Toward the integration of esports into the Olympic Movement: retrospective and prospective analysis.

Florian LEFEBVRE

University of Montpellier

florian733.lefebvre@laposte.net

Nicolas BESOMBES

Université Paris Cité, Institut des Sciences du Sport-Santé de Paris

nicolas.besombes@u-paris.fr

Nicolas CHANAVAT

CETAPS, University of Rouen Normandy Olympic Studies and Research Center (CEROUEN)

nicolas.chanavat@univ-rouen.fr

Abstract

While International Olympic Committee's (IOC) president Thomas Bach recently asked the new IOC Esports Commission to study the creation of Olympic Esports Games, no research provides an empirical analysis of the rationale behind the IOC' esports strategy. This study aims to fill this gap by highlighting how the IOC could plan the maintenance and evolution of its esports strategy for future Olympic esports events such as the Olympic Esports Games. A focus group of Vietnamese Generation Z esports fans forms the main data used for this research. The results provide both a retrospective and a prospective analysis of IOC' esports strategy. The findings suggest that IOC' esports commission decision-makers should try to find a balance between popular and sustainable esports scenes when choosing titles for the future Olympic Esports Games. The latter event further appears to be a strategic opportunity for the IOC to partner with major esports titles while previous initiatives such as the Olympic Virtual Series (OVS) and the Olympic Esports Series (OES) rely on physical and non-physical virtual sports.

Keywords

Olympic movement, esports, strategy, retrospective, prospective

Introduction

On October 15th 2023, IOC president Thomas Bach declared during his opening speech of the 141st IOC session in Mumbai that he asked the new IOC Esports Commission to study the creation of Olympic Esports Games (IOC, 2023a). This latest announcement follows on from the IOC's previous esports initiatives, namely the Olympic Virtual Series (OVS) held online between May and June 2021 (Chanavat, 2023) and the Olympic Esports Series (OES) held in Singapore in June 2023 (IOC, 2023b). In particular, this statement occurs at a time when many esports disciplines are already medals events both at the Southeast Asian Games and Asian Games (Lu, 2022). Indeed, Lu (2022) reports that esports have "joined the 2022 Hangzhou Asian games as a medal sport under the 'intellectual titles' event category" (p. 258) and "was included in the 2019 Manila Southeast Asian Games (SEA Games) as a medal sport" (p. 258). In this respect, the latest edition of the Asian Games featured popular esports titles in its program such as Arena of Valor, League of Legends, EA Sports FC Online, Street Fighter V: Champion Edition, Defense of the Ancients 2 (Dota 2), Dream Three Kindgoms 2 and Peace Elite (Goh, 2023). The SEA Games followed a similar pattern with its latest edition including esports competitions as a medal event in its program for the third time in a row. Notably, esports players were competing on six popular titles in Southeast Asia, namely, Mobile Legends: Bang Bang, Attack Online 2, Crossfire, League of Legends: Wild Rift, Valorant, and PUBG Mobile (Lukman, 2023).

From there, it seems that an important challenge for the Olympic Esports Games (OEG) is the possible inclusion of popular esports titles around the world to match the expectations of esports fans and attract younger audiences to the Olympic movement (OM). While the OVS and the OES have been mainly built on physical and non-physical virtual sports (Parry & Giesbrecht, 2023), the OEG represents a unique opportunity for the OM to demonstrate to esports audiences that they truly embrace esports disciplines as medal events. However, despite the existence of a growing literature focusing on OM's esports activities (Abanazir, 2022; Anðelić, Bianco, Maksimović, Todorović, & Drid, 2022; Gries, 2019; Lefebvre & Besombes, 2021; Miah, 2021; Miah & Fenton, 2020; Parry, 2021; Parry & Giesbrecht, 2023; Postma, van Delden, & van Hilvoorde, 2022; Ribeiro, Almeida, Calapez, Matsuoka, & Yamashita, 2023; Witkowski, 2016; Wu, 2019), we found no single research examining how esports fans' perception of OM's esports strategy could help the IOC to guide their esports strategy over the coming decades by taking into account both esports cultures and the rapidly evolving nature of the esports industry (Scholz, 2020). Thus, based on a retrospective and prospective analysis of esports fans' perception of the OM's esports strategy, this research aims to highlight how the IOC might consider supporting and evolving its esports strategy for its future events involving esports such as the OEG. In other words, this research attempts to provide a new managerial direction that could help the IOC reshape its long-term vision regarding esports. To this end, this article is divided into five parts. The first provides a retrospective description of the Olympic journey through competitive gaming. The second part presents our literature review based on OM's esports literature. We then present our methodology

for collecting data through a focus group. Drawing on a thematic analysis of our focus group, the fourth section provides both a retrospective and a prospective analysis of OM's esports strategy. Finally, the fifth section concludes this article by proposing theoretical and managerial implications for the IOC's esports long-term strategy.

## 1. From Esports to Virtual Sports: The Olympic Journey through Competitive Gaming

The early stages of the relationship between the OM and the esports industry dates back to July 2013 when the International Esports Federation (IESF) – one of many self-proclaimed international esports federations – applied for membership of Sport Accord – the former name of the Global Association for International Sports Federations (GAISF) – the umbrella organization of international sports governing bodies that is part of the OM (IeSF, 2013). Following on from this, the IOC sent representatives to the eSports Summit held in December 2015 at the IESF world championships in Busan, South Korea. A few months later, the eGames, an international showcase event organized by the British Esports Association (BEA), was held in August 2016 at the British Olympic House during the Summer Olympic Games (OG) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

As shown in Figure 1, the real catalyst came in July 2017 when Paris Olympic Bid Committee co-chair Tony Estanguet announced that he was eager to hold talks with esports representatives and the IOC about possible collaborations between the two movements (Graham, 2017). A few months later, during the Olympic Summit – the annual consultation meeting on important issues of significance

for the future of Olympism, OM's leading representatives publicly agreed that: (i) esports was experiencing strong growth that could provide a platform for engaging the youth demographic with the OM; (ii) professional esports could be considered a sporting activity; and (iii) to be recognized by the IOC, esports content should not infringe on Olympic values, and an organization guaranteeing compliance with OM rules and regulations should exist.; and (iv) the IOC and GAISF were asked to open a dialogue with the gaming industry and players to explore areas of collaboration and engagement (IOC, 2018a).

Simultaneously, Intel (one of The Olympic Partners - TOP), former ESL Gaming (one of the leading esports tournament organizers) and the IOC hosted the first-ever esports competition held under the Olympic rings prior to the PyeongChang Winter OG. The "Intel Extreme Master" (IEM) tournament featured a major competition of StarCraft II, a videogame historically strongly played competitively in South Korea. This event remains notable in esports history as Canadian player Sasha "Scarlett" Hostyn became the first woman to win a major StarCraft II tournament (Arrivé, 2018).

Figure 1 - Esports and Olympism Chronology
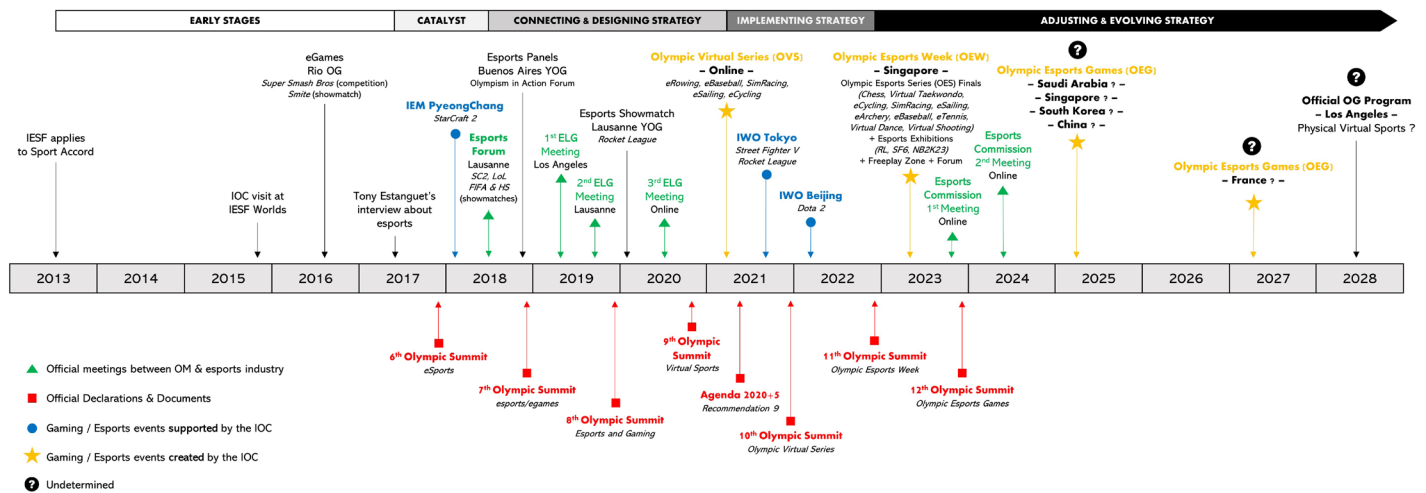
The first official meeting between the two worlds dates back to July 2018 at the Esports Forum. The event brought together over 150 leading figures from the esports industry (publishers, professional players, media & broadcasters, event organizers, national and international associations) and the OM (IOC, National Olympic Committees, International Federations, TOPs, Right Holding Broadcasters, Olympians) to discuss opportunities for further interaction (IOC, 2018a). The main objectives were to: (i) explore synergies between the two worlds; (ii) build a common understanding of Olympic values & structures; and (iii) establish a platform clarifying the mutually beneficial next steps for engagement. The Forum explored the following questions: could esports be recognized as a sport, could it be represented within the OM, how to achieve gender equality, analogies and differences between professional players and Olympic athletes, governance, media-broadcasting, investors, etc. At the same time, two demo zones were set up to experience esports as a player for a dozen videogames, and as a spectator for four of the major esports games (StarCraft II, FIFA, Hearthstone, League of Legends) (The

Esports Observer, 2018).

In December 2018, the Olympic Summit stated that: (i) some games are not compatible with Olympic values and cooperation with them is therefore excluded; (ii) the esports industry is evolving rapidly, with specific games changing in popularity, (iii) the esports industry is fragmented in nature; (iv) the esports industry is commercially driven. For all these reasons, it was considered premature to include esports as a medal event in the Olympic program (IOC, 2018b). The Olympic Summit also encouraged the International Sports Federations (IFs) to explore the potential benefits and applications of virtual versions of their sports (i.e., restricting their engagement to activation in the virtual forms of their traditional sports). Finally, it was decided that the IOC/GAISF would invite esports and gaming stakeholders to participate in a liaison group to jointly explore collaborative projects.

In June 2019, the Esports and Gaming Liaison Group (ELG) met for the first time during the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) in Los Angeles, USA. It aimed to develop mutually beneficial collaboration at an international level, promoting physical

activity and Olympic values (i.e. friendship, respect and excellence) within the esports and gaming communities, and developing electronic versions of traditional sports to promote Olympic sports to new audiences. Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) President David Lappartient was appointed Chairman of the Group. The meeting focused mainly on presenting the attendant stakeholders and key areas for collaboration previously identified by the IOC and GAISF, including an introduction to OM, engagement through esports and gaming, and building a healthy esports ecosystem.

The second ELG meeting was held in November 2019 in Lausanne, Switzerland. Its aim was to work on concrete recommendations to be integrated into the Olympic Agenda 2020 to be presented at the Olympic Summit. Four topics emerged as priorities: (i) sports participation (how to encourage and motivate players to engage in physical activity); (ii) sports in videogames (how to partner with game publishers/developers to promote sports); (iii) showcasing esports (how to jointly showcase esports and sports events); (iv) supporting esports athletes (how to build a healthy and sustainable ecosystem that protects and supports players).

In December 2019, the Olympic Summit agreed on a two-tiered approach: (i) IFs were encouraged to focus their strategy on virtual forms of their sport and to engage with publishers to gain or retain appropriate control over them; (ii) regarding other esports games, OM would focus on players and promoting a healthy lifestyle (IOC, 2019a). Sustainable partnerships between both worlds were required, including platforms and events as appropriate. One month later, during the

135th IOC Session preceding the Winter Youth Olympic Games (YOG) in Lausanne, Switzerland, David Lappartient presented the ten actions identified by the ELG concerning esports and the OM. These projects covered three main topics: (i) promoting a healthy lifestyle for elite players and youth; (ii) engagement between esports and sport at local and global levels; and (iii) engagement between esports and OM, including promotion of Olympic values or support for IFs to create virtual events.

Esports was officially included in the cultural program for the first time during the Winter YOG in Lausanne in January 2020. The event took the form of a Rocket League showcase competition, with a specific independent games exhibition set up in the city. The ELG met online for the third time in August 2020 and strengthened its strategy regarding support for esports athletes, engagement with the OG, promotion of physical activity and sport for youth and grassroots, gender equality, and promotion of virtual sports. This led to the December 2020 Olympic Summit's decision to no longer implicitly use the term "esports" and to focus on its core strategy regarding "virtual sports", both "physical" (e.g., Zwift) and "non-physical" (e.g., NBA2K) (IOC, 2020).

In February 2021, the publication of Olympic Agenda 2020+5 Recommendation 9 added that physical virtual sports could be part of the Olympic Sports Program. This position was confirmed in June 2021 by IOC director of Sports Kit McConnell: *"We open the door to the possibility of seeing physical forms of virtual sports like Zwift (virtual cycling) or rowing, these types of physical simulations could integrate the Olympic program in the future. The Olympic program of Paris*

2024 is already finalized but for Los Angeles this door is open" (France Info, 2021).

Between May and June 2021, the IOC and five IFs produced the OVS, the first-ever Olympic-licensed event for physical and non-physical virtual sports (IOC, 2021). Each IF attempted to offer its corresponding event in a format maximizing online mass participation, theoretically allowing participants from all over the world to compete from their home or training centers (in reality, one of the tournaments was only open to a few Southeast Pacific countries: Japan, South Korea and Chinese Taipei). All five OVS events differed in form and concept, and were operated via the sports' publisher platforms on which participants could take part: eBaseball Powerful Pro Baseball 2020 for the World Baseball Softball Confederation (WBSC), Zwift for the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI), Virtual Regatta for the World Sailing Federation, Gran Turismo for the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA), and an Open format for the World Rowing Federation.

At the same time, the Intel World Open (IWO) esports tournament, which was initially scheduled for July 2020 ahead of the Tokyo 2020 OG (IOC, 2019b), was postponed to 2021, allowing then for the first time any player, whatever their level, to compete for a chance to join and represent their national team in two major esports titles: Street FighterV and Rocket League. The event was sponsored by Intel and delivered by DreamHack Sports Games (a newly created ESL Gaming subsidiary for sponsored and sports-related gaming and esports operations) and supported by the IOC, as evidenced by the presence of the Olympic rings and the Tokyo OG logo

on all communication campaigns and online content. This model was discreetly replicated in February 2022 in the run-up to the Beijing Winter OG with the Dota 2 IWO.

In November 2022, the IOC announced the creation of the OEW, a new product dedicated to hosting the 2022 OES finals in Singapore. The event, confirmed at the Olympic Summit in April 2022 (IOC, 2022), was based on four pillars: ten virtual sports competitions, physical and non-physical virtual sports free-to-play sessions, competitive gaming (non-sport related videogames) exhibitions and demonstrations, and a forum dedicated to esports conferences (IOC, 2022). Symbolically, the change from "virtual sport" to "esports" in the title reveals the IOC's decision to adjust its strategy by gradually integrating non-sports video games into its official events. The ten virtual sports tournaments included in the OES event, whose finals were held in person in June 2023 at Singapore's Suntech Arena, were: archery (Tic Tac Bow), baseball (WBSC eBaseball: POWER PROS), chess (chess. com), cycling (Zwift), dance (JustDance), motorsports (Gran Turismo), sailing (Virtual Regatta), taekwondo (Virtual Taekwondo), tennis (Tennis Clash) and shooting (Fortnite). Table 1 provides a summary of the different typologies of events linking the OM and the IOC to video games, virtual sports, and esports.

Table 1. Typology of gaming and esports events supported or organized by the IOC

	SPORTIZATION OF VIDEOGAMING			DIGIT(AL)IZATION OF SPORTS	
	ESPORTS (= competitive video gaming)			VIRTUAL SPORTS	
				NON-PHYSICAL & PHYSICAL	EXCLUSIVELY PHYSICAL
EVENTS	South East Asian Games (SEA)	Asian Games	Intel Extreme Masters (IEM) Intel World Open (IWO)	Olympic Virtual Series (OVS) Olympic Esports Series (OES)	Olympic Games (OG) ?
			Olympic Esports Week (OEW) and Olympic Esports Games (OEG) ?		
OLYMPIC LEVEL	Regional	Continental	International	International	International
YEARS & LOCATIONS	2019 (Philippines) 2022 (Hanoi)	2018 (Jakarta) 2023 (Hangzhou)	2018 (PyeongChang) 2021 (Tokyo / online) 2022 (Beijing / online)	2021 (online) 2023 (Singapore) 2024 (France) ?	2028 (Los Angeles) ?
SELECTED VIDEO GAMES	Dota 2 StarCraft 2 Arena of Valor Hearthstone Tekken 7 Mobile Legends League of Legends FIFA Online 4 Wild Rift PUBG Mobile Free Fire	Arena of Valor Hearthstone Dota 2 PES 2018 League of Legends StarCraft 2 Clash Royale PUBG Mobile FIFA online 4 Street Fighter V Three Kingdoms	StarCraft 2 Street Fighter V & 6 Rocket League Dota 2 NBA 2K23	eBaseball Powerful eCycling (Zwift) eRowing eSailing (Virtual Regatta) SimRacing (Gran Turismo Sport) Virtual Taekwondo Just Dance Chess Online eArchery (Tic Tac Bow) eTennis (Tennis Clash) eShooting (Fortnite)	eCycling (Zwift) ? eRowing ? Ping VR ? Virtual Taekwondo ?
Olympic Movement's Stakeholders involved	Olympic Council of Asia (OCA)	Olympic Council of Asia (OCA)	International Olympic Committee (IOC) The Olympic Partners (TOP)	International Olympic Committee (IOC) International Sports Federations (IFs)	International Olympic Committee (IOC) International Federations (IFs)
Esports' Stakeholders involved	Philippine Esports Organization (PESO) Vietnam Electronic Sports & Entertainment Association (VIRESA)	Asian Esports Federation (AESF)	ESL Video Games Publishers	DreamHack Sports Video Games Publishers	?
Olympic Sport ?	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES, it could be considered as an Olympic Sport under the control of the IFs

As aforementioned, the last step in OM' esports strategy deployment is characterized by IOC president Thomas Bach's statement in October 2023 when he asked the new IOC Esports Commission to study the creation of Olympic Esports Games (IOC, 2023a). This last statement is important because it opens the door to the creation of a new product for the IOC which may better integrate popular esports titles as it is already the case for the Asian Games and the SEA Games. The following section presents our research framework.

2. Literature Review: OM' esports strategy analysis

Despite the many initiatives deployed over the past five years, academic work on the relationship between esports and the Olympics is rare and relatively recent. While the increasing proximity of esports to the Olympic & Paralympic Games (Miah & Fenton, 2020) can be seen as the culmination of the process of international institutionalization of esports (Witkowski, 2016), it has proven to be complex in many respects. For Wu (2019), "esports distribution", which is still mainly limited to certain geographical areas (South-East Asia, North America, and Europe) and younger generations is an obstacle to the value of universality promoted by the OG. For Gries (2019), the private, commercial and monopolistic aspect of video game publishers is antinomic to the OM. For Pack and Hedlund (2020), the absence of a single and legitimate international esports governing body and the violence inherent in certain types of esports (e.g., first-person shooter games) would not be easily compatible with Olympic values.

In this context, Parry & Giesbrecht (2023)

recently pointed out that the IOC has developed a *"hybrid affair"* (p. 212) through the OVS which combines both "physical virtual sports" (PVS) such as cycling on the Zwift platform and rowing, and non-physical virtual sports (N-PVS) like Gran Turismo sport, eBaseball Powerful Pro Baseball 2020 and Virtual Regatta. On this subject, the authors notably argue that the term "virtual" cannot be applied to the OVS and thus *"should be abandoned"* (p. 223). However, it should be noted that the OES which replaces the OVS integrates both virtual sports, hybrid physical sports and simulated sports. In fact, the authors state that *"the confusion reigns"* (p. 224) regarding what is identified as esports by the IOC as the OES features *"a disparate set of activities"* (p. 224) that include one PVS (cycling), four N-PVS (archery, baseball, sailing and tennis), three non-Olympic sports (chess, dance and motor sport) and one duo-type sport (virtual taekwondo). Under these uncertain circumstances, Anðelić et al. (2022) assert that Virtual Reality (VR) technologies also represent new opportunities to embrace the possible joint future of esports and the Olympics. Notably, they suggest that VR esports could be a wildcard for future IOC-led digital events as *"VR esports allows the players to enjoy the gaming experience and compete on the move — as opposed to sitting while playing non-VR esports like League of Legends or DOTA 2"* (p. 2). Finally, Postma et al. (2022) consider that the *"the inclusion of esports in the Olympic program appears to be just a matter of time"* (p. 11). They support this idea because sports cultures have become increasingly digitized since the emergence of Covid-19 pandemic, which further blur the boundaries between esports and traditional sports.

Although research has analyzed the outcomes of the IOC' esports strategy through the OVS (Anðelić et al., 2022; Parry & Giesbrecht, 2023; Postma et al., 2022) and the results of the collaboration between OM and esports stakeholders (Lefebvre & Besombes, 2021), to our knowledge, few studies focus primarily on examining esports fans' perception of the IOC esports strategy. In this regard, we found no single research examining how esports fans' perception of the OM's esports strategy might help the IOC to shape its esports strategy over the coming decades. Therefore, this research aims to highlight how the IOC could plan the maintenance and evolution of its esports strategy for future Olympic esports events such as the Olympic Esports Games.

3. Methodology

Given the lack of literature on esports fans' perception of IOC's esports strategy, the research approach for this paper was exploratory. We chose a qualitative design method based on one focus group to collect how esports fans experienced the previous Olympic esports events, their opinions and expectations regarding the evolution of the Olympic movement's esports strategy. Following Stewart and Shamdasani (2015) methodology, we therefore conducted a thematic analysis of discussions among a group of young Vietnamese Generation Z esports fans. This choice was firstly made because this group of individuals is from a country where some esports players participated in both the SEA Games and Asian Games where esports is a medal event. The second reason why we opted a focus group is that it provides a quick overview of a phenomenon. In addition, the flexibility of focus group methodology was also an advantage for examining a relatively

small number of topics, challenges and issues and clarifying answers with follow-up questions. Nonetheless, this would be important to complete in the future our data with focus groups with participants from other continents like Europe, North and South America to cross check our findings.

3.1. Sampling

Primary data source is a focus group with Vietnamese esports fans aged from 18 to 24 years old held on Discord platform on November 14, 2023. Participants were recruited through a post written in Vietnamese by the first author in the Facebook group of the university esports club of the National Economics University (NEU) in Hanoi. Given that groups *"that are relatively homogeneous are more productive"* (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015, p. 11), we selected Generation Z participants who had been following the popular esports scene in Asia for at least five years. As shown in Table 2, six male Vietnamese esports fans agreed to take part in this research.

Table 2: Vietnamese esports fans interviewed

Interviewee code	Interviewee's position	Age	Esports genre follow	Since how many years
FG1	Student at Phenikaa University	20 years old	MOBA and FPS	10 years
FG2	Student at NEU	19 years old	MOBA and FPS	7 years
FG3	Student at NEU	20 years old	MOBA and FPS	7 years
FG4	Student at Waikato University (New Zealand)	20 years old	MOBA	8 years
FG5	Student at NEU	18 years old	MOBA and FPS	10 years
FG6	Esports reporter	24 years old	MOBA and FPS	10 years

3.2. Data collection

Due to geographical barriers, the focus group was conducted via video call using the online platform Discord. The focus group lasted eighty-three minutes and was recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author. To debrief before the focus group, the first author explained the aim of the research and answered the interviewees' questions about the aims and purpose of the research. The full interview guide consisted of two sections. In the first section, the researcher began by asking interviewees to introduce themselves and give their esports background. Respondents were specifically asked to explain which esports scenes they followed and for how many years. They were also asked about their perception of the inclusion of esports disciplines in the SEA Games and the Asian Games. The second part included questions on the implementation of IOC's esports strategy. To this end, respondents were first asked to provide their thoughts on previous esports events (1) supported by the IOC, such as the IEM PyeongChang and the Intel World Open and (2) initiated by the IOC, such as the OVS and the OES. More specifically, participants were asked to assess whether these events were in line with the IOC's values and ambitions to better attract younger audiences. To this end, the focus group moderator reminds participants about IOC's values and ambitions at the beginning of the interview. Secondly, respondents were asked to identify the main advantages and limitations of the rapprochement between the world of esports and the world of Olympism. In addition, participants were asked to make managerial recommendations in terms of games selection and the format of the competition for the future OEG. In the final part of the focus group, the researcher invited the interviewees to discuss the most important challenges and issues regarding the future of Olympism within esports. Finally, it should be noted that the focus group was conducted by the first author who is experienced in qualitative methods and familiar with the many ways of talking about esports and OM research.

3.3. Data analysis

The focus group was digitally recorded and the data was transcribed into verbatims and uploaded into QSR NVivo 12 by the first author to assist analysis (Bryman, 2016). The advantage of using QSR NVivo 12 software is that it allows data to be easily retrieved, allowing it to be reviewed as many times as necessary. Therefore, it permits for systematic coding and qualitative data management processes (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019). All interviewees were given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. The first author conducted an initial coding, which was then discussed and modified by all co-authors, facilitating further development of the data analysis. Subsequent analysis led to the creation of sub-nodes, as certain elements emerged that refined higher order nodes. In accordance with Lincoln and Guba (1985), all new constructs were discussed among the authors, who independently examined the data collection and theoretical issues, in order to increase trustworthiness and credibility.

4. Findings

To assess how does the IOC might plan to maintain and develop its esports strategy for its future events featuring esports such as the Olympic Esports Games, this section presents

the findings according to three main themes: (i) a description of respondents' perceptions of the addition of esports as a medal event at the SEA Games and Asian Games, (ii) a retrospective analysis of previous esports events supported and initiated by the IOC, and (iii) a prospective analysis of the rationale behind the future development of the Olympic Esports Games by the IOC. Each theme contains different sub-sections for a more structured examination of the findings.

4.1. Addition of esports disciplines to the SEA Games and the Asian Games.

Interviewees collectively agreed that it would be a good idea to include esports disciplines in specific events such as the SEA Games and the Asian Games. In particular, they pointed out that esports could *"bring some global popularity because esports are a global phenomenon with a massive and diverse audience"* (FG3). In this regard, respondents also highlighted that esport *"can attract teenagers"* (FG5) which is important to rejuvenate SEA Games and Asian Games audiences. In addition, one respondent argued that the inclusion of esports in these events is crucial because it *"can show older audiences that people are serious about esports, which can help esports to be more professionalized"* (FG6). This is particularly important as esports is often perceived negatively by older generations in Asian cultures (Lefebvre & Thang, 2023).

4.2. Retrospective analysis of esports events supported and launched by the IOC.

Firstly, the discussions were very fragmented in terms of respondents' perceptions of IOC-supported esports events such as the IEM PyeongChang and the two editions of the

Intel World Open. A first idea reported by one respondent was the fact that these events could bring *"new media and economic value to the IOC"* (FG2). This statement is particularly true as *"esports is gradually being fully recognized"* (FG6) by the society. In this respect, the support of these events also demonstrates *"the willingness (of the IOC) to learn and research about esports […] as selected games benefit from global audiences and loyal fan bases"* (FG3). However, a limitation of this model is that the IEM PyeongChang and the two Intel World Open were perceived by one interviewee as *"not in line with IOC values except maybe for friendship"* (FG4).

With regard to the esports events launched by the IOC, half of the participants firstly agreed on the fact that the OVS was *"a good idea"* (FG1), which could be described as *"a very safe strategy by the IOC which is sticking to its values"* (FG3). However, the downside of committing to traditional sports on a virtual platform is that it *"might not allow to capture the younger audience that is oriented towards highly competitive games"* (FG3). Interestingly, the other half of the respondents questioned the coherence of the IOC's choice of esports disciplines for the OVS. In particular, one respondent argues that he *"doesn't understand why they have this idea (of virtual sports) for esports"* (FG5) while another supports the idea that *"the IOC should rely on some famous games like League of Legends, FIFA or Valorant if they really want to attract younger audiences"* (FG2). Like the OVS, the OES was also perceived by most respondents as a safe strategy by the IOC, in line with their values. Overall, the OES represents *"a big step for the IOC because it is very difficult, if not almost impossible, for a video game to make it to the Olympics"* (FG4). In this respect, the rapprochement between the world of esports and the OM was not perceived as an impossible task because

"the Asian Games in Hangzhou did it" (FG6). At this point, it seems important to note that five out of six interviewees nevertheless argue that the esports events launched by the IOC were not in line with the current esports culture. The main reason for this was that the chosen disciplines were mostly individual whereas *"popular esports titles generally require you to play in a team"* (FG4). However, one respondent disagreed with this narrative, stating that both *"OVS and OES are in some ways aligned with the esports cultures because esports is for everyone and anyone can play it on any kind of device"* (FG3). Taken together, this suggests that in the future, IOC-sponsored esports events should focus more on major esports scenes to be perceived as more in line with popular esports cultures.

4.3. Prospective analysis of the rationale behind the future development of the Olympic Esports Games by the IOC.

In order to present the rationale behind the future development of the Olympic Esports Games by the IOC, it is first necessary to delve into the main advantages of the rapprochement between the world of esports and the OM. In this regard, respondents firstly argued that this could bring younger audiences closer to the OM because *"esports attracts young people while the Olympics attracts older people"* (FG1). In addition, respondents also reported that such a rapprochement between the world of esports and the OM could *"improve the reputation of the IOC towards younger audiences"* (FG5) which *"could bring them more media and economic value"* (FG2). However, all respondents agreed that this rapprochement is possible because the *"inclusion of esports within the Hangzhou Asian Games was appropriate"* (FG6) but they also shared the idea that *"bringing the*

right concepts into the Olympics by including games like League of Legends and Valorant will take a lot of time" (FG6).

To promote a wider rapprochement of the esports world within the OM, it is then important to consider the possible limitations of the current IOC's esports strategy. In this respect, two main limitations emerged from the discussions between all the interviewees, namely the rapid development of esports and the too safe strategy towards esports developed by the IOC. In fact, one interviewee specifically stated that *"the rapid evolution of esports is a very big disadvantage because esports is evolving more and more every day which will affect the esports titles that could be chosen by the Olympics"* (FG4). Considering these factors, the problem for the OM is that they might choose esports disciplines for future events such as the OEG that could become less popular at the time of the event. Therefore, it seems paramount to choose game titles that are well established in the esports world to mitigate this risk. It is precisely in this respect that the IOC has so far adopted a safe strategy, relying on physical and non-physical virtual sports, which is not without consequences for the OM. In fact, by sticking to disciplines that seem to be in line with the IOC's values and traditions, the OM could completely miss its objectives of rejuvenating its audience if it continues to engage with very minor esports scenes.

Within this complex context, practical recommendations for the OEG emerged from the interactions between focus group participants. From there, the main recommendation that all respondents agreed on was that the OEG should include popular esports scenes, in line with the IOC's ambitions to attract younger demographics. A

key idea was particularly to select esports titles *"such as League of Legends and Valorant because they have benefited from highly established championships for years and their experience could help the OM in its quest"* (FG3). Although the interviewees identified different gales, they all converged on the idea that the IOC should focus on popular esports genres such as Multiple Online Battle Arena (MOBA) and First Person Shooter (FPS). It is also worth mentioning that half of the respondents reported that the IOC should not forget to include some mobile games in the OEG program, such as Mobile Legends: Bang Bang and PUBG Mobile, as this could *"increase connectivity between many countries"* (FG6). Other popular but minor esports genres such as Fighting games and football games were also highlighted by half of the respondents as possible ways for the IOC to explore to broaden the focus of the OEG. Overall, respondents largely agreed that *"whatever game the IOC chooses for the Olympic Esports Games, they should have a balance between popularity and sustainability"* (FG4). This is particularly important because *"you never know when a game publisher will go bankrupt and when its game will be shut down"* (FG4).

More generally, interviewees finally identified several stakes for the IOC to consider when launching the OEG. A first stake, highlighted by two interviewees, is based on the need for the IOC to better understand what esports are in order to better explain it to its audience, especially to older people who are not familiar with esports. In this regard, one respondent claims that *"his parents' and grandparents' generation think that games like League of Legends or Counter Strike: Global Offensive are some kind of promotion that will lead the children to become violent"* (FG5). In other words, it is crucial for the IOC to overcome this obstacle to develop a wider

acceptance of the inclusion of core esports titles to the OEG. Another challenge that the IOC needs to consider when structuring the future OEG is that game publishers may be pursuing financial goals that conflict with the values of the OM. In this regard, one respondent noted that *"game publishers want a lot of profit and tend to constantly change the content of their game while the IOC's traditional sport events tend to rely on stability"* (FG6). What should be understood from this statement is that the Olympics generally require from sports to have been established for many years to be part of the main OM events, while the fast-paced nature of the esports industry (Scholz, 2020) does not offer the IOC any guarantee that a game selected for the OEG will still be popular enough when this event will be organized. As a result, another respondent stated that *"sustainability is a big thing because you don't know when a game will fail"* (FG4). It is therefore crucial for the IOC to develop an esports strategy that takes this sustainability issue into account to increase the chances of achieving its goals of mass participation and large audiences.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this research was to highlight how the IOC could plan to maintain and develop its esports strategy for its future events featuring esports, such as the Olympic Esports Games. Through a retrospective and a prospective analysis of IOC's esports strategy, based on a focus group with six Vietnamese esports fans, this research provides an exploratory answer to this question, which we can break down into two main practical implications.

Firstly, respondents highlighted the fact that it is complicated but not impossible for esports

disciplines to reach the Olympic Movement, as the Asian and the SEA Games already include some esports titles as medal events (Lu, 2022). In this sense, this research shows that the future rapprochement between the OM and esports stakeholders through the OEG could be made by including popular esports disciplines that benefit from widely established scenes in its program, in order to meet the IOC's expectations of attracting younger audiences to its bosom. In fact, in contrast to previous IOC's esports initiatives such as the OVS and OES, which were mainly focused on the introduction of PVS and N-PVS (Parry & Giesbrecht, 2023), this study shows that the OEG rather represents a strategic opportunity for the IOC to further engage with competitive gaming. Following the categorization of Parry (2021), this may include N-PVS such as EA Sports FC 24 or other forms of competitive gaming such as League of Legends.

A second main rationale for this research is based on the assertion that the IOC should find a balance between sustainability and popularity when selecting the esports disciplines to be included in the OEG. In particular, this implies that decision-makers taking part in the IOC' esports commission should invest more time in analyzing the overview of competitive-esports scenes at a global level to come up with a proposal of game titles that fit both the IOC's core values and the expectations of esports fans. In this perspective, our results support the idea that the IOC should primarily focus on popular and sustainable esports titles among MOBAs and FPSs if it wants to be more accepted by the main esports audiences. However, at a time when Ribeiro et al. (2023) argue that in-game emotional experiences could positively influence Olympic values, such a positioning

could still be in conflict with IOC's values given the inherent violence of FPSs' content (Pack & Hedlund, 2020). This is an obstacle that the IOC should still try to overcome if it wants to attract esports younger audiences. Furthermore, our findings also suggest that the IOC could engage with mobile games for the OEG by delivering competitions on popular titles such as Arena of Valor and PUBG Mobile. Another possibility for the IOC which is reflected in our results is that it could decide to complete its positioning for the OEG with some minor esports titles that are either PVS or N-PVS. This last scenario represents the so-called safe strategy for the IOC, in line with previous OVS and OES initiatives.

Overall, if this research is one of the first studies to provide a set of managerial and theoretical implications that could help decision-makers of the IOC's esports commission to define possible ways of operationalizing the OEG, our exploratory findings based on esports fans' perception of the IOC's esports strategy could be further complemented in the future. To this end, it may be relevant to further investigate how game publishers could work with the IOC to provide competition formats on popular esports that can be in line with esports values. Another idea to complete our findings could be to analyze how the IOC's esports strategy is perceived in other continents, such as Europe, North and South America and Africa, to measure if fans' expectations differ depending on the esports cultures in which they are embedded.

Finally, like any research, this paper has some limitations. First, our findings are based only on the analysis of six Vietnamese esports fans, all of whom belong to Generation Z. Therefore, our findings cannot be generalized

to a wider population such as esports fans worldwide. It would have been relevant to conduct other focus groups with older people, with people from other Asian countries such as South Korea, Japan and China as well as from other continents to better highlight possible cultural differences. Second, we only present findings through the lens of esports fans via one focus group, it would have been interesting to strengthen our data set by also conducting focus groups with OM's stakeholders such as the members from IOC esports commission.

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Authors

Florian LEFEBVRE is currently working at the University of Montpellier, his work is at the crossroads of several scientific disciplines including strategic management, sociology, history and economics of sports and esports organizations. In particular, he is conducting research on the analysis of the esports strategies of traditional sport stakeholders, on the strategic development of endemic esports actors and on the career paths of professional athletes.

Nicolas BESOMBES is an Associate Professor in sociology of sport at the Institut des Sciences du Sport-Santé de Paris (URP 3625) of the Sports Department of Université Paris Cité. For the past ten years, his research has focused on emerging digital sports practices and more specifically on esports. Among the various themes he addresses, the sporting dimension and the sustainability of esports remains the main focus of his work: institutionalization by the traditional sports' governing bodies, physicality and motor skills, health prevention, performance optimization, diversity and inclusion issues, and Olympic and esports marketing strategies.

Nicolas CHANAVAT is a Full Professor, Director of the University of Rouen Normandy Olympic Studies and Research Centre (CEROUEN), Project coordinator "Olympic & Paralympic University", Head of the MSc Professional Sport Management and the Sport Management Research Team at University of Rouen Normandy. He is also Vice-President of the French National Olympic Academy

(ANOF), co-founder and in charge of the French Centre for Olympic Studies (CEOF). His research is positioned on the intersection of marketing and strategic management with a focus on the sport industry.

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