

The legitimacy of simulation and eSports racing as a sport, from a skill and marketing perspective.

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The legitimacy of simulation and eSports racing as a sport, from a skill and marketing perspective.

Mark Reed

eSports Racing

The practice of “eSports”, or “electronic sports”, dates back to the mid-nineties, with early first-person action games encouraging consumers to compete against one another. These players would often form ‘clans’ or teams wherein members would work together, aiming to prevail as the top group of competitors in the game. Shooting and action games such as ‘Doom’, and “Quake” were popular choices for competitive gaming in the nineties, (Wagner, no date) having been released in 1993 and 1996 respectively. The advances in both gaming software and hardware since then have allowed for games with much more fidelity, or accuracy compared to real world counterparts. Whilst Shooting games are still a significant aspect of eSports, recent developments in simulation software and game design have allowed driving and racing simulators to be incorporated into eSports. Games such as “Gran Turismo Sport” and “Assetto Corsa Competizione” have been developed in recent years with competitive online racing at the forefront of each game.

Due to the ever-increasing level of fidelity between racing simulation and real-world racing and the training and coaching benefits simulation can offer, it is becoming increasingly possible that skills obtained using simulation software can be translated into real world, on track, driving skill. This then raises the question; is simulation racing a legitimate sport? If the real-world activity is simulated in enough depth and with enough accuracy, are the two forms of competition comparable? Can the two forms of competition contribute to each other? This study will focus on simulated driving and racing software, its implementation as a form of competition, and the legitimacy of “eSport racing” as a sport.

Research Problem

Whilst there is a wealth of documented research of simulation racing relating to its function and implementation in driver training and coaching, a less documented area of racing simulation is eSports competition, the development of racing eSports events and use as an entry or pathway to motorsport. Therefore, this study will investigate and document how simulation software is used as a form of competition, the relation to motorsport and how eSports and motorsports relate and can benefit and detract from each other, from both a skill perspective and business perspective.

Research aims and questions

The research aim of this study is to identify (1) the aspects of simulation racing and eSports racing that justify or vindicate its potential status as a legitimate sport (2) eSport racing’s relationship to motorsport and (3) how eSport racing and motorsport differ between demographic groups

Research questions

1. What aspects of eSports racing qualify it as a form of sport?
2. What factors relate eSports racing and Motorsports?

3. How do eSports racing and Motorsport differ between demographic groups?

Scope

The topics this study will focus on simulated driving and racing eSports. The research in this study will cover other forms of eSports such as shooting games and role-playing games for comparison between forms of eSports and the skills in each type of eSports. However, the purpose of this comparison is to highlight the factors of eSports racing and simulated racing that justify or vindicate if simulation racing is comparable to traditional forms of sport.

Literature review

One of the key factors behind the popularity of electronic sports and games is that 'they are fun, convenient, unpredictable and/or provide an opportunity for skill mastery' (Lee, Schoenstedt, 2011, p.40). This makes the software more accessible for a wider audience, and therefore it is key for a software developer to incorporate these criteria into their simulators or games to increase the size of the game's potential market. An example of this is the incorporation of "DualShock 4" controller support for Gran Turismo Sport. DualShock 4 is the handheld controller that is supplied with the "PlayStation 4" console. Whilst specialist simulation hardware such as steering wheels and pedals is the intended way of playing the game, support for the simpler method of playing using this controller makes the game more accessible to novice and casual users, potentially increasing the sales of the software. The accessibility of simulation racing games Looking at eSports from a wider perspective, the levels of participation from both genders could provide useful for real world motorsport. 'While it is still a male-dominated activity, many females (approximately 40%) play eSports games' (Lee, Schoenstedt, 2011, p.40). Because of the low cost of eSports compared to motorsports, competitive gaming is a field of competition where male and females can compete with no major financial investment. This highlights a difference between eSports racing and motorsport between males and females, as Britain's 'under-16 boy/girl karting license split is 1,794/139' (Rencken, 2018). This ratio highlights the differences between the participation in esports and motorsports across both genders.

Due to games being accessible to a wide market, and hardware such as consoles to run these games widely available and low priced compared to gaming focussed computers, 'the market for digital games has grown to nearly \$100 billion' (Ströh, 2017, p.13) the size of this market shows the public demand for games, and by extension the potential eSports market. This is because a larger overall consumer base increases the potential segment of that consumer base that participate in eSports. Ströh argues 'The core of eSports is similar to traditional types of sport' (2017, p.13) in regard to player training, organised competition events and spectatorship. This means that there is similar potential for sponsorship and advertisement in esports, compared to traditional sports. In image 1 (Ströh, 2017, p. 21, image 1), the author states that the key components in a professional gaming event are the consumers, brands, teams, publishers, events and leagues. Consumers are the audience of the gaming event, and their investment in the event is entertainment from watching the competition. Ströh states that 'according to a recent Newzoo report, 40% of all viewers are not playing any of the popular eSports disciplines themselves' (2017, p.13) showing that there is potential to advertise the product to new customers. In summary, the author identifies key factors behind the incentive to financially invest in eSports competitions, and the key components of an eSports event. Ströh also highlights that there are similarities between the core aspects of eSports and traditional sports, a point echoed throughout the research in this study. Therefore, this source, from a marketing perspective, justifies eSports as a true sport.

One of the key issues surrounding eSports is its legitimacy as a sport. One of the most common opinions of eSports is that it is 'a 'sedentary activity' that lacks physical activity and therefore does not contribute to public health, as 'regular sports' are supposed to' (Hilvoorde, Pot, 2016, p.15). This may be due to the forms of eSports that revolve around first-person shooting games, where the competitor sits at a desk and operated the game with a keyboard and mouse. However, when considering racing eSports at a high level of competition, the level of physical activity is far higher. Using a wheel and pedals and competing for long periods at a time can place physical strain on a competitor, as well as the mental strain from the multitasking and decision making. It is therefore prudent to counter this opinion and argue that racing eSports can contribute to public health. An additional element of eSports that can reinforce its legitimacy is the development of motor skills. Hilvoorde and Pot argue 'motor skills are a defining element of eSports' (2016, p. 19). Whether it is the press of a button, or the turn of a steering wheel, the timed actions that are required to play a game, when repeated, build up a player's motor skills, potentially increasing the coordination of the player or simply training them to carry out repeated actions quicker or with better timing. This is also an aspect that can be seen in traditional sports through training. However, as this could be achieved without physical strain, such as button presses on a keyboard or controller, it could be argued that this is no different from the practice of typing an essay, as repeated typing could build up similar motor skills as playing a computer game.

A factor that can be considered when comparing eSports to traditional sports is the level of stress a competitor undergoes during competitions. Bodily production of steroids such as cortisol can be used to measure the effect of stress a competitor experiences whilst participating in a game. In eSports, the 'level of cortisol during competitions is comparable to the one of racing drivers' (Hallmann, Giel, 2018, p. 15). Also, 'their average heartrate during competitions is over 100 beats per minute with peaks of up to 160 to 180 beats per minute' (Hallmann, Giel, 2018, p. 15). This shows that the mental strain placed on an eSports competitor is similar to traditional motorsport. This is potentially owing to the similar mental skills and knowledge needed to operate a racing car in both a simulator and the real world, and a similar level of multitasking, as both simulator drivers and real-world drivers have to focus not only on driving, but racing other competitors. This relates to the study as it provides legitimacy to eSports as a form of sport. Both articles argue that whilst the perception of a traditional sport is a physical activity that contributes to an individual's health, there are many other factors of eSports that are comparable to physical sports. One of the key factors that both sources do not investigate is the physical activity associated with simulated driving at a mid to high level of fidelity using a wheel and pedal setup to play a simulator or game. Therefore, it is key to investigate the physical stress and activity carried out when gaming and the comparison between simulation and real-world motorsport, in order to test the argument that racing eSports is not a physical activity that contributes to an individual's health.

This research, in summary highlights the key difference of eSports and traditional sport, the physical nature of traditional sports being predominantly absent in most eSports genres such as shooting games. However, the similarities between the eSports and traditional sports are highlighted throughout the research, from the perspective of mental strain, to physical signs of stress. Also, the audience for eSports is shown to be similar to that of traditional sports. However, these sources do not specifically refer to racing simulation and eSports racing, as there is a lack of research on eSports events focussed on racing. This highlights an area in which this study can contribute, as an investigation into eSports racing events and the events' legitimacy as a sport can determine how eSports racing can contribute to motorsport from an events management perspective, skill development perspective, and a business and marketing perspective through the relationship and differences between the two forms of competition across different demographics such as gender.

The reliability of these sources is improved due to their academic format, and the significant number of both references and citations. This shows the authors have carried out in depth research.

Whilst there is a wealth of research on eSports and its implementation as a whole, a less documented area of eSports is the racing and simulation area, the development of racing eSports events and use as an entry or pathway to motorsport. Therefore, this study will investigate and document how simulation software is used as a form of competition, the relation to motorsport and how eSports and motorsports relate and can benefit and detract from each other, from both a skill perspective and business perspective.

Methodology

The philosophy of the study will involve both an interpretivist approach and an empirical approach. Question 1 will be addressed with an interpretivist approach, looking at case studies such as the Gran Turismo World Tour Events and individuals such as Jann Mardenborough and Jimmy Broadbent who have made the transition from eSports to motorsports. The study will be conducted through both case studies and interviews with individuals. The second question will be addressed using an empirical approach, through conducting quantitative studies into the fidelity of simulation software in relation to real world data. A Quantitative study allows for a comparison of data sets acquired through Motec data acquisition software from both a simulator and real-world data using the same vehicle and race circuit in both instances. Data such as g-force and driver input will be obtained through monitoring software on a sports 2000 series car and then the conditions will be replicated in the simulator using the same monitoring software, and the two data sets will be compared.

To investigate question 3, both an interpretivist and empirical approach will be used to find the differences between the two forms of competition between different demographic groups, a qualitative study looking at case studies in both eSports and Motorsports highlighting the participation and performance of different demographic groups such as age, gender and race will be carried out. The qualitative data can be conducted through research and interviews with individuals, and the quantitative data can be obtained in the same way and analysed using SPSS to carry out statistical tests such as a paired T-test.

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