

Nerves of Zeal

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23/03/2018 Car races are decided on the track. That will continue to be the case in the future. But virtual contests are on the rise. Welcome to the world of Esports.

"Curtains!" yells Lars Kern as his Porsche 911 GT2 RS comes to a crashing halt against the barriers on the Nordschleife of the Nürburgring. "Well, that would normally be the case," he adds with a smile. He takes a quick look at the controller in his hand, searching for reverse. A few seconds later he's flying through the "Green Hell" again—on the screen of an Xbox console video game.

Kern is a test and development driver at Porsche who spent many years as a race-car driver. In 2017 he drove a 911 GT2 RS to a new record for road-authorized sports cars on the Nordschleife—a sensational 6:47.3 minutes. He's also very good at transferring his skills to a racing simulator, thanks to the steering wheel and the software's high degree of realism. But even for someone with his level of experience, driving without a steering wheel is a completely different story. A small controller with a dozen buttons but no pedals and no feel for the car. "I'm slightly out of my depth," concedes Kern.

World rally champion on the Xbox

The contestants are also another story in the world of Esports. One example would be “aTTaX Johnson”—also known as Niklas Krellenberg—who at twenty-seven is already a world rally champion on the Xbox gaming console. He steers his Porsche confidently across the screen through the virtual curves of the legendary racecourse in the Eifel region. The controller is for him what the steering wheel is for Kern—an extension of his arms. Like Kern, Krellenberg knows the braking points on countless racetracks and the weaknesses of his rivals and challengers. He knows which cars will respond in which ways to strong steering actions. And when he races, he switches off the traction control and anti-lock braking. After just two minutes on the Xbox, Krellenberg the e-racer is already several seconds ahead of Kern the sim racer. “Amazing!” exclaims Kern. Krellenberg seldom sits behind a real steering wheel in an actual car. He uses public transportation for the short commute to the university. If he needs a car in his home town of Magdeburg, he borrows his parents’ wheels.

Krellenberg is a new type of athlete. He doesn't lift weights or send balls of any type flying across a court. Soccer players have amazing legs; race-car drivers are said to require extraordinary muscles in their buttocks. For gamers like Krellenberg, the eyes and hands are what count. Their fingers can perform up to five hundred actions per minute.

Next goal: the Olympic Games

For some time now Esport tournaments have been filling arenas—but are these competitions really sports? “Of course they are,” says Krellenberg. “I do more than sports shooters, for example.” Athletic associations are beginning to share this view. In 2022 Esports will be a medal event at the Asian Games, and the International Olympic Committee is considering whether to include them at the Summer Games in Paris in 2024. This is hardly surprising. Worldwide sales of computer games exceeded one hundred billion U.S. dollars in 2016—more than the global film and music industries combined. Some 2.2 billion people compete regularly in these games. The best of them can live off the sport—quite well, in fact. They’re organized in professional teams, draw set salaries, and win high levels of prize money. Tournaments for League of Legends, a role-playing team game, can award millions of dollars to the winners.

Controller artists

Soccer clubs like VfL Wolfsburg in Germany’s Bundesliga have begun to add Esport teams to their organizations. “We want to reach young people with our programs,” explains Tim Schumacher, the club’s general manager. And of course there’s also a strong interest in “developing new marketing fields.” So Wolfsburg became the world’s first soccer club to offer contracts to Esport players.

Twenty-five-year-old Benedikt Saltzer and twenty-year-old Timo Siep, who have both won multiple

German championships, have signed one-year contracts with the Wolfsburg team. “It’s growing very quickly,” says Saltzer, who lives off his skill with a controller, as does Siep. The trend has caught on throughout the sector. More pro clubs have followed suit and a virtual soccer league might just be a question of time. “That would be cool,” says Siep.

E-racing hasn’t made it that far yet. “But it certainly pays for my studies,” notes Krellenberg. During crucial periods he trains up to eight hours a day and is convinced that he’ll eventually be rewarded for his efforts. “It’s just starting to take off, and the momentum is unstoppable,” he says.

Model presentation at a gaming fair

Professional structures are also starting to appear in motorsports. In the summer of 2017 Porsche and Microsoft invited the best e-racers from an online contest to enter a twenty-four-hour race in Le Mans. The contestants vied for their own Le Mans laurels on their Xbox consoles—in a sixth classification—and took part in the official awards ceremony. One week earlier Microsoft had presented the most powerful 911 in history, the GT2 RS, at the Electronic Entertainment Expo in Los Angeles. To a crowd of gamers. In advance of the model’s official presentation. After all, the GT2 RS is the hero car of the popular Forza Motorsport 7 racing video game. Based on the steering wheel of the real 911, a controller lined with Alcantara leather is available for sale.

“The gaming sector means a lot to us, because it enables us to provide an emotional and interactive brand experience to a young and extensive target group,” explains Sebastian Hornung, Porsche’s director of branded entertainment. “Awakening and promoting interest in motorsports and conveying the excitement of the racetrack—you can do that really well in the virtual world,” he adds. Last year alone, Hornung and his team put considerable effort into preparing multiple Porsche models for use in a wide range of games. “The entire process—including taking photos and possibly laser measurements, providing the technical data, and producing a digital copy for the game—takes around six months. For each individual model,” he reports. The result is a virtual experience that is astonishingly close to driving a real Porsche. “It's awfully similar to the real thing,” confirms test driver Kern as he races his GT2 RS around the Nordschleife in Forza Motorsport 7. “It feels extremely realistic.”

Esports are gaining in relevance

Digital developments and rapidly accelerating process speeds have brought virtual racing to the attention of the traditional racing scene. “The lines between the two fields are starting to blur,” says Frank-Steffen Walliser, Porsche’s motorsports director. “Esports are are gaining in relevance. We’re interested in this development and want to help shape it.” After all, virtual processes are an integral part of making cars. Simulators are used every day to tune them, and computers are absolutely essential development aids.

What’s new are the possibilities for training drivers. How can young talent be encouraged? Console

games can help address this question, says Walliser, because “many e-racers have acquired a very good foundation.” A virtual Carrera Cup is conceivable. One major advantage is the fact that the threshold for ambitious young drivers is considerably lower. “I wanted to be a race-car driver at a very young age,” says Kern. “But my mother thought racing was too expensive and too dangerous.” So he made his way into the profession via simulator races. “That was a lot less expensive—and not dangerous at all.”

Despite major advances in virtual racing, everyone recognizes that they’re different from racing in physical form. “The sense of speed isn’t the same; you can’t compare it with accelerating a real car,” says Kern. It’s difficult to convey that type of sensation in a virtual setting. The textures, spatial relations, and smells of a race car also play very special roles. “Which is why classic motorsports will continue,” predicts Kern. “But in the future, it’ll be side by side with virtual motorsports.”

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