CHARLES UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism

Department of Media Studies

Bachelor's thesis

2024   **Jonáš Mácha**

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The media representation of Czech and international esports leagues

Bachelor's thesis

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Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on 20th of July 2024   Jonáš Mácha

References

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Abstract

The biggest esports events are incomparable to the regional esports events in viewerships and revenue, however, there are many similarities that all of the esports events share - one of them being the importance of media representation. This bachelor thesis aims to outline how esports leagues and their respective teams present themselves to their audiences by researching the media-related development of esports at the highest level, and then comparing it to the domestic development. The specific esports organizations I chose for this thesis are the Czech Hitpoint Masters League of Legends league and the European League of Legends EMEA Championship (LEC). I conducted semi-structured interviews with several professional League of Legends players, management members and insiders and processed these interviews using thematic analysis. During this thesis' research and the following analysis, I found that while the LEC is essentially a role model in esports media representation, Hitpoint Masters is severely lacking behind because of the lack of funds and resources, and more importantly because of an inappropriate approach to media representation.

Abstrakt

Největší esportové události jsou nesrovnatelné s těmi regionálními, co se sledovanosti a příjmů týče, nicméně všechny esportové události mají mnoho společných rysů - jedním z nich je důležitost mediální reprezentace. Tato bakalářská práce si klade za cíl nastínit, jak se esportové ligy a jejich jednotlivé týmy prezentují svým divákům, a to prostřednictvím výzkumu mediálního vývoje esportu na nejvyšší úrovni a jeho následným porovnáním s vývojem na domácí scéně. Konkrétními esportovními organizacemi, které jsem si pro tuto práci vybral, jsou česká League of Legends liga Hitpoint Masters a evropská liga League of Legends EMEA Championship (LEC). V rámci výzkumu jsem vedl polostrukturované rozhovory s několika profesionálními hráči League of Legends, členy vedení a insidery, a tyto rozhovory jsem následně zpracoval pomocí tematické analýzy. Během výzkumu této práce a následné analýzy jsem zjistil, že zatímco LEC je v podstatě vzorem v mediální reprezentaci esportu, tak Hitpoint Masters výrazně zaostává kvůli nedostatku finančních prostředků, nedostatku zdrojů a především kvůli nevhodnému přístupu k mediální reprezentaci.

Keywords

esports, video games, content, online, media, representation

Klíčová slova

esport, videohry, obsah, online, média, reprezentace

Název práce

Mediální reprezentace českých a mezinárodních esportových lig

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Introduction

The world of esports (professional video gaming) is still a relatively new entertainment industry. Its spread around the world sparked many controversies and misunderstandings, especially from mainstream media. Often compared to regular sports, esports basically divided people into two different communities - on one side, there were people who defended esports as a new form of serious competition, on the other, there were those who completely disregarded esports as anything remotely serious, be it because it is something new and unknown or just because they perceive video games to be childish, hence unserious.

Whether you support esports or not, they have come a long way and are growing every year (Statista, 2023). These statistics show us that revenue from esports has been growing and is expected to continue doing so - the global esports market was expected to reach $1.084 billion in 2021, representing a year-on-year growth of 14.5%. By 2025, the combined market of esports and games streaming is projected to be worth over $3.5 billion (Gilbert, 2021). The global esports audience is projected to reach 920.3 million in 2024, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 7.7% (Gilbert, 2021). Well at least that is the global trend, which obviously counts in the biggest global organizations, leagues and tournaments, such as Counter-Strike Majors, League of Legends World Championships, huge continental leagues such as League of Legends EMEA Championship (LEC). Even successful regional (sometimes referred to as Tier 2) leagues such as the French *La Ligue Francaise* (League of Legends French League) can have a huge impact on these numbers.

But if we look at research done by the Czech Esports Association regarding our domestic Czech esports scene and growth, we can see that it is stagnating at best. While the report from 2021 shows 34% growth in terms of cumulative views and 20% in terms of hours watched, both on the streaming platform Twitch (which is the most popular), it is undoubtedly related to the 2021 pandemic outbreak of COVID-19, which has left many young people quarantined at home with nothing to do (Rok českých úspěchů a návratu publika, 2022). The report regarding 2022 shows minimal decline in watch time (-0,5%) and doesn't even touch on cumulative views (Rok neomezovaných eventů a velkých projektů, 2023). Other statistics from this research show very minor changes, which may suggest that during 2022 esports in Czechia haven't really interested any new viewers, even though during 2022 we have seen arguably the greatest and biggest Czech esports events in the country's history, such as the

Prague Champs tournament which was held in the O2 Universum arena or Sazka eLeague grand final hosted at the For Games expo. But still, the viewership didn't grow and on the other hand, expenses did. These growing expenses combined with the economic crisis resulted in the betting company Sazka to withdraw from esports and a shutdown of Sazka eLeague, the biggest Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO) league in the Czech republic. With CS:GO at the time being the most popular esport title in the Czech Republic (Rok neomezovaných eventů a velkých projektů, 2023), this obviously resulted in a big dip in domestic esports viewership and has probably sent Czech esports back in time. Although there are some research that offer positive outlooks, for example from 6wresearch.com that expects the value of the Czech esports market to reach approximately $4.5 million by 2024 (Czech Republic Gaming Market (2024-2030), n.d.). Unfortunately at the time of writing, the Czech Esports Association hasn't yet released a 2023 study, so there is no way of seeing current precise data.

But throughout all the ups and downs, some organizations held on and continued with esports competitions. Great examples are the Czech Championship ("Mistrovství České republiky v počítačových hrách" or "MČR"), which is an annual tournament that covers multiple games: the most important are Counter-Strike and EA Sports FC, but the championship also covers Brawl Stars, which is a popular competitive mobile game. But the organization I would like to focus on is the Czech League of Legends league - Hitpoint Masters. This league, unlike many others, has the benefit of an official license directly from the game's publisher Riot Games and yet it might seem underwhelming in size and viewership, when compared to other, more well-known League of Legends leagues.

I picked Hitpoint Masters as a prime example of a Czech esports league (and the industry in general) and I will compare it to one of the biggest and most successful continental League of Legends league - the European LEC. Comparing these two in size or viewerships is obviously irrelevant, as their audiences and financing differs extremely. That's why I decided to focus on their respective media representation using Stuart Hall's theory (Hall, 1997; Hall, 2018) and through semi-structured interviews with players and management, I aim to answer questions, such as: "How does LEC and Hitpoint Master perceive themselves in the context of mainstream media?", "How did the LEC and Hitpoint Masters evolve over the last 5 years?" and compare these two organizations through questions like: "What are the

differences between the media content of the European LEC and the Czech Hitpoint Masters?", "What responsibilities does a professional player have regarding media?" and even "How are Hitpoint Masters and LEC monetized compared to each other?"

I will then be able to construct the analysis, comparison, development and figure out whether or not Hitpoint Masters is lacking in terms of media representation, and point out the areas in which they could improve. This thesis isn't aiming to state the obvious: "LEC is bigger than Hitpoint Masters.", but rather figure out the production and media representation quality differences, which can eventually help Hitpoint Masters - and Czech esports in general - to get closer to the qualities of the biggest esports events, create a better domestic esports scene and resume the growing trend, which has been most likely lost in the recent years.

1. Theory

In this chapter I will lay out all the important information and theory regarding esports. This chapter includes an overall introduction to esports, what it is, where it came from, its history and the structure of the industry. It also includes description and differences between selection of the biggest esport titles, such as League of Legends, Counter-Strike and Valorant. It describes how exactly media operates and functions in sports and esports, how sponsorship and media cooperates with leagues and competitions, and their comparisons.

1.1. Esports

First of all, we need to understand what esports actually are. If we look at the Oxford dictionary, we can see a definition: *"a video game played as a competition for people to watch as entertainment"* (E-Sport Noun | Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, n.d.), which is true, but very brief. Esports, short for electronic sports, dates back to the early days of gaming, with the first official video game competition recorded at Stanford University in 1972. This event featured players competing in a game called Spacewar, with the top prize being a year's subscription to Rolling Stone magazine (History of eSports: how did video game competitions begin?, 2024). The development of esports of course came hand-in-hand with the development of video games and technology. The popularity of video games, which erupted in the 80s combined with increasingly more available internet connection in the 90s ensured the rise of this phenomenon (History of eSports: how did video game competitions begin?, 2024). Though the biggest esports "boom" so far arrived in the 21st century. With the

releases of bigger, better, prettier and most importantly more popular competitive video games, the industry saw a significant growth and professionalization. The consolidation of esports with the establishment of professional sports structures, the involvement of developers in hosting esports competitions, and the emergence of platforms like Twitch and YouTube helped esports significantly rise in viewerships, engagement, and revenue.

In its core, esports truly are about video games played competitively, but throughout the years it has become a professional entertainment industry and as with most industries, there are multiple layers to it, which are similar to regular sports.

1.1.1. Esports players

At the very base of esports we have the players, be it professional or not, they are obviously absolutely necessary for esports to exist. Much like in regular sports, these players form teams (or play solo, which depends on the specific game), sign contracts, transfer to different organizations, get paid in salaries and represent their teams both with their performance and more importantly for us, through media. A good esports player will help his team grow, while also building their own image and brand, either through their performance and/or just their persona alone. Many professional esports players work also as online streamers, which helps them not only make more money, but also connect with their fans and community and let the fans get to know the player more. This alone makes most of the esports players basically influencers as well. The most successful esports player from the Czech republic in terms of winnings is definitely Jonáš Volek, Dota 2 player known as SabeRLight-, who managed to earn more than 430 000 USD just from prize money (this does not include a salary from the team, sponsorships or any other sources of income) (Czech Republic Esports Results & Statistics :: Esports Earnings, n.d.).

1.1.2. Esports teams

Then we have the teams that participate in esports leagues, tournaments and other events. These are the organizations that the professional (and sometimes amateur) players represent. The organizations will usually build a team of players for multiple esports titles, all of which need coaching staff and management. Most better teams also have some form of a facility to stay and train in (these facilities are usually called "gaming houses") and more staff to take care of them, such as marketing and media specialists, content creators, cooks, cleaners,

(physical) personal trainers, mental coaches, etc. These conditions of course differ from team to team and are mostly related to the teams economic status. The biggest teams in the Czech Republic are arguably eSuba and Entropiq. The team eSuba, established in 2004, has won multiple Czech and international titles and is the most successful team in Czech history (Leaguepedia, n.d.) Entropiq on the other hand is a very young team, established in 2020, but arguably the most ambitious team from Czechia, mostly because the team hired a roster full of foreigners in order to compete at the highest global level. They even succeeded with their efforts when they qualified for PGL Major Stockholm 2021, the most prestigious global tournament in Counter-Strike (Leaguepedia, n.d.). The biggest competition was apparently too much for them though, since they only placed on a shared 9th-11th place (Leaguepedia, n.d.).

1.1.3. Esports organizations and events

The esports leagues, tournaments and other events are created and managed by different organizers, which are yet another absolutely key aspect of esports. There are many types of organizers and events, some can be held completely on-line, with no physical contact and some can sell out the biggest arenas. To put it simply, organizers can be split into three categories: amateur, professional and first-party.

Amateur organizers usually do community-driven competitions and small tournaments without expecting any sort of revenue from it. The motivation to hold such an event is first and foremost entertainment, and perhaps expansion of the organizers community. An example of an amateur organizer could be a community on Discord (communication platform), which is built around a specific game, or even a live streamer, who wants to make a tournament for his audience. A question can be asked, whether or not these amateur competitions classify as esports, especially if we look back at the definition from Oxford dictionary, which implies that there needs to be an audience for an event to be called esports. But if playing football without an audience is considered sports, then the argument for amateur esports events is strong. There's even usually some prize that's either collected through crowd funding or in some rarer cases, the tournament can have a commercial partner, who provides the prize.

However, these commercial partners and sponsors tend to prefer professional organizers. This group of organizers is in my opinion the largest, since it includes all the different media and non media projects, big global brands, small local brands and some community projects. Their motivation can sometimes include monetization and revenue, either from partners, ads or even ticket sales, if the event is held off-line. But for the most part, the primary motivation is visibility and public relations. A perfect example is a brand, let's say Red Bull, who wants to appeal to gamers, so they create and organize a huge esports event - Red Bull League of Its Own. A one day event, which presents several different show matches between a mixture of amateur teams consisting of streamers, professional teams and even the current world champions. A spectacular event, which in 2023 was held in Berlin. And while of course, Red Bull did charge visitors for entry (meaning revenue was a motivation), it was also an extremely well done PR with Red Bulls and its branding on every corner and every online stream. Red Bull has probably one of the biggest League of Legends non-first-party events, probably because they are closely partnered with Riot Games, the developer of the video game.

Riot Games are a prime example of a first-party organizer. We can watch and even play many League of Legends tournaments throughout the year, but very few can compare to the prestige of officially licensed leagues and global tournaments - the main focus point of this thesis. The motivations of these are quite simple, firstly, these major events build up the industry, they also build up the game's prestige and popularity, which in turn makes more people interested in the game and eventually watching and even physically participating in these events. All of which contributes to the ultimate goal - revenue. The examples of such events are the League of Legends World Championship, organized by Riot Games themselves, or even Hitpoint Masters, the first Czech League of Legends league, which although not organized by Riot, is still officially licensed and supported by them. It is a common practice for game developers to reserve the rights to make the biggest events for their own games.

1.1.4. Esports funding and promotion

But none of these events would be possible without proper funding. Many first-party organizers use their own funds, but they always combine them with funds from sponsors.

Sponsors are, similarly to sports, absolutely crucial and irreplaceable in esports. Firstly, they provide finances to the industry - either through supporting the whole tournament, league, event or through supporting specific teams and even players. All of these require significant financial resources to cover all of the operational costs, such as salaries, equipment, traveling or when it comes to events, rent of the arena and prize money (What Do You Need to Know about Esports Sponsorships?, n.d.; alda09x024, 2023). And while finances are the most important aspect of sponsorships, there are also other key benefits they provide. For example, we can look at credibility and reputation, because associating an esports event with a big mainstream brand brings you exactly that (What Do You Need to Know about Esports Sponsorships?, n.d.; alda09x024, 2023). People might not even know your event, but they know the brand and through that, they might take interest in your event - this of course works the other way around as well, bringing interest of the event's fans to the brand's product. This obviously goes hand-in-hand with marketing and brand exposure - collaborations with other big brands can increase awareness, engagement and revenue for both parties. (alda09x024, 2023; Esports Sponsorship: Why Brands Enter the Gaming Space, n.d.)

Esports events have another form of collaboration and promotion - live streamers and influencers. This is one of the aspects that I believe is stronger in esports, than in sports, not because sports don't have their own influencers or even streamers, but because esports, gaming streamers and influencers have in general more direct and engaging relationships with their audiences. Many of them stream regularly and build engaged communities around them with interactive content, which in turn might be more valuable in a potential collaboration.

1.1.5. Esports fans

Last but not least, an entertainment industry cannot exist if there are no fans. They are the main reason esports exist and as well, the main source of esports income, be it from their physical appearance on offline events, or from their attention being sold to advertisers. One of the most important differences between an esports fan and a regular sports fan is willingness to pay for viewing. While esports fans are very willing to donate to their favorite streamers and buy exclusive merch, they are not used to paying for the actual watching, mainly because all of the events are being streamed online on platforms such as Twitch and YouTube, which means they are free to access and watch. For example, back in 2021, in the

Czech Republic only approximately 10 % of esports fans were paying members of at least one esports subscription (Czech Republic - a Small but Dynamic Market Ready for Development, n.d.). Deloitte.com also conducted a survey last year, which revealed that 30 % of all sports fans have paid for a subscription in order to watch sports, and when it comes to Millennials, the percentage increases to 46 %, which is a significant difference considering esports are as well more or less focused on one generation (Giorgio et al., 2023).

1.2. Types of Esports games

In this subchapter I will introduce some of the most important esports titles, their specifics and differences. Each video game is different and has a different set of rules and principles, which means the esports have to be set up accordingly in order to maintain a healthy and competitive environment for the players and entertaining experience for the viewers.

1.2.1. League of Legends

League of Legends is a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) video game developed and published by Riot Games in October 2009. The game was originally inspired by a custom map from a video game Warcraft 3 called "Defense of the Ancients" (which also inspired DOTA, another MOBA video game) which had similar gameplay to what we saw in League of Legends later. The developers wanted to create a stand-alone video game that captured the gameplay of Defense of the Ancients, while also giving it a new name, world and characters. Riot Games also made a very bold move for that time, when giving their game away for free and monetizing the game through upselling cosmetic virtual looks for the characters (skins). A free-to-play model wasn't very popular at the time (apart from Asian markets) and many publishers turned down League of Legends because of this (Crecente, 2019). So Riot Games had to make another bold move and sign a deal with a foreign publisher very early into their studio's existence. But the developers believed in their product and saw a global potential, so after finishing their Pre-Alpha version of the video game, they signed a deal with a Chinese publisher Tencent (Kollar, 2016). Tencent later went on and acquired a majority stake in Riot Games in February 2011 for 400 million USD. By December 2015, Tencent had bought the remaining 7 percent and now owns the entire Riot Games company (Russel, 2015).

The gameplay of League of Legends, as mentioned before, takes its inspiration in the custom Warcraft 3 map "Defense of the Ancients". In League of Legends primary game mode

"Summoner's Rift" (the game has had many game modes over the course of its existence), the player controls a character, also known as "champion", who is a part of a five member team of other champions controlled by other players. Each of these champions has a different set of unique abilities that help them cooperate with their teammates and fight the other five member team. Over the course of the game, players acquire "XP" (experience points) and "gold" (a form of in-game currency) by defeating their enemies or destroying enemy structures. Both experience points and gold help to make the champion stronger, either by increasing their level and improving their abilities or purchasing items that increase the champions attributes respectively. In the esports prominent game mode "Summoner's Rift", the goal of the team is to destroy the other team's base.

In these bases, players start the game and reappear after their deaths. At the heart of each base is a structure called "Nexus" - whichever team's Nexus is destroyed first, that team loses the game. Both Nexuses are protected not only by the champions, but also by other structures called "Turrets" and "Inhibitors". In addition each base creates non-player characters known as "minions" over the course of the entire game, that advance through the map and attack the other team's minions, structures and champions. The map is split into 3 lanes with a place called "Jungle" between them. Players usually take on different roles in the team, which is not enforced by the game, but has been conventionally accepted by the players. This means that at the start of the game, the champions occupy different lanes (one of them occupies the jungle), until they eventually come together to fight for neutral objectives (such as Dragons or a huge fictional monster called "Baron Nashor") in the jungle. Whoever defeats these neutral objectives grants his team powerful bonuses known as "buffs", that usually help the team to close out the game and destroy the enemy Nexus. A Summoner's Rift match can last anywhere from 15 minutes to over an hour and after it ends, everything starts over in the next one (Blue, 2020; Watson, 2015).

Players can be competitive in League of Legends even if they aren't professional players, since the game offers a ranked system of 10 total ranks ranging from "Iron" all the way to "Challenger". In addition, these ranks are split into divisions: Iron, Silver, Gold, Platinum, Emerald and Diamond ranks are divided into four divisions, denoted by Roman numerals from IV (4) to I (1). The ranks Master, Grandmaster and Challenger (only 0.2% players worldwide reach these ranks (Laserface, 2024)) do not have divisions and the rankings within them are based solely on League Points (LP). League Points are the what players gain and

lose when playing ranked matches - to be promoted from one division to the next within the rank (eg. Platinum II to Platinum I), a player must gain a total of 100 League Points. In addition to 100 League Points, a player must go through promotion series and win three out of five ranked matches to be promoted from one rank to the next (eg. Platinum I to Diamond IV) (Laserface, 2024).

Despite the never ending criticism of the player base toxicity (arguably caused by the competitiveness) and many gameplay issues the game has had over the years, League of Legends remains among the most popular video games worldwide each year with over 150 million registered players, and over 117 million active monthly players (Xu, 2024). When it comes to Czechia, the Technical University of Ostrava has conducted a research in 2021 which estimated a total count of 900 000 players from the Czech Republic (The Czech Esports Scene in This Country and Abroad Will Be Newly Covered by the CESA Association, n.d.).

League of Legends is also arguably the biggest esports title worldwide. At least if we look at peak viewership, League of Legends is far ahead of its competition - on the 19th of November 2023 during that years finals of the League of Legends World Championship, the match between T1 and Weibo Gaming managed to peak at 6 402 760 concurrent viewers, while Counter-Strike, arguably League's biggest competition set it's own record on the 7th of November 2021, peaking at 2 748 434 concurrent viewers (All-time popular esports games by viewership, n.d.).

1.2.2. Counter-Strike

Counter-Strike is a series of tactical first-person shooter video games. It started as a modification for the video game "Half-Life" designed by Minh "Gooseman" Le and Jess "Cliffe" Cliffe and was later acquired by Valve Corporation to be released as a stand-alone retail product. Counter-Strike has had many iterations ever since its initial 2000 release, but for the purposes of this thesis, we are focusing on its newest versions, namely "Counter-Strike: Global Offensive" and its current upgraded version "Counter-Strike 2". Both of these titles are essentially very similar and more importantly - they share the same esports scene.

The gameplay of Counter-Strike is much simpler compared to the MOBA genre. In the game's primary game mode called "Competitive", two teams of five players compete against each other on various maps. One of the team is representing "Terrorists", while the other represents "Counter-Terrorists". Terrorist's goal is to plant a C4 explosive on one of the to bomb sites (set points on the map, called "A" and "B") and defend it until it explodes or kill all the Counter-Terrorists, while the goal of Counter-Terrorists is to either kill all the Terrorists or defuse the planted C4 explosive. The players have a wide range of weapons they can use to accomplish their objectives - from assault rifles to throwable grenades. Whichever team completes one of their objectives wins the round - the match can consist of a maximum of 24 rounds, with the first team to reach 13 won rounds winning the match. In the case of a draw (scoreline of 12:12) the match usually continues to a stage called "Overtime", where the first team to reach 16 won rounds wins the match, unless the score ends up being 15:15 and another Overtime takes place.

Similarly to League of Legends and other esports titles, Counter-Strike offers its own ranked system, so that players can be competitive on a non-professional level as well. In Counter-Strike 2, Valve introduced a new refreshed ranked system with tiers ranging from "Grey" all the way to "Yellow/Gold" and Elo points being the primary commodity that determines your tier. But even with this updated version, the official ranked system of Counter-Strike is not very popular, especially at higher levels of play, where a third party ranked system called "FACEIT" comes into place. FACEIT offers a similar ranked system (Counter-Strike 2 actually inspired their own updated system on this one), but offers better teammates to play with, better anti-cheat (software battling players who use third party programs to gain an unfair advantage) and most importantly much better server quality, which in turn improves the competitive environment that the official Counter-Strike competitive system can't compete with at the moment (slydeR, 2023).

Counter-Strike is the second biggest esports title in terms of viewership and prize pool (All-time popular esports games by viewership, n.d.). As of June 2024, the total prize money of all Counter-Strike tournaments accumulated to 142 602 373 US dollars, while the first place is held by Dota 2, another MOBA game, with a total of 318 081 537 US dollars of prize money (All-time popular esports games by viewership, n.d.). Both Counter-Strike and Dota 2 were developed, published and are owned by Valve Corporation, an American video game developer, which is famous for other video games as well, such as Half-Life, Left 4 Dead or

Portal, and for their video gaming platform "Steam". Even though Valve esports titles are still behind League of Legends viewership success, they do provide more prize money for their official tournaments.

1.2.3 Valorant

The last esports title i want to mention, is a relatively new and very promising one from Riot Games. The developer of League of Legends celebrated the game's 10th anniversary in October 2019 with an announcement of several new games - it was a big deal for the fans, since up until then, the company's only game was League of Legends. Among those games was a new free-to-play tactical first-person shooter initially teased under the name "Project A" and later released as "Valorant".

Since the esports market has already had a fan-favorite tactical first-person-shooter in the form of Counter-Strike, the developers of Valorant had to come up with a number of distinct differences, in order to capture the attention of first-person-shooter players. Especially if we look at the fact that the main competitive game mode is very similar to that of Counter-Strike - players form two teams of five players, from which one is attacking and the other defending (the teams switch after half of the possible rounds is played). Attacker's objective is to plant a bomb-like device called "Spike" to any of the "bombsites" (such as "A" or "B") and defend it until it explodes or to eliminate all the defenders - their objective on the other hand, is to defend said bombsites, eliminate all the attackers and/or defuse the "Spike" if it was planted. Whoever completes the objective, wins the round and whichever team wins 13 rounds first, wins the game. Of course an Overtime system is implemented in the game as well, so that if the score of the match ends up being even at 12:12, the match will continue until one of the teams wins two rounds in a row.

Riot Games decided to incorporate playable characters also known as "Agents". These Agents are designed to fill different roles on the team and fall into four categories: "duelists", "controllers", "initiators" and "sentinels". Each agent has a set of unique abilities (similarly to League of Legends) that help them fulfill their role in the team and complete their objective. While some abilities can do damage to other players, there is a large arsenal of weapons which are necessary in order to play and win the game.

Even from this description alone it is clear that Valorant and Counter-Strike share many similarities. In fact, many of Valorant in-game mechanics were clearly inspired by Counter-Strike: Global Offensive. But Riot Games took them a step further and made many improvements, that fans of Counter-Strike wanted for many years - from small quality of life changes such as the ability to sell weapons, to big technical improvements, such as "128 tick" servers (servers that are more responsive). These improvements over the competition were implemented to make the game as good as possible, but also to motivate Counter-Strike players to try their game - and many did, even a number of professional Counter Strike players decided to move to Valorant. "In a response" Valve released Counter-Strike 2 which replaced Counter-Strike: Global Offensive in September of 2023, which implemented many of the improvements Valorant did.

Valorant currently sits at the fifth biggest esports PC/Console title in terms of peak viewers with a record from March 2024 of 1 687 848 peak viewers (All-time popular esports games by viewership, n.d.). This is arguably a great result, given the fact that Valorant is only in its fifth year of existence. In the Czech Republic however, Valorant is yet to find the expected success in our domestic esports scene. As of writing this thesis, only two professional teams from Czech Republic exist - Enterprise Esports and Czech Repre (national Valorant team), although there were a total of 7 Valorant teams in the Czech Republic, all of which ceased to exist throughout the years, because of the lack of popularity of Valorant esports on the domestic scene (Liquipedia, n.d.).

The most prominent players from the Czech Republic are probably Martin Peňkov (known in game as MAGNUMEKK) and Karel Ašenbrener (known in game as Twisten). Both of these players, alongside a few others, played or are still playing at the highest European and global level (Top Player Rankings from Czech Republic for VALORANT - Esports Player Rankings :: Esports Earnings, 2024). Unfortunately, the Czech Valorant scene suffered a terrible loss, when Karel "Twisten" Ašenbrener decided to take his life on the 6th of June 2023 - this tragedy brought a lot of attention to video gaming and esports, but also to mental health surrounding it. The family of "Twisten" even started an endowment fund "Twisten foundation", which supports teenage mental health (Team Vitality, 2023; Home | Twisten Foundation, n.d.).

1.3. Role and function of media in sports and esports

Sports and esports both share one very important aspect - the media. Even though both industries have slightly different use cases, for both the media is a crucial tool for promotion, visibility and popularity. The visibility that the media creates can help to create and grow a sort of "relationship" between the sports, esports, teams, individual athletes and the viewers and fans (Chatterjee, 2023). This relationship is usually positive, but the media can often sensationalize or over-dramatize events, which can negatively influence the viewers perception and even influence the players behavior (Esson, 2020). Media is also a key determinant of popularity, meaning that the sports having the biggest media coverage are the ones gaining the most of it. Of course, this goes hand in hand with what sports are popular and which sports are going to generate the biggest reach in the region where the media operates - they essentially help each other grow their audiences. Other, less popular sports on the other hand don't get much attention. Sports leagues and organizers also often partner with media houses to further commercialize their product (Chatterjee, 2023).

Media coverage is absolutely necessary and crucial for both every sport but also every esports title, however the type of coverage usually differs. Esports are rarely covered by mainstream media, such as television, radio, print or mainstream web pages and online media houses. They are usually covered by online media specifically focused on esports or gaming in general. The same can be applied to broadcasting esports events - while sports events are usually broadcasted in paid television broadcast or online PPV (pay-per-view) live streams, esports are usually broadcasted for free and exclusively online, on gaming-specific streaming platforms, such as Twitch or YouTube, gaining revenue mostly from advertisement (Turcanu, 2024).

Social media and creating online content plays a much more important role in esports, than in sports, given the fact that the esports audience is significantly younger than that of sports - the average age of esports viewers is 32.05 years old, compared to 45.89 years old for traditional sports viewers (Turcanu, 2024). Esports fans are also often familiar with internet content and are regularly consuming it, which means that it is arguably the most important type of content for esports subjects to produce (Baker & Pizzo, 2021).

1.4. Sponsorship and media partnerships

Similarly to sports, sponsorship and media partnerships are essential to the commercial success and growth of the esports industry. They provide the largest revenue streams for leagues, tournaments and teams across all regions, and all of these subjects heavily rely on them for sustained income (Alda09x, 2023). Even though the esports industry is still maturing and some brands tend to be hesitant about investing, it provides a young and digitally engaged audience which is very sought after by many marketers (Kane, 2022). Whether a brand takes esports seriously or not, the numbers speak louder than prejudices - esports sponsorships and advertising revenues are projected to reach over 1 billion USD in value by 2025 and the number of publicly announced esports sponsorships have risen significantly in the recent years (Kiogi, n.d.; Statista, 2024). The report from marketingreport.one also mentions the biggest brands involved in esports, such as Coca-Cola, Red Bull or Mercedes-Benz for example, which adds to the credibility of the industry (Kiogi, n.d.; Statista, 2024).

But the sponsorships are not only for events, leagues and their broadcasts, even most esports teams have their own sponsors. And apart from being visible as a part of the team's visual representation, they also require social media content to be produced, oftentimes with the brands product placement involved. The team and its players basically become influencers that promote services or products, usually as a part of their contract.

When it comes to media partnerships, the esports industry is quite different from the sports industry, at least when it comes to the type of media they usually partner with. Esports events, tournaments and leagues mostly partner with online streaming platforms, such as Twitch or YouTube to live stream their matches - this is crucial, as it helps the event reach more viewers, engage with them and of course, provide exposure which turns into sponsorship revenue. These streaming platforms often provide real-time fan interactions, and the collection of valuable audience data, that can be later used for marketing purposes (Alda09x, 2023).

So even though esports events usually partner with different types of media, the sponsorship principles are essentially very similar to the ones of sports sponsorships when it comes to

broadcasting, but when it comes to teams and players, they are expanded to social media content.

1.5. Media representation

Before I talk about the research, it is important to state what exactly is "media representation", why it is important and how it affects society. The theory source I chose for this chapter is Stuart Hall's lecture "Representation & the Media" and his essay "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse" (Hall, 1997; Hall, 2018). In his lecture, Hall (1997) talks about cultural reproduction through media representation: he argues that media representation is not necessarily about an "accurate reflection of reality" but rather an active process that shapes how people perceive and think about the world. What he's saying essentially means, that media representation is a tool of power, which is being used by the field's dominant subjects to spread their influence and maintain the status quo.

In his essay, Hall (2018) introduced his "encoding/decoding" communication model - it describes how the individual messages can be "encoded" with a certain meaning by the media, but then "decoded" with a different meaning by the audience. This model basically denies that media messages could have a singular and fixed meaning - the interpretation of the audience is a key factor that can change the meaning of the message and its impact on society.

Overall, Stuart Hall's work highlights how media representation goes hand-in-hand with power and the reproduction of cultural hierarchies within society - these theories get even more impressive when we contextualize them within a young industry, such as esports.

For example, the encoding/decoding model can be applied to esports broadcasts, where producers encode the live stream with a certain narrative and meanings, but are then decoded by the audience in a different way - this model is even more visible since esports live streams are highly interactive and the difference in decoding can be often visible in the live stream's live chat or on social media, where the audience (sometimes on purpose) interprets the messages in their own way.

Esports is a new and rapidly evolving media industry, where many different subjects "battle" for power and the attention of esports fans, but of course there already are dominant publishers (e.g., Riot Games, Valve) and leagues (e.g., LEC) that already hold this power and can shape the esports industry through the important tool of media representation (exactly like Hall (1997) described). However it is important to mention, that since esports is a rapidly evolving industry with a participatory nature, smaller publishers, leagues and organizers do have opportunities to challenge the hegemonic representations.

The media representation of esports leagues and their respective teams can for example affect the leagues and teams popularity, it can help fans understand and peek behind the scenes and even create parasocial relationships with the different esports personalities - because of these and other factors, media representation is undoubtedly a crucial part of the esports industry.

2. Thesis methodology

In this section I will introduce the research objectives and research questions. Since this thesis uses semi-structured interviews and analyzes them using Braun and Clark's (2006) approach to thematic analysis, this section also includes an introduction of the individual respondents, reasons for their relevance and an overview of how the interviews were prepared and conducted.

2.1. Research objectives

Having outlined why media representation is particularly important to esports compared to other sports, this thesis will explore how esports leagues and their respective teams present themselves to their audiences. It aims to research the media-related development of esports at the highest level, and then compare it to the domestic development in the Czech Republic. I intend to compare the Czech esport scene to the European, by investigating leagues and their distinct approaches to online media presence coupled with the leagues underlining foundational basis such as monetization, infrastructure, and public popularity. By doing this I seek to highlight glaring differences that can explain, and suggest solutions, to existing problems that the Czech league might have .

To do that, I will conduct several semi-structured interviews with professional players, organizers and insiders both from the Czech Hitpoint Masters league teams and from the

European League of Legends EMEA Championship teams. I will analyze the presentation method of the specific teams and leagues and analyze what are their goals and motivations that make them create a certain kind of online content. I will compare the media presentation of the European LEC league and our domestic Czech Hitpoint Masters league, figure out whether or not Hitpoint Masters is lacking and what are the reasons behind it.

2.2. Research questions

As stated previously, this thesis goal is to compare the media presentation of the European LEC and the Czech Hitpoint Masters league.

Thus, the most important research question is: "What are the differences between the media content of the European LEC and the Czech Hitpoint Masters?", with subsequent research questions such as: "How does LEC and Hitpoint Master perceive themselves in the context of mainstream media?", "How did the LEC and Hitpoint Masters evolve over the last 5 years?", "What responsibilities does a professional player have regarding media?" and "How are Hitpoint Masters and LEC monetized compared to each other and other sports?".

I have used these research questions to create a comprehensive interview guide, which I then used to conduct said semi-structured interviews. These interviews and their analysis were crucial in understanding the key differences between the LEC and Hitpoint Masters and figuring out the possible solutions that could elevate our domestic esports scene.

2.3. Materials

To accomplish this thesis's objectives, I have used a combination of research and semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted on-line (via platforms Discord and Google Meets), due to the nature of the esports profession, some respondents living abroad and for better practicality. These interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. All of the interviews were conducted in June 2024 and were conducted in private without the presence of other persons. These interviews are the main source of information used in the following research. I have interviewed a total of four respondents, which are arguably the best suited respondents in terms of esports that I was able to get in contact with.

2.4. Analyzed leagues

In this section I will introduce the two League of Legends leagues researched and compared by this thesis.

2.4.1. Hitpoint Masters

Hitpoint Masters is a professional Czech national League of Legends league (with Slovak teams and international players also participating) run by Hitpoint. The first ever Hitpoint Masters season was held in 2014 with the legendary Czech esports team "eSuba" winning the trophy. Since 2018 however, Hitpoint Masters was granted an official license by Riot Games and was added to the "EMEA Masters circuit", meaning that the best two teams from each split advance into the EMEA Masters tournament where they face other regional league winners (Leaguepedia, n.d.).

Currently Hitpoint Masters are played mostly online, with playoffs and finals usually played on an offline event in Svitavy. Eight teams participate in a double round robin format and best of one matches, known as the regular split. The best four teams from the regular split advance into playoffs, where all matches are best of five and are split into two brackets - winners bracket, where best two teams face each other for a spot in the finals, and losers bracket - where the 3rd and the 4th teams face each other for a spot in round 2. After that, the playoffs advance into the second round, where the defeated team from the winners bracket faces the winners of the losers bracket - whoever wins this match advances into the finals, where they face the winning team from the winners bracket and decide the champion of that specific split (as of right now, Hitpoint Masters has two splits - Spring and Summer) (Leaguepedia, n.d.). Since 2023, Hitpoint Masters is dominated by the team "Entropiq" which has won 3 consecutive splits (Leaguepedia, n.d.).

Hitpoint Masters is broadcasted on the streaming platform Twitch and according to twitchtracker.com the league has 953 viewers on average, with 17 327 viewers being its all time peak (HITPOINTCZ statistics, n.d.). These statistics alongside their official status brought in many sponsors, such as Mastercard, KitKat or Pringles.

2.4.2. League of Legends EMEA Championship

League of Legends EMEA Championship or "LEC" for short is a professional League of Legends league run by Riot Games. Compared to Hitpoint Masters, LEC is not a regional league, but rather a premier league that operates across the entire Europe (and also Middle East and Africa ever since the rebrand to "EMEA" in 2023) (Riot Games, n.d.). LEC is considered to be one of the best League of Legends leagues, alongside the Chinese "LPL", South Korean "LCK" or North American "LCS".

Currently ten permanent and partnered teams participate in the LECs "group stage", where they face each other in single round robin best of one matches, with the best eight teams advancing into playoffs. Playoffs are then played as a double elimination bracket, with rounds one and two being best of three matches and the rest of the rounds being best of five matches. The winner qualifies for an international tournament (either Mid-Season Invitational or League of Legends Worlds Championship. depending on the split) and for the LEC Season Finals. These regular seasons and playoffs currently have three splits - Winter, Spring and Summer. The LEC Season Finals is the culmination of the entire season, meaning all three splits, where the top six teams across the entire season compete in a double elimination bracket to be crowned the LEC Champions and to secure a spot on the League of Legends World Championship (Leaguepedia, n.d.).

LEC is played mostly offline with an official Twitch broadcast straight from the LEC studio in Berlin throughout the entire season. According to Twitch Tracker, the league has 39 806 average viewers across the leagues existence, with 400 312 peak viewers from September 2020 (LEC Statistics, n.d.).

The league has also attracted major sponsorships from brands like Kia, LG, Red Bull and Erste Group.

2.5. Respondents

In this section, I will introduce all of the respondents and why they are relevant to this research.

2.5.1. Petr "denyk" Haramach

The first respondent I interviewed is Petr Haramach, professional League of Legends player known in-game as "denyk". Petr was born in the Czech Republic on the 30th of April 1995 (currently 29 years old). His professional League of Legends career dates back to February of 2013, but more or less started in August of 2014 with the Czech team Extatus (Leaguepedia, n.d.). A big step up in his career came in 2017 in the form of a contract from a Spanish organization "x6tence". After that Petr transferred back and forth from Spanish and Czech teams with a 1 month stop in the French organization "Millenium" (Leaguepedia, n.d.).

The biggest transfer however came on December of 2019, when Petr signed a contract with the organization "Misfits Gaming" which at the time played in the "League of Legends European Championship" (which was later renamed to "League of Legends EMEA Championship, because of the inclusion of other regions) or better known as the "LEC", the biggest European League of Legends competition. Petr spent one year and 6 months playing in the LEC for the teams "Misfits Gaming" and later "Excel". He also spent 4 months in the team "BT Excel", which was an academy of the team "Excel". After this experience he transferred back to the Czech Hitpoint Masters league when he joined the team "Entropiq" in December of 2021, where he still currently plays.

His rich career allowed him to experience the highest level of European competition and organization first-hand as a player. Since he came back to play in the Czech Hitpoint Masters, he is the perfect respondent when it comes to comparison of these two leagues, especially in terms of media representation, since players are a key part of it.

2.5.2. Ondřej Báča

The second respondent is Ondřej Báča, founder and CEO of Hitpoint and CEO of the Czech national League of Legends league Hitpoint Masters. Ondřej graduated from Masarykova Univerzita Brno where he got a master's degree in Project Management and Informatics. The same year he founded Hitpoint, a business focused on studio production of esports and live events. Throughout the years Ondřej and Hitpoint have hosted and organized many esports events in the Czech Republic including a League of Legends league and in 2018 Hitpoint acquired a license from Riot Games to host the official Czech national League of Legends league.

This was a big turning point for Ondřej and Hitpoint, as it gave him a significant advantage over the competition in the Czech Republic (because Hitpoint Masters is ever since the only official league) and it also established connections with Riot Games. Because of his imminent experience with Hitpoint, he is undoubtedly a crucial respondent regarding Hitpoint Master, esports, organization and even LEC.

2.5.3. Petr "Xnapy" Jirák

The third respondent is Petr Jirák, known in-game and online as Xnapy. Petr is a Twitch live streamer, League of Legends esports personality, caster for Hitpoint Masters, former professional player, former coach and a founder of a former esports organization "Fraternitas". Petr started his League of Legends esports career in October 2012 when he joined the team "eXtatus" as a professional player. In January 2013 he also began his casting career at Hitpoint, where he casts to this day. In 2015 he also founded a new esports organization "Fraternitas" where he was also coaching for a while (Leaguepedia, n.d.). Petr, in his own words, "tries to be the foundation and the pillar of the Czech League of Legends community", which he arguably is - essentially most of the significant Czech League of Legends events have him involved in one way or another, either as an organizer or a an influencer, many times both. Petr also owns a production company EksDee, which helped organize many League of Legends events such as Prague Champs or more recently Streamers Clash.

In his own words, Petr is a "collection of information and contacts regarding League of Legends esports". His more than twelve years worth of experience make him the perfect insider and also a respondent to this thesis.

2.5.4. Matyáš "Carzzy" Orság

The last respondent is Matyáš Orság, known in-game as Carzzy - a professional League of Legends player, who currently plays for a French organization "Team Vitality" in the LEC. Matyáš was born in the Czech Republic in January 2002 and at only 22 years old he's one of the most experienced League of Legends players in the Czech Republic. Matyáš started playing League of Legends during season two, which was the time period from November 2011 to November 2012 and four years later, at the age of 14, he managed to reach the rank

of "Challenger" on the "Europe West" server, which is recognized as the most competitive European server due to the fact that all European professional players play there. On the "Europe Nordic & East" server, Matyáš even managed to reach Rank 1, which at the time made him the best player of the entire server (Leaguepedia, n.d.).

His esports career started in August 2016 in a Czech organization "REViTAL Gaming". He also played for Czech organizations "eXtatus" and "Inside Games" throughout 2016 and 2017. With eXtatus he even managed to win the Slovakian Championship. In 2018 however, Matyáš got his first abroad contract in a German organization "Mysterious Monkeys" and throughout 2018 and 2019, he played with many other organizations such as the Spanish "KIYF eSports Club" or the German "BIG". All of them were just a stepping stone, because in November 2019, Matyáš transferred to a Spanish organization "MAD Lions" which was and still is an LEC team. Ever since then, Matyáš has been an LEC player, with MAD Lions and Team Vitality being the only teams he played for so far. Throughout his five years of LEC career, Matyáš managed to reach over 1000 kills (only the 12th player in the LEC history) and with Marek "Humanoid" Brázda he became the first professional player from the Czech Republic to ever win an LEC title (Leaguepedia, n.d.).

Matyáš managed to win the League of Legends EMEA Championship three times: in 2021 (both spring and summer splits) and in 2023 (spring split), and he even attended multiple international tournaments (both League of Legends World Championship and Mid-Season Invitational) with the best results being a shared 5th-8th place on Worlds 2021 and a shared 3rd-4th place on Mid-Season Invitational 2021 (Leaguepedia, n.d.).

All of these achievements and his first-hand experience with both the current state of LEC and history at Hitpoint were the key reasons why I chose him as a respondent for this thesis.

3. Results

This section discusses the results of the analyzed interviews and aims to answer all of the previously stated research questions, with the analysis of the interviews being the main source of information. I analyzed the interviews using Braun and Clark's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. During the analysis, I have generated 365 codes, which I then categorized

into 19 themes. These themes were the key sources of information for the results of this thesis' research.

3.1. Media representation as production: Hitpoint Masters' struggle with consistent content quality

The first topic I will explore is how the Czech League of Legends league "Hitpoint Masters", the teams within the league and its individual players represents themselves medially. According to Ondřej Báča, the CEO of Hitpoint, the organization's small team hosts a total of three leagues (Hitpoint Masters, the second and third league), while also hosting the official Czech re-streams of the LEC, Mid-Season Invitational and League of Legends World Championship (all of these are broadcasts are produced online, with the exception of the Hitpoint Finals, which is an offline event) - with this in mind he also mentions that broadcast is the primary focus of Hitpoint, ensuring that everything works properly and solving any complications that might occur during the live stream.

However this, alongside other difficulties I will discuss later, means that Hitpoint has little to no focus on "non-stream" content (e.g., content on social media and video content), which is very important in the digitally focused world of esports. As of 2024, Hitpoint does arguably only the bare minimum when it comes to content. For example Petr "Denyk" Haramach said: "Basically, at the start of the split, Hitpoint requires the teams to shoot photos of the players for the broadcast and during the split they do post-match interviews with the players, that's about it." Denyk explains that Hitpoint requires each team to provide basic "headshot" photos of individual players that are later used in the broadcast to highlight players the camera is currently focused on, he even points out that the quality of these basic photos differs from team to team: "In Entropiq, we shoot the photos in front of a greenscreen with directions from our production, but other teams often send bad quality photos, for example shot on their phones in front of a wall." Simply put, even the bare minimum content is inconsistent in terms of quality.

This problem is spread far beyond team photos though - since the league doesn't really produce any other content than the broadcasts, match results and interviews, the entire media representation of Hitpoint Masters becomes a responsibility of the individual teams and players. There are teams in the Hitpoint Masters, like Entropiq, which are heavily inspired by

LEC teams and try to produce a lot of content, such as social media posts, short-form videos and even long-form YouTube videos - these videos usually follow a trendy structure, ranging from more personal interviews and FAQs to all sorts of online challenges, essentially simple but fun and popular content. Entropiq is a prime example of an ambitious esports team and their content is exactly what i just described - they publish a huge variety of content, for example: "Škola LOLka", where Denyk teaches players all sorts of in-game mechanics. Entropiq also publishes sponsored videos (ads), TikToks, highlights from their games, Tips and Tricks videos and much more.

When asked about the most thorough and well-made content from Hitpoint Masters and its teams, all of the respondents mentioned exceptions supported by sponsors - some of the teams hired an external professional production and created an advertisement with professional cinematic qualities, such as the Sinners collaboration with the Czech grocery store Kaufland from 2022 (Kaufland ČR, 2022).

But there are also teams that shoot the team photos, report their match results and apart from that, they do not produce any content at all, which when combined with the lack of content from the league itself becomes a significant issue - Hitpoint Masters does not have enough content and is almost not representing itself medially. This statement was backed up by all of the respondents, even the CEO Báča himself.

3.2. Media representation as production: Leveraging esports personalities within League of Legends EMEA Championship

Since the League of Legends EMEA Championship (LEC) is the premier league for Europe (with the addition of the Middle-East and Africa) it is understandable that it leads by example in terms of content creation, as well as other fields, such as the quality of all audiovisual assets, media training of the players, the structure of the league or quality of gameplay.

In terms of the basics, the LEC hosts the live broadcasts of the LEC league, which is produced live from the LEC studio in Berlin and the LEC Finals, which are produced from different venues across Europe. However, the LEC content doesn't stop there - both Carzzy and Denyk explained that in the LEC there are entire days set up just for content creation called the media days. For example, before the start of each split, a media day is held at the

Berlin LEC studio and can take up one, sometimes two days of shooting. At this media day, each player goes through different sections and shoots all the necessary materials for the league.

The LEC releases multiple long-form YouTube videos throughout the split such as the "LEC Pop Quiz" and other YouTube formats, they also release many short-form videos on social media platform (TikTok, Instagram), which are either cut from the long-form content or sometimes created exclusively for said platforms. This content is released throughout the entire split, but is all shot at the media day. At this media day, the LEC production team also shoots professional photos of all the teams and all their individual players and records dramatic "poses" and "walks" which are then used for match teasers. For some players and teams (mostly those, who are more popular or advance into later stages of the competition) this media day won't be enough and they will shoot more content later in the split, either as service for the fans or (more often) for match teasers, known as "hype videos".

But the LEC does not stop there, the league has a team of talented and popular casters and esports personalities, which means they utilize them to the maximum - the LEC has its own podcast, which releases regularly, and the league even has its own musical band, which has created multiple music videos. The entire league has another layer to its match marketing and that is narrative direction. Petr "Xnapy" Jirák mentions that "for big events, there's a director who's exclusively in charge of storytelling, which means that in the LEC, there is a lady who's only responsibility is to write the plots of the league and the scripts for the hype videos." This essentially means that the league does not advertise their matches only as a display of the best European players, but rather a continuation of a story that has its roots in the history of the LEC and builds rivalry between teams and sometimes individual players, which arguably makes the matches and the league more attractive to the audience. Denyk further expands this as he describes that "each team has a certain profile based on its paper predictions and Riot adapts the content around that", which means that Riot and the LEC works with the narrative even when it comes to other, than match advertising content, e.g., question in interviews will reflect the team's and player's profile within the narrative.

In addition to everything LEC does, the individual teams create a lot of content to represent the league as well as themselves. Even though all of the LEC teams are professional, their content is different from team to team - examples of the greatest LEC teams, in terms of

content, according to Jirák, are G2 Esports and GiantX (formerly Excel Esports). GiantX content team shows a great skill when it comes to social media content - their content team uses the knowledge of their professional players to create online short-form content with tips and tricks for regular players, without even needing the professional players to create any content at all - all they provide is the information. With this concept, GiantX has seen massive success on social media platforms, especially TikTok, where they're nearing 500 000 followers at the time of writing. GiantX also has a successful YouTube channel, where they recreate popular YouTube formats and adapt them to the esports world.

G2 Esports on the other hand are an example of an organization where the content team utilizes their professional players to the utmost, essentially creating esports personalities. Jirák describes them as "next level", because their content team even writes scripts and basically makes cinematic-level content, such as trailers, funny sketches, parodies etc. and most importantly, Jirák mentions that "they know how to make them, while not being cringe", meaning that the content has good cinematic quality, but is also very well prepared content-wise, so that the audience can relate to it and doesn't interpret the content as "forced" or "cringe" (slang term for embarrassing, awkward).

Even in teams which are not considered the best in terms of content, the content teams still create a wide range of it. Team Vitality for example, where Carzzy plays, describes their team content like this: "We have cameraman who's with us for the majority of the split and shoots vlogs and behind the scenes, sometimes even the main content team from Paris travels to Berlin to shoot more sophisticated content for the organization." Carzzy also mentioned that their team isn't really focused on content creation - this means that what would be considered a step forward in Hitpoint Masters, is the bare minimum in the LEC.

There is also a new trend that was recently discovered in the LEC called "co-streaming". Co-streaming is basically an expansion of the official LEC live broadcast, in which multiple different esports personalities "restream" the official broadcast and add their own comments to it. This way of watching has become very popular among fans, since it made watching the stream more interactive than ever before. All of the "co-streamers" have to be officially approved by Riot and the LEC, so that they can use their official broadcast for their own live stream. These live streams are in-turn counted towards the total number of viewers, and with some live streamers getting more viewers than the official stream, these numbers

significantly improve it, hence improving the advertisement and marketing results of the LEC.

3.3. Media responsibilities of a professional League of Legends player

From the description of both leagues media representation, we can assume that a player in the Hitpoint Masters will have different responsibilities than a player in the LEC. It is also important to understand that each team is different as well, meaning that the responsibilities differ even within the league.

In Hitpoint Masters a player must shoot photos for the league to use in their broadcast and social media. As stated previously, even this seemingly basic task is executed with various qualities, based on the team's conditions. At the moment the only other media responsibilities towards Hitpoint Masters seem to be post-match interviews and reporting of results to social media.

When it comes to the team media responsibilities in the Hitpoint Masters, they are various, based on the individual teams. Some teams aren't considered professional and only create the bare minimum required by the league stated above. Some teams are professional and more ambitious - Denyk explains that "Entropiq organizes media days for the team, where all the players, often living abroad, travel to the office and shoot everything necessary for the split - team content, sponsored content etc. He also explains that "results are extremely important, because without them, partners won't care about us as much".

If we look at the LEC, it is obvious that the responsibilities are more vast. Players must attend the previously mentioned media day, but some players are required to make extra content throughout the season, depending on their popularity and results. Post-match interviews are also very common in the LEC, but with representatives from both teams, winning or losing. The important thing about them is that there are post-match interviews not only for the live broadcast, but also for multiple journalists, which can request any player. LEC sometimes even uses their players for sponsored content, but it's not very common according to Carzzy.

The LEC teams is where the responsibilities pile up. According to Jirák, "It is common for the LEC teams to have a shooting day at least once a month". Players have to shoot content for the long-form YouTube formats, for social media content and for sponsored content. The

players often don't have any say in what content they have to shoot, as they are obliged to shoot it based on their contract, the only thing they can decide is how they interpret it and how they behave. According to Jirák, players in the LEC also undergo media workshops, where they learn how to represent themselves, their organizations and their brands. All of the media work is also included in the players contract and is a part of the player's responsibilities. According to the interviews, the players are usually fine with this, since they understand it is a part of their job, however there are exceptions, in which some players get less screen time, mostly because shooting content makes them uncomfortable.

Both leagues and all of the teams have some sort of content team. In the biggest organizations there are multiple people, sometimes even production teams, that take care of the content. In the smallest non-professional organizations, it is often one person who takes care of it, sometimes it is even the owner of the team who has to take care of everything media related, due to economic status. The important thing is that the players are only "actors", everything else gets taken care of by others.

3.4. Motivations for content creating in Hitpoint Masters and the LEC

In this subchapter I will explore what are the motivations for the leagues and the different teams within them to produce the content that represents them.

Denyk states a very important fact that needs to be addressed first: "Each league has its own philosophy for presenting their content." This means that the LEC, Hitpoint Masters and all the other leagues have different approaches to content creation and media representation depending on their own preferences and time/financial options. Nevertheless each and every league wants to represent itself in the best possible way, no matter the philosophy or limitations.

The first and most important motivation for both leagues and teams within League of Legends esports is economic sustainability. As previously mentioned, each professional organization works with a multitude of partners (such as Red Bull, Kia or Mastercard) that bring the organization key funds, without which no business can operate sustainably. These partners or sponsors bring funds for which they require the organization to produce content that represents and promotes the partner to the organization's audience. This is the reason

why the respondents estimated that 75-100% of Hitpoint Masters and 50% of the LEC content is sponsored. This means that partners are the primary motivation for the production of the content - it's also quite visible, since most of the content the esports leagues or teams produce has some sort of product placement included. The relationship between partners and the content is very tight - essentially the better and more interesting the content, the more people will get attracted to the organization, resulting in more and bigger partners being attracted as well, which in turn brings more funds and expands the possibilities for content creation. In Denyks words "Content is a part of the entire esports industry, you won't attract people just because you play good, you have to show them who you are and let them get to know you." This doesn't only apply to players however, the same could be said about the teams and the leagues respectively - while some portion of the audience is attracted by the level of play, it usually only applies to the highest levels of play (e.g., League of Legends World Championship). When it comes to lower levels of play, such as Hitpoint Masters, creating good quality content and building narratives is crucial to attract viewers.

Another motivation is creating, developing and nurturing a relationship with the organization's fans through interactive content. These parasocial relationships help to develop the brand and eventually help to develop the entire industry by creating more incentives to come back to future content, watch the official matches, buy the organization's merchandise, and by attracting more partners and (again) bringing more funds. According to Báča, "the media representation of an organization can be often more important than their results, marketing-wise."

When discussing the topic of mainstream media with the respondents, they mentioned that mainstream media usually takes interest in bigger "standout" events (e.g., Prague Champs), but not in the regular leagues. However, the respondents also mentioned that the leagues themselves do not engage with mainstream media - the reason being that esports leagues simply do not benefit from mainstream media coverage as much as other fields. Esports fans usually follow esports leagues and teams through social media, streaming platforms such as YouTube or Twitch and gaming/esports specific media. Potential fans are more likely to get attracted to the leagues and teams through those channels as well. With this in mind, we can assume that in contrast to regular sports, mainstream media aren't important for either of the leagues or teams, as esports are focused on a highly "digital" audience who's consuming content primarily online, making the mainstream media mostly irrelevant

3.5. Development of Hitpoint Masters and the LEC

Over the years, both Hitpoint Masters and the LEC made improvements to their leagues across the board, however the LEC improvements are expectedly more significant.

According to Denyk, the Hitpoint Masters broadcast "got better since the transfer to a different studio in Brno." But many aspects of the league got worse or stayed the same - some of the better teams used to play in "gaming houses", whereas now they play from their homes, the league hasn't changed its format and as I stated in the Introduction, the overall viewership and revenue is stagnating at best.

Jirák said this about Hitpoint Masters development: "When I was in Hitpoint, we always organized media days, where we shot footage that was later used for trailers etc. but since I left, they kind of stopped doing them. It also seems that Hitpoint hasn't really developed content-wise since then." According to Báča, Hitpoint has seen the biggest development in terms of sponsorships: "The entry of non-endemic partners, such as Mastercard, was really important to us, it improved our conditions a lot."

Based on the information above, as well as the general answers of the respondents, it appears that Hitpoint Masters has seen mostly internal improvements while its approach to media representation strategy has not developed over the last few years.

The LEC development has also seen some ups and downs. According to the respondents, the LEC has seen massive improvements in viewership and revenue during the Covid-19 pandemic (similarly to the entire esports industry), however after the pandemic ended the viewership and revenue dropped off and has been decreasing slightly ever since. According to Jirák, "The broadcast quality has seen a little drop in quality, because many of the esports personalities left the league and the new ones aren't as good yet. Also, the stories and the rest of the faces in the LEC are a bit too repetitive at this point." In this statement, Jirák points out that even for the biggest league in Europe, it is quite challenging to keep the attractiveness of the league going for many years solely by broadcast - that's why it's important to produce good quality content to support it.

Although many personalities left the LEC, their content has seen many additions and improvements over the last years. All of the additions mentioned in chapter 3.2. were made within the last five years, but the expansion seems to have come to stop - according to Báča "the recent global economic crisis within the gaming industry has caused the content to stop evolving, the LEC will now try to most likely keep what they've build and stop expanding." Jirák also mentioned that "League of Legends has been around for 15 years and even though it's still one of the most watched esports globally, it most likely won't be around forever."

Based on the information here and the respondents' answers, the LEC seems to have made significant improvements to their media representation over the last few years, but will most likely slow down improvements for the upcoming years in order to sustain the financial requirements. This is a great example of the development of the entire esports industry at the highest level. The Covid-19 pandemic brought the industry a lot of funds, which ended up expanding it, but the following decrease in interest, viewership and revenue forced even the biggest leagues to stop expanding and focus on economic sustainability.

3.6. The difference between Hitpoint Masters and the LEC

The Hitpoint Masters is obviously incomparable to the LEC in size, viewership and revenue. But when it comes to media representation, e.g., content they produce to support the league, Hitpoint Masters is arguably far behind and severely lacking, even for the leagues own potential.

According to Denyk, "Riot Games gives the league freedom when it comes to content, because every league has its own philosophy and approach towards it." But it seems that Hitpoint doesn't see content as necessary at the current moment. The respondents estimated that the LEC does 20 to 30 times more content to support their league, compared to Hitpoint Masters and as mentioned previously, Hitpoint Masters hasn't really seen any improvements in this field over the last few years. The CEO of Hitpoint, Ondřej Báča sees this as an issue and would like to "focus on the media representation more in the upcoming years."

There are several reasons for why Hitpoint Masters is doing only the bare minimum at the moment, which I explored with all the respondents. Finances are obviously a big topic, but during the interviews, all of the respondents agreed that they aren't the primary difficulty

Hitpoint faces, Denyk said that "finances play a certain role, but it isn't really about money, some leagues just do it better and and some worse", meaning that the underlying issue might be more about Hitpoint's approach. "It seems that Hitpoint focuses on the Hitpoint Finals, but there's not much going on before that", Denyk adds. Hitpoint essentially only requires the bare minimum, such as team photos and doesn't push the teams to create more content, nor does it create the content itself.

Ondřej Báča presented many difficulties regarding content, such as that "the players are essentially children, students of high schools and universities, whereas in the LEC, the players are older, more professional and with media training." Within the teams, the issue seems to be that many of them aren't actually professional and do not have the staff to take care of the content. "It would be ideal, if all of the teams had good quality social media and we didn't have to beg for even the bare minimum, but the teams often struggle to even exist sustainably," Báča adds. When it comes to Hitpoint content, Báča also said that taking care of all of the broadcasts they produce makes the team busy throughout the entire year and makes creating extra content very difficult. Báča explains the issue further: "Content is the first thing you cut, when you need to cut something in order to survive, but I admit that Hitpoint kind of froze when it comes to this and we didn't really focus on this field recently. We would love to change that, but currently the players aren't really used to it and in Hitpoint, we don't have the time nor the resources to create the content on our own."

According to Jirák and Denyk, Hitpoint could very well improve and achieve "LEC qualities", but "someone would have to do something about it", meaning that they see the issue within the organization's approach, rather than their resources. "No one in Hitpoint is doing more than they need to. The people that do these kinds of projects are usually motivated by passion towards gaming, but aren't naturally business oriented. After all, the slow paced improvement is why I left", Jirák adds.

4. Discussion

In this chapter, I will share my perception of the research topic and results and set up some new questions for possible future research.

The research I have done essentially confirmed the assumptions I had, which were the reason why I chose this topic in the first place. Hitpoint Masters always seemed a bit underdeveloped to me, lacking in content and the whole media representation, especially since the league is officially licensed by Riot Games since 2018. I have been following League of Legends esports for quite a while and whenever I've seen Hitpoint Masters online or in person, I always thought that there is more potential to it, especially when big esports events aren't unusual even in the Czech Republic and the interest isn't small. However, the league has a long way to go, before it'd be able to sell out arenas.

In my opinion, Hitpoint Masters have to start their expansion within their own ranks - investing funds into acquiring more staff, which would take care of their media representation (e.g., social media and content supporting the league). It isn't necessary to hire a production team either, only one or two capable full-time creators can supply the league with tons of content. If expanding isn't possible, then partially relocating some of their existing staff to these roles could also prove useful. Hitpoint should also expand their media partnerships, which can generate even more content, such as their recent partnership with the new Czech media project "Poggers". Hitpoint is definitely doing some progress already, but the steps they take could be more ambitious and significant. This can in turn attract more viewers, attract more partners and raise the funding Hitpoint receives, which the organization can use to further expand.

No creative minds are needed either - getting inspired by the LEC and following in their footsteps, possibly adapting them to the Czech environment is more than enough. A great example could be adapting the new trend of co-streaming, meaning reaching out to Czech and Slovak League of Legends live streamers, which could co-stream the official matches and make comments on them, which would significantly improve Hitpoint Masters viewership. But of course, the league has to start with its own presentation - that way, creators will want to cooperate with Hitpoint on their own initiative.

It is also possible to use Stuart Hall's theory to better understand the media representation of both Hitpoint Masters and LEC. Hall's encoding/decoding communication model (Hall, 2018) can provide a useful look into how the different types of content are produced and interpreted by the audience. It is possible to analyze how different esports entities describe (coding) their created narratives and how it shapes the audience's perceptions (decoding).

Hall describes three types of decoding: "Preferred reading", which is when the audience interprets the narrative as it was intended by the commentators, "Negotiated reading", where the audience "accepts" the narrative but modifies it based on its views, and "Oppositional reading", which occurs when the audience doesn't accept the narrative, likely because their view is completely different.

I can apply this model to my research comparing Hitpoint Masters and the LEC, for example when I analyze both leagues' trailers for their finals. The last trailer Hitpoint Masters did was for their 2017 Hitpoint Finals in December. In this 54 seconds long trailer, we can see the CEO Ondřej Báča play a guitar and shout "Finals!" at the camera alongside a short footage of fans from previous finals and a comedic scene at the end of the trailer. Essentially, this trailer encoded the message "Hitpoint Finals will be held soon" in a humorous and a clear way, however no additional information apart from date and place were included. This trailer is a great example of Hitpoint's poor media representation, since Hitpoint doesn't really utilize the teams and their respective players to promote their final event and more importantly it is the last trailer Hitpoint has released until today.

Looking at the way LEC encoded the message "LEC Finals will be held soon", there are many apparent differences. First of all, LEC is producing trailers for every single split, playoffs and finals up until today, but for the purposes of this comparison, I analyzed the very first LEC finals trailer from 2019 (after the league's rebrand from EU LCS). The LEC trailers use a mixture of player interviews, gameplay footage, broadcast footage including commentators' voices and material shot specifically for the trailer, such as different poses and player's comments. More importantly, the trailer follows and builds a set narrative for the final event - this includes building rivalries, expressing player's motivations and creating a certain build-up for the audience. All of this is underlined by dramatic music and editing, which makes for an amazing trailer that encodes the message "LEC Finals will be held soon" with seriousness, narrative and build-up, alongside practical information such as date and place.

It is also possible to apply Hall's theory of cultural reproduction to assume how these different qualities in encoding can impact the respective leagues (Hall, 2018). The LEC's high quality encoding can be a key factor in the way the audience perceives the league, essentially pushing it into what Hall (2018) calls a dominant-hegemonic position, which

means that the audience accepts their message (e.g., LEC is serious, audience believes the narrative) or into the "negotiated" position where the audience accepts that the league represents itself well, but still negotiates the message (e.g., LEC is serious, but the narrative seems embellished). Both of these positions however, help the LEC to be accepted and integrated into broader cultural norms and perhaps even align it with regular sports. Additionally, applying this theory to Hitpoint Master hints that their lower quality encoding could lead some parts of the audience to reject their message (e.g., Hitpoint Masters is trying to be funny, but it's not working) and what is even more important, it could reinforce Hitpoint Masters and esports in the Czech Republic as a niche industry aimed at sub-cultures - while this could improve the authenticity and the community aspect of the league, it could also hinder the viewership and revenue development.

Applying Hall's encoding and decoding model to further research the interpretation of such esports content could uncover some of the underlying differences between both leagues.

However, there are more questions left unanswered, such as: How long is League of Legends going to stay relevant? Should Hitpoint consider expanding to other esports titles, such as Valorant? Are Czech inexperienced organizations and players capable of adapting to new, more content-oriented responsibilities? Should the esports monetization strategy change to a pay-per-view system instead of free online broadcasts?

5. Research limitations

I have encountered some limitations while making this research. The first one is the availability of relevant respondents. Many relevant esports insiders, personalities, players and management members are very busy throughout the entire year, and despite my very good contacts within the industry and contacting the respondents months in advance, many couldn't or didn't want to take the interview. This research would benefit from more respondents, who could offer different perceptions of the topic, however the respondents i interviewed were more or less unanimous, which makes me confident in this research's results.

Another limitation is that some information I wanted to include, such as the monetization structure of leagues and teams is legally unavailable due to non-disclosure agreements.

Conclusion

In this bachelor thesis I aimed to outline how esports leagues and their respective teams present themselves to their audiences through researching the media-related development of esports at the highest level in the League of Legends EMEA Championship, and then comparing it to the domestic development of Hitpoint Masters.

The results of this research seem to point in multiple directions. First being that the Hitpoint Masters have difficulties regarding resources and time, resulting in lack of media representation. Esports is still a very young industry, which could definitely be a deciding factor, since our domestic scene could still be underdeveloped and its structure isn't prepared for the European level of esports. The second direction suggests that Hitpoint's approach to media representation is insufficient and that the lack of content is an unaddressed issue that requires changes within the organization to be made in order for it to be resolved.

Even though the esports industry is in a weird spot at the moment, the biggest organizations like the LEC have found a way to create and maintain high quality media representation, despite decreasing funding. This thesis suggests that, while problematic, the Czech esports scene, specifically Hitpoint Masters, should try to alter their approach to media representation and develop the league to a higher standard, not only for the sake of revenue, but also to improve the entire industry as a whole.

Závěr

V této bakalářské práci jsem se snažil nastínit, jak se esportové ligy a jejich týmy prezentují svému publiku, a to prostřednictvím výzkumu mediálního vývoje esportu na nejvyšší úrovni v League of Legends EMEA Championship a jeho následného srovnání s domácím vývojem Hitpoint Masters.

Výsledky tohoto výzkumu ukazují několika směry. Prvním je, že Hitpoint Masters mají problémy s nedostatkem času a prostředků, které mají za následek nedostatečnou mediální reprezentaci. Esport je stále velmi mladým odvětvím, což by rozhodně mohlo být rozhodujícím faktorem, jelikož naše domácí scéna může být stále nedostatečně rozvinutá a její struktura nemusí být připravena na evropskou úroveň esportu. Druhý směr naznačuje, že přístup Hitpointu k mediální reprezentaci je nedostatečný a že nedostatek obsahu je neřešeným problémem, pro jehož vyřešení je třeba provést změny uvnitř organizace.

Přestože se odvětví esportu v současné době nachází v podivné situaci, největší organizace jako LEC našly způsob, jak vytvořit a udržet kvalitní mediální reprezentaci, a to i přes klesající finanční prostředky celého odvětví. Tato práce naznačuje, že ačkoliv je to problematické, česká esportová scéna, konkrétně Hitpoint Masters, by se měla pokusit změnit svůj přístup k mediální reprezentaci a rozvinout ligu na vyšší standard, a to nejen kvůli příjmům, ale také kvůli zlepšení celého odvětví jako takového.

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48. Xu, D. (2024, March 7). LEAGUE OF LEGENDS PLAYER COUNT – 2024 STATS. esports.net. https://www.esports.net/news/lol/league-of-legends-player-count/

Thesis proposal

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism FSV UK
Proposal of the Bachelor's thesis</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">THIS SECTION IS TO BE COMPLETED BY THE STUDENT:</td></tr>
<tr><td>Surname and name of the graduate:
Mácha Jonáš</td><td rowspan="4">Stamp of the mailroom:</td></tr>
<tr><td>The matriculation year of the graduate student:
2021</td></tr>
<tr><td>Faculty e-mail of the graduate student:
51865256@fsv.cuni.cz</td></tr>
<tr><td>Study programme/specialization:
Communication Studies - Media Studies Specialization
(J21BPKSMS1330)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Title of the thesis in Czech:
Mediální reprezentace českých a mezinárodních esportových lig</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Title of the thesis in English:
The media representation of Czech and international esport leagues</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Estimated completion date
LS 2024</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Basic characterization of the topic and the intended aim of the thesis:
In this bachelor thesis I will outline how esports leagues and their respective teams present themselves to their audiences. This thesis aims to research the media-related development of esports at the highest level, and then compare it to the domestic development. I intend to compare the Czech esport scene to the European, by investigating leagues distinct approaches to online media presence coupled with the leagues underlining foundational basis of existence such as monetization, infrastructure, and public popularity. By doing this I seek to highlight glaring differences that can explain, and suggest solutions, to existing challenges.

To do that, I will conduct several semi-structured interviews with professional players both from the Czech Hitpoint Masters league teams and from the European League of Legends EMEA Championship teams. I will also conduct interviews with management members from their respective leagues. I will analyze the presentation method of the specific teams and leagues and analyze what are their goals and motivations that make them create a certain kind of online content. I will also compare the two different roles - working in the role of management and working as a professional player, and more importantly compare the presentation of the European LEC league and our domestic Czech league.

The questions this thesis seeks to answer are: "How does LEC and Hitpoint Master perceive themselves in the context of mainstream media?", "How did the LEC and Hitpoint Masters evolve over the last 5 years?" and subsequent questions like: "What are the differences between the media content of the European LEC and the Czech Hitpoint Masters?", "What responsibilities does a professional player have regarding media?" and even "How are Hitpoint Masters and LEC monetized compared to each other and other sports?". Through these questions, I will be able to construct the analysis, comparison, development and achieve this thesis goals.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Expected structure of the work:
  1.   Introduction</td></tr>
</table>

Definition of the material to be processed: Interviews with a professional player and management from both the Czech Hitpoint Masters League and the European LEC

The procedure (technique) for processing the material: I will conduct semi-structured interviews and analyze them using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. These interviews will be split into different sections that will aim to answer different research questions:

As an example:

To answer the research question "How does LEC and Hitpoint Master perceive themselves in the context of mainstream media?", I will be asking the following questions:
1. How do you approach media broadcasting outlets as a team/league member? What are your responsibilities?
2. Does your team/league have any PR specialists?
3. Are you briefed on the topics you can and cannot talk about?
4. Do you have any code of conduct regarding your presence on social media?
5. What kind of content does your team/league create? With what purpose and motivation?

To answer the research question "How did the LEC and Hitpoint Masters evolve over the last 5 years and what are their possible futures?", i will ask the following questions:
1. What kind of content were you making 5 years ago? Did it change?
2. How would you compare Hitpoint Masters to the LEC?
3. Throughout your career, have you ever been included in mainstream media thanks to esports? On what occasion?

4. Is there some kind of content you're glad you don't have to create anymore? Is there some you'd like to make in the future?
5. What do you think is the future of League of Legends and esports in general? If it's good/bad, then why?

The interviews will be recorded and transcribed, whereafter I will familiarize myself with its content, formulating codes, categories, and eventually themes as a part of the process of thematic analysis.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Basic literature:

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- An accessible and theoretically flexible approach to qualitative data analysis. Outlines what thematic analysis is and relates it to other qualitative analytical methods.

Boluk, S., & LeMieux, P. (2017). Metagaming: playing, competing, spectating, cheating, trading, making, and breaking videogames. https://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/1953410/pdf
- Describes how games transcend the "boundaries of the screen" and how streamers, viewers, analysts, or even artists are changing the way we play.

Raising the stakes: e-sports and the professionalization of computer gaming (2012). Choice Reviews Online, 50(03), 50-1511. https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.50-1511
- Examines the emerging scene of professional computer gaming and the accompanying efforts to make this form of gaming a sport.

Taylor, T. L. (2018b). Watch Me Play: Twitch and the rise of game live streaming. http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB27241144
- Examines home studios and behind the scenes of major esports events. Describes the rise of live game streaming and how it is poised to change our understanding of media and audiences.

Leech, B. L. (2002). Asking questions: Techniques for semistructured interviews. PS: Political Science & Politics, 35(04), 665–668. https://doi.org/10.1017/s1049096502001129
- Describes how to develop and process questions for the research interview. It takes into account the information we know and the outcome we want to achieve.

Master thesis on the topic:

Janák, V. (2019, January 17). Popularity of esport among UK students. UK Digital Repository. https://dspace.cuni.cz/handle/20.500.11956/104794

Tereza, K. R. (2021, September 15). Digital Repository UK. https://dspace.cuni.cz/handle/20.500.11956/150512

Kolomoiets, M. (2023, June 12). From fun to profession: the identity of Counter-Strike:Global Offensive esport players. Digital Repository UK. https://dspace.cuni.cz/handle/20.500.11956/181895

Zeman, O. (2022, June 16). esport team as a marketing communication tool. Digital Repository UK. https://dspace.cuni.cz/handle/20.500.11956/174147

Date / Signature of student
13th of March 2024 ………………………

THIS SECTION IS FILLED IN BY THE TEACHER/EDUCATOR:
Recommendations on the topic, structure and technique of the material: The topic is relevant in addressing an emergent sports industry. It redirects the inquiry inwards asking questions about actors within the industry's self-perception and branding strategies, instead of taking a detached observer perspective of evaluating the industry. The proposed structure suggests a predominantly empirical inquiry, and I compliment the author's choice of not overly complicating the topic with uncanny theoretical frameworks or concepts to a topic that may strike some readers as opaque. And lastly, having insider access to industry actors is a privilege in a creative industry, which leads to my full confidence in the final results of this work.
Possible recommendation of other titles of literature prescribed for the topic: From a previous consultation, the student has received and already incorporated my recommended literature.
I confirm that I have consulted the above thesis with its author(s) and that the topic corresponds to my field of specialization and the area of professional work I am doing at FSV UK. **I agree to be the leader(s) of this work.** Nielsen, Daniel   ………………………
Surname and name of the teacher   **Date / Signature of the teacher**

THESES MUST BE SUBMITTED PRINTED, SIGNED AND IN DUPLICATE BY THE DEADLINE SPECIFIED IN THE INSTITUTE'S DIRECTOR'S DECREE, THROUGH THE OFFICE OF THE FSV UK. ACCEPTED THESES MUST BE COLLECTED FROM THE SECRETARIAT OF THE RELEVANT DEPARTMENT AND BOUND INTO A COPY OF THE THESIS. THESES ARE APPROVED BY THE GUARANTEE OF THE RELEVANT STUDY PROGRAMME.