research indicated that there are multiple aspects influencing why people watch esports and storytelling content: general motivations, gameplay motivations, escapism, community and identification. This research did not find significant results that explain how these aspects influence viewing consumptions directly, but does indicate that these aspects play a part.

How can esports organizations make use of storytelling?

There are a broad range of mediums and tools esports organizations can make use of: social media, videos and live broadcasts. Personality driven storytelling about the players or teams often works best in appealing to the mainstream and core audiences. Behind the scenes footage generally does well with the core audience and video content created by influencers can spread fast within the community. Further, it is important to remember that players themselves fulfil a very important role in building their narrative identity, as much of their actions are publicly available and every statement they make on social media can be reflected back to them by the community, at any given time. In case this happens negatively, it is important to address the problem fast as news can spread very fast in online networks.

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Appendix

Survey

<u>Introduction</u>
This survey is about storytelling in esports, which are the stories or backgrounds of players, teams or organizations. These stories can be told in many different ways, for instance through youtube videos, reddit posts or during live broadcasts on sites like Twitch.tv.

This survey will take about 10 minutes to fill out.

All data will be kept anonymously and is used only for a research purposes.

<u>Demographics:</u>
What is your year of birth?	[open answer]
What country are you from?	[list of countries]
What is your gender?	male, female, other, prefer not to say
What is your level of education?	None, primary, secondary, upper.
What is your employment status?	Student, full-time, part-time, unemployed.

<u>Awareness & time spend</u>
On average, how many hours did you spend watching esports storytelling content within the last month?
On average, how much hours per week do you spend watching esports broadcasts or VOD's?

<u>Motivations</u>
I find watching esports enjoyable **Likert scale**
I find watching esports storytelling content enjoyable. ↓
Watching esports is exciting
Watching esports storytelling content is exciting
I have fun watching esports
I have fun watching esports storytelling content
Watching esports is entertaining
Esports storytelling content is entertaining

<u>Gameplay motivations</u>
I watch esports to pick up on new skills or strategies
Watching esports has made me pick up on new skills or strategies
Watching esports motivates me to play the game
Watching esports is a fun activity when I am not playing the game

<u>Escapism</u>
Watching esports storytelling content relaxes me

Watching esports storytelling content reduces my stress
Watching esports storytelling content distracts me from daily life routines
Watching esports storytelling content allows me to escape from daily life routines

Community
I actively browse esports community pages
I enjoy engaging with esports communities on social media
I actively create posts on esports community pages
I actively comment on posts on esports community pages
I actively create content for and on esports community pages
I would consider myself as an active member of an esports community

Identification
I can relate to esports athletes
I can identify with esports athletes
Watching esports storytelling content makes it easier for me to relate to esports athletes
Watching esports storytelling content makes it easier for me to identify with esports athletes
Feeling related to esports athletes motivates me to watch esports
While watching esports storytelling content, I focus mainly on the players
I spent more time watching esports when I feel connected to the stories
Watching esports storytelling content has brought me closer to an esports community
I consider esports storytelling content to be an important factor when engaging with esports communities.

Transcript of Interview with NA LCS Social Media Manager

Team X has many different media channels (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, etc.), which media channels do you run?

I manage pretty much everything now. The only things I don't entirely manage are the Chinese pages. We have someone on the Chinese partnership side who manages those, but we do work together. Everything else is pretty much entirely me, except the subreddit, which is fan driven. I actually don't run anything on the subreddit, but I do run the [organizational] reddit account.

Regarding YouTube content specifically, did you have any say in how the videos are made? Or were they made before you joined the organization?

I actually joined the organizations between last summer and this spring, so right around before spring split is when I joined this year. Anything before that, which you see on YouTube, I had no part in. But starting from this spring, is all stuff I helped with; <u>provision of the content, the messages that we want to send with the videos</u>. I don't actually do the editing of the videos. <u>I do all of the channel management</u>

Do you also come up with ideas for videos?

Yeah, I help with coming up with video ideas. They are an collaboration between me and the manager of marketing [from a higher ownership of organization], who oversees my work and our video guy, who edits and stuff. Between the 3 of us we come up with all the ideas and concepts.

What does storytelling mean to you?

I think that to me, personally (not related to my organizations views)…

I see storytelling as avenue to show people truth. I am big advocate of honesty, I think honesty is the best thing to show people. When you're telling stories in a professional environment it's not always honest, in the sense that there are things that you show people and there are things that that you show people but keep very close to yourself. That's something I have to do in my everyday job. For me, it has always been about telling a real story and being able to share with people things that they don't know or like they don't necessarily see or have like the ability the see (or resources to see).

Do you believe a story comes naturally or is it formed by people?

I don't consciously form a story step-by-step. I like taking what's already there and then tweaking it, so there is emphasis on the parts that I think are more meaningful, and then releasing the story from there. Everyone has a different story and the magic of storytelling comes from being able to make your story unique, but also relatable. I definitely do not have imagination to formulate a story out of thin air. I do not enjoy spinning stories towards anything that does not exist. But there is definitively an art to it.

I find it interesting that you mention 'spinning' stories, because for an organization there might be a tendency to do that towards a more positive view than reality

From my experience it comes down to information. There is information that you release or keep to yourself. The important part is distinguishing which is which. Sometimes that does not

even come from me, it can be from someone higher up. My general philosophy when I go into a project or brand is that I need to establish my initial understanding: these are the things we want to show, highlight and what the brand focuses on and this is the story we want to tell. Things outside of that do not necessarily need to be told, you want to have a strong brand which is true to what you want to represent.

How is storytelling being used, I've noticed that teams do it differently, and part of storytelling is having a narrative, right? I was wondering, how do you create a narrative (for instance in social media)?
There are two sides to it: one thing is to emphasise the things your brand wants to be focused on. For us, there is a focus on showing where we come from (geo-location & cultural wise), there is no other team in the league currently doing that, except maybe X. It has been quite effective for us, and even the players get in on the jokes and memes.

The overarching picture is that we are a league team, we are competitive and we want to win. Every team in the league wants to express that. On a micro-scale, I would say it's just a lot of showing your personality, especially of individual players. Ultimately, that's what fans really watch for, at least for now.

More so than the teams?
So far, that is definitively the case. There are exceptions to that, for instance we have a lot of fans simply because we are from X region and represent that heavily. Apart from that, teams like X and maybe X have a lot of fans, but still people mostly follow players. For instance, the journey of 'Doublelift' from CLG to TSM to Team Liquid. That's what people are fans of, and you even see that in traditional sports, such as with Kobe Bryant. When their personality shines they feel closer to this figure they are a fan of. When you look at specific basketball team X, you can clearly see in their social media that it is mostly about the players. I do similar things on social media; telling the story of the player, hyping up them as people, figures. & personalities. I just like posting stuff of them behind the scenes, or jokes of them, funny pictures, videos or when they interact with each other (that relationship is something people really like seeing as well). Especially the younger audience are really about fandom; people will ship pairings like anime or drama shows and even to that in the league itself. For example, we have [X player], who has a big personality and a lot of fans. People still ask him about his old team mates, whom he had such good synergy with at the time. So those are also stories you can tell. I guess that how you go by it day to day, and keeping the bigger picture in mind.

Cool, so you are really focused on pushing the players forward, instead of focusing everything on the organizations itself.
Yeah, and I don't mean this as a bad thing, but the players are a marketing tool for the organization; the more successful the players are marketed, then the more successful the team will be. That's kind of how it is. And having personalities to highlight benefits the team as a whole.

Example of a Reddit Post

▲
30
▼

(icon) **r/FortniteCompetitive** · Posted by u/Razt 2 months ago

Quick survey about storytelling in esports

`Data`

Greetings r/FortniteCompetitive

My name is Rogier and currently I am studying communication science in the Netherlands. It has always been a dream of mine to somehow combine my academic career with my passion for esports. Therefore, I have decided to do research on storytelling in esports as my final bachelor thesis. As far as I know, storytelling has always been present in esports, as it allows us viewers to get to know the players and teams stories of trying to achieve peak performance and the struggles that come with it.

Fortnite is one of the newer esports out there and I find it fascinating to see how the competitive scene has grown so quickly in recent years with the passionate community that comes with it.

If any of ya'll have the time, I would highly appreciate if you could fill out this quick <10 minute survey to help me with my research and not let my dream be a meme:
https://utwentebs.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_881cdXugoADuTsN

I'm open to any discussion, feedback or comments regarding my work and I hope you all have a wonderful day :)

💬 **4 Comments**   ➤ **Share**   ✏ **Edit Post**   🔖 **Save**   ⊘ **Hide**   🏷   ···   98% Upvoted

Comment as Razt

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What are your thoughts?




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SORT BY **TOP** ▼

▲
▼   Oknarf25 4 points · 2 months ago

Finished! Hope the research goes well.

💬 Reply   Give Award   Share   Report   Save

▲
▼   Foxjay11 1 point · 2 months ago

Veel succes in Twente daar!😊

💬 Reply   Give Award   Share   Report   Save