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ESPORTS: VIDEO GAMES OR SPORTS?

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Abstract

Esports are defined as organized competitive human activities involving specific video games played over the internet or a local area network (LAN). The popularity of esports has led to an intense debate in the field of Philosophy of Sport about whether esports can be considered as sports. In the literature on the Philosophy of Sport, the focus is mainly on formalistic characteristics, to the detriment of the humanistic value that sport embodies. This paper aims to critically approach esports as to whether they can be considered as sports. This is a theoretical paper which uses analytical philosophical thinking and conceptual analysis. The thesis of the paper is that considering esports as sports is difficult based solely on their formalistic approach. Bernard Suits, the principal proponent of formalism, defines sport as the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles that exist. This definition is contingent upon the involvement of physical skills and a certain level of stability and institutionalization. Esports are competitive games with a specific regulatory framework and require the application of mental skills. Consequently, they possess physical abilities that cannot be directly compared to those of conventional sports. Furthermore, they are characterized by a certain degree of stability and institutionalization, regardless of any objections. The discussion suggests that considering esports as sports is difficult based solely on their formalistic approach, and their ethical nature should be discussed. The formalistic consideration of esports as either video games or sports is a challenging task.

Key Words*: formalism, Philosophy of Sport, rules, physical skills, institutionalization*

Introduction

Esports can be defined as human activities based on video games played in an organized competitive manner online or on a local area network (LAN) (Adams et al., 2019; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). In many cases, esports are regarded as merely another form of *gaming*. However, they encompass much more than this. They constitute an ecosystem, which includes video game genres, video game publishers, players, viewers, video game designers, and the organizers of esports championships and tournaments (Kanellopoulos & Giossos, 2024b). The ecosystem is characterized by two fundamental elements: entertainment and social interaction. Furthermore, the historical analysis reveals that the social characteristics of engagement with video games, as with games in general, are enduring (Billings & Hou, 2019; Collis, 2020). Video games have always been associated with specific places of gathering, entertainment and fun, which have historically been sites of social interaction (Billings & Hou, 2019). This phenomenon has remained consistent, even in the advent of esports, where players can now engage in video gaming from the comfort of their own homes via the internet. It is frequently observed that there were occasions when family and friendly gatherings were held for the purpose of engaging in video games (Billings & Hou, 2019).

One of the defining characteristics of esports is competition. From its inception, video game tournaments and leagues have incorporated elements of sporting events, including rules, players, spectators, and media coverage (Billings & Hou, 2019; Taylor, 2012). Initially, competition between players was based on their individual scores, but it soon evolved into a competition between players playing the same video game at the same time. There are three main types of competition and therefore competitions for esports: tournaments, relegation leagues and franchise leagues (George & Sherrick, 2019). The winners of these competitions are awarded financial prizes, and it is evident that players are not only interested in entertainment and fun (Hedlund, 2019). They devote a significant amount of time and energy to engaging

with video games as a form of training with the goal of becoming elite professional esports players (Kanellopoulos & Giossos, 2024b; Taylor, 2012).

The process of professionalizing esports, along with the involvement of sports media and the entertainment industry, has a history spanning decades (Billings & Hou, 2019; Collis, 2020). This process involves the continuous attempt to align esports with the characteristics of conventional modern sports. The internet, entrepreneurship, and the evolution of video game design parameters, in conjunction with economic and cultural factors, have led to the emergence of modern professional esports (Billings & Hou, 2019). South Korea appears to be at the centre of this phenomenon, serving as a hub for human engagement and the spread of video game culture across the globe (Billings & Hou, 2019; Taylor, 2012).

There are several categories of esports, which are defined mainly by the content of their video games and the way players act (Kanellopoulos & Giossos, 2024b). There are esports with video games of sports content, such as FIFA23, virtual sports that simulate conventional sports, such as taekwondo or table tennis, and esports with fighting and war strategy video games (Mirabito & Kucek, 2019; Sturm, 2019; Young & Strait, 2019). Indeed, war strategy video games (like *League of Legends* or *Counter-Stike: Global Offensive*) are the most popular among gamers, which raises concerns about whether esports can be considered sports or simply a more serious engagement with video games (Hallmann & Giel, 2017; Jenny et al., 2017; Kanellopoulos & Giossos, 2024a). Despite the categorization of esports, this paper does not consider any particular category; rather, it considers esports as a whole and as a human activity.

The above may lead to the conclusion that esports are similar to conventional sports. Esports share several external features and functions with conventional sports. These similarities extend beyond their competitive dimension (as games) to include their governance, social, and entertainment dimensions, which also encompass economic characteristics (Kanellopoulos & Giossos, 2024b).

The innovation and popularity of esports in the contemporary world, particularly among younger demographics, has prompted the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to engage with them and attempt to integrate them, albeit conditionally (Bach, 2023; Brown, 2018). It has already facilitated the organization of two significant events for them: the Olympic Virtual Series in Tokyo in 2021 and the Olympic Esports Series in Singapore in 2023 (*IOC Announces Olympic Esports Series 2023 with Winners to Be Crowned at Live Finals in Singapore from 22 to 25 June*, 2023; Palar, 2021). Consequently, the attempt to link them to Olympic sports, and conventional sports in general, appears particularly interesting. However, this paper does not focus on linking esports to the Olympic Games; rather, it focuses on linking esports to what is considered sports, in general, today.

But what is sport? This question has been the subject of much debate. Several theoretical approaches exist within the field of Philosophy of Sport that can be employed in order to characterize an activity as a sport. Some philosophers consider the social functions of sports in isolation, while others examine the intrinsic characteristics of sports in isolation. The former are part of *externalism*, which includes theoretical approaches such as *functionalism*. This perspective bases the value of sports on their social functions, which may exist independently of them (López Frías, 2017; Simon, 2014). However, there are also approaches that fall within *internalism*. These include theories such as *formalism* or Morgan's (2012, 2015) *'deep' conventionalism*, which argue that sports possess a set of principles and values that are intrinsic and conceptually linked to sporting activities and practices themselves (López Frías, 2017; Simon, 2014). It is evident that the Philosophy of Sport lacks a definitive and unambiguous definition of sport. This particular debate continues to evolve over time. It is evident that sports are human activities that share a number of similarities. In addition to any formal criteria that define them, they are also based on ethics and aesthetics. In the case of esports, the question arises as to whether the similarities with conventional sports are sufficient to qualify them as sports.

Aim and thesis

The aim of this paper is the critical approach of esports as to whether they can be considered as sports. It is a theoretical paper based on analytical thinking and conceptual analysis. In light of the existing literature on the Philosophy of Sport, which tends to focus on a formalistic debate on whether esports can be considered sports (Kanellopoulos & Giossos, 2024a), this paper argues that a formalistic approach is insufficient to determine whether esports can be considered sports.

In order to substantiate this position, it will be presented the concerns that emerge for each of the criteria formalism posits for sports, in relation to esports. These concerns make the whole discussion problematic rather than enlightening. So, the following discussion will demonstrate that the formalistic criteria of sports

are not clearly and explicitly defined in esports, and that formalism does not address all aspects of sports and esports.

The formalistic criteria of sports

Formalism is an internalist approach of sports that is based on the theory of Suits (2014). This theory defines *playing game* as:

To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific *state of affairs* (prelusory goal), using only means permitted by the rules (lusory means), where the rules prohibit use of more efficient, in favour of less efficient means (constitutive rules), and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity (lusory attitude). (Suits, 2014, p. 41)

Consequently, Suits' (2014) theory is predicated on the existence of rules that prescribe the means to achieve the goal of an activity. Even in the case of formalism, if the constituent rules of a competitive game undergo change (e.g., modification), this will be determined by the rules themselves.

Formalism posits that sports are defined by specific criteria (Suits, 2007, 2014). They should be games that require a certain degree of physical skill and have a certain degree of stability. Suits (1988, 1989) posits a distinct relationship between sports, games, and play, suggesting that not all games can be considered sports. In contrast, Meier (1981, 1988) posited that not all games can be considered sports, yet all sports can be classified as games. Nevertheless, for an activity to be considered a sport, it must, without a doubt, possess both the element of a competitive game and that of play which is contained in the game. Indeed, if it can be demonstrated that the activity in question meets the additional criteria set out by Suits (2007) in his formalistic approach, then the evidence will be stronger. Consequently, the subsequent section will examine the formalistic criteria of sports in relation to esports.

Formalism and esports

In the field of Philosophy of Sport, researchers such as Jenny et al. (2017) and Llorens (2017) have drawn on Suits' (2007, 2014) definition to discuss whether esports can be considered sports. In essence, Suits (2007, 2014) defines sports as the voluntary effort to overcome unnecessary obstacles that exist, provided that a physical skill is included and that a certain level of stability and institutionalization has been achieved.

It is intriguing to consider the applicability of the aforementioned criteria to the domain of esports.

Esports as games with rules

The formalistic approach stipulates that for an activity to be considered a sport, it must be a competitive game. The existence of explicit (constitutive) rules is a fundamental aspect of any sport, as they determine the means by which the goal of the competitive game may be achieved, and the winner determined. Esports are competitive video games, and thus the criterion of the existence of rules in them is met regardless of whether the game in esports takes place in a virtual environment and not exclusively in the real environment (Jenny et al., 2017). The specific rules that govern competitive games in esports are accepted because they facilitate the activity in question (Abanazir, 2019). These rules apply to human activity in both the real and virtual worlds of esports, and thus players must abide by them. With regard to the rules of esports, two principal concerns have been identified. The first pertains to the possibility of players violating these rules, while the second concerns the ethical implications of these rules (*ethos* of game).

The normative framework is evident in both esports as video games and the events of esports tournaments or championships. This is evidenced by the presence of referees in the various events (Llorens, 2017). Nevertheless, the objection is raised that esports video games lack constitutive rules that can be violated, and they also lack a prelusory goal, as Suits' (2014) theory requires. Holt (2016) posits that in video games, players are unable to break the rules because they are embedded in the video game software. According to Holt (2016), if players are unable to contravene the rules, then these are not rules that constitute the game; rather, they are merely regularities that are akin to laws of nature.

The absence of constitutive rules in video games leads to the conclusion that video games do not have prelusory goals for achieving a particular virtual *state of affairs*, since the latter depend on the rules that define the virtual environment in which this virtual *state of affairs* applies (Holt, 2016). In response to Holt's (2016) criticism, it can be argued that video games always have a prelusory goal, which is achieved using specific means. At the same time, it is possible to circumvent the rules by cheating software. However, no individual is compelled to do so if they possess the lusory attitude towards the game. The existence of

rule-breaking (cheating) software in video games is a beneficial element for the functioning of the game in esports, as if there were no such software, compliance with the rules would be forced. This can be regarded as a design flaw of the video game (Holt, 2016).

Other methods of violating the rules include the provision of assistance to a player through chat between team members in live matches on local LANs when the match is interrupted for technical reasons (which is prohibited), or during a game by electronic means, such as the use of "scripts" (programs that enhance the performance of the online video game platform or the technical features of the video game) (Llorens, 2017). Nevertheless, a Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack may be employed, whereby the game network is overloaded during a match, resulting in a reduction in speed or even a complete "crash" (Grabowski, 2019). Alternatively, "stream sniping" may be employed, whereby a player observes the live webcast of the game during a match, thereby gaining insight into the opponent's style of play and attempting to exploit any weaknesses (Van Allen, 2017). Additionally, there is electronic doping (e-doping), whereby players manipulate their equipment (keyboard, mouse, or even computer software) to gain an advantage in competitions (Giuffrè, 2019). Furthermore, the use of neuro-enhancing drugs to gain an unfair advantage is also a concern (Gatto & Patrick, 2017). As in conventional sports, another problematic practice is match-fixing (Grabowski, 2019).

It can be reasonably deduced from the preceding analysis that, in the context of esports, compliance with the established rules can give rise to concerns regarding fairness, instances of cheating and the principles of fair play. Reid (2012) posits that it is not the type of rules that define a sport, but rather the manner in which players utilise those rules. According to her, beyond the explicit rules, there are additional elements that define or characterise sports. These include *ethos* (the implicit rules of the game), and the "spirit" behind the explicit rules. A sport is a complex human activity that encompasses a multitude of elements, rendering it challenging to define with absolute clarity.

Llorens (2017) posits that the concept of fair play is understood differently in esports than in conventional sports. This is because, unlike in conventional sports, fair play in esports cannot be determined by all parties involved. In essence, the determination of fair play in esports is at the discretion of the video game developer. The discussion of the ways in which rules are violated in esports demonstrates the significance of rules for the existence of esports, given the value that formalism places on explicit rules. Nevertheless, as is the case with the formalistic approach to conventional sports, it is challenging to define esports on the basis of the existence of explicit rules alone. D'Agostino (1981) emphasises the significance of implicit rules in conventional sports for the comprehension of these activities. He defines the *ethos* of competitive games as the set of informal and implicit conventions that determine how the rules of a competitive game are applied in specific circumstances. Indeed, on occasion, a game is played in such a way that the implicit rules allow for the violation of their explicit (constitutive) rules.

Esports, skills and physical skills

The second defining characteristic of sports, from the perspective of formalism, is that they constitute games of skill (Suits, 2007). In contrast to conventional sports, esports require the development of a high level of technical skill and coordination to operate the controller (or keyboard) (Jenny et al., 2017), but also a kind of sport intelligence (Hemphill, 2005). This combination, as described by Hemphill (2005), is known as *cybersport intelligence*. It involves the skilful linking of video game avatar movement actions by players to the challenges of the game and the making of complex strategic decisions in a very short time. One emerging concern in relation to esports is whether esports also possess physical skills, as required by the formalistic approach.

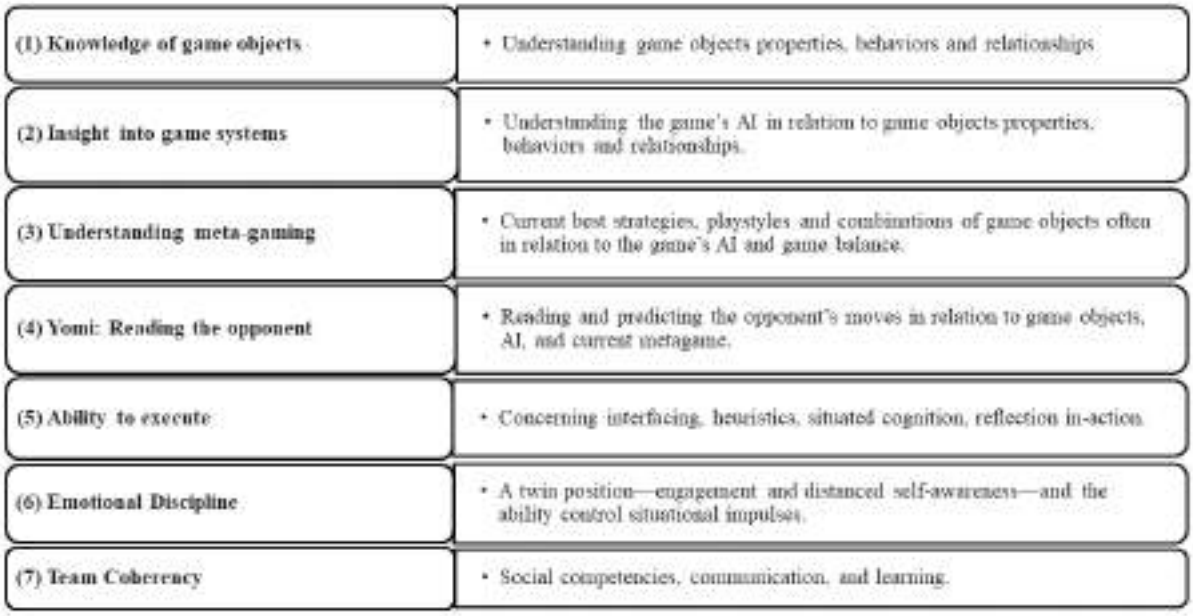
In esports, rapid perception, decision-making and fast motor response are required (Jenny et al., 2017; Llorens, 2017). Furthermore, these skills have been shown to improve cognitive function, creativity, reaction time, concentration, memory and overall cognition (Jenny et al, 2017). Indeed, video games based on conventional sports activities also improve sports knowledge (player positions, field layout, tactics, strategies) and enhance teamwork (in terms of team-based esports) (Jenny et al., 2017). However, one might be led to question whether esports require solely mental skills.

Mental skills are not independent of any motor skills present in esports (Bowman & Cranmer, 2019; Larsen, 2020). Figure 1 presents the skills of professional esports players, as outlined by Larsen (2020). These include both mental and physical skills, as both are related to knowledge and the ability to perform a particular activity (Attewell, 1990).

One might inquire whether there exists a specific threshold of physicality that must be present in esports

in order to satisfy this particular formalistic criterion. The term *physicality* is employed to describe the actions and participation of the body in the performance of any activities associated with a sport (Kanellopoulos & Giossos, 2022). As the subsequent discussion will demonstrate, there is no clear answer. The physical demands of esports can be divided into two categories: *controller demand* (the control of the game through a controller, including the computer keyboard or any similar technological equipment or through sensors that may be attached to the body) and *physical exertion* (Bowman & Cranmer, 2019).

Figure 1 *Outlining the seven strands embedded in the theory of skill in relation to eSport (adapted from Larsen, 2020, Fig. 6, p. 16)*



Controller demand, although based on mental models, is distinct from the mental skills required in a video game, as it refers only to the mechanistic and physical requirements, i.e., the physical movements to select specific buttons and manipulate the controller (Bowman & Cranmer, 2019). It refers, therefore, to the elicitation of a specific action in the video game of esports rather than to solving a problem. It is a highly skilled and fast-paced physical skill that is not universally attainable (Ekdahl & Ravn, 2019; Hemphill, 2005). Control movements via the controller are characterized by precision and are fine motor skills. They rely on movement and body control skills, coordination (eye-hand coordination) and endurance. Indeed, to a degree that is not required by any other conventional sport (Jenny et al., 2017; Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010).

The question thus arises as to whether these fine motor skills are sufficient to qualify an esport as a sport. Conventional sports are characterized by gross motor skills involving large muscle groups and their physicality involves the player's entire body (Loy, 1968; Parry, 2019). It could be argued that the answer to the above question is in the affirmative, as there are conventional sports that rely equally on fine motor skills, such as shooting and archery. Additionally, conventional sports such as tennis and basketball rely on both gross and fine motor skills, with precision movements playing a significant role in conjunction with gross physical movements (Jenny et al., 2017; Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010).

From the above, it can be seen that the debate on the physicality of esports focuses on the kind of motor skills (fine or gross) required for an activity to be considered a sport. Hemphill (2005) concurs with Meier's (1981, 1988) perspective, which posits that there is no distinction between fine and gross motor skills in a motor activity. It is evident that there are sports that necessitate the performance of subtle physical movements, such as archery, which has been previously mentioned. Nevertheless, these alone are insufficient to fully describe the physical dimension of sports. It can be argued that in these sports, large muscle groups must also be activated, even if only for the control (and not necessarily for the movement) of the whole body. Holt (2016) presents a contrasting viewpoint, suggesting that Hemphill (2005) employs a strategic approach to argue that esports can be considered sports. He posits that it is possible to distinguish between fine and gross motor skills. He further asserts that the only esports that can be considered sports are those based on motion with video games simulating conventional sports (Motion Based Video Games or MBVGs), and this is because they feature an overall physical activity. Similarly, the positions of Jenny

et al. (2017) and Parry (2019) can be considered. These authors argue that the skills required by the esports player do not contribute to the development of the "whole" person and are not "full body".

However, despite the absence of a definitive conclusion regarding the type of motor skills involved in esports, it is evident that players engage in physical exertion, as evidenced by the prevalence of musculoskeletal injuries and pains (Bowman & Cranmer, 2019; Llorens, 2017). The *physical exertion* dimension in esports is a more holistic view of physical activity, encompassing a multitude of functions, from sensory functions to the movement of the body itself (Bowman & Cranmer, 2019). It can vary in intensity and may not always be minimal, as argued by Hemphill (2005) and Jenny et al. (2017). Additionally, there are motion-based esports (MBVGs) that simulate specific conventional sports, utilising motion-sensing sensors mounted on the player's body (e.g. Wii Sports, Zwift Sports). Indeed, these have been found to have a significant effect on human body functions, including increased respiration, perspiration, and heart rate (Jenny et al., 2017; Siegel et al., 2009). However, they are characterised by energy expenditure, which is lower than that present in their conventional sports counterparts. It is evident that Parry (2021) and Parry and Giesbrecht (2023) consider only specific virtual sports (such as virtual static cycling and virtual static rowing) to require "integrated" physical effort from their players.

In light of the aforementioned considerations, Jenny et al. (2017) propose that the criteria for defining a sport should be revised, or that only MBVGs should be included in esports if they are to be considered sports. However, it is questionable whether the mere presence of physical effort (either gross or fine motor activity) in esports is sufficient to meet the physicality criterion for sports.

In conventional sports, *physical exertion* affects performance and the outcome of the game (Funk et al., 2018; Van Hilvoorde & Pot, 2016), constituting a *motor action*. The term *motor action* is defined as an intentional movement performed with a specific purpose in a given environment, accompanied by a displacement of the movement vector (Van Hilvoorde & Pot, 2016). One might inquire whether there are motor actions in esports that involve virtual rather than real environments. It is accurate to state that in esports, the player's body becomes a tool for displacing an object in the virtual environment (e.g. an avatar). However, it is not always the player's body itself that is displaced (Van Hilvoorde & Pot, 2016). Parry (2019) posits that esports are an indirect human activity (i.e., through the computer), thus they have an indirect physicality. The movements of the video game avatars indirectly lead to the outcome the player is trying to achieve. This perspective is at odds with Llorens (2017), who posits that the electronic medium (i.e., the computer) utilized in esports is a medium, akin to any medium employed in conventional sports (e.g., the football field in football). The key issue is not the actions of the avatars themselves, but rather the manner in which the players interact with them within the context of video games.

Regarding the element of intentionality, the physical control movements of the game controller affect the actions that occur in the virtual world of the game. For instance, the subtle bodily movements of computer sports players when controlling the controller constitute skills that affect the performance and outcome of the game (Funk et al., 2018). Professional esports players, for instance, can perform over 400 to 500 actions per minute, while novice players average around 50 (Funk et al., 2018; Wong, 2014).

Furthermore, it is notable that the actions of esports players cannot be separated from their virtual representations (Ekdahl & Ravn, 2019), if their physicality is approached phenomenologically. Considering this approach and with a focus on esports and simulations of conventional sporting activities, Hemphill (2005) posits that esports are embodied sporting practices that refer to an alternative sporting reality where "athletes" (that is players) are extended into sporting worlds that are digitally represented. These activities are distinguished by their incorporation of electronically extended sporting actions, which are enabled by the high degree of *immersion* experienced by players, the high degree of *interactivity* inherent in video games, and the reliance on the *cybersport intelligence* discussed previously (Hemphill, 2005; Holt, 2016).

Immersion refers to the experience of the player becoming fully involved in the virtual world, to the extent that they forget about the real world. This is a physical attunement of players to the virtual environment, which enables them to perceive what is possible and achievable in the virtual worlds they operate in. In terms of *interactivity*, this refers to the control that the player has over the virtual world, which is ensured by the audiovisual and/or tactile interface with the projected "sporting" action. The combination of *interactivity* and *immersion* ensures the extension of the player's body boundaries from the real world to the virtual world. This can occur using appropriate technological equipment or through a virtual embodiment in an environment that does not simulate or replicate the real world (Van Hilvoorde & Pot, 2016). In the latter case, the player's physical space is extended into the screen space through the avatars of the video game (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010; Van Hilvoorde & Pot, 2016). These two characteristics are

directly linked to the development of the necessary skillful game in esports, namely the development of *cybersport intelligence* (Hemphill, 2005).

Esports, stability and institutionalization

However, in addition to the formalistic criteria of the game and physical skills, an activity must also exhibit a certain degree of stability in order to be classified as a sport. The degree of institutionalization and popularity are key factors in determining the stability of a sport. The concept of institutionalization of a sport is linked to the development and standardization of rules, standardization of learning *how to play*, development of expertise and the existence of coaches, trainers, officials and governing bodies for the sport (Abanazir, 2019; Jenny et al., 2017). Although esports have been highly developed globally due to their online format, Jenny et al. (2017) argue that their governing bodies, which oversee the creation and standardization of rules and the competition that characterizes them, have not been developed to the same extent.

Nevertheless, esports appear to have reached a certain degree of institutionalization, as evidenced by the existence of relevant esports associations and federations, teams, professional players, and related tournaments and championships at local, national, and global levels (e.g., The International ESWC; World e-sports Games; World Cyber Games, etc.) (Jenny et al., 2017). One of the earliest official organizations to be established was the Korea eSports Association (KeSPA), which was formed in 2000. Additionally, analogous associations were established in Europe and America (Taylor, 2012). In 2008, the International e-Sports Federation (IeSF, 2023) was established with the objective of fostering collaboration with existing esports associations in Asia and Europe. The overarching goal was to promote the stability and growth of esports globally (Taylor, 2012). In this context, the World eSports Association was also established.

The issue, however, is that there is no singular model for the development of esports in all countries, nor is there a singular administrative structure (Llorens, 2017). The supervision, development and enforcement of the rules are primarily the responsibility of commercial companies and those that publish the video games, who simultaneously act as the governing bodies and organizers of the different tournaments and leagues. This presents a significant challenge to the operation and development of esports. Video game owners possess considerable influence over esports (Abanazir, 2019; Funk et al., 2018), demonstrating a greater interest in financial gain than in any sporting values. One might, of course, argue that this is not a particular problem, as something similar is occurring in conventional sports, where entities such as the National Football League (NFL) and the National Basketball Association (NBA) run and promote football and basketball in America (Koot, 2017). However, in esports, numerous legal issues arise from the involvement of video game publishing companies in the administration of any competitions and leagues (Abanazir, 2019; Grabowski, 2019). For instance, the frequent renewal of video games utilised in these competitions by the companies themselves, as well as the upgrades to video game software. The creation of new video game versions can give rise to issues concerning both game practice and copyright between developers and publishing companies (Jenny et al., 2017). Of greater significance, however, is the impact on the criterion of stability. However, it is questionable whether a single administrative structure can be established. Such an approach carries the risk of violating antitrust law, given that esports are primarily concerned with the private sector (Abanazir, 2019).

Nevertheless, esports enjoy considerable popularity and wide following. The involvement of thousands of players and spectators has been documented (Bach, 2023; Billings & Hou, 2019; Van Hilvoorde & Pot, 2016) and there is now general consensus that esports constitute a global phenomenon in the contemporary era (Jenny et al., 2017). Furthermore, sports media are also engaged with esports. The number of people engaged in esports globally is currently estimated at three billion (Bach, 2023). Furthermore, the Olympic Esports Series, held in Singapore in 2023, attracted 6 million viewers to its web streaming (Bach, 2023). At least 70 countries have demonstrated a high level of engagement with esports (Van Hilvoorde & Pot, 2016). It is evident that not all countries have embraced esports with equal enthusiasm. However, is there a need for them to be universally accepted? It is important to note that conventional sports were not established in a short period of time either. According to Şentuna & Kanbur (2016), this is not a distant prospect

However, in light of the aforementioned considerations, the following question arises: What is the threshold of institutionalization at which esports can be considered as sports, with no operational issues? In a similar vein, Reid (2012) queries whether the very nature of a sport remains unchanged before and after its institutionalization, regardless of the necessity of such a process for organizational and administrative

reasons. In other words, as an activity, isn't sport the same with or without its institutionalization? Moreover, Reid (2012) posits that the broad appeal of sports is a similarly controversial criterion for defining sports, as it is only a criterion for the inclusion of a sport in the Olympic Games. In addition, Suits (1989) ultimately rejected the notion that stability represents a fundamental aspect of sport.

Conclusions

The fundamental formalistic criteria that define a sport are its rules and its physicality. With regard to the rules, however, formalism does not address the question of what would occur if they were altered or revised.

Although Suits' formalistic theory touches on the ethics of sports, since voluntary obedience to rules and the use of less effective means to achieve the goal of the game are considered moral behaviour, it does not address the *ethos* of game – that is to say, the implicit rules that shape fair play. This conclusion is applicable to any competitive game, whether it is part of conventional sports or esports. It is evident that there is a need for further discourse on the matter of whether players in esports adhere to both their constitutive rules and the implicit rules.

Regarding the physicality of esports, it can be argued that it exists even if the quantity and quality of physical movements required by a formalistic definition cannot be calculated. The mental skills of esports players are not independent of their motor skills, demonstrating that the mind finds new ways to express itself in esports, as it does in conventional sports. Sports are created by humans for humans and are about human nature itself, not just the physical level (Reid, 2012). The body and mind are inextricably linked, and therefore the discussion of physicality that formalism focuses on in sports and, consequently, in esports is inherently problematic. It is imperative to investigate the human element in esports.

In conclusion, formalism is an approach that does not consider any other social or psychological function of esports. It proposes a specific normative framework for ethical evaluation in them based on respect for rules and the prohibition of cheating. In other words, it does not consider the behaviours of those involved in esports, the level of competition, the wrong decisions of referees, or the level of effort of players in a match. This approach downplays the aesthetic and ethical nature of sports, as it identifies them as a specific skill practice that aims at an outcome in a defined "absolute" way (Kretchmar, 2015). It is similarly unable to discuss the ethics related to video game content. Nor can it discuss the ethics of information about them as a medium of digital technology. These specific elements, however, are of critical importance and warrant further investigation. Formalism does not encompass all the characteristics of the competition; rather, it merely assigns value to the outcome. This prompts the question of whether this is the essence of sport. So, for the aforementioned reasons, it is evident that esports cannot be considered as sports solely through the lens of the formalistic approach.

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