Review

eSport management: Embracing eSport education and research opportunities☆

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ABSTRACT

Consumer demand for eSport and the growth of organized video game competitions has generated considerable attention from the sport, event, and entertainment industries. eSport therefore represents a novel and popular area for sport management academics to conduct research, educate students, and service industry. However, despite growth and acceptance by consumers and practitioners, academics debate eSport's position within the domain of sport management, their debates largely concentrated around the question of whether *eSport can be classified as sport.* In this article, the authors argue for the inclusion of organized eSport events and competitions within sport management vis-à-vis eSport's meeting certain defining criteria of sport in general. eSport's connection to traditional sport and defining characteristics are addressed to support eSport's role as a sport entertainment product recognized by industry as representing a substantial growth opportunity for sport and related organizations. As eSport continues to evolve, practitioners face managerial challenges that are similar to those in traditional sport, particularly in areas of governance and diversity. Sport management academics should embrace the potential of eSport in order to examine this evolution and provide guidance to industry through education and research.

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1. Introduction

eSport, organized video game competitions, is increasingly receiving industry recognition as sport entertainment. Competitive gaming has rapidly institutionalized with the establishment of national and international governing bodies (Seo, 2013). eSport features many of the trappings of traditional sport, including professional players, teams, uniforms, coaches, managers, agents, leagues, competitions, marquee events, endorsement deals, player transfer fees, colour commentators, highlight reels, college scholarships, and a darker side with match fixing, doping, and gender-related disputes (Jenny, Manning, Keiper, & Olrich, 2017; Li, 2016; Segal, 2014). Expanding participant and spectator markets have attracted major corporate sponsors, such as Microsoft, Samsung, and Red Bull, helping fuel global eSport industry revenues in excess of $350 million in 2016, with projected revenues of $696 million in 2017 (Newzoo, 2017). Despite eSport's

increasing legitimacy and similarity to traditional sport events and competitions, a debate continues on whether to consider eSport a sport (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010).

Strong opinions from sport industry figures and academics highlight the polarizing phenomenon of eSport. Mark Cuban, media mogul and owner of the NBA's Dallas Mavericks, stated eSport is "real sport, and people are going to figure out really, really quick" (Gu, 2015, para. 2). In contrast, John Skipper, President of ESPN, commented that "[eSport is] not a sport, it's a competition" (Tassi, 2014, para. 2). Debate between sport management scholars is no less polarizing, with academic conferences and journal editorial board meetings filled with robust discussion. Amongst a panel of 17 academic scholars consulted, eSport represents an emerging research area that could redefine traditional notions of what is considered sport and, importantly, the way sport is managed (Funk, 2017). Perhaps due to this contested view of eSport, the newness of eSport, or eSport's previous marginalization as a fringe or niche activity, eSport has not received substantial empirical attention from sport management scholars.

In this article, we argue for the inclusion of organized eSport events and competitions within the sport management domain and is divided into two main sections. The first section defines eSport and examines whether eSport exhibits defining characteristics of sport, eSport's relationship to traditional sport, and concludes by addressing views opposing the classification of eSport as sport. The second section recommends that practitioners and sport management academics devote increased attention to eSport due to substantial growth potential and implications for sport management education and research with the goal of providing guidance on how to address key issues confronting the eSport industry.

2. Defining eSport

Determining eSport's classification as sport depends both on defining eSport and understanding what qualifies a particular activity as sport. Electronic sport, or eSport, organized video game competitions, is also known as cybersport, virtual sport, and competitive gaming (Jenny et al., 2017). Popular genres of eSport include fighting games (e.g., *Street Fighter IV*), first-person shooters (FPS; e.g., *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* or *CS:GO*), real-time strategy games (RTS; e.g., *StarCraft II*), multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBAs; e.g., *League of Legends* or *LoL*), and sport-based video games (SBVGs; e.g., *FIFA 17*). eSport includes both individual (e.g., StarCraft II) and team-based (e.g., CS:GO) games, with the most popular games (LoL and CS:GO) featuring teams of five competitors battling against each other in head-to-head match-ups. The predominant organizational model for eSport centres on competitive events before live, online, and broadcast audiences.

eSport has grown from a fringe activity to a popular sport entertainment product. Organized eSport events started in 1980, with Atari's Space Invaders Championship, the first major video game competition, drawing over 10,000 competitors (Li, 2016). eSport events have grown in size with The League of Legends World Final 2016 conducted in front of a sold-out crowd of 20,000 at the Staples Center in Los Angeles with 43 million more viewers watching online (Kennedy & Rozelle, 2016). The prize pools of eSport events are also growing with The International 2016 (DOTA2) offering the largest prize pool in eSport history, splitting $20,770,460 USD amongst 16 teams (Valve, 2016). Despite eSport's emergent popularity, whether it meets the criteria of sport should be addressed, and conceptualizations of sport are reviewed next.

2.1. Defining characteristics of sport

Authors from sport philosophy and sport sociology have discussed the essential nature of sport and what distinguishes sport activities from superficially similar activities that are not sport. These authors describe sport as playful competition based on physical skill, strategy, and organization (Guttmann, 2004; Loy, 1968; Suits, 2007). Specifically, Suits (2007) defined sport as games that meet four requirements: (a) they require skill (as opposed to pure chance); (b) the skill is physical; (c) they have a wide following; and (d) stability, as represented by the development of ancillary roles and institutions (e.g., coaches, research and development, criticism or commentary, archived records). Suits was explicitly a-theoretical in developing this list, preferring instead to deduce the required characteristics of sport from observed characteristics shared by games generally perceived as sport and contrasting with games generally perceived as not sport. For instance, Suits (2007) distinguished between games and sport with chess on the games side of the divide, because "how chess pieces are moved has nothing whatever to do with manual dexterity or any other bodily skill" (p. 15). Yet, manual dexterity is precisely the physical skill most necessary for success in eSport. Following Suits's defining characteristics, eSport requires physical skills, is popular globally, and involves organized competitions with ancillary roles and institutions, thereby meeting the criteria of sport. Jonasson and Thiborg (2010) suggest that eSport, if not yet exhibiting all the characteristics of modern sport, is at least in the process of evolving to meet all criteria.

2.2. eSport and traditional sport

eSport's relationship with traditional sport entertainment products are noteworthy. eSport events sell out iconic arenas (e.g., Staples Center, Madison Square Garden), receive substantial sport media coverage (e.g., ESPN, Turner Sports), and have college scholarships, betting and doping scandals, large tournament prizes, leagues, teams, transfer fees, agents, and work visas (Holden, Kaburakis, & Rodenberg, 2017; Jenny et al., 2017). Established professional sport teams, including the Philadelphia 76ers and Milwaukee Bucks, have joined the eSport trend, investing in teams and players. Their actions lend