

## Thought Leadership From the Field

**Levelling up: Opportunities for sport for development to evolve through esports****Richard Loat<sup>1</sup>**<sup>1</sup> Simon Fraser University, Singapore

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**ABSTRACT**

As one of the most disruptive forces to the sports industry in decades, the esports industry has borrowed long standing approaches used in sport to emerge and establish itself in the sporting landscape. Esports has a growing appeal among a youth demographic that is similar to the youth demographic targeted by the Sport for Development (SFD) community. This paper examines the aspects of esports that the SFD sector can leverage to enhance program delivery to drive deeper systemic change, including leveraging gamification, harnessing the reach of mobile gaming, and capitalizing on the variety of games and consoles available to achieve nuanced SFD outcomes. The paper encourages starting increased dialogue on how video games and esports may be complementary tools for SFD organizations that want to innovate or evolve how they create and deliver impact.

**Levelling Up: Opportunities For Sport For Development To Evolve Through Esport**

Sport for Development (SFD) has evolved since the Magglingen Declaration in 2003, in which sport was recognized as a legitimate means for promoting social change (Svensson, 2020). In that time, SFD methodologies have evolved to include new sports and new approaches that are often contextually appropriate to a region. For example, in Cape Town, South Africa, ocean access and consistent surf saw the creation of Waves for Change, while a sports

policy gap in Afghanistan created an opportunity for the SFD organization Skateistan. Innovation of SFD ranges from new sporting methodologies to unique new fundraising mechanics (Common Goal, n.d.), and alternative delivery models (Metro, 2012).

Concurrently, esports has emerged as a disruptive force in sports through redefined fan engagement mechanisms, new revenue models and income streams, as well as a decentralized sporting structure (Overweg, n.d.). Pioneering live streaming platform, Twitch, has provided alternative broadcasting options to reach spectators and fans (Overweg, n.d.), and esports' low barrier to entry for new competitive teams or team ownership means it isn't restricted by cumbersome corporations (Overweg, n.d.). The esports industry has leveraged mainstream sporting brands to tap into existing sport fan bases and accelerate expansion (Alvarez, 2017). EA Sport's (EA) primary games (e.g., FIFA, NHL, or Madden) catalyzed esports by leveraging the popularity of existing sports brands (and fan bases) to drive initial fan engagement.

Esports has emerged as a mainstream industry for two reasons: the industry has emulated aspects of nondigital sport, and it has leveraged unique fan engagement mechanisms and revenue streams attracting a coveted demographic (Singer, 2019). It is estimated esports generated over \$1 billion in 2019, while the global sports industry generated approximately \$500 billion in the same

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period (Ayles, 2019). While this appears to be a drop in the bucket, it is limiting to suggest disruption can be measured just by revenue generation. Esports in 2019 generated 433 million viewers, and 2017 reports indicate how one game, League of Legends, drew larger viewership than the National Basketball Association, Major League Baseball, and the National Hockey League (Jones, 2019). Revenue projections for the industry put it on pace to surpass the UEFA Champions League and Formula 1 by 2023 (Ayles, 2019). The short timeframe in which the industry has achieved these milestones is particularly disruptive. Most mainstream sports built their multigenerational reputation, brand value, and engagement over the last century. The first competitive video game events started in the late 90s and it has only taken two decades for the industry to surge in participation and uptake (Larch, 2019). Esports may not be disrupting older sports audiences yet, but they are winning significant chunks of market share with new audiences (Ellis-Jones, 2017). This has been enabled by redefined fan engagement methods and decentralization of the sport itself, as well as techniques used in video games to incentivize certain user behaviors, such as mobile compatibility and portability, interchangeability across titles and platforms, participant parity, and the by-design use of game mechanics.

The emergence of the esports industry at such scale has consequently increased the number of entities leveraging esports as a tool for good. Organizations like Kids in the Game (Boehnke, 2019), the West Ham United Foundation, and London Sport piloted some of the first eSFD methodologies. Comparatively, esports efforts “for good” appear limited to corporate social responsibility pilots, community-wide fundraising efforts (Extra Life: Play Games. Heal Kids, n.d.), or live-streaming cause-based fundraisers, and they do not employ any traditional SFD methodologies. However, a growing and well-established competitive video game scene provides an opportunity to look at how esports can be used as the “hook” in SFD methodologies.

In nearly the 18 years since Magglingen, SFD has evolved considerably. At the same time, the video game industry has evolved through the rise of online competitive play. Esports is currently the fastest growing sport (Rodriguez, 2019) largely due to unique digital and technical capabilities driving innovation in broadcasting, fan engagement, and revenue generation. The evolution of both SFD and esports has started to converge as academics begin to explore eSFD, however, their work is still nascent (Hayday & Collison, 2020). In the continued effort to advance SFD best practices, should we pay more attention to the value and opportunity of eSFD as an emerging field?

### Levelling The Field: A Foundation For Competitive Parity

The virtual nature of esports means that parity of competition should exist (Hilbert, 2019). However, a lack of inclusion at a grassroots level means esports is still male dominated, and achieving a level playing field is simply just a vision. It may appear reductionist to suggest that competitive differences between genders are due to biology, but it accounts for the largest factor in competition between individuals (Thibault et al., 2010). The potential of this level playing field cannot be realized while toxic masculinity and misogyny plague esports (Lorenz & Browning, 2020). Early observations of esports shows that audiences, participants, and professional opportunities are male dominated, and online environments are abusive and toxic toward women (Seiner, 2019), even though increasingly women appear to be playing video games more than men in the United States (Saltzman, 2019). Women account for 44% of video games sales but make up only 5% of professional gamers (Yabumoto, 2018). The esports gender gap extends to employment, wages, and all professional opportunities (Valentine, 2018).

It is not uncommon for SFD programing to focus specifically on girls and promoting gender outcomes, and in some cases, programing for boys and girls is separated to achieve those outcomes. As Saavedra (2009) points out, “Sport can be a powerful, and potentially a radical and transformative tool in empowering girls and women and affecting gender norms and relations throughout a society” but goes on to highlight the “paradoxical” nature of this, given “sport can be a bastion for male privilege and power” (p. 124). Esports is in its infancy. At this nascent stage of the sport, greater intentional involvement from women can change the sport’s destiny and prevent exacerbating gender stigmas (Featherstone, 2017). A key step to reducing the gender gap in esports is the development of grassroots opportunities in esports for both young boys and girls (Impey, 2019), and this is something toward which SFD programs can contribute. The elements for a level playing field and mixed-gender competition are present. It is likely that because of this parity, esports can avoid some of the gender controversies that plague other sports, but there is a lot of work to be done (Ingle, 2019). Esports programing within SFD methodology could create an opportunity to design truly integrated curriculums and methodologies that become another effective way to achieve gender outcomes.

Esports, as a tool for equality, is not limited to addressing gender. Esports can be a platform through which the first steps of social cohesion are encouraged between groups that are unable to physically congregate. A number of award-

winning SFD programs have specialized in bridging ethnic and social divides. PeacePlayers International, for example, has successfully done this by bringing together Jewish and Arab youth in Israel and Palestine (Masters, 2015), and Catholic and Protestant youth in Northern Ireland through basketball (Scott, 2018). Using video games as a tool to tackle social development issues may appear ethnocentric to some critics, however, access to video games across socioeconomic contexts is rising and could become the next technological force for good (Nthite, 2018). Thus, could complement existing work by organizations such as PeacePlayers International. Parity of competition should enable an inclusive sporting experience. This playing parity might also encourage mixed-ability SFD methodologies. Virtual arenas moderated by SFD organizations could be inclusive, enabling fair and equitable competition among individuals of all abilities and backgrounds.

### **Mix And Match: An Interchangeable Medium**

Esports encompasses competitive gaming across different titles (games) and different platforms (consoles). For example, in games produced by EA, playing controls follow similar patterns. Additionally, each game can be played across different platforms. This interchangeability isn't present in mainstream sports, where learning the new physical skills to play a game adequately can take time. For example, some elite cricket players will only play test cricket and not limited overs cricket, or elite rugby players that play 7-aside rugby do not also play the full form of Rugby Union or Rugby League. This is usually because of the different skill set required by athletes across the different formats. The esports barrier to entry is lower because games have fewer unique physical or mental requirements. To transition from football to hockey or basketball requires learning the physical attributes of each sport. In contrast, games of a similar type, or genre, have almost identical playing controls and require little or no re-learning.

An interchangeable medium (games) means different opportunities to engage a broader demographic of beneficiaries. The sport underpinning an SFD model can be influenced by community interest, available coaching, physical space requirements, and funding. An esports platform complements existing SFD models and has a variety of games that can broaden the appeal of a program to beneficiaries. For example, some beneficiaries could be interested in an eSFD program because it is potentially free of certain sporting stigmas (Taub et al., 1999). A stigma-free sport as the base of an SFD curriculum could lead to better inclusion outcomes across ability and gender. Interchangeability can lead to stronger development

outcomes and participant retention in part by attracting new participants who might otherwise be excluded from physical sport. Participation itself isn't the aim, but if more participants are attracted to a SFD program, the organization's impact stands to increase. Traditional SFD organizations have been criticized when scaling programming because scale can dilute the impact on participants. ESFD may increase participation, but organizations should ensure that programming quality is not affected.

Not discounting the start-up and maintenance costs to organizations when implementing esports, once established, the switching costs between games is minimal. For example, after an organization spends the upfront cost of buying video game consoles to run a program, the cost of switching to a new game is limited to the cost of the game itself. This cost is much lower than the human, temporal, and financial costs of switching physical programming between sports, such as from football to cricket, which would require the development of new methodologies, a different playing space, new training for coaches, and new equipment. In esports, "learning" a new sport is fast tracked by slick virtual tutorials, and participants don't actually have to physically learn the sport itself. Scalability in eSFD programs may be more sustainable in some instances because of their reduced physical footprint. This makes a diverse and variable eSFD program realistic and affordable for the organization. Beneficiaries have the option of different games to achieve a desired outcome. In this argument, interchangeability assumes minimum levels of access to technology, technological literacy, and affordability that would detract from the purpose of this paper, which is to encourage high-level, open-minded thinking about the value of interchangeability to sustainable scalability within SFD programming. Future research into some of these nuances would help advance eSFD. The value of interchangeability may be in the ability to "refresh" SFD methodology and curriculum in an affordable manner and to increase appeal within a demographic or to attract new individuals to a program.

### **Anywhere, Anytime: Absolute Portability**

The evolution of video games, particularly after the rise of social gaming and the shift from console-based, offline gaming to online competition, has prompted game publishers to rethink how players access their games. Mobile versions of video games, such as *PlayerUnknown's Battle Ground* or *Call of Duty Mobile*, provide a player experience similar to consoles while being accessible to audiences previously excluded by console costs (Krishnaswamy, 2020). Data streaming quality has improved the mobile experience (assuming an urban/peri-

urban context in developed countries). Next-generation consoles, like Google Stadia and the outcome of the new Microsoft-Sony partnership, will expand portability. The aforementioned organizations are racing to develop an all-platform, video-games-on-demand streaming service like Netflix for video games (Handrahan, 2019).

SFD curricula vary in length, with the shortest lasting a few weeks and the longest spanning an entire year. Driving outcomes for beneficiaries is a function of the amount of time individuals spend engaged with the program (Coalter, 2013). The longer a beneficiary is participating in a SFD program, the more likely they are to achieve desired outcomes and the deeper those outcomes could be (Coalter, n.d.). Program length is not the only variable influencing outcome efficacy, but the assumption is sufficient for this exploration. Esports is an opportunity for youth to engage with a curriculum in a self-led manner after their in-person session has ended.

Esports gives SFD organizations options. It gives organizations affordable customizability over program content, frequency of engagement, remote programing, and more. Esports offers an opportunity for beneficiary engagement beyond the times and spaces that beneficiaries gather for SFD programing. While some SFD programing goes beyond the program time, not all programs provide “homework” or additional post-program activities that contribute to program outcomes. Esports also opens up the possibility for greater engagement of program participants over a shorter time period, thus, in theory, enhancing outcomes. An integration of esports into SFD programing could allow programs to engage youth beyond their facilities, opening opportunities for greater inclusion in participation, an alternative means of engagement should programing be disrupted, and a mechanism for further peer-led engagement. The portability of video games potentially frees beneficiaries from the restriction of schedules and allows them to continue to work toward program outcomes at their own pace. Although not suitable for all participants, the possibilities created by the portability of video games have their own merits. Realising the potential of these possibilities would require an adaptation of curriculum and is not automatic. This could, however, mean that whenever and wherever beneficiaries play, they may be working toward program outcomes. For example, while sport was suspended globally due to the COVID-19 pandemic, esports flourished. Esports viewers and participant figures soared (Epstein, 2020), and one could assume digital delivery of SFD methodologies through esports may increase program resilience in the face of unforeseen circumstances.

### **The Future Is Now, The Future Is Mobile**

SFD programs across the world prioritize youth beneficiaries (Blom et al., 2015). These programs reach a population that is increasingly technologically literate. There is value in conceptually exploring how esports can potentially complement the deployment of SFD methodologies while acknowledging that access to technology is varied and that there are many layers to the digital divide (Lafleur et al., 2020). The digital divide appears across developed and developing countries, as well as between urban, peri-urban, and rural communities within individual countries. This paper assumes an urban/peri-urban focus within developed countries. In these countries, access to smartphones, mobile connectivity, and digital content has grown rapidly. Youth are increasingly growing up as “digital natives” (Joshi et al., 2018). Basic smartphones are not so basic anymore. With an increasing range of applications, youth are consuming more media online, and their ability to engage across long distances is evolving (Ayllón et al., 2020). Beyond youth interest in digital technology and games, a key benefit of esports is the digital reach, scale, and access it can offer (Qian et al., 2019). Contextual relevance is necessary when evaluating how SFD has evolved in different regions, but the global technological evolution is trickling down across most countries and continents from urban to rural communities.

Video games have evolved beyond traditional hardware and consoles increasing their presence across our smartphones and tablets (Chikhani, 2015). Accessing virtual arenas and content doesn’t require the same physical access one may need when playing a sport like basketball. Mobile access and portability of access means that delivering an eSFD program comes with less of the spatial requirements of traditional programing. Esports could reduce spatial requirements for program delivery if the sport is played on a device. Handheld devices not only take up less space, but they can also be used in multiple locations. Participation will still require a stable internet connection and device access. Assuming both are satisfied, participation in an eSFD program may require fewer staff to implement. There is also the possibility of remotely coaching participants. The opportunity for remote participation in programs and broader participant-group composition could hold real value for SFD organizations with unique contextual challenges. Remote participation in turn could reduce the long-term cost of delivering programs, create stronger and deeper connections, enable programing that might be impacted by public health changes (e.g., COVID-19), and increase digital skills.

As SFD programs evolve and develop, so too will their curricula. Esports elements of SFD programming are an opportunity to introduce digital skills, digital education, and digital literacy in an SFD setting. They also offer a natural gateway to conversations about science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education and employment in ways other mainstream sports may not. Digital and technology outcomes are a natural integration to esports programming because the sport is digital. SFD programs that embrace esports in their programming may also find they attract at-risk or vulnerable individuals who were otherwise not interested in their services. Greater program inclusivity through mixed-ability participation is another new possibility. Esports, though virtual, is potentially able to demonstrate similar social, collaborative, and communication skill development to traditionally physical sport with possible additional benefits (Halbrook et al., 2019).

### **Achievement Unlocked: Gamification Is King**

Video games are built on a series of game mechanics that influence participation rates, engagement levels, and performance. Game mechanics have long been a tool to influence behavior change (Sailer et al., 2017). Gamification, the intentional use of game mechanics to change the behavior of an individual, has not been confined to digital games. In fact, we see the use of gamification across our day-to-day lives in the form of consumer loyalty schemes, performance dashboards, participation leaderboards, and more (Robson et al., 2015). However, it is in video games that we see the most consistent and successful uses of game mechanics to drive in-game behavior and participation. Leaderboards and achievement lists are just some of the game mechanics that can influence participation and behavior. Leaderboards encourage further play in order to improve one's rank and achievement lists can be designed to encourage exploration within the game beyond the primary story arc or repeat participation (Robson et al., 2015).

Based on anecdotal evidence from conversations with a number of SFD organizations, many are not intentionally aware of game mechanics and gamification. If elements of gamification and game mechanics exist within their programming, this is coincidental and not by design. The number of different game mechanics are exhaustive, but a specific category of game mechanics called performance-condition mechanics (also known as victory-condition mechanics), control how a player wins a game or achieves a task. Conditional mechanics (conditional on certain actions or behaviors) include goals (or achievement lists), quests or missions, performance races, and even structure building

(Maloney et al., 2015). Each of these mechanics motivates the participant toward improved performance. In an SFD context, this could be an intentional function linked to the achievement of specific outcomes. The intentional introduction of gamification elements and game mechanics such as victory-conditions to SFD programming could directly drive longer, deeper levels of engagement, higher quality outcomes, and an increase in beneficiary retention. One SFD organization that has built gamification into its program design is The Running Charity (TRC) based in London, UK. Gamification is employed to provide each beneficiary with a unique development pathway that they traverse at their own speed. Beneficiaries achieve their outcomes at different rates, but the motivation of their gamified pathway remains and is enhanced by performance-based incentives. If an SFD organization wasn't ready to introduce esports within their programming, they could still benefit from gamifying aspects of their programming. Game mechanics can be designed into a program and TRC is a proven success story when it comes to implementing nondigital game mechanics into program design. While the case study of TRC predates the influence of esports, that doesn't mean the SFD community cannot learn about the value of gamification and game mechanics from esports. TRC is an excellent case of how game mechanics can enhance programming. TRC's use of game mechanics was the result of years of programmatic evolution. For organizations without the time and in-house expertise to gamify their programming, esports may be an off-the-shelf solution with built in gamification. Carefully selecting the right video game for your esports program can link to the desired outcome delivery.

Much has been written about the possible negative effects of video games. This is primarily linked to violent games with potentially negative implications to behavior change (Greitemeyer, 2014; Przybylski et al., 2009). SFD programs could achieve greater, more sustainable, positive transformational behavior change by choosing the right game (the avoidance of certain games is part of a broader ethical discussion), using online and offline game mechanics, and combining these with the other aspects of esports (e.g., mobility and portability).

### **The Future Is ESFD?**

This paper's aim is to stimulate dialogue on the intersection of SFD and esports. It set out to explore how SFD organizations can enhance delivery of programming considering the introduction of esports. SFD esports programs appeal to similar demographics and this creates an area for further exploration. SFD growth since 2003 has legitimized the community within the development sector

as evidenced by the mention of sport as a tool to achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (Lemke, n.d.). Esport's rise within the global sports sector should not be ignored (Leonsis, 2020). To date, esports initiatives "for good" have tended to be branding exercises or fundraising efforts. SFD programs that aim to maximize participant reach, program outcomes, and beneficiary engagement can benefit from leveraging esports. Organizations able to increase reach, retention, and performance may find it maximizes the impact returned for money that is invested.

Esport's benefits include portability of access and engagement, interchangeability of the game, motivating design features (game mechanics), and a parity of competition. Each of these elements, even if introduced separately, stand to potentially improve the delivery and capacity of SFD organizations that are attempting to maximize the impact of their programs. There is also the consideration that youth are increasingly engaging with games in a social manner and that modernizing SFD programs might be achieved by complementing physical sport programming with virtual sport programming. Any esports methodology that is developed should consider the possible negative consequences that can arise from video games and build into the program's design active mitigations (McCarthy, 2016).

Existing SFD models have been developed to target a wide range of outcomes. SFD methodologies tackle complex, systemic social issues like ethnic divides (e.g., PPI), homelessness (e.g., The Running Charity), mental health (e.g., Waves For Change), inclusive sport (e.g., Change Foundation), sexual reproductive health and education (e.g., Tackle Africa), and refugee integration (e.g., Laureus Germany). SFD model efficacy is still being researched and, although there is growing evidence to suggest these models can be effective, there are still questions that exist about the quality of evidence from the field (Whitley et al., 2019). This does not suggest that this programming should be replaced, but the addition of esports to SFD programming tool kits could have positive benefits either as a complement to traditional methods.

As with any disruptive force to a sector, there are often more questions than answers. Esports is a potentially exciting new platform to drive youth engagement within SFD programs. Counterbalancing that excitement is the fact that there is much more research needed on this topic. This paper has started to highlight, conceptually, some of the ways that SFD programming might benefit from an esports complement. In the same way that some physical sports can be dangerous to youth (contact sports, concussion risks, action sports), esports does present risks. Mainstream media

have been quick to highlight the potential negative consequences of video games and esports: cyber bullying (Yang, 2012), the negative effects of excessive screen time (Ballard, 2017), the potential of certain games to endorse violence (Carnagey, 2007), unregulated elements of gaming akin to gambling (Drummond, 2018; Griffiths, 2018), and health challenges. It should be noted that these consequences are always a result of excess and that in moderation there is real value in video games. Esports is not a silver bullet, but it may allow us to achieve outcomes that aren't possible in existing traditional sport-based models. More donors, scholars, and practitioners should evaluate the potential of esports, and SFD organizations should be open to exploring how esports might enhance delivery of their work. We should proceed with an open mind to investigate the value of esports to the SFD community.

As an established part of mainstream culture, esports may incorporate unique characteristics into the design of SFD programs. This could improve program performance, flexibility, customizability, reach, and resilience. The impetus for the growth of esports in SFD is not guaranteed. It requires open-minded collaboration. As esports brands look to expand their footprint, there is every chance that current "for good" efforts evolve to be more holistic. This could fit in nicely with the ambitions of SFD organizations that are interested in attracting new funding partners/stakeholders. A collaborative process may yield the greatest successes if SFD and esports organizations collaborate in the mutual interest of creating social change through esports (Svensson & Loat, 2019). While this paper has explored how esports can contribute to the SFD community, there is also further scope to explore whether SFD can benefit the esports community. The opportunities to evolve SFD programming presented in this paper suggest that eSFD may enhance program delivery. As esports keeps growing, SFD organizations may find it valuable to innovate and test these new methodologies. The first step is increased dialogue and discourse on the topic, for, as one might say, there are many levels to this game.

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