

# *Understanding the European Business Environment in Esports: An Ecosystem Perspective*

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## **Abstract**

Esports is a growing global industry that encompasses aspects of competitive sports and entertainment. The purpose of this paper is to explore the crucial actors surrounding the competitive video gaming (esports) industry in Europe. Particularly, the study focuses on the European esports business environment and how different key actors, organizations, and institutions form the current esports industry. Based on the review of previous literature, industry publications, in-depth interviews, and a webinar with Nordic esports experts, we identify the structure of the esports business environment, involving several important key actors that together create and develop the business around competitive video gaming. As a contribution to the earlier research, we illustrate the business side of the esports environment, including the roles as well as weak and strong ties between the crucial actors in the different stages. We conclude our paper by outlining future research topics in this understudied field of research.

## **Keywords:**

Structure of esports business environment, roles of key actors, dependencies

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## 1. Introduction

Esports has been built on the basis of video gaming, which is a global and very popular form of entertainment. According to Jenny et al. (2018), at least one person plays video games for at least three hours a week in 63% of U.S households, and 61% of esports fans live in households with three or more people. Globally, people are playing more than ever, and Wijman (2019) has estimated that globally there were 2.5 billion gamers in 2019, who spent USD 152.1 billion on video games. Over the past decade, esports has grown rapidly, and new games, teams, tournaments, and players appear monthly. Nowadays, around the world, hundreds of millions of people watch esports weekly on various platforms and channels. According to the popular video game streaming platform Twitch, more than 100 million viewers watch esports every month. Moreover, the game developer Riot Games announced that their League of Legends esports final tournament had 99.6 million viewers worldwide; the event was broadcast in 19 languages and across more than 30 platforms and TV channels (Strive, 2018). In addition, traditional sports channels, such as ESPN, have made major investments in esports and now livestream esports tournaments. Interestingly, the media rights and sponsors already hold over 75% of esports' industry revenue, which has been estimated at over USD 1.1 billion (Wijman, 2019).

The landscape of the esports phenomenon is complex, and all the actors have their own interests and roles in esports. The esports industry involves a large number of different types of business organizations, institutions, and individuals that together form the business ecosystem around competitive video gaming. In addition to individuals who competitively play video games, there are esports teams that these individuals represent, game developer organizations that own the rights to their games, and tournament organizers that, together with the aforementioned actors and others, make competitive video gaming possible. Interestingly, more and more organizations are willing to be part of this industry after discovering its business potential. Even though esports, as competitive video gaming, is a relatively well-understood and -documented field, it is still a new and unknown phenomenon from a business perspective. The dynamic, constantly evolving and developing environment of the esports industry, and particularly its increasing business ecosystem, is rather unclear and fragmented, and thus calls for further academic research.

The current academic literature on esports focuses largely on the players and what attracts them to esports (e.g., Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Martončík, 2015; Seo & Jung, 2017), thus neglecting the important role played by other actors and factors connected to the esports industry (Seo, 2017; Scholz, 2019). Because academic research on esports has a short history, it is mainly focused on social, physiological, motivational, information, communication, media, cognitive science, law, sponsorship, and sociological approaches (Burton & Gawrysiak, 2017; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Reitman, Anderson-Coto, Wu, Lee, & Steinkuehler, 2020; Qian, Wang, Zhang, & Lu, 2020b; Bertschy, Muhlbacher, & Desbordes, 2020). Nowadays, following the definition from Hamari and Sjöholm (2017, p. 22), esports is understood through the collaboration of human beings and computers as follows: "a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the esports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces". In the most recent esports literature, there is, however, a thin common understanding of a business approach involving the structure of esports business environment, and the roles and dependencies between the crucial actors.

In this study, we follow Still, Russell, and Basole (2018), who define the ecosystem as complex sociological, economic, and technical systems. They also characterize the ecosystem as

consisting of human networks that generate productive output on a sustainable basis, and as business ecosystems consisting of interdependent firms that form symbiotic relationships to create and deliver products and services. To understand the esports business ecosystem, we focus on the meanings (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989; Dubois & Gadde; 2002; Riessman, 2002) produced by Nordic esports professionals. Meanings are a fruitful method to explore complex networking dynamics related to key actors' experiences and values in this context. Our aim is to illustrate the esports environment from a business management perspective involving the structure of crucial actors that interact and (co-)create value inside and around the esports industry. We are also interested in exploring the role of these actors' mutual dependence in the esports environment. Therefore, the following two research questions are addressed:

1. How is the esports environment structured from the business perspective?
2. How do different actors interact, how are they dependent on each other, and how do they create value together in the esports business environment?

## 2. Overview of previous research

A search of academic research into esports shows a fragmented picture of the field. One of the most recent literature reviews covering the most recent studies (in total 150 studies) by Reitman and his co-authors (2020) focuses on seven main areas of the esports field: media studies, informatics, business, sports science, sociology, law, and cognitive science. Interestingly, business studies in esports are more often presented through the value of an experience for consumers, the popularity aspect of the video games, social recognition of video gamers, and the benefits of technology (Seo, 2013; Zang, Wu, & Li, 2007). In this study, we focus on looking for the business approach of esports studies between 2006 and 2020, which led us to isolate four themes: 1) overall industry studies, 2) studies focusing on industry actors and players of esports, 3) studies of sponsors and marketers, and 4) papers on fans and audiences. A picture of the existing studies draws esports as a complex environment of consumers, players, organizations, and other stakeholders, where players and consumers are most often understood as the common subjects of study for business researchers. The business environment approach has been shown as a minor part in the field, and its independent role has not been clarified. In Table 1 below, the sample studies have been gathered under each theme.

**Table 1.** Themes and sample studies

THEME	SAMPLE ARTICLES PUBLISHED	THE FOCUS OF THE STUDIES
Industry of esports overall	Wagner (2006) Deppe (2017) Funk et al. (2018) Scholz (2019) Keiper et al. (2017) Holden et al. (2017)	Defining esports and different approaches to esports; the esports industry; intercollegiate athletics.
Industry actors and players of esports	Hamari & Sjöblom, (2017) Teng (2018) Seo & Jung, (2017) Martončík (2015) Hollist (2015)	Describing the players, tournaments, and governing of esports; social practices. Exploring motivations and differences among esports players; regulation of esports players.
Sponsors and marketers	Bertschy et al., (2020) Seo, (2013; 2018) Chanavat, Desbordes, & Lorgnier, (2017) Chadwick, Chanavat, & Desbordes, (2015)	Stakeholders in esports value network in the form of sports; the marketer’s point of view; the role of sponsors; advertising in esports, brands.
Fans and audience	Qian et al. (2020a) Hamari & Sjöblom (2017) Seo and Jung (2016) Cheung & Huang (2011) Lee & Schoenstedt (2011)	Motivation to consume esports; motivation to join esports as a fan and audience. The role of fans and audiences in tournaments and online environments.

Publications falling under the first theme of overall studies of the industry describe esports as an industry that involves humans as well as the technology, and hence is absorbing context to investigate from the business approach. The first published definition of esports by Wagner (2006, p. 439) defined the phenomenon directly through the lens of traditional sports and information systems as follows: “[esports] is an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies”. At its core, Wagner (2006) defines esports as competitive video game playing broadcast to a live audience, both online and in a physical location. However, we see his definition of esports as rather limited, owing to its focus only on traditional sports and the gaming aspect of esports. Deppe (2017) describes esports as a cultural phenomenon around competition, community, and entertainment that underlines a business management approach. Funk et al. (2018) suggest that esports should be included in the sports management field and explain the managerial challenges that the evolving esports industry is likely to face in the future. Scholz (2019) points out that esports is predominantly self-organizing and mostly business-driven due to the lack of a standardized governance structure. Moreover, Scholz’s (2019) book about the business of esports covers the history of esports as well as the important stakeholders in the industry. Keiper et al. (2017) explored esports as an intercollegiate sport in the United States. The study covers a number of issues, such as boosting participation numbers, revenue generation, and creating diversity within a university athletics department.

The governance of esports has been a topic of interest for several years. For instance, Holden, Rodenberg, and Kaburakis (2017) discuss corruption in esports linked to gambling and doping. Even though the studies above pay attention to the industry and business approach of esports, the researchers lack a common structure of the esports environment, involving the roles between the crucial actors as well as dependencies between them. We follow the definition of the ecosystem from Still, Russell, and Basole (2018), understanding the esports as an industry of complex sociological, economic, and technical systems. They characterize the esports environment as human networks that generate productive output on a sustainable basis, and as business ecosystems consisting of interdependent firms that form symbiotic relationships to create and deliver products and services.

The second theme of the previous literature focuses on the industry actors and players of esports, e.g. describing the players, tournaments, and governing of esports, exploring motivations and differences among esports players, as well as regulation of esports players. The examples of the studies range from observations of players in tournaments, such as Seo and Jung (2017), and Martončík's (2015) study comparing different types of esports players, based on their personality traits, explicit motives, and selected life goals. In particular, descriptions of effective marketing techniques were explored (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Seo & Jung, 2017). Seo and Jung (2017) understand esports environment practices involving the players' interconnected engagement of playing, watching, and governing of esports. Hollist's (2015) law review article addresses the regulations concerning players such as contracts and the issues with underaged players.

The third broad theme of current esports literature examines the business side of esports with a focus on sponsoring and advertising. Seo (2013) approaches esports from a marketing perspective. Seo et al. (2018) examines the effectiveness of advertising in esports in an experimental setting. Even though Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) present networks and organizations surrounding the players, they focus on how esports can be understood as a form of sports. Bertschy et al. (2020) present the critical role of brand building from the European perspective. They investigated the football industry, in particular showing that esports not only helps football clubs innovate in their portfolios, but also expand their brands, underlining the importance of society or the esports community (Bertschy et al. 2020). As esports is presented as a merchandised activity of a new business unit among sponsors and marketers (Chanavat, Desbordes, & Lorgnier, 2017; Chadwick, Chanavat, & Desbordes, 2015;), we also highlight the necessity and rising role of sponsors and marketers in the near future of esports.

The fourth theme we found in the esports literature explores the fans and audiences. Researchers have studied them in both the tournament and online environments. For instance, Seo (2016) explored esports and gaming from the consumer behavior perspective, and motivations for esports consumption have also been explored (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Seo & Jung, 2017). Lee and Schoenstedt (2011) compare esports and traditional sports consumption in a study using the same game patterns in both esports and traditional sports events. The study defined sports fans or members of sports audiences as those competing in games, those attending games events, those viewing sports, those reading about sports, those listening to sports, and those using the internet specifically to consume sports. Cheung and Huang (2011) studied fans of the game StarCraft in an online environment, and Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) investigated why people watch esports online. Recently, Qian et al. (2020a) designed and tested a motivation scale of esports spectatorship and examined what spurs people to watch esports online.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Research context

Today, esports tournaments fill stadiums worldwide and offer prize money totalling millions of dollars. Newzoo (2020) estimates that the global esports audience will grow by 11.7% in 2020, to 495 million people. For instance, more and more well-established football clubs, such as Paris St-Germain, Real Madrid, and Manchester United, sponsor esports in Europe. Even in 2014, some 40,000 fans followed South Korea's final match in the League of Legends World Championship Finals in the sold-out Seoul World Cup Stadium (Hollist, 2015), and millions more followed the tournament online. For comparison, the US National Football League's regular season had 204 million unique viewers in 2016 (Molina, 2018), whereas esports had 281 million viewers in the same year (Statista, 2018). In May 2018, Epic Games, the company behind the very popular game Fortnite, announced that it would provide USD 100 million to fund prize pools for Fortnite tournaments in the 2018–2019 esports season (Gottsenger, 2018). In addition, in May 2018, the first FIFA eClub World Cup was held in Paris (FIFA, 2018). In July 2019, the Fortnite World Cup finals, with a total prize pool of USD 30 million, attracted 19,000 fans to the sold-out Arthur Ashe Stadium in New York, with a further 2.3 million viewers watching via YouTube and Twitch (Epic Games, 2019). Platforms such as Twitch and YouTube ensure that esports reaches a global audience and have prompted some traditional sports teams to start their own esports leagues (Palmeri, 2017).

#### 3.2. Data gathering

The reliability of the study (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015) was enhanced by detailed data gathering aimed at obtaining an in-depth understanding of esports phenomena from the business perspective based on primary data from the interviews with esports experts and secondary data from a Finnish esports webinar and a large number of web sources (industry reports, press releases, esports columns and blogs). In the interviews, four knowledgeable Nordic esports experts were invited to attend semi-structured, in-depth, face-to-face interviews (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2018). The research team also conducted a second round of interviews with additional questions in spring 2019 via email. To strengthen the interview data, two of the researchers, who both have more than 15 years' experience in esports, organized a webinar in autumn 2020. The online event gathered a total of 104 participants, consisting of Nordic industry experts and business representatives who were already involved in the esports industry or showed interest in its business potential. Additionally, the research team utilized data triangulation and explored several industry-related webpages, annual reports, and press releases about the esports environment to deepen our understanding of the phenomenon (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). By using a back-and-forth approach with the primary and the secondary data, the researchers were able to make sure that all the information based on the secondary dataset was consistent with the interviews with the experts, and this guided our investigation of the interviewees' (internal) approaches.

The interviews were around 60 to 75 minutes long and began with background questions before focusing on semi-structured and open-ended questions (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2018, Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015) encapsulating the esports environment and stakeholder networking. The additional questions were intended to obtain a holistic understanding of the phenomena and clarify the message of the interviewees. As part of that process, we asked our interviewees to describe the esports environment, the actors within it, and the interplay between the esports partners, as they understood them. Examples of the questions asked are:

*“Tell me about yourself and your description of esports.” “How did you become involved in esports?” “How would you define the esports environment?” “Who are the key stakeholders and actors in the European esports industry? Why?” “How would you define the tasks and responsibilities of [a specific stakeholder]?” “How would you describe the relationships between these actors?”*

### 3.3. Analysis

First, we organized all the data sources into a single database using the qualitative study protocol and controlled for validity (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015) following the principles of an abductive research path (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The researchers analyzed the data separately and then cross-checked the data. Any differences of opinion were resolved in conversation and then by re-analyzing the texts if required (Jick, 1979). The researchers focused on collecting and understanding the themes of esports embedded in the interviews, a webinar, and the themes found in the earlier literature by using the principles of theme analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researchers analyzed the transcribed interviews, gaining a holistic understanding of the data, and organized all the text under the four main themes provided by the existing research: overall industry studies; studies focusing on industry actors and players of sports; studies of sponsors and marketers; and papers on fans and audience.

Second, we focused on utilizing a tight analysis (Jick, 1979) and analyzed all our data in themes again in order to interpret the subjective meanings (Thompson et al., 1989; Riessman, 2002) of the representatives who participated in the interviews and a webinar. Due to our decision to analyze themes and meanings, we followed the scholars of social constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Ultimately, we identified meanings embedded in the esports business environment and actors, which we labeled from the core of esports towards an outer edge of esports. The meanings focused on the esports environment, crucial actors involved in this industry, interaction and value creation among crucial actors, and the dependence between the crucial actors in the esports business environment. The researchers accepted that their preconceptions of the phenomena might change during the study (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) and, owing to the limitations of the esports research field, meanings were therefore allowed to emerge inductively (Patton, 2002) as an iterative process (Elliott, 2005). In particular, analyzing meanings helped us to develop an in-depth understanding of the themes and led to us having a broad picture of the phenomena.

## 4. Findings and discussion

The study firstly introduces the little-known structure of the esports environment from the business approach, as Esports Expert 2 identified:

*I think it's a big problem that there is too little information and understanding. Everyone knows esports ... They have seen some CS [Counter-Strike] match on TV... but, to understand that from a business perspective also... we are not there yet.*

Based on the findings of our theme analysis, we show the structure of the esports business environment and its key actors at various levels, from the core towards the outer edge. Because all the actors in the various levels are dependent first on the actors at the core, these key actors can be understood as the heart of the esports business. The next level out from the core level involves channels for playing, as well as the important actors who support and enhance playing through their businesses. These second-level actors offer an open opportunity to everyone to

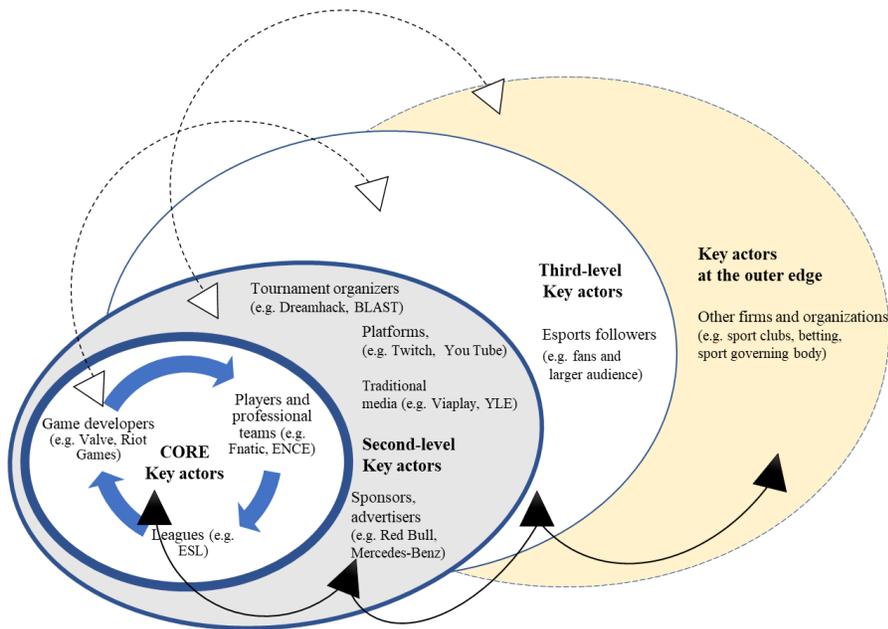
join esports, as well as spreading worldwide awareness of this industry. The fast and ongoing growth of the esports industry as a business is highly dependent on the workings of this second level. The followers are the audience for gaming, who consume esports and spend time around it, using the channels operated by the second-level actors.

The outer level of the esports environment involves firms and organizations with weak or strong ties to the esports environment in their businesses. Based on our webinar data, firms in Europe are increasingly interested in esports in 2020; however, they lack fundamental knowledge, e.g. how the industry works, who its gatekeepers or most important actors are, and, most importantly from their viewpoint, how to monetize esports. According to the data, various types of business organizations have joined esports recently. These firms are not only energy drink companies or fast food chains. Interestingly, “traditional businesses” (e.g. banking and insurance, clothing and fashion, and logistics) want to be present in esports as well.

The findings reveal the esports environment to be very complex, with a variety of ties – and even unexpected influences – between the key actors from the core towards the outer edge in the structure of the esports business environment. However, esports was continuously described as a fascinating environment, primarily due to its ever-changing nature, which is highly dependent on the business opportunities at each level of the structure. Even though the sport was underlined, the business-orientation raise crucial based on the well-organized business opportunities in several models by varied actors. Esports Expert 1 stated the following:

*Esports can be seen as a sport's climax! It is a huge market where franchisers: game developers, device manufacturers, particular trade marks and brands, and professional teams and players are all in the centre [of the industry]. Their products are sold around the sports; we are talking about computer components, game consoles or games themselves... The teams and players represent these big brands.*

Our findings of esports environment as an ecosystem support Still et al. (2018), who define an ecosystem as an industry of complex sociological, economic, and technical systems, which is also possible to view as a human network. Moreover, we show that the structure of the esports business environment is not an ecosystem with a structure of interdependent firms that form symbiotic relationships to create and deliver products and services. Instead, we show that the esports environment and its ties are constructed as a structure from the core towards an outer edge, with key actors who are dependent on each other with several ties, but also have their own independent businesses. Because each key actor has a role in the esports environment, they utilize each other, but it is not a very symbiotic relationship. In our view, only the core actors have an indispensable role in the environment. The esports business would fail without the core actors. Neither is this environment a self-organized structure, as Sholz (2019) stated in his studies. The structure of esports environment is well-developed and built on the basis of the core level actors' businesses (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The structure of the esports business environment as an ecosystem.

Our structure of the esports business environment and the interplay between the key actors can be seen as an incremental advance on the previous research (Corley & Gioia, 2011). The interaction, dependencies, and value creation between the key actors is shown in the next sections in light of our findings and we discuss them with the current esports research. Our study challenges the limited lens of existing studies in esports, which often focus on one approach, e.g. presenting differences between traditional sports and esports (e.g. Wagner, 2006), cultural approaches (Deppe, 2017), managerial challenges (Funk et al., 2018), and governance structure or stakeholders in the self-organizing and mostly business-driven esports environment (Sholz, 2019).

#### 4.1. The core actors of the esports business environment

The heart of the esports business environment involves game developers (e.g. Valve and Riot Games), professional teams and players (e.g. mousesports and ENCE), and esports leagues (e.g. ESL). These core key actors in esports interact actively with each other, and they are also highly dependent on each other and create value together for other actors at all levels in the esports business environment, based on their roles at the core of the esports structure. Game developers need players to play their games and leagues to run the business at the professional level. Players need games from game developers and leagues to play at a professional level. For their business, esports leagues need professional players to play games that are created and updated by game developers’ studios. Respectively, the entire esports community needs esports leagues to build the infrastructure of competitive gaming.

*We must have the type of institutional organizations that know how to develop esports, and how to coach and improve players. It's like a process of how we can make better players in Finland now and in the future. – Esports Expert 1*

### *Game developers*

Game developers produce and offer esports products and organize tournaments for all people who want to join the industry in one way or another. Their important role shows a key difference between esports and traditional sports. Therefore, understanding these dynamics is key and based on the role of technology (Wagner, 2006). There could be no esports without video games; the game developers are the gatekeepers of the video games that are played in the tournaments and streamed online (Scholz, 2019). FIFA cannot stop a soccer player playing soccer, but Valve Software could shut down its *Counter-Strike* game (Scholz, 2019). Esports Expert 1 explains the difference between traditional sports and esports:

*Esports is not one big organization, such as FIFA in soccer, that governs the sport. In esports, the owners are those who develop the games that are played. They [the game developers] have the power to decide how games are played and organized.*

As the existing literature has shown, game developers are crucial in decision-making related to games and playing, which is even the most essential role in the esports environment. They have offered an ongoing role for regeneration through their esports businesses, which has been important for the growth of the industry. Games from three developers – Valve, Riot Games and Blizzard – are the most played in the professional esports world. Valve created Dota 2, which is one of the most complex, yet popular, games in esports (Kline, 2018; Scholz, 2019), as well as Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, which has been the most-played first-person shooter (FPS) in esports for almost two decades. Riot Games developed League of Legends, which belongs to the multiplayer online battle arena genre and is currently one of the most-played games in the world (Scholz, 2019). Riot Games also released a new FPS game called VALORANT in June 2020. The game is free, and it is expected to become very popular among esports players and fans. Moreover, Blizzard Entertainment has created several hits for esports, such as their popular real-time strategy game StarCraft II, and Overwatch, which is a popular FPS game created especially for competitive video gaming. Recently, “battle royale” games have become hugely popular. For example, Epic Games created Fortnite, which instantly became one of the most played games. Fortnite is based on the format outlined in the film *Battle Royale* (2000). The same film inspired the Bluehole company to develop a popular PlayerUnknown’s Battlegrounds game.

Game developers also host and produce major esports tournaments and events, such as The International (Valve) and the League of Legends Championship Series (Riot Games). Also, Epic Games has already organized large esports tournaments, such as the 2019 Fortnite World Cup, with a USD 30 million prize pool and a USD 3 million prize for the creative mode competition (Hayward, 2019). The environment for game developers is based on esports as a business that these days involves a number of different business opportunities. Game developers derive their revenue streams from game sales, sales of downloadable in-game content, as well as revenue generated via organizing esports events and tournaments. They also license their games to external organizers and streaming platforms, thus exemplifying the franchise operating model. The main game developers in the industry exploit the opportunities to ensure that their games

remain successful and popular. These important actors support the development of the industry as a business, but also create new entertainment for the future. Moreover, small new actors can easily join the esports community that advances ongoing regeneration for the industry. Esports Expert 3 talks about the new developments in this area:

*It looks like there will be more events in the future because of increased collaboration in the [esports] leagues. In these events, all actors function independently and grow their business the way they like.*

We address the game developers as the core key actors in decision-making related to games and playing, which is the most essential role in the esports business environment. Therefore, we advance the earlier literature (e.g. Seo and Jung, 2017; Hollist, 2015; Martončík, 2015), which has focused more on the definitions of the industry and the role of players. Therefore, there is a need for clarification based on the role of game developers in the earlier research. We show that the success of the esports business is dependent on game developers and would fail without them. As their role is powerful but they are also a necessity for regeneration required in the industry, we placed game developers at the core of the structure of the esports environment. We argue that they are the most powerful actors in the esports environment who are connected to every other actor in the esports environment.

### *Professional teams and players*

The appeal of participating in esports, or even becoming an esports star, is partially due to its accessibility to many people from various backgrounds. Parking (2018) illustrates that esports, unlike traditional sports such as tennis or golf, does not require major investments: only a copy of a game and a semi-decent computer are needed. In general, esports players are young, and they may turn professional while still teenagers. This can create various problems, and as Hollist (2015) points out, young players are inexperienced and uneducated in the complexities of contract negotiation. Hollist (2015) also emphasizes that some contract terms proposed by games developers can be alarming, and goes on to cite a clause from a contract Riot Games made with players competing in a league hosted by Riot Games. The contract sought to deny players the freedom to compete in any other video game competitions hosted by other leagues or to publicize competitors' video games (Hollist, 2015). Martončík (2015) presents different types of esports players, based on their personality traits, explicit motives, and selected life goals. Seo and Jung (2017) investigated esports environment practices involving the players' interconnected engagement of playing, watching, and governing of esports.

We learned from the meanings of our interviews and various sources that players' contracts vary greatly. According to the esports competitor we interviewed, remuneration for competitors in esports usually comprises three different elements: an actual salary, compensation from streaming revenue, and prize money from the tournaments. Some players have attained superstar status. One of them is Tyler Blevins, known as Ninja, who is an example of an esports competitor (or former esports competitor) who combines the power of social media, streaming, and video gaming to enhance his reputation (Alexander, 2018). For now, he is one of the most popular personalities in the world and has more social media interactions than soccer star Cristiano Ronaldo and basketball star LeBron James (Teng, 2018). As another example, Esports expert 2, a member of the ENCE esports organization, states that:

*It's a full-time job. One could say that they [players] are employees. It's the same kind of contract that [ice] hockey professionals have.*

Although prize pool money is considered as a bonus, ENCE has chosen to conclude long-term contracts with its players as a part of a long-term strategy to develop ENCE into an internationally competitive team based on its domination of the Finnish Counter-Strike: Global Offensive tournaments.

Having an esports team does not follow the traditional understanding of a sports team in the sense that a certain team plays only a specific sport. In esports, a team might have players in the same team involved in several different games. ENCE is best known for its players who compete in Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, but they have representatives in StarCraft II and Overwatch too. Another team, OG, is known for its Dota 2 skills, having won the Dota 2 tournament The International, and teams such as Fnatic and Rox Tigers are well known and successful teams involved with the game League of Legends.

We claim that esports players are growing to have a more and more powerful position in the sports entertainment, but also from the business side. This new position will be dependent on the growth of businesses such as the game development business around esports. Even now, the meaning of players and teams were highly underlined:

*[The success of esports tournaments] often depends on how well the organizers succeed in getting the best teams to join their tournaments ... Also, players have a dominant role in esports ... they can pretty much choose whom they play with ... especially in Dota [the game Dota 2]. – Esports Expert 3*

In the earlier literature (e.g. Seo and Jung, 2017; Hollist, 2015; Parking, 2018), there is a lack of business-related understanding about the key actors and their roles in the esports environment. Above, we show that the success of the esports business is dependent on game developers as well as players and teams. The business would fail and the structure of the esports industry would fail without these core actors. Because social media has a strong effect on all societies currently, we suppose the role of the game developers, players, and teams may even increase in the near future.

### *The leagues*

According to an esports competitor and other representatives we interviewed, a career in esports is mentally and physically demanding. Therefore, the leagues are the instance for the management of industry practices in sport and businesses is mentally and physically demanding, and the esports leagues are places where the management of industry sport and business practices happen. At the professional competitive level, the leagues support players and the players are important for the leagues' businesses, as Esports Expert 4 explained:

*The player coverage is organized and done by the esports leagues, and through their channels, the brands [sponsors/advertisers] get marketing coverage as well.*

The practices of the esports leagues have begun to standardize, for example by regulating rules and institutions and following professional rules, as other sports associations do in their organizations. There are many leagues, such as the Electronic Sports League (ESL) in Europe, the

Cyberathlete Professional League (CPL) in the USA, the Korea e-Sports Association in Korea, and the World Cyber Games (WCG), which can be compared to the Olympic Games in traditional sports (Seo & Jung, 2016).

In August 2015, the Electronic Sports League became the first major esports league to subject players to drug testing after players admitted to taking Adderall (a drug prescribed to treat attention deficit disorders) to enhance their performance (Plunkett, 2015). On October 16, 2014, professional gamer Terrance Moore died at 29 years old during a livestreamed tournament (Dundan, 2014). In April 2014, 22-year-old professional League of Legends player Hai Du Lam was hospitalized with a collapsed lung but continued to log five-hour practice sessions even while in hospital (Hollist, 2015). Lam retired after six years of professional gaming in 2018 (Goslin, 2018).

We disagree with Scholz (2019), who saw a lack of standardization in esports. Our data from the leagues confirms the esports players are growing towards more and more admitted roles among the sport environments in general. This new position will be dependent on the growth of esports-related businesses, such as the game development business, as well as players and teams. Moreover, traditional media and esports followers will have an important role.

#### 4.2 The second-level actors: platforms and traditional media, tournament organizers, sponsors, and advertisers

Platforms and channels that show esports tournaments and gaming streams are the second-level key actors in our esports business environment. We argue that the actors working within the group of platforms and tournament organizers offer a channel for other actors and stakeholders to meet and conduct business. Global access over the internet engages global companies, making esports a real global phenomenon while creating high value for the esports environment. Representatives in our esports webinar stressed the importance of having a global presence: with one campaign it is basically possible to reach the entire global segment of potential customers. Or, as Esports Expert 4 puts it:

*How it [the esports industry] develops and grows... surprises me every day less and less.*

Because of the platforms, players and fans are able to enjoy esports from their own homes via Twitch.tv as the main platform, and also using many other channels. Twitch.tv is a live streaming video platform for video gaming and is watched by over 100 million people around the world every month, many of whom not only watch esports, but play too (Elasri, Rodriguez, & Aparicio, 2020, Pan, 2017). Twitch.tv shows esports tournaments, streams from individual players, and gaming-related talk shows. Fans can also follow players and support them financially by subscribing to their channels. However, many other channels – including big media players like ESPN – stream esports.

The platforms differentiate esports from traditional sports. Because of the ease of access to esports through its platforms, it is attracting viewers from the traditional sports audience. As many as 76% of esports enthusiasts state that esports has replaced the time they used to spend on traditional sports (Nielsen 2017). This is a result of digitalization and the environment in which the younger generation is growing up. Essentially this means that corporations have an opportunity to reach the younger generation and those whom they can no longer reach through traditional sports (Elasri et al., 2020; Pan, 2017). However, the professional players see their future in the worldwide environment of esports, as Esports Expert 2 stated:

*If you're a good player, you will go international [to international teams].*

The group of sponsors and advertisers in the esports environment is made up of companies and/or individuals investing in or otherwise sponsoring events, teams, players, or a combination of them. According to the online research firm eMarketer (2019), esports advertising revenues are expected to surpass USD 200 million by 2020 in the USA alone. Large multinational consumer companies such as Gillette and Coca-Cola are already sponsoring esports teams and events, and Mercedes-Benz featured esports in a TV commercial in 2018 (Mercedes-Benz, 2018). Recently, the Hershey's and Reese's brands partnered with Twitch for advertising and sponsorship (Keefer, 2019).

Esports can be seen as a unique community incorporating sub-communities of different games. Consequently, according to the Netflix documentary *All Work All Play* (2015), each sponsor has an opportunity to choose the most appropriate segment, which can then offer access to a network of media corporations. Moreover, a sponsor can create networks of its own. Media plays a key role in esports, which offers various paths for corporations to achieve their goals (*All Work All Play*, 2015). From a business perspective, sponsors are the crucial actors in the structure of the esports environment. One of our interviewees, Esports Expert 3, explains as follows:

*They [sponsors] bring money to the teams; they bring money to the tournament organizers; they bring money to the publishers. At the moment, sponsors are the ones who pay for the entire system.*

In the earlier research, Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) introduce sponsors and advertisers as a part of esports surrounding the players. We argue that previous research presents a very limited picture of the role of these actors. Several other studies present esports as a merchandised activity of a new business unit among sponsors and marketers (e.g. Chanavat, Desbordes, & Lorgnier, 2017; Chadwick, Chanavat, & Desbordes, 2015;). We show that there is a lack of understanding in the structure of the esports environment and value creation related to the businesses of platforms and traditional media, tournament organizers, sponsors, and advertisers. In this study, we show that platforms, sponsors, and advertisers offer global business opportunities to all actors in the esports environment via ties, both tight and loose, based on their own businesses (see Figure 1). Furthermore, we highlight the benefits of technology, as presented by Borowny (2013), Seo (2013), and Zang, Wu, and Li (2007) in their studies. We show that utilizing technology leads to worldwide opportunities in businesses, helps to differentiate esports from traditional businesses, and creates equality between the players, fans, followers, and the entire audience.

#### 4.3. The third-level actors: esports followers

Wagner (2006) states that professional gaming plays an important part in how esports is perceived by the general public, but the real fundamental issues can be found elsewhere, in particular in private homes on family computers. We describe esports followers as third-level key actors, involving fans and the larger audience in the esports business environment. Esports Expert 1 explains that the organizers need to get the top teams to compete in their tournaments or the fans will not watch the tournament online or show up to live events. Fans also directly pay the players to watch their streams on Twitch.tv. In addition, our findings reveal that consumers are seen as end customers, mainly of the publishers. Esports Expert 2 stated the following:

*Consumers currently spend money in esports on fan products and sales of downloadable in-game content; money from the latter goes to the game developer and the leagues and players get money from fan products.*

The fans' participation in a broad range of events (e.g., tournaments, online, and watching events) means they strongly associate with the esports ecosystem. We argue that fans take on the role of global supporters among all the actors involved. They promote the esports environment and are elevating it toward becoming the most current and popular sports environment. Showing their interests in esports, fans participate in creating value for the business in the esports environment. However, fans and audiences, in general, are always dependent on technology that is offered by other levels of the esports environment structure (see Figure 1). Even though Hamari and Sjoblom (2017) investigated why people watch esports online and Qian et al. (2020a) tested a motivation scale of esports spectatorship and examined what spurs people to watch esports online, we underline the importance of consumer behaviors and the motivation to consume esports among fans and an even-larger audience. Fans and audience keep esports as a worldwide sport that is always related to business view.

#### 4.4. Actors at the outer edge: other firms and organizations

In the findings, other firms and organizations are understood as key actors at the outer edge of the esports business environment. However, esports events or tournaments are perhaps not well understood by newcomers to the genre. Esports Expert 3 highlights the importance of business connections between the firms and organizations around esports. He explains that the biggest difference between esports events and traditional sports events such as hockey is that there are no home games to generate revenue for the teams via ticket sales, VIP packages, food and hospitality, and television broadcast rights. Esports events are organized by external operators who invite teams and arrange the prize pool (the amount of money that can be won in the tournament). This sum is usually gathered by levying a certain percentage of the publishers' downloadable in-game content sales, through sponsorship, investors, organizers, or fan donations.

As a good example, betting has a long history in traditional sports and has now made its way to esports. Companies such as Veikkaus in Finland, Betway in the UK, and international Unibet have made considerable marketing steps toward developing awareness of esports betting. Additionally, Mark Cuban, a well-known entrepreneur and owner of the NBA basketball team the Dallas Mavericks, invested USD 7 million in an esports betting startup called Unikrn, and is actively engaging in the esports business (Morris, 2015). Consequently, betting is an additional channel for the large audience and fans to engage in esports, and betting companies also actively sponsor teams, individual players, and tournament organizers to garner recognition among this potential customer base. Esports Expert 1 acknowledges the potential of betting in esports:

*Finland is like a gold mine because the internet here is affordable and open to everyone. Many actors try to get different types of deals here so that they can bring their new services to the market through teams, actors, and the media. Betting has to be a part of the esports and companies want to be part of it. This of course supports teams if they are able to make deals.*

## 5. Conclusions

The findings and the discussion of the existing literature above emphasize the actors involved in the esports business environment. They create and deliver value to each other through the different levels of the structure having interplay, relationships, dependencies, tensions, and overall interaction between each other in this esports business environment. Our findings demonstrate that different actors have different roles and positions in the esports business environment, and that brings dependencies between those actors. Actors wishing to be part of the esports structure must therefore understand their role, the roles of others, and especially the forms of dependence inherent in the ecosystem. The bigger the esports event or tournament, the greater the dependence among the actors who are participating. Profiting in this scenario requires an ability to change and an understanding of the esports landscape.

Previous studies have focused mainly on the gaming side of esports and the social interaction of people that play games competitively. According to the experts that we interviewed, it seems that the business side has been neglected and there is simply not enough understanding of how the esports business works. More and more firms will invest money in this rapidly growing global industry, and in order to get more firms involved, there should be enough reliable and valid research data that shows the most important aspects of the industry.

As presented in Figure 1, different key actors have various relationship ties to each other related to their own businesses and/or interests. At the heart of esports, the core key actors are the most dependent on each other, and these three groups (developers, teams and players, and leagues) have the most power, and the entire ecosystem depends on them. The core key players rely heavily on each other, but perhaps more importantly the other layers need them even more. There is no business if these core actors do not function together. In most esports games, the game developer has the most power in the ecosystem, and they decide how the game is played and even about the tournaments that can be organized. Therefore, we suggest that the esports environment as an ecosystem is structured on the basis of the core edge and expands towards the outer edges.

The structure of the core is dense and can be described as a closed network for outsiders. Therefore, we see that the other important organizations and individuals form the next layers. The most important sponsors can achieve an insider position in the ecosystem through leagues, players, and professional teams and platforms. However, the structure of the esports environment and the game developers' dominant role inhibit them from becoming the core of the industry. Building strong partnerships with the core actors, therefore, becomes vital for esports sponsors and advertisers.

Whereas the core is closed, and its relationships are trusted and formal, the other layers are more loosely connected, open networks. This means that the structure of actors on these layers is more organic, and more weak relationship ties, known as "structural holes", can be identified. These types of relationships often connect actors from different networks together, and also in esports this type of connection is present.

The findings add original and scientifically theoretical knowledge to complement the existing literature, advance prior research clearly and incrementally, and contribute scientific utility, in addition to clarifying the phenomenon of esports to aid practitioners in global businesses that meet the prerequisites for scientific and practical utility outlined by (Corley & Gioia, 2011).

Clarifying the appearance of a framework with the available global business, our findings are potentially fruitful in practice (Corley & Gioia, 2011) because esports may offer unexpected

opportunities for the development of several fields, such as education, technology, and business.

## 6. Limitations, and future research areas and topics

This study is one of the first to focus on esports as an industry. Esports is a global phenomenon, and all the interviewees were very knowledgeable about esports in the global context. Esports also offers opportunities for corporations to create customer contact points (Ayoki, 2017), which could spur several opportunities, such as market research, product introductions, obtaining feedback, harvesting development ideas, and brand management. Esports itself creates an environment that can encourage innovations and technological development (Hall, 2017). Marketers and sponsors may find esports a suitable arena through which to reach millennial and Generation Z consumers who are moving from watching traditional sports to following esports. Esports offers a global community where people can be connected to events, players, and teams from anywhere. However, there is still a discussion over whether esports should be considered a sport at all (Wagner, 2006; Hamari & Sjoblom, 2016; Hallmann & Giel, 2018). Although esports events are viewed as a sport by many involved, there is still discussion about the sports credentials of esports (Hallmann & Giel, 2018). Despite those debates, the Olympic Council of Asia has declared its intention to include esports in the Asian Games official program in 2022 (Graham, 2017).

To address this limitation, future research could explore further power asymmetries in the esports business environment and the various goals of each actor in the environment, as well as the country differences in the esports industry. It would be interesting to study professional esports teams and their partnerships with multinational business organizations. The sponsor needs the esports team to get coverage, target the younger generations and probably renew their brand image. Respectively, the professional team needs the sponsor not only to get money but also to legitimize their team as a real business organization. Some teams and sponsors have succeeded in achieving these goals, but more have failed. Therefore, it would be interesting to study both the esports teams and their sponsors to see how this type of co-operation can be developed to meet the goals of both sides.

The esports environment as an ecosystem is not static but constantly evolving, part of which involves development of its governance. Although esports is a global phenomenon, different countries have different opportunities and challenges related to the growth of esports and the organization of events. South Korea has been the leader in the esports arena since its inception and continues to dominate it. Large esports tournaments are being organized around the world and attracting players from multiple countries. Future research could explore how the home country of the players affects their sponsorships and also those players' success in esports.

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