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## Review

eSport management: Embracing eSport education and research opportunities<sup>☆</sup>Daniel C. Funk<sup>\*</sup>, Anthony D. Pizzo, Bradley J. Baker

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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

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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

credence to the connections between eSport and sport. Meanwhile, the NBA has announced the *NBA 2K eLeague*, debuting in 2018, where each NBA franchise will draft five gamers, and teams will play NBA 2K in an 82-game regular season, followed by play-offs (Landrum, 2017). Traditional sport organizations investing in eSport is an international phenomenon, as the French professional soccer league, *Ligue 1*, recently launched Europe's first professional eSport soccer league (Burns, 2016). Meanwhile, the Australian Football League (AFL) is developing an eSport tournament to be hosted at the 56,347-capacity Etihad Stadium in Melbourne and has expressed desire for AFL clubs to sponsor or create eSport teams (Colangelo, 2017). The Olympic Council of Asia announced that eSport will become a medal event at the 2022 Asian Games in Hangzhou, China (Morrison, 2017). Traditional sport entities affiliating with eSport highlights the growing relationship.

### 2.3. Criticism of eSport as sport

The primary argument against eSport as a form of sport centres on its perceived lack of physicality. Yet, as noted by Connor (2011), the view of sport as a physical contest between human beings is a relatively recent invention, preceded by sport consisting primarily of hunting, as practiced by the upper classes. As described by Jonasson (2016), sport can be conceptualized both narrowly and broadly. From the narrow perspective, sport represents a physical context amongst humans, while the broad perspective equates sport with general physical activity. For eSport to fall into the domain of sport does not require this perhaps overly broad latter definition. eSport is a modern and highly-structured activity that requires physical actions of the human body to decide a competitive outcome.

Reliance solely on physical motions of a human body cannot be a requirement for an activity to be considered sport. For example, jogging 5K on Saturday morning is considered leisure, but when this same activity takes place in an organized 5K run, it is considered sport. Equestrian and motor sports are both widely considered sports, yet unquestionably involve the integration of non-human activity (Borowy, 2012; Jonasson, 2016). Various shooting disciplines, including pistol, rifle, and archery, feature on the Olympic Games program, yet integrate equipment designed to minimize the effect of body movement. The shooting jackets, pants, shoes, and gloves used in high-level shooting competitions are essential components for success in these sports. The inclusion of considerable levels of physical skill, aided by or in coordination with specialized technical equipment is a necessary component of sport, but the inclusion or even substantial contribution of a non-human component is not sufficient to reduce an activity to non-sport.

Similar to various shooting disciplines, the physical skills required for eSport rely on fine, rather than gross, motor movements. Both, however, require complex physical skills (Gawrysiak, 2016; Jenny et al., 2017). In eSport, and unlike in games such as chess or poker, these skills (along with strategy) directly influence the outcome of the competition (Gawrysiak, 2016). These movements, measured as actions per minute (APM), require manual dexterity to perform and are significantly and positively correlated with performance in eSport (Lewis, Trinh, & Kirsh, 2011). Professional eSport athletes can regularly execute upward of 400 to 500 APM, while novice players average around 50 APM (Wong, 2016). When competing, eSport players are faced with an extremely well-defined virtual environment in which the only way of winning a match is to identify and execute strategies that outperform the strategies of the opposing player or team (Wagner, 2006).

### 2.4. Distinguishing eSport from video gaming

While all eSports are video games, not all video gaming should be classified as sport. Video games must have structure (e.g., standard rules), organization (e.g., rule adherence), and competition (e.g., clear winners and losers) to be considered sport. Furthermore, the criterion of institutionalization must also be met to elevate a game to a sport. Institutionalization refers to an activity having regulation and official governing bodies, adding standardization to that activity (Jenny et al., 2017). Institutionalization permits formal competitions with all players competing under the same conditions. *Super Smash Brothers Melee*, a fighting video game published by Nintendo, offers structured, organized, and competitive gameplay, but lacks well-developed institutional elements. The game lacks formal leagues, governance, and standardized ranking metrics associated with larger competitive video gaming competitions. In mobile games such as *Candy Crush Saga*, structured gameplay and organized rules dictate that players swap coloured candy pieces in order to progress. Yet, *Candy Crush Saga* lacks competitive gameplay, thus failing to meet a prerequisite of sport. Sport-based video games, such as *FIFA 17* or *Madden NFL 17*, are virtual representations of traditional sport; yet without formal tournaments, events, or leagues, these games do not qualify as sport due to failure to meet requirements for structure, organization, and institutionalization. By contrast, eSport such as *League of Legends* and *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* have formal ranking systems, match players based on skill level, and matches resulting in definitive winners and losers, and can thus be considered sport. In conclusion, we argue that organized eSport events and competitions that meet all requirements should be classified as sport.

It may take more than consistency with formal definitions of sport to convince sceptics that eSport truly deserves to take a place alongside football, basketball, cricket, and tennis (Hemphill, 2005). Lagaert and Roose (2016) contend that an essentialist definition of sport is not possible in any case, as any such definition is necessarily simultaneously both too broad and too narrow, excluding activities that are widely-accepted as sport, while including activities that are not. In their view, a one-size-fits-all definition cannot be developed, in part because sport itself is a fluid concept and individuals within the sport field compete to assert their preferred interpretations. Ultimately, it may not matter whether eSport is sport. The eSport

industry faces dilemmas that can be addressed by sport management scholars, educators, and practitioners, thus establishing a strong fit between eSport and the sport management discipline. In the next section, we address why sport management scholars and practitioners should devote attention to eSport.

### 3. Implications of eSport for sport management

eSport is a relatively new phenomenon, but core management concerns are not. eSport faces many of the same challenges present throughout the sport industry and that sport management is already equipped to address and research. eSport represents a sport entertainment product with substantial growth potential, requiring management expertise related to events, merchandise, sponsorship, endorsements, marketing, technology, human resources, social media, governance, legal issues, celebrity culture, and athlete well-being. A useful managerial perspective to highlight the need for practitioners and academics to devote attention to eSport would be to examine how consumers and existing organizations are using eSport. Specifically, what job is eSport being hired to do?

#### 3.1. eSport and jobs to be done

The *jobs to be done* approach emphasizes what sport consumers hope to accomplish through consumption, focusing on what job a sport product or service performs in order to understand why it is hired (Christensen, Hall, Dillon, & Duncan, 2016). From this perspective, both eSport and traditional sport are hired by consumers for the same job: entertainment. Both are sources of sport entertainment competing for limited leisure time and financial resources. Recent researchers suggest that eSport spectators seek to fulfil similar motives as traditional sport spectators (Pizzo & Funk, 2017). These motives include socialization opportunities, athlete performance, and vicarious achievement, with results suggesting that eSport is consumed (i.e., hired) for similar purposes as traditional sport and satisfy similar consumer needs.

While the idea of watching other people play video games for sport entertainment may be surprising (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Sjöblom & Hamari, 2016), throughout history, individuals within society primarily hire sport for entertainment purposes. In response, organizations and managers responsible for the delivery of sport entertainment continue to provide products and services that meet consumer demand. Hence, whether eSport is sport remains largely an academic debate, since eSport is well-established within industry (PwC, 2016) and hired by consumers and organizations to perform a job. By default, eSport must be managed. For industry practitioners, such a debate is similar to two fleas arguing over who owns the dog they are on – it is a debate that has limited business relevance. What is relevant for sport organizations is to accurately develop and manage eSport products tailored to what sport customers want and are already using eSport for, in order to monetize eSport and secure resources to be successful. One such organizational perspective can be illustrated by the Philadelphia 76ers in the National Basketball Association (NBA).

Sookju Park, eSport business development director of the Philadelphia 76ers, indicated that NBA teams are entering the eSport marketplace to provide structure and content in a format familiar to traditional sport consumers (S. Park, personal communication, March 30, 2017). In the case of the 76ers, a sport organization is managing eSport like traditional sport. Thus, if sport consumers consider eSport to be sport and sport organizations are managing eSport as sport, sport management scholars should apply existing sport management knowledge to eSport. Yet, organizations are still uncertain how to enter the eSport industry. A.J. Dimick, director of operations for the University of Utah's eSport program, stated that other universities frequently contact him seeking information as interest in eSport grows (Smith, 2017). Dimick noted that the growth of eSport has gone relatively unnoticed by the mainstream until recently, leaving many unsure how best to enter the field. His remarks highlight the need for additional guidance for practitioners, as the infrastructure surrounding eSport has not kept pace with rapid growth.

#### 3.2. eSport governance

In this section, we provide a discussion of five governance challenges to highlight why practitioners and sport academics should devote more attention to eSport. These challenges include: (a) collegiate eSport, (b) legal issues of eSport as sport, (c) labour issues, (d) diversity and gaming culture and (e) who owns eSport. We review each of these key challenges and how sport management has provided guidance to similar issues in traditional sport, highlighting how existing sport management literature can inform and benefit from future research on eSport and the implications for sport management practitioners and researchers.

##### 3.2.1. Collegiate eSport

As with traditional sport, eSport has established a presence on college and university campuses and is seeking or has received official institutional recognition and status. South Korean universities are classifying competitive gamers as traditional athletes (Sorokanich, 2014), and in the U.S., colleges and universities have begun offering both academic and athletic scholarships to eSport players (Weller, 2016). Robert Morris University became the first U.S. university to offer athletic scholarships to eSport gamers (Moore, 2017), while the University of Utah is the first school from a Power Five athletic conference (Pac-12, Big Ten, Big 12, ACC, and SEC) to officially recognize eSport as a varsity athletics program (Utah, 2017).<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the University of California, Irvine (UCI) has established a state-of-the-art eSport arena to support a

university-sponsored team, research, education, and recreation, thus demonstrating how eSport fulfils diverse roles within a university community (UCI, 2016).

Increasing formal recognition of eSport at colleges and universities introduces potential drawbacks, alongside opportunities for increased student-athlete diversity. There are concerns related to the health impact of extreme commitments to player training, the effect on university academic missions, and alarms about the gaming industry's attitude towards women (Doran, 2017). Specifically, elements of a sometimes sexist and toxic video game culture must be recognized and addressed (Consalvo, 2012). Fink (2015) highlights the sport industry's underrepresentation of women and the need for change, and eSport can potentially be a catalyst for this change. The growth of eSport presents opportunities for college and university athletic departments to diversify student athlete populations, as eSport appeal to a diverse audience (PwC, 2016). eSport appeals to typically marginalized populations, particularly Asian student-athletes, a demographic generally underrepresented in many athletic departments (Demby, 2014). The reason higher education institutions are hiring eSport and the job it performs has a rich literature base to guide research on the related concerns pertaining to eSport's presence on college and university campuses.

Academic coursework on eSport has emerged with recently-launched courses at UCI, Miami University, and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). While eSport courses are typically housed within computer science or media science departments, the University of South Carolina offers an eSport course in the Department of Sport and Entertainment Management, establishing a connection to the sport management discipline. More broadly, eSport could feature as content throughout existing sport management curricula to teach principles of sport management. eSport provides appropriate case study material to teach foundational sport management topics, including the sociological foundations of sport, how sport is governed, marketed, and communicated, and important legal, ethical, and diversity issues in sport management. In addition, eSport offers experiential learning opportunities that may particularly appeal to the current and next generation of college students.

### 3.2.2. Legal issues of eSport as sport

The growth of eSport globally raises governance issues related to sport wagering and athlete visas. In many jurisdictions, numerous laws, statutes, and regulations treat sport wagering differently than non-sport gambling. Researchers from sport legal studies (e.g., Holden et al., 2017), have reviewed relevant international statutes on sport wagering and how these laws and regulations impact eSport. These scholars conclude that the classification of eSport as sport would expose the eSport industry to similar litigation confronting existing sports and sport-related industries. This research highlights how the future development of eSport depends on the activity's legal classification. Regardless of legal classification as sport, eSport wagering may introduce conflict with local and national laws and regulations governing sport wagering. Legal research from sport marketing on fantasy sport highlights the complex legal landscape surrounding sport gambling (e.g., Drayer, Dwyer, & Shapiro, 2013; Moorman, 2008), with additional guidance necessary to keep pace with the changing dynamics surrounding the legal classification of eSport.

National governments are gradually recognizing eSport players as professional athletes. Danny "Shiptur" Le was the first professional gamer to receive a P-1A visa to enter the United States (Dave, 2013). These visas represent a category designated for "Internationally Recognized Athletes" (USCIS, 2016, para. 1). Yet, not all eSport players have been granted this visa. In 2015, William "Leffen" Hjete, a Swedish national and an elite-level player in Super Smash Brothers Melee, was deported from the U.S. after his P1 visa application was denied. His visa was denied, because *Super Smash Brothers Melee* was not considered a legitimate sport, as the game lacks a formal ranking system (Lurie, 2016). eSport player immigration law issues will need to be addressed by the industry practitioners, academics, and government officials, as players move across country borders and new games ascend to join the rank of official eSport. These issues have already been addressed by professional clubs in traditional sports, such as football, basketball, and hockey, further demonstrating how sport management knowledge and expertise applies to eSport.

### 3.2.3. Labour issues

The rapid growth of eSport has outpaced regulation. The eSport industry is highly fragmented, with teams competing across multiple games, leagues, and tournaments (Green, 2016). The eSport industry is missing regulated elements common in mainstream traditional sport, including entry drafts, standardized contract terms, and league oversight of player behaviour (both on- and off-field). This affects both player protections (guaranteed salaries, protection from arbitrary dismissal from teams) and teams or leagues seeking to exert control over their product. The precarious nature of sustained employment and success as a player limits the ability to organize or negotiate for improved working conditions. These factors are compounded by an industry where most players are young, careers are short, and the next wave of would-be professional gamers is always on the doorstep seeking to claim any vacated place.

<sup>1</sup> Individual colleges and universities choose which activities to include in their athletic departments and sponsor as varsity sports. Formal recognition as a *championship sport* by the NCAA requires a minimum of 40 (women's sports) or 50 (men's sports) schools sponsoring the sport and successful completion of an application process leading to approved legislation (NCAA, 2016). Currently, 34 schools sponsor varsity eSport programs, a number projected to grow to between 50 and 60 by next year; approximately 40% of varsity eSport teams are housed within university athletic departments, while others are organized by academic departments or student affairs (Smith, 2017).

The eSport industry is in its relative infancy compared to established traditional sports. Issues pertaining to the rules, structure, and governance are fundamental to their legitimization, with key governance issues a focus of a significant amount of research. In their review of special features of sport, [Smith and Stewart \(2010\)](#) highlight four modes of sport governance, first identified by [Morgan \(2002\)](#), which may inform research on regulating the industry: hierarchy, cartel, oligarchy, and promoter-led, and they illuminate the distinct features of sport. eSport leagues and event managers can adopt these modes to provide formalized governance to the burgeoning industry.

### 3.2.4. Diversity and gaming culture

An acute challenge for eSports is the pressing need to evolve the existing gaming culture to become more welcoming to a wide diversity of participants and spectators. At their best, eSports can be exciting, competitive tournaments enjoyed in social settings. Unfortunately, eSports can also be plagued by rampant racism, misogyny, and homophobia ([Mulkerin, 2016](#)). Game content and marketing frequently showcase scantily-clad women, establishing an environment in which players may feel emboldened or encouraged to make sexually-charged comments ([Consalvo, 2012](#)). A series of high-profile incidents of harassment have led to recent calls for game developers to take an active role in community governance to protect players from abuse and promote a more inclusive environment ([Busch, Boudreau, & Consalvo, 2016](#)). Similarly, emerging eSport governing bodies are beginning to address gender inequities at the collegiate level by encouraging fair distribution of opportunities and resources ([NACE, 2017](#)).

eSport remains a highly gendered environment, and identifying barriers to competition and spectatorship is a strength of sport management research that can be leveraged by eSport. Critical studies on the culture surrounding eSports can build on existing research from the broader sport management literature to guide practice on promoting a more inclusive environment (e.g., [Cunningham & Fink, 2006](#)). Furthermore, eSport represents an area of opportunity to investigate an emerging sport which may also in turn inform the broader sport management literature on how to better address issues still confronting sport management.

### 3.2.5. Who owns eSport?

One aspect differentiating eSport from traditional sport is the dominant role played by the creator and manufacturer of the game itself. Firms such as Valve Corporation (CS:GO), Activision Blizzard (StarCraft II), and Riot Games (LoL) wield influence over the play of their respective games unlike that available in any traditional sport. The sport of basketball, for instance, does not have a single *owner*. The International Basketball Federation (FIBA), the U.S.'s National Basketball Association (NBA), or any number of other basketball organizations can, and do, maintain distinct rulebooks and governance regulations. Organizational structure and even play of the sport itself can be adjusted to the needs of a particular event, league, or institution without directly impacting how the sport is conducted by others. But it is impossible to play any of the games at the heart of eSport competitions without software provided and maintained by a particular corporate entity. Questions of ownership impacts both the game publishers, who may be legally responsible for activities taking place in-game or relying on game outcomes, and eSport promoters, who require license rights to produce tournaments. Even absent a formal finding that game manufacturers are liable for game-related activities, these companies may proactively choose to engage in industry self-regulation ([Holden et al., 2017](#)).

## 4. Conclusion

In the current article, we argue for the inclusion of organized eSport events and competitions within the sport management domain. This position is supported by examining how eSport exhibits defining characteristics of sport, its relationship to traditional sport, and addressing opposing views to its classification as sport. It should be noted that only eSport video gaming that meets the criteria requirements of structure, organization, competition, and institutionalization should be included and viewed as sport. As a result, sport practitioners and sport management academics should devote increased attention to eSport and embrace its commercial, educational, and research potential. From a governance perspective, points of concern related to eSport are areas that sport management is equipped to address. Leveraging existing expertise established in traditional sport can help inform current and emerging dilemmas facing eSport stakeholders.

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