

Emerging Discourses: eSports

Thomas M. Hunt and Austin Duckworth

University of Texas, Austin

eSports, We would like to express our appreciation to the editors of the *Journal of Emerging Sport Studies* for inviting us to participate in this Emerging Discourses conversation. Their prompt asked us to contemplate an issue that we believe is a crucial question in the field of sport studies. “What impact, if any,” they asked, “will ESports have on the landscape of modern sport?”

Before answering, we would like to first provide some context as to why we find the subject so interesting. Throughout our relationship as faculty supervisor and (now recently graduated) doctoral student, we have shared in a commitment to employ sport as a means by which to better understand the broader political world. The works that we have respectively produced under this aspiration have to a large degree concentrated on “major” sporting affairs such as the Olympics and the World Cup. Given their sizable political meaning, such topics of course deserve considerable scholarly attention. But over the last several years, we have become increasingly aware of new modes by which sport is both consumed and performed.

One avenue through which this perception crystalized arose as part of our mutual interest in the game of golf. In a seemingly endless obsession, one of us (Hunt) even downloaded an iPhone app called World Golf Tour (WGT) so that he could still play (even if only digitally) while away from the course. The options for WGT include a multiplayer game mode that allows participants from all over the world to compete against one another in head-to-head competitions; and they can even chat with one another while doing so via text input. In these scenarios, the home country of each player is indicated through a small representation of its national flag. During his initial one-on-one game, Hunt noted that his opponent resided in Latvia (after Googling what country the flag on the screen actually symbolized). Over the course of their round together, the two players exchanged stories about what life was like in their respective communities. In conversing about the experience afterwards, it struck us that eSports offered an interesting lens through which to understand the cultural, technological, and economic dynamics at play in today’s globalized world.¹

¹ On the relationship of digital gaming to globalization, see Vít Šisler, Jaroslav Švelch, and Josef Šlerka, “Video Games and the Asymmetry of Global Cultural Flows: The Game Industry and Game Culture in Iran and the Czech Republic,” *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 3857–79; and Ahmed Elmezeeny and Jeffrey Wimmer, “Games without Frontiers: A Framework for Analyzing Digital Game Cultures Comparatively,” *Media and Communication* 6, no. 2 (2018): 80–89.

It is worth noting from this perspective that a number of teams within the “traditional” sporting world have adopted digital gaming platforms as teaching aids for their athletes. A more meaningful side to the story of eSports exists, however — one which is rooted in militarism and international conflict. Armed forces around the world have in recent decades turned to digital gaming technologies in efforts to train and equip their respective forces.² And they are pursuing ever more ambitious plans. In 2015, the U.S. Air Force recruiting services partnered with the Reel FX digital studio and the GSD&M advertising agency to create a flight simulator for the Oculus Rift virtual reality system.³ The service is now working to develop an online game that it hopes will attract a specific type of audience; the goal is to be able to track IP addresses of participants and to send recruiting material to players who demonstrate special promise.⁴

eSports and digital gaming platforms thus reveal much about the broader world. They on the one hand reflect a profound degree of global connectedness consequent to the digital revolution in human affairs. Even so, contemporary society remains greatly affected (indeed, is in many ways fundamentally based) on the idea of the nation-state. And it is marked by great societal tensions that manifest themselves at state and non-state levels alike.

As for what all this means regarding the editors’ original question regarding the impact of eSports on the landscape of modern sport, we would to point out several recent decisions in military circles that we believe possess special relevance. In 2017, eSports was adopted as an official component of the Finnish military’s Sports School. In partnership with the Finnish eSports federation, the program provides elite training as well as time off for competitors to attend eSports competitions; this parallels the treatment of soldiers with high-level skill in traditional sporting events.⁵ To take another example, the South Korean

² See Thomas M. Hunt, “The Digital Games That Militaries Play,” *Stratfor.com*, January 8, 2018, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/digital-games-militaries-play>.

³ Jamie Feltham, “Reel FX Partners with US Air Force for ‘Performance Lab’ VR Title,” *VRFocus* (blog), May 31, 2015, <https://www.vrfocus.com/2015/05/reel-fx-partners-with-us-air-force-for-performance-lab-vr-title/>.

⁴ Stephen Losey, “‘Ender’s Game’ Meets Air Force? The Service Is Working on a Video Game to Find Potential Recruits,” *Air Force Times*, May 24, 2018, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/news/your-air-force/2018/05/24/enders-game-meets-air-force-the-service-is-working-on-a-video-game-to-find-potential-recruits/>.

⁵ “eSports Accepted as Part of the Finnish Defence Forces’ Sports School,” accessed July 29, 2018, <https://www.ie-sf.org/news/esports-accepted-as-part-of-the-finnish-defence-forces-sports-school/>.

military held an eSports tournament last October.⁶ And there has even been speculation that the country's leaders might at some point give elite eSport players who win medals at international competitions an exemption from military service as they do now for athletes who win in traditional sports.⁷ The fact that the 2022 Asian Games will include eSports competitions as official medal events gives the matter an ongoing significance.

Such questions will grow both in their number and complexity in the coming years. While the specifics of their resolution will play a large role on the matter, it seems clear at this point that eSports has the potential to exert a truly profound impact on the future sports landscape. We look forward to following its story.

J E
S S

Emerging Discourses, eSports

Journal of Emerging Sport Studies

Issue 1, (2018)

All Rights Reserved, 2018

⁶ Nicole Carpenter, "The South Korean Army Hosted an Overwatch Tournament This Morning," *DOT ESPORTS*, October 9, 2017, <https://dotsports.com/overwatch/news/south-korea-overwatch-tournament-army-17903>.

⁷ Sharon Coone, "Esports May Be Joining the Asian Games, Saving Korean Players from Required Military Service," *Blitz Esports*, April 18, 2017, <https://blitzsports.com/lol/article/845/esports-may-joining-asian-games-saving-korean-players-requi>.