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EARLY TELEVISION VIDEO GAME TOURNAMENTS AS SPORTS SPECTACLES

ABSTRACT

This article looks at two televised video game tournaments from the 1980's from the viewpoint of sports spectacle. Through the analysis of the television episodes and comparison to modern eSports-scene, the aim is to see, if there were similarities or differences between sports broadcasting and video game broadcasting at the time. The article suggests that because of visual choices made in sports broadcasting, the video game tournaments adapted this style coincidentally, which might have affected the style of eSports-broadcasting later.

1 INTRODUCTION

Competing in video games in a popular sport these days. Online streams and even some television shows create a spectacular atmosphere around these tournaments and the best players are now celebrities. Electronic sports (eSports) events are broadcasted widely over the internet and television. Watching others play has been a big part of video game culture since the arcade ages. Gathering around an arcade machine and cheering on the people playing was an important part of the whole arcade experience (see Newman 2004 & Kocurek 2015).

Many of the online streams through services such as Twitch gather broad audiences globally, reaching amounts of individual viewers topping even some physical sports events. According to Activate, a consulting company focused of technology, there are currently over 250 million individual eSports-viewers. Activate also predicts that if the growth in the amount of viewers stays stable, then by 2021 a single eSports final can reach over 80 million individual viewers, which would be more than in for example professional basketball and baseball. By that time, Activate estimates that the total amount of individual eSports-viewers should double to 500 million viewers¹.

In this article, I will look at two 1980's televised video game tournaments from the viewpoint of the spectacle. The two tournaments discussed are *That's Incredible! Video Game Invitational* and *Incredible Sunday Nintendo Challenge*. Through these two episodes, I will look at the purpose and formation of a spectacle in a televised video game tournament and compare the analysis to modern day eSports-spectacles. Through this, I am aiming to find how the video game spectacles compare to sports spectacles and how the spectacle has evolved throughout the years.

2 THE SPORTS SPECTACLE AND VIDEO GAMES

There are multiple ways of creating audiovisual spectacles and many different viewpoints on how to look and interpret them. Based on Guy Debord's view of the spectacle in his book *Society of Spectacle* (1967), Douglas Kellner builds on Debord's views, arguing that especially media spectacles dramatize and highlight some phenomena and values of the contemporary time. Via this, the sports spectacle serves as a form of commercialization and a promoter of nationalism (Kellner 2003, 2–3; 66–70). Marcella Szablewicz researched Chinese eSports-scene based on Kellner's opinion of spectacles, looking at the live event from the viewpoint of

¹ <https://onlinebusiness.syr.edu/blog/esports-to-compete-with-traditional-sports/>

audience and politics. Szablewicz argues that in China, competitive gaming is in a way a promoter of nationalism and ideology through the audience. The spectacle in this case is merely a façade. (Szablewicz 2015, 260–262; 269–271). Rory Summerley also notes, that there are similarities between the institutionalization between traditional sports and eSports in the sense how both aim to propagate their sports through big events, rulesets and philosophy (Summerley 2019, 7 & 15).

By looking at the coeval sports research with the shows discussed in this paper, it is evident that there are also some similarities with the presentation of the shows and sports broadcasting of the 1980's. As Robert Gruneau wrote, the action in sports broadcast must be immediate and take the television audience to the event, as if they were there. This involves many different choices regarding what to show and what camera angles and lighting to use (Gruneau 1989, 134–135). With these choices, it is possible to capture the drama within one single match in a distinctive way that differentiates the television viewing experience from being at the audience. The choices made are artistic and very dependable on the director of the broadcast (Morris & Nydahl, 1985). As an example, when a usual sporting event is shot from multiple camera angles, where they show the athletes emotions, reactions of the audience and statistics with graphical overlay, a simple athletic performance becomes a drama.

Spectating play has followed video game culture, according to Sjöblom & Hamari (2017), through LAN-parties to watching modern online streams (Sjöblom & Hamari 2017, 986). Cheung and Huang (2011) found from their interview data about spectating Starcraft that the viewers appreciated the clarity of action, with clear indications in the screen of how the game was playing out and who was at the moment winning the game. This allowed the interviewees to understand the game flow and feel suspense during the game, even though some of them had never even played the game themselves (Cheung & Huang 2011, 768–769).

Allegedly, the first “Video Game World Championships” took place at 1982 at Twin Galaxies Arcade located at Ottumwa, Iowa. The co-founder of U.S. National Video Game Team and the owner of the Twin Galaxies arcade, *Walter Day*, had already gotten some notable media attention with the high score lists in the arcade. Days’ connections to the media resulted in an arcade-themed article and photoshoot in the *Life* magazine and in February 1983, a feature live arcade competition in *That’s Incredible* (Patterson 2017; Taylor 2012, 4). The show shortly covered the original tournament before moving on to the actual competition. The episode was not the first time the show features live action arcade gaming, as there was a Ms. Pac-Man tournament a year before. The “Olympic finals” however, got more attention later^{2 3}.

The episode starts with a recap from the Twin Galaxies tournament. The three hosts of the show each at a time narrate something about the tournament, whether it be the location, the games, or the structure of the tournament. After the introduction, the hosts introduce the three contestants and the structure of the competition while at the same time introducing the games. The players competed in five different games: *Cosmos*⁴, *BurgerTime*⁵, *Millipede*⁶, *Donkey Kong*

² “That’s Incredible” Broadcasts History’s First Video Game World Championship (1983).
https://dangerousminds.net/comments/thats_incredible_broadcasts_historys_first_video_game_world_championship_19

³ The Golden Age Arcade Historian: That’s Incredible – The North American Video Game Olympics.
<http://allincolorforaquarter.blogspot.com/2013/02/thats-incredible-north-american-video.html>

⁴ Century Electronics 1981

⁵ Data East 1982

*Jr.*⁷ and *Buck Rogers*⁸. Each of the game had a point goal, which the players needed to meet in order to progress to the next game. After getting enough points in the last game, the final objective was to run through a ribbon on stage for the victory. In the television set, we find three units of each arcade cabinet – 15 cabinets in total. Each player has a designated arcade machine to play with, as well as an arrow-pointed route from cabinet to another. The goal line is right in the middle of the stage, therefore completing the racetrack of the competition.

That's Incredible came to the end of its run almost precisely a year after the big live tournament. However, producer Alan Landsburg wanted to have another go with the format a couple of years later. The show, Incredible Sunday (1988-1989) again featured a live video game competition in one of the episodes. Whereas in the Video Game World Championships the prize was to get to the finals that aired on live television, in 1988 the stakes were a bit higher. The U.S. National Video Game Team®, founded in 1983, was on a lookout for new players and the winner earned a spot on the team. (Patterson 2017). This time the players competed in only three Nintendo Entertainment System -games, *Super Mario Bros. 2*⁹, *Ice Hockey*¹⁰ and *Rad Racer*¹¹. However, Atari endorsed The U.S. National Video Game Team officially just a year earlier. The team members even appeared in children's prime time television advertising the Atari 7800 console, which was set out to compete with Nintendo NES and Sega Master System (Patterson 2017). One reason for the show to opt for Nintendo over Atari could have been the install base of the consoles at the time of the tournament. By the end of 1987, the NES had sold about 4,1 million units, whereas Atari had moved only 1,6 million consoles in the same time (Matthews 2009; Majaski 1988). Apparently, Nintendo moved over 7 million NES consoles in North America in 1988, as the console became so popular during the holiday season of 1987, that the stores were bought empty of the NES's (Suominen 2015, 79). This makes the marketing and commercialized point of view evident in the tournament.

Again, the competition took inspiration from the world of sport, as the main objective was to reach a given point in the game as fast as possible. In *Super Mario Bros. 2*, the objective was to complete the given level faster than the others did. In *Ice Hockey*, the players needed to score three goals against a computer opponent and in *Rad Racer* complete the given level faster than the competition. This time just finishing the game was enough, as there was no final ribbon to run through. This is especially interesting when comparing the competition format to other video game tournaments in the 1980's. Competing for high score in a given game was the usual task, but most of the time, there was only one game to compete in – in fact, the whole tournament usually revolved around just one game, like the Space Invaders Competition or the Pac-Man Championships in Finland (Suominen, Saarikoski & Reunanen 2018).

Visually, the similarities to a sports broadcast are evident. With the divided imagery showing scores, players' emotions and the game itself, the artistic direction aims to capture the intensity and the drama of the competition. When the camera zooms out to a wider image, the racetrack is clearly visible, showing how the players run from a cabinet to another. In these wider images, the audience is also visible on screen. The play-by-play commentary of the hosts dominates the

⁶ Atari 1982

⁷ Nintendo 1982

⁸ Sega 1982

⁹ Nintendo 1988

¹⁰ Nintendo 1988

¹¹ Square 1987

audio and the audiences' reactions to the events on stage can also be heard. Therefore, the episodes focus more on the competition than the games. What mistakes the other two players might have made, is very unclear to the television audience. Even though there are large portions of the games shown, the competitive element takes over the visual narrative.

This brings up an important notion: playing just one game for high score would not probably have given the same excitement than playing several in a row. For television audience, a fast-paced race for win probably seemed like a more entertaining choice of format. In addition, having multiple games played in the show was clearly more profitable for marketing and advertising. From the viewpoint of the spectacle, this creates quite the contradiction: the games presented are new and something that the producers and the game companies wanted to promote through these special episodes, but the performance of playing steals the show. The choices made in the presentation are therefore quite alike to sports broadcasting, as the event and the competitors are taken into visual account much like in a traditional sports broadcasting. The games are the sport and the player are the athletes. In comparison, the Todd Holland – movie *The Wizard*¹² features multiple Nintendo Entertainment System –games from the late 1980's throughout the film, as well as different Nintendo accessories. The final tournament in the movie, the Video Armageddon, that takes place in the Universal Studios Theme Park, is visually presented much alike the two aforementioned televised tournaments, but also the Nintendo World Championships in 1990. The actual tournament was not televised, so therefore the movie promoted not only the NES-games and –accessories, but in a way the tournament itself.

By the time *Incredible Sunday* was out, there were only a handful of other shows airing in other parts of the world. Therefore the only ways to see live action video gaming in television - disregarding commercials – were these shows and the separately sold VHS-tapes made by the video game companies or for example the U.S. National Video Game Team. In the 1980's North American video game industry was still at the same time steadily growing and in the later years of the decade recovering from a big depression. It is quite peculiar that the *That's Incredible!* Video Game Invitational was held earlier the same year the "Great Video Game Crash" occurred – this especially noting how the crash of the industry affected direly even the arcades. As the timeline shows, the episode aired at February 21. 1983, whereas New York Times reported about the crash October 17. of the same year¹³. As the next tournament in *Incredible Sunday* aired at fall 1988 (Patterson 2017), the video games were rapidly making their comeback in North America. As the special episode was among the first ones to air in the show, it is likely that Alan Landsburg wanted to catch the attention of the younger audience right off the bat, therefore promoting the show itself.

The similarities between the episodes and sports broadcasting of the 1980's are not coincidental. According to Borowy & Jin (2013), as the competitive arcade gaming was on the rise in the 1980's, the arcade operators and media took a lot of influence from the world of sports (Borowy & Jin 2013, 2261). From the viewpoint of sports, the technology required to create an adequate audiovisual sports spectacle was not available until the 1970's (Whannel 2009, 208). This came through lighter and eventually cheaper camera-sets developed in those decades and the invention of mobile radio microphones (Dwyer 2019, 143). However, if we look

¹² Universal Pictures/Nintendo Movies 1989

¹³ Video Game Industry Goes Down To Earth. New York Times October 17. 1983.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1983/10/17/business/video-games-industry-comes-down-to-earth.html>

at Kellners' views of how a sports spectacle is strongly commercialized and nationalized, the early tournaments do not contribute to this as much as competitive gaming today. The spectacle of the tournaments do work as a marketing channel for the games, but because of the visual choices taken from the sports broadcasts, the performance rises above the commercialism. This is not the case with The Wizard though, as the product placement is also visually very evident. This, returning to Robert Gruneau¹⁴, is because in a live event the audience has to feel that they are at the location. The artistic choices made in movies and commercials does not need to tie to the audience in a same way.

It is unclear why official tournaments were absent from television in the 1990's. When it came to video games in television, play-by-phone –games, different magazine shows and game shows dominated the 1990's (Kerttula 2019). Most notable shows featuring competitive elements were *Famiko Daisakusen* (Japan 1986–1988), *Famiko Dai Shuugou* (Japan 1988-1990), *Games Master* (Great Britain 1992-1998), *Video and Arcade Top 10* (Canada 1991-2006) and *A*mazing* (Australia 1994-1998). Meanwhile video gaming competitions were still very much alive. Examples range from *Finnish National Computer Gaming Championships* 1994 & 1995 (Suominen, Saarikoski & Reunanen 2018) to *Evolution Championship Series*, which began in 1996¹⁵. In comparison to the old live action representations, the 1990's shows promoted both the games and the performance. In the competitions, the games played were repeated episode after another and the prizes were games, consoles and other kinds of promotional video game – related stuff.

Competitive gaming started to appear in television only at late 1990's and early 2000's. In Finland, there was a brief show called *OverDose* (MoonTV 2002) and in The United States, *Arena* (G4tv, 2002-2006). *Arena* features many aspects that are present also in sports broadcasts. The interviews, staging, after-match talks and such are a big part of broadcasting style today in both electronic and traditional sports. The gameplay in *Arena* is presented very much as it was presented in the 1980's, but this time there are several players included in the imagery. However, this time around, the teams have names and the players' names are their online nicknames, rather than their real names. In addition, nationalism is now a big thing in competitive gaming. By looking at the best teams in Counter-Strike¹⁶ and Rocket League¹⁷, it is clear that the teams represent a country or a continent. In even smaller scale, some teams represent a city, which is obvious in for example the Finnish Esports League¹⁸. These days the cities or countries the teams represent are also a part of the spectacle. In Dreamhack Stockholm 2018, the local team, *Ninjas in Pyjamas*, were always announced to the stage in a spectacular fashion, where the announcer emphasized that the team was from Stockholm, or the "boys from our home city".

3 CONCLUSION

¹⁴ See p. 2

¹⁵ Fighting to Play: The History of Longest Lived Fighting Game Tournament in the World. Kotaku. <https://kotaku.com/fighting-to-play-the-history-of-the-longest-lived-figh-5054856>

¹⁶ <https://liquipedia.net/counterstrike/Portal:Teams>

¹⁷ <https://liquipedia.net/rocketleague/Portal:Teams>

¹⁸ <https://fel.gg/csgo/joukkueet/>

It is obvious that these shows played a notable role not only in the history of video game industry and marketing, but also in the early stages of video gaming culture and even competitive gaming. What really differentiates the shows from 1980's to 1990's and the contemporary shows is the focus of the spectacle. While before the video games were meant to be the spectacle and from the commercial point of view, usually the object being advertised, in modern days the spectacle has shifted the focus more on the performance. The commercialism revolves around the equipment. Asus, Acer, Razer and other big gaming-related accessory brands, sponsor the events. The players – or rather athletes – are part of the spectacle and promote these accessories through their performance. Through the spectacle, modern world of esports also promotes the lifestyle of the esports-athletes, in many ways alike the world of sports promotes the athletic lifestyle. This promotion comes through big paychecks and the idea of playing video games as an athletic profession. This was not the case in the early shows, as the whole concept of esports was still not developed. This is the reason why I am arguing that these shows originally tried to promote the games through the spectacle, but ended up promoting the performance of competitive play.

It is arguable whether these early shows affected the presentation of the modern eSports-broadcasts or not, but there is clear indication that sports broadcasting affected the presentation given in the shows. The form of the competition has changed towards modern days and the spectacle with the nationalism and commercialism being more and more a part of it has changed as well, but in the end, the players and the sport are the reason why the eSports-audience counts in millions today. It might have not been the initial case in the 1980's, but it surely became so once the competition began.

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