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Embracing the sportification of society: Defining e-sports through a polymorphic view on sport

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author argues that, regardless of whether e-sports qualify as sports, they should be examined in sport management because they are a manifestation of sportification. Sportification means to either: (a) view, organize, or regulate a non-sport activity in such a way that it resembles a sport and allows a fair, pleasurable, and safe environment for individuals to compete and cooperate, and compare their performances to each other, and future and past performances; or (b) add a sport component to an existing activity in order to make it more attractive to its audiences. As the sport industry itself is embracing e-sports as a sport, scholars should embrace e-sports as a manifestation of sportification and examine their negative and positive effect on our industry.
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1. Introduction

The question of whether e-sports should or could be qualified as a sport might to some be a cerebral intellectual activity that is symptomatic of the nature of academic's ivory tower. In fact, even some scholars who are engaged with the philosophy of sport would caution others from engaging in such discussions, as sport itself is impossible to define. To cite McBride (1975): "Philosophers ought not waste their time attempting to define 'sport'" (p. 4). He came to that conclusion based on his understanding of sport as an ambiguous phenomenon, and the realization that any attempt to do so would likely fail. He acknowledged that sport has many different meanings and usages, and as such, attempting to define sport might be an adverse exercise that limits understanding thereof. Thus, if sport represents an undefinable ambiguous construct, the debate of whether e-sports are a form of sport is a somewhat redundant exercise.

However, when McBride (1975) made this argument, he could not have foreseen the astronomical growth of the professional sport industry (Milano & Chelladurai, 2011), nor did he foresee the emergence of an entire new academic discipline, called sport management, which originated to serve this growing industry, and made its purpose to manage this ambiguous term that carried polymorphic meanings to different populations. With the rapid rise of the sport industry, the question of whether something qualified as a sport was not merely an intellectual exercise, but also one that was important for the legislation of sport as a business activity (Holden, Kaburakis, & Rodenberg, 2017). To sport management scholars, the question whether something qualifies as sport is of crucial importance, as it is this term that is deemed to separate them from the parent discipline of management itself.

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The heterogeneous origin of the different sport management programs in either physical education, kinesiology, recreation management, or business schools has further exacerbated the challenge of defining sport. Largely pending on their academic home, sport management scholars are encouraged to position sport as an instrument for health (kinesiology), for skill development (education), or for entrepreneurial opportunities (business) among others, in order to find synergies with their colleagues in associated programs or departments.

In addition, sport management has a need to distinguish itself from its peers in associated disciplines such as leisure management, recreation management, and hospitality and tourism management. The current discussion of whether e-sports should be included in sport management discourse is only the latest step in a long discussion of what defines the field, exemplified by contributions of Weese (1995) and more recently, Newman (2014). On the one hand, scholars clamor for an open view of what sport management is, and view sport management as an interdisciplinary field (Chalip, 2006). On the other hand, some scholars argue that sport management can only survive if the sport management domain is clearly marked and defined relative to other fields, such as management, recreation management, and leisure science (Dustin & Schwab, 2008). As e-sports is rapidly growing within the sports industry, these two divergent views on the definition of sport meet, placing e-sports at the center of the debate of what defines the sport in sport management.

The struggle to define what sport is becomes apparent from the purpose statement of the oldest international association in sport management, the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM), in which it is stated: "Members of the Society are concerned about the theoretical and applied aspects of management theory and practice specifically related to sport, exercise, dance, and play as these enterprises are pursued by all sectors of the population" (www.nassm.com/nassm/purpose). In this statement, the founders of the organization commit to sport management as a broad field that embraces the subject of sport, exercise, dance, and play. Yet, at the same time, they define sport as a construct that excludes exercise, dance and play, by listing them separately. This dichotomy has been at the heart of an ongoing debate of what is or is not sport management (resulting in the contributions in this issue on whether e-sports qualifies as one). When the European Association for Sport Management (EASM) was established eight years later, the founders decided to leave the term sport undefined and merely acknowledged that scholarship should focus on sport management in "the broadest sense" (www.easm.net/what-is-easm). Two years later, when the Sport Management Association of Australia and New Zealand (SMAANZ) was established, founders left the term sport management undefined altogether. As such, the major continental associations have not taken a firm position on the definition of sport within sport management, leaving open the debate on where the boundaries for the field are. I contend that over the last few decades, these boundaries have even been further obfuscated by the enormous growth of the popularity of sport in our society, which has introduced a plethora of new activities that might qualify as sport. Moreover, society has been inundated with organizations that place non-sport activities in a sport format, even further obscuring the boundaries of sport.

This issue did not escape some of the pioneering sport management scholars, and was discussed at the first EASM conference in a presentation by the sport pedagogy scholar Crum (1993), which forms the foundation for my thesis. He introduced the term sportification to the field of sport management. His presentation was based on the book he wrote in 1991, in which he detailed how society was slowly becoming more sportified. He proposed this notion of sportification based on the work of Elias (1971), who viewed the construct as one of the forces of the civilizing process that started in the 18th century. Crum (1991) argued that in the modern post-industrial era, values have shifted toward a great importance of emancipation, freedom, creativity, self-development, self-realization, hedonism, and emotionality, and within this changing value system, sport and play are ideal domains to pursue those values. Within this post-industrial society, a bigger emphasis has been placed on sports, and has caused a sportification of non-sport activities. This trend started in the 18th century, with the sportification of play and recreation, and resulted in the modern sport industry, yet has expanded over the last half century to include sportification of other aspects of society, such as entertainment, business, sexuality, fashion, music, and even policy development and politics.

In his book, Crum (1991) explored the consequences of this trend for the policy making process of Dutch sport organizations, and argued for defining sport in the tradition of Wittgenstein (1922), who stated that sport should be defined through its usage. As such, Crum (1991) argued, similar to McBride (1975), that sport can be espied as a large family, in which members of the family might be related, but that is open to adoption of others, which serves as a metaphor for the polymorphic nature of sport. For each of these usages of sport, the organization that is developing policy in regards to the sport in question needs to consider the usage of the sport in their own context.

By way of example, governmental entities concerned with the health of the population should define sport as an instrument that increases the health and value sport activities on their ability to fulfill that purpose. For these entities, activities such as chess, poker, e-sports, and even low intensity traditional sports, such as baseball, might (or should) not qualify as a sport to them, as the return on the investment might be non-existent or low. They also should consider who the beneficiaries of their programming and funding are (healthy competitive athletes vs. non-active overweight individuals), and consider the context of the sport. Vice versa, organizations seeking to increase community engagement through sports and focus on the formation of social capital might focus on such low intensity activities, or higher intensity activities within a non-competitive environment, as it allows for more interaction during the activity. Media companies, sponsors, and technology-oriented companies should be receptive of new trends, such as e-sports, as it allows them to reach a new audience or provide new products. Acceptance of sport as a polymorphic phenomenon allows for agreement of disagreement on what it means, depending on the purpose its serves. Each organization could then formulate its own definition of the term, which best serves its own purposes.

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