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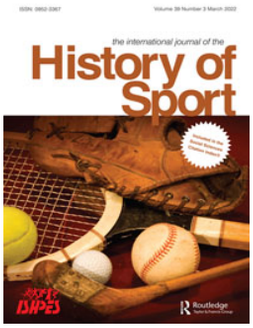

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Forging a Link between Competitive Gaming, Sport and the Olympics: History and New Developments

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ABSTRACT

Using historical narratives and a qualitative research approach, this article aims to understand how competitive gaming has established its relationship with sport and the Olympics in the past five decades, and further discusses the obstacles and challenges for esports' Olympic inclusion. In the 1970s and 1980s, game manufacturers and publishers, consciously or unconsciously, forged a link between video games, competition and sport. Beginning in the early 2000s, due to its overwhelming popularity, efforts have been made by various organisations to have esports accredited as a full sport. In recent years, sporting governing bodies have started to take esports seriously, and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has made efforts to incorporate it into the Olympic movement. This article suggests that the IOC must adopt a more open-minded and inclusive approach in order to better understand the esports ecosystem and the young digital generations.

KEYWORDS

Competitive gaming; esports; sport; Olympics; history

In 2021, gaming market research company Newzoo estimated that the global esports industry had generated US$947.1 million in revenue in 2020, with esports enthusiasts and occasional viewers at 220.5 million and 215.4 million respectively. This means competitive gaming/esports is already a popular spectator event with a fan base comparable to that of mid-tier traditional sports such as table tennis, baseball, rugby and golf.[1] Due to its overwhelming popularity, competitive gaming has become an important academic topic. Reitman et al. review esports literature published between 2002 and 2018, and point out that esports research 'has developed from nonexistent into a field of study spread across seven academic disciplines' – business, sports science, cognitive science, informatics, law, media studies and sociology. Among these research topics, the definition of esports and its relationship with real sport have been widely discussed and studied.[2] For example, Parry argues that, in contrast to Olympic sports that can be defined as institutionalised, rule-governed contests of human physical skill (though not the official definition from the IOC), esports are inadequately 'human', lack direct physicality, fail to employ decisive whole-body

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control and skills, cannot contribute to the development of the whole human, and lack stable and persisting institutions characteristic of sports governance. They therefore should not be recognised as sports.[3] Jenny et al. also point out that although esports 'include play and competition, are organised by rules, require skill and have a broad following',[4] they lack physicality and institutionalisation, both defining characteristics of real sport.

Kane and Spradley, on the other hand, believe that esports should be considered sports, because multiple links can be observed between physical exertion and video games, and one must learn skills and techniques to become a professional gamer.[5] They point out that 'playing video games as a hobby has evolved into competitions and tournaments with cash prizes'.[6] Llorens supports this view. She asserts, 'Competitive gaming disputed in discrete games, with the intention of beating an opponent, requires a lot of skill, precision, concentration, body control, fast movements, endurance and team strategy… provided these esports have wide following and a certain institutional framework around them'.[7]

Some scholars take a neutral stance.[8] For example, Jonasson and Thiborg apply Guttmann's definitions of sport and the characteristics of modern sport to esports, and point out: 'Sports are often regarded as a virtue, whereas computer gaming is looked upon as a vice… the conception of esport as an unhealthy activity still works against esport in the struggle to become accepted in hegemonic sport'.[9] Thiel and John argue: 'In the public discourse, esport has already established itself as a specific form of a sportive competition, even though the debate about whether esport can be defined as a sport in the narrower sense or not is far from resolved'.[10]

The nature of competitive gaming, particularly its relationship with sport, needs to be explored further. Unlike the above mentioned studies that discuss the issue from theoretical and philosophical perspectives, this article for the first time uses historical narratives and a qualitative research approach to investigate how competitive gaming has built up a link with sport and the Olympics in the past decades. It also tries to identify and understand the obstacles and challenges facing esports' Olympic inclusion. The data for this study are collected from journal articles, newspaper articles, video game company newsletters, video game magazines, market research reports, esports news portals, esports organisation and sport governing body websites.

Forging a Link between Video Game Competitions, Sport and the Olympics

The history of competitive gaming can be traced back to the mid-twentieth century when the first generation of video games was developed by computer scientists and electronic engineers in order to explore and demonstrate the capabilities of computers. Pioneering games, such as Josef Kates' *Bertie the Brain* (1950), Alexander Shafto Douglas' *OXO* (1952), William Brown and Ted Lewis's *Pool* (1954), William Higinbotham's *Tennis for Two* (1958), and Steve Russell's *Spacewar!* (1962) were all based on the concept of sport-like competition, pitting players against each other or against the computer. The world's first competitive gaming event, the Intergalactic Spacewar Olympics, took place in Stanford University's Artificial Intelligence

Laboratory on October 19, 1972, with some 20 participants fighting a virtual interstellar war for the title.[11]

When commercial video games began to emerge in the United States and Japan in the early 1970s, game developers and manufacturers, consciously or unconsciously, forged a link between video games, competition and sport. As early as 1974, Sega hosted Japan's first competitive gaming event, the Sega All Japan TV Game Championships. The tournament was designed to promote interest in video games and 'foster better business relationships between the maker-location-customer and create an atmosphere of sports competition on TV amusement games'.[12] Starting in the late 1970s, coin-operated arcade distributors and operators in the United States began to organize video game events and competitions, some of which tried to establish a connection with real sport competitions and the Olympic games. For instance, in 1977 Atari's corporate newsletter, *Atari Coin Connection*, reported that local operators in Des Moines, Iowa had created special games rooms in hotels and motels for high school students who visited the city to attend sporting events. Atari advised operators in other cities to follow this 'profitable idea' and organize mini game tournaments 'to provide added incentive to the players'.[13] In August and September 1979, a Pinball Olympics and a game tournament were hosted by Pinball Pete's Arcade during the 'Games of Amusement' exhibition staged at the Impression 5 museum in Lansing, Michigan.[14]

Entering the 1980s, assisted by the powerful Atari phenomenon, *Pac-Man* fever, and the Nintendo craze that swept the world, video games started to penetrate pop culture and gain mainstream acceptance. Against this background, competitive gaming entered its first golden age, and game manufacturers, operators and publishers continued to make efforts to build up the link between video games and the Olympics. It started in February 1980 when an Olympic Arcade Triathlon was held during the winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York. The event, approved by the local Olympic Committee, was organised by Upstate Vending Service and sponsored by coin-op amusement machine companies Bally Midway and Irving Kaye. It aimed to 'broaden the appeal and enhance the image of coin-operated games by presenting them as a clean wholesome form of leisure time competitive entertainment'.[15] Athletes were invited to a game room set up in the Athletes' Village, to compete in three arcade games: pinball, foosball and *Space Invaders*. Canadian ski jumper Steve Collins won the grand prize by scoring 4,700 points in *Space Invaders* and 645,000 points in *Harlem Globetrotters* pinball.[16] This tournament was one of the first officially recognised gaming competitions held during an international sporting event.

In the same year, Microsoft released the first Olympic-themed sports video game in history – *Olympic Decathlon*. The game was developed by Timothy W. Smith for the TRS-80 home computer. It simulates real-life track and field events including 100 m dash, 400 m dash, 1500 m run, 100 m hurdles, long jump, high jump, pole vault, shot put, discus and javelin. Up to eight players could compete against each other, using the keyboard to control the in-game characters' speed and movements. The skill, timing and reflexes necessary for success lie in the players' manual dexterity and hand-eye coordination.[17] Points were awarded based on each event's finishing times, distances or heights. The objective was to get the highest points possible, and to beat the world record of 8,168 points created by Bruce Jenner in

the 1976 Montreal Olympics. Thanks to its innovative designs and engaging gameplay, *Olympic Decathlon* won the Creative Computer Game of the Year award at America's 1980 West Coast Computer Faire.[18] Due to its popularity, the game was ported to Apple II in 1981 and the newly released IBM PC in 1982.[19]

Inspired by the highly successful *Olympic Decathlon*, game developers produced similar track and field simulations, and used the Olympic movement to promote their games. In 1983, Activision – a third-party game software company founded by former Atari game developers in 1979 – released *The Activision Decathlon* for the Atari 2600 home console. The company hosted a gaming event called the Activision Decathlon Lounge during the sixth Special Olympics Summer World Games, held in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in July 1983. During the three-day event, around 2,000 athletes frequented the lounge and played the game.[20] Later that year, a 16-week fundraising video game tournament, with $60,800 in prizes, was launched in the US to support schools and the Special Olympics.[21]

That same year, Konami released the arcade video game *Hyper Olympic*, in Japan. The game's six Olympic events were the 100 m dash, 100 m hurdles, javelin, hammer throw, long jump and high jump. Players used three buttons to control the speed and action of the athletes to achieve high scores in a chosen event. The game was officially licensed by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) for the upcoming 1984 Los Angeles Olympic games, and was released in Europe and the US under the title *Track & Field*.[22] It was advertised by Konami as a unique video game allowing players to experience the excitement of real sport.[23] Before the 1984 summer Olympics, a Konami-sponsored video game tournament called March of Dimes International Konami/Centuri Hyper Olympic/Track & Field Challenge was held in Japan, Germany and the US between April 29 and May 19. Over a million players took part in regional qualifiers in arcades and convenience stores nationwide, and the grand finals took place in Tokyo that June.[24] This tournament raised $100,000 for children's charity March of Dimes International and was praised as 'the kind of activity that the industry could take pride from'.[25] It was later listed in *Twin Galaxies' Official Video Game & Pinball Book of World Records* as 'history's largest arcade video game tournament'.[26]

Around this time, video game players and supporters began to suggest that competitive gaming should be recognised as a sport and included in the Olympic programme. American writer Craig Kubey, author of national bestsellers *Scoring Big at Pacman* (1982) and *The Winners' Book of Video Games* (1982), explained the logic behind this in 1982: 'Due to the tremendous athletic skill needed to master video games, due to their huge spectator appeal, and due to their acceptance in countries all over the globe, video games clearly should be made a part of the Olympics'.[27] He offered an example of how video game competitions could be conducted at the coming Los Angeles Olympics:

> Ideally there will be video competition for both men and women at the 1984 Games in Los Angeles. Competition should be conducted in the world's most popular five coin-op and five home video games. Medals should be awarded for highest scores by individuals and by teams (of five players), as well as for highest style point scores by individuals and teams. Style points, up to 10.0 per game per athlete, should be awarded for ship movement, laser fire and Smart-Bomb use, with attention paid to grace, speed, proximity to danger, and creativity of movement.[28]

In the 1990s, together with the widespread uptake of personal computers and the internet, PC games began to replace arcade and console games as the ideal platform for competitive gaming, with players competing against each other via Local Area Network (LAN), through dial-up modem connection or over the internet. Game publishers, online gaming service providers and the online gaming community played a leading role in organising these tournaments. Landmark events – DWANGO's Deathmatch '95, the annual QuakeCon LAN party started in 1996, the CPL FRAG series (1997–1999), the PGL seasons (1997–1999), and the '99 Sports Seoul Cup – all contributed to the formation of a modern form of competitive gaming which involved players, spectators, game publishers, online gaming platforms/services, event organisers, sponsors, media coverage and game-based virtual clans and communities. Based in the rapidly growing online gaming community and stimulated by an ever-increasing prize pool, a cyberathlete culture took shape and the concept of esports and professional gaming began to spread internationally.[29]

In the 2000s, an increasing number of esports organizations and international tournaments were launched in Asia and Europe, and leading technology companies and game publishers now spend millions of dollars a year sponsoring and organising tournaments. With the rapid development of computer hardware and software technologies, and assisted by high-speed broadband networks and services, online multi-player gaming has become much more accessible for both PC and console gamers, leading to fast growth in both competitive gaming participants and the fan base.[30]

At the same time, new games of various genres have emerged, boosting the growth of the global video games market and transforming the esports landscape. Sports games, notably soccer, basketball, golf and sim racing, have become increasingly popular among the competitive gaming community, opening new possibilities for esports to integrate with traditional sports; fighting games have continued to expand their influence in the competitive gaming community and beyond; traditional Real-Time Strategy (RTS) games have been replaced by Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) games; team play-oriented competitions have started to dominate the First-Person Shooter (FPS) arena.[31] Today, competitive gaming is widely regarded as a hobby, a leisure activity, a social media platform, and a new lifestyle choice in the computer age. It is mirroring the achievements of 'real' sports and changing the international sports landscape.

The Emergence of Esports Governing Bodies and Participating in International Sporting Events

Beginning in the early 2000s, in response to the growing popularity of competitive gaming, independent, non-profit and membership-based national governing bodies for esports began to emerge in Asia and Europe. These include the Korea esports Association (KeSPA) and the Russian Esports Federation (RESF), founded in 2000; the Belgian Esports Federation (EBSF) and the Dutch eSports Association, founded in 2005; the Austrian Esports Federation (ESVÖ), founded in 2007; the Swiss Esports Federation (SESF), founded in 2008; and the General Administration of Sport of China's Esports Division, founded in 2009. These federations share similar goals –

to unify esports organisations at all levels, to set standards and rules, to organise gaming tournaments, to provide service and support to both amateur and professional players and, more importantly, to help esports win public recognition.[32]

With the rise of national federations, the first global esports organisation – the International Esports Federation (IeSF) – was formed in South Korea in 2008,[33] backed by South Korea's Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism and the country's top wireless provider, SK telecom. It was set up as a non-profit organisation with the objective of unifying all national esports organisations, setting international standards and becoming the equivalent of the IOC for gaming.[34] A year after its establishment, the federation had 14 members and hosted the IeSF Challenge in Taebaek on December 10–14, 2009, attracting 180 players from 20 countries.[35] The IeSF Challenge was held again in late 2010, followed by the 2011 IeSF World Championship, featuring national trials hosted by IeSF's member organisations and a three-day finals held in South Korea. From 2013, the IeSF World Championship has been held every year, touring various countries across the world. Although the tournament does not compare with top tier esports competitions in terms of scale and prize pool, and the 2019 event held in Seoul was even criticised by some participants as 'a cheap LAN café tournament',[36] it has created a unique and important platform for the global esports community and has helped to develop esports according to the principles of non-profit international sporting competitions.

In addition to organising the annual World Championships, the IeSF has been active in getting esports recognised as a true sport. In 2013, the federation became an official signatory of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) – the first time for an esports organisation to be recognised by an international sports governing body.[37] In 2014, the IeSF joined The Association For International Sports For All (TAFISA) and later hosted its eighth World Championship at the 2016 Jakarta TAFISA World Games.[38] In 2015, the IeSF joined Athletics for a Better World, the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF)'s community investment programme for young people.[39] Two years later, the International University Sports Federation (FISU) signed an MOU agreement with the IeSF to popularise competitive gaming among college students in order to maximise 'the strength and synergies of traditional sports and esports'.[40] By the end of 2020, the IeSF had 100 member nations.[41] It should be credited for helping esports to win recognition from international sports governing bodies and opening up new possibilities for the future development of competitive gaming.

In the 2010s, a growing number of non-profit national esports federations were founded across the world,[42] and regional esports organisations emerged in Asia, Africa, Europe and South America. These included the Pan American Electronic Sports Confederation (PAMESCO), founded in 2016; the Asian Electronic Sports Federation (AESF), launched in 2017; the Arab Esports Federation (ARESF) and the Electronic Sports Federation of Africa (ESFA), founded in 2018; and the European Esports Federation (EEF), founded in 2020. For example: the Hong Kong-based AESF is headed by Kenneth K.K. Fok, Vice-President of the Fok Ying Tung Group and the Sports Federation & Olympic Committee of Hong Kong. It is recognised by the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) as 'the sole competent authority for electronic sports throughout Asia',[43] and is committed to having esports accepted as an

Olympic sport. The Saudi Arabia-based ARESF is supported by the Saudi monarchy and headed by Prince Faisal bin Bandar bin Sultan Al Saud. Modelled on the Arab Olympic Federation, it consists of 11 member countries.[44] Key objectives include organising major tournaments, raising awareness of esports and promoting the professional gaming and video game industry in the Arab region.[45]

In addition to regional federations, more international esports organisations were established in the late 2010s, adopting different approaches to promote competitive gaming and integrate it with real sports and the Olympic movement. For instance, the World Esports Consortium (WESCO), founded in Brazil in 2016, and the Global Esports Federation (GEF), launched in Singapore in 2019, both aim to work with national esports federations and esports companies and organisations to develop esports globally.[46] The WESCO has established partnerships with the IeSF, the AESF, the PAMESCO and the ESFA, and has co-organised various events and tournaments in China, South America and Africa.[47] In 2019 it also launched an education programme called 'Changing the People, Changing the World' to integrate esports with real sports, and has invited retired celebrity athletes, including footballer Cafu, MMA fighter Renzo Gracie, Olympic fencer Salvatore Sanzo and F1 racer Jarno Trulli, to be WESCO Ambassadors of Esports.

The GEF is backed by Chinese technology company Tencent and is committed to integrating esports into the Olympics. Members of the federation include leading game publishers and developers such as Capcom, Konami, Sega, Riot Games, Smilegate and Supercell, as well as sports governing bodies including the International School Sports Federation (ISF), the Union Internationale de Pentathlon Moderne (UIMP), Invictus Games Foundation (IGF), Peace and Sport, the Organización Deportiva Suramericana (ODESUR), the Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) and the OCA. Many key GEF members are leaders in the Olympic movement – for example, founding President Chris Chan is Secretary-General of Singapore's National Olympic Council and the board includes five-time Olympian Charmaine Crooks and OCA honorary life Vice-President Wei Jizhong.

For game publishers, joining the GEF is a good way to promote their games. As Sega Chairman Hideki Okamura explains, 'Sega shares the same collective vision with the Global Esports Federation, to harness the benefits of technology for good, and to explore new opportunities particularly where sport meets esports; elevating the future of esports, bringing the global community together'.[48]

Martinelli points out that these esports organisations and governing bodies all focus on different areas of the industry, leading to a lack of cohesion.[49] In fact, as Peng et al. argue, none of them have the legitimacy to govern esports worldwide, because they do not own the intellectual property rights to any esports games. On top of that, they are reluctant 'to cede authority on any single issue, to anybody outside their business'.[50] For example, when esports was included in the 2017 Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games, several national esports federations, including South Korea's KeSPA and Australia's AESA, boycotted the games because the OCA had commissioned AliSports, rather than the South Korean-based IeSF, to manage and promote the esports events.[51]

In summary, the current esports governance framework is primarily led by major game publishers and esports companies, notably Blizzard, EA, Tencent, Valve and

the ESL. The newly emerging independent, non-profit esports organisations are increasingly involved in the esports industry, making the governance structure more diverse and complex. Although different organisations are competing to become the legitimate regulatory body of esports at national, regional and international levels, there is no enforcement mechanism to implement the regulations they propose.[52] In addition, these organisations have very limited influence in the esports community, since most players and fans focus on publisher-organised tournaments and leagues such as The International, LoL World Championship, the Overwatch League and the Fortnite World Cup. Generally speaking, there is still a lack of interest in or demand for a global regulatory model for esports.

Traditionally, the esports ecosystem has been driven by the video game market, with a lack of interest from key stakeholders in having esports coming to be recognised as sports. However, the new esports organisations in Asia have been especially active in promoting competitive gaming as a sporting activity and incorporating it into multi-sports events organised by regional and international sports federations, a new direction for the development of esports. As early as 2007, with the efforts of the Macau E-Sports Federation (MESF) and the OCA, esports was included in the second Asian Indoor Games (AIG) in Macau.[53] National teams from China, Iran, India, Kuwait, Mongolia, Qatar and Uzbekistan competed in *NBA Live 2007* (2006), *FIFA 2007* (2006) and *Need for Speed Most Wanted* (2005) at the Macau East Asian Games Dome between October 27-30. This was the first time that esports was a medal sport at an international multi-sports event.[54] Esports was then included in subsequent AIGs in Vietnam (2009), South Korea (2013) and Turkmenistan (2017), attracting wide media coverage and public interest in East, Southeast and Central Asia.[55]

In 2018, the OCA cooperated with the AESF, the Indonesian Esports Association (IeSPA) and key IOC sponsor Alibaba's sports division AliSports to include esports as a demonstration discipline at the Jakarta-Palembang Asian Games, the second largest international sporting event after the Olympic Games.[56] The AESF selected six PC and mobile games for the event.[57] Eighteen national teams participated in the seven-day event held at the BritAma Arena in Jakarta and the matches were broadcast through online stream platforms, with some competitions drawing over 500,000 concurrent viewers.[58] Aided by the influence of the OCA and the Asian Games, the event 'significantly changed the perspective of esports and boosted its image, especially among non-enthusiasts'.[59] Subsequently, with the joint efforts of the AESF, the OCA, Tencent and Alisport, esports joined the 2022 Hangzhou Asian Games as a medal sport under the 'intellectual titles' event category. This was regarded as a milestone for the esports industry that would undoubtedly help esports to gain mainstream attention and move further towards becoming an official event at the Olympic Games.[60]

While the OCA and the AESF successfully integrated esports into the AIG and the Asian Games, gaming hardware companies also joined the campaign to build up their brands. Lobbied by Singaporean-American technology company Razer, esports was included in the 2019 Manila Southeast Asian Games, one of the sub-regional games of the OCA, as a medal sport. The esports events featured six games, with 183 participants from Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia,

the Philippines and Thailand.[61] The competitions were broadcast on Razer's streaming platforms, attracting a peak of 90,000 concurrent viewers. Upon the conclusion of the event, Razer was given honorary recognition by the Philippine SEA Games Organizational Committee (PHISGOC) for 'helping esports receive the same recognition and coverage as traditional sports'.[62] In 2020, with the efforts of Razer, the AESF and the Vietnam Electronic Sports and Entertainment Association (VIRESA), esports was again selected as one of the 40 medal sports in the 31st SEA Games in 2021.[63]

In addition to the above new developments, virtual sports competitions, which requires physical activity and exertion, have started to gain traction in recent years. The Digital Swiss 5, jointly organised by Cycling Unlimited AG/Tour de Suisse, professional cycling organisation Velon and indoor training software developer ROUVY between April 22 and 26, 2020, was one of the first major events of this kind. The tournament was created to replace the Tour de Suisse, cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. A total of 57 UCI WorldTour professional riders (in 19 teams) competed on five virtual circuits from home on their own bikes, connected to ROUVY's cycling training platform, and the races were broadcast live on TV and online, showing the cyclists' 3 D avatars on the virtual tracks as well as their live images captured on home cameras.[64] The event allowed cyclists and fans to continue to engage with the sport in a unique way during lockdown.[65]

Other cycling governing bodies and event organisers soon adopted this creative way of racing. After the Digital Swiss 5, the French Amaury Sport Organisation (ASO) and California-based interactive fitness platform provider Zwift jointly organised the Virtual Tour de France over three weeks in July 2020. Hundreds of professional and amateur cyclists raced on a set of virtual stages from home, attracting over 80,000 spectators online.[66] A few months later, on 9 December 2020, 54 female and 78 male pro athletes from 22 nations took part in the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI)'s inaugural Cycling Esports World Championships and competed on a 50 km course on Zwift's virtual cycling platform, a landmark in the history of both cycling and esports.[67] These virtual races offer a new experience for sport governing bodies, athletes, sponsors, and fans and spectators. They have legitimised the new discipline of e-cycling and blurred the line between esports and traditional sports.

Also starting from the late 2010s, it had become common practice for international auto racing organisations to cooperate with game companies to organise esports competitions. Major events include McLaren's World's Fastest Gamer and Formula One Group's Formula 1 Esports Series, launched in 2017; Formula E's $1,000,000 2017 Visa Vegas eRace; the FIA Gran Turismo Championships, launched in 2018; and Automobile Club de l'Ouest's Le Mans Esports Series and SRO Motorsports Group's Fanatec GT World Challenge, launched in 2019.

In 2020, sim racing have become a big buzzword among esports and motorsports communities.[68] In April 2020, Formula 1 launched the Virtual Grand Prix to make up for the postponed FIA Formula One World Championship. The series lasted three months and F1 drivers, rally racers, golfers, footballers, cricket players and pop stars participated, attracting over 85 million views on multiple TV and online platforms in over 100 countries.[69] The same year, other major motorsport series, including NASCAR, the Supercars Championship, the IndyCar Series, the FIA World

Rallycross Championship, the 24 Hours of Le Mans and the BMW M2 CS Racing Cup, all teamed up with video game developers/publishers and esports companies to organise sim racing tournaments.[70] These events have put sim racing into the spotlight and helped people to understand the great potential of sim racing in popularity and viewership.[71]

Inspired by the success of the esports events at the AIGs and the SEA Games, and the newly emerging virtual cycling and sim racing tournaments, the IOC began to review the possibility of adding esports to the Olympic games – seen as the 'Holy Grail'. As early as 2017, the IOC concluded at the 6th Olympic Summit that 'competitive "esports" could be considered as a sporting activity and the players involved prepare and train with an intensity which may be comparable to athletes in traditional sports'.[72] In February 2018, with support from the IOC, Intel hosted a gaming event before the PyeongChang Winter Games in South Korea, featuring the Intel Extreme Masters PyeongChang StarCraft II tournament and an exhibition of *Steep Road to the Olympics*, an IOC licensed game which features 12 official Olympic winter sports events.[73] Later that year, IOC President Thomas Bach stated during the organisation's exceptive meetings in Tokyo: 'There is agreement we can't, and we should not, ignore the growth of the e-games industry and the interactivity of it for the young generation. That we should engage with this community'.[74]

Subsequently, the 8th Olympic Summit in 2019 reached agreement that the IOC should facilitate the integration of sports simulations into the Olympic Movement, and international federations should 'consider how electronic and virtual forms of their sport could be governed, and explore opportunities with games publishers'.[75] A year later, at the 135th IOC Session in Lausanne, Bach again highlighted esports: 'Whether they could one day be considered for the Olympic programme – the answer is yes. It depends when this day is coming'.[76] In May 2021, the IOC approved the Olympic Agenda 2020 + 5 – the new strategic roadmap of the IOC and the Olympic Movement through to 2025. One of the 15 recommendations of the roadmap states: 'Encourage the development of virtual sports and further engage with video gaming communities'.[77]

Obstacles and Challenges for Esports' Olympic Inclusion

There are several barriers that the IOC and the esports community must address. First and foremost is the intellectual property (IP) issue. Esports tournaments and leagues are modelled on traditional sports competitions. However, unlike traditional sports that have passed down through generations, evolving with gradual rule changes over the course of time, esports competitions are based on video games – intellectual property owned by game publishers. While nobody holds the immaterial rights to traditional sports, video games are free-market commodities that are sold and profited from. Anyone can participate in traditional sports such as football, basketball and swimming, and organise commercial or non-commercial competitions without permission from a governing body, but this is not the case for esports. Game publishers retain complete control over how their games are used, and this is protected by copyright laws around the world. All players are required to consent to the terms of an end user licensing agreement or applicable terms of service, giving publishers

excessive power in esports governance.[78] As esports consultant Will Partin puts it: 'Esports is what sports would look like if traditional sports could have monopolistic control over their ecosystem'.[79] Many publishers have used this monopoly power to achieve direct and indirect commercial benefits, and disputes arising from IP issues are common.[80] Until unified standards, legislation and dispute resolution frameworks are put in place by governments, esports organisations and sport governing bodies, game publishers are likely to continue to be the dominant power in the esports ecosystem.

As an independent, non-profit international organisation with the mission of promoting the principles of Olympism as laid down by Pierre de Coubertin, the IOC must figure out a balanced approach to engaging with a gaming industry primarily driven by commercial interests. It is almost certain that game companies will achieve strong financial gains if their games are included in the Olympics. Therefore, it will be extremely challenging for the IOC to develop an open and transparent selection criteria and process for possible Olympic esports titles. Second, the summer and winter Olympics alternate every two years and are normally planned five to ten years in advance. However, most esports titles have a life span of only three to five years before being replaced by new games or sequels that run on the next generation of consoles and PC hardware.[81] With the constantly changing video game industry and esports landscape, it will be difficult for the IOC to make long-term plans on what games to include in the Olympic programme and what hardware platforms to use.[82] Third, unlike the OCA, which includes various genres of games in its subregional games, the IOC holds a conservative stance and rejects any video games that feature violence, which excludes most of the popular esports titles – *Counter Strike*, *Fortnite*, *Overwatch*, *Street Fighter*, *Dota 2*, *League of Legends*, etc. The IOC instead hopes to use sports games and virtual sports to introduce traditional sports to young people and get them engaged with the Olympic Movement. This policy was clearly explained by Bach in 2020: 'We have a clear red line that we do not want to deal with any game which is contrary to the Olympic values… Our main motivation is to look for ways how we can convince the people playing these games to do the real thing'.[83] Fourth, the Olympic Games award top athletes with medals and fame rather than prize money, and therefore are much less attractive to professional esports players who train and compete for big cash prizes at commercial events. Although some Olympians are rewarded by their national Olympic committees or governments, the prize money normally ranges from a few thousand to several hundred thousand dollars, which does not compare with publisher-organised esports tournaments such as Valve's The International and Riot Games' League of Legends World Championship, which feature prize pools of up to $35 million.[84] It would be hard for national esports federations to form Olympic teams, because professional players must focus on their seasonal events and major tournaments to avoid financial losses.[85] As Rahul Sood, CEO of esports betting company Unikrn, notes: 'It's extremely unlikely top athletes would choose the Olympics over top esports events… It's misguided, or egotistical, of mainstream culture to think the Olympics are somehow a greater honour than The International, Worlds or a *CS:GO* (*Counter-Strike*) major'.[86] Fifth, not everyone supports the idea of including esports in the Olympics. Some members of the esports community believe that as a unique

entertainment and competitive activity, esports has been growing organically and independently for decades, and is well able to stand on its own rather than follow a traditional sports model and attach itself to the IOC or other international sports governing bodies. The amplifying effect of the Olympics would not benefit esports much, since it already has a worldwide fan base, money, media exposure and prestige, and is still growing fast.[87] As Tobias Scholz, founder of the Esports Research Network, observes: 'In the first decade of 2000, esports was just a niche phenomenon seeking legitimacy and professional guidance, today, esports is as diverse as sports… esports doesn't need the Olympics in the sense that it is essential for its growth'.[88] Professional *Overwatch* player Jake Lyon holds the same view: 'We're already building it out ourselves. Esports is so grassroots, so ground up… The Olympics brings the highest level of competition for sports that maybe don't have a unifying league, but the way I see it is the Olympics needs esports more than esports need the Olympics'.[89]

Many members of the sporting community have also voiced their concerns. Some argue that esports lacks the physical movement, skills and demands of traditional athletics and therefore does not qualify as an Olympic sport. As former IOC marketing chief Michael Payne argues: 'The Olympics has always been about physical action, not just mental, and it's why chess and other intellect games have never been accepted'.[90] Others point out that esports is male-dominated and falls short on the gender equality criteria of the Olympics.[91] In addition, some critics believe esports may encourage a sedentary lifestyle that increases the risk of both physical and mental health issues. For example, in 2021 a group of Canadian Olympic medallists, doctors and health researchers sent a co-authored letter to the IOC, stating that esports can be harmful to youth health because it encourages 'more time spent in front of a screen and less time allotted to physical activity'.[92] They warned that commercial enterprises have long used sports to promote their products and urged the IOC not to 'fall into the trap', and to abandon the plan to introduce any type of esports into the Olympics.[93] 2018 research by auditing and consulting firm PWC shows that only 10.4 per cent of sporting industry leaders across the world believe esports should join the Olympics; many believe it does not qualify as sport (28 per cent) and that it should develop independently (29 per cent).[94]

Tune into the Future

While the debate on whether esports should be recognised as an Olympic sport continues, the IOC has taken a substantial step forward by launching its first official esports event, the Olympic Virtual Series (OVS), in summer 2021. The OVS is a joint effort between the IOC, Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA), World Baseball Softball Confederation (WBSC), UCI, World Sailing, World Rowing, DreamHack Sports Games and a number of game publishers including Konami, Polyphony Digital, Virtual Regatta and Zwift. It took place May 13 to June 23 and featured competitions on five sports including baseball, auto racing, cycling, rowing and sailing.[95] The IOC hopes to use the OVS to facilitate the development of both physical and non-physical virtual forms of sports, reach out to new audiences, encourage sports participation and spread Olympic values among young people.[96] The event has not only created a platform for the IOC, IFs and main stakeholders

in the esports industry to integrate, but has also helped introduce esports to a wider, casual audience. It is therefore regarded as a landmark move for both the Olympic movement and esports. However, the OVS focused solely on sports games and virtual sports, thereby excluding the majority of esports players and fans.[97] Despite this, at the 10th Olympic Summit held in December 2021, the IOC reviewed the OVS positively and announced that the event will be held annually to provide opportunities for IFs 'to reach out, engage with and promote their sports, and reach new communities'.[98]

Esports is not only a new form of entertainment and competition, a lucrative business with great potential and a unique cultural phenomenon in the computer age, more importantly, it is a reference point for the next generations. The IOC is now facing an ageing TV audience for the Olympic games. The median age of American viewers for the 2016 Rio games was 52.4, higher than 49.5 years for the 2012 London Olympics and 45.5 for the 2000 Sydney games, indicating that young people are becoming less interested in the Olympic movement. This trend is also clear in Asia.[99] To better engage with the young digital generations and the esports community, the IOC must adopt a more open-minded and inclusive approach in order to better understand the esports ecosystem, and to work together with game publishers, esports teams and players to bring strategy, shooting and fighting games into the official Olympic esports programme. As esports reporter Trent Murray comments: 'If the IOC wants to strengthen its relationship with the gaming community, do it the right way. Empower esports communities, support under-developed scenes and create something that speaks to our culture. Otherwise, don't expect an audience who grew up on *Fortnite* to be particularly interested in virtual rowing'.[100]

To conclude, this article has provided an overview of the historical process of interaction and integration among competitive gaming, sport and the Olympics, and further discusses the obstacles and challenges for esports' Olympic inclusion. In the research areas of game studies and sports history, the relationship between competitive gaming and traditional sports, notably its engagement with the Olympic movement, is still a novel research topic. With this introductory work, the author seeks to draw more attention to the fast growing esports industry, especially with regard to the need for further research into esports' impact on the global sports landscape and development trend.

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