



MAKING THE CASE FOR A NEW OLYMPIC SPORTING CATEGORY

WHY ESPORTS SHOULD ZAP INTO THE ARENA

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You are probably watching the Olympics this week, supporting your home country and cheering on your favorite athletes. It seems to us, however, that the Olympic games are in need of a refresh. Viewership has fallen in most major markets. Time differences may explain some of the drop in markets such as Europe and Asia, but even in North America, within the same time zone as Rio, viewership is down more than 20%¹.

We suspect that a major contributing factor to this decline is that viewers are finding it harder and harder to relate to many of the sports being offered. For the average viewer, how exciting is it to possibly get about archery, dressage, or synchronized swimming? Any sport where the commentator needs to explain the rules is unlikely to make much of an impact.

The IOC is aware of this situation, and has added more relatable sports to the agenda in recent years, including soccer and tennis. Yet, we contend that they have not gone far enough. BMX biking is cool, but do we really need 10 fencing events or 18 wrestling events?

A Modest Proposal

We propose that a new category of events should be created that has the potential to bring a whole new, youthful generation of fans to the Olympics, and herald a new era of sporting viewership – eSports. eSports are video game competitions, played both individually and in teams.

You may believe, as many people do, that eSports do not qualify as sport. The US Immigration Authorities would agree with you; they have on several occasions denied issuing visas to players wishing to enter the country to participate in tournaments on US soil, stating that eSports competitors are not athletes.²

We argue that this is an outdated notion. While these professionals may seem a long way from the Olympic ideal of 'faster, higher, stronger,' their sport requires a massive amount of mental concentration, as well as high levels of coordination, speed, and stamina. Studies support this view having found that eSports athletes are exposed to strains that are similar to those of traditional athletes³.

Professional eSports athletes must maintain peak physical and mental fitness, easily comparable to both the divers and the 10 meter air pistol competitors at the current Olympic Games.

The Current Scale of eSports

eSports are not niche anymore. Tournament prizes often exceed millions of dollars.⁴ In 2015, there was an average of 150,000 online paid tournaments per day⁵, plus dozens of major events with a total prize pool of more than 50 million dollars.⁶

Moreover, eSports are not just played by millions; they are watched as well. Most eSports viewing is done online. Twitch, owned by Amazon, is probably the most popular platform to view other people playing videogames. More than 100 million unique visitors a month view 621 billion minutes of live streamed content.⁷ eSports events regularly fill arenas of 20,000 people, but these numbers vastly underestimate global popularity. While major eSports tournaments still fall behind American football's Super Bowl and soccer's World Cup in total online and offline viewership, they exceed basketball's NBA finals, baseball's World Series, golf and tennis majors, and ice hockey's Stanley Cup.⁸

¹ <http://deadline.com/2016/08/olympics-ratings-hit-rio-2016-high-michael-phelps-katie-ledecky-nbc-1201800037/>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/jun/08/esports-pro-video-gamers-recognised-athletes>

³ <http://www.dw.com/en/science-shows-that-esports-professionals-are-real-athletes/a-19084993>

⁴ Tassie, Paul; "Largest Overall Prize Pools in ESports."

⁵ "ESports Revenue"

⁶ "Largest Overall Prize Pools in ESports."

⁷ <http://expandedramblings.com/index.php/twitch-stats/>

⁸ http://www.espn.com/espn/story/_/id/13059210/esports-massive-industry-growing

Clearly, there is a viewership here, and the IOC would be foolish not to consider reaching this segment of the population by including some version of eSports in their lineup.

As prize pools increase by an average of 70% year on year, more and more skilled gamers have started adapting their passion to full time jobs with relatively high incomes. As player and audience numbers grow, eSports' revenues also grow, with an increase of 67% in 2015 and an anticipated 43% in 2016.⁹

Imagine offering these players the opportunity once every 4 years to compete against each other for glory and medals as representatives of their countries. The International eGames Committee (IEGC) is hoping to illustrate how this could work as they kick off a two-day pop-up in Rio next week. Their plan is to showcase the eSports movement to the non-gamer population and mainstream media.¹⁰

Attracting a New Generation of Sports Fans

People tend to like watching sports that they can relate to, and play themselves. We watch professionals play our favorite sports to compare their strategies and techniques to our own. How excited can we get about rhythmic gymnastics or the modern pentathlon? eSports is built on the foundation of the 101 billion dollar video game industry. Whether we like it or not, children and many adults today play video games. The Olympic movement should recognize this.

The most prominent eSports competitive games include commercial games such as "Counter Strike," "World of Warcraft," and "League of Legends." Yet, there is no reason that the Olympics could not build other games to test the skills of players, which would avoid the violence and misogyny that characterize many of today's popular offerings.

By recognizing eSports as a legitimate Olympic event, the IOC could promote healthy lifestyles for children and adolescents and push them to exercise. Similar to other athletes, professional eSports teams practice from 12 to 14 hours daily in order to keep a competitive edge.¹¹ Many eSports professionals are extremely physically fit. Long periods of mental and physical concentration requires them to be so.

The IOC has made a big push to 'get the couch potatoes off the couch,' but we contend that the answer is not to present more hammer throw, curling, or canoe slalom. Nor is it to fight against video games. We propose that eSports be given the legitimacy it deserves and then used to promote an active lifestyle.

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⁹ "Global Esports Market Report."

¹⁰ <http://www.egames.org>

¹¹ "Professional Gamer Schedule."

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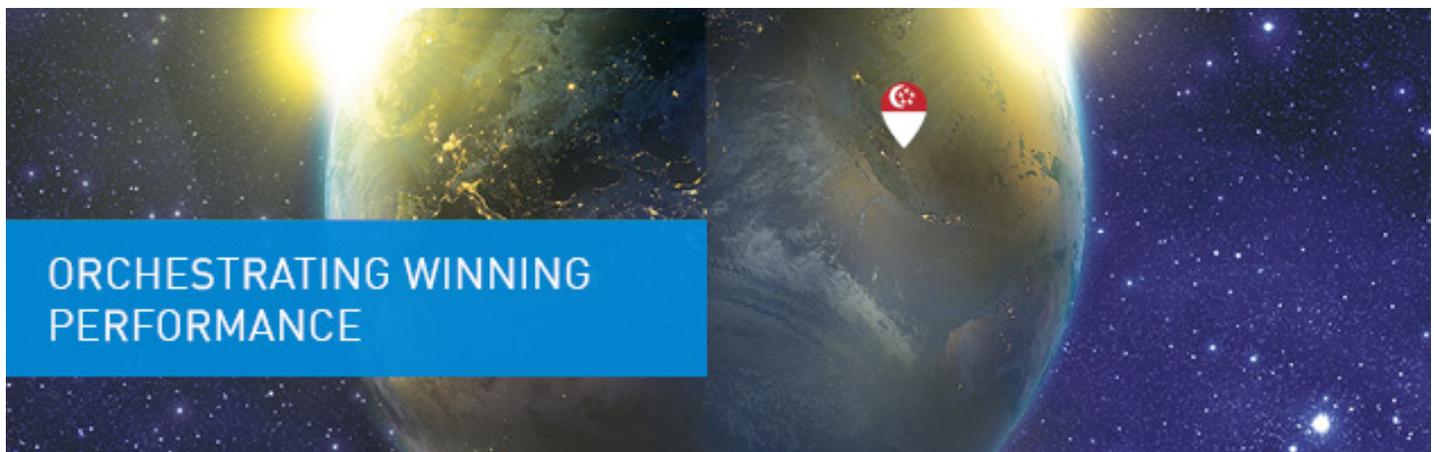


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