

# ESports hopefuls dare to dream big at Germany's Gamescom

August 26 2017, by Tom Barfield

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Yes, this could be your day job. Lavish cash prizes have allowed some computer game players to go professional, competing on eSports teams. Professional computer game players battle it out for cash prizes in front of giant audiences online or in real-life arenas with tens of thousands of seats.

As hundreds of thousands of gamers surge through the halls of Cologne's Gamescom trade fair, a select band ducks out of the throng into roped-off lounges and VIP sections to talk tactics and prize money—the

professional eSports players.

Fast becoming one of the biggest trends in gaming, eSports sees teams of professional computer [game players](#) battle it out for cash prizes in front of giant audiences online or in real-life arenas with tens of thousands of seats.

A slightly-built 23-year-old from Slovakia, Martin Styk could easily have passed unnoticed at an event like Gamescom if it weren't for his bright red football-style shirt emblazoned with the logos of big-name sponsors like Vodafone and Dr. Pepper.

Under his online alter-ego Styko, German eSports team mousesports hired him in early August for his skills in the tactical shooter game Counter-Strike that pits insurgents against counter-terrorists.

"It's definitely not an easy task to become this kind of a player, but I can say so far it's really worth it," he said across the barrier to a VIP area—punctuated elsewhere by gawkers angling for a view into the lives of the energy drink-sipping pros.

Styk spends up to 10 hours a day practising his chosen game, a rhythm he's kept up for around two years since eSports became his full-time job.

On top of keeping their skills sharp, professional players maintain intense interaction with their fans, streaming live video of their playing sessions while chatting about their performance and posting a steady flow of tweets.

Even with the pressure to perform and to be available to fans, perks for an eSports pro can be attractive, with all-expenses-paid travel to tournaments or events like Gamescom, where mousesports played friendly matches against rival team Flipsid3 Tactics.

"We as the players are kind of living the dream while we're on the road. It's something that maybe will not last forever, but since I have it I want to enjoy it as much as I can," Styk said.

## **Billion dollar business**

Dane Saief Al-Faour—whose team Meet Your Makers claimed the title of world champions in Battlefield 4 at Gamescom 2014—was a little more cautious at the height of his gaming career.

Now 32, he never quit his job as a software developer even back when prize money was rolling in.

That turned out to be the safer choice, as the combat game's star faded and the cash dried up.



Dressing up as game characters is part of the fun at the gaming fair Gamescom

in Cologne, Germany.

"I've always been a hardcore Battlefield fan, I don't play for money. If I played for money then I would play something else," Al-Faour explained.

The most popular games can be lucrative. At Gamescom, some \$237,000 (200,000 euros) was set to be distributed among winners of a Rainbow Six league, while contenders in a Playerunknown's Battlegrounds league had their sights on total prize money of \$350,000.

Al-Faour still nurtures hope that the latest instalment of the Battlefield franchise will propel the series back into big-time competitions.

But he's equally enthusiastic about other possibilities opening up in the field.

ESports "is changing a lot and we don't know where it's gonna take us, what the limit is," he said.

Estimates cited by the organisers of the E3 industry show in July suggest eSports could hit the threshold of \$1 billion in revenue next year, five times its size in 2015.

ESports will be an official part of the Asian Games in Hangzhou, China in 2022 after a dry run at next year's event—although the oft-discussed prospect of gaming securing a place at the Olympics still appears remote.

## **Passion project**

And with more cash and larger crowds come new opportunities for

insiders, like working as a talent spotter for big-name teams or offering on-camera analysis of live events.

"I'm getting too old for the game personally, but I would like to be more involved. I need to go for my passion, and my passion is eSports," Al-Faour said.

Even for those striving to break into the exclusive world of the professionals, gaming remains a passion rather than a piggy bank.

"Having a lot of money or getting a lot of fans isn't the goal. It's about playing and making people happy," said Fabian Robbe, a 21-year-old Call of Duty player from western Germany using his ample downtime as a student to hone his bid for the big leagues.

In any case, "only maybe one percent of people manage" to make a living from eSports, he pointed out. "That's why I'm focusing on my studies right now."

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Citation: ESports hopefuls dare to dream big at Germany's Gamescom (2017, August 26)  
retrieved 11 September 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2017-08-esports-big-germany-gamescom.html>

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