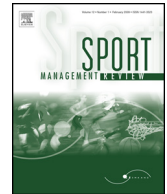




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Review

eSports – Competitive sports or recreational activity?

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ABSTRACT

eSports is growing around the globe, with more and more individuals are engaged as players or spectators. In this paper, the authors reflect on whether eSports can be considered as sport based on evaluating five characteristics of sport and assessing them for eSports. Currently, eSports are not a sport but there is the potential that eSports will become a sport. Different opportunities how marketers and managers can attend to eSports are outlined.

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1. Introduction

“eSports to be a medal event at 2022 Asian Games” – the British daily newspaper *The Guardian* reported in mid-April 2017 about the decision of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) to include eSports, which is also known as electronic sports or competitive gaming, to the official programme at the 2022 Asian Games in China (Graham, 2017, n.p.). According to the OCA (2017a), the Asian Games are “the biggest multi-sport games after the Olympic Games” (n.p.) generally following the Olympic Games’ sports programme. Therefore, this decision, reflecting “the rapid development and popularity of this new form of sports participation among the youth” (Olympic Council of Asia, 2017c, n.p.), could constitute a milestone for eSports to be officially and worldwide recognised as a sport. However, the question if eSports really should be perceived as a sport is highly arguable and needs a more detailed appreciation. It is an important question because, for example, in Germany the state promotes sports by means of subsidies (Breuer, 2011) as well as tax exemptions for sport organisations. The tax exempt status is common for many sports within the European Union: For instance, Austrian, Danish, French, Dutch and Belgium tax authorities recognise even bridge (‘duplicate bridge’) as sport (Miles, 2017). This implies that a potential eSports federation and their member organisations could get substantial economic benefits if eSports would be officially accepted as a sport. In addition, eSports has grown to an important industry: Spectator-events, which are often sold out, are hosted (e.g. ESL, 2016) and the events are also sponsored indicating an economic dimension. Also prize pools for the players are highly increasing. The eSports tournament ‘DOTA 2 International’ had the highest prize pool for its 2016 tournament in Seattle, with more than US\$20 million. The prize pool for the 2017 tournament will even surpass this amount (Craddock, 2016; Keefer, 2017). Furthermore, eSports especially fascinates adolescents and young people (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). eSports illustrate one possibility to reach the youth and connect them to at least virtual sporting activities, which again might induce growing interest to practice sports themselves.

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2. eSports as sport?

According to the Council of Europe's European Sport Charter originally adopted in 1992 and revised in 2001, sport “means all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organised participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels” (Council of Europe, 2001, n.p.). This definition has also been used by the European Commission in their 2007 White Paper on Sport (European Commission, 2007). Rodgers (1977) argued that two factors should always be present in a sport: it should (a) involve physical activity and (b) be practiced for recreational purposes. Ideally sport should include two more factors: it should (c) involve an element of competition and (d) have a framework of institutional organisation (Rodgers, 1977). In addition to these four criteria, Gratton and Taylor (2000) named general acceptance (e.g. by the media or sports agencies) as another important criterion for an activity to be considered a sport. These five criteria are used to discuss whether eSports go beyond a sole recreational activity and will be used within the chapter as sub-headings.

2.1. eSports and physical activity

Both, the sport definition of the Council of Europe (2001) as well as the one of Rodgers (1977) primarily refers to physical activity as a core element of a sport. The physical activity element leads to divergent opinions regarding activities like chess, darts, poker, snooker, or eSports, and several debates about their claim to be a sport are on-going. Physical activity itself has several definitions. While the American Heart Association (2016) defined physical activity very broadly as being anything that leads people to move their body and burn calories, Pate et al. (1995) used a more detailed definition: “Moderate physical activity is activity performed at an intensity of 3–6 METs” (p. 402). The metabolic equivalent of task (MET) is a physiological measure for the amount of energy that physical activities take. The energy needed to sit quietly is defined as one MET, which is the so-called resting metabolic rate. For most healthy adults, 3–6 METs are generally equivalent to walking at 5–6 km per hour (Pate et al., 1995). The definition of the World Health Organization (2017) is in between the two earlier mentioned: “Physical activity is any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure” (n.p.).

Turning from sport and its core element physical activity to eSports, Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) defined eSports as “a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the eSports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces” (p. 211). Also the definition of the OCA (2017b) explained that eSports “describe the playing of video games competitively [while] the games themselves can vary in nature and clued [sic] shooting, strategy and sporting games” (n.p.) calling it “a relatively new form of sports” (n.p.). Other definitions do not describe eSports as a form of sport; for example, the Cambridge Dictionary (2017) defining it as an “activity of playing computer games against other people on the internet, often for money, and often watched by other people using the internet, sometimes at special organized events” (n.p.).

None of these three definitions mentions physical activity as any component of eSports. Only playing computer games is mentioned as an activity in the context of eSports. Referring to the sports definitions of the Council of Europe (2001) as well as of Rodgers (1977), it would be easy to conclude at this point that eSports cannot be a sport, as it does not include any particular physical activity. However, some governing bodies officially accept as sport other activities in which physical activity does not play a major role either—the German Olympic Sport Confederation's (DOSB) acceptance of chess represents one such example.

The DOSB is the largest citizens' movement in Germany, with more than 27 million members in approximately 90,000 sports clubs (DOSB, 2017), and it generally has the decision-making power to define if an activity is officially recognised as a sport in Germany. Its admission regulations involve both athletic as well as organisational requirements for sports. Generally, three essential conditions have to be fulfilled to be accepted by the DOSB as a sport: (a) a sport has to include some form of physical activity; (b) it should convey ethical values, such as fair play, equal opportunities, as well as a person's inviolability; and (c) clear organisational structures need to be existent (DOSB, 2014). Apparently the physical activity in chess is sufficient to comply with the requirements of the DOSB, as it is officially accepted by the DOSB just like, for instance, billiard, boules, bowling, curling, darts, equestrian, or mini-golf (DOSB, 2016). In contrast, the DOSB does not recognize professional boxing, as it violates the condition of conveying ethical values (Spiller, 2010). On the other hand, amateur boxing is accepted, as are shooting and fencing (Kühl, 2016). Currently, eSports is not accepted by the DOSB as a sport. However, there are discussions going on about the handling of eSports in Germany (Reuter, 2015).

Some researchers have already dedicated their interest on the phenomenon of eSports and analysed its different components, taking into account several perspectives. Witkowski (2012) argued that eSports players are physically engaged in different ways, as professional players, for example, have a balanced body which is not mimicking the movements of their virtual avatar and are haptically engaged through the use of their keyboard and mouse to steer their avatar. Rudolf et al. (2016) have shown that eSports players are exposed to physiological stresses and strains during competitions, which are to some extent comparable to the ones of top athletes from other sports. Bearing in mind the small sample size of the study, the analysis of the stress hormone cortisol and the heart rates of eSports players points at the existence of acute stress during competitions. While their level of cortisol during competitions is comparable to the one of racing drivers, their average heart rate during competitions is over 100 beats per minute with peaks of up to 160 to 180 beats per minute. Based on their own subjective perception, eSports players are not exposed to chronic stress. The researchers concluded that in combination with

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