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From Esports to Virtual Sports: The Olympic Strategy Regarding Competitive Video Gaming

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Introduction

Organized video games competitions, or esports, has been growing in popularity since the turn of the 2010s among younger generation, as evidenced by the continuous increase in the number of players, the size of audiences, or the revenues generated (Scholz, 2019). At the same time, the Olympic movement (OM) is developing a global strategy to attract new audiences and rejuvenate its fanbase (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011), whether through the creation of the YOG, the implementation of digital-led content, or the integration of new disciplines such as skateboarding or breakdancing. To pursue this ambition, the IOC has started since 2017 a reflection about possible synergies with the esports industry (Miah & Fenton, 2020). How have these reflections been conducted? What are the main outcomes? And what issues does this convergence reveal?

Methods

To answer these questions, I conducted an ethnographic study as an advisor to the international OM between March 2018 and December 2020. I took part in the multiple formal and informal meetings that occurred within the Esports & Gaming Liaison Group, the thematic group specially created by the IOC. In addition, secondary data was collected and analyzed, such as all official publications (e.g., Olympic Summit reports, Agenda 2020, IOC sessions).

Results

The data reveals an evolution in the way the OM apprehends esports and its integration. If the first statement made by the IOC in 2017 indicated a relative acceptance of all competitive forms of video games, the Agenda 2020+5 presented in early 2021 definitively targets a specific genre of games designated under the term "Virtual Sports". The Olympic Virtual Series (OVS) held in June 2021 confirm this choice since the competition is composed of five virtual versions of existing sports: cycling, sailing, rowing, baseball, and motor sports. Beyond the stated desire to make the term "esports" invisible, the new categorization proposed by the OM is implicitly symbolized by the ELG chairperson position granted to the president of the International Cycling Union (UCI), whose electronic version of cycling is presented as a reference. At the same time, the IOC is encouraging International Federations (IFs) to take control and regulate the virtual and electronic versions of their sports, at the risk of coming into conflict with the publishers who own the intellectual property of these games.

Discussion

These findings confirm the challenges facing the OM, from the game publishers' monopoly (Gries, 2019) to the esports compatibility with the Olympic Games (Pack & Heldlund, 2020). In addition, the study also reveals how the IOC is attempting to leverage this collaboration, by redefining the types of games worthy of interest and by using players as a vehicle to promote its own values.

Conclusion

The evolution in the way the OM apprehends esports requires a clear understanding of its role and ambitions. Under the pretext of modernization, the IOC and the IFs are finally trying to reproduce the institutionalization model of sport on an intrinsically commercially driven industry. If the esports sector

seems to a certain extent to be interested in benefiting from the Olympic influence, it seems that it is only under the conditions decided by the IOC.

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