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The Value of E-Sports Is in the Eye of the Beholder, But Can E-Sports Operators Influence What the Spectators See?

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Abstract

This article considers the societal discussion revolving around e-sports to be a reflection of the incommensurability of different means of value justification. The article seeks an answer to the question of how e-sports operators can demonstrate that their work entails aspects, i.e. propose value to aspects that are generally valued. The article presents a theory-guided analysis of the means of value justification in the world of e-sports. The theoretical basis builds upon modern economic sociology. The esteem of e-sports is not generated spontaneously but requires active measures by operators within the e-sports field. This calls for an ability to recognise various means of value justification and the related value categories and conflicts in one's own work. The attractiveness of e-sports in the eyes of the corporate world as well as the general public is proportional to how credibly the e-sports operators are able to demonstrate aspects of their work that are in line with things that are generally valued. The present article contributes to the collaboration between e-sports operators and stakeholders by verbalising the tensions and possibilities related to such collaboration. The article aids in recognising the value-creating interfaces and in fortifying the collaboration and finding synergy benefits.

Keywords

E-Sports, Value, Value Creation, Worth, Justification

1. Introduction

E-sports, i.e. competitive online gaming, is the fastest-growing means of engaging in and following sports. Globally, it interests as many as half a billion people (Statista 2018a). Despite its popularity, e-sports also elicits a fair amount of sus-

pcion. Many would ask whether e-sports is real sports to begin with. The answer is no, if the essential criterion for accounting as sports is considered to be the maintenance and honing of physical fitness. However, if sports is defined as competing in abilities considered to be culturally relevant within the confines of collectively defined rules, the answer is yes. Those who work within e-sports tend to answer the question by stating that if sports refers to an activity in which trained and talented individuals and teams compete against each other according to a certain set of rules, e-sports is to be considered a sport, just like football. Success in e-sports requires physical and mental abilities. Instead of height, muscle power and explosive speed, e-sports requires highly honed fine motor skills and a strategic eye for the game. It is clear that the characteristics required in e-sports differ from those expected of, for instance, marathoners. Some of the questions and concerns that can be identified in the current social discussion are similar to those expressed in relation to motor sports in the 1970s and 1980s. What one regards as a sport seems like something entirely different through the lenses of another. Heere (2018: p. 21), for example, argues that as “the sport industry itself is embracing e-sports as a sport, scholars should embrace e-sports as a manifestation of sportification and examine their negative and positive effect”. (See discussion of similarities and differences between sports and esports for example Kari & Karhulahti, 2016; Jenny et al., 2017; Cunningham et al., 2018.)

The relationship between e-sports and traditional sports is not the only factor causing hesitation. The most popular e-sports games are various fighting games. Fighting games, in particular, carry various kinds of stigma, the most persistent one of which probably being the notion that fighting games damage the minds of the players and propose behavioural models for real-life conflict situations. A gun on the computer screen will soon turn into a gun in someone’s pocket. The myth of the relationship between video games and violence is persistent, although studies have failed to demonstrate a causal relationship. Furthermore, sitting in front of the computer is often associated with an increased risk of musculoskeletal or cardiovascular diseases. Online gaming that occurs across different time zones is also known to disturb the sleep rhythm of adolescents.

The advocates of e-sports emphasise the social aspect of online gaming and of following and discussing it, which may reinforce an individual’s self-esteem (e.g. Wang & Hsu, 2016). Indeed, instead of reflecting social exclusion, e-sports may well constitute a factor that brings meaning and a sense of accomplishment to an adolescent’s life. The advocates also point out that e-sports is a highly international activity and may thus provide gamers with abilities that will be beneficial in a working environment that is becoming more and more diverse culturally. Digital games may be associated with various cognitive, emotional and social benefits. Instead of being a waste of time, e-sports is actually producing marketable know-how. The popularity of e-sports has also made several companies evaluate what kind of a medium it offers for reaching various target groups.

There are several studies available on the value-creation ecosystems that have formed around traditional sports (e.g. Woratschek et al., 2014; Jalonen et al.,

2018), but research on the value creation and the means of value justification linked to e-sports are notably scarce. Without underestimating the risks or over-emphasising the benefits related to e-sports, the present conceptual and theoretical article considers the societal discussion revolving around e-sports to be a reflection of the incommensurability of different means of value justification. In a slightly black-and-white parallel, for some e-sports represents a threat to the ‘sound mind in a sound body’ image, while others perceive e-sports as a novel environment that provides an opportunity for self-fulfilment and, for more and more people, also an occupation.

The article is structured as follows. Sections 2 and 3 present a short overview of the development of e-sports and construct a multi-level e-sports ecosystem. Section 4 introduces the article’s theoretical foundation, which builds upon modern economic sociology, with the trend investigating the conventions of social relationships in particular (cf. especially Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Brennan & Pettit 2004; Stark, 2009). The section suggests that: 1) *nothing is inherently valuable as such, but value is assigned to things*; 2) *value and esteem are context-bound* and always dependent on the prevailing practices, culture and norms; and that 3) *there are some general but incommensurable sources of value and means of value justification* (Brennan & Pettit, 2004; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Hirose & Olsen, 2015). Section 5 comprises a theory-guided, systematic analysis of the means of value justification in the world of e-sports. The section analyses the esteem and disesteem of e-sports and discusses the preconditions for e-sports developing into a collaborative partner similar to “traditional sports” in the eyes of businesses. The section seeks an answer to the question of how e-sports operators can demonstrate that their work entails aspects, i.e. propose value to aspects that are generally valued. The esteem of e-sports is viewed in this article as a crucial precondition for the development of the sport. Finally, section 6 of the article presents the conclusions and discusses the needs for further research.

2. E-Sports Makes Its Way from the Margins to the Mainstream

To the best of our knowledge, the first e-sports tournament was arranged at the Stanford University campus in 1972. According to legend, the main prize was a year’s subscription to the Rolling Stone magazine (Baker, 2016). The time and place of the event were not a coincidence, but rather a consequence of the development that had taken place in the Silicon Valley. The Stanford Research Institute was a key player in the development of Arpanet, the predecessor of the internet. Without inter-computer connections, it would have been impossible for e-sports to evolve into its current form.

In less than fifty years, the sport has broken through from the margins and made its way to magazine covers and television broadcasts. The internet turned a niche sport into a hobby of the masses, as it created the foundation for real-time online gaming (Taylor, 2012). During the early 2000s, the development

of e-sports picked up speed, with tournaments and competitive leagues being generated in various countries. As a result of this development, competitive gaming began to be regarded as an occupation. The e-sports cash prize sums have continued to grow steadily, with no end in sight. For example, Epic Games, the developer of the popular game Fortnite, has announced that the company will be awarding prizes to the amount of some 100 billion dollars during the 2018-2019 season alone (Crook, 2019). This is not just about rewarding good e-sports performances but, to a large degree, about game company marketing, with the objective of catching the attention of the masses.

Although e-sports has never had a similar ranking system to, for instance, football, evaluations are made of the success of different nationalities. One way to do so is to estimate the cash prizes won by e-athletes, in which case the top three positions are held by China, the United States and South Korea (Statista, 2018b). In the United States, e-sports is currently ranked the third-most followed sport after basketball and American football, and in Asia, e-sports events bring as many spectators to stadiums as football in England. Via the internet, the most popular e-sports events reach tens of millions of viewers. As an example, the 2018 League of Legends World Finals had nearly 100 million viewers (Goslin, 2018).

Traditional sports and e-sports have more factors in common than those that set them apart. Like traditional sports, e-sports is a hierarchically organised, systematic and goal-oriented activity that is implemented either professionally or on a recreational basis. The competition between players is at the core of e-sports. At the top of the game, competition is fierce, but there are several division levels – exactly as in other forms of sports. In both forms of sports, success requires practice and talent, and both can become an occupation where an athlete makes a living and secures a retirement plan. Both are followed, and the stars in both have their own fans. Both are also associated with negative aspects, such as doping and match manipulation (Wagner, 2006; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Hallmann & Giel, 2018).

Even though traditional sports and e-sports have a lot in common, there are also differences. Unlike traditional sports, the institutional structures in e-sports are largely just being built. Football has been played for more than a hundred years in its current form, which is why any changes to drive the sport forward take time. Indeed, one of the most significant differences is in the power of game developers and publishers to determine the content of e-sports events. Football is not the intellectual property of any specific operator, but the Clash of Clans, for instance, is a product developed and owned by Supercell, and any “rule changes” in the game are made by the company and not an international sports association. As a result of this development, new games are born and old ones die in e-sports. Currently, the most popular games include strategy and fighting games, as well as sports games simulating traditional sports. Nobody knows for certain which game will interest people in 2024, at which point e-sports may even be followed as a demonstration sport at the Paris Summer Olympics. The

competition between game companies renders e-sports slightly more commercial than traditional sports. In this respect, some researchers (e.g. [Karhulahti, 2017](#)) have astutely pointed out that the letter “e” in the name of the sport not only stands for electronic, but also for economic sports.

Combining all competitive gaming under a single umbrella concept of e-sports is about as problematic as merging cross-country skiing, sprinting and backstroke swimming into a single event. E-sports entails numerous different games that require different skills for the player to succeed. E-sports games can be classified into a few main categories (see e.g. [Scholz, 2019](#)). First-person shooter games are fast-paced games that require quick reactions. From the point of view of someone not familiarised with shooting games, the striking feature in these games is the violent destruction of the opponent. Well-known examples of this category are Counter-Strike and Over watch, among other games. Multiplayer online battle arena games are somewhat calmer than first-person shooter games, although the objective in them is also pursued by beating up opponents and destroying their property. The significance of strategic thinking is emphasised in multiplayer online battle arenas. Commercially successful games in this category include, for example, League of Legends and Dota 2. Racing games are, true to their name, games in which the competitors race against each other with vehicles and craft travelling on land, in the air or on water. Popular games in the racing game category include, among other games, Grand Turismo Sport and Formula One e-sports. Digital collective card games refer to games in which gamers seek to beat the opponent in playing with packs of cards consisting of various characters, icons and symbols. Succeeding in this game category requires tactical skills and the ability to read ahead to the internal twists and turns in the complicated games. The most popular games in this category are Starcraft and Hearthstone. Fantasy sports games are modelled against traditional sports. Fantasy sports is referred to as fantasy sports because the participants play with virtual teams constructed based on existing sports leagues, featuring actual teams and players ([Tacon & Vainker 2017](#)). The fantasy teams are imaginary, but they have a link to reality in that the teams’ and players’ performance is calibrated according to their real-life counterparts. The best-known examples are Madden NFL, FIFA Football, the NHL series and NBA 2K.

3. Collaboration and Competition in the E-Sports Ecosystem

An ecosystem refers to an operational entity that includes operators that are highly interdependent and whose fates are interconnected. Borrowed from natural sciences, the concept has been established in the examination of the viability and development of socio-economic systems, especially since the 1990s. According to [Moore \(1996\)](#), a business ecosystem comprises organisations and individuals who are in both cooperation and competition, i.e. co-opetition, with each other in an environment with scant resources (cf. [Lechner & Dowling, 2003](#)). The success of specific operators is dependent on the development of the operational entity, which, in turn, is born of the actions and inactions of the spe-

cific operators. A functioning ecosystem entails various roles. Large operators serve as umbrella species of sorts, possessing the ability to influence the development of the whole, whereas small operators seek to find suitable ecological niches for themselves within the ecosystem. A viable ecosystem also needs pollinators tasked with communicating information and other resources necessary for the operators.

The ecosystem approach has also been popular in describing the business opportunities related to e-sports (Figure 1). Those typically considered to be part of the e-sports ecosystem include e-athletes and e-sports teams as well as their trainers; game developers and publishers; e-sports tournament organisers and league organisations; national and international e-sports associations; the media and live streaming platforms; betting companies; gaming computer and equipment manufacturers; sponsors and advertisers; and naturally also e-sports fans and followers.

The business potential of the e-sports ecosystem is generated by the interdependencies of various factors. At the core of e-sports lies either professional or recreational competitive gaming. Succeeding in e-sports tournaments and leagues requires careful preparation. Matches that last for hours, the minimisation of disadvantages due to different time zones, and the pressure arising from high cash prize sums and the fans' expectations necessitate psychological and physical coaching of the players. E-sports content with media interest comes from professionally constructed events, in which the e-athletes are capable of performances that speak to the audience. At the top of the game, the cutting edge is narrow, but its sharpness is proportional to the wideness of the base of recreational gamers. Large numbers of recreational gamers attract game developers and publishers. Securing the generation of players requires investments



Figure 1. The multi-level e-sports ecosystem.

made into creating paths to e-sports and into e-sports coaching. Furthermore, the organisation of competitive and recreational e-sports activities requires national and international institutions that use incentives and sanctions to develop the image of e-sports and guarantee the uncertainty of the outcomes of e-sports events, which is a prerequisite for betting companies offering e-sports as a betting target. A socially legitimate image of e-sports is an essential criterion for companies considering potential sponsorships.

E-sports also provides operators within traditional sports with an opportunity to extend their brand. Brand extension refers to the utilisation of a brand in another field of operation (Keller, 1998). A great deal has been written and published about brand extension. There are some field-specific distinctions, but researchers seem to be in consensus about the utility of extending a well-known brand with a good reputation if the extension does not pose a threat to the core of the brand. A brand is created interactively and concretised in the form of subjective esteem in the eyes of the customer. This is also why a careless extension of a brand both leads to failure in the new field and jeopardises the entire existence of the brand with which extension is pursued. For sports operators, brand extension is not an end in itself, but rather a tool with which they can make contact with new target groups (e.g. Abosag, Roper, & Hind, 2012). New target groups are valuable to operators in the sports industry, as they facilitate the offering of new collaboration concepts to their partner businesses. Many sports clubs have established e-sports teams. In most cases, this is about extending the brand of the specific sport. For the clubs, e-sports is a tool for reaching new target groups and, at the same time, a means to increase the market value and attractiveness of the sport brand in the eyes of the corporate world. Brand extension is not easy, as the extender risks not finding a natural connection with the potential partner. In this respect, different sports are in a different position when it comes to e-sports. This has played its part in several sports clubs seeking partnerships with gamers who are successful in the kinds of games that interest the general public but whose connection with the selection of sports offered by the club itself remains slim to non-existent. There are also exceptions. For example, the Premier League in England has established the For FIFA Sake academy tasked with assisting clubs in the Premier League in scouting potential e-athletes. The academy supports the clubs in organising try-out camps and tournaments and in integrating FIFA players into the more traditional football brands, many of which have a global fan base. The founder of the academy, Keiran Sanford, points out that clubs should not recruit e-athletes just for the sake of recruiting. In his view, a more essential criterion is that the FIFA players subscribe to the values represented by the club and respect the club's history. According to Sanford, even the most skilled FIFA players must understand that they are a part of a traditional sports brand (Stewart, 2017).

Digitalisation is a breeding ground for hybridity, i.e. varied combinations of two or more elements. This calls for special hybrid governance (Figure 2), recognising various means of valuing and different types of institutional logic

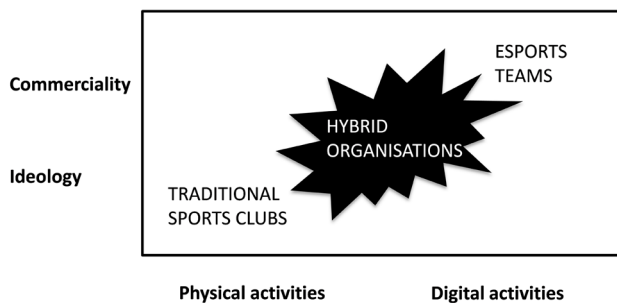


Figure 2. Hybrid organisations of e-sports and traditional sports (modified from Bäckström et al., 2018).

behind the operations (Johanson & Vakkuri, 2017). The ambiguity of the objectives and the means of valuing generated by the diversity associated with hybridicity need not constitute a problem, as it can also be viewed as an opportunity.

The operators and activities in the e-sports ecosystem have a lot of features in common with traditional sports. Sports—with or without the “e”—offers viewers experiences that they are willing to pay for. Both are viewed live as well as via the media, and in both the rights holders offer content by means of sponsorships. The two are, however, different types of sports (each with different sub-categories included in the main category) with their own logic of operations. A brief look at the games included in and the historical development of e-sports shows that e-sports entails a wide variety of activities. Competitive gaming, the media and game companies form the hard core of e-sports, the functioning of which plays a key role in the development of the ecosystem. Game companies are dependent on the commercial success of their products and therefore have to build features in the games that make people buy the game or make in-game purchases. The life cycle of a video game is often counted in months, whereas the discus has been thrown according to largely the same rules since the Athens Olympics in 1896. Despite the fact that e-sports has grown into a business worth billions of euros, it has also maintained its connection to the hacker culture, with a characteristically strong social dimension and an inspirational and experimental nature. E-athletes are not computer geeks, but neither are they marathoners. People can become engaged in e-sports from several different points of departure, and it can satisfy a variety of needs. The value of e-sports is (also) in the eye of the beholder.

4. From Values to Esteem

Value, *values* and *esteem* are interrelated concepts, although they refer to slightly different things. Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary of English (1996: p. 1578) defines *value* as follows, among other definitions: “the worth of something in terms of the amount of other things for which it can be exchanged or in terms of some medium of exchange.” In the simplest terms, then, value refers to a benefit derived as the remainder of the products of operations and the sacrifices

made to produce them. Value represents what makes something pleasing, endorsable, desirable or good by any other standard. Understanding value is useful in many ways, but it is not always simple. The nature of value already occupied the thoughts of the great minds of Ancient Greece. Aristotle, for instance, is said to have pondered whether value is generated—in today's terms—as *value in exchange* or as *value in use* (cf. e.g. Grönroos & Voima, 2013; Vargo & Lusch, 2017). More than two thousand years later, the concept of value still puzzles the academic community. Value has been the topic of much research, but it is not the sole property of any particular field of research. In addition to economics, it is a central topic of research in psychology, anthropology and philosophy. There has been development, but a consensus is yet to be reached (cf. e.g. Hirose & Olsen, 2015). Value is often equalled with price. This is understandable, as assigning a monetary value to things creates an illusion of comparability (Nelson Espeland & Lom, 2015; Mazzucato, 2018). Price is considered to be a universal measure of value that can be used to derive commensurable quantitative and qualitative dimensions associated with various commodities (Reinecke, 2015). Aristotle was also convinced of the necessity of commensurability in commodities that carry value. Without the commensurability occurring in the form of a price, market exchanges would be impossible. In Aristotle's words, "this is why all things that are exchanged must be somehow comparable. It is for this end that money has been introduced, and it becomes in a sense an intermediate; for it measures all things, and therefore the excess and the defect—how many shoes are equal to a house or to a given amount of food" (Reinecke, 2015, p. 211). Price may be the measure of value, but a price is influenced by several factors. How much customers are willing to pay for a commodity largely depends on the characteristics the customers associate with the product or service in question.

According to Webster's Unabridged Dictionary (1996: p. 1578), the plural *values*, in turn, refers to the following: "the ideals, customs, institutions, etc., of a society toward which the people of the group have an affective regard." Values bind people together. Benefit is not pursued in a vacuum, for values determine what is regarded as an acceptable activity. Values constitute a collection of principles which guide human and organisational behaviour and also influence what is considered, from a wider perspective, to be acceptable and desirable behaviour in society. Values are adopted and internalised in interaction and through exposure to influences in the community. Values may also be used normatively as criteria of sorts for gaining membership in a community. In the same dictionary (ibid., p. 488), the verb *esteem* refers to a subjective evaluation in which a specific thing is regarded as valuable: "to regard highly or favourably; regard with respect or admiration; to consider as of a certain value." Esteem can manifest as, for instance, admiration and respect. When the object of esteem is an individual or an organisation, the esteem is not so much in the object itself as it is in its actions. Esteem is not conceived of being, but of doing.

Sheth, Newman, & Gross (1991) have introduced five principal consumption values: functional, social, emotional, epistemic and conditional. The premise in

the functional value is an assessment made by a consumer concerning the characteristics of a service or commodity, such as quality, durability and price. An essential selection criterion is represented by the product's instrumental qualities, i.e. its ability to meet a need better or to be in some other way more useful than an alternative product. A consumer seeking functional value selects the alternative he or she deems most beneficial because it improves his or her performance in a specific task. Social value is based on identifying with a particular group: with the aid of the product, one can be stereotypically regarded as belonging to or otherwise associated with a specific group (or avoid being associated with another group) better than with an alternative product. The basis of emotional value is the perceived ability of a product, or the ability associated with the product, to yield positive emotions or other affective states better than alternative products. Where functional value is based on the notion of a consumer as a rational thinker, the perspective emphasising emotional value views consumers as impulsive actors who are not interested in the products' technical features but rather in the feeling that they get when using the product. Epistemic value is based on the observed ability of a product to elicit more interest and curiosity than alternative products, or to provide an experience of novelty or satisfy a need for information. Epistemic value is always time-bound. Conditional value is the most ambiguous of the five types of consumption values. It is rooted in the notion of context-specific valuing, in which the premises and means of valuing arise from situational conditions. The service or product is perceived as valuable because it suits the situation, time or place at hand better than competing alternatives.

Nothing can be measured or perceived as valuable without some semblance of a foundation to explain why one measurement or experience would be better than another. However, no such foundation can form unless an item can actually be perceived or otherwise demonstrated to be better than an alternative in a manner that is, to at least some degree, commensurable. In simplified terms, when discussing the concept of value, there can be no quantity without quality and no quality without quantity.

In society, however, not everything can be accepted as representing the common good. According to the theory of justification by Boltanski & Thévenot (2006), there are certain historically established conventions of justification in society, representing the prevailing conceptions of the common good. In other words, it is easier to justify an activity with certain value foundations and justification logics than with others. Boltanski & Thévenot introduce six worlds of worth that reflect the things that people value, the conceptions of the common good and the related potential ways of justifying value. These worlds of worth include the *inspired world* that emphasises creativity, the *world of fame* concerned with maintaining reputation, the *civic world* with an emphasis on equity, the *domestic world* relying on tradition, the *market world* built upon trading, as well as the *industrial world* rooted in efficiency (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006).

In the inspired world, the basis of value judgements is in creativity and an

ability to be inspired, as this world is in a constant state of change. Esteem is based on spontaneity, passion, emotions—aspects that cannot be measured or directed (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006: p. 159). People come together and perceive doing things together as being valuable, as this provides them with a transient experience of shared admiration, collective ecstasy or novelty. The operations and activities seek to appeal to emotions and strengthen belief. Valued social activity is related to the experience of admiration and novelty, as well as to mass events, such as concerts, performances, matches, religious gatherings and celebrations.

In the world of fame, value judgements are based on recognisability, celebrity and visibility. Value is realised as attention received through symbols and meanings. The value of a social activity depends on the opinions of others (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006: pp. 178-179). A thing becomes valuable, when it is recognised as having a specific symbolic status in a community. The value of an opinion represents the value of an interviewer, fan, critic and follower. A distinguishable personality is the only deciding factor. The world of fame helps us to understand the symbolic and cultural meanings of current phenomena, such as the attention economy, the talking heads on television, fashion or the celebrity culture. Valuable social activity is conceived through identifiability, an admiration of success and recognition. A valuable item, such as the latest trendy restaurant, a viral internet video or the ultimate fashionable garment is recognised by the notion that it “must” be seen or experienced.

In the civic world, value is based on collectiveness and solidarity. An activity gains value from people creating and articulating a shared will as equal actors with equal rights and an equal official status. The premise for valuing is a shared interest. Civic and human rights play a central role in the civic world because they are shared by and apply to all people. Rights and responsibilities make the actors valuable (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006: pp. 187-189). Respecting the rights, following the rules and shared procedures are regarded as valuable.

In the domestic world, the basis for value provision is in loyalty and respect, which are born of trust, fidelity and traditions. The hierarchy of values is defined by interpersonal relationships, the permanence and continuity of traditions, as well as the hierarchies of exercising power (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006: pp. 164-166). The value of the home is seen not only in family life and the relationship between a couple, but also in friendships, the working life and hobbies in the form of, for instance, a well-knit community, a group of peers or colleagues who share tacit knowledge. The value of home requires intimacy, closeness and even lifelong commitment.

The market world lies at the core of the institutions of modern market economy and international business. The value judgements are based on desire. Desire is based on a shortage and interest specific to an operator. The time span of value is thus transient: the value lasts only for as long as a product or service is being searched for, as the service providers are being compared and bid against each other, and as the actual transaction is transpiring. A valuable item is one

that can be demonstrated to yield “value for the money”, i.e. to satisfy a specific desire in exchange for a smaller investment of resources than the alternative. This world values success and wealth, as becoming rich facilitates a luxurious and thereby at least seemingly satisfying life (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006: pp. 193-197).

The industrial world values technology and scientific methods, and maximal efficiency, profitability and productivity are pursued by investing into the future. In the industrial world, value judgements are based on shared objectives and realised in the form of efficiency and profitability. An activity is valued according to the degree to which it yields measurable fringe benefits between the resources and end products. In a valuable activity, professionals work efficiently towards achieving the shared goal. The value of a social activity in the industrial world is associated with the manageability, hierarchies and labour division of the activity. Reliability, professionalism and operationality are valued characteristics in the actors.

According to Boltanski & Thévenot (2006), value creation can be defined as a conscious and goal-oriented pursuit of an activity that is perceived as valuable. It is a matter of incorporating various justification logics into an activity and communicating about the activity in a manner that resonates with and speaks to actors within the sphere of the said activity.

So, what is it that makes e-sports valuable, and which aspects of e-sports can be justified as a valued activity?

5. Value Justification in the E-Sports Ecosystem

In the spirit of the pluralist conception of value (Eymard-Duvernay, Favereau, Orléan, Salais, & Thévenot, 2005), various incommensurable justification discourses can be identified around e-sports. The operators assign significance and value to aspects based on dissimilar grounds, which is why the value propositions of e-sports vary from one operator to the next. For a sponsor company, for instance, e-sports provides a tool for reaching a desired target group. It is about utilising the images associated with the sport, team or player and transmitting them as a part of the company’s brand. The following is an overview of the relationships between the operators in the e-sports ecosystem in the light of the worlds of worth introduced by Boltanski & Thévenot (2006). In particular, attention is directed at the operations, choices and interactive relationships of the players, followers, the media and the sponsoring companies.

Inspiration – e-sports produces pleasure

The mindset and manner of expression that values creativity, passion, innovation and intense emotional experiences is referred to by Boltanski & Thévenot (2006) as the value category of inspiration. Within this value category, pleasure is produced by, for example, art and sports events, mass ecstasy, collective admiration, novelty attraction and passion. Inspiration is experienced spontaneously in the moment.

The inspiration value category has traditionally been associated with leisure activities, but as the changing sphere of work is increasingly demanding creativity and an ability to transform, similar values have also begun to apply to work. This is also seen in which occupations are admired, identified with, idolised and pursued. In the discussion revolving around e-sports, this division of work and leisure, and the change therein, is clearly visible, since attaching values traditionally associated with leisure to work and to the traditional valuation logics thereof is not easily accomplished. The division between work and entertainment has been under constant negotiation since the first publications concerning e-sports, with no end in sight for the debate (Rambusch, Jakobsson, & Pargman, 2007; Taylor, 2012; Kauwelo & Sunrise Winter, 2016).

E-sports speaks to individuals on an emotional level, thereby generating emotional value. MOBA tournaments, for example, have transformed from a sub-culture to an immense global phenomenon that currently interests wide masses of people (Taylor, 2012). The community that used to be in the cultural margin has become mainstream, and a sense of community is now experienced at mass events, on global discussion forums and game communities, and by following the tournaments together with millions of other gamers. During such events, the sense of community is temporarily energised and intensified, as the community experienced during the events is always bound to the time and space. Momentarily, there are more viewers than players. Identifying with and analysing the performance of the players together with others can amalgamate into an intense presence and collective concentration. The spectatorship is not passive and un-social but rather takes the form of active participation. In accordance with the value category of inspiration, the followers of a tournament seek to demonstrate and share the joint passion with their peers. The more everyday sense of community among gamers and fans varies in intensity and is manifested on, for instance, social media platforms. By posting tweets, status updates and video clips, players can strengthen the viewers' sense of community and assign meaning to the events in the eyes of the viewers. Even though the connections in this context typically constitute parasocial, i.e. one-sided, relationships (cf. Horton & Wohl, 1956) between the e-athlete and fan, the passion, creativity, emotional experiences and everyday relatability coming across from the players create a sense of contact for fans, who identify with the players.

The roles of viewer and player are often parallel, but the pleasure related to inspiration is constructed differently in each role. When a player enables others to experience his or her emotional experience, he or she acts as a driver of e-sports in the inspired world. At the same time, the player's personal emotional experience is crystallised into his or her own or the team's performance and the emotions induced by it, such as the joy of success and concentration, or frustration and dissatisfaction. Creativity, passion and the skills honed through practice are channelled into the player's performance and are seen by the viewers as either successful or unsuccessful game strategies.

Citizenship—e-sports is a form of representation

An experience of community is also essential in the category of civic value. It is different from inspiration, however, in that instead of personal experience, what is key is the following of rules, as well as mutual understanding, shared interests, equality, solidarity, equity and the formal recognition of these values. The civic world of worth is characterised by respect, responsibility and equality. People enjoy competitions, discussions and peer activities.

From the perspective of citizenship, the central theme in e-sports is representation; an e-athlete is a representative of the company that owns the team, of the club and of the team. Citizenship is therefore not a matter of interpersonal relationships, but of the relationships of various operators to their environment. E-sports operators can realise their citizenship by, for example, proposing solutions to the negative phenomena associated with e-sports, such as game addiction and physical inactivity. Acting for the societal good pays off, as it makes e-athletes more attractive partners for companies.

At the competitive level, e-sports is, like traditional sports, a global activity in which representation manifests itself on several different levels. In addition to individual players and professional teams, e-sports also entails competition between nations. The e-athletes performing on international arenas are regarded as representatives of their country. First and foremost, however, e-athletes represent their teams, which at the top level are composed of various nationalities. The team is comprised of individuals, but the games are won or lost as a team. Indeed, in addition to skills, the solidarity and team spirit among the players in the team are what sets the winning teams apart from the rest (Rambusch et al., 2007: pp. 157-161; Taylor, 2012: pp. 97-98). For the general public, a player also represents the gaming community. He or she embodies the sport and has a large impact on how the sport is perceived. The player therefore also serves as an advocate for the shared interest. Representation is an aspect that is particularly communicated via the media that parses meanings. Representation is a reciprocal activity: a fan must see the player as a representative, and the player must then reinforce this perception of representation.

The challenge of e-sports when it comes to the category of civic value is the difficulty of identifying a common good or shared interest in gaming, since the sport is unfamiliar to and perceived as hedonistic by many people. E-sports may yield a unifying impact within a generation, but, at the same time, it can drive different generations further apart. Expressions that abide by the expectations of the civic world of worth can, however, alleviate the prejudices related to the harmful effects of gaming. Team spirit, hard work and determined practising, as well as the diverse responsibilities of a competitive gamer are in concert with conservative values and cannot be achieved by an antisocial or game-addicted individual.

Fame—e-athletes are opinion-leaders

The world of fame is based on celebrity, reputation and recognition by a community. In this world of worth, admiration is directed towards trendy,

well-connected and well-known individuals. Value is realised as media coverage and sensations, as well as a symbolic, cultural and semiotic significance. Value is preserved for as long as a specific item is interesting and talked about.

The world of fame has some characteristics in common with the inspirational world, as admiration and the pleasure yielded by community are key elements in both value categories. The essential difference between the categories is that fame is determined externally and runs on peer pressure, whereas a personal emotional experience is at focus in the category of inspiration. In the world of fame, recreational and professional gamers or fans construct their identity, become engaged in a group and detach themselves from other groups. People are motivated by what must be seen or experienced. Although fame can be used to potentially reach a target group exceeding the confines of the most fervent gaming community, activities in line with the value category of fame are not as rewarding for this group as the emotional experiences implied by the value category of inspiration. An externally guided individual's commitment is calculated, and the extent of the commitment is directly proportional to the degree of increase in social status proposed by a specific item (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In the value category of fame, supporters, followers and the media decide who is featured prominently. At times, public attention has a deciding symbolic significance. A good example of this is the invitation received by the Finns Jesse "JerAx" Vainikka and Topias "Topson" Taavitsainen, winners of the 2018 world championship title in the DOTA 2 game, to attend the President's Independence Day Reception. ¹The invitation can be viewed as the presidential institution's way of communicating that success in e-sports is a source of national pride and an achievement worthy of recognition. The gesture can be considered significant, as the status of e-sports, despite dedicated sections in various news media, remains unestablished in the eyes of the general public.

The degree to which e-sports is considered to be sports has been the topic of nearly as much debate as the question of whether the gamers perceive the activity as work or pleasure (Rambusch et al., 2007; Taylor, 2012; Kauwelo & Sunrise Winter, 2016; Karhulahti, 2017). The discussion illustrates the difficulty of processing an activity that lies at the intersection of different discourses. Here, we see divergent worlds of worth collide, and we therefore need to evaluate the concepts of work and sports within a new kind of framework. These concepts are unstable and force us to redefine the conditions according to which a given activity is regarded as work, a leisure activity, sports or something else.

Fame and reputation are experienced on a personal level, with no obvious benefit to outsiders. The value of fame is often regarded as being easily transmitted (Gunter, 2014), however, and a local community, for instance, may feel that the success of a member of the community increases the esteem of the entire

¹The Independence Day Reception is an official celebration arranged annually by the President of Finland on Finland's Independence Day, the 6th of December. The first reception was arranged in 1919. The invited guests include representatives of the state, municipalities, economy and organisations, as well as individuals who have achieved merit during the year, such as artists and athletes. The reception is arranged at the Presidential Palace in Helsinki.

local community (Whitworth, 2009). Numerous towns in the world are known to the larger public as the hometowns of well-known athletes. E-athletes may also potentially bring fame to their home towns.

Home—e-sports offers a sense of community

Home represents a value category that is based on trust, respect and permanent intimacy. In this development, people value a connection akin to family relations, love or shared secrets, among other features. The domestic world is at play when one values traditions, myths and a property that is perceived as unique. What is regarded as valuable is orally transmitted experience or knowledge and fascinating stories. In addition to family and friendship, the domestic world of worth may be present in a closely-knit work or recreational community. The value category of home is demanding, for a breach in trust and respect may dissolve the entire community.

E-sports communities are not bound by national borders or time zones. That is why it is difficult for them to build the kind of trust necessitated by the domestic world that is based on intimacy. It is not an impossible undertaking, however, since a sense of community has always been an intrinsic part of the gaming culture (Taylor, 2012). Retrospectives, contemporary reports, biographies and historical reviews related to e-sports may strengthen the original operators' identity and also offer a set of roots for new enthusiasts. Interaction helps supporters produce added value through community, which is why the activity of various forums and platforms, for example, provide the admirers with an experience of belonging to the same reality as their idols. Traditions and rituals also yield cross-generational continuity.

For an e-sports event and team, a sense of community is a resource that can be utilised as long as it is done without breaching the supporters' trust. From the point of view of companies seeking to enter the community, for example, it is essential to operate in a manner that is not in conflict with the community's internal relationships. In the best case scenario, this involves social capital (cf. e.g. Coleman, 1988), which is manifested as a mutual trust and reciprocity between the members of the community. Businesses are welcome and sought-after partners for e-sports operators, but the businesses should not look for quick and easy gains. Brands that emphasise the visibility of their logo are, in most e-sports communities, regarded as unwanted intruders. A significantly stronger position is held by companies that manage to construct a shared story with e-sports operators (Carillat & d'Astous, 2012; Fortunato, 2013). In an ideal case, the company is able to justify its commitment and elicit trust and a sense of continuity, in addition to demonstrating a shared passion with the supporters (Fortunato, 2013).

For the player, the value of home represents the team spirit and a safe gaming community. When the competition remains in the arena and there is a supportive atmosphere among the players, they are operating within the domestic value category. The players are almost duty-bound to belong to the same reality as their admirers. They are expected to share their knowledge and secrets with their

followers (Cf. [Marshall, 2010](#)). Many players do this on, for instance, their own YouTube channels.

Industry—e-sports is a goal-oriented activity

The objectives of the industrial world of worth include efficiency and productivity, as well as systematic and manageable operations. The industrial discourse values determination, expertise and new methods, placing faith in the division of labour and various measurable indicators. People come together to work towards a goal in a determined fashion.

The industrial world constitutes the external framework for e-sports. Betting, score statistics and strategies, for example, are weighed and assigned significance based on the logics of industry. Furthermore, game performances, player transfers and game tactics are analysed with concepts characteristics of the industrial world. Statistics provide players with information about their performance and, for instance, the development of their own brand. A player is operating according to the values of the industrial category when his or her training is methodical and rational and not indicative of an addiction, uncontrolled behaviour or sheer entertainment value. The industrial world is the framework of professional e-athletes and goal-oriented trainees. The financial worth of a professional player is primarily determined according to industrial values, since a player with no competitive success is not particularly interesting. E-athletes, recreational players and viewers serve as material for the statistics and indicators that are produced to convince those not involved in the sport itself. Companies evaluate the rationale behind their investment based on the target groups that can be reached through e-sports, whereas match results, the cash prizes offered at tournaments and the numbers of viewers constitute essential material for the media ([Fortunato, 2013](#)).

Value judgements arising from the industrial world are key from the perspective of the societal legitimacy of e-sports. Players speaking of their countless hours of practising, their personal investments and sacrifices, the focus required by professional gaming, as well as of their expertise, skill, strategies and the various dimensions of their work, resonates with the tradition of valuing work and serves to dissolve the prejudices associated with e-sports. Numeric indicators also communicate the fact that e-sports is not a strange subculture but a serious field of business, a vocation and a phenomenon that interests large masses.

The market—the value of e-sports is created through trade

The basis of the market world is desire, which can be realised in economic terms. The roles of the operators in the market typically constitute those of a buyer, seller or competitors. The productisation of e-sports and the related commodities and services constitute the most interesting content from the point of view of the market. Market value is established as value in exchange, and the measure of the value is the price. What is considered valuable is something that yields benefit for the trading partners.

For the market world, the most significant relationship in e-sports is the financial relationship between an e-sports enthusiast and a company. Relation-

ships between all of the operators involved can be identified within the market value category, but their role is to strengthen the relationship between the company and e-sports supporter (Cf. Fortunato, 2013). From the point of view of the market, e-sports operators are trading on their relationship with the group of recreational gamers and supporters. Here, a central role is played by the media, as the desire directed at e-sports is reaffirmed with emotionally evocative stories. From the perspective of media, it is also beneficial to construct a story and semi-otic value for e-sports because this will also generate new viewers whose needs are met by the content created. A large proportion of the media also live on advertising income, which is to say that the media is ultimately trading on the same audiences as the e-athletes and e-sports events themselves. (Ibid.)

E-sports operators have to be able to offer credible roles to companies, for their value is based on interesting content and an immediate relationship with the viewers (Fortunato, 2013). E-sports operators should take the negative images associated with the sport seriously, as the attractiveness of the sport in the eyes of businesses is directly proportional to how credibly e-sports operators are able to demonstrate aspects of their operations that are in line with aspects that are generally held in high esteem (ibid.). A company, then, should be actively involved in constructing its own role. It must build its participation in the e-sports world and subscribe to the same passions and values as the gamers and supporters (ibid.). Without these, a company will not gain access to the e-sports community.

Companies seek e-sports content that captures the interest of their target groups. They do not have direct access to the worlds of inspiration or fame but need e-athletes, e-sports events and the media to provide them with the ability to utilise these worlds. Companies seek to utilise the emotional relationship between an e-athlete and viewer as well as between the recreational gamer and the game (Fortunato, 2013). It is difficult to measure the utility of corporate investments with the concepts offered by the market world. The work requires perseverance, and the images of the company in the minds of a target group, for example, could serve as indicators of value. Value is created when members of the target group begin to use the company's products to construct their identity and to communicate that they belong to a specific group (ibid.).

6. Conclusion

The behaviour of operators “can be viewed as reasonable, coherent, and *justifiable* according to a principle that is known and acknowledged by all, as opposed to unconscious motivations or hidden or inadmissible interests (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006: p. 43). Elevating e-sports into something unequivocally good or judging it as something unequivocally bad does not aid us in understanding the multidimensionality of the sport. E-sports, like any other activity conceived by man, has its good and its bad sides. Although analysing e-sports through the worlds of worth introduced by Boltanski & Thévenot (2006) does not completely

resolve all of the tensions related to e-sports, the present article states that visualise the value categories associated with e-sports also promote the conscious development of the e-sports ecosystem. Understanding the conventions of valuing aids e-sports operators in identifying the value-creating interfaces and in fortifying partnerships and finding synergy benefits. In addition to the six worlds of worth, this also requires a seventh, which [Thévenot, Moody, & Lafaye \(2000\)](#) refer to as the ecological world. The interdependencies between various operators are emphasised in the ecological world, where value judgments are based on survival. The common good is to be understood as the good of the ecosystem. In an ecosystem, no single operator can survive alone, but only in interaction with other operators. Value is realised in the form of “natural” guidance, which forces the operators to either evolve or perish. The value is often realised in a compellingly material fashion: if specific needs are not met, the operations begin to dwindle. A valuable activity entails collaboration and synergies. It is characterised by preservation, adjustment and an operator’s survival, i.e. aptitude and initiative in responding to needs for change.

The realisation alone that several value categories are mutually incompatible helps operators to recognise the potential dangers entailed in the interactive relationships within the ecosystem. The greater the conflict, the more likely it is that the activity will not produce but will rather destroy value. For example, the domestic value category is in almost irreconcilable conflict with the market world, as the values of home and the realities of capitalism are intrinsically far apart. Both do utilise stories, for example, but while the purpose of stories in the domestic world is to create a sense of belonging and to build trust, the market world relies on stories because they produce a desire that can be turned into cash flow. E-sports is a commercial phenomenon, in which game companies manage the licences and the changes occurring in the games. E-sports communities value solidarity, but circumstances dictate that the communities are actually closer to a commercial coexistence than they are leaning towards traditions and roots ([Karhulahti, 2017](#)). E-sports is an easier fit with the worlds of inspiration and fame and their novelty- and hedonism-driven value categories than it is with the category of home that emphasises traditions and roots. Similarly, when viewed through the lenses of the industrial world, e-sports is in conflict with the value categories of inspiration, fame and home—defined as work, e-sports achieves legitimacy but also loses some of its meanings related to leisure time, pleasure and relaxation, which are essential to recreational gamers.

One of the cornerstones in [Boltanski’s & Thévenot’s \(2006\)](#) theory is the notion that things are made and proven to be valuable. The worlds of worth are abstract principles that become slightly more practical, when one looks at the different value categories appearing in them. In the inspirational and the market world, e-sports operators are primarily appealing to the emotional value created by the activities (cf. [Sheth et al., 1991](#)). It is about creating a feeling, which entails that the operators engaged in the e-sports community are per-

ceived as impulsive actors who seek adventure and experiences. In the inspirational world, adventure and experience carry value in and of themselves, whereas the market world categorises them as tools to be used in commercial activities (cf. Rønnow-Rasmussen, n 2015). In the world of inspiration, there is also an element of operating upon the epistemic value (Sheth et al., 1991), as e-sports is a young and rapidly evolving phenomenon. New games are launched to maintain and increase consumer interest. The civic and domestic worlds utilise social value in particular (Sheth et al., 1991). E-sports operators offer those interested in the sport the opportunity to both join reference groups that are important to them and separate themselves from other reference groups. Instead of bringing together entire nations, this typically entails communities that have been established around the various game types in e-sports. The social value of e-sports is concretised as a purpose that transcends the everyday existence. Within the worlds of fame and industry, e-sports offers operational (Sheth et al., 1991) and symbolic value (Ravasi & Rindova, 2008). To sponsor companies, successful e-athletes constitute attractive opinion-leaders, as they open up a route to reach target groups that interest the companies. Communicating the story and values of a company through e-sports can simultaneously serve as an effective way to stand out from the competitors and as a factor that reinforces cultural cohesion for the target groups. Particularly in competitive e-sports, the operations are professionally organised and managed, which can be considered to be a necessary prerequisite for a goal-oriented collaboration between businesses and e-sports operators.

In accordance with the ideas of Boltanski & Thévenot (2006) and Sheth et al. (1991), **Figure 3** is a concise presentation of the potential manifestations of the worlds of worth in the e-sports ecosystem and the various means of valuing. E-sports operators constitute a distinct ecosystem, the success of which depends,



Figure 3. The worlds of worth and means of valuing in the e-sports ecosystem.

like that of other ecosystems, on the utilisation of potential that lies in the interdependencies between the operators. E-sports carries instrumental value, the utilisation of which requires recognising and respecting the special characteristics of the sport. The esteem of e-sports is not generated spontaneously but requires active measures by operators within the e-sports field. This calls for an ability to recognise various means of value justification, the related value categories and the conflicts that these entail in one's own work. The attractiveness of a sport in the eyes of the corporate world as well as the general public is proportional to how credibly the e-sports operators are able to demonstrate aspects of their work that are in line with things that are generally valued.

The vitality of the e-sports ecosystem ultimately depends on which kinds of combinations and compromises the operators are able to forge out of the means of value justification that are based on different principles. While the different means of value justification aid e-sports operators in outlining strategic solutions, the different worlds of worth support operative decisions. A smart strategy produces workable solutions that can be put together to generate shared value (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Shared value entails activities that utilise interdependency, in which the specific operators' means of value creation are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually complementary.

The worlds of worth and means of valuing discussed in this article are in need of an empirical analysis. One natural course for further research would be the concretisation of the diagram presented in **Figure 3** with a survey conducted with e-sports operators, the general public and companies sponsoring e-sports, including an analysis of the esteem factors shared by or setting apart the various operators. The justification theory by Boltanski & Thévenot (2006) offers a coherent tool box for structuring the rather polarised discussion revolving around e-sports. In addition to providing a structured examination, understanding the worlds of worth supports the collaboration between e-sports operators and sponsor companies by visualising and verbalising the tensions and opportunities associated with such collaboration.

Every research has its own limitations. While the worlds of worth provide a coherent approach to value creation in the context of e-sports, it should be kept in mind that reality is always more complex than any model can describe.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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