Virtual Light in the Sports Blackout

An enduring boost of virtual sports or just a temporary respite?

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While the majority of traditional sports events and activities around the world were cancelled, suspended or postponed after the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic, the eSports industry is growing like never before. As one of the greatest benefits of eSports is that it can be played without physical co-location of participants, it offers an engaging distraction for people at home looking for social interaction during times with social distancing. This scholarly commentary draws on existing eSports research literature and relevant news stories in a discussion of what virtual sports can contribute with during a time of crisis when traditional sports are at a standstill, and what challenges virtual sports will have to face in order to make the boost that it is currently experiencing during the pandemic more than just a temporary respite while traditional sporting activities and events are suspended.

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During times of economic turmoil or political unrest, the world of sports has often been a welcomed distraction. However, ever since the WHO declared the situation around the coronavirus a pandemic, the sports world as we know it has gone into hibernation. Healthcare restrictions have limited sports activities and competitions down to almost zero. For a while, the world of traditional sports was completely shut down and sidelined – until sports organizations and athletes began to come up with new and innovative ways to fill the void caused by the cancellation and suspensions of traditional sporting events. NASCAR became one of the first organizations to tackle the live sports blackout by holding the first-ever eNASCAR iRacing Pro Invitational Series race on March 22, putting actual NASCAR drivers into simulators for a virtual competition that aired live on FOX Sports 1 (The Nielsen Company, 2020). The initiative attracted top talent in terms of both drivers and broadcast announcers. The event also became an instant success among fans with 903,000 viewers in the US, making it the most watched linear eSports broadcast in history (The Nielsen Company, 2020). The race also made great success on social media, generating 217,300 interactions and 912,500 video views on Twitter, making it the most social TV program of the day on the platform (The Nielsen Company, 2020).

Of course, eSports has not been immune to the pandemic’s reach, and cancellations of major stadium events have come thick and fast. However, unlike traditional sports, the eSports industry has been able to go on comparatively unscathed. The online streaming platform Twitch has reported massive increases in user streaming hours, online games platforms such as Steam have reported record numbers, and, importantly, much tournament and competitive play has gone online (Kozelko, 2020). Traditional sports and sports rights holders have also quickly followed this development in search of a platform to compete and provide content for their fans. For instance, when the prestigious road cycling race Tour of Flanders was forced to cancel for the first time in its history since World War I, the tour organizers decided to turn the tour virtual. This way, Belgian Olympic road race champion Greg van Avermaet became history’s first winner of both a professional virtual road race and the first virtual edition of the Tour of Flanders from the comfort of his own home. The competitors used bike trainers while being connected to a screen where they could watch themselves and their competitors racing through the electronically simulated environments of Flanders while fans were watching the whole event on YouTube. Olympic gold medalist Jan Frodeno even completed a full 8.5 hours virtual Ironman
triathlon in his own home, swimming almost 4km in his counter-current pool, cycling 180km on a bike trainer and running 42km marathon on a treadmill. The running and cycling parts of the triathlon were completed in the virtual universe of the sports videogame Zwift, allowing other sports celebrities as well as amateurs to join Frodeno in his event, which ended up raising over $200,000 for charity (Reuters, 2020a).

The success of virtual sports events such as these demonstrates that sports fans are ready to consume sports in new, innovative ways (The Nielsen Company, 2020). With this background, my scholarly commentary aims to discuss what electronic games simulating sports can contribute at a time when traditional sports are at a standstill, and also what challenges such games will have to face in order to make the current boost of electronic games simulating sports more than just a temporary respite while real-world sporting activities are suspended. In this discussion, I highlight some relevant stories from international news media to use as examples and discuss these in light of relevant research literature.

In the following, I will first present a brief background of eSports and sports videogames. Then I move on to the main part of the discussion by taking a closer look at some important contributions of sports videogames in the absence of traditional sports during the coronavirus crisis. This is followed by reviewing some of the challenges which sports videogames and the eSports industry will have to face in order to make its current boost enduring rather than temporary. Finally, in the conclusion, I sum up these contributions and challenges and discuss the question of whether or not the boost of virtual sports during the coronavirus crisis can endure even when traditional sports are back on track and recovered from the time of crisis.

eSports and sports videogames: a brief presentation

Virtual sports, electronic sports, competitive computer gaming, gaming, and cybersports are common synonyms for eSports. Over the years, many scholars have worked to define eSports. Wagner (2006) provided perhaps one of the earliest definitions of eSports, describing it as “an area of sports activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies” (p.3). Hemphill (2005) adds that eSports is “alternative sports realities, that is, to electronically extended athletes in digitally represented sporting worlds” (p.199). Hamari
and Sjöblom (2017) describe eSports as “a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams, as well as the output of the eSports system, are mediated by human-computer interfaces” (p. 213). Of the scholarly definitions, Hamari and Sjöblom’s definition is the one that comes closest to addressing the nature of eSports without broadening the concept into a “catchall” term according to Adams, Devia-Allen, and Moore (2019). The problem of having “catchall” terms is that the definition would not help differentiate between eSports and traditional sports, as well as between eSports players and occasional gamers (Adams, Devia-Allen, & Moore, 2019).

Regardless of the term used, eSports have grown exponentially over the past years, both recreationally and as professional, commercialized competition. In 2014, over 70 million people across the world watched eSports on the internet or TV, the same year in which a single eSports event retained viewership surpassing the National Basketball Association’s game seven and the Major League Baseball World Series (Adams, Devia-Allen, & Moore, 2019). Momentum has continued in recent years, and Newzoo (2018) predicts that eSports will become a billion-dollar industry by 2021.

There are many genres within eSports, like multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA), first-person shooter (FPS) fighting, sports, card games, battle royals, and real-time strategy. Sports videogames are a genre that try to capture the essence of the sport they are associated with, using trademarked imagery, logos, and maybe most importantly, the likenesses of star players. However, different sports videogames capture reality in varying degrees. Popular games like Mario Kart or NBA Jam, which rely more on arcade-style gaming than authenticity, still fall in the sports videogames category despite taking a more entertainment-based approach rather than simulation (Mirabito & Kucek, 2019). On the other hand, the objective of the popular soccer-based FIFA games series is to create an authentic, competitive simulation of international soccer (Mirabito & Kucek, 2019). Although the level of authenticity in games like FIFA is high, the physical activity level is still limited as the gamers use traditional game controllers with buttons to play the game. Some sports videogames, like the road cycling game Zwift – the game used to simulate the virtual Tour of Flanders, takes the authentic sporting experience a step further. Zwift does this by requiring players to link bike trainers up to a computer device in order to race other cyclists in a virtual environment. Zwift then uses an algorithm to translate the input data from the bike trainer into the gaming avatar’s speed on the virtual course.
This way, those who participate in the game will experience a real physical workout along with the gaming experience.

The contributions of sports videogames

With the world of live sports completely sidelined, we have seen how new and innovative virtual sports events like the virtual NASCAR race have arisen to tackle the unprecedented sports blackout. However, eSports has been a massively popular form of sports for many years already. Two prime reasons for the growth of eSports in recent years are increased accessibility of technology and access to elite competition (Jenny et al., 2017). During the coronavirus crisis, there is reason to believe that these two factors have become even more relevant as societies are in lockdown. In these times, eSports provide a safe way to connect with other people for entertainment and competition from the safety of one’s own home.

With access to traditional sports limited, the close resemblance to real sports that many sports videogames represent can be an advantage in order to attract a new and wider audience. For people who are not familiar with eSports, electronic games simulating sports may be easier to grasp and relate to than other genres of eSports which rely entirely on fantasy and fiction. Many of the popular sports videogames virtually simulate real players, clubs, competitions, and rules, which provides a clear connection to real-world sports. However, sports video games’ high resemblance to real sports can also be a challenge. While developers continuously work to capture realistic gameplay features, players exploit flaws in the game to defeat their opponents in ways that are regarded as unrealistic compared to how the associated sports are actually played. This takes away from the game’s authenticity, and a lack of authenticity is directly counteractive to the motivations of gamers to participate (Mirabito and Kucek, 2018). Mirabito and Kucek (2018) believe that this may be the cause of sports videogames not being among the most popular eSports genres. However, with almost all other forms of sports sidelined during the coronavirus crisis, flaws of authenticity in sports videogames are likely to be easier overlooked as currently there are no other alternatives.

Another attraction almost unique to eSports is that the players themselves can communicate directly with their fans and viewers while they are playing, commenting events as they happen and share their personal knowledge of the game, their competitors, tactics, etc. This attraction of eSports is now
even more relevant as the cancellation of traditional sports events causes star players and profiles to move to eSports in search of a platform allowing them to engage with fans. For instance, through initiatives like the Combat Corona fundraiser for UNICEF, fans have had the chance to watch some of the world’s biggest soccer stars like Gareth Bale and Paulo Dybala compete against each other in a game of virtual soccer while commenting the matches themselves (Wright, 2020). During the televised virtual NASCAR race, the drivers accounted for nearly half of all owned Twitter engagement (across NASCAR, team, driver, and media profiles), a much larger share than in normal NASCAR races (The Nielsen Company, 2020). This demonstrates the potential of virtual events and eSports to capture the attention of fans and provide new opportunities for rights holders, teams, and sponsors (The Nielsen Company, 2020). Sports videogames also provide an actual possibility for fans and athletes on a lower level to interact with and maybe even compete against top-level professional athletes, especially now when more top-level athletes engage in sports videogames.

This way of further engaging with the fans and reach a new, broader and younger demographic is a significant advantage of merging eSports with traditional sports. It is evident that sports associations partnering with eSports provide a lucrative relationship (Forbes, 2018), but league sports officials are interested in more than just financial decisions. Several sports officials believe that playing sports videogames can promote participation in traditional sports as well. For instance, Crawford (2005) found no evidence that playing digital games reduced sports participation, and that sports videogames appeared to increase interest in and knowledge about sports. An analysis of data collected for the US National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Nelson & Gordon-Larsen, 2006) hints that videogame play could be compatible with, or perhaps even supportive of, real-world exercise. In a more recent study, Adachi and Willoughby (2016) found a long-term predictive effect of sports video gameplay on increased involvement in real-life sports over three years and that self-esteem was an underlying mechanism of this long-term association. The International Olympic Committee has also suggested that “competitive gaming (eSports) entails physical activity which can be compared to that required in more traditional sports” (IOC, 2019).

An advantage of sports videogames compared to other videogames genres is that many sports videogames require additional gaming equipment designed to measure selected physical abilities of the players. The additional equipment then translates the input data into the game avatar’s performanc-
es in the game. This way, those who play will also experience a real physical workout while playing the games. In general, the physicality (or lack of thereof) of videogames is the most apparent limitation to their acceptance as sports, as videogames are played sitting down and with minimal apparent physical exertion (Bowman & Cranmer, 2018). However, the higher degree of physicality in many sports videogames have led the IOC to state that they see the potential for cooperation and incorporation of electronic games simulating sports (IOC, 2019). Previously, the IOC has expressed concerns about implementing eSports in general because violent videogames and other explicit content could run counter to Olympic Values. Their latest statement now clarifies that they only intend to consider implementing games simulating sports, which of course will be of great importance to the business and players in the future.

There are many positive contributions and aspects of sports videogames, which even more people are likely to become aware of at this time with few other sports alternatives, resulting in the future growth of sports videogames and eSports in general. However, eSports needs more than growth. Any professional competition, whether virtual or not, requires strict regulations. The eSports industry is still nascent and in need of more regulations (Hollist, 2015). Sponsors, media and fans alike can turn away from the competition if it gets associated with different kinds of cheating and dishonesty. Therefore, I would also like to discuss some major challenges and issues related to sports videogames and the eSports industry.

Challenges and issues related to sports videogames

Even though eSports has grown explosively in recent years, it is still a nascent industry which is challenged by several unresolved issues. In this regard, I will present two challenging topics concerning sports videogames: The first is about social inequality caused by costs and marginalization of minorities in eSports, while the second topic is about doping, cheating, and illegal betting.

Technology and virtual sports can both equalize and create social inequality. Social inequality can be caused by several things, and first I will look at costs as one of these causes. In general, costs are a constraint for sports videogaming (Mirabito and Kucek, 2019). Many of the popular sports videogames feature new games each year, and they cost upwards $60 per game,
which does not include potential monthly fees and in-game purchases. Some games also require additional gaming simulation equipment like bike trainers, treadmills, car wheels, pedals, chassis, etc. This results in additional costs, especially with higher-quality equipment. However, there are exceptions too. In reality, there is a huge threshold to begin with motorsport due to massive financial costs tied to this sport. In comparison, simulated car racing becomes an affordable, environmentally friendly, entry to the world of motorsports for many. That being said, driving simulators range in size, price, and quality, from relatively affordable systems to $20,000 desktop systems and all the way up to full-vehicle simulators that cost millions of dollars. For fans watching the virtual NASCAR races eager to pursue virtual motorsports on a high level themselves, it is not cheap. Professional racing driver and journalist Robb Holland estimates that a low-end package costs around $1,000-1,200. On the higher end, you are looking at $5000-7000 and all the way up to $35,000 for the very best rig (Holland, 2020). On the other hand, sports video games’ counterparts, the more popular eSports genre of fantasy games, can often be downloaded and played for free or considerably lower costs, and they also exist on a broader range of digital platforms. The threshold to participate in sports videogames can then quickly be raised if playing these games gets too expensive compared to other activities, thus excluding those who are not able or willing to pay what it costs to play these games.

Another challenge regarding social inequality for sports videogames, and for eSports in general, is how to include and engage more women and minorities. Just as the history of sports includes women trail-blazers who wanted to play despite obstacles, the history of videogames has also featured girls and women overcoming barriers to play (Consalvo, 2013). According to the Entertainment Software Association (2019), 46% of all people playing videogames in 2019 were women. However, only 15% of all eSports players are female (Euroforum Deutschland, 2015). A general idea of competitive computer gaming as a male activity could explain why so few women participate in eSports compared to videogames in general. Other explanations could be tied to marginalizing processes in eSports. For instance, women receive more sexually harassing comments than male players and they often feel a need for hiding the fact that they are female to avoid negative attention from male players (Ratan et al., 2015). Some studies suggest that this is a result of an underlying difference in game preferences between women and men and that women prefer to play more casual games that are less competitive, like typical mobile phone games. In contrast, male players
prefer competitive games like shooter- and sports games (Trepte, Reinecke, & Behr 2009). However, other studies contradict this suggestion, saying that there is no significant difference in game preference between genders (e.g., Yee, 2008; Jenson, & de Castell, 2009). With millions of people all over the world at home and unable to work, online gaming has seen record numbers of players during the pandemic as a popular activity to counter social distancing (Romano, 2020), a practice recommended by the World Health Organization (Snider, 2020). However, one might ask if these record numbers are divided by gender. Adams-Prassl et al. (2020) find evidence that since lockdown measures started, women in the US, the UK, and Germany are spending more time on active childcare and homeschooling than men. This fact may also have implications for who has time to engage in eSports and gaming during lockdown, which again could widen the existing gender divide in eSports and gaming even further.

The other challenging topic for eSports and sports videogames that I want to bring up is doping, cheating, and illegal betting. These aspects have also been identified by the Esports Integrity Coalition (ESIC), a not-for-profit association established in 2015, as some of the main threats to the eSports industry (Ashton, 2019). Just like traditional sports, eSports suffer from unfair practices. In eSports, these include “e-doping,” a manipulation of the game outcome against fair play rules that increases the chance of winning for a given player. E-doping comes in several different variations, some of which resemble traditional doping, while others only exist only in cyberspace. Like regular athletes, eSports players may use pharmaceuticals to improve not just physical fitness but also intellectual efficiency in order to help them concentrate, react quicker, and reduce fatigue. An equally prevalent form of e-doping includes hacking a game’s underlying software to take control of the program and thus gain advantages or determine the winner. The use of software cheats has already gained attention among both amateur and professional athletes during the period of the coronavirus crisis. For instance, amateur cycling athletes have expressed concerns about competing online due to the deliberate use of defect bike trainers that provides false pedaling force values, which also demotivates them from participating in virtual sports competitions (Olsen, 2020). In the game, athletes can register whatever bodyweight they like. Registering a lower body weight than the athlete’s actual weight will result in faster race times in the game than the athlete would have been able to achieve in reality. A system within the game has been developed to detect this and disqualify players who are generating suspicious pedal force values. However, this system is far from perfect, as
proven when it falsely disqualified professional athlete Thomas De Gendt from a virtual race. For a professional, De Gendt’s pedalling force values were not significantly high, but for an amateur athlete, the same values would have been regarded unlikely to be correct. This shows how difficult it can be to address cheating in virtual sports when professional athletes and amateurs alike participate in the same competitions (Cyclingnews, 2020).

Along with doping and cheating, illegal betting and match-fixing are also major challenges to eSports. Most of the money in the eSports industry are made from betting, and wagers on eSports are expected to surge to $13 billion in 2020, from $5.5 billion in 2016 (Nicola, 2020). Just as in traditional sports, there are many ways to manipulate the system. Players have for instance been bribed or pressured by illegal betting syndicates into losing matches on purpose (Nicola, 2020). During the sports blackout, eSports is one of the few things that are still open for bets, which could result in increased pressure from illegal betting syndicates. With the cancellation of all stadium competitions, the form which bigger eSports competitions usually take, eSports has gone back to its roots, with players competing remotely and competitions streamed live. Since much of the action takes place in a world that spans multiple jurisdictions, it can be easier to implement doping, cheating, and illegal betting among dishonest players and harder for officials to detect and stamp it out. The situation around the pandemic complicates this even further. For instance, anti-doping work has been made much more challenging to carry out in general, as national and international anti-doping agencies have limited their control activities severely during the pandemic (Reuters, 2020b).

The eSports industry is under pressure to become more professional and transparent as media companies, sponsors, and sports organizations deepen their involvement. Officials are working to develop eSports into a popular sport for the masses, and to do so, these challenges must be taken seriously. With the extra exposure that eSports gets while most other traditional sports are sidelined, it becomes increasingly more important for the industry to prove that it has matured and become more well-regulated.

Conclusion

In this scholarly commentary, I have discussed what electronic games simulating sports can contribute with during a time when traditional sports are at a standstill, and what challenges games sporting will have to face in order
to make the boost that virtual sports is experiencing during the coronavirus crisis into more than just a temporary respite while most traditional sports events and activities are suspended.

As traditional sports have gone into hibernation and broadcasters struggle to fill the wide-open gaps in their schedules, the eSports industry has become a welcome area of opportunities for those who are struggling to provide content during the coronavirus crisis. Of course, the eSports industry is hardly unaffected by the crisis, but the digital scope of eSports has shielded it from the most devastating effects of the sports blackout. Competitions, events, and players have returned to the roots of the industry and streaming online, providing fans that are forced to stay at home with easy access to a constant flow of entertainment.

Without their typical products to offer, traditional sports rights holders have been quickly catching on to this development. One of the most successful of these has been NASCAR, who has turned to virtual races featuring current drivers and various celebrities, with major broadcasters such as FOX sports in this case, willing to air these new virtual sports events. Turning races virtual has also turned out to be a great success for NASCAR with 903,000 viewers in the US, making it the most watched linear eSports broadcast in history (The Nielsen Company, 2020). Sporting bodies have first and foremost been searching for a platform to keep providing fans with content during an otherwise dead period until the traditional sports are back on track after the coronavirus crisis. However, virtual sports can also be used as a marketing tool, reaching new and younger audiences through new platforms, such as Twitch and YouTube. The benefit of traditional sports’ entry into eSports can go the other way as well; fans may follow along when their world of traditional sports merge with the world of virtual sports, resulting in the introduction to the virtual sports world for potential new players and viewers. This extra exposure of sports videogames could have real and lasting impacts on fan and player bases.

However, it is still far too early to conclude that the period during the coronavirus crisis can be a defining moment for sports videogames and eSports in general. Right now, it makes perfect sense that a competition best suited to indoor play rise to the top, but can this be an enduring boost of virtual sports, or will the sports landscape go back to what it looked like before the pandemic when traditional sports have recovered? The key to this question could rely on how the eSports industry handles this extra exposure. As attention and money enter eSports, rules and regulations become a more pressing concern. A post-lockdown eSports market is likely
to attract more investment and commercial partners. The eSports industry should aim to demonstrate to investors that the eSports market have matured. This will help to bring in new investors, brands and sponsors that have been unavailable prior to the coronavirus crisis, and this could also help solve some of the misconceptions about the industry. Challenges related to social inequality, doping, cheating and illegal betting are pressing as the eSports industry is expected to become more professionalized and transparent. With more people than ever watching eSports, the industry will have to prove that it has matured. This time of crisis has proven the resilience of the eSports industry and how much it has to offer. It has given both fans and traditional sports bodies and rights holders the opportunity to explore the electronically simulated parts of the sports world and the possibilities it has to offer as an extension of real-world sports, a potential supplement to social media and traditional broadcasting content, and a valuable tool to reach wider audiences.

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