

# **ESPORTS IN THE DIGITAL AGE: HISTORY, ECONOMY, MEDIA, AND GLOBAL POWER**

## **Editors**

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## PREFACE

Esports has emerged as one of the most defining phenomena of the digital age, reshaping how competition, media, economy, and culture are organized in contemporary societies. What began as experimental digital gameplay and informal competitive practices has evolved into a global ecosystem characterized by professional leagues, platform-based media systems, transnational sponsorship networks, and complex investment structures. This transformation cannot be adequately understood through a single disciplinary lens. Instead, esports demands an integrated analytical approach that situates digital games within broader processes of technological change, economic restructuring, media convergence, and globalization. This edited volume was conceived in response to that need. Bringing together ten original chapters by scholars working at the intersection of sports studies, media studies, digital economy, and sociology, the book offers a comprehensive and historically grounded examination of esports as a multidimensional field. Rather than treating esports merely as a form of entertainment or a derivative of traditional sport, the chapters collectively conceptualize esports as a digitally native competitive domain shaped by platform capitalism, media power, institutional innovation, and global cultural flows.

The volume opens by tracing the cultural, technological, and economic foundations of digital games, establishing the historical conditions under which competitive gaming became possible. From early laboratory experiments to mass-market commercialization, these chapters demonstrate that esports is rooted in long-term transformations of human-computer interaction and digital production. Building on this foundation, subsequent chapters examine the transition from localized, offline competitions to online tournaments, highlighting the role of internet infrastructure, networking technologies, and participatory cultures in reshaping competitive practices. A central contribution of this book lies in its sustained focus on the political economy of esports. Several chapters analyze the historical development of esports economics, financing models, and revenue structures, revealing how sponsorship, media rights, and platform-based monetization have become central to the sustainability of the sector. Particular attention is given to the industrialization of esports after 2018, when investment flows, franchise league systems, and corporate governance models transformed esports into a fully institutionalized industry. These analyses underscore that

esports differs fundamentally from traditional sports economies, as game publishers and digital platforms occupy unprecedented positions of power within the competitive ecosystem.

The global dimension of esports is another core theme of the volume. By examining the South Korean model and the broader East Asian experience, the book highlights how state policies, media integration, and institutional coordination enabled the early professionalization of esports and shaped global standards that later diffused to other regions. This perspective challenges Western-centric narratives of sports globalization and positions esports as a field in which non-Western models have played a foundational role. In addition to macro-level economic and institutional analyses, the volume addresses the structural and cultural dimensions of esports competition. Dedicated chapters explore genre formation—particularly the rise of MOBA games—as well as the transformation of media systems through live streaming platforms such as Twitch and YouTube. These contributions demonstrate how esports has redefined spectatorship by integrating interactivity, participatory culture, and continuous content production into the experience of competition. Media legitimacy, discursive power, and the construction of esports as a “sport-like” activity are examined through comparative and theoretical lenses, emphasizing the role of digital media in shaping public perception and authority.

Finally, the book offers an in-depth analysis of esports sponsorship models, digital activation strategies, and market dynamics, illustrating how brands engage with esports audiences through content-oriented and platform-specific practices. By situating sponsorship within broader debates on platformization and digital labor, the volume provides critical insights into the opportunities and vulnerabilities that characterize the contemporary esports economy.

Taken together, the chapters in this book present esports not as a marginal subculture, but as a central case for understanding how sport, media, and economy are being reconfigured in the digital age. The volume is intended for scholars, graduate students, and practitioners interested in esports, digital sports economies, media studies, and globalization. More broadly, it seeks to contribute to ongoing academic debates on the future of competition, cultural production, and power in an increasingly platform-driven world.

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## EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, esports has evolved from a marginal practice within digital gaming cultures into a globally organized field of competition, media production, and economic value creation. This transformation has not occurred in isolation. Rather, esports has emerged at the intersection of broader structural shifts associated with digitalization, platform economies, media convergence, and the reconfiguration of sport in late modern societies. As such, esports constitutes a critical empirical site for examining how competition, labor, spectatorship, and institutional power are being reorganized in the digital age.

Despite its rapid growth and increasing visibility, esports remains conceptually under-theorized and frequently mischaracterized within both academic and public discourse. Popular narratives often frame esports either as a technologically enhanced form of traditional sport or as a transient entertainment trend driven by youth culture. Both perspectives risk obscuring the deeper structural dynamics that distinguish esports from established sporting systems. This volume starts from the premise that esports should be analyzed not merely as “sport plus technology,” but as a digitally native competitive field shaped by platform-based governance, media logics, and global political-economic relations.

From a theoretical standpoint, esports challenges several foundational assumptions within sports studies. Classical definitions of sport emphasize physical embodiment, federation-based governance, and territorially bounded competition. Esports destabilizes these criteria by foregrounding cognitive performance, virtual arenas, and publisher-centered control over competitive environments. At the same time, esports shares key characteristics with traditional sports, including professionalization, institutional regulation, fandom, and symbolic struggles over legitimacy. This tension makes esports a productive case through which to rethink what sport means under conditions of digital mediation. Equally important is the role of media in shaping esports as a legitimate and economically viable domain. Unlike traditional sports, which historically relied on television broadcasting to achieve mass visibility, esports developed within digitally native media ecosystems. Live-streaming platforms, algorithmic recommendation systems, and participatory audience practices have not merely transmitted esports competitions but have actively constituted their meaning,

value, and organizational form. Media platforms function simultaneously as broadcasters, labor markets, data infrastructures, and sites of cultural production. Any serious analysis of esports must therefore engage with theories of media convergence, platform capitalism, and digital labor.

The economic structure of esports further differentiates it from conventional sports models. Rather than federations or clubs controlling competition, game publishers retain ownership of the intellectual property that underpins esports ecosystems. This arrangement concentrates regulatory, economic, and symbolic power in unprecedented ways, raising critical questions about governance, sustainability, and labor relations. Sponsorship, media rights, and investment flows have transformed esports into a high-growth industry, yet this growth is accompanied by structural vulnerabilities related to platform dependence, revenue volatility, and asymmetries between corporate actors and competitive labor.

Globalization constitutes another central axis of analysis in this volume. Esports did not globalize through the same pathways as traditional sports, which were largely institutionalized in Western contexts before spreading internationally. Instead, esports emerged as a global phenomenon through digitally networked infrastructures, with East Asia—particularly South Korea—playing a foundational role in early institutionalization. State policies, media integration, and coordinated governance models in the Far East established templates that later diffused globally. This trajectory complicates dominant Eurocentric narratives of sports globalization and invites comparative, non-Western perspectives. The chapters collected in this volume address these issues through a multi-layered analytical framework. Historical analyses trace the transformation of digital games into organized competitive systems. Economic chapters examine the evolution of financing, sponsorship, and industrialization processes. Media-focused contributions analyze broadcasting platforms, legitimacy discourses, and power relations. Genre-based studies explore how specific game forms—such as MOBAs—structure competition and spectator engagement. Taken together, these perspectives position esports as a hybrid field located at the intersection of sport, media, and the digital economy.

Importantly, this book does not seek to provide a definitive or closed account of esports. Rather, it aims to establish a robust conceptual foundation for future research by situating esports within broader theoretical debates on digitalization, globalization, and institutional power. By bringing together diverse yet complementary approaches, the volume argues that esports should be understood

*Editors' Introduction*

not as an anomaly at the margins of sport, but as a paradigmatic example of how competitive practices are being reshaped in platform-driven societies.

In this sense, esports offers more than a new object of study. It provides a lens through which scholars can critically examine the future of sport, media, and economic organization in the digital age. This volume is intended as a contribution to that ongoing conversation.

## CHAPTER 1

# THE AGE OF DIGITAL GAMES: CULTURAL, TECHNOLOGICAL, AND ECONOMIC FOUNDATIONS

Çağlayan Adil CANSU<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction: The Digitizing Universe of Play

Since the second half of the 20th century, humanity has witnessed an unprecedented transformation, largely driven by technology that has resonated across the globe. One of the most prominent cultural outcomes of this transformation is the redefinition of play, which has been liberated from its traditional physical confines and reconstituted through digital interfaces and global networks. The wave of digitalization, accelerating after the 1980s, reduced the cost and increased the accessibility of computer technologies. By the 1990s, this momentum had carried the gaming industry to a powerful and central position in the international market (Ernkvist, 2008; Newman, 2008). This era, defined as “The Age of Digital Games,” did not merely introduce a new form of entertainment; it constituted a critical juncture that fundamentally altered the nature of human–computer interaction, cultural production practices, socialization patterns, and economic models.

The increasing significance of digital games in socio-economic and cultural interaction is directly linked to the widespread adoption across diverse demographics and geographies. Gaming is no longer an activity confined solely to children or teenagers; it has evolved into a heterogeneous structure encompassing adulthood. Research in Europe indicates that one in three adults regularly plays games (Boniel-Nissim et al., 2024), while in the United States, the rate of children who regularly play games has reached 91% (Granic et al., 2014). Data from Turkey presents a similar picture: 79% of adults are interested in mobile gaming, and 74% of children report playing games. Reports by the Information Technologies and Communication Authority (BTK, 2020) and the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK, 2024) confirm that a substantial portion of internet usage (72.7%) is

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into a global sector with organized, professional teams, coaches, and corporate sponsorships (Taylor, 2012). As indicated by data from BTK (2020) and TÜİK (2024), digital games are not merely a form of entertainment but one of the most dominant cultural and economic actors of the 21st century, holding increasing significance in national economies and global cognitive interaction (Granic et al., 2014). This ecosystem clearly demonstrates that even technological constraints can trigger creativity, transforming games into a field of high cultural legitimacy.

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## CHAPTER 2

# THE TRANSITION TO ONLINE TOURNAMENTS: THE HISTORICAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL EVOLUTION OF E-SPORTS

Çağlayan Adil CANSU<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction: The Transformation of E-Sports into a Global Phenomenon

Electronic sports (e-sports) represent the intersection of modern entertainment, technology, and competitive culture. Originating in the modest arcade halls of the 1970s and maturing through Local Area Network (LAN) parties in the 1990s, this competitive culture underwent a revolutionary transformation from the 2010s onward. Driven by the proliferation of broadband internet and online streaming platforms (Twitch, YouTube Gaming), e-sports evolved rapidly into a structure dominated by online tournaments. This transition elevated e-sports from a regional subculture to a borderless, global media and entertainment industry.

One of the most critical catalysts for this transformation was the COVID-19 pandemic. As physical arenas and stadiums temporarily closed from 2020 onward, all attention and competition shifted to digital platforms, accelerating the technical infrastructure and mass acceptance of online tournaments. Today, peak events like the *League of Legends World Championship* rival traditional sports viewing figures, reaching over a hundred million concurrent viewers. The global e-sports economy is projected to approach \$5 billion by 2025, underscoring that this shift represents not only a technological change but also a tremendous economic inflection point, supported by media rights, sponsorship deals, and new business models like franchise leagues (Scholz, 2019).

This chapter will thoroughly analyze the process of transition from the first sparks of digital competition to the contemporary colossal online tournament ecosystem, examining its historical, sociological, and technological dimensions.

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Esports World Cup, to be held annually in Riyadh starting in the summer of 2024. Organized by the Esports World Cup Foundation, this event aims to establish Saudi Arabia as a leading global hub for gaming and e-sports, further enhancing the sport's legitimacy in the international sporting world (ITMAM Consultancy, 2024).

## 5. Conclusion

The competitive history of digital games represents a comprehensive technological, social, and economic evolution, beginning in the modest arcade halls of the 1970s and extending to today's billion-dollar online tournament industry. Early experiences like *Spacewar!* and *Space Invaders* institutionalized the high score challenge; organizations like Twin Galaxies paved the way for the birth of the first e-sports stars. Despite setbacks like the 1983 crash (Wolf, 2012), e-sports culture survived and transitioned into a community-based experience through LAN parties and internet cafes (as in Turkey) in the 1990s.

During this period, games like *StarCraft* and *Counter-Strike* laid the foundations for genres like FPS and MOBA, proving, through participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), that game content could be redesigned by users. From the early 2000s onward, e-sports gained an international identity with the World Cyber Games and was elevated to stadium arenas through massive organizations like *League of Legends Worlds* and *Dota 2 The International*.

The biggest drivers of e-sports' professionalization have been low-latency streaming platforms like Twitch and new economic models such as franchise leagues (Scholz, 2019). These models attracted global corporate sponsorships (4.5) and media rights revenue, ensuring the sector's financial sustainability. Consequently, e-sports is positioned as one of the 21st century's most dynamic and global cultural transformations, facilitating the professionalization of the player identity, the strengthening of international fan culture (Pizzo et al., 2018), and the complete elimination of geographical boundaries via online platforms.

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## CHAPTER 3

# THE HISTORY OF ESPORTS ECONOMICS AND FINANCING

**Fatma Pervin BİLİR<sup>1</sup>**

### **1. Digital Game Economies Before Esports (1970-1995)**

To accurately understand the historical origins of the esports economy, it is necessary to examine the formation of digital game economies prior to the institutionalization of competitive gaming. The period spanning from the 1970s to the mid-1990s represents a phase in which the concept of “esports” had not yet emerged, yet the first economic value chains surrounding game production, distribution, and consumption began to take shape. This early period is critically important for understanding the technological, cultural, and commercial dynamics that would later form the infrastructure of the esports economy (Wolf, 2008; Newman, 2013).

During the 1970s, the digital game economy was largely confined to academic research laboratories and military-technological R&D environments. Early games such as *Spacewar!* emerged not as commercial products but as outcomes of technical experimentation and software expertise; consequently, gameplay had not yet generated a systematic revenue model (Kent, 2001). In this era, economic value was produced indirectly—not through the games themselves, but through hardware development, software engineering, and the broader diffusion of computer use.

With the advent of the 1980s, arcade halls constituted the first sustainable commercial ecosystem of digital games. This coin-operated model introduced an early form of micro-payment logic, directly linking gameplay duration to revenue generation. As such, arcade systems can be regarded as historical predecessors of time-based revenue models later observed in the esports economy (Wolf, 2008). Concurrently, game design became increasingly aligned with economic logic, with difficulty levels and replayability emerging as key revenue-enhancing elements.

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evolving economic domain. An examination of the global esports market further reveals pronounced differences among regional economic models despite shared digital infrastructures. North America's investor- and franchise-oriented system, Europe's more fragmented and hybrid structure, and East Asia's early institutionalized and media-integrated approach demonstrate that esports cannot be reduced to a single economic template (Taylor, 2012; Reitman et al., 2020). While this multi-centered configuration enhances global growth potential, it simultaneously raises challenges related to regional adaptation and governance.

In conclusion, the esports economy and its financing mechanisms combine high visibility and rapid growth potential with structural challenges related to revenue stability, labor relations, governance, and long-term sustainability. The historical and analytical framework presented in this chapter suggests that the future of esports depends not solely on the size of prize pools or rising audience figures, but on the development of balanced revenue distribution, transparent governance structures, and context-sensitive financing models. Accordingly, esports should continue to be examined—both academically and in practice—as a dynamic economic industry requiring critical and holistic analysis.

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## CHAPTER 4.

# THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE ESPORTS ECONOMY (1990–2025)

Ergin KARINCAOGLU<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction: From Digital Games to the Global Economy

Although esports initially emerged as a form of competitive entertainment centered around digital games, it has since evolved into a multilayered economic ecosystem. This transformation is too complex to be explained solely by the growth of the gaming industry; instead, it is positioned at the intersection of platform economies, creative industries, media studies, and sports economics literature. The institutionalization of esports in economic terms is regarded as one of the most visible examples of digitalization penetrating the realm of sports (Taylor, 2012; Seo, 2016).

In the early 1990s, esports consisted mainly of LAN tournaments organized by amateur communities with limited financial rewards. At that time, competition was more about in-game prestige, community recognition, and technical skills. However, as internet infrastructure improved, digital games spread globally, and online multiplayer structures became more robust, esports began to transform into a field of economic value production (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). The historical development of the esports economy has followed a different trajectory compared to traditional sports economies. While the economic structure in traditional sports is shaped largely through physical venues, federations, and long-term institutionalization processes, esports has created a global market directly through digital platforms. This has facilitated esports' early integration with media, advertising, and sponsorship revenues, while also positioning game developers and streaming platforms as central actors within the ecosystem (Nielsen & Tang, 2022).

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revenue, they have also been criticized in academic literature due to market volatility and speculative valuation issues. The lack of balance between fan loyalty and financial risk is particularly highlighted (Dowling, 2022).

Beyond these technological developments, the academic institutionalization of esports is another key factor that will directly influence the future of the industry. In recent years, undergraduate and graduate programs in esports management, business, and digital sports studies have been established at universities. These programs have helped legitimize esports by supplying the industry with qualified human capital and supporting long-term sustainability (Jenny et al., 2021). Academic institutionalization also allows the esports economy to become more transparent and predictable through data-driven analysis. Research on performance analytics, viewer behavior, sponsorship ROI, and health-performance relationships is contributing to more evidence-based decision-making in the sector. This demonstrates that esports is now shaped not only by market dynamics but also by academic knowledge production (Holden et al., 2017). Another notable future trend is the integration of AI-supported decision-making systems into the esports economy. Artificial intelligence is being used for audience segmentation, sponsorship matching, and content recommendation systems to optimize revenue. However, the spread of these technologies brings about new areas of debate, including data privacy, algorithmic transparency, and ethical responsibility. Academic literature stresses the importance of addressing these issues for the long-term legitimacy of esports (Floridi et al., 2018).

In conclusion, the future of the esports economy will be shaped by the interaction between technological innovation and the search for institutional balance. Technologies like the metaverse and blockchain may generate short-term excitement, but the sustainability of esports will largely depend on strengthening education, governance, and ethical frameworks. In this respect, academic institutionalization stands out as a fundamental force turning esports into not only a growing market, but also an interdisciplinary field of research and practice.

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## CHAPTER 5

# REFRAMING ESPORTS GLOBALIZATION: THE SOUTH KOREAN MODEL, FAR EASTERN INSTITUTIONALIZATION, AND GLOBAL EXPANSION

Eren TÜRKMEN<sup>1</sup>  
Mahmut Çağatay NAZLICAN<sup>2</sup>

### 1. East Asia and the Global Transformation of Esports (2000–2010)

The first decade of the 2000s represents not merely a phase of quantitative growth in the historical development of esports, but a decisive period in which the field was fundamentally restructured in institutional, cultural, and economic terms. During this period, esports moved beyond fragmented and individual digital gaming practices and began to take shape as a global industry organized around professional leagues, regulatory bodies, media integration, and sustainable revenue models. At the center of this transformation stood East Asia, and South Korea in particular (Jin, 2010; Taylor, 2012).

The emergence of esports as a globally recognized competitive domain cannot be explained as a natural cultural evolution alone. Rather, it reflects a multilayered process shaped by specific historical conditions, state policies, investments in digital infrastructure, and the strategic orientation of youth culture. In this context, the South Korean case offers a distinctive “foundational model” that enabled the early professionalization of esports. While esports in Western countries was long perceived as a marginal form of digital entertainment, in South Korea it was framed as media content, a source of employment, a form of cultural representation, and an element of national competitive capacity (Jin, 2010). Examining this process through the lens of globalization theories is crucial for understanding why esports institutionalized more rapidly in certain geographical

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political, economic, and cultural conditions. At the global level, esports has evolved into a transnational field characterized by both convergence and fragmentation. While common competitive formats, media practices, and professional norms have become increasingly widespread, significant inequalities persist across regions in terms of access to resources, institutional stability, and labor protection. These asymmetries underscore the importance of analyzing esports not only as a form of digital entertainment, but also as a site of power relations embedded within the global political economy.

The chapter has further highlighted that the legitimacy of esports remains a contested and evolving process. Although esports has achieved substantial cultural recognition and economic scale, debates surrounding governance, regulation, labor rights, and social impact continue to shape its future development. The absence of unified global governance structures, combined with the dominance of platform-based and publisher-controlled models, presents ongoing challenges to transparency, accountability, and equitable participation. Looking forward, the future trajectories of esports will be shaped by how these tensions are addressed. The development of more coherent regulatory frameworks, greater attention to player welfare, and increased dialogue between state institutions, market actors, and civil society will be critical in determining whether esports can achieve sustainable and inclusive growth. In this regard, the experiences of East Asian esports ecosystems provide valuable insights—not as models to be replicated wholesale, but as historically grounded cases that illuminate the possibilities and limitations of different paths to institutionalization.

In conclusion, esports represents a distinctive arena in which broader transformations associated with globalization, digital capitalism, and cultural change become particularly visible. Understanding its development requires sustained critical engagement with issues of power, inequality, and governance across regional and global scales. As esports continues to expand and diversify, scholarly analysis will play a vital role in shaping informed debates about its social, economic, and cultural significance in the years to come.

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## CHAPTER 6

# MOBA (MULTIPLAYER ONLINE BATTLE AREN)

**Serhat GÖKÇE<sup>1</sup>**

### 1. What is MOBA?

MOBA stands for Multiplayer Online Battle Arena. This abbreviation, which refers to the Multiplayer Online Battle Arena in the literature, is defined as a specialized subcategory of the Real-Time Strategy (RTS) video game genre (Yıldız, 2016).

Although its origins are a derivative of strategy-based games, the MOBA genre has, over time, developed its own structural dynamics and become an independent genre. This game type simplified the multi-focus structure of classic strategy games—"resource gathering, base construction, and army management"—by shifting the player's attention to a "micromanagement"-based structure focused on a single unit (character) (Hussain & Al-Hajji, 2020). This transformation can be explained by the increasing prominence of dimensions like "instant decision-making, positioning, mechanical skill, and in-team coordination" in the player experience, rather than "macro-scale production and multi-unit control". The fundamental dynamics of this game genre typically rely on two opposing teams, usually consisting of five participants each, struggling on a strategic map plane structured around three main lanes. The three-lane structure (top-mid-bottom) and the surrounding jungle area enable both the resource economy and team strategy to proceed within a framework that is "predictable but highly variable" (Lee et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2023). While in traditional RTS games, the player is responsible for simultaneously controlling numerous units and production facilities on the battlefield (macro-strategy), in the MOBA genre, each player controls a single avatar, referred to as a "Champion" or "Hero". This situation has shifted the cognitive load of the game from "strategic planning" to "tactical application" and "reflexive skills". The necessity for players to act in a coordinated manner as a team grounds the genre in a collective effort rather than individual

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In conclusion, the MOBA genre represents the turning point in the digital culture history of the 21st century where gaming evolved from passive consumption to an active form of production. Thanks to its constantly updated balancing structure, community-based competitive culture, and the evolution of the meta, it is foreseeable that MOBA games will continue their existence by changing form in the coming decades (Kica et al., 2015). In this context, the MOBA genre will maintain its importance as a forward-looking interdisciplinary field of study in digital culture research.

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*Moba (Multiplayer Online Battle Aren)*

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## CHAPTER 7

# THE ERA OF DIGITAL BROADCASTING IN ESPORTS

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### **1. The Rise of Twitch, YouTube, and Digital Broadcasting (2011–2015)**

The rapidly growing structure of the esports ecosystem has transformed traditional media models, placing digital broadcasting at the center of both viewer interaction and the sector's economic sustainability. Several key platforms occupy this growing center. In the field of digital broadcasting, Twitch holds a pioneering position in terms of both its historical background and developmental processes (Mao, 2022). In addition to its popularity in the field of video games, which includes esports competitions, Twitch also offers music broadcasts, chat streams, and creative content. This presence of real-life-focused streams indicates that the platform is not solely a virtual environment. Twitch was introduced in June 2011 as a spin-off of Justin.tv, a general broadcasting platform (Twitch, n.d.). Content on the platform can be watched in both live stream format and as video-on-demand (VOD). The games displayed on Twitch's current homepage are ranked according to viewer preferences and cover various genres such as real-time strategy, fighting, racing, and first-person shooter games (Doğaner et al., 2024).

Twitch's rise eventually surpassed the popularity of Justin.tv. In October 2013, the platform reached 45 million unique viewers and was cited as the fourth largest source of Internet traffic in the United States by February 2014 (Ewalt, 2013). Following these developments, Justin.tv's parent company rebranded as Twitch Interactive to reflect the strategic shift, subsequently shutting down the original platform in August 2014. By 2015, Twitch's monthly viewer count exceeded 100 million (Wall Street Journal, 2015; Twitch, n.d.). With these developments, Twitch gained a crucial position, surpassing other digital broadcasting platforms.

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In conclusion, cultural globalization and the power of platforms are among the fundamental factors determining the future of the esports ecosystem. Digital broadcasting in esports should be viewed not only as a media practice but as a cultural space where global culture is produced, circulated, and reshaped.

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## CHAPTER 8

# MEDIA, LEGITIMACY, AND POWER IN ESPORTS: A GLOBAL COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

**Serkan VAROL<sup>1</sup>**

### 1. Introduction

Esports has undergone a profound transformation over the past two decades, evolving from a niche form of digital gameplay into a globally organized, economically significant, and media-driven sporting phenomenon. This transformation cannot be understood solely through technological innovation or the growing popularity of competitive video games. Rather, esports must be examined as a socio-cultural formation that has emerged at the intersection of media systems, digital capitalism, youth culture, and contemporary sport (Taylor, 2016).

From a media studies perspective, esports represents a critical site for analyzing how sport itself is being redefined in the digital age. Traditional sports have historically relied on mass media—particularly television—to achieve legitimacy, visibility, and commercial value. Esports, by contrast, has developed primarily within digitally native media environments, such as live-streaming platforms, social media networks, and algorithm-driven content ecosystems. These platforms do not merely transmit esports competitions; they actively structure audience engagement, economic models, and cultural meanings associated with esports (Jenkins, 2006; Hutchins, 2016). The growing visibility of esports within global media has reignited longstanding debates surrounding the definition of sport. Classical conceptions of sport emphasize physicality, institutional regulation, and embodied competition. Esports challenges these criteria by foregrounding cognitive skills, digital interfaces, and virtual arenas. Media discourses play a decisive role in mediating this tension. Through narratives emphasizing professionalism, discipline, training regimes, and global

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# CHAPTER 9

## ESPORTS SPONSORSHIP MODELS: THEORETICAL APPROACHES, DIGITAL ACTIVATION, AND MARKET DYNAMICS

Fatma Pervin BİLİR<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, esports has evolved from a marginal subfield of digital gaming culture into a multi-layered industry with significant economic, cultural, and media-related impacts on a global scale. Today, esports is regarded as a complex ecosystem encompassing professional leagues, clubs, players, broadcasting platforms, media organizations, and brands (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). One of the core revenue streams underpinning this transformation is sponsorship. Indeed, the sustainability of the esports economy largely depends on sponsorship and media rights revenues (Newzoo, 2019, 2021, 2022).

As in the traditional sports industry, sponsorship in esports is not merely a financial support mechanism; rather, it functions as a strategic marketing and communication tool that enables brands to establish symbolic, emotional, and cultural connections with their target audiences (Meenaghan, 1983; Cornwell, 2015). However, structural characteristics that distinguish esports from traditional sports—such as its digital nature, a predominantly young and global audience profile, the central role of live-streaming platforms, and the concentration of intellectual property rights in the hands of game publishers—have led sponsorship models to evolve in distinctive ways (Cornwell, 2019; McKinsey & Company, 2020).

Industry reports indicate that sponsorship has consistently represented the largest share of esports revenues over an extended period. According to Newzoo, sponsorship constituted the single largest revenue category within the esports ecosystem in 2019; even during the COVID-19 pandemic, sponsorship and

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of sponsorship effects, and systematic examinations of how regulatory frameworks influence sponsorship performance. Such efforts will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of esports sponsorship and its evolving role within the global sports economy.

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## CHAPTER 10

# THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ESPORTS: INDUSTRIALIZATION, LABOR, AND PLATFORM POWER

Ergin KARINCAOGLU<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Industrialization and Commercial Transformation of Esports

The period between 2018 and 2024 represents a decisive phase in which esports evolved from a competitive digital gaming practice into a fully institutionalized industry with economic, media, and organizational dimensions. During this transformation, esports partially adopted the structural characteristics of traditional sports while simultaneously internalizing the logics of the digital platform economy. Esports organizations are no longer limited to producing competitive performance; instead, they operate as hybrid media enterprises that generate value through content production, community management, and brand partnerships (Taylor, 2018; Scholz, 2022).

This shift has fundamentally redefined the meaning of the “esports club.” Competitive success remains important, but it is no longer sufficient as a standalone source of value. Visibility, audience engagement, and digital storytelling have become equally central to organizational sustainability. As Partin (2025) argues, the platformization of esports has repositioned clubs within an institutional logic closer to that of media companies than traditional sport organizations. Consequently, esports occupies a hybrid position between the sports industry and the digital content economy. A critical driver of this industrial transformation has been the hybridization of team–brand relationships. Leading organizations such as G2 Esports, FaZe Clan, and T1 have integrated competitive identity with lifestyle branding and digital narratives, particularly through documentaries, social media campaigns, and influencer-driven content strategies (Scholz, 2022). In this environment, content functions not merely as a promotional tool but as

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control. These forces collectively underscore that esports sustainability cannot be secured through market expansion alone.

Against this backdrop, governance reform emerges as a central prerequisite for institutional maturity. The literature increasingly converges around the need for hybrid governance models that balance efficiency with legitimacy. Such models would preserve publishers' control over intellectual property and competition design while introducing independent oversight mechanisms for labor standards, health protection, revenue transparency, and ethical regulation. Multi-stakeholder participation—including clubs, players, and public institutions—constitutes a critical component of this reform agenda. Future pathways for esports therefore depend on the deliberate construction of institutional balance. Economic growth must be aligned with labor protections, platform power with regulatory accountability, and global expansion with ethical responsibility. Health-oriented performance management, standardized labor policies, and transparent governance frameworks are not obstacles to innovation; rather, they are conditions for sustainable value creation.

In conclusion, esports should no longer be understood merely as a digital activity or entertainment product, but as an emerging institutional field with economic, social, and political dimensions. Its long-term viability rests on the capacity to reconcile market logics with public responsibility and stakeholder inclusion. The sustainability of esports will ultimately be determined not by how fast it grows, but by how equitably and responsibly it is governed.

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