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## SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, ECONOMICS AND LAW

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### **THE ROAD TO PROFESSIONALISM**

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*A qualitative study on the institutionalization of eSports*

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# **The Road to Professionalism**

A qualitative study on the institutionalization of eSports

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## **Abstract**

ESports as an industry is a rapidly growing digital sport, with a multitude of different disciplines. While it is a vastly growing industry, it has as of yet seen limited academic attention. In this study, the development of one specific eSport is examined, namely Counter-Strike: Global Offensive. Institutional theory, in addition to institutional work theory, was utilized as a theoretical lens to understand how and why the eSport is developing. A qualitative approach was used towards this study, with the conduction of 15 interviews and a multitude of observations varying between events, community discussions and video work performed by spokespersons. The empirical findings were thereafter presented in a subject related manner through 5 different categories: (1) coaching, (2) rule adaptations, (3) unionization, (4) events and (5) community. The analysis of the data was done through the theoretical framework and two distinct forms of institutional work were identified: (1) establishment work aiming to increase the professionalism and legitimacy of eSports and (2) shielding work aiming at safeguarding the eSport and its' community. Next to the identification of institutional work, neo-institutional trends were noticed in the form of isomorphism and decoupling within the Counter-Strike eSport (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Through the new insights provided through this study, a contribution is attempted to increase the understanding of eSport development and shed light on the presence of institutional work in emergent sport discourse.

**Keywords:** institutional theory, institutional work, eSports, emergent sports,

## Introduction

Sports play a crucial role within modern culture (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010). While everyone knows traditional sports such as football, soccer, basketball, etc., there are new emerging sports, which are increasingly gaining in popularity. One of such sports are the so-called Electronical Sports, also known as eSports. This form of sports is different from a traditional sport, as it takes place almost entirely within a virtual setting (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010; Jin, 2010; Taylor, 2012). ESports has seen a rapid growth in popularity in recent years. To define what eSports are, we rely on the definition stated by Wagner (2007), which is widely regarded as the go-to definition within eSports (Jin, 2010; Seo, 2013; Seo, 2016). ESports are "... an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies" (Wagner, 2007: 182).

Jonasson & Thiborg (2010) state that the current definition of a modern sport involves three key parameters: (1) it is physical, (2) it is competitive and (3) it is an institutionalized activity (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010). Sports are seen as something that contributes to society, and therefore has a strong legitimacy in contemporary society (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010). If one were to apply the criteria of a modern sport towards eSports, it can be argued that eSports does not fit this definition through its competitive aspect being limitedly physical and primarily mentally oriented. The current social environment does not aid in this aspect, as the act of playing video games is still generally being frowned upon and considered a "waste of time and potential" by the majority of parents and adults (Jin, 2010). This consequently aids in the argument that eSports is not to be considered a legitimate sport. However, through the emergence of competitive play within various gaming communities, partly due to the surge in popularity of the Internet and video gaming, it was not long later that official matches and tournaments were organized by "professional" organizations (Jin, 2010). These early leagues, in lack of knowing better, aimed to mimic popular sport leagues as a framework for their own leagues (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010). Henceforth, professional gaming became to be handled as a sport, and it was consequently named eSports or Electronic Sports (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010; Jin 2010). Players started grouping together, made teams and competed against each other on both national and international levels (Taylor, 2012), competing in tournaments with ever increasing prize money, in some cases prize money being well over a million USD (eSport Earnings, 2016). Through the increase of investment capital within eSports, the sport rapidly became a spectator sport which gained its' own professionally produced events, broadcasts, merchandise, etc. (national TV-networks and online streams in a multitude of different countries) (Jin, 2010; Blizzard Entertainment, 2016; eSports Marketing Blog, 2017). This trend consequently saw the rise of professional gamers whom make a living through playing video games (Jin, 2010).

Henceforth, within this article eSports will be treated as a modern competitive sport within the virtual environment (Jin, 2010; Jonasson & Thiborg; 2010, Taylor, 2012). The current worldwide trend of increasing digitalization can potentially realize a further rise of digitalized sports, such as eSports. Previous research within eSports and online gaming has taken several different discourses, with most of them coming from the cultural studies perspective (Jin, 2010; Taylor, 2012), the socio-economic meaning of online games (Taylor,

2007; Taylor 2012), Sport defining (Jonasson & Thiborg; 2010, Seo, 2013), socio-political studies (Jin, 2010), and social practices studies (Seo, 2016). Institutional studies concerning the development of eSports therefore has been widely unaccounted for.

The rapid growth within eSports raises the question of exactly how, and more specifically how well, the development of the industry is occurring. Therefore, within this article I aim to examine the evolution and development of eSports. Specifically, I aim to answer the following research question: (1) *How is eSports developing?* and (2) *What are the reasons it is developing in such a manner, and what are the implications of these developments on the sport?* In order to answer these questions, a limitation to one popular eSport will be maintained to limit the scope of research. The practices within this eSport will be examined, both from an observational standpoint as through in-depth interviews. By examining these practices and processes that occur within the industry, it will be possible to examine the methods in which professional gamers and eSports as a whole is developing itself. This research therefore seeks to provide strategic guidance to new eSport industries and organizations, players, managers, etc. within eSports.

The paper begins with an introduction into eSports. Following, a theoretical framework will be constructed through the utilization of institutional theory in order to explain this phenomenon on an organizational scale. Henceforth, this theory will then be utilized as a lens to analyze the gathered data and shed light on the degree of institutionalization that is taking place within the eSport industry. A discussion of the results, along with the potential implications and limitations of the study will conclude the paper.

## **Literature Review**

### **What are eSports?**

ESports has various degrees of commitment within itself. Therefore, it does not mean that one that sits at home playing a video game casually, is a practitioner of eSports. People can have a multitude of different motivations as to why they play video games: cultural enrichment, relaxation, story telling, immersion into a new world, etc. (Taylor, 2012; Seo, 2013; Seo, 2016). ESports however is, as defined by Wagner (2007: 182) “... an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies” while Oxford, as quoted by Jin (2010), defines eSports as “a computer game played in professional competitions, especially when it is watched by fans and broadcast on the Internet or on television” (Wagner, 2007; Jin, 2010). While gaming is generally perceived as a leisure activity, there are numerous ways of making a living through gaming. One of such is through eSports in the form of online competitions, major events and organizational sponsorship (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010; Taylor 2012; Seo 2013). In the early days of eSports, such as in 2008, there have been LAN (Local Area Network) events in Sweden where the total prize money was 200.000 SEK (approx. 23.000 USD) (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010). Currently, prize money is increasing at tremendous rates, with figures well over a million USD being more the norm than ever before (eSport Earnings, 2016). For instance, the 2017 ELEAGUE Major for Counterstrike in January 2017 had a prize pool of 1 million dollars (Counterstrike, 2016a). And this is but mere one of multiple different leagues and events taking place over the course of a year. Due to such prize money being

involved, a trend has been noticed where players commit themselves to train fulltime in order to compete in both national and international events (Jin, 2010; Taylor, 2012; Seo, 2013).

For a video game to be considered an eSport, some requirements have to be met. There has to be a competitive factor and a way of judgment that entails a clear winner (Jin, 2010, Seo, 2013). Every eSport has a different method of judgment such as through a difference in won rounds, the amount of won rounds, time-based elimination, etc. (Seo, 2013). Due to these requirements, mainly FPS (First Person Shooters) and RTS (Real-Time Strategy) games have been the most popular eSports (Jin, 2010, Seo, 2013), but other genres have been noticed to be increasing in popularity. While there are continuously new eSport titles being launched, the most broadcasted eSport games at this time are: League of Legends (a RTS), Counterstrike (a FPS), Dota 2 (a RTS), Starcraft 2 (a RTS), Overwatch (a FPS) and Heartstone (a card game) (Twitch.tv, 2017).

### **The popularity of eSports**

While eSports has gained popularity in an extraordinary rate in the past couple of years, it has a very long history and path in obscurity behind itself. The current explosion in popularity is accredited to two prime phenomena within modern society: (1) the cultural acceptance and rise in popularity of video games and (2) the launch of the World Wide Web in 1989 (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010, Jin, 2010, Seo, 2013, TeamLiquid, 2017). Nonetheless, earliest traces of eSports can be traced back to the year 1981, which is the year Atari held the first ever recorded electronic championship (Electronic Games Magazine, 1982) and in which the company Twin Galaxies, founded 1981, kept track of high scores on arcade games and made a ranking on high scores (Jin, 2010). Wagner (2007) states that there is a direct correlation between cultural development and the growth of eSports within Western and Asian countries. When looking at global eSport trends, here the first international focus on gaming can be noticed (Jin, 2010, Seo, 2013).

Within Europe and North America (Western eSport industries), the main competitive eSports have been within the FPS genre ever since the 90s', with games such as Medal of Honour, Quake and Counter Strike leading the charge (Seo, 2013). First Person Shooters (FPS) have a high variety of different game modes where one team has to beat the other, either through the game modes rules or through the elimination of all players of the opposing team. Within these games, in the early 00s', you would find groupings of players in what they call "Clans", who would then compete against other clans for international rankings within tournaments and leagues (Seo, 2013). Two examples of such early leagues are the Cyberathlete Professional League (CPL, 2017), a league modelled after major professional leagues within the US (Wagner, 2006), and Clanbase (Clanbase, 2017). In the current Western eSports environment, an emphasis on this genre is still witnessed through the most popular broadcasted games being FPS-games, such as Overwatch and Counter Strike.

In Asia, the RTS (Real-Time Strategy) games were the leading genre throughout the development of eSports within the region (Jin, 2010, Seo, 2013). One particular game had the leading hand in this, which is the infamous Starcraft RTS designed by Blizzard Entertainment in 1998 (Jin, 2010, Seo, 2013, Blizzard Entertainment, 2015). Through this title, Blizzard Entertainment would end up dominating most of the Asian eSports industry. Eventually, Starcraft became so popular that in some countries, such as in South Korea, television

channels would broadcast competitive gaming events (Seo, 2013), which in turn led to an increase in popularity of competitive gaming within Korea and resulted in successful players becoming national celebrities (Wagner, 2007; Jin, 2010). The Korean eSports Association (KeSPA) was then formed in 2000, which was additionally approved by the Korean Ministry of Culture (Taylor, 2012; Seo, 2013). This establishment triggered an international chain response, with eSport associations being created in numerous countries and ultimately to the establishment of the International eSports Federation in 2008 (Seo, 2013).

### **Going mainstream**

While eSports has a long history behind itself and had a continuous steady growth throughout the years, in the past 5 years this growth has been exponential. Leagues such as the Electronic Sports League (ESL), founded in 2000, have seen huge increases in the last 5 years. For instance, the ESL had around 3.6 million unique registered accounts in 2012, 5.1 million unique registered accounts in 2015 and 6.6 million unique registered accounts in February 2017 (ESL, 2017). ESL is but one of many different platforms that gamers have to their availability, and each game has its own leagues and methods of handling the competitive aspect of eSports.

The rise of professionalization within gaming is another phenomenon that has seen an increase in the past decade. Professional gaming here is to be understood as players that practice eSports as a form of work and have it as their sole income (Seo, 2013). It is important to note that there are different forms of professional gaming. One of such methods is through the usage streaming platforms, such as Twitch.tv, where gamers make a living through live broadcasting their gameplay every day for at least normal working hours. Consequently, they rely heavily on advertisement revenues, corporate sponsorship and viewer donations to support their lifestyle (Twitch, 2017). Popular streamers do not necessarily have any association with eSports; such as the streamer “Lirik” whom has such a big following he always has around 30.000 concurrent viewers and is widely followed on other social media (Twitch, 2017a). There are also eSport streamers, them either being members of competitive teams, presentators, analysts, etc. whom through their stream try and give back to the community by answering questions and showing their reasoning during their matches (ibid). Most of the popular streamers are furthermore sponsored by a multitude of brands, going from computer brands to beverages (Red Bull, 2017).

With this exponential growth within eSports, both online and offline in the form of viewership, leagues, etc. the market potential has grown with it in both the Western and Asian markets. Broadcasting rights of the various events are now being combated for, and live events are ever more so being broadcasted on national TV stations (Jin, 2010; Seo, 2013; Electronic Sports League, 2016). Additionally, the gaming industry has been affected by this growth as well. More games are being designed consciously to allow a competitive environment within the game, in order to potentially found an eSport. Blizzard Entertainments latest game releases (Hearthstone, Heroes of the Storm and Overwatch) have all been focused on realizing an eSport following the games’ launch, with Hearthstone and Overwatch currently being among the top six Western eSports (Blizzard Entertainment, 2017; eSports Marketing Blog, 2017). Other publishers have additionally made this switch, and have launched games that can only be played within an online setting, similar to Overwatch, where

the game publishers themselves promote their games through organizing their own events and leagues (Taylor, 2012). Blizzard Entertainment is a perfect example of this trend: Blizzard Entertainment uses its yearly convention “BlizzCon” as a means to advertise its products, one of which is their eSports scene. While new titles are announced at BlizzCon, it additionally serves as the stage for numerous eSport league finals (Blizzard Entertainment, 2017a).

## **Theoretical Framework**

As the primary purpose of this study is to examine the evolution and development of eSports, both from a developmental as an implicational standpoint, institutional theory will be utilized as the theoretical lens to understand the reasons for development. The choice for institutional theory was taken to examine and shed light upon the process of how this industry is establishing itself. There are numerous sports in the world, but a glance on multiple traditional sports sees a high degree of similarities. Institutional theory offers a way of comparison but also a method to explain how and why industries are forming as they are. While institutional theory is a theory on its own, aiming to explain institutionalization through the notions of myths, decoupling and isomorphism (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), many recent developments are found such as Institutional Logic (Lounsbury, 2007), Institutional Work (Lawrence et al, 2009) and Scandinavian Institutionalism (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005), which aim to explain institutionalization through different means (through change, practice and variance). Within this study, general neo-institutionalism theories will be utilized through the earlier mentioned works of Meyer & Rowan (1977) and DiMaggio & Powell (1983) in addition to the recent developments of institutional work. Consequently, the following chapter aim to shed light and present these theories.

## **Institutional Theory**

Institutional Theory has been a long discussed topic and method of making sense of organizations (Selznick, 1996). However, it was not since the 80s through the works of Meyer and Rowan (1977) and DiMaggio & Powell (1983, 1991) that new institutionalism gained in prominence within the institutional studies (Selznick, 1996). New institutionalism aimed to gain new insights into institutionalization. As cited from Selznick (1996): “... new institutionalism in organization theory and sociology comprises a rejection of rational-actor models, an interest in institutions as independent variables, a turn toward cognitive and cultural explanations, and an interest in properties of supra-individual units of analysis that cannot be reduced to aggregations or direct consequences of individuals’ attributes or motives.” (Selznick, 1996: 273).

Meyer and Rowans’ (1977) work primarily dealt with the notions of myths and ceremonies, which are used within organizations. They state that constructed ideas that have been institutionalized within the direct environment of an organization is what defines a myth. They state a multitude of different stakeholders can enforce the implementation of such a myth on an organization, which would be highly dependant on the position that stakeholder holds within the direct environment of the organization (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Public opinions, media attention, new legislation and similar events can effect the implementation of ceremonies and myths. Meyer and Rowan (1977) furthermore differentiate the organizational

structure in two distinct structures: the formal (the institution perceived from the outside) and informal (the institution perceived from the inside). They state that while the formal structure can present one thing, the informal structure can be completely different. They link this notion to the term “Decoupling”, which represent the fact that while something is said to be done in the formal environment, the informal environment sees no direct implementation (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This is primarily performed by organizations to gain a higher sense of legitimacy, where organizations institutionalize myths in the formal structure to appease the stakeholders. While decoupling is the notion that formal and informal are completely unlike, there is also the term loose coupling, which represents when not all aspects of the formal structure institutionalized myth are applied within the informal structure of the organization (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). However, the institutionalization is always performed through a ceremony, where organizations show their direct environment that they have adapted the myth (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

While ceremonies are performed to appease their direct environment, and as we already pointed out to the pressure of stakeholders concerning institutionalization of myths, we can notice a rising effect of similarity within the same industry. This process has been identified as isomorphism through the works of DiMaggio & Powell (1983). Isomorphism can be best defined as “... a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983: 149). Three different forms of isomorphism were identified; coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphism. First, we have the notion of coercive isomorphism. Coercive isomorphism takes place when organizations are directly influenced by greater powers than their own, such as through political changes and legislative changes. Secondly, we have mimetic isomorphism. This type of isomorphism takes place within industry that are characterized as being highly unstable, where organizations aim to imitate what they perceive as successful organizations. Thirdly, we have normative isomorphism. Normative isomorphism takes place when industrial trends and professionalization within the industry have an effect upon the organization. This can be realized through professional network among employees, but also through similar formal educations among employees within different firms, whom through their education shape organizations in a like-minded order (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). It is important to note that not only one form of isomorphism can be seen within an industry; a multitude of different isomorphic forces can be witnessed. Meyer & Rowan (1977) further stresses that such isomorphic processes that lead to higher homogeneity within an industry can further stabilize the survivability and endurance of organizations. Therefore, the theory of isomorphism could further strengthen the identification as to why an industry is evolving itself in a specific meaning, and why different organization or industries are seeing a higher rate of homogeneity among themselves.

The aforementioned theories of institutionalization, being isomorphism as devised by DiMaggio & Powell (1983) and the notion of decoupling, ceremonies and myths as devised by Meyer & Rowan (1977) in combination offer an interesting perspective on institutionalization. As mentioned, isomorphism takes place through three different methods (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). However, this does not require there to be an actual implementation of such isomorphic forces when those forces are not beneficial to organizational efficiency. Decoupling is within this scenario the given choice, offering the

organizations means to appear to uphold isomorphic tendencies, while in reality, it is merely a façade to increase legitimacy within the industry and among the different stakeholders (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Meyer and Rowan (1977) further stress that decoupling therefore can be used to momentarily increase and gain legitimacy through communicating the implementation of new practices within the formal structure, while the informal structure sees minimal implementation of those advertised practices, as long as there is no direct investigation or leakage of information. Nonetheless, a pressure is perceived within such industries, where organizations and institutions are “afraid” to be different from their direct competitors in the risk of being perceived lesser (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Both aforementioned theories however do not give any direct power or agency to individuals, but rather state that environments and industries as a whole perform institutionalization. Therefore, a lack of agency is noted, and to offset this lack the addition of institutional work shall be included in this theoretical framework. The addition of institutional work aims to offer a base to identify and analyze agency within institutionalization, as it aims to include the aspect of agency and deliberate actions to create, maintain or disrupt institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al, 2009).

### **Institutional Work**

Institutional work will be, next to the works by Meyer & Rowan (1977) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983), the main theory through which the empirical data will be analyzed. Institutional work is defined as “ the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence et al, 2009: 215). Institutional work reorients traditional concerns, and in doing so shifts its focus to understanding how actions affect institutions (Lawrence et al, 2009). Therefore, while institutions are generally perceived as to be of an enduring nature, work is still required to be performed to maintain the institutionalized practices (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Therefore, work may involve the creation and enforcement of both formal and informal rules, alteration and potential structured routinizing of practices concerning the institution (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Additionally, it is important to note that institutional work primarily refers back to actions taken with the direct aim of creating, maintaining or disrupting an institution (Lawrence et al, 2009). Therefore, it introduces the aspect of agency into institutional theory.

Institutional work, as presented by Lawrence et al (2009), is divided in three broad categories: (1) the creating of institutions, (2) the maintaining of institutions and (3) the disrupting of institutions. The most extensively researched is the creation of institutions, where three types of creation processes have been identified. Firstly, we have the creating of an institution through political work where actors construct new rules and boundaries, which shape the new institution. Secondly, we have the creating of an institution through actions, which reconfigures the actors’ beliefs. The third type of creating an institution is through actions, which are designed to alter abstract categorizations in which boundaries of meaning systems are altered (Lawrence et al, 2009). The maintaining of institutions is primarily concerned with keeping the current institution in effect such as through reproducing existing norms (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Lastly, we have the disrupting of institutions, which related to work that aims to disrupt current accepted beliefs, such as through disproving a current technology or practice with new technologies or practices (Lawrence et al, 2009).

It is important to note that within institutional work, the creating, maintaining and disrupting of institutions is seen as an activity, and not an accomplishment in itself (Lawrence et al, 2009). This therefore means that, while it aims to create an institution, it is also likely to fail, which in turn could result in unintended consequences, such as affecting unanticipated institutions in unintended ways, which could disrupt existing institutions but also create new institutions through its own unintended consequences (Lawrence et al, 2009). However, the main focal point concerning institutional work is the aspect of intentionality, meaning the purposive action aimed at creating, maintaining or disrupting an institution (Lawrence et al, 2009). This is translated in the adding of “Work” in this theory, where work is defined as “... activity involving mental or physical effort in order to achieve a result) (Lawrence et al, 2009: 15).

To conclude, while general institutional theory, such as presented through the works of Meyer & Rowan (1977) and DiMaggio & Powell (1983), offers us the theoretical tools to look at an industry and observe institutional trends, institutional work will look more closely at direct actions performed by actors within the industry in order to create, maintain or disrupt institutions. Consequently, the author is of the impression that through the addition of agency to institutional theory, as provided through institutional work, both the perspectives of individual, organizational and industrial institutional work can be identified. Therefore, the combination of both fields offers a new platform of analysis, widening the understanding of institutionalization within the eSport industry.

## **Method**

### **Design of the Study**

For this particular study, the choice has been taken to approach the subject from a case study method. This method aims to provide a deep and thorough understanding of the researched phenomenon (Czarniawska, 2014). It therefore aims to provide the researcher with information that is both realistic and relevant towards both the research question and the data required (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Additionally, Flyvbjerg (2006) states that the method of case studies enable researchers to gain a higher degree of specified, contextual information which renders them to become experts in their field of research, a feat not easily achieved through other, more general, research methods. Using this approach, a focus on the eSports that is Counter-Strike can be realized, with the potential results being utilized for generalization purposes towards other eSport industries when applicable.

### **Setting**

As presented within the introduction and literature review, eSports as a whole holds many different industries. Therefore, a more specialized look will be taken to one particular eSport to gain an in-depth look at the different processes taking place towards institutionalization. Therefore, a small intro towards the chosen eSport has to be given. The selected eSport industry on which this research will base itself is Counter Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO), a First Person Shooter developed by Valve Software (Valve, 2017a). Counter-Strike was initially released as a mod (a modification) for the Half Life franchise in 1999, and ever since its release, it became one of the most played online PC action games in the world (Valve,

2017b; Counter-Strike, 2017c). Ever since its inception, the game has gone through different iterations, the latest being CS:GO, which is currently sitting at over 11.3 million unique players each month (Counter-Strike, 2017c). A multitude of different game modes are present within the game, but the primary focus is on the competitive aspect of the game, where one team has to plant a bomb while the other team defends the bombsites. This is done within a 5v5 setting, and a typical game consists of 30 rounds, with official events having overtime rules in place (Counter-Strike, 2017c). Valve Software, the publisher of CS:GO, keeps the game updated through new balancing updates, map rotations, engine improvements, etc. (Counter-Strike, 2017d)

Counter Strike: Global Offensive is currently one of the most popular eSports, only being rivaled by League of Legends, Dota 2, Hearthstone and Overwatch (Twitch, 2017; eSports Marketing Blog, 2017). Counter Strike has a long history, with the first version having released in 1999 and the latest in 2012 (Counter Strike, 2017a). The online competitive aspect did however not start until the launch of Counter-Strike Source in 2004, and since then it has been gaining momentum with currently Counter-Strike: Global Offensive having the epitome of this momentum with events having over 1.6 million concurrent viewers (Venturebeat, 2016; Counter Strike, 2017b). Due to the growth and gain in popularity it has had over the past years, the industry as a whole has been changing tremendously in the past few years, with more established teams, sports brands and even FMCG brands making moves into eSports sponsorship and new leagues being formed on a continuous basis (Redbull, 2017; Team Liquid, 2017). Consequently, Valve Software themselves have put in effort to support the eSport aspect of the game through the sponsorship of so-called “Majors” (Counter-Strike, 2017e). These majors are big events sponsored by Valve Software but ran through other organizations such as ELEAGUE, ESL and Dreamhack (Counter-Strike, 2017e). Every tournament has its own setting and group system, but generally consists in the form of 8 “Legends” (the top 8 of the previous major) and 8 “Challengers”, which have placed themselves in the major through long qualification rounds (Counter-Strike, 2017e). However, there are also leagues organized without Valve’s support, such as the ESL Pro League, with its own prize pool and rules (Electronic Sports League, 2017a). Lastly, nearly all-professional events are broadcasted in a sport-like fashion with the presence of hosts, stage-analysts, playbacks and commentary throughout the match, broadcasted on a multitude of cable networks and online streaming platforms (Warner, 2015). Valve Software tries to regulate the industry in a minimal fashion, either through enforcing rules of general conduct imposed by third- parties, such as was in the case of the skin betting case (eSports Betting Reports, 2017), or through their own rules of perceived sportsmanship, such as was done through the banning of teams that match fixed professional competitive matches (Gamespot, 2015; PCGamer, 2015).

It is therefore to show that CS:GO (Counter-Strike: Global Offensive) does represent a very large eSport industry. Within this industry, a recent shift has been noticed in how organizations and players are conducting themselves in the form of governing bodies such as the Worlds eSports Association (WESA, 2017) and player-run organizations such as Godsent and Astralis (Astralis, 2016). However, there is near to no information as to why they decide to form these organizations.

## Data Collection

Within the scope of this study, both in-depth interviews and observations have been utilized to gain a thorough understanding of the phenomena. The choice of having two diverse data collection methods is in line with the suggestion of Silverman (2011) to further increase reliability and knowledge of the collected primary data (Silverman, 2011). The collection of primary data was maintained for as long as new information was gathered, but a time limit was put into place in order to leave ample time for proper analysis of the gathered data. The method of data collection was subsequently through ethnographic research (Spradley, 1979, Crang & Cook, 2007). However, netnographic aspects were used, as virtual observations were utilized in relation to events, third-party interviews and the conducting of personal interviews through Skype (Kozinets, 2002). Ethnography and netnography are highly similar, with the main difference being in which setting they are conducted (a physical vs. a virtual environment) (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Netnographic research was essential due to the geographical dispersion of eSports and the global character of the industry.

Initial contact with interviewees was established through e-mail and/or telephone contact with an enquiry to conduct an interview with the person contacted or, in the case of an organization, a person within a managerial position. If a positive answer is received, a time and place was set-up where both parties could meet to conduct the interview, either in person or through an electronic method (phone or Internet). A preference was given to in-person interviews. Prior to the interviews, two test-interviews were conducted in order to assess the quality of the questionnaire and limit potential yes/no answers. In-depth interviews were scheduled with a variety of leading figures within CS: GO, such as hosts, analysts, players, coaches and team managers.

The interview itself was divided in a number of themes, which aided in the structure of the interview and resulted in a clear oversight. This method is similar to the practice of utilizing a checklist, as suggested by Craig & Cook (2007), by which to steer the interview and a higher chance of meeting the objectives of the interviews is to be realized. Questions within the interview were aimed to be open-ended, and therefore qualitative questions in order to not steer the interviewee to specific answers, but to enable the interviewee to freely speak concerning the subject (Spradley, 1979, Crang & Cook, 2007, Silverman, 2011). The interview wasn't limited to these pre-made questions and guidelines, as given answers could initiate additional follow-up questions, therefore it being a semi-structured interview format (Crang & Cook, 2007). The interviews were recorded with interviewee approval and additional notes were taken during the interview.

As mentioned beforehand, Silverman (2011) suggests that a multitude of different data collecting methods are recommended to be utilized when conducting a qualitative study. In light of this, observations have been included within the data collection. These observations were done within an online setting, and are mostly limited to the observation of live events such as the ELEAGUE Major (21/01 – 29/01) and IEM Katowice (01/03-05/03) (Counter-Strike, 2016a, Intel Extreme Masters, 2017). Additionally to these events, community forums, news portals and ongoing discussions within the scene were monitored on a plethora of websites known to be reliable sources of information and discussion towards the industries practices. Within observations, a general method of data writing will be utilized in the form of

note writing. As proposed by Martin & Turner (1986), these notes are to be utilized to remember important aspects of observations linked to their direct sources.

Interviewee	Role	Method
A	Professional Player	Face-to-Face
B	Supportive Asset	Face-to-Face
C	Professional Player	Face-to-Face
D	Professional Player	Skype
E	Professional Player	Face-to-Face
F	Professional Player	Skype
G	Supportive Asset	Face-to-Face
H	Supportive Asset	Skype
I	Supportive Asset	Skype
J	Professional Player	Skype
K	Spokesperson	Skype
L	Spokesperson	Skype
M	Spokesperson	Skype
N	Spokesperson	Skype
O	Spokesperson	Skype

Table 1: Supportive assets are roles such as (but not limited to) coaches, team psychologists, team managers, team analysts, etc. Spokespersons are roles such as (but not limited to) analysts, casters, back personal events, league organizers, community spokespersons, etc.

Observation	Venue	Date
1	ELeague Major in Atlanta, Georgia	Jan 22-25 & Jan 27-29
2	DreamHack Masters – Las Vegas	Feb 15-19
3	IEM Katowice in Spodek, Poland	Feb 25-26 & March 3-5
4	StarLadder i-League Starseries	Apr 04-09

Table 2: 4 different live observations were conducted through the streaming platforms of Twitch.tv and YouTube live, gaming section for these 4 CS:GO events.

## Data Analysis

Grounded theory was utilized to analyze the collected data. Grounded theory gives the benefit of being a continuous, comparative method which enables the author to continuously compare different field material as it is being analyzed, shaping new potential discourses of interests (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, Martin & Turner, 1986). While this technique does hold the disadvantage of being time-consuming, it elevates this offset through the increased expertise and depth of knowledge it provides towards the research topic. Through the usage of multiple data collecting methods, different approaches and time-schedules were set-up to analyze the gathered data. A total of 17 interviews were conducted and analyzed. After careful analysis of these interviews, one was removed due to incorrect information in relevance to the others and another was removed per request of the interviewee. Hence, a total of 15 interviews shall be utilized within the data analysis. The average lasting time of an interview was 40 minutes, with in person interviews taking longer than digitally conducted interviews. The interviews

were then scripted, encoded, categorized and manually compared (Martin & Turner, 1986). Per request, NDA's were signed with two interviewees, which resulted in total obscurity to be required in relation to all identifiable information. Hence, all identification data was subsequently rendered anonymous, resulting in no direct link to any organization or individual. All interviews were consequently mixed within their pool and have been accredited random alphabetical letters. Henceforth, all interviews will be referred to with the letters A till O.

Additionally, a plethora of different observations have been conducted. The observation period saw the note-taking of four CS:GO events, 124 CS:GO-related discussions and 45 video-series conducted by personas within the industry (such as historians and journalists). These notes were subsequently categorized throughout the observational period in pre-set categories in correspondence with major events and actions happening both within the scene of CS:GO as within eSports as a whole (examples: "Coaching", "Unions", "Rule adaptations", etc.). The aim of the observations is to serve as an extra dimension to understand the studied phenomena and gain additional insights into the why and how a new sport stabilizes itself while it goes through tremendous growth.

Following the end of the observational period, data from both collecting methods was pooled together and categorized in correlation with each other. These categories were: (1) Coaching, (2) Unionization of Players, (3) Rule Adaptations, (4) Events and (5) Community. This categorization resulted in a thorough overview of multiple subjects and trends of the eSport, and offered the framework in presenting the empirical data in a direct, coherent manner. Therefore, the empirical findings will find the presentation of different aspects on a subject-related basis, rather than through a theoretical framework.

## **Limitations**

One of the limitations found within this research is the limitation of the field in itself. The conscious choice was made to limit the field of research to one specific eSports industry, namely Counter-Strike: Global Offensive. Through this choice however, other prominent eSports industries such as Dota 2, League of Legends, Hearthstone and Overwatch are ignored. These industries might have various different aspects and rules in place on how their industry is conducted. To offer an example: Within League of Legends, all leagues are directly managed through Riot Games, the owner of the franchise (League of Legends, 2017). Within every country and continent, they hold different leagues with the same rules, and winners get directly invited into the League of Legends World Championship (League of Legends, 2017).

Another limitation that was maintained was the narrow perspective utilized towards the industry. It is to be noted that Counter-Strike has both male and female professional teams. However, within the scope of this article, only the male scene was examined and interviewed. This causes a bias towards the male industry evolution, and neglects potential facets of the female scene. It can be argued that both scenes are similarly evolving, but observational data shows there is a lesser focus on the female scene within Counter-Strike.

ESports as a whole is still a relative new industry, with its rise to prominence having been established in recent years. However, as pointed out earlier, there are distinct differences between geographic regions concerning the acceptance and conduct within the eSport industry. The gathered data and consequent analysis will deal with the European environment,

as primarily European individuals and establishments were interviewed. Henceforth, it is important to note that some of consequent analytical work is limited to the European landscape.

### **Ethical Dimension**

As indicated earlier, a preference was given to face-to-face interviews, but due to the geographical dispersed nature present within eSports, at the majority of the interviews a digital method was utilized. While digital interviews were for some respondents not an unfamiliar setting, for others this was the first time. Therefore, to not make the experience stressful or uncomfortable in any way, the first couple of minutes were always utilized to explain the scope and aim of the research and the interview. Additionally, at the start of the interview, questions were asked to verify the permission to both record the interview and to use the gathered answers afterwards within my research. Additionally, it was stressed to the interviewee that he/she was completely able to end the interview at any point. This was done in line with Kvale (2006) and Silverman (2011), to ensure no obligation was present from the interviewee's side.

Additionally, as mentioned, measures have been taken to ensure the anonymity of the respondents through the signing of NDA's and additional editing of personal information within the answers given, as to not directly indicate their identity. The editing was limited to changing "Us/I" to a general "We" and the obscuring of names mentioned to "XX". While all respondents did not require this obscuring of personal information, all respondents have been treated as such to present a unified front. As a further measure to ensure complicity of the interviewees, quoted lines used within this research were communicated to the interviewees to approve their status in obscurity and anonymity.

### **Empirical Findings**

The following empirical findings will be presented on a subject-related basis. This decision was made in light of categorization(s) used within the data gathering stage, and the ease of presentation that followed accordingly. This manner of presentation will consequently be used throughout the empirical findings, to facilitate coherency and an easy overview. As mentioned within the method section, observational data was categorized within a multitude of different subjects, which then saw the addition of interview data to be merged together. While a vast number of subjects were gathered, in the scope of this thesis a limitation will be enforced to go more deeply into important aspects, rather than skim through a high volume. Therefore, a total of five different subjects shall be presented. Following, the different segments are presented:

*Coaching:* This section will primarily deal with the implementation and changes that have been occurring around the coaching role within professional teams. This section heavily relies on interviewee data, and minimal observational data has been used within this segment.

*Unionization of players:* A topic most discussed within the community and among players, the aspect to form a player union to protect the rights of the players as athletes. This section will present findings from multiple sources as to why it is needed, what is being done and the problems it currently faces.

*Rule adaptations:* The corporation Valve Software owns Counter-Strike: Global Offensive. They have set up gameplay and competitive ruling themselves, but for a part let the community decide themselves what is deemed necessary. Through this, a multitude of organizations have come to the forefront organizing their own leagues, and consequently their own rulings. This section will delve deeper into this and how it affects the interviewees and industry as a whole.

*Events:* Through observational data, a high difference in the conduction of events was noticed. Interviewee data further introduced backstage information, proving that there is a high degree of variance between different events and how they are conducted. This section will go deeper into these events, their conduct and the impressions gained by multiple parties on these events.

*Community:* Lastly, we will be looking into the community. Interviewee data supported this category through various statements supporting the observational note of the community having a lot of power in the decision-making process of big gaming organizations (such as ESL). Community in this context has to be understood as viewers of the sport, but also the players and teams that are operating within the Counter-Strike eSport.

## **Coaching**

The role of coach within a CS:GO team is relatively new, and is only seen on the upper brackets of professional play. While it is common in any traditional sport to have a professional trainer, within eSports a pure coach role is exceptionally rare. The role of a coach within CS:GO has seen quite some changes throughout the years. Therefore, a chronological description shall be given.

Coaches were initially hired to bring in an analyst to support strategies, and give more depth into the play style of a team. However, they also had other responsibilities, such as being the team psychologist and be the social “*back-bone of a team*” (Interviewee B). However, their main responsibility lies within the tactical awareness within the game, and at early stages this was primarily handled outside of events. As interview G, a coach at a team, states:

*“In the past, my sole role was to analyze demos of opposing teams, and make an as solid strategy against them the days ahead of the match. This was recognizing patterns, roles, positional plays, and so forth. It’s an important task we believe. It’s like at any other sport: half the game is on the court, the other half is in the preparation” - G*

However, a rule adaptation was made by Valve Software that saw coaches have a more active role within live events. Coaches were at certain events given their own computer and a spectator role to on-the-spot analyzing plays and actions, and communicate them directly to their players. Additionally, this gave coaches the option to directly lead the team, with the five players focusing solely on winning the round and following directions. This eventually lead to every team hiring a coach, as this trend lead to (unintentionally) allowing a 6<sup>th</sup> player on the team roster. This change consequently lead to teams adapting their whole team roster, at times replacing their in-game leader for a better shooter. :

*“When I was standing up there (in the player booth), I could communicate everything very direct and keep a good oversight for them all. It helped XX as well, as he did no longer need to think about changing strategies and making decisions. Instead, he was able to just focus on playing, and we would have limited discussions between rounds on play insights.” - B*

However, in August 2016, Valve Software stepped in, as more and more teams were changing players out, with coaches taking over their leading role. As the trend continued, Valve released a new rule stating that henceforth coaches were only allowed to talk with their team during tactical breaks, warm-ups and halftime (Counter-Strike, 2016b). This rule was implemented due to teams not adhering to earlier rules and warnings of Valve Software stating that the coach role was not to be the 6<sup>th</sup> player, but a coach (Counter-Strike, 2016b). This had quite substantial effects on some teams, while for others it was a welcome benefit:

*“The change back to 5 players was hard for us, as we had set up a system where our coach would basically lead us rather than XX and so his role became easier, and it felt like we had more firepower.” – A*

*“We never used a coach ingame. Our coach was there more for guidance and support. So when Volvo (note: the name utilized by the community for Valve Software) did the whole coaching change again, it was not a big deal. I imagine other teams had it harder, especially teams that relied completely on their coach.” – J*

This brings us to the current position. Some teams are currently still adapting to the new environment where the roster consists of 5 players with a coach being purely a coach. Some other teams “... are on the look out for a new leader since our old one is in a new team” (interviewee F). It can therefore be said that this rule altered the whole playing field, and reverted the role of coaching back to a more back-office spot with limited influence on actual direct plays. Coaches are currently still allowed to stand behind the players, but are not allowed to talk or vocally interact with their players outside of breaks. Therefore, coaches can only communicate with their team during a match at halftime and at “Tactical Time-outs” that can be called during the match, highly similar to time-outs in sports such as basketball.

### **Unionization of players**

The topic of unions has been widely discussed and presented both within the community as by a multitude of professional players. Data indicated that there are no unions in play within CS:GO, but there have been talks concerning the foundation of such unions.

*“I think unions could be a good answer to some issues we are facing, but players themselves have been changing themselves to let’s say, free themselves. Unions are an interesting topic, and it comes back a lot on Reddit and among ourselves. But making one takes a lot of work, and right now no one has any time I think.” – L*

With freeing themselves, he referred to the foundation of player-lead organizations such as the earlier mentioned Astralis and Godsent. Astralis players removed themselves from their

previous organization and instead of choosing a new organization to represent, they decided to form a new brand with new investors and divide the shares equally among all players present at the forming of the organization. While such individual actions have taken place, within CS:GO there are only two high performing teams that have made such a move, and therefore do not represent a solid base of analysis. When inquiring as to why a player union had not been formed as of yet, despite the continued conversations and mentions of such a need, the interviewees were highly varied in their responses:

*“We keep talking about it, but forming one while attending events all over the world, practicing with your team, seeing family and friends and all that makes it really hard to talk about it” – A*

*“I believe union have not been formed as it’s simply not possible to make a union within this industry yet. The sport is too young and perhaps still too small to have a player union” - N*

Above quotes clearly indicate different perspectives: a multitude of interviewees noted that the establishment of a union requires too much work, and with their current schedules is unfeasible to reach. Additionally, the topic of industry state is brought up with the claim that perhaps the eSport as a whole is too young to warrant a union. However, while player unions have not been able to be formed, another type of union has seen its emergence. This organization is named “WESA” or World eSports Association (WESA, 2017). At the foundation of this association, one of the major league organizers and a total of 8 professional teams supported the idea. When interviewing members of the founding organizations, the following answers were given:

*“WESA had a lot of scrutiny ever since it was communicated. However, we stuck by them, as they wanted to protect our players. We as an organization can only do so much. We had heard of some harsh circumstances when our players were at events, and we believe WESA could help such issues with governing the scene” – H*

Ever since the foundation, the organization was received with high amounts of skepticism, where the community and several league organizers saw WESA aiming to gain exclusivity of the CS:GO scene. Some analysts and leading persona’s within the CS:GO scene made multiple videos to further illustrate the issue that was WESA, and the potential effects it could have on the CS:GO industry. As one interviewee responded concerning the foundation:

*“The launch of WESA was horrible. They were unclear, did not communicate, no clear goal, press leaks, selected board members towards ESL favor, and I can go on. The departure of XX did not help either. We were uncertain of what WESA would represent, what they could do and what their aim was, or is.” – O*

WESA currently is still active, and has ever since its’ launch kept a rather low public profile. They have established a Player Council, where players “will advocate on behalf of the pro-gamers in relation to league policies, rule sets, player transfers and more “ (WESA, 2017b).

They have additionally gained more members and set up their own regulations (WESA, 2017c). However, beyond this governing body of WESA no similar associations are active within the CS: GO scene that takes the rights of the professional players at heart as their main objective.

## **Rule adaptations**

This section concerning rule adaptations will not be taken only from the perspective of Valve Software, the owner of CS:GO, but from an overall industry standpoint. Therefore, the inclusion of league organizations such as ESL and ESEA are taken into this section. As earlier presented within the coaching segment, the adaptation of existing rules and implementation of new rules can have huge effects on the CS:GO environment. While the coaching situation was a massive change towards the environment, there are other rule adaptations that are needed to be presented, and how they changed the environment.

One of such changes was by the ESL, in which they allowed VAC-banned players (VAC = Valve Anti-Cheat) to compete in their leagues after 2 years of the ban having been issued. Valve Software have the rule that VAC-banned players are never allowed to return to any Valve sponsored event or league, and are therefore removed from most competitive leagues (Kotaku, 2017). However, this change meant that previously banned players were re-accepted to play within the ESL leagues but were still prohibited from Valve sponsored events. When enquiring interviewees concerning such changes, the following answers were gained:

*“It’s good and bad. Yes, they made a mistake and should be given another chance, but at the same time you say: “Go cheat and in 2 years we will have you back”.” – D*

*“Some of these players were banned live on stream while in a competitive map, with thousands of people watching. There is no justification for them to be re-allowed when prize money involved exceeds the 100k (USD) mark in my opinion. There is no guarantee they won’t cheat again.” – M*

All interviewees voiced similar opinions. Therefore, this specific ruling is both perceived positively and negatively by the community. While not directly asked, multiple interviewees also gave their criticism towards the aspect of match fixing, and how this has been handled by both Valve and league organizations.

*“They let confirmed cheaters return to the leagues, but people that match fixed one game more than 2 years ago they refuse to let play. I don’t understand that as I believe cheating is far worse than throwing a match. In my opinion, and these are solely my words, I am quite confident that teams now are still occasionally throwing matches.” – O*

Another aspect of rule adaptation is found through Valve themselves. As earlier mentioned, the coaching rule is a massive rule changes. However, smaller changes are also found that change the dynamic of the game. Changes such as spray patterns of weapons, the costs of weapons, bomb defuse and placement timers, etc. are just mere examples of how the game is

affected and changed on an ongoing basis (Counter-Strike, 2017f). League organizations themselves have started to adapt to these changes, conforming their rules to the ever-changing gameplay rules imposed by Valve Software. ESEA has a very direct process of communication, and together with ESL continuously changes its rules to have a better “standard rule set that will be used across servers, leagues and LAN events” (ESEA, 2016). Interviewees were in general very pleased with the efforts by both Valve Software and the league organizers.

*“For me as a XX this is the most annoying but also fun part. A small change such as a prolonged bomb timer and small map changes alters potential strategies of retaking a bombsite, and changing prices or damage numbers on weapons makes force-buying better at times” – B*

## **Events**

Since Counter-Strike has such a long history, with multiple versions of the game having been launched since 1999, there has also been a change in attitude within the industry concerning how their events and leagues are organized towards the phenomenon of eSports. Particularly within the last 4 years the interviewees have noted vast changes within the industry. These changes were not only found in how the event was organized, but also the general conduct that was shown towards them, the frequency of events, the viewership, etc.

*“Back when I played, we couldn’t dream of prize pots over 500k (500.000 USD), big stages and cameras everywhere. I remember when I was bringing my own computer to a LAN event here in Sweden and the prize money was 10.000 crowns (10.000 SEK, approx. 1050 USD), no cameras and people were just there to play the game and have fun while doing so. Now, off course there is still fun but it’s a lot more “professional” (hand gestures “”) I would call it” – B*

*“I would definitely call it an improvement. Now it is a real show production, and it’s what I love about the sports. We are flown in, are given our own hotel rooms, are provided food and breaks between casting and are handled like valued associates. In the past, a lot of this would have to come out of your own pocket, but now this is all provided and on top of that, we even get paid now!” – O*

Both interviewee quotes above indicate an increase in professionalization of the sport: wages are being paid, increase in prizes, more professional productions, accommodations are being arranged, etc. The interviewee data indicated an overall trend in increase of quality concerning the conducting of events within CS:GO. However, simultaneously there was a high stress within this theme of answers on the abundance and even dislike to the amount of events that are happening. This goes from the abovementioned strains on traveling, and consequently the effects it has on the personal life of the people involved, but also on more competitive and team-oriented aspects:

*“Lately we have had to cancel attending some events, simply because we cannot make the scheduling. It comes to a point now that we choose X over Y because of prize money, or better competition brackets and stuff like that. We’d like to attend everything, but it is not worth it” -*

- D

*“... what you don’t think about though, is your friends and family. Sometimes I don’t see my friends for weeks. I guess my team has sort of become my family. But that isn’t always easy either, and discussions do emerge a lot, especially when we are together for weeks” –A*

As noticed, while there are complaints about the abundance of events in the above quotes, it’s equally important to stress the personal dimension of the quote. As interviewee A mentioned, through the current activity within events and practice, the personal life of the interviewee is threatened. Other interviewees within all three categories voiced such concerns, that personal and social life was “suffering” cause of pressure to attend the events and consequently win them. As interviewee L mentioned, his life could be easier if “... *more qualified personnel that could fulfill our role. Currently, it’s nearly always the same people being chosen to attend (events)*”. From the observational data gathered in the period, a number of interesting aspects did occur when comparing current observations with pre-recorded data found in media such as YouTube to have a comparison. Especially the scope of the events was noticed to have increased tremendously, with earlier iterations of events being in a rather humble, “geekish” setting. Currently, eSport events within Counter-Strike are seen to have vast podia with big LED screens, comfy seating, high cost venues and even additional sideshows such as flame throwers and smoke machines to imitate events within the streamed game. Another observational note was the dissimilarity within different venues at different geographical locations. The ELeague Major was held within North America, and was conducted within the FOX Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia which is an performing arts venue, while IEM Katowice 2017 was conducted at the Spodek Arena in Poland, a multi-purpose arena complex. Additionally, the ELeague major had priced tickets while the IEM Katowice event had both paid and free admittance. This discrepancy between the two events is widely noted within the industry as a whole, where there is a high difference between continents in how their CS:GO events are handled.

However, interviewees did mention that while vast improvements are made within the industry, there are still plenty of flaws. These so-mentioned flaws were of a high variety and given responses touched upon aspects such as the paying out of prize money, the logistical aspects of events, the quality of lodging and food, quality of hardware and even to heating issues.

*“We are hesitant at times to go to events, especially new ones. I think this is due bad experiences in past, where new events did not deliver what was promised, decent food and stuff like that. Once, we had no food and when complained, we were given tokens to go buy food at end of road. Also, some events have known reputation of not paying out prize money or being insanely late. I heard from other team once they were lodged in a motel by organizer, and had bugs...” – F*

## Community

The franchise that is Counter-Strike has a big following ever since the establishment of the game in 1997 as a mod to Half Life 2. Throughout the years, this following has grown and currently represents a wide community of both players (casual and professional) and CS:GO enthusiasts. Official unique monthly players account for over 11 million (Counter-Strike, 2017e) and community websites have an ever-increasing amount of active users. One of such platform is the CS:GO Reddit page, which holds nearly 500.000 subscribed accounts (Reddit, 2017a). With such a community and the ability to discuss facets of the industry on websites such as Reddit, the community is seen as having a slight power within the field of Counter-Strike.

*“I would not state that they (Valve) always listen to the community, but I do consider them being listened to. There is no proof they read everything that is written, but at times you do see Valve employees make comments on threads.” – N*

*“Valve is horrible at community management. They barely communicate to us even, but you do notice them listening when it is needed. Remember the R8 when it was released?” – M*  
(The R8 was a new revolver that was too strong, and caused a massive outcry by the community. This led to the weapon being altered in strength in a timely manner by Valve Software.)

The comment relating to direct community posting on forums such as Reddit proved to be true. After careful digging through different Reddit posts, very sporadic entries were found by verified Valve employees in a handful of threads, two of such being Vitaliy\_Valve and ido\_valve (Reddit, 2017b; Reddit, 2017c). Entries done by these Valve employees are very sporadic, with often months in between different posts and mostly concerning official news and fixes that are being carried out. Nonetheless, there seems to be a wide understanding that they are primarily monitoring the community and refrain communicating unless necessary.

*“I think they’re just passive. You do notice changes happening when community members and professional players voice their opinions. Not everything is being listened to, but a couple of concerns you do see changed.” – L*

An interesting aspect that was noticed within the data was the “need” of the community expressed by a number of interviewees. This need, as they described it, was double sided: the community needed the interviewees and the interviewees needed the community. This is primarily to gain attention, but also to potentially make changes happen, for better or worse. Hence, as reflected from the 2 quotes underneath, a decent degree of authority could be accredited to the community. Both quotes show different aspect of the so-called power of the community: their ability to support players, but simultaneously, potentially hurt the industry through their demands as presented by interviewee K.

*“Sometimes it isn’t easy for us XX to make a change happen. When others voice their opinions, and us XX add to this discussion on our verified accounts, it suddenly gains a lot*

*more importance it feels like. Sometimes, us XX are just a small group, but when a bigger group complains, it feels like we are stronger to get a change going. Of course, sometimes nothing changes, but it feels better.” – J*

*“The community holds more power than they think I think. You notice when their favor or popularity or however you call it changes. When you see the thread “he should do XX” or “they should do XX” appear on like Reddit, this can lead to organizers adapting their planning to do that. I guess organizers are just like anyone else and just want to be liked? I don’t know, but sometimes it’s strange how people get given roles they are not meant for...” –*

K

While the community is large and in general aims to aid the development of the franchise, there are also threatening developments within the industry. One of such was the aspect of “Skin Betting”. To offer some explanation: Within the game CS:GO, you can have different skins on your weapon. These skins alter the looks of your weapon, and depending on the skin, it holds a market value varying from 0.01 USD to 10.000+ USD. One of the most exposed “Skin Betting” scandals was concerning a player called Phantoml0rd, whom streamed himself betting on his own site (and winning) against other players with rigged winning ratings. These rigged winning ratings and ownership of the website was initially kept hidden until eSport journalists found discriminating evidence that this was the case, and further followed up on it to eventually broadcast it to the community as a whole (YouTube, 2017). Additionally, lawsuits were filed against Valve Software concerning the aspect of Skin Betting (Polygon, 2016a; Fortune, 2016; Polygon, 2016b; Forbes, 2017; eSports Betting Report, 2017).

*“The case of Phantoml0rd was exceptional. He was such a big figure within CS, and there were others that did similar things but at least did not directly broadcast it around. Sites such as CSGOWild and CSGOLounge were also allegedly operated by professionals, but these professionals didn’t stream and fix their own winnings. There is even a video where the betting slot actually goes back to his name” – N*

## **Analysis**

Within the European landscape, we see a lack of overall governing bodies, with primarily WESA, Valve Software and league organizations shaping the landscape from an organizational perspective. This leads to the fact that the development of Counter-Strike as an eSport is highly influenced by these organizations, but it is furthermore influenced by the strong culture that is present within eSports. Interviewee data indicated that many believe that without the following that eSports has, eSports would not have been able to grow as it has in the past decade and that the community found within eSports through its presence has helped shape the industry. Henceforth, the author states that it is both the culture, the community of eSports, the players and the organizations together should be considered the institutional actors that shape the industry through their actions. Henceforth, as these actors perform actions that directly influence the institutions present within the Counter-Strike: Global

Offensive environment, the following analysis will be primarily performed through the theory of institutional work. The preference to institutional work is given as it directly includes agency within its theoretical perspective (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al, 2009). While categorization within the empirical findings was performed through a subject related basis, the following analysis will use a categorization based on the theoretical framework. Through the actions performed by numerous actors, different types of institutional work have been identified, each with a different aim as the source for their action(s). The categories henceforth have been defined as: (1) *establishment work* and (2) *shielding work*. Both of these types of institutional work are active within all three aspects of institutional work being creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions, and consequently aid in the overall institutionalization of the eSport as a whole (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al, 2009).

The aspect of establishment work aims to legitimize and professionalize the eSport industry of Counter-Strike, and consequently primarily refers back to actions taken to further enhance the degree of professionalization within the eSport. Within shielding work, the author refers back to the actions taken to safeguard the industry, the players and the community by different actors. Therefore, colliding interests can be experienced between the two types of work, as professionalization actions can hurt shielding actions and vice versa. However, the author believes both aspects of work do help to provide insights as to why and how eSports is developing.

### **Establishment Work**

As mentioned above, the type of establishment work found within the data is primarily aimed at legitimizing and professionalizing the industry through its actions. Additionally, these types also include actions, which are aimed to make the eSport more mainstream and easier to understand from an outsider-perspective. Therefore, a broad range of different actions takes place within establishment work.

One of the establishment work aspects is seen within the empirical subsection of coaching. The presence of a coach among professional sport teams adds an aspect of legitimacy towards the sport as a whole. This was a similar feat to be achieved within eSports. However, through the implication of this rule at the time by Valve Software, a direct consequence was spotted where the coach would become the 6<sup>th</sup> player on the intended 5-player team and take over direct roles from these 5 players. This trend could be understood as an unintended consequence (Lawrence et al, 2009). Through this unintended consequence, the whole environment and team structure shifted, which lead to organizational changes among the teams. Additionally, coaches started demanding their own desktop at events with a spectator position among their team players for direct tactical awareness and insight. This whole unintended consequence consequently implemented a “requirement” of having a coach, or your competitive aspect towards professional competition would be disadvantageous. Here, we notice a first form of isomorphism being applied within the industry itself: One team capitalized highly of this new rule, and consequently a big volume of teams adapted their own team roster to integrate a similar structure. This can be understood through DiMaggio & Powell (1983) as mimetic isomorphism, as the CS:GO eSport at this time was rendered unstable through the implementation of the new ruling by Valve Software. However, it is

important to note that not all teams relied this heavily upon the new coach, and instead still utilized a coach but with a mere background/supporting position, as was noted in our data. Therefore, the data indicated a degree of decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), where it appeared that the coach was actively leading the team, but in effect was a mere pillar of support for the team and had a bigger function during practices and strategy making. This ruling, as pointed out within the empirical section did not last long, and consequently teams were forced within their old framework of 5-team roster with limited coach-insights as an addition. It is important to note that Valve Software in this case both aimed to create and consequently disrupted it's own creating process of the institution (Lawrence et al, 2009). This further adds to the unstable nature in which eSports are right now, and as to why this establishment work is being conducted.

Additionally, this instability in nature can furthermore be the reason as to why a high degree of mimetic isomorphism is noticed between the teams in their team rosters and strategies (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Interviewee and observational data indicated that Valve Software and other actors within the industry change the rules of the sport within different time-spans. While this is a known fact, it is noticed among the different teams that they utilize different roles for different team members, and consequently utilize a similar form of strategies. This can be related to other, more traditional sports such as football where you have people assigned to specific roles, such as keeper, defenders, midfield and strikers. Similar roles are utilized within the Counter-Strike, such as "entry-fragger", "AWPer", "ingame leader", etc. These roles are clearly communicated by the analysts and broadcasters throughout the events, just as how such positional plays and feats performed by high performing national footballers would be communicated on your everyday match on TV. Therefore, while it is not directly advertised, a high degree of isomorphism is noted between traditional sports and eSports in the broadcasting of events, both from a mimetic and a normative standpoint (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). However, it is important to note that while the appearance of such events might be highly similar to the conduction of events in traditional sports, this does not mean it is similar in the background. While interviewee data indicated an upward trend in quality of event and player conduct, there were reported cases of misconduct and mishandling of players and events. Therefore, while the eSport aims to be perceived in an ever-increasing professional fashion, aspects of decoupling are noticed as to merely appear professional (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Data for this stems directly from interviews, but also players themselves voice their opinions on bad conduct when attending events through a multitude of platforms, such as through community forums and social media. Henceforth, while decoupling is noticed in such scenarios, it is quite commonly shed light upon by the community and the players themselves, and consequently such organizers are avoided if measures are not taken. These types of actions are categorized within this segment, as they (in)directly aid in the establishment of a more professionalized environment.

### **Shielding Work**

While establishment work is aimed at making the sport more widely accepted, and consequently aims to bring it to a mainstream focus, the aspect of shielding work aims to protect the interests of the players, the community and the organizations as an entity in itself. A multitude of different actions are taken as our interviewee data indicated in order to

safeguard the industry both from outside forces, but also from itself and the development it has been taken in the recent decade. Within this segment, we will look closer at different actions performed by the organizations, the community and the players.

### **Organizational shielding work**

Through the recent development of the industry, there had been a noticed increase of leagues and events for teams to attend, to a point where a multitude of events would be held in the same timeframe. Additionally, another observed trend is the implementation of events, which have been held for longer periods of time (such as 2 week events as observed in Table 2). Through such developments, teams had an increasing pressure to choose where to attend but also how to plan their team schedule as a whole. A selected group of individuals aimed to aid the professional teams in this matter, and consequently formed the earlier mentioned WESA association to provide a base of discussion for player rights. WESA in its own through this initiative aimed to play a bigger role within the community, and aimed to through its actions shield players from misconduct performed by event organizers and team owners. Their direct actions and their aimed functioning as a quality label (as they formulate it: “WESA approved events”) have created a new discourse within the community. As data indicated, the initial acceptance of this foundation was negative, but more organizations have joined the association. Additionally, ever since the establishment of WESA, interviewees indicated an increase of quality among event organizing and player rights. Therefore, we can see a positive correlation through the work invested by WESA and their presence within the industry. There was no direct information that this trend in quality increases stems from WESA; but it is assumed it might have an indirect effect upon it. Additionally, WESA implemented a “Personal Code of Conduct”, a “Sanctions Regulations” section and a “Multi-Team Ownership Prohibition” to warrant a safer and fairer competitive atmosphere (WESA, 2017d). Similar governing bodies are found within other sports, but no direct indication was given that WESA aimed to mimic another entity within another sport, but it can be speculated that there were grounds to mimic organizations such as FIFA within football (ESPN, 2016; Foxsports, 2016). However, the conclusion can be derived that WESA through its establishment and actions aims to create a new institution within the industry, and aims to disrupt previous established norms and values, which it deems inadequate for the industry (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al, 2009). This derived conclusion therefore supports the notion that WESA, as an institutional actor, is aiming to disrupt and create institutional practices within the eSport industry with the aim of safeguarding the interests of the players and the community (Lawrence et al, 2009).

Another recent trend seen within the CS:GO eSport scene is the unification of leagues in their ruling. As indicated, ESEA and ESL have both adapted their rule sets in line with the new rules implemented by Valve Software for the official Valve events (the so-called Majors). While this was not an enforced move by Valve Software, league organizers have still adapted their own regulations in light of these changes. This can be accredited to an isomorphic tendency through light coercive isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). It is considered lightly coercive through the non-obligatory regulation aspect but nonetheless enforced as Valve Software is the sponsor of the biggest events and additionally is regarded within the professional scene as the primary entity of rules and regulations. However, while

Valve Software keeps creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions within the CS:GO eSport, the league organizations are (in)directly supporting this process through the disruption of their own institutions to adhere to Valve Software's changes (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al, 2009).

### **Communal shielding work**

Counter-Strike: Global Offensive has a one of the bigger player basis within eSports. With this big population comes an active and very communicative audience which aims to see it's community grow, but also be treated fairly. As data indicated, within this specific eSport the community is not directly handled by Valve Software. You can even state they do barely any community management and that the community, which is heavily invested within CS:GO game is let to be on it's own. Therefore, there is no direct institutional work present from Valve Software into the creating or disrupting of the status quo, but rather Valve Software is maintaining it through their maintenance of their passive stance towards the community (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al, 2009). Interviewee and observational data indicated a very sporadic activity from the Valve employees, but a higher degree of conformation and monitoring of the community. Additionally, interviewed parties indicated that at sponsored Valve Software events they were questioned about rules and their opinions on potential rule changes and aspects that could increase the quality of the competitive setting. Hence, the assumption can be made that while Valve presents a rather "uninterested" stance towards the community, it does hold the communities opinions in regard in their changes. This was furthermore noticed with the implementation of the earlier mentioned new R8-revolver, the community uproar and the very quick follow-up by Valve to reduce the weapons' power. Therefore, a decoupling effect is noticed between the internal care for community, organizational and professional player thoughts in opposite to the extend of external communication towards the community and other parties (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Additionally, the community is shown to be of a caring nature within the CS:GO industry. While a high degree of toxicity is notable and renown within the digital environment, the CS:GO community aims to better this understanding through both official ruling but also ethical conduct. This was shown through observational data at the final days, when the case of "Loop" received mainstream CS:GO attention (Reddit, 2017d). To quickly elaborate on the setting: A player with HSAN, or Hereditary Sensory and Autonomic Neuropathy, was due to effect of his illness kicked from a player group for not wanting to communicate, while before he was asked not to do so by those same players. These players henceforth bullied him while in the game, but later apologized for their behavior. Furthermore, the community going from casual to professional players and organizations then came together to support this player, and helped him raise enough money to pay for his surgery to regain his eyesight. While such cases are unique, similar cases have been brought up in the past where the community came together to protect and help players in need, being it through illness or through unjustified blame from organization within the field (such as through unjust actions by organizations). Henceforth, a high degree of agency is seen to be accredited to the community as a whole by the interviewees, and it does hold a high degree of power to realize changes within the eSport of CS:GO. Henceforth, a degree of institutional work can be accredited to be performed by these actors (Lawrence et al, 2009).

### **Player shielding work**

Concerning the aspect of player shielding work, individual actions are not as easily taken by individuals to protect the industry due to the size of the eSport. However, there are some individuals that have advocated themselves to be so-called “guardians” of the industry. Numerous cases have been noticed ever since the rise of CS:GO eSports where individuals aim to profit on new unregulated trends within the industry. One of such was the earlier mentioned “Skin Betting” scandal concerning Phantom10rd. Sports’ betting is a common practice in traditional sports, but within the eSports scene, this is highly unregulated through the digital nature and various unregulated organizations providing the service. This led to lawsuits being filled against the persona, Cease-and-Desist letters being sent out by Valve Software and aided in official regulation and banning of any CS:GO betting within the industry. Nonetheless, the aspect of sports betting can be accredited to mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Similarly, the eventual downfall and banning of “Skin Betting” was consequently due to both coercive isomorphism through added regulations on national levels and through institutional work by Valve Software aimed to shut down those betting websites (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al, 2009).

While it has to be noted that player-shielding work is of a very limited scale in comparison to organizational and communal shielding work, it is important to note that it does hold a high degree of agency. The case as described above resulted indirectly in a ban on CS:GO skin betting, which became enforced by law regulations in a multitude of countries through which Valve Software further enforced regulations on an international scale. Such individual actions by spokespersons within the community comprise massive repercussions on the eSport as a whole. Consequently, while the aim of his investigation might have been to just shed light on an unfair process of betting, it can be understood that the unintended consequence of such actions was directly noticed through both the creating and disrupting of institutions present at the time within the CS:GO eSport (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

This study aimed to contribute to emerging sport development literature, more specifically aimed towards eSports and other digital emerging sports. A descriptive development has been presented through the usage of institutional theory and institutional work, which aimed to shed light on how the eSport industry has been developing in the past couple of years. Empirical findings were categorized based on subject, which aided in the identification of trends but also provided a detailed insight into the different aspects. Through these categories, two general trends were identified: (1) an intention to better the general conduct found within eSport, and to further expand the eSport in size, popularity and in spectatorship, and (2) a sense of guardianship among the different interviewees and answers given in correspondence to Counter-Strike both as a game, a community and as a sport.

Consequently, two distinct forms of institutional work were identified, in addition to the presence of general institutional tendencies in the form of isomorphism and decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The first form is institutional work

being that is performed to further the professionalization of the eSport (i.e. establishment work), while the second form is aimed at safeguarding the industry from its rapid pace of development (i.e. shielding work)(Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al, 2009). Within shielding work, three subcategories of shielding work were noticed: (1) organizational shielding work, (2) communal shielding work and (3) individual shielding work. These subcategories represent both the actors whom initiated the institutional work, but also simultaneously indicate the scope of the institutional work performed.

Additionally, it is noted that there are a multitude of different actors whom perform institutional work within the CS:GO eSport; Organizations, teams, the community and even the individual contribute to the creating, maintaining and disrupting of institutions within the industry (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al, 2009). Henceforth, it is to be noted that while numerous actors are performing institutional work, the power balance is ever shifting and that even an individuals' work can realize vast changes within the eSport industry, an aspect perhaps unique to the digital environment.

### **Practical Implications**

Firstly, the findings of this research can aim actors within eSports to understand how and why developments are made as they are. The research aims to give an understanding of the institutional environment that is present within CS:GO, which could be present within other, similar eSports. Additionally, it is noticed that through establishment work, all actors are directly benefited from its results as its work aims to add legitimacy to the eSport. Through this, professional players and organizations are given the power to increase their exposure and consequently, realize a living through the practice of eSports. It is noted through findings that without an interest and community willing to watch games, CS:GO as an eSport would not be lucrative. Henceforth, it is important to acknowledge the power of all actors in the realization of status that has been accredited to eSports.

Secondly, it is also noted that direct work performed by actors can potentially hinder the development of the sport through their shielding work. As noticed, organizations and individuals alike aim to protect the best interest of all actors, but consequently can obstruct the work of others, through which massive changes can take place within the industry. Nonetheless, it is apparent that such work is required for the eSport to remain sensitive and regulated, as establishment work alone can be interpreted as being too demanding for the different actors subject to it's work (players and supportive personnel alike).

### **Future Research**

This study aimed to contribute to the emerging sports literature concerning eSports and other digital emerging sports. However, the aspect of it being a case study of one eSport, Counter-Strike: Global Offensive severely limited the study. While Counter-Strike: Global Offensive is at time of writing one of the most popular eSports, there are other eSports with bigger spectator numbers and communities, such as Dota 2 and League of Legends (Dota 2, 2017; League of Legends, 2017; eSport Marketing Blog, 2017). Dota 2, while being operated by Valve Software, has a different construction towards its eSport industry and League of Legends additionally holds its eSports competitive leagues mostly entirely in-house. Both

these eSports therefore have a widely different framework than noticed within Counter-Strike: Global Offensive. Additionally, the eSport is still evolving on a continuous basis, and therefore this offers a mere snapshot at the current environment. As such, this research aims to provide a basis for future research to use concerning eSport practices and institutional development within eSports.

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