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"It Was All without Emotions, and This Wasn't the Same Anymore": "Replacing" Traditional Sports with E-Sports during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

To limit the spread of COVID-19, governments across the globe implemented measures such as social distancing, remote work, face masks, curfews and multiple other restrictions. (Hammami et al. 2022). COVID-19 started on November 17, 2019, in the city of Wuhan, Hubei Province, central China, and was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020 (Rath 2022). In Poland, the first case of SARS-CoV-2 infection was found on March 4, 2020 (Dąbek 2021). From March 20, 2020, to May 15, 2022, the Polish Ministry of Health imposed a series of intensive lockdowns that significantly transformed people's lives. The present chapter covers the first year of these restrictions, from March 2020 to November 2021, in the context of changes in both traditional sports and esports. We consider this period to have been crucial because the first year of the pandemic involved the harshest restrictions ("Rok od pierwszego przypadku COVID-19 w Polsce" 2021) and the most momentous changes for both traditional sports and esports—these changes being the topic of the presented chapter.

Researchers reported remarkable growth in the popularity of esports, most noticeably in the number of fans and cyber-athletes (Kim, Nauright and Suveatwatanakul 2020; Bisht,

Sharma, and Choudhury 2022). López-Cabarcos, Ribeiro-Soriano, and Piñeiro-Chousa (2020) noted that although many financial markets collapsed, not all sectors were affected equally. They pointed to gaming and esports industries as those that "suffered the least from the fall in the markets. Millions of people locked up at home, bored, stressed, and anguished, gave gaming and eSports companies growing prominence throughout the first half of 2020" (López-Cabarcos, Ribeiro-Soriano and Piñeiro-Chousa 2020: 289).

For the purposes of our study, we have expanded the definition of esports to include both "classical" esports, including competitive games such as *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009) or *Dota 2* (Valve Corporation 2013), and the application of various mixed reality (MR) solutions and sports video games to traditional sports. We understand MR as an experience that merges a real-world environment and a virtual one, with physical and virtual objects co-existing and interacting in real-time.

As was already mentioned, classical esports flourished during COVID-19. What is more, interest in MR grew significantly as it garnered a reputation as a tool for enhancing real-world sports skills due to the realism and flexibility it can deliver (Richard, Lavoie-Léonard and Romeas 2021; Romeas et al. 2022; Woyo and Nyamandi 2022). During the lockdowns, esports temporarily "replaced" traditional sports in many different disciplines, such as cycling, football, or Formula 1 (a phenomenon we will discuss in more detail below) (see Witkowski et al. 2021). Many sports events were virtualized, and professional athletes' competition routines changed in unprecedented ways (Westmattelmann et al. 2021a; 2021b). Sports simulators such as the *FIFA* series (EA Sports 1993-2022) and *Zwift* (Zwift Inc. 2014) became partial solutions for the sports media industries by enabling them to cope with the difficulties of canceling sports events. Interestingly, sports celebrities were often involved in promoting these new virtualized events (Goldman and Hedlund 2020; Möhring 2020; Westmattelmann et al. 2021b).

All this fed into claims that there are grounds for promoting sports and esports simultaneously, even more than before COVID-19, as the pandemic "has placed more barriers to the playing and watching of traditional sports than it has for [esports]" (Kim, Nauright and Suveatwatanakul 2020: 10). Researchers have argued that traditional sports is now somehow compelled to move closer to esports, with the gap between the two gradually narrowing. Such scholars argued the pandemic changed the fundamental meaning of sports brands, audience viewing behaviors, and sponsors' investment preferences (Kim, Nauright and Suveatwatanakul 2020; Ke and Wagner 2020). The claim was that, in a post-pandemic world, esports would become an extension of sports, and the substitutability of sports with esports would increase. In line with this thinking, sports brands began investing heavily in esports assets in the wake of the pandemic. Kim and colleagues (2020), for example, noted that "many major international soccer brands and professional US sports teams operate [esports] teams or have bought stakes in existing teams" (2020: 10).

While many researchers have eagerly embraced the confluence of esports with traditional sports that has supposedly been occasioned by the pandemic, others were more skeptical. Ke and Wagner (2020), for instance, suggested that the lockdowns merely provided a temporary opportunity for the growth of classical esports and the use of MR and video games as substitutes for traditional sports. In other words, esports and traditional sports should properly be viewed as parallel industries rather than converging enterprises:

> The esports extension of sports amid [the] pandemic is acceptable .... However, sports fans may become less tolerating and feel their belief in original brand and culture are "contaminated" if the sports organizations keep recommending this "mixed content" to them after the global pandemic, because this action probably violates the current "parallel management" tenet of sports club and esports club. In this regard, sport fans

are highly likely to perceive a negative extension experience (Ke and Wagner 2020: 4).

The view espoused in this chapter aligns with these doubts, so rarely raised during the pandemic because of high uncertainty on what the future holds. The chapter evaluates critically the contention that esports is "replacing" traditional sports and that stronger connections between the two are an enduring positive result of the pandemic. It does so by listening to the voices of insiders—journalists and others from the media industry who deal with both esports and traditional sports. We conducted 15 retrospective semi-structured in-depth interviews, and, as it turned out, the respondents were highly skeptical of the optimistic stance presented above. We consider what these voices tell us not only about the actual relations between esports and traditional sports during the pandemic but also about the future of these relations and esports in general.

In particular, the chapter examines the oft-raised topic of whether esports should take steps to gain general public recognition as "real" or "genuine" form of sport (Marta et al. 2021; Di Virgilio et al. 2022). Debates on whether esports is "real" have raged for some time. In their seminal article on the impact of esports on traditional sports, Jonasson and Thiborg (2010: 288) describe esport as "sport within and through the medium of cyberspace" and argue that it "deserves" to be called a traditional sport. Opposing this, Holt (2016) believes that the crucial element of physical activity must be present for a "cybersport" to be considered a "genuine sport" (see also Hallmann and Giel 2018). Even if physicality is present in some form, however, esports are virtual—in contrast to "real" sports—and this, too, raises doubts about their authenticity. Jenny et al. (2017) endorse this view, also adding that it is difficult to accept esport as "true" because of its lack of history and long-term institutionalization. They claim that in esports, there are no well-developed governing bodies

to oversee and standardize rules (see Summerley 2020, for a comparison of early institutionalization of traditional sports and esports). While not a focus of this chapter, such studies are important to understanding several of the conclusions of our research. It is our view that there is little point in comparing esports with traditional sports using conventional terms of reference, as the two are distinct phenomena with their own histories, ideological bases, and rules. We shall return to this topic later.

Methods

The chapter is part of a broader project examining the changes in media sports during the lockdowns (see Siuda et al. 2023). Interviewees were selected from among the top-tier Polish media broadcasters based on various rankings by influential media analytics services, mainly *Wirtualne Media* (https://www.wirtualnemedia.pl/). Interviewees were associated with the most influential and popular TV channels, radio stations, newspapers, and online news services in terms of audience numbers and ratings. They are not named here as anonymity was guaranteed to all who were interviewed. All are significant journalists who either hold managerial positions or are well-known and recognizable (for example, as TV commentators). Prominence and expertise in particular sports were important criteria for selection, but we were also concerned with ensuring a representative spread from across the various mainstream media. As a result, we interviewed:

- Six esports journalists, including editors-in-chief of the esports sections of the main Polish media, and TV esports commentators. All of these interviewees declared their main interest is in esports.
- Nine traditional sports journalists, including well-known commentators and journalists working for the largest Polish media, and heads of TV, radio, and press sports

departments. These journalists indicated traditional sports as their main professional interest, including diverse disciplines such as football, cycling, tennis, and volleyball.

We decided to include both traditional and esports journalists to gain a broader insight into the changes which have occurred in conventional sports and esports, and the relations between the two amid the pandemic. The interviews took place during a three-month period from September to November 2021. As the full process of designing the study and analyzing the data is described in Siuda et al. (2023), here we will highlight only that the data were reviewed repeatedly to obtain a sense of the whole and develop codes to capture key concepts. The codes were then linked, sorted into subcategories, and finally sorted into broader categories (see Siuda et al. 2023). The analysis was a purely inductive process for recognizing both the "explicit communication" and "inferred communication" realized in the process of the interviews (Hsieh and Shannon 2005: 36).

For this chapter, we have drawn on the subcategories that correspond with our aim and used these as subtitles in the Results section. An interviewee's number and type are provided alongside each quote. The letter "T" denotes a traditional sports journalist, and the letters "ES" denote an esports journalist. For ethical reasons, we have anonymized the quotes and redacted information that might identify interviewees or the media in which they are involved. All interviews were in Polish and then translated during the transcript stage.

Results

Coping with Changes in Traditional Sports Media

The interviewees were asked to provide a retrospective view of whether and how the pandemic had affected their professional activities. They were unanimous in stressing that the cancellation of sporting events at the beginning of COVID-19 led sports media to resort to

archival materials to fill the sudden gap. In addition to re-screening or re-playing past events, broadcasting also included interviews with players, physicians, or psychologists, mostly about the nature of training during the lockdowns. The interviewees pointed out that the forced, *ad hoc* use of various online solutions was a particular challenge, especially since some had no prior experience working with newer technologies. During the pandemic, instant messaging services (such as, for example, Skype) were somehow rediscovered, experiencing a resurgence in use despite having been present for many years. As one interviewee said: "Previously media companies … paid guests for coming to the studio, for hotels, for planes, and yet now you could connect online and instead of one guest have five for the same amount of money" (I10T).

For many, working from home became the new normal, and consequentl, it became common for journalists to have a home-based mini-studio and take on many roles previously unknown to them, such as reporter, editor, and light and sound specialist. Over time, technical barriers ceased to be problematic and journalists found they could be more effective at home than in the office. This came at a cost, however, as lockdowns were damaging the organizational culture of media agencies in the long run.

According to the interviewees, the pandemic caused financial losses for clubs, tournament organizers, bookmakers, and broadcasters. Examples provided were losses in revenues from commercials and subscribers canceling their paid access to sports coverage. However, the interviewees were unanimous that initial fears about a massive drain of sponsors proved largely unfounded and were more a reflection of the ubiquitous panic that characterized the beginning of the pandemic. Contrary to initial forecasts, over time, it became clear that event organizers and athletes did not face bankruptcy. Similarly, investors did not withdraw from sports *en masse*, as was initially anticipated, although attracting new investors has indeed turned out to be much more difficult than previously.

Interviewees revealed that during lockdowns, live sports commentary was replaced by studio commentary based on footage of the sports event live-streamed via the Internet to the commentator in the studio. They also believed that the pandemic confirmed the key significance of live fans at any sports spectacle. This was highly evident in the case of desperate attempts to replace "real" crowds with "artificial" crowds. Interviewees commonly criticized this mode of broadcasting for its rigidness and awkwardness. For example, people were allegedly employed to press a button for crowd cheering, sometimes mistakenly pressing the button too early or too late and conjuring "artificial" spectator responses that were delayed, too loud, or inappropriate to the situation on the pitch. This made it more difficult to comment on matches and proved that real fans cannot be effectively replaced. It also emphasized how crowds contribute to the unique atmosphere of live events by creating a performance that is crucial for sports rivalry. As one interviewee put it, without live fans "it was all without emotions, and this wasn't the same anymore" (I05T). Another said: "Imagine an actor who plays in a theater and the audience's reactions are played from the tape …. Everyone knows it's a hoax" (I10T).

Bridging Gaps Between Traditional Sports and Esports

Although showing memes about athletes or their social media was an integral part of traditional sports broadcasting even before COVID-19, the pandemic has certainly forced broadcasters to use Internet resources more widely. The interviewees argued that the Internet was the medium least affected by the lockdowns, and admitted that the shift towards new media would not have taken place so quickly or on such a large scale had it not been for the pandemic.

Esports was an evident example here, as it has become the only available safe substitute for traditional sports. For this reason, video games were viewed more positively and

sometimes noticed for the first time in the context of sports. The interviewees argued sports simulators were primarily intended to maintain the interest of fans or soothe their frustrations during the lockdowns, not to replace sports. In the wake of the pandemic, many media people feared fans might choose other forms of entertainment altogether, and that audiences might therefore be lost for good. They also worried that lockdown restrictions on fans supporting clubs or players directly at the sporting arena would dampen fans' enthusiasm in the long term, and that fear of infection might prevent them from returning to the stands even after the restrictions had been lifted. This is where technology was intended to help by allowing fans to experience sports (or quasi-sports) competition in their favorite discipline in a new, relatively easy, and pleasant way. It quickly became apparent to fans that apart from watching, they could even compete with others—including well-known athletes who were themselves isolating at home—thanks to football, cycling, car racing simulators, or running applications.

Zwift (Zwift Inc. 2014) (see Figure 9.1)—the most popular cycling simulator, a game adapted to compete on a stationary bike—was the perfect solution for the lockdown periods. Firstly, it directly referred to traditional sports rivalry; secondly, it required physical effort; and finally, it was not strictly associated with "classical" and disliked (in the conventional sports community) esports such as *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009) or *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve Corporation and Hidden Path Entertainment 2012). Our respondents recognized the role of *Zwift*, although they saw its numerous limitations, especially the inability to comment on the history, art, or culture of the region of a given stage in the race: "Watching a cycling race is more pleasant thanks to commentators, who usually don't talk about what is happening on the screen at all. They talk about the history of these races or the history of the regions, all that stuff you know …" (I06ES).

[Figure 9.1 here

Figure 9.1 Zwift Application. Racing scene from "Zwift" (Zwift Inc.) © Zwift Inc., 2014]

> It's like someone has cut off one of our hands. If we have three or four hours of broadcasting, or even more, this is the information we normally use ..., and sometimes we manage to get the attention of fans. And they do like these comments. It's not strictly about cycling, because you can only talk about cycling for those freaks who are crazy about the sport, but this is not a large group. And then these stages would not have such viewership, sometimes around 250,000. And that was missing in the virtual world, and this whole Zwift's utopia was not perfect …. There was nothing to talk about. It was practically the same view all the time. Of course, we could do trivia about the cyclists, or the specificity of virtual racing, but it was very difficult and not the same (I07T).

Our interviewees also identified Formula 1 racing simulators as an attempt to tackle the new realities of the pandemic. Here they referred to the previously mentioned online competitions involving well-known sports celebrities, with amateurs having a chance to compete against their favorite athletes. Some interviewees witnessed fans beating Lewis Hamilton (the leading Formula 1 driver) or competing against Real Madrid (Spanish football club) goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois. Such events made online simulations more attractive, although many drivers (including Hamilton) pointed out that the experience of driving a "real" car is completely different from that offered by a simulator.

Running marathons or half-marathons with the help of mobile applications was another popular way of dealing with lockdowns (see Woyo and Nyamandi 2022). Despite these solutions being more flexible than traditional events, the respondents were very

skeptical about them being used as an alternative to conventional competitions in the future. This is because many runners care dearly about such details as having a starting number or hearing the fans' applause when crossing the finish line.

The journalists provided many examples of using various sports games in traditional sports even before the pandemic, especially football simulations from the *EA Sports FIFA* series (EA Sports 1993-2022). Such usage only intensified during the lockdowns, with alternative football matches in *FIFA* being organized instead of the canceled traditional games. For example, a *FIFA* game was used when the traditional fixture between Poland and Ukraine was canceled, and two players from each national team, who were themselves *FIFA* gamers, staged a *FIFA* match (organized by the Polish Football Association) (see Figure 9.2). Other interviewees mentioned traditional football clubs that have sections for *FIFA* gaming players who formally represent the club in esports leagues and tournaments. During the pandemic, this blending of sports and esports became even more pronounced, and both traditional sports and esports were able to promote their brands and products among new audiences. Although the interviewees did notice this kind of interpenetration of sports and esports, they still believed that COVID-19 had not changed the subordinate position of the latter, as it would, in their view, always be "inferior" (I10T) to traditional sports. In this regard, many journalists expressed limited interest in and skepticism about esports, arguing that during "lockdowns sports does not exist and no simulators will replace it" (I06ES).

[Figure 9.2 here

Figure 9.2 Poland Vs. Ukraine FIFA Game on YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91INSA1l3VQ&t=28s, accessed May 15, 2023]

According to the interviewees, as the pandemic progressed, the vast majority of journalists, athletes, and fans expected a return to the normality they had known before the pandemic. They believed a return to traditional forms of practicing and broadcasting sports was inevitable because 1) alternatives are less attractive; 2) direct offline contact is essential for journalistic work; and 3) the risks of transmitting a virus on the pitch or in the studio are negligible. For the most part, journalists saw the replacement of traditional sports as a kind of unavoidable, temporary compromise—a "rescue" for players that had to take a break. A return to "normal" events with only some restrictions (for example, in the number of spectators) was seen as a "light at the end of the tunnel," the beginning of the end of the pandemic. Our interviewees stressed that lockdowns had caused fans to appreciate what had been taken away from them and that they would eagerly return to sports arenas.

The interviewees were unanimous that after the pandemic, not only would sports abandon various electronic solutions adopted during the lockdowns, but the community would also have had enough of these for good. In this regard, various examples were given, such as a video where Mikel Landa (a Spanish cyclist) destroys his stationary bike with an axe. The journalists argued any professional athlete who is committed to competing in real-life events would not, by choice, switch to any kind of electronic event as an alternative. It was emphasized that some sports simulators, such as *FIFA*, had already spread before the pandemic and despite this, they had not come anywhere close to replacing traditional games. In this view, esports can certainly serve as a kind of bridge to traditional sports, but, like sponsors or bookmakers, it is not essential to the "real game."

Esports' Problems

Our interviewees noticed the increase in the popularity of esports during the pandemic outlined at the beginning of this chapter. Interestingly, they were not entirely convinced this

was the result of a search for alternatives by traditional sports fans. They speculated that this growth could have occurred naturally and might anyway have happened without COVID-19, especially since esports viewership had been growing year after year before the lockdowns. Although esports coped with the pandemic relatively well, it too was affected by many of the same problems, such as the lack of crowds during live events. The most important tournaments in esports are organized along similar lines to traditional sports events; that is, in specially prepared arenas with fans in the stands, live broadcasts (mostly Internet streaming and occasional TV broadcasting), bookmakers, and so on. The finals of the Intel Extreme Masters Katowice 2020 World Championship were the largest tournament in Poland canceled at the beginning of the lockdowns, just twelve hours before the scheduled start (see also Markowska 2020). As one interviewer pointed out, the most important esports events cannot be effectively replaced on the Internet: "IEM Katowice with and without fans is completely different [see Figure 9.3].... The prestige of the entire tournament immediately increases when you see that the whole world is watching you, not just streaming on the Internet, and when you have thousands of supporters gathered in one place" (I02ES).

[Figure 9.3 here

Figure 9.3 A Scene from a Clip Promoting IEM Katowice 2022—A Live Event. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xXhsdLje5k, accessed May 15, 2023]

The interviewees emphasized that the interpenetration of traditional and electronic sports during the pandemic revealed a lack of professionalism in esports organizations. These organizations operate differently, as esports is an important part of the gaming market and publishing companies own copyrights. While the organizations manage to abide by the rules of this market, they are not necessarily experienced in cooperating with large media entities

like national and global television networks. For example, unexpected delays due to technical issues are much more common in esports than in traditional sports. Unexpected changes to the fixed TV schedule caused by such delays are a very serious issue for TV producers, and this is an issue of which, according to the interviewees, esports organizations are rarely aware.

During the interviews, it was stressed that esports streaming is less "rigid" compared to TV broadcasting, which made it easier to adapt to the rapidly changing conditions of the pandemic. However, streaming cannot be easily transferred to traditional television. One reason for this is players' use of profanities or offensive language. The interviewees emphasized that while esports will undoubtedly continue to grow online, its potential for growth on TV is mediocre at best. One of the most professionally experienced journalists (I10T), who has covered sports since the 1990s, pointed out that compared with the relatively structured and refined content of TV broadcasts, the vast majority of the online content is simply of poor quality. A further issue from the perspective of TV sports channels is that broadcasting esports in prime time is highly problematic because some popular games, such as *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve Corporation and Hidden Path Entertainment 2012), are intended for people over 18 years of age.

General Skepticism Toward Esports

The interviewees frequently stressed that despite the experience of lockdowns, it is difficult to imagine replacing traditional sports with anything else. Sports and esports "occupy different places in society" (I06ES). People who identify with a particular traditional or electronic sport are characterized by a "different lifestyle" (I05T), and the pandemic did not change this significantly. Advertising agencies usually reach out to esports influencers not because they are the new faces of mainstream sports, but rather to attract a niche group of gamers. In this

regard, the interviewees highlighted generational differences, and believed esports is primarily for young people:

> Well, it won't replace sport, let's make it clear. I think the Premier League organized a tournament with footballers and they played football games. It was all nice, but I'm not buying it. But I believe young people could be interested in their idols playing these games and enjoy watching it. Well, there were many curious attempts to do sports without sports (I14T).

As mentioned earlier, during the lockdowns, many celebrities participated in virtual competitions, including athletes representing the most popular traditional sports disciplines, and they "dragged some of their supporters with them" (I14T). Esports temporarily gained from this, which the interviewees repeatedly confirmed by reference to viewership data. Nonetheless, it was pointed out that while the growth in video games during the pandemic was not surprising (although it is not certain to what extent it was caused by the pandemic itself), it is more difficult to predict whether this will be perpetuated in the future. Some interviewees doubted it would be, emphasizing that the new opportunities offered during the pandemic are likely to be wasted.

In this regard, it was stressed that the increased interest demonstrated in esports was instead a spontaneous and temporary trend that resulted from forced isolation. Due to the lockdowns, moreover, some of the best gamers had to move from competing live at prestigious tournaments, such as the Intel Extreme Masters, to quite common online games. One of the interviewees (I03ES) mentioned the well-known Ukrainian esports team Natus Vincere, whose members were forced to play important games online for the first time in a year. This is important because playing offline and online differs significantly, both in terms

of tournament preparation (e.g., the need to organize travel and accommodation) and from the point of view of how the matches are experienced by both players and the audience. Sponsors are conscious of the differences between live esports events and those staged on the Internet and are not willing to invest as much in online games.

The interviewees emphasized that famous athletes and other celebrities who invest in esports do not do so because they believe esports will replace sports, but rather as means of making lucrative short-term profits. While the rules and social contexts of popular traditional sports are widely known, entering the gaming community requires quite a commitment. "Newbs" are excluded from the growing, but still quite hermetic, group of esports fans. In addition, esports is very diverse, with numerous streamers scattered across the Internet:

> The available technology allows you to comfortably follow esports, however, it's still not that widespread. I wouldn't expect a revolution here, making the games even more attractive, and causing people who haven't watched esports to suddenly start following it. … What is challenging is… to "tell" this game interestingly for laymen and professionals at the same time. It seems to me that this technological barrier, I mean using various technologies, is not problematic here. However, deciding how this storytelling should look, and how to attract the masses is incredibly challenging for all those who create esports content (I13ES).

In general, our interviewees agreed that during the pandemic, esports was primarily a kind of "life raft" for both traditional sports organizations and media facing a huge crisis. This "life raft" turned out to be very useful during the lockdowns, but will not be needed in the long run:

There should always be blood, sweat, and tears on the pitch or the track, and so on. Of course, in a goalless situation, where there is no other possibility, it's a different story… During that first COVID-19 wave, I was in favor of stopping football games, because the world was worried whether this pandemic would wipe us off the face of the Earth. … But the more we know about it, the longer we live with it, the more I would defend this sport because, in the long run, there is nothing healthier than regular physical activity (I05T).

Discussion

This chapter has thus far presented the outcomes of interviews with prominent Polish journalists about how sports media coped with the pandemic, how it impacted the state of traditional sports and esports, and how it affected the relationship between the two. Most interviewees agreed that viewership of esports grew and some new connections were made between it and traditional sports during the pandemic. However, they argued strongly against the view that some kind of enduring confluence between esports and sports was forged as a result of the COVID-19 lockdowns. The interviewees were emphatic about two critical points. The first is that, contrary to widespread belief, it is fiction that esports experienced a net benefit due to the pandemic. Like traditional sports, esports was detrimentally affected both financially and organizationally by the lockdowns. The interviewees' second critical point is that, at least in their view, the increased use of video games and MR solutions during the pandemic cannot be taken to indicate a permanent shift in traditional sports, nor can these platforms be considered to have the potential to replace traditional sports to any significant extent. Events organization, management, training, viewership, building communities of fans, and evoking excitement and emotion are so vastly different between the two. The respondents

identified many problems related to the interpenetration of sports and esports that occurred or intensified during COVID-19 lockdowns.

The present study challenges the view of the pandemic as an agent in the process of moving traditional sports closer to esports. It also casts doubt on studies that stress the long-term impact of lockdowns on traditional sports and esports, and the alleged closer connections it brought about between the two. One should consider whether all the so-called "new" phenomena that supposedly emerged during social isolation were not, in fact, existing technologies that were merely spotlighted during the pandemic. Similarly, it is questionable if the interconnections between sports and esports that became more pronounced during the lockdowns were not the outcome of some kind of natural evolution. Either way, these phenomena were not harbingers of permanent change and did not revise understandings of either traditional sports or esports, especially since these phenomena did not persist after the lockdown periods, as we now know (see, for example, "Sports Teams, Venues Revved for Return of Full-Capacity Crowds" 2022; Otake 2022). This leads us to the broader conclusion that care should be taken when analyzing and juxtaposing esports and traditional sports. Rather, these should be understood as separate phenomena, each defined by its own distinctive characteristics (see also Jonasson and Thiborg 2010; Hutchins 2008; Hebbel-Seeger 2012; Seo and Jung 2016; Witkowski 2012).

This is especially true in light of the failure during COVID-19 to successfully replace traditional events and practices with electronic alternatives. Had this occurred, one could argue that traditional sports has indeed shifted permanently in its nature as a consequence of the pandemic. But this did not occur—at least, not with any level of success. The conclusion that has to be drawn is that esports is a completely different domain of social activity; it takes different social forms and fulfills different social functions. If a global event of the scale of the pandemic failed to bring about a fundamental shift in the relationship between sports and

esports, this only serves to underline the essential distinctions between the two, and actually reinforces the unassailability of traditional sports.

This chapter is not about pointing out the defining characteristics and features of esports using traditional sports as a frame of reference. As mentioned at the outset, many such attempts have already been made (see, for example, Hewitt 2014; Isaac 2021; Parry 2019; Thiel and John 2018). Nonetheless, the failure of electronic solutions to successfully fill the gaps in traditional sports practice and coverage during COVID-19 holds a particular lesson for the esports community (people, organizations, fans, etc.). Specifically, esports should not try to be like conventional sports, nor should it aim to prove its value by following the path of conventional sports. Again, esports is a distinct and independent domain and recognition of this has major implications for its management and its future. For example, this has some major implications on how to manage the institutionalization of esports. It would be unwise to compare traditional sports, whose first institutions date back to the nineteenth century, with the twenty-first-century phenomenon of esports (see also Abanazir 2019). Indeed, institutionalization—as it is commonly understood and manifests in, for example, state sports associations—may not even be fully possible for esports due to its entanglement with the gaming market. Game producers are key players in the esports ecosystem and hold copyrights for the games (Karhulahti 2017). Our interviewees stressed that the stronghold held by game producers over the esports industry was evident during the pandemic, but this did not translate into any kind of institutionalization as it is conventionally understood.

There are other lessons esports could learn, foremost among which is perhaps that esports is not only about streaming. The cancelation of esports events such as Intel Extreme Masters Katowice 2020 proved how important it is for esports fans, players, and organizations to have their offline live "Sports Mega Events," i.e. large-scale sporting events that have a dramatic character and mass popular appeal (see Lee Ludvigsen, Rookwood and Parnell 2022;

Roche 2000). The growing esports community needs to keep in mind that offline events of this kind are essential for the development of esports. The experience of the pandemic has shown that the future of esports lies as much in the concrete realities of offline social and cultural contexts and interactions as it does in online virtual realities.

Our study also shows that despite its enormous growth, esports is still a niche industry compared with traditional sports and is still located outside of mainstream media. Esports audiences are mostly young people (Rogers 2019) and despite some dedicated TV channels broadcasting esports, the bulk of transmissions are streamed using Twitch or DAZ (Johnson and Woodcock 2019a; 2019b). The entry of the aforementioned alternatives (MR, video games) into mainstream broadcasting during the pandemic was not appreciated by the journalists, even those who specialize in esports. As we have stated, these alternatives did not last long. With traditional sports events returning to their normal schedules following the pandemic, mainstream media lost their interest in esports (D'Anastasio 2022). Concomitantly, research on the growth of esports waned and speculation about possible shifting of the weight between traditional sports and esports all but ceased.

This is not to suggest that esports is unpopular and is not growing; on the contrary, it is flourishing. Based on this study, however, we believe it will remain a niche industry unless it develops an altogether more TV-friendly approach to staging events. Currently, its absence from mainstream TV hampers the development of esports. To be attractive to TV broadcasters, esports need to adhere to rigid timeframes, as TV scheduling will not allow the kind of extensions, delays, or postponements that are tolerated with streaming on the Internet. Traditional sports events have a fixed time, which means they fit the schedule of mainstream TV. Our interviewees interpreted esports' lackadaisical approach to timing as a sign of unprofessional management and viewed this as its main barrier to competing with "real," conventional sports. It could be argued that this approach is too rigid and misunderstands the

nature of esports and those who participate in it, especially since it is a distinct social practice. It might also be the case that its absence from mainstream TV is not particularly significant for its growth, as TV is progressively becoming less popular among young people (Gerken 2022; Elder 2016). These issues are beyond the remit of this study but are certainly worth placing on future research agendas.

As should now be clear, our research debunks certain myths that arose surrounding the perceived connections between esports and traditional sports during COVID-19, as embodied in the use of MR and video games as substitutes for traditional sports. As stated at the outset, many saw this "connecting" of esports and conventional sports as a new trend, and even as proof of an inevitable merging of the two that was merely accelerated by the pandemic. Based on the views presented here, we argue this is not the case. Esports and traditional sports can certainly benefit one another by joining forces for purposes of promotion, business, and advertising. However, despite their obvious similarities, superficial and otherwise, the two are—and will remain—distinct in the minds of both players and fans. Any notion of a complete fusion of sports and esports is, therefore, nothing more than make-believe.

All this being said, we are aware of the limitations of our research. We interviewed only Polish journalists, but research carried out elsewhere could yield alternative findings and viewpoints. For example, in Asia—considered the cradle and center of esports (Micky and Peichi 2021)—journalists' observations and experiences could be altogether different. Notwithstanding these possible limitations, our respondents are all highly respected and well-informed insiders with considerable knowledge of the subject. The unique insights and perspectives they have offered certainly provide a useful starting point for future analysis of connections between esports and traditional sports and their respective places in contemporary, post-pandemic society.

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