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## The Rise of the Bentley and Broad War Boys: Converting Nascent Automotive and Computer Technologies into Mainstream Sports

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sports was governed by three important, interrelated factors (Betts, 1953; Cofaigh, 2011; Hassan, 2014; Jackson, 2015; Li, 2016; Martin, 2002; Rose, 1949; Scholz, 2019):

- (1) the pace at which the technology became mature enough for competitive success to be sufficiently attributable to human factors, that is, for it to become a “sport”;
- (2) the pace at which the technology infused popular culture deeply enough to generate a sufficient number of participants and spectators; and
- (3) the pace at which businesses recognized the competitions as attractive avenues for product promotion.

This paper will compare the early factors that were involved in developing sports branches of the nascent automobile and computer industries. It will show that, for both technologies, it was not only industries directly profiting from mainstreaming the technology, but mostly industries indirectly related to these technologies (such as media), that drove the evolution of these industries into sports. The paper will start with an overview of how business, media and technology intertwined in the evolution of both motorsports and e-sports. It will compare the influence of the three identified factors on motorsport and e-sports, concluding with how these factors will continue to influence the evolution of both sports.

### **The Origins of Motorsport: Showcasing the technology, the car brand, or the race organiser?**

Automobility saw its roots at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1885, internal combustion engines became small and light enough to be installed in motor vehicles (McShane, 2014). Between then and 1914, automobiles became an essential element of everyday life, and motorsports matured with sophisticated vehicles competing in prestigious international competitions (Cofaigh, 2011; Kanger, Geels, Sovacool, & Schot, 2019; Rose, 1949).

There is no shortage of histories of the earliest years of the motorcar industry, mostly featuring vehicle details and biographies of key figures (Flink, 1990; Laux, 1963, 1976; McShane, 2014; Thompson, 1954; Thoms & Donnelly, 2017; Twitchen, 2004). That this industry could not have been considered an *industry* without there being a sufficient number of substantial commercial enterprises to make it one, often fades into the background. The image of a handful of skilled craftsmen assembling a few automobiles in a workshop and delivering them to select (wealthy) sportsmen is not without a kernel of truth. However, such ventures would almost inevitably fail without their growing into serious *businesses*.

Growth required a broad customer base beyond select wealthy, discerning sportsmen who had the time, money and the determination to overcome obstreperous machinery and poor roads to motor for pleasure. Automobiles had to attract the interest of the larger part of the population who



competitions could facilitate the vicarious experience of spectators closer to the action envisioning themselves in the drivers' seat.

At the same time, the popular press was benefitting from increased levels of literacy in society and therefore a growing readership. They were actively seeking ways to ensure this new class of readers would purchase their papers over competitors'. With a simultaneous increase in literacy with interest in sports, their motivation was to take advantage of a pre-existing interest in a product, whether bicycles or automobiles (which competed with each other), or to create an interest for subsequent exploitation (Cofaigh, 2011). Publishers and other promoters created profitable opportunities to simultaneously satisfy both sorts of demand by creating automotive events and then writing about them.

More explicitly, by co-organising these races, newspapers would have first (and sometimes only) access to news stories related to the race, giving them the possibility to publish as many stories about the race as they deemed necessary to capture the interest and enthusiasm of their readership (Holladay & Coombs, 2013). In summary, it is doubtful that there would have been enough interest the following day in the results to stimulate sales of *Le Petit Journal*, which organized the first event, but in the long term, the event could promote the paper in general and perhaps initiate a successful tradition having the potential to earn entry and admissions fees along with publicity with future events. In that sense, the slogan '*Race on Sunday; Sell on Monday*' (Cornwell, Pruitt, & Van Ness, 2001) was less likely to refer to the sales of automobiles than to the sales of newspapers and magazines and advertising space in them. This intimate relationship between sports and media was not solely limited to motorsports, and has been the subject of much research on the position of sports in society (Rowe, 2015).

Media coverage about automobile technology thus supported the manufacturers, as people were fascinated by the novelty, the excitement and freedom automobiles represented. Even though they might not be able to afford automobiles themselves, people sought out information about them directly (looking at them) and indirectly (reading about them) (Betts, 1953; Flink, 1990; Holladay & Coombs, 2013; McShane, 2014). For manufacturers, it was advantageous to participate in the events to display their products and to place advertisements in newspapers and magazines adjacent to the articles about those events. After all, those who were reading the articles were among the most likely sales prospects (Holladay & Coombs, 2013). Thus, the inaugural events of organized motorsport were driven by: (1) automobile manufacturers that wanted their products to be seen, (2) a curious public that wanted to see them, and (3) a press promoter who saw a profitable opportunity bringing the two together.

Perhaps a more interesting question is whether the event was really *motorsport*. That it is described as a competition and had a winner *might* qualify it as a sport, but that it is elsewhere described as a *concours* and was essentially a mobile display is more characteristic of a sort of *motorshow*. Furthermore, the first automobile organization (Automobile Club de France) was only started



Manufacturers were human too, and in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, many drove for the same excitement, adventure, and status that their customers sought, and they strove for power, speed, and durability for that reason.

### **The Origins of e-Sports: Love for the game, the technology or the money?**

The birth of modern computers is often situated in the 1930s-1940s, with many early systems developed in secrecy due to their military purposes (Martin, 2002; Rosenberg, 2013). Finally after public exposure, there was much interest from the general populace in computers which could perform numerous calculations at incredible speed. There were also many critics, however, arguing about the possible negative effects this new technology could have on society and claiming that these systems would be too complicated for use by non-experts (Rosenberg, 2013).

For further progress, then, researchers had to show how computers could be useful for dealing with everyday tasks by any individual. One strategy was by showing how computers could be used to play games such as checkers or tic-tac-toe. This showed the advantage of computers being able to do a large number of computations in a short time, allowing them to anticipate a human player's moves (Jorgensen, 2009). However, it quickly became obvious that gaming would be more exciting if computers would provide an interface for multiple players to play against one another (Jorgensen, 2009).

One of the first multiplayer games—and often considered the first computer game—was *Spacewar* (Monnens & Goldberg, 2015). The game code was available for other programmers, allowing the game to spread (Monnens & Goldberg, 2015). Although some sources claim *Spacewar* almost immediately grew in popularity (Graetz, 1981), others show that it first became popular from 1968 onwards largely in universities, thanks to a strong increase in the number of computers available at these institutes (Monnens & Goldberg, 2015). Eventually by 1972, the game had gathered sufficient attention to be featured in the television series *21<sup>st</sup> century* (Monnens & Goldberg, 2015) and popular culture magazine *Rolling Stone*, in which it was covered by the magazine's sports' reporter Stewart Brand (Brand, 1972; Monnens & Goldberg, 2015). The *Rolling Stone* article covered the first *Spacewar* competition, which was organised and sponsored by the magazine at Stanford University and attracted about 20 “competitors” who were members of the research laboratory (Li, 2016). Sponsoring of the event was limited to providing food and drinks to the participants and giving the winners (there were 3 events) a free one-year subscription to the magazine (Brand, 1972; Li, 2016).

The main reason for *Rolling Stone* involvement appears to have been to provide a platform for the magazine to describe the dawn of the modern computer era. *Rolling Stone*, having been founded in 1967, was a relatively new magazine, and it arguably wanted to cement its position as a leading popular culture magazine by being one of the first to cover the potentials computers could offer. Although the story was not surrounded by advertisements for





these gamers, and gamers did not have the financial resources to travel the world to compare their skills to other local champions.

New interest in competitive gaming occurred in the early 1980s with the arrival of the Atari VCS/2600, which included versions of popular arcade games (Novak, 2011). In 1981, Atari created the *Space Invaders Championships*, attracting more than ten thousand players in the USA to compete against one another and reach the highest score in *Space Invaders* (Li, 2016). This was followed up by a television series *Starcade*, which featured contestants trying to set the highest score in popular arcade games (Borowy & Dai, 2013). These events coincided with the first boom in game consoles (Borowy & Dai, 2013). As the competition in the industry grew, console manufacturers recognised the need to attract gamers to their own products, but since games remained console-specific, game developers themselves did not see benefit in sponsoring tournaments. Apart from the Atari championships, gamers remained unable to compete at (inter)national levels.

The World Wide Web, however, brought online gaming and more generally the usefulness of home computers to the attention of the general public. At its introduction in 1993, about one fifth of American households were using a personal computer. By the 2000s, this had increased to over half the number of households, of which about 80% used the Internet (File, 2013). The World Wide Web gave people access to information from across the world, and this finally allowed gamers to test their skills at an international level. In North America and Europe, a game genre that quickly gained a large community were first-person shooters (FPSs). By 1997, the participants set up the first (semi-)professional leagues, which organized the first e-sports events competed in front of a live audience (Wagner, 2006). As early internet networks were not sufficiently stable for online gameplay (Li, 2016), these tournaments were organised in large venues allowing gamers to compete using a local-area-network (LAN). As all computers on an LAN are connected to the same server, issues related to internet technology were avoided, and players could compete with equal access to technology. LAN tournaments continue to be the standard format of contemporary e-sports (Li, 2016).

The release of *Counter-Strike* fully developed e-sports toward mainstream audiences, with competitions organized by the *Electronic Sports League (ESL)* being broadcast on free-view television channels (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010). As with the 1972 championship, this rise in e-sports seemed to be mostly driven by gaming enthusiasts and media broadcasters who saw potential in this 'new' form of sport (Li, 2016). Both hoped to increase future profits by exposing the e-sports audience to their products (Li, 2016). Some businesses, especially computer accessory and energy and soft drink companies also started sponsoring e-sport players or teams, albeit in very limited amounts (Li, 2016). These businesses likely expected some increase in sales if the winning gamer or team used their specific headset or keyboard, or their energy drink to maintain focus on the game. When the 2008 financial crisis hit,



This marketing strategy arose from the popularity of professional gamers' channels on social media streams such as Twitch.tv and YouTube (Taylor, 2018). After losing their sponsorship, many gamers started channels to share their gameplay strategies with the community or allow spectators a 'driver's seat' view when they were competing. Tournament organizers started broadcasting tournaments on these social media as well, ensuring e-sports is now considered as part of mainstream events (Li, 2016; Taylor, 2018) and making e-sport events and teams interesting avenues for advertising products by businesses such as Audi (Miceli, 2018), Pringles (Hayward, 2019) or Marvel Entertainment (Duran, 2019).

Many professional sports leagues are also organising their own e-sports versions of their events (FA, 2019; FIA, 2019; FIFA, 2019; NBA, 2019). In motorsports, the e-motorsport series linked to the (real) Formula E Series and World Endurance Championship have received much attention (FIA, 2019; Robeers & Van Den Bulck, 2018), and live streams of racing games such as iRacing or Project Cars are now widely available online (Scacchi, 2018). Many of the e-sports players are also paid by the sports teams they represent (Li, 2016), and human teams or athletes occasionally participate in e-sport events, potentially with the intention to increase interest in the original sport with the gaming community (van Leeuwen, 2019). Li, however, remains cautious about this interest from businesses not directly related to gaming:

The question of whether more money is good for eSports remains unsettled. It can mean more financial opportunity for all involved, but also a shift towards reliance on businesspeople and investors with no emotional ties to eSports. Their focus is revenue, users and growth. That's all fine when the eSports industry is booming. But when the next downturn or crash happens, they're unlikely to have much loyalty to the people who built it and were invested purely on passion (Li, 2016).

Things have however been changing due to differences in marketing strategies of online and mobile games based on in-app purchases (Liu, Au, & Choi, 2014; Nieborg, 2016). Game developers now see e-sports tournaments as a way to attract new audiences to their game and to show their current customers how they can improve their gaming skills and winning chances by buying upgrades. Gamers are also starting to relate to teams or e-sports stars, often by buying the same weapons or outfits as these stars use for their game characters. This is similar to how others are inspired to buy branded products promoted by Instagram or YouTube influencers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). Finally, developers also make limited-edition accessories available to promote and provide funding for e-sports tournaments, which might improve sustainability of these tournaments (Li, 2016).



on functionality (data analysis, computation power) that could not be derived easily from competitive gaming performance. This can be a further aspect of the reason why e-sports took slightly longer to become mainstream compared to motorsports, as only recently game developers have become interested in promoting their games through competition.

The upturns and downturns of motorsport popularity since its birth have been strongly influenced by its portrayal in the media. A recent example is the reduced interest in NASCAR (Gold, 2019), which a decade ago was considered to have been surging in popularity (Newman, 2007). Although often showing how advances in motorsport technology benefit technology in everyday cars, media has often scrutinised motorsport regarding its safety (McNish, 2015), strong relationship with products that place people's health at risk (Dewhurst & Hunter, 2002) and, most recently, the detrimental effects of racing and automobiles on the environment (Dingle, 2009; Tranter & Lowes, 2009). The automobile industry and interested parties in motorsports have been able to maintain motorsports' popularity through changes in regulations and advocating new technology. Media is used to promote these new technologies, for example the recent increase in Formula E media coverage (Kalinauckas, 2019; Lovett, 2019; Robeers, 2019).

Interest in e-sports could suffer as a result of the legal complexity associated with the regulation of events and assignment of broadcasting rights of (online) gaming. Gameplay rules are set by the game developers, who maintain intellectual property on any game they release. The game development companies therefore have significant control over which tournaments can be organized and who can broadcast tournaments, as was evidenced by the difficult negotiations between Blizzard Entertainment and KeSPA in 2008 regarding broadcasting rights (Li, 2016). Other issues with the gaming industry that have been scrutinized by the media are related to exposing children and other vulnerable groups to hidden costs related with in-app purchases (Kleinman, 2019a, 2019b), and how these in-app purchases violate regulations associated with current gambling laws (Tassi, 2019).

Furthermore, issues have been raised regarding game and gamer violence (Fleming, 2018; Potkin, 2018; Ruvalcaba, Shulze, Kim, Berzenski, & Otten, 2018) and gaming addiction (Lally, 2018; Reynolds, 2018). Another major issue is the gender and racial imbalance in e-sports (Taylor, 2012). Women joining e-sports events are mostly members of the audience or fan base of (male) e-sports athletes, and female pro gamers are often the victims of online sexual abuse or limited training opportunities, as they are considered to "game differently" or being inferior to their male counterparts (Li, 2016; Taylor, 2012). In some gaming genres, most professional team members are still white males, although a more diverse population can be seen in fighting and strategy games (Li, 2016; Taylor, 2012). Not all countries have an e-sport governing body either, leading to a lack of regulations and to players suing their teams due to unpaid salaries or poor living conditions (Hollist, 2015; Li, 2016).



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