

Kimmo Leinonen

## **Why is electronic sports captivating?**

*Why 18 to 29-year-olds watch electronic sports*

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Kimmo Leinonen  
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International Business  
Oulu University of Applied Sciences

## ABSTRACT

Oulu University of Applied Sciences  
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Author: Kimmo Leinonen

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Electronic sports has seen a substantial growth in terms of money involved, number of spectators and of course new teams and organizations are being established around the world. A record number of people every year play and spectate electronic sports in different ways. Electronic sports organizations, clubs and event organizers are interested in what has made electronic sports such a phenomenon and why hundreds of millions of people are interested in it and watch it. Because of this it is important to understand what makes people interested in electronic sports in the first place and what keeps them engaged as spectators.

This thesis explores what motivates and drives people to spectate electronic sports. The two main focuses are to find out why people for the first time decided to watch electronic sports and what motivates them to continue following electronic sports in the future. My two research questions are *how people start watching electronic sports* and *why do they watch it and what affects their enjoyment*.

Research method for this thesis is qualitative research. Data was collected from six semi-constructed interviews. By interviewing the participants instead of using questionnaires the data collected was able to give more insightful information and the participants were able to tell the answers in their own words. From the data collected four themes emerged that affected the participants motivation to spectate electronic sports.

The four themes were gaming background, aim to learn, social experience, and atmosphere. In most cases the participants had previously played the games they followed. Their gaming background contributed in them starting to spectate electronic sports in the first place. The need to evolve and learn as a player was strongly present in the data. Social and community aspects were also present in the data as people tended to watch events and games with their friends. The atmosphere produced by the event was important for the enjoyment for both event goers and those who spectated online.

Electronic sports has become an important aspect of lives of millions of people. In the same way the value of electronic sports has grown for companies who host these events. It is crucial for them to understand why their customers behave in the way they do.

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Keywords: electronic sports, esports, spectatorship, platforms, motivation

# CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION .....	5
1.1	Hercules Esports .....	6
2	ESPORTS .....	8
2.1	Genres .....	10
2.2	Games.....	10
2.2.1	Counter Strike: Global offensive .....	10
2.2.2	Dota 2 .....	11
2.2.3	League of Legends .....	11
2.2.4	Rocket League.....	11
2.2.5	Overwatch.....	11
2.2.6	PlayerUnknown’s Battlegrounds .....	12
2.3	Broadcasting platforms.....	12
2.3.1	Twitch .....	14
2.3.2	Mixer .....	14
2.3.3	Facebook gaming .....	15
2.3.4	YouTube/YouTube gaming .....	15
3	RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.....	17
3.1	Research method .....	18
3.2	Limitations of the thesis .....	20
4	LITERARY REVIEW .....	22
4.1	Spectatorship research.....	23
5	FINDINGS .....	25
5.1	Gaming background .....	25
5.2	Aim to learn .....	26
5.3	Social experience .....	27
5.4	Atmosphere .....	29
6	CONCLUSION.....	31
7	REFERENCES .....	33

# 1 INTRODUCTION

1972 marked the unofficial beginning of electronic sports even though the term was not invented at the time. Students gathered at Stanford University to see who would become the world champion of Spacewar computer game. Today electronic sports professional can make millions of euros but in 1972 the winner would go home with a one-year subscription of Rolling Stones Magazine. (Baker 2016, cited 18.8.2019.)

The purpose of this thesis is to find out why people, aged between 18 and 29 are initially interested in electronic sports and why do they keep spectating it. This thesis will be conducted as a qualitative research. Semi-constructed interviews are main way of data collection. The findings are compared to other previous studies conducted on electronic sports spectatorship.

This thesis has been commissioned by Oulu based electronic sports club Hercules Esports. Hercules Esports will be introduced in length in the latter part of this thesis. Hercules will use the findings to further develop their electronic sports offering and choose what types of activities they should focus on. They are also interested to learn how to introduce new people to electronic sports. Esports has seen rapid growth in 2019 according to Newzoo (see figure 1) and the growth is expected to continue in 2020.

Electronic sports audience growth is estimated to hit over 550 million by 2021 (figure 1). The importance of electronic sports especially in Finland can be seen in the fact that Finnish youth are more interested in electronic sports than they are in ice hockey (Sponsor Insight 2019, cited 18.8.2019). This fact combined with the lack of studies done to understand electronic sports spectatorship means that there is a need for research. Therefore, it is ever so important for an electronic sports organization to identify the key factors and motivators that drive their potential customers.

## ESPORTS AUDIENCE GROWTH

GLOBAL | 2016, 2017, 2018, 2021

- OCCASIONAL VIEWERS
- ESPORTS ENTHUSIASTS

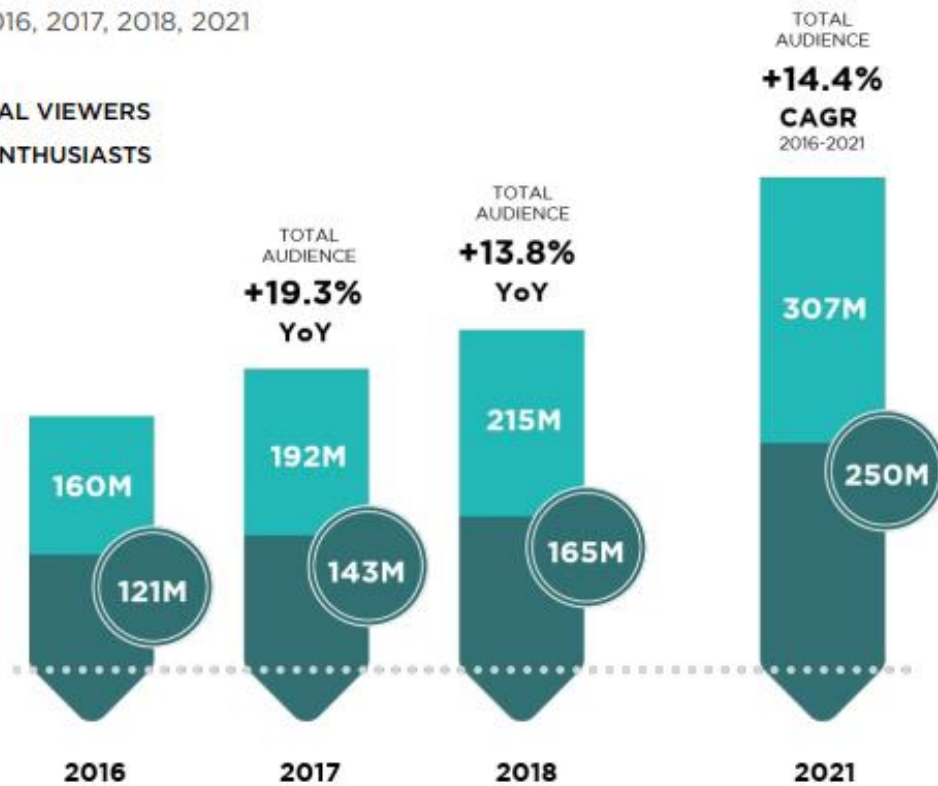


FIGURE 1. Esports audience growth (Newzoo 2018, cited 5.8.2019)

### 1.1 Hercules Esports

Hercules Esports is an electronic sports club established in early 2017 by Oulu-based football club JS Hercules. Hercules Esports' main objective is to advance and develop amateur and professional gaming in Oulu and northern Finland. They focus on developing and coaching youth players aged between 8 and 18-years old. They also have vast electronic sports related digital youth work projects going on with multiple cities and municipalities including the City of Oulu. They hold coaching sessions, leagues, tournaments, and electronic sports related streams. (Hercules Esports 2019, cited 11.7.2019.)

In 2019 they have started to focus more on other age groups, and they are especially interested in electronic sports spectators between 18 and 29-years old. Mr. Tuomas Tarkki, electronic sports

manager of Hercules Esports, says that Hercules and their partners are very interested in this aforementioned age group since people in this group have quite a lot of disposable income and they are the second biggest age group interested in gaming. (Tarkki, discussion 05.07.2019). Hercules Esports also lacks the understanding of the age group in question in this thesis.

Currently Hercules Esports is focusing on much younger gamers and the average age of their customer is 12.2 years. In the age group spanning from 10 to 19 69.8% of the people played digital games either once a week or more often (Kinnunen, Lilja & Mäyrä 2018). These are high numbers and explain why Hercules is interested in these two groups in general. Hercules has offered coaching and other activities to the younger age group for two years now and they feel that they have somewhat good understanding on why they enjoy games and what motivates them. They are unsure how the older age group 18 to 29-year olds operates and that is why this thesis further explores this specific age group. In 2018 61.1% of people in the age group 20 to 29 played digital games weekly or more often and 27.8 % of them play digital games daily (Kinnunen, Lilja & Mäyrä 2018).

## 2 ESPORTS

Electronic sports (also known as esports) is a form of sports where competitors use electronic systems to compete against each other, where the input of the competitors and the output of the electronic sports systems are mediated by human-computer interfaces (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Electronic sports has multiple definitions and it makes it harder to define what it is. Most of the sources define electronic sports as a type of competition in which one or more participants play against each other. The Finnish Electronic Sports Federation defines electronic sports as a competitive sport that utilizes information technology (Suomen elektronisen urheilun liitto 2019a, cited 03.06.2019). In this thesis the focus is on electronic sports and casual gaming is left out. In this thesis electronic sports is defined as a competitive gaming in which human players play against each other with predetermined rules.

When talking about traditional sports everybody knows that there are different types of sports like ice hockey, football, tennis and motorsports for example. Within electronic sports there exists multiple games which are considered electronic sports. Not all games are categorized as electronic sports games yet there is no official definition of what makes a game an electronic sport. Usually, electronic sports games have three things in common: they are competitive, well-funded and have large player base (Cobban 2016, cited 5.7.2019). This thesis presents game genres that came up during the interviews. The genres that came up were: MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena), FPS (First-Person Shooters) and BR (Battle Royale). The genres in question will be presented later in this chapter.

Electronic sports has enjoyed fast growth globally and in Finland in recent years and there are no signs for it slowing down. Due to this rapid growth a few traditional sports entities have taken interest in electronic sports as a sport and as a type of entertainment. In 2016 HIFK, one of the oldest sports clubs in Finland, made a move to electronic sports by starting a project called Helsinki REDS. Helsinki REDS started by competing in Overwatch and they expanded to other games. (Helsinki REDS 2019, cited 16.7.2019.) Since 2016 new organizations have been established either by already existing sports clubs or as new entities. These organizations aim to promote more professional aspect of electronic sports and they try to operate in the same way as traditional sports clubs: they own players and/or teams who compete in chosen competitions or tournaments. The rise of electronic sports has also given birth to a new wave of companies who specialize in



electronic sports related events like leagues and tournaments. Also, some other activities in electronic sports include fantasy leagues and gambling.

Players and fans alike have spectated games starting from the early 1970's when students came together to see who would be the best player in SpaceWars (Consolazio 2018, cited 8.7.2019). We have come a long way since then and electronic sports has grown to become a global trend which battles with traditional sports when it comes to spectatorship. Electronic sports in 2018 was the second most watched sport in the United States with 84 million spectators. (The Wall Street Journal 2017, cited 27.7.2019).

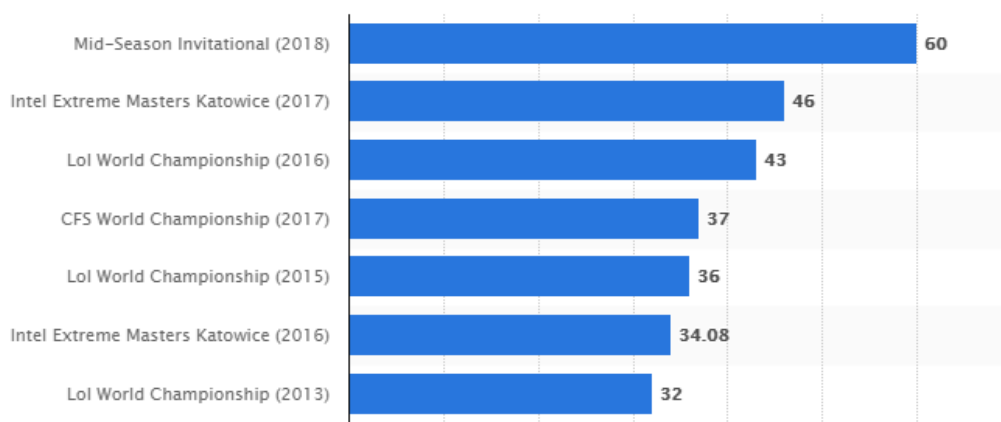


FIGURE 2. Most spectated electronic sports tournaments in history. (Gough 2019, cited 15.8.2019)

In figure 2 you can see the seven most spectated electronic sports tournaments in the history. Six of the seven most spectated tournaments have been held in 2015 or later. The number of unique spectators of electronic sports tournaments has grown steadily and it can be seen in League of Legends World Championships for example. In 2013 it gathered 32 million unique spectators and in 2018 League of Legends Mid-Season invitational recorded 60 million unique spectators which makes it the most watched electronic sports tournament in the world.

In the interviews participants mentioned several game genres, games and broadcasting platforms. To be able to fully understand electronic sports it is important to have basic knowledge of these terms in question. The main genres, games and broadcasting platforms will be introduced next.

## 2.1 Genres

**FPS** or First-person shooter is a game genre that is centred around gun and other weapon-based combat. The name comes from the fact that these games are played from a first-person perspective. Current electronic sports examples of this genre are Counter Striker: Global Offensive and Overwatch. (Suomen Elektronisen urheilun liitto 2019b, cited 10.8.2019.)

**MOBA** or Multiplayer online battle arena is a game genre that is considered to be a sub-genre of real-time strategy games. In MOBAs players choose characters who usually have a set of abilities and together with their teammates try to fulfil the game objective which usually is destroying the enemy team's base. Dota 2 and League of Legends are the two most prolific MOBA games. (Suomen elektronisen urheilun liitto 2019c, cited 10.8.2019.)

**BR** or Battle Royale games are last man standing type of games in which a player or a team combats against others in gun-based combat. PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds is a model example of a BR game since in it you can play solo, duo, and squads (in squads you play with up to 3 friends).

## 2.2 Games

### 2.2.1 Counter Strike: Global offensive

Counter Strike: Global Offensive or CS:GO is a team-based FPS game created by Valve Software. CS:GO is the fifth instalment in Counter Strike series which started in 1999 as a modification or a mod in Valve Software's Half Life game. In CS:GO two teams of five players battle against each other as Terrorists and Counter-Terrorists. The objective is either to eliminate the other team or plant a bomb.

### **2.2.2 Dota 2**

Dota 2 is a MOBA game developed by Valve Software in which two teams of five players battle against each other. The main objective is to destroy the base construct of the opposing team called the "Ancient". In Dota 2 there are over 100 different heroes and each player controls a one with special abilities. Dota 2 has the biggest prize pool in the history of electronic sports as its "world championship" called The International 2019 will have a prize pool of over 30 million USD (The International 2019, cited 4.8.2019).

### **2.2.3 League of Legends**

League of Legends or LoL is a MOBA game created by Riot Games and it is also a successor of Defense of the Ancients just like Dota 2. Like Dota 2 it has two teams of five players trying to destroy the opposing teams' structures. It also has a high number of different heroes and items to make the game complex. League of Legends is the shorter of the two games and the main differences make it faster and more streamlined experience than Dota 2 (Minotti 2015, cited 4.8.2019.)

### **2.2.4 Rocket League**

Rocket League is a game created by Psyonix and it was released in 2015. Rocket League can be played in multiple formats 1v1, 2v2, and 3v3 but in electronic sports scene only 2v2 and 3v3 are played competitively. Described as football with rocket cars, the aim in Rocket League is to score goals with rocket powered cars while flying around the stadium.

### **2.2.5 Overwatch**

Overwatch is a team-based FPS game created by Blizzard Entertainment in which two teams of six players battle against each other to complete an objective related to the chosen map. Unlike in CS:GO in Overwatch there are four different types of maps in which there are different win conditions: Assault, Escort, Hybrid and Control. Overwatch also differentiates itself from other FPS

games by having characters or heroes with unique plays-styles and skills. Overwatch is the only game featured in this thesis that has its own franchise league in which teams have purchased a spot in Overwatch League or OWL. OWL has been highly successful and in 2019 over 3.2 million hours' worth of material of OWL Stage 2 competition was watched in Twitch in a span of a single weekend. (Lee 2019, cited 19.7.2019).

### **2.2.6 PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds**

PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds or PUBG is a battle royale game developed by Bluehole. In PUBG 100 players are dropped without any gear or items to an empty island and their sole purpose is to be the last man or woman standing (Gilbert 2017, cited 17.8.2019). Due to the nature of battle royale games there might exist scenarios where people are dropped to far sides of the map and it feels improbable that they would ever meet each other. This problem is solved in PUBG by a circle that keeps getting smaller and if you stay outside of the said ring you would take damage and eventually die. (Sathyamurthy 2017, cited 18.8.2019.)

## **2.3 Broadcasting platforms**

As electronic sports is rapidly growing, so is the demand to watch other players compete in tournaments or leagues. Video game streaming is the main way of enjoying electronic sports and it allows the fans to get closer to the professional players. These broadcasting platforms are the answer for the previously described need, and they are places where competition broadcasters and professional players stream their games for their fans to see. Any single individual can stream if they have the correct software and equipment, but electronic sports broadcasters take it a step further by having analyst panels and commentary in their streams. These platforms have different ways of engaging fans and spectators by offering features. For example, built-in live chat which enables viewers to interact either with the individual streamer or broadcaster or other spectators. (British Esports Association 2019, cited 22.7.2019.)

### Live hours watched per platform

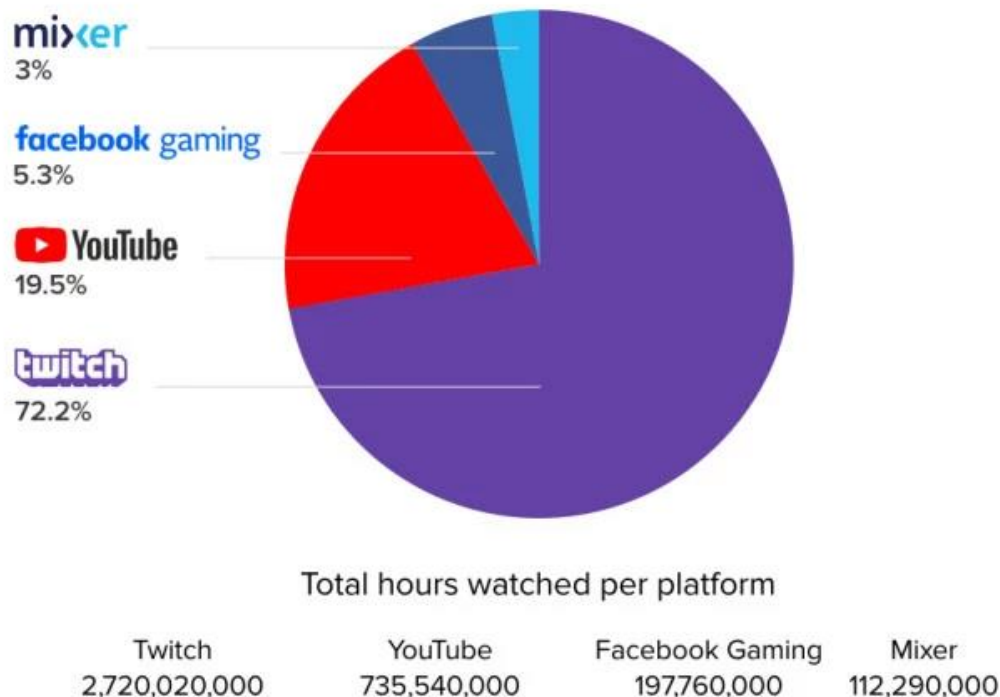


FIGURE 3. Live hours watched per platform. (Perez 2019, cited 12.8.2019)

In this thesis four biggest broadcasting platforms that host electronic sports professionals and professional broadcasters will be introduced. The four biggest platforms are Twitch, YouTube, Facebook and Mixer in that order. As one can see in figure 3 Twitch generates two times more live footage than the other three competitors combined. There are many reasons why Twitch is the dominant broadcasting platform currently but for the purpose of this thesis it is not important to elaborate it further.

### **2.3.1 Twitch**

Twitch was established in 2011 as a spin-off of already existing video platform called Justin.tv. Twitch has become the main channel for gaming and electronic sports related streaming. The platform grew fast with electronic sports and it eventually was acquired by Amazon for nearly 1 billion US dollars. In 2016 Twitch came out with a new feature that made it possible for the spectators to “tip” a broadcaster with their own digital currency called Bits. During 2016 they also released Twitch Prime which allowed their users who already had Amazon Prime to subscribe to a channel for free which would have cost 4.99 US dollars otherwise. Twitch has made multiple deals to ensure that they have exclusive rights to broadcast specific tournaments and competitions. They have exclusive rights to broadcast for example Blizzard’s Overwatch League and tournaments held by tournament organizer Dreamhack. (Brathwaite 2018, cited 8.8.2019.)

In February 2018, Twitch had around 2.2 million broadcasters on the platform and they had 15 million unique daily spectators. During an average month they were able to attract 140 million spectators and have a peak concurrent spectatorship around 2 million. To put that into a traditional sports perspective MNSBC and CNN were able to pull between 783 000 and 885 000 concurrent spectators in the same time. Over 50% of their spectators are aged between 18 and 32. (Iqbal 2019, cited 8.8.2019.)

### **2.3.2 Mixer**

Mixer, originally known as Beam, is a streaming platform acquired by Microsoft in 2016. It is a relatively new player in electronic sports broadcasting and streaming but with interesting and differentiating features. Mixer differentiates itself from other platforms with extremely low latency, which means that there is less time between the action the streamer or broadcaster makes and the spectators seeing the action. (Brathwaite 2018, cited 8.8.2019.)

In 2019 Mixer made a major acquisition in the streamer market by signing a streamer called Tyler “Ninja” Blevins with an exclusive deal. Tyler Blevins was previously the biggest streamer on Twitch platform who had over 14 million followers and his subscriber count peaked at over 280 000 in

2018. He is the first global streamer to stream on mixer as before his arrival no other streamer never had over 1 million followers in Mixer. (Ashton 2019, cited 9.8.2019.)

### **2.3.3 Facebook gaming**

Facebook gaming is one of the newer competitors in the streaming and electronic sports broadcasting market being established in 2018. Facebook is trying to compete with already established competitors such as Twitch and YouTube. They try to appeal to streamers and content creators by demanding a lower percentage of the tips these streamers receive - ranging from 5 to 30 percent compared to Twitch, who takes around 50% (Perez 2019, cited 12.8.2019).

As you can see from figure 3 Facebook Gaming is dwarfed by Twitch and to some extent by YouTube Gaming but they have tried to expand their offering via non-exclusive broadcasting deals like their deal with ESL to broadcast Intel Extreme Masters (IEM) and ESL One, and the ESL Pro League (Fitch 2019, cited 12.8.2019).

### **2.3.4 YouTube/YouTube gaming**

YouTube is a big player in electronic sports as a streaming platform and as one of the main platforms for VODS or videos-on-demand like replays for tournaments or tournament compilations. It separates itself from the competitors by operating as a hybrid platform for VODS and streams. YouTube has a program called YouTube Gaming which focuses on streaming. It keeps some of the features we all know YouTube has like the possibility to rewind even in the middle of the livestream so you can replay a certain portion of the video. (Brathwaite 2018, Cited 8.8.2019.) With YouTube gaming you can also stream with mobile devices like phones easily and this is something that further differentiates it from its competitors and might become a key feature in the future as mobile gaming keeps growing (Wijman 2018, cited 9.8.2019).



## TOP GAMES BY NUMBER OF STREAMERS | JAN 2019

ON TWITCH AND YOUTUBE | GLOBAL

TOTAL STREAMERS IN JANUARY: **63.7K**



TOTAL STREAMERS IN JANUARY: **22.0K**



RANK	GAME TITLE	GENRE	STREAMER COUNT	RANK	GAME TITLE	GENRE	STREAMER COUNT
1	Fortnite	Shooter	10.0K	1	Fortnite	Shooter	3.5K
2	League of Legends	Battle Arena	5.2K	2	PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS	Shooter	1.7K
3	PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS	Shooter	4.1K	3	Minecraft	Adventure	1.6K
4	Counter-Strike: Global Offensive	Shooter	4.0K	4	Garena Free Fire	Shooter	1.2K
5	Resident Evil 2	Adventure	2.9K	5	Counter-Strike: Global Offensive	Shooter	1.1K
6	Overwatch	Shooter	2.8K	6	Resident Evil 2	Adventure	1.0K
7	Call of Duty: Black Ops 4	Shooter	2.3K	7	PUBG Mobile	Shooter	949
8	Dota 2	Battle Arena	2.3K	8	Grand Theft Auto V	Adventure	893
9	Old School RuneScape	RPG	2.2K	9	FIFA 19	Sports	615
10	Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Siege	Shooter	1.9K	10	Roblox	RPG	539

© copyright Newzoo 2019 | Top Games by Number of Streamers on Twitch and YouTube January 2019:  
[newzoo.com/game-streaming-tracker](http://newzoo.com/game-streaming-tracker)

FIGURE 4. Top games by number of streamers on Twitch and YouTube. (Pannekeet 2019, cited 9.8.2019)

As seen in figure 4, number of streams Twitch dominates YouTube quite clearly but if you look closer at the games that are popular in each platform you can spot two quite unique games in YouTube's list. Garena Free Fire ranked fourth and PUBG Mobile ranked 7th overall on YouTube are mobile games which further highlights the different approaches these two platforms have taken.



### 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As previously stated, the electronic sports environment is rapidly growing and new players, organizations and platforms are quickly being established. Many entities have made moves that could be considered mistakes. These mistakes can stem from misunderstanding why their spectators watch electronic sports. As an example, in 2018 ESL, (Electronic Sports League) which organizes big and global electronic sports events, came public with the information that they had made a deal with Facebook for exclusive broadcasting rights for four of their tournaments: Genting 2018, Cologne 2018, New York 2018 and ESL Pro League. This meant that official streams of these tournaments could only be viewed in Facebook instead of the Twitch. Up to this point Twitch had been de facto place to broadcast and spectate electronic sports. Fans, players and spectators took the news with a heavy heart and the disappointment as they viewed Facebook as less appealing platform. Facebook's Genting 2018 stream had multiple problems and the stream was offline multiple times. This had a substantial effect on the spectatorship numbers of the tournament. Genting 2018 tournament at certain points had only few hundred spectators while Twitch's unofficial broadcast had nearly 20 000 (Rohan 2018, cited 20.7.2019).

The previous example is just one where organizations and companies have misunderstood why people spectate electronics sports. Due to Twitch being the main platform to watch electronic sports and therefore the fan favourite, ESL took a risk and paid the price by taking their games to another platform.

The data for this thesis was collected by interviewing people who spectate electronic sports and have watched tournaments either from an online broadcasting platform or by going to an event by themselves. The interviews were structured around five talking points around which the conversation revolved. This is a common way of conducting semi-structured interviews. The identities of the participants will be kept secret and the interviews were done anonymously. The protection of human participants in any research study is critical (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden 2000, 93). The aim is to understand what motivates these people to follow electronic sports and how did they start spectating it. There is a limited number of qualitative researches on electronic sports spectatorship which has been done in the near past. Due to these reasons a qualitative research is used in this thesis and the research questions are:

1. How people start watching electronic sports?
2. Why do they watch it and what affects their enjoyment?

### **3.1 Research method**

Quantitative and qualitative research paradigms have fundamental differences between them which mostly lie at the nature of the assumptions of the research. Quantitative research usually aims to confirm or deduct something. The problem with these two methods is that some scholars do not acknowledge that both can be used to address almost any kind of research question. (Atieno 2009, 14.)

The purpose of this thesis is to better understand why the participants watch electronic sports and why they started to watch in the first place. To better understand why the participants in their opinion watched electronic sports, qualitative research was chosen as the method for this thesis. When the purpose is to understand how the participants experience something and how they interpret their experiences the researcher needs a method that will allow the room for the researcher to discover and interpret the experiences and perceptions of the participants. The goal which qualitative methods share is to create new ways of seeing the already existing data. If the purpose is to better understand a phenomenon in deep and detailed manner the researcher needs methods to discover the central themes of the subject. (Atieno 2009, 16.)

Qualitative study can be viewed as a process. Different perspectives and interpretations of the data can be seen as development in the consciousness of the researcher. Because of this, qualitative research process can be described as a learning process in which you aim to better understand the studied phenomenon and the factors that affect it. (Kiviniemi 2018, 73, 79.) In qualitative research the data is usually examined as one big entity. Large number of participants is not necessary or always possible in qualitative research. Sometimes one can produce 30 pages of transcripts and data from a single interview. (Alasuutari 2011, 38–39.) Therefore, the low number of participants in this study does not hinder the ability to describe the reasons and motivations they have in spectating electronic sports.

Four potential activities for data collection in qualitative research are interviewing, observing, collecting, and feeling (Yin 2016, 138). Because the goal of this thesis is to find out why the

spectators watch electronic sports, interviewing was chosen as the method of gathering information from the participants. Research interview is one of the most important methods when it comes to qualitative data collection methods. Research interviews have been widely used when conducting field studies and ethnographic research. Qualitative interviews are usually chosen as data collection method over ethnographic methods when the aim is to establish common themes between participants. (Qu & Dumay 2011, 238; Warren 2001, 86.)

Interview is one of the most used data collection methods. It has been used since around 300 BC. by Aristoteles. When one wants to gather insight of people's opinions, gather information about them or study their behaviour, interviewing is a good way of achieving that. Potential interviewees are also more likely to agree to be interviewed by someone face to face as they see it as a pleasant occurrence. The interviewee usually knows how the interview is laid out and the interviewer has had a chance to prepare with enough time. It is quite important to record and analyse the findings of the interviews as soon as possible as the memory imprint is still fresh. Every interview can be interpreted as a unique occurrence and it is important not to generalise with haste. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 11–12.)

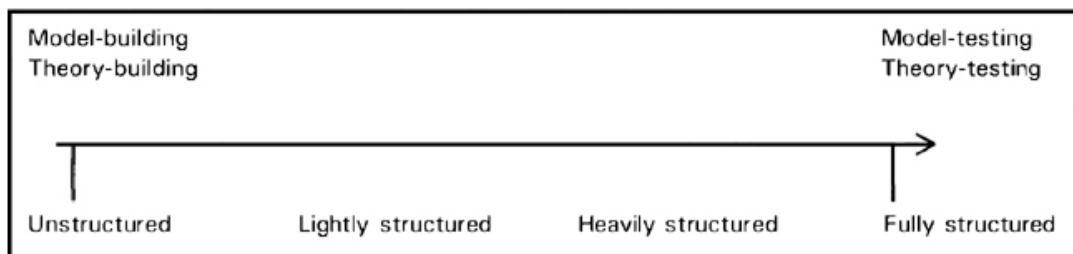


FIGURE 5. Spectrum from Unstructured to Fully Structured Interviewin. (Wengraf 2001, 61)

Wengraf (2001) describes the spectrum of different types of interviews (see figure 5) ranging from unstructured to fully structured. In situations where there are no general models, unstructured or lightly structured interviews are used. These two ways of interviewing are used to build a theory or a model of particular reality. Once the model or theory has been built, it is then tested by more heavily structured or fully structured interviews. (Wengraf 2001, 60.) No general models exist of electronic sports and therefore unstructured or semi-structured interviews are needed to create new models.

The interviews in this thesis are semi-structured, which means that the path of conversation is not the same for each participant and there might be questions that are asked from some participants but not others. In semi-structured interviews the interviewer has prepared topics and open-ended questions. Focus is on discussion rather than a set list of closed questions. (Allmark, Boote, Chambers, Clarke, McDonnell, Thompson & Tod 2009, 48.) The problems and limitations of semi-constructed interviews will be further explained in the latter part of this thesis when the limitations of the thesis are described.

As the aim of the thesis is to find out specific reasons why the participants watch electronic sports. Therefore, it is important to conduct the interviews in such a way that the participants can talk freely and from their own perspective. The opinions of the participants are in the focus in this thesis and that is why it is important that they can emphasize what is important to them in their own words. The participants for this thesis were recruited by seeking volunteers via online platforms and some of them were directly asked to participate by the author of the thesis.

### **3.2 Limitations of the thesis**

Every research approach has its disadvantages and so does qualitative approach. The main disadvantage of the qualitative approach is that one cannot apply their findings to the larger population with the same kind of certainty that one could with quantitative approach. The reason for this is that the findings of a qualitative research are not meant to discover if they are statistically meaningful like in quantitative research. (Atieno 2009, 17.) The main way of gathering data for this thesis was via interviews which meant that the sample size is quite small. A drawback with semi-constructed interviews is that without huge time and personal investment it is highly unlikely that one could gather a large enough sample of data that would yield the same precision as a quantitative research. (Adams 2015, 366–367.) For this thesis it would have been highly difficult to gather a large enough sample of data to be able to generalise the findings in any meaningful way.

Semi-constructed interviews have different disadvantages. It takes time to prepare for the interviews, set-up the interviews, conducting them and analysing interview data is not as quick and easy as one might think. Amount of effort and time needed to do this right is considerable. Semi-structured interviews include the task of analysing and going over notes and sometimes many

hours' worth of transcripts. (Adams 2015, 366.) Setting up interviews with participants in another country for example took extra effort to conduct because of the time difference.

Depending on the interview topic the interviewer might face subjects who barely talk. They keep their answers short and will not elaborate on their answers. As interviewees these people can be challenging to work with. As a strategy to cope with people like this you can for example avoid questions that can be answered either "yes" or "no". On the other end of the spectrum there are people who are happy to talk and provide much information. Sometimes there are subjects who talk too much and beside the point, providing irrelevant information about the topic. In qualitative research all collected data is potentially useful and that is why it is better to let the subjects ramble, since the rambling might make more sense in hindsight when the researcher goes over the interview data. (Hove & Anda 2005.) Some participants in the thesis were quite talkative when compared to others.

Semi-structured interview helps to define the limits of the thesis, but it might result in missing information due to the interviews changing between participants. For this thesis interviewing is the best method of gathering a deeper understanding on why the chosen participants spectate electronic sports.

Interviews can offer a way for the researcher to learn and understand the world of others, but real definitive understanding might prove hard to grasp. Even in situations where it seems that both parties of the interview are speaking the same language the meaning of their words might be totally different due to cultural meanings. Therefore, communication can become difficult if the parties have different worldviews. (Qu & Dumay 2011, 293.) The participants in this thesis are all from Europe which makes communication easier with the shared language in English and worldviews.

One obstacle when researching games and genres was that they lack official definitions in some cases. The definitions might change from country to country or from federation to federation. This thesis relies mostly on the information offered by the Finnish Electronic Sports Federation. This example shows how new electronic sports as a phenomenon is and how little of official academic research there is.

## 4 LITERARY REVIEW

During this chapter the different aspects of electronic sports research are represented ranging from general research to spectatorship focused research. Some general researches are presented in this literary review to help the reader to better understand the electronic sports research. The latter part of this chapter focuses on spectatorship research which is compared to findings of this thesis.

Electronic sports as an entertainment has a huge following and gathers a lot of interest today. There are estimated to exist over 200 million electronic sports enthusiasts globally and they are those who consume electronic sports as spectators weekly or more often (Newzoo 2018, cited 5.8.2019). Because of the rapid increase in electronic sports spectatorship and engagement, more research has been conducted about it. The fast growth and development in electronic sports make it hard and troublesome for researcher to keep up.

Some number of studies have been done on electronic sports in recent years and they mainly focus on different aspects of electronic sports than spectatorship. Macey & Hamari (2018) used an online survey as their method of data collection and they researched the relationship of video gaming, spectating electronic sports and gambling. They concluded that the increased consumption of video games had a positive association with gaming addiction and gaming-related gambling. (Macey & Hamari 2018.) Their research does not consider what makes electronic sports interesting for the spectators which is what this thesis is set to research.

Literary review conducted by Funk, Pizzo & Baker (2017) explored electronic sports from the perspective of sports management. They compared electronic sports and traditional sports. They found out that even though electronic sports is rather new phenomenon it shares many of the same challenges that traditional sports have faced in management. For example, the lack of organisational structures. (Funk et al. 2017.)

Hallman & Giel (2018) compared how electronic sports compares to traditional sports. They concluded that electronic sports is close to traditional sports but not fully comparable to it, at least yet. Lack of organizational structures and strong commercial focus were seen as drawbacks by traditional sports community. (Hallman & Giel 2018.) But as electronic sports keeps evolving and the research continues, it is possible that electronic sports can be seen in the same way as

traditional sports. Diverse research ensures that new models and structures are created for electronic sports. This thesis aims to further the understanding of electronic sports spectators. The findings of this thesis make it possible for Hercules Esports to further develop their operations and models concerning electronic sports spectatorship.

#### **4.1 Spectatorship research**

Some spectatorship focused research has been done in electronic sports in recent years. Weiss and Schiele (2013) researched why people watch electronic sports. Weiss & Schiele conducted their research data collection in two steps. First, they interviewed electronic sports league experts in Germany using the uses and gratifications approach. These experts put forth five need gratifications which are competition, challenge, social relationship, escapism, and fun. Based on questionnaires answered by players the three need gratifications obtained through electronic sports are competition, challenge and escapism. (Weiss & Schiele 2013.)

Hamari & Sjöblom (2017) conducted a research which investigated why people watch electronic sports on the internet and what influenced their watching frequency. Their research used the motivation scale for sports consumption (MSSC) which is widely used instrument when researching sports consumption. Their data collection method was a questionnaire to which they received 888 answers. They had ten hypotheses based on the MSSC. With quantitative data analysis methods, they were able to identify for example that appreciation for player skills was positively associated with electronic sports watching frequency. Also, social interaction was positively associated with electronic sports watching frequency. As they used MSSC there were some discrepancies when researching traditional sports and electronic sports. (Hamari & Sjöblom 2017.)

In “Esports Spectatorship in Australia” research paper Gibbs, Carter, Cumming, Fordyce & Witkowski (2018) found out that electronic sports spectators engage in range of different behaviours when it comes to electronic sports. They conducted 18 semi-structured interviews in gaming convention Oz Comic Con in Melbourne, Australia. They distinguished three unique groups they called players, fans and recruits. For the purpose of this thesis the groups are not important as the interviewees are viewed as individuals, not representatives of a specific group. Amateur play of electronic sports games and spectating electronic sports was found out to be closely linked. High

level of engagement of electronic sports was intertwined with broader video game culture and the spectators saw electronic sports as a part of everyday gaming experience. Those who themselves played the games that they spectated and followed were highly motivated by the learning aspect of spectating. These individuals wanted to see high level of gameplay and expertise in the game. People, who were not that interested in playing the game themselves or were considered low skill level players, saw live tournaments as social and community events where they could see and interact with top level players, teams, and other people. (Gibbs et al. 2018.)

The three researches examined before are all important for the purpose of this thesis because they directly or indirectly approach electronic sports watching from the perspective of the spectator. Even though the data collection and analysis methods are different in each case they all have similar findings. All three highlighted for example the importance of player skill level and social experience when it comes to watching electronic sports. Research conducted by Gibbs et al. (2018) used the same kind of approach to their research as is used in this thesis. The purpose of both is to better understand the spectators and their perspectives through semi-constructed interviews.

Hercules Esports is interested to know why people watch electronic sports and what affects their enjoyment. This question can be seen in all three previous researches as a basis and this thesis aims to gather more information about it. However, these researches in question take no position on why these people started watching electronic sports in the first place. This is something Hercules Esports is interested in because by knowing why people get into spectating electronic sports, they can develop their own operations in such a way that it attracts new spectators. Therefore, the findings of the three spectatorship focused researches are compared to this thesis and its findings.



## 5 FINDINGS

In this thesis data was collected with six semi-structured interviews with people aged between 18 and 29. The participants had varying backgrounds and experience with electronic sports. The interviews were structured around five main talking points. Interviewees would provide answers and insight for the two research questions. From the interviews four themes emerged that affected participants' motivation to watch electronic sports. The four themes were gaming background, aim to learn, social experience, and atmosphere. The themes and their findings are represented in the order of their significance as interpreted by the researcher. Gaming background for example was something that all participants shared and felt strongly about.

### 5.1 Gaming background

Gaming background was one of the main reasons why the participants initially started to spectate electronic sports. All six participants had at least some level of experience in gaming. One of them played games less than on weekly basis while one can be considered as a professional electronic sports athlete who plays around 8 hours per day. Games played by them varied heavily from MOBAs like Dota2 and League of Legends to Rocket League and FPS games like Counter Strike: Global Offensive and Overwatch. Participants were most interested in watching the same games that they had gaming experiences from. Because the participants had a background in gaming they wanted to learn and get better. The learning aspect came up as one factor why the participants continued to spectate electronic sports after the initial time. The learning aspect is further explained in the "Aim to learn" chapter.

Few participants watched multiple different electronic sports games and even spectated games they themselves did not play. Even though they watched games that they did not play, they tended to favour the games that they did play when choosing what to spectate. With Dota 2 and League of Legends, those who watched them thought it was important to have at least adequate knowledge of the games since they can be seen as complex and multi-layered. Without basic or mediocre knowledge of the game and its electronic sport side it might be difficult for some to keep up with the broadcast.

Gibbs et al. (2018) found out that those who played games tended to engage and spectate the same game's electronic sports scene. The gaming background is a fundamental factor when it comes to why people start spectating electronic sports and continuing to do so in the future. They also cited that the overall gaming culture might have something to do with people's interest in electronic sports as 84% of 15-34-year-olds in Australia were interested in video games. (Gibbs et al. 2018, 12.) This is also an important thing to consider in Finland because as Kinnunen, Lilja & Mäyrä (2018) reported that 61,1% of Finnish people between 20 and 29-year olds played games every week or more often (Kinnunen, Lilja & Mäyrä 2018, 35).

## **5.2 Aim to learn**

Learning and developing gaming skills were important for many of the participants. For some of the participants this inner need to learn was the catalyst why they were initially drawn to electronic sports. Learning from electronic sports professionals was one of the reasons they have continued to spectate events. Most participants said that the initial reason they started watching professional players was to learn more and see what was possible in the game. High level of play was described as the most crucial part of any tournament by one of the participants and many others highlighted the importance of highly skilled players have. Participants felt that by spectating high level games and professionals they would have the chance of learning more about the game and the tactics involved. Weiss & Schiele (2013) noted that challenge is one of the main factors for electronic sports enjoyment as a player. This challenging phenomenon can be seen in the participants answers where they want to develop themselves.

As many of the participants had knowledge and experience about the game they spectated, they deemed it necessary that the competition they spectated had the best players and teams. High level of play is tied to the entertainment level of the tournament and the learning experience. On the other hand, even if they were not able to learn and execute the strategies the professionals used, they were able to appreciate them more because they knew how hard or improbable, they were.

Two of the participants went as far as they said that they would not watch a tournament that they deemed to have too low skill level. This would in their words take the enjoyment out of the activity. To highlight how highly these professional players can be regarded, one participant said that as a child he would dream of meeting the footballing superstar Lionel Messi but now he would much rather meet his Rocket League idol. This example highlights the how significant even one highly skilled professional player can be. Gibbs et al. (2018) noted in their findings motivation to learn about the game and its mechanics were important for those spectators who had the gaming experience (Gibbs et al. 2018, 12).

One participant started their electronic sports career when they as a new player of CS:GO spectated their first professional tournament. They originally wanted to watch the tournament because they wanted to see what was possible to do in the game and how good the professional players would be. After the first tournament they started to more closely follow professional players and tournaments with the sole aim of bettering themselves through these professionals. They would watch replays and take notes of the best plays and games of these tournaments. Afterwards they would go and try and replicate the skills that they had observed. Previous example reflects the need and desire to learn and evolve. This drove the participant to spectate electronic sports and by learning from it they have been able to create a career as a professional electronic sports athlete.

### **5.3 Social experience**

Very common way of being introduced to electronic sports was by a friend. Nearly every participant mentioned that their electronic sports spectating was started by someone else urging them to try it. Therefore, the social experience is an important factor both in starting to spectate electronic sports and continuing to do so. Over half of the participants had this experience and they also stated that they saw the social aspect of electronic sports important to their continuing enjoyment.

Participants talked at length how they first spectated games after being encouraged by a friend. One participant is currently living abroad of his home country and to them the ability to share and talk about electronic sports with their brother was an important reason why they actively followed Dota 2. This example reflects how the act of spectating electronic sports is usually tied to social experiences. The same theme appeared with other participants. Participants watch electronic

sports from various sources which enhance the social aspects of watching games with other people. Broadcasting platforms that the participants used were Twitch, YouTube, Mixer and Facebook. The ability to share a great game or an event was compared to the feeling of watching traditional sports with friends. Social experience in electronic sports was as important to those who went to live events as it were to those who spectated games online.

The word community appeared in multiple interviews and one can see it as a form of social aspect of esports. Over half of the participants had attended a live electronic sports event. Attending an event was described by multiple participants as community type of experience and they felt sense of belonging with other attendees. Gibbs et al. (2018) discovered in their research that for some people the social experience from attending events was an important trigger in their growing interest in electronic sports. They divided their participants into players, fans and recruits. The importance of social experience was strongest in fans and least strong in players. (Gibbs et al. 2018, 17.) Interviewees mentioned that the possibility to share one's ideas and feelings about the game you like with like-minded people was considered to be an important reason for going to an event. One participant compared talking about electronics sports with your friends to talking about last night's football or ice hockey game. Talking about electronic sports made it appear more real and relevant in their opinion.

Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) in their research concluded that the social aspect is not the most important aspect that affects the frequency of spectating electronic sports (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017, 222). In this thesis the presence of the social experience of the participants was strongly present. Gibbs et al. (2018) found out that the group of electronic sports spectators which had the least gaming experience or background were most interested about the social side of electronic sports (Gibbs et al. 2018, 13). We can presume that people who play games a lot want to learn and develop. People who play less feel that community and the social side of electronic sports are more important. These people want to gather with like-minded people to share their interest in electronic sports.

## 5.4 Atmosphere

Atmosphere was the last theme that emerged from the interviews. Atmosphere in this context covers the quality of the broadcast and the feeling emitted by the crowd in an event. Over half of the participants thought that the quality of the production both at the event and online broadcast greatly affected their enjoyment of the electronic sports broadcast. It was also noted that if a tournament or broadcaster was known to have bad quality of production it would deter the participants from viewing their events. In this case the term production covers the online broadcast, interviews and other tournament activities on top of the games that are played. Interviews and other activities give a chance to observe the teams, players, commentators and analysts.

A participant said that for them being able to see the electronic sports professional and learn about them as individuals was an important reason why they spectated electronic sports tournaments. Participant noted that the atmosphere and the crowd were also important even when spectating the tournament online as it gave a sense of togetherness. Gibbs et al. (2018) noted that for some people the actual live event and extra activities provided on-site were one of the main attractions of electronic sports (Gibbs et al. 2018, 13). As seen in the comment of the participant, atmosphere in the tournament included like-minded people and extra activities.

The atmosphere can also be felt when spectating a tournament online from home. One participant gave a great example on how good atmosphere enhanced their spectating experience even when they were not at the event themselves. During an intense part of an Overwatch league season final one of the teams were able to pull off an incredible play. The team in question was able to turn the tables in a situation where they had only 3 players alive fighting to a capture point. The seamless teamwork put forward by the three players was rewarded by loud cheering of the crowd. The participant and their friends who were watching the game at home, also got up yelling. When a group of like-minded people gather in the same place they affect and contribute to the general atmosphere as seen in the previous example.

Broadcasting platforms played a big part when it came to the atmosphere of online spectating. Participants favoured Twitch as a platform as it is one of the longest serving streaming platforms. In the interviews participants had run into situations where they were forced to use a specific platform because the said platform held exclusive rights to show certain games or events. As stated, quality and atmosphere play a role when watching electronic sports and a bad streaming

experience will affect the spectator's motivation. An example of bad or low-quality broadcasting's effects on Genting 2018 on spectatorship were given in the beginning of chapter 3.

## 6 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis was to gather data to get a better understanding why people between 18 and 29-years of age get initially into spectating electronic sports and what keeps them engaged. To find out the motivations and reasons people have in spectating electronic sports six semi-constructed interviews were conducted with people from varying electronic sports backgrounds.

Four distinctive themes were discovered from the interview data. Themes were gaming background, aim to learn, social experience, and atmosphere. The two research questions for this thesis were *how people start watching electronic sports* and *why do they watch it and what affects their enjoyment*. Gaming background and social experience were closely linked to the reasons why these participants spectated electronic sports for the first time. These themes also influence their ongoing motivation to spectate electronic sports and the enjoyment they get from doing so. Aim to learn and atmosphere were clearly answering to why the participants spectate electronic sports. These two were not clearly seen as the main reasons to start spectating.

These four themes were present in some way in every interview conducted for this thesis and that is why these four can be considered to be the main sources of motivation for the participants of this thesis to spectate electronic sports. All the themes had some parts of them overlapping with other themes. For example, the social experience and atmosphere were closely linked in multiple interviews. All four themes can be also indirectly found in previous researches conducted by Hamari & Sjöblom (2017), Gibbs et al. (2018) and Weiss & Schiele (2013). It can be claimed that these four themes are quite important when you consider that they appear in some form in all three researches. Still one cannot make any objective conclusions about their importance to the general public.

The findings and conclusions of this thesis are based on researchers own interpretation of the interview data, so as such they cannot be generalised. The interpretative nature of qualitative research means that the published findings are just the researchers' version of "the truth" (Richards & Schwartz 2002 ,136). As previously stated in limitations, the low number of interviewees in this thesis affects the reliability of the findings. These findings can be used in further studies as they give more perspective into the motivations and reasons of individual electronic sports spectators. For example, the findings can be used as a basis for creating quantitative research questionnaire.

As the researcher of this thesis personally knows some of the interviewees that might have affected the how the data was analysed from the specific interviews. This can be a weakness since the researcher can make assumptions based on the knowledge they have of the interviewees. On the other hand, the personal relationship between the researcher and the interviewee might encourage the interviewee to be more open and honest.

As previously represented in the literature review of this thesis, most research done about electronic sports are on the general level or from a different perspective than spectatorship. Electronic sports keeps growing fast and it is expected to have over 550 million viewers in 2021 (Newzoo 2018, cited 5.8.2019). This rapid growth combined with the lack of research currently being done on electronic sports opens many possibilities for researchers and electronic enthusiasts alike. For example, the difference in the motivational factors for spectating between professional electronic sports athletes and amateur players.



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