

The popularity of E-sports and the logic behind the growth

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Abstract. This study explores the birth of side businesses that have made eSports the most popular competitive activity in the world, including streaming media, eSports gambling, and other industries, under the auspices of significant commercialization, while being powerful entertainment and spectacle in its own right. Some of the main reasons why eSports have become popular in the last decade are mainly sorted out as well as organized. Using the STEPPS analysis method, the internal factors, as well as the external factors, are studied mainly by using the most representative game of eSports, League of Legends. The analysis includes some attractive mechanics of the game itself besides gameplay, as well as the reasons that may lead people to share eSports games. Use the findings at the end to give some advice that emerging eSports manufacturers can refer to the industry standards, as well as the main features to attract players.

Keywords: Electronic sport; Popularity; Growth; STEPPS analysis method.

1. Introduction

Electronic sport is the full name of e-sports. It is a new sport that uses games to compete, whether a single-player game to get a higher score or a multiplayer online game to compete in real-time to win or lose [1-2]. According to records, the history of e-sports can be traced back to 1972 in Stanford University held a game about the Intergalactic Spacewar Olympics [3]. With the development of technology, the introduction of game consoles and other items makes the cost of playing games lower. At the same time, opening the public Internet is making online duels more convenient [4]. However, despite the 50-year history of eSports and the fact that the game has long been a popular pastime, why has it only exploded in the last decade of its history? Especially with the commercialization of eSports, capital has found that this sport has value to exploit. The game is no longer just a game but a vehicle that supports the entire eSports industry. Live games streaming, professional player training, Internet cafes, game platforms, and other industries are benefiting from the rise of the eSports industry while also contributing to the industry [5-6]. At the same time, e-sports is in the process of substantial commercialization because the market development is very strong, resulting in a substantial inflow of funds. With the substantial publicity under the support, e-sports gradually came into the public view [7]. Nowadays, e-sports have gradually integrated into people's lives, students often discuss their achievements in yesterday's e-sports games, and even in university towns, Internet cafes sponsored by schools gradually appear to entertain students. Even small and large eSports leagues are springing up to provide a level playing field for players and enthusiasts [8]. This article will summarize and sort out some of the reasons eSports have gone through to become popular and break down the main process of commercializing e-sport.

2. Case description

League of Legends, as the headline game of Riot, has truly brought the concept of eSports to the public. According to the official report of Riot, as of December 2021, it has a total of 3.5 million daily active players and a staggering 125 million monthly active players. There are 700,000 online players, and 11 million people play simultaneously in a day at its peak. These staggering numbers show why we must mention League of Legends when discussing eSports. League of Legends is not only the most popular eSports game but also the gateway to bringing eSports to the masses. According to google trends, since January 2013, the search volume of the word esports began to rise sharply. Among them, in several related subjects, including League of Legends, Twitch live streaming

platform, etc., proving that the commercialization of e-sport in the last decade is not a coincidence, but caused by the expansion of the industry, and the growth of the surrounding industries. For example, it can even be seen that the search frequency rise and drop of the League of Legends world championship (an event for this MOBA online real-time matchmaking game) is reflected in that of eSports. The success of League of Legends completely ignited the entire e-sports market. After 2013, with the mobile internet being thoroughly popularized, similar mobile games popped up all over the place. MOBA games to push towers have also made a splash on cell phones, and the most representative ones are Mobile Legends and King's Glory, which bring hundreds of millions of cash flow to their parent companies every year. At the same time, while players are exposed to these games, they will also learn more or less about the originator of these games, which is League of Legends (technically, the originator of MOBA games is Dota, but as the industry benchmark and imitated object, only League of Legends will be mentioned here). So, more people will aspire to play this game. It is also interesting to note that, as mentioned earlier about e-sports, strong e-sports players have become heroes in the minds of a new generation of young people, and the high-end operations they make in the game have been comparable to those in sports, which can equally ignite the hearts of enthusiasts.

3. Case Analysis

So, what exactly did Riot, as the parent company, do to make their game League of Legends so popular, and what are the similarities between other successful games in the same industry and League of Legends? Also, what are the external factors that have enabled League of Legends or the whole eSport to achieve such exaggerated success. The following will use Jonah Berger's STEPPS analysis and official data to determine why eSports is popular.

3.1 Operating Model

League of Legends uses a free to play policy, as long as you have a computer with sufficient configuration, you can play the game without any cost. In the post-arcade era, before the popularity of the free-to-play model, there were two main strategies for charging for games on the market, one was to buy out the game and the other was to subscribe to play. The advantages of buyout games are obvious, as game makers generally do their best to condense a game to its essence and present it to their audience in the best possible way. In this era, such as Mario, Call of Duty, Pokémon, and other heavyweight IP was born, the excellent games born in this era, none of them are heirloom classics, the manufacturers of these games are directly by the players to God. And at the same time subscription trial game, can make players enjoy non-stop updates, in their own just finished this part of the game, may be new content has appeared and available for players to play. World of Warcraft MMORPG (Massively multiplayer online role-playing game) is a representative of this category of games. However, when free-to-play games appear, people who do not want to pay for the game are naturally attracted to it. The important thing is that at this time, when free-to-play games had just started, there was no lack of good works. Similar to CF, Dungeons & Dragons and other Korean free online games are equally interesting, however, today, after more than a decade, League of Legends is still hot and even achieved a large user growth in 2021, while CF, Dungeons & Dragons and other works have declined significantly in simultaneous online users, so what is the difference between League of Legends and them? The main thing is that the value of money in the League of Legends lies in the ability to buy good-looking skins, not in the ability to acquire strength enhancements. Then it comes down to the next point, the playability of League of Legends.

3.2 Playability

Anyone who played e-sports games before they gained widespread popularity should know that the vast majority of games aim for a showdown between humans and artificial intelligence as well as algorithms, however League of Legends as an early team-based PVP matchup, was a matchup where

infinite possibilities occurred. Even if all players choose the same heroes and the same runes (a mechanic in League of Legends matchups) in the game, a different decision could make the matchup have a completely different ending. In a way, this has been removed from the game itself and is more in line with the characteristics of competitive sports (otherwise, it would not be called eSports). Secondly, the game is also essential in addition to these added values. Riot will update League of Legends from time to time, introduce new characters for players to play, and update the mechanics of the game, including equipment, maps, etc., so players don't get bored with the original gameplay. I often hear old players returning to League of Legends lamenting that "this game is not the same game I was playing".

3.3 Professional league

Since it has been determined that e-sports are also a type of sports, it is not unusual to know that there are professional leagues for e-sports. The League of Legends World Finals is the most watched finals in the world. According to the official report of the live streaming platform Twitch, the third League of Legends World Finals in 2013 was watched by 32 million people, and the highest number of traffic was 8.5 million people online at the same time. Also, players who excel in these professional leagues are sought after by fans like sports stars, such as Faker, who won the 2013 finals and has been recognized as the "God" of the League of Legends and enjoys a reputation among young people comparable to that of the "God of Basketball" Michael Jordan. It's also because seeing these high-end players operate that enthusiasts are also full of dreams, hoping they can make such moves in the game one day.

3.4 Other Games

After a closer look, it is easy to see that other eSports games also have strikingly similar characteristics. Other popular eSports games on the market include CS: GO, Dota, Rocket League, Fortnite, etc. They all have low barriers to entry, fair competition, frequent updates, and the characteristics of professional leagues, with only changes in gameplay and mechanics. So, after understanding their common points, formally analyze the reasons behind the popularity and other external factors.

4. Actual Analysis

As mentioned in previous articles League of Legends and eSports are trending similarly on Google Trends. Although League of Legends has a low barrier to entry and strong gameplay, there was no shortage of such games before that, so the value brought by League of Legends itself is not enough to justify why this game has been so successful.

4.1 Streaming Industry

The live streaming industry's development and eSports' popularity are inseparable. The industry benchmark is Twitch. Tv has become a haven for streamers to express themselves. In a medium like live pinstriping, streamers can show their viewers what they are interested in, no matter what it is, as long as it is compliant and legal, without reservation. And the audience can interact with the anchor in real-time through "chat" according to what they see. This is a perfect fit for these competitive games, where viewers can watch a high-end streamer play like a sporting event. In 2014, Amazon and YouTube fought for ultimate control of Twitch, which Amazon eventually acquired for \$970 million [9]. Among the STEPPS models, this live streaming approach also compounds why eSports have become popular. The first thing is that more and more people are starting to play the game because people like to imitate the practices of others. When people see many people playing a game live, this game will gradually become more and more popular because people will imitate others to follow the trend to play this game, and slowly these people's friends will also follow them to play so that this game will be like an explosive viral spread.

4.2 Ranking System

League of Legends also has a ranking system, which means that more skilled players are positioned in more advanced brackets, thus further enhancing the competitive nature of League of Legends. When there is a ranking system, people have a goal, and people who aim to reach certain ranks are more enthusiastic about playing the game and feel proud of getting certain ranks. In STEPPS, social currency refers to the fact that people like to be treated as intelligent and cool in front of others, so with this ranking system in place, high-ranked players are naturally perceived as having high social currency, which makes higher ranking more meaningful. People are more willing to spend time and try their best to practice in the game to become better players.

4.3 Convenient Social activity

According to an activeplayer.io report, since 2019, League of Legends players are again showing a growing trend in the vast majority of people having to choose to live in isolation at home because of the COVID-19 epidemic. The game has become a pastime in the minds of many people. Still, at the same time, the characteristics of e-sports lie in the ability to communicate with teammates so that people who feel lonely at home are no longer lonely. The game is an excellent way for people to get to know each other because they only need to turn on the computer and open communication software with their friends. They can do one thing together and have new topics to talk about. And even today, after the epidemic has been significantly reduced, eSports are still a good means of socializing. Two people who don't know each other, as long as they play the same game, have the same topics to discuss and do the same things. eSports are not just about winning but also about building a good team environment. And some people have made better friends in eSports than in real life, and some people have found a companion for life in eSports. According to STEPPS analysis, strong emotions like loneliness drive people to these games. During the epidemic, the convenience of socializing and the total emotional value of the video game made it easy for people to recommend the game to others. It is no surprise that gaming became popular during the epidemic.

4.4 Gambling Market

Gambling on top of tournaments is no longer new, and as a form of competition, eSports will naturally be a part of eSports. According to the survey, in 2019, the eSports gambling market reached \$700 million [10]. Usually, people who participate in gambling have been exposed to this game or learn about it to increase their winning percentage, naturally making more people understand it. Using the STEPPS analysis, it is easy to see that people who know the game can also make the game worth money for them, so why not? People who win like to tell others about their winning results and let them follow suit so that, one way or another, these games are gradually becoming more popular.

5. Suggestions

At this stage, the most critical problem that needs to be solved for e-sports games is how to control user churn because there are not many e-sports games like League of Legends that can maintain high user traffic for a long time. In today's fast-paced world, users' tastes change very quickly, so how to make their gaming games adapt to the changing preferences of users will be the primary problem that manufacturers need to solve. Secondly, how to ensure the gameplay and keep introducing new content so that players won't be bored with the gameplay and won't feel overwhelmed by too much content. The third point is how to effectively ensure fairness because when an eSports game is released, it is not just a game but a competitive vehicle. So, since it is a competition, we must ensure the game's fairness. However, ensuring justice and providing a fun game is not as easy a game. Still, good game manufacturers gradually adapt to the game in the subtle changes and adjust it. The article has previously analyzed some of the reasons for the success of the League of Legends based on the STEPPS analysis. Because these analysis methods do not involve gameplay, these reasons for popularity are equally applicable to any eSports game. Take the example of CS: GO, another eSports

game that has been successful for a long time. Besides the gameplay, almost everything that has made League of Legends successful, including the high-quality updates, fair competition, the ranking system, the clever use of live streaming platforms, and the success of the professional leagues, are the reasons why this game has been successful for a long time. These features seem to have become the industry benchmark, but few can make each point well. A gaming game can be successful in most of the features and will be able to get the majority of players. How to make the specific decision is still in the hands of the game manufacturers. Specifically, do you want to do an excellent job with the game and then let the players willingly give money or squeeze from the players, and the value of the game will be wasted in the short term?

6. Conclusion

The new market has much room for development, and talent training has just begun, with most of the money flowing in at the start-up stage. New businesses like gaming academies, gaming teams, and internet cafes are just emerging, so there's still a long way to go to commercialize this kind of game. The most obvious example is the Blizzard game Overwatch, which was once thought to beat League of Legends as the world's hottest e-sports game when it was first launched. When it was found, because of its novel gameplay, excellent picture quality, and unique game mechanics successfully became the best e-sports game in the minds of many players. However, it was once, because of improper operation, poor balance, and fairness (cheating and other bad behavior are not officially controlled), that the game was too slow to update, resulting in weak gameplay and other shortcomings, gradually resulting in player disappointment and reputation plummeting. Especially the inconsistent Professional league strategy has failed the audience completely. These are also the reasons that led to the loss of many players, and initially, players are to lament the attitude toward this game. So, it is easy to see that although there are many similarities between e-sports and sports, the most crucial thing is the game itself, the manufacturer's attitude towards the game, and the players. However, there is no way to meet every player's idea listening to the players' ideas is still critical to keep the game fresh and competitive fairness is the top priority. Reasonable use of the external environment is also essential. For example, the success of the League of Legends cannot be separated from the rise of the streaming media industry. Finding a few more successful streamers to bring the game into the public eye in this era is not at all impossible. Of course, there are many other ways to do this, such as enhancing player interactivity (in-game calls, strengthening the need for cooperation), promoting professional leagues, etc. In this era of booming eSports, an excellent eSports game will never be hidden as long as you put your heart and soul into it for the players.

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