

eSports Players Status: Myth or Reality?¹

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ABSTRACT

eSport, competitive video games, is a recent phenomenon that hasn't stop growing for the last couple of years. However, the growth was so that some aspects are still very amateur and especially players support and contracts. Becoming a pro-player, now is the dream of thousands of children around the world but only a few has the capabilities to make it through, only a few can live of it, because today, it's still a very unsafe path. That is why in this document, the aim will be finding possible and viable solution to make eSport Athletes status more recognized and safer, using Multi-Attribute Decision making, to compare and evaluate them. The main expectation is to find viable and durable solutions to this problem, and it should also show how new, unique and complex is the eSport ecosystem, and what other aspects need to be developed to not only help eSport players but the whole industry.

Key Words: ESPORT, SPORT, CONTRACTS, ORGANIZATIONS, PLAYERS, ECOSYSTEM, PROFESSIONALS, AMATORS, COMPETITION, INNOVATION

INTRODUCTION

From bedrooms to stadiums! This is the path of gamers for the last 4 decades. Today eSport, live or online video games competitions, gather millions of players, among which the bests want to become professional and real eSport Athletes, millions of viewers online (70M for the finals of Worlds on League of Legends in November 2017) and involves more and more economical actors like media, event organizations, teams, and now investors from different horizons. In fact, recently, companies like Cleveland Cavaliers, Houston Rockets or Airbus bought spots in different leagues on several games. The video game industry which already is a big one (25.2 billion in 2010 according the *Entertainment Software Association*) doesn't stop growing, and eSport could push it to the next level.

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2011: League of Legends Worlds
season 1 Finals²



2012: League of Legends Worlds
season 2 Finals³



2013: League of Legends Worlds
season 3 Finals
Staples Center - Los Angeles⁴

However, as the industry of eSport is growing really fast right now, it appears that it suffers from its youth and kind of lack of experience. And the consequences of this situation are many and on different level. The first victims are the professional players. Back in when the competitions were amateur, 15-20 years ago, players competed for 100€ or for keyboards, and had to manage themselves, creating their own team, and going to events by themselves. But during the last decade, professional structures appeared (Fnatic, G2 Esports, TSM, CLG...) and started managing the players giving them contracts, and working with sponsors. Even though it became more professional, issues still appear very often concerning, Visa, the legal status of eSport athlete from a country to another, revenues, and the value of an eSport contract overall.



2014: League of Legends Worlds
Season 4 finals
Seoul World Cup Stadium (40 000 people) ⁵

¹ Riot Games (Jun, 2011) Worlds Season 1, Sweden, Riot Games

² Riot Games (Oct, 2012) Worlds Season 2, USA, California, Riot Games

³ Riot Games (Oct, 2013) Worlds Season 3, USA, California, Riot Games

Therefore, we can interrogate ourselves about the real status of an Esport player and if it really means something legally and if it is a really safe path to build a career on. The objective of eSport as an ambitious industry is to build a solid and secure environment for its key actors: the professional players. Through this research, the status of eSport and eSport Athletes will be developed, reasons why eSports contracts are criticized will be explored, and what needs to be done to enhance them, and why it will benefit the whole industry, will be explained.



2017: League of Legends Worlds season 7 finals will take place in Olympic Stadium of Beijing in China ⁶

METHODOLOGY:

STEP 1 - PROBLEM/OBJECTIVE STATEMENT:

What is the status eSport athletes, and what needs to be done so they can be more recognized and protected in the industry?

Are eSports contracts effective right now?

Why is it a crucial necessity to have strong contracts in eSport to make the industry even more professional?

What else needs to be developed to make eSport contracts meaningful?

STEP 2 - FEASIBLE ALTERNATIVES:

- 1/ Copy sports contracts standards and legislation
- 2/ eSport players need a syndicate to defend their interests
- 3/ States should act as a general referee to regulate the industry
- 4/ Develop Global Infrastructure such as FIFA in football, where all parts (Teams, Developers, Leagues, Players...) can discuss.

⁴ Riot Games (Oct, 2014) Worlds Season 4, South Korea, Riot Games

⁵ Dicosport.fr (May, 2016), Nid d'oiseau de Pékin, France.

STEP 3 - DEVELOPMENTS OF OUTCOMES:

1/ As the eSport industry is getting more and more popular, it gets the attention from more and more people, institutions, investors, or spectators. And for new comers, the comparison to traditional Sports is usually the easiest path to understand this new phenomenon. However, if the competition aspects, and the entertainment created from is a common point, looking at the ecosystem, Sports and eSport are very different. In eSport, each developer owns his game and has the last word on everything related to it. Nothing can be done without their agreement. Structures who have roster on different games are dependant to each game developer and specificities. For example, one of the most famous European organization called Fnatic, has a roster on League of Legends and Counter Strike Global Offensive, and according the game, the organization must follow the rules of each developer. For the first one, the developer pays the players because they play in their league which they organize. For the second one, it's freer, Fnatic earn money from competition prize pool or in-game merchandising. So, a team structure must adapt its contracts and management according each game specificities for payment system, duration and some obligations toward the developer. However, for the content of the contract, eSport team structure can inspire a lot from traditional Sports, when it comes about, brand respect, sponsorships requirements, transfer...

So, sport can be useful but only at a certain point, because eSport ecosystem is very unique and the more experience it will get, the more consistent eSports contract will be.

2/ eSports is historically an initiative from the players, who started to play together in team, online or at amateur events. However, eSport has an entertainment became for developers a marketing tool, to promote their game and some content that players can buy in-game, and the players quickly became a useful element in this mechanism. Even though this logic is evolving and changing, it can't be avoided, and it put players in a shaky and unsafe position, and most players don't consider this part of the career, and are not aware enough of all the responsibilities involved.

Furthermore, as a young industry, professional career are only reserved for the very best players among millions of players, who can keep a very good level, and there are lots of example of player who only made it to the main stage for a short period of time.

Therefore, a global syndicate that would defend player interests could be useful and effective to protect them from dangerous manipulation or interests from game developers or team structures as well, who couldn't respect their obligations, as the industry is still very amateur and where some players are not paid by their team or when they win tournament. However, this kind of lobby group would require high organization from players, with representatives, recognition from developers and structure, and in the actual state of the scene, it seems very ambitious as players are very young, and unexperienced, and prefer to be in team to manage this part of their career.

3/ As a new industry and new phenomenon, eSport is not an industry always recognized with precise laws. For example, VISA issues are very frequent, or event organisers have some legal issues. In South Korea, holy land of eSport, it has been recognized for decades now, in the US, it's only been since 2013 that they officially recognized eSport Athletes as Pro-Athletes, and delivered eSport VISA, but in France it's only been one year, that eSport has been recognized, and a legal status has been created for eSport events, because before that, they were legally considered as Gambling event.

Therefore, States have a big role to play, first by recognizing the industry and in the development of the industry to create a legal environment where all actors can work in. States can bring professionalism to the industry and so security for eSports Athletes status and their career.

If States could act as a referee, however, It would be only at national level, and some differentiation could appear from a country to another, and some issues as well.

4/ As we've seen, eSport is a very recent and growing industry, where there are lots of things to do and where lots of actors are already present. Those actors are ambitious because eSport is promising, but the competition seems to be tough in the future. However, all type of actors is dependant to each other, everyone is required to build an eSport industry, economically safe, viable and durable. That's why, sooner or later we can expect to see global institution that would regulate the whole institution (such as FIFA in Football) and where every actor would be fairly represented and where debates would take place to find solution to current and future problems that eSport will have.

Such initiative took place in France during Spring 2017, called *Dojo Esport*, where different actors met to discuss about current situation and issues of eSport, what needs to be done and how. In France, as well, there was an attempt to create a French Institution where French actors would regroup to regulate the industry, but it failed lacking legitimacy and consistency.

However, in a distant future, we can contemplate that such organization would be a huge advantage for the industry and its recognition from other international Institution like The International Olympic Committee (IOC) or the United Nations (UN), and it would defend especially players interests like IOC does.

Attributes for an effective solution that can bring eSport athletes security and recognition:

- 1 – Duration effectiveness: if the solution is durable
- 2 – Concrete: If it can bring concrete change (10) or only encourage (0)
- 3 – Synergy: If the solution is profitable to other parts
- 4 – Adaptability: If the solution can evolve and change over time
- 5 – Feasibility: is it easy and fast to implement (10) or long and hard (0)

ATTRIBUTES	Sports Comparison	Player Syndicate	States as Referee	Global Institution
Duration Effectiveness	Short Term	Long Term	Mid Term	Long Term
Concrete	8	5	2	6
Synergy	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Adaptability	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Feasibility	9	5	3	6

Table 1: Comparison of alternatives

STEP 4 - SELECTION CRITERIA:

The Topic covers not only eSport Athletes alone, but their role and position in the industry, as a whole. That is why it is hard to find one precise and perfect solution. However, *States as Referee* seems hard to implement, because it can act only indirectly and only as a support role in the development of the industry. Three others are more effective right now, or a more related to the industry growth itself.

FINDINGS

STEP 5 – ANALYSIS & COMPARISON OF THE ALTERNATIVES

Looking at the previous Table, we can first say that 1st solution is a technical solution that would support professional players, for their recognition and legitimacy. The three other solutions are structural solutions, that involves lots of organization from different parts, and are quite or very ambitious to realize but that would bring different and several changes to pro-players.

Secondly, it seems that each solution has its own strengths and weaknesses, and no one is globally perfect.

Therefore an individual and general assessment of each alternative might be helpful and reveals differences between them.

ATTRIBUTES	Sports Comparison	Player Syndicate	States as Referee	Global Institution
Duration Effectiveness	0.33	1	0.5	1
Concrete	0.8	0.5	0.2	0.6
Synergy	1	0	1	1
Adaptability	0	1	1	1
Feasibility	0.9	0.5	0.3	0.6
TOTALS	3.03	3	3.2	4.2

STEP 6 – SELECTION OF THE PREFERRED ALTERNATIVES

Using previous table it appears that solution 4, a **Global Institution**, might be more effective, as three other solutions are 25% less effective.

In fact, a *Global Institution*, that would be recognized by all parts, led by legit people, with a fair system and that would gather every actor of eSport would be the symbol that eSport has overtaken the amateur status and became a more mature, stable and safe industry.

Sports Comparison is today solution because eSports is very unique, and can see in sports some similarities that help but at long term, because there are too many differences, eSports will find his own solution to his own problems thanks to innovation regarding organization or contracts for example.

Player Syndicate, regarding current eSport situation doesn't seem viable. Players don't have experience and are more focus on their performances, for the best, or reaching a professional status, for the rookies. They prefer to delegate administrative and legal stuff to their team structure, and there is no such initiative so far in eSport.

States as Referee doesn't seem effective especially because of like any other industry or market, States, in liberal economy, provides legal support otherwise, its range is quite limited.

STEP 7 – PERFORMANCE MONITORING & POST-EVALUATION OF RESULTS

Creation of a Global Institution is an ambitious, long term and complex solution to support eSport and the professional players. The path to build a such organization will be very long and tough and there are many prerequisites. First, all actors, Developers, Teams, Players, Media, must set up same goals and same interests, the business competition between each Game must benefits to eSport in general and not individual interests finding ways to coexist, eSport must defend its identity and not be afraid to innovate and create new things because eSport is a true revolution and like any other it suffers from criticism, and actors in general must discuss, exchange about their needs and how they can help each other because a good harmony is necessary for the development of eSport industry.

To monitor and evaluate this solution, there will be several indicators and numbers that will show its impact.

First, if the number of Professional Gamer worldwide increases, it will mean that eSport would have become a safer path, certainly very tough like Sports, but safer to build a career on.

Secondly, if, eSport becomes socially recognized but most people all around the world as a common activity, it's mean that watching eSport becomes as common as watching Sport, the eSport industry will have reach a more mature and durable status.

Finally, if such an organization becomes recognized by other very important international institutions like United Nations or The International Olympic Committee, it will mean that this institution's voice will be heard because it represents people that will have importance. Just like IOC represents all athletes around the world, this organization would support e-athletes.

CONCLUSION

eSport phenomenon is on his way to become something real and valuable, it attracts more and more attention from big investors, but as this analysis described, there are still lots of word to do, concerning eSports players recognition and the industry structure.

Finding 4 possible solutions, comparing and assessing them, it finally appeared that for an ambitious industry that is eSport, ambitious solutions must be considered, and a Global Insitution that would regulate and gather all actors of the industry, seems to be the most effective solution to support not only players' recognition but eSport as whole.

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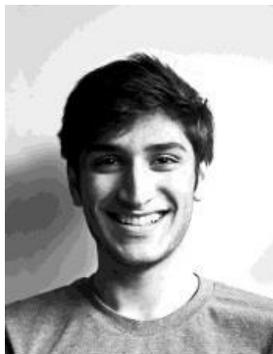
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Nicolas Diaz is 22 years old student in Skema Business School, on Paris Campus. Currently in Msc Project & Program Management, he had the opportunity to travel to the United States, at NC States for a full semester, and is globally attracted by travelling, discovering and experiencing new cultures. French, with Peruvian origins, he grew up in a mix culture that brought him a lot, and spent whole his youth in Franconville, not far from Paris. With previous experience has intern, in PSA Peugeot Citroen, he is more attracted by eSport, the New Big Thing, by the competition and the ecosystem itself.