Review

eSport: Construct specifications and implications for sport management

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to add to the conceptual discussion on eSport, analyze the role of eSport within sport management, and suggest avenues for future eSport research. The authors suggest that debates surround the degree to which eSport represents formal sport, and disagreements likely stem from conceptualizations of sport and context. Irrespective of one's notion of eSport as formal sport, the authors suggest the topic has a place in sport management scholarship and discourse. Such a position is consistent with the broad view of sport adopted by *Sport Management Review*, the perspective that eSport represents a form of sportification, and the association among eSport and various outcomes, including physical and psychological health, social well-being, sport consumption outcomes, and diversity and inclusion. Finally, the authors conclude that eSport scholarship can advance through the study of its governance, marketing, and management as well as by theorizing about eSport.

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1. Introduction

eSport represents tournament level, interactive video games, described by British eSports as "the top level of video gaming in terms of skill and professionalization" (What are eSports?, 2016). Their popularity is evidenced by the amount of participants, spectators, and media coverage, as well as organizers considering eSport for inclusion in major sport competitions. According to Newzoo, a company that specializes in offering market data related to digital media and related activities, there were 191 million eSport enthusiasts around the world in 2017 (Esports, 2017). These figures are up considerably from 2016 (148 million enthusiasts; Rapaport, 2017). Industry revenues have followed suit, with US \$493 million generated in 2016 and US\$660 million in 2017. Spectator attendance for eSport is equally impressive. The tournaments have sold out large venues, such as Key Arena in Seattle and Madison Square Garden in New York City

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(Rapaport, 2017). But, even more impressive is the online spectatorship; in fact, the "League of Legends" World Finals drew 12 million more fans than the National Basketball Association (NBA) finals held at the same time (Clavio, 2017). The growth of eSport has not been lost on popular press outlets, where the likes of *Forbes,ESPN*, *Sports Illustrated*, and the *Guardian*, among others, all cover aspects of the events. Finally, the rise of eSport is perhaps best illustrated by news in 2017 that it would be a medal event in the 2022 Asian Games (Graham, 2017).

The rise of eSport has not been lost on academics. At past *Sport Management Review (SMR)* editorial meetings, as part of broader discussions about the boundaries of sport management, board members have discussed and debated the role of eSport, whether the activity should be considered sport at all, and the implications for sport management as a discipline. When the topic was first broached, some members met the discussion with a healthy skepticism, perhaps thinking that it was a passing fad. As eSport grew, however, so too did attention dedicated to the topic—by sponsors, spectators, and academics.

The discussions ultimately resulted in the scholarly exchange presented in this issue of SMR. We asked experts in the field to consider two questions: (a) is eSport a sport; and (b) irrespective of the response to the first question, is eSport relevant for the sport management discipline? In this introductory article to the exchange, we, as the SMR editorial team, address these questions, too. In doing so, we seek to contribute to the emerging dialogue surrounding eSport and identify potential paths forward.

2. Construct specification

We first asked the authors to consider whether eSport was a sport. Though Funk, Pizzo, and Baker (2018) and Hallmann and Giel (2017) both spoke to the question, Heere (2018) was resistant to even address the idea. He argued: "To think that sport management scholars are in control of what should or should not be defined as sport, is an illusion" (this issue). He further suggested that "it falls outside the purview of sport management scholars to decide what or what does not qualify as sport" (this issue).

Although we appreciate Heere (2018) perspective, there are several reasons to consider whether eSport is a sport. First, as noted on the journal website, *Sport Management Review* is a "multidisciplinary journal concerned with the management, marketing, and governance of sport at all levels and in all its manifestations—whether as an entertainment, a recreation, or an occupation." As the statement suggests, sport is the focus of the journal; thus, considering the boundaries of sport, or of activities that influence its management, marketing, or governance, not only is of interest to scholars, but also a duty of the editorial board. Second, consideration of what constitutes sport has considerable economic and financial ramifications. As Hallmann and Giel (2017) note, some countries provide subsidies for sport as a means of promoting sport involvement (see also Breuer, 2011). Thus, if eSport was considered a sport, a national federation could receive government funding. Finally, construct definition and specification is an activity in which academicians engage. Part of the theory development process, for example, is defining constructs and how they relate to other constructs (Bacharach, 1989). As theory and theory building are fundamental to the development of an academic discipline (Cunningham, Fink, & Doherty, 2016), engaging in scholarly discussions around constructs—in this case, what constitutes sport—is a core function of the academic enterprise.

In returning to the question at hand, we consider sport to represent (a) a physical activity, (b) requiring skill, (c) that is competitive in nature and (d) has a level of stability and (e) institutional organization (see also Rodgers, 1977; Suits, 2007). Past scholars who have reviewed the question have generally agreed that eSport requires skill, is competitive in nature, has a level of stability (e.g., coaches, sponsors, and large following), and has some level of institutionalization of rules, records, and other standards, though the latter point is somewhat debated, too (Funk et al., 2018; Hallmann & Giel, 2018; Jenny, Manning, Keiper, & Olrich, 2017; Keiper, Manning, Jenny, Olrich, & Croft, 2017).

The notion of eSport as a physical activity is more contentious. Funk et al. present data related to fine motor skills and elevated physiological readings to suggest that eSport does have a physical component. Moreover, considering that some activities that are stereotypically not considered as overly physical, such as racecar driving or rifle shooting, are also considered sport, Funk et al.'s rationale is compelling. To their point, physiologists have provided empirical evidence of racecar drivers possessing similar cardiorespiratory capacity as athletes in basketball, football, or baseball (Jacobs, Olvey, Johnson, & Cohn, 2002), and they have demonstrated physical activity ratios comparable to athletes in basketball or soccer (Beaune, Durand, & Mariot, 2010). In light of these studies, such comparative research might be helpful for eSport in an effort to make a case for it to be considered a physical activity. That noted, exertion of fine motor skills does not necessarily equate to physical activity (Hallmann & Giel, 2018). In fact, eSport competitors sit during practice and competition, remaining sedentary for up to 15 h a day (Hattenstone, 2017). Given the association between sedentary behavior and poor physical, psychological, and cognitive health (de Rezende, Lopes, Rey-López, Matsudo, & do Carmo Luiz, 2014; Owen, Healy, Matthews, & Dunstan, 2010), this potentially places eSport in a contestable position when considering its inclusions as a sport.

This positioning becomes increasingly complex when viewing classifications of sport from an international perspective. In Canada, for example, government funding from Sport Canada provides a tangible classification for what is sport and what is not. Specifically, national sport organizations are funded for the purpose of providing enhanced sport programming ranging from community sport clubs to high performance training centers. Within this context, eSport is not funded by the government, and thus could be argued that it is not considered a sport in Canada. In New Zealand (NZ), which shares many public funding similarities to Canada, sports can apply for government funding if they meet certain criteria, including the potential to win medals at international tournaments. The New Zealand eSports Federation Incorporated (NZESF) is the