

Article

Esports vs Traditional Sports: Which Is the Future?

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Citation: Mansurov, Z.
Esports vs Traditional Sports:
Which Is the Future?. Web of
Synergy: International
Interdisciplinary Research
Journal 2026, 5(3), 29-36.

Received: 05th Jun 2026

Revised: 3rd Jul 2026

Accepted: 16th Jul 2026

Published: 3rd Aug 2026



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Abstract: This article compares esports and traditional sports, examining their development, characteristics, benefits, and potential roles in the future of competitive entertainment. It explores the physical and mental skills required in both forms of competition, as well as their accessibility, economic influence, technological development, educational value, and social impact. The article also considers important challenges, including physical inactivity, digital inequality, player health, governance, and career stability. Particular attention is given to emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and augmented reality, which may increasingly connect physical and digital competition. Ultimately, the article argues that esports are unlikely to replace traditional sports. Instead, both are expected to coexist, influence one another, and create new opportunities for competition, entertainment, and global connection.

Keywords: Esports, traditional sports, competitive gaming, digital competition, professional gaming, athletic performance, physical activity, gaming industry, sports industry, technology, artificial intelligence, virtual reality

1. Introduction

For centuries, the word *sport* has been associated with physical strength, endurance, speed, and competition. From ancient Olympic athletes racing across stadiums to modern footballers performing in front of enormous crowds, traditional sports have occupied a central position in human culture [1]. They have produced national heroes, strengthened communities, created international rivalries, and generated some of the most memorable moments in modern history. Yet during the last few decades, an entirely different form of competition has emerged. Instead of running on a track or competing on a football field, participants sit in front of computer screens, using keyboards, controllers, and highly developed strategic skills to defeat their opponents [2]. Competitive video gaming, commonly known as esports, has grown from a relatively small hobby into a global entertainment industry followed by millions of passionate spectators. The extraordinary development of esports has generated a fascinating debate about the future of competitive entertainment. Supporters argue that esports represent the natural evolution of sport in an increasingly digital society [3]. Young generations have grown up surrounded by smartphones, computers, gaming consoles, and online communities, making digital competition a familiar part of everyday life. Critics, however, question whether activities involving relatively little physical movement should be described as sports at all. They argue that traditional sports provide physical, psychological, and social benefits that competitive gaming cannot fully reproduce [4]. The debate therefore involves a much broader question than simply determining which activity attracts larger audiences. It requires us to examine what sport actually means, why people participate in it, and how technological change may reshape competition in the decades ahead [5]. Traditional sports possess an extraordinarily long history. Ancient civilizations developed athletic competitions thousands of years before modern stadiums or professional leagues existed. Wrestling, running, archery, swimming, and various ball games were practised across different regions for entertainment, military preparation, religious ceremonies, and community celebration [6]. The ancient Olympic Games in Greece became one of history's most famous sporting traditions, bringing competitors together to demonstrate physical excellence. Over time, many informal activities developed standardised rules and organised governing bodies, eventually producing the global sports industry familiar today [7].

2. Materials and Methods

Football provides perhaps the clearest example of the enormous cultural influence traditional sports have achieved. What began as relatively simple games involving a ball gradually developed into an international phenomenon played and watched across almost every continent. Major tournaments attract enormous global audiences, while professional clubs develop identities closely connected to particular cities and communities. Similar traditions exist in basketball, cricket, tennis, rugby, baseball, athletics, and countless other sports. Supporters often inherit loyalty to teams from their parents and grandparents, creating emotional connections that can continue throughout an entire lifetime. This historical depth gives traditional sports an advantage that esports have not yet had enough time to develop. Famous clubs may possess more than a century of history, while international competitions have created traditions shared across generations. A grandfather can tell his grandchildren about a legendary football match he watched decades earlier, just as parents can introduce children to the same teams they supported when they were young. These shared memories create powerful cultural continuity. Sports therefore become more than competitions; they form part of family history, regional identity, and national culture. Esports, by comparison, are remarkably young. Competitive gaming began to attract attention during the late twentieth century as computers and gaming consoles became increasingly accessible. Early competitions were relatively small events organised in arcades, universities, or technology conventions. Players competed for modest prizes, and few people imagined that professional gaming might eventually fill large arenas. The arrival of widespread internet access completely transformed this environment. Players no longer needed to be physically located in the same room to compete. Instead, individuals from different cities or countries could challenge one another instantly through online networks. As internet speeds improved, competitive gaming communities expanded rapidly. Games specifically designed around multiplayer competition developed sophisticated ranking systems, organised leagues, and professional tournaments. Titles such as *League of Legends*, *Counter-Strike*, *Dota 2*, *StarCraft*, and *Valorant* attracted highly skilled players capable of competing at extraordinary levels. Professional teams began employing coaches, analysts, managers, nutrition specialists, and psychologists, creating organisational structures increasingly similar to those found in traditional sports.

3. Results and discussion

Streaming technology accelerated this growth even further. Traditional television networks initially showed limited interest in gaming competitions, but online platforms allowed esports to bypass conventional broadcasting entirely. Viewers could watch professional players live, communicate with other supporters, follow individual competitors, and analyse matches from anywhere with an internet connection [8]. This accessibility transformed esports from a niche subculture into a significant global form of entertainment. One of the strongest arguments supporting esports is the extraordinary level of skill required to compete professionally. Although esports athletes may not demonstrate the cardiovascular endurance of marathon runners or the muscular strength of weightlifters, successful players require exceptional reaction speed, hand-eye coordination, concentration, strategic thinking, communication, and decision-making [9]. At the highest level, competitors must process enormous amounts of visual information within fractions of a second while simultaneously predicting opponents' actions and communicating with teammates. Consider a professional player participating in a complex team-based game [10]. During a single match, the competitor may need to monitor several areas of the screen, remember the positions and abilities of opponents, manage limited resources, execute precise movements, and adjust strategy continuously. A small error made within a fraction of a second can determine the outcome of an entire contest [11]. Professional esports players therefore spend thousands of hours developing technical skills and tactical knowledge, much like traditional athletes repeatedly practise movements until they become nearly automatic. The mental demands can be enormous. Tournament competitors frequently perform under intense pressure while millions of viewers watch online [12]. Prize money, professional contracts, team expectations, and personal reputations may depend upon a single match. Maintaining concentration in these circumstances requires emotional control and psychological resilience. As esports have become increasingly professional, teams have begun employing sports psychologists to help players

manage anxiety, develop confidence, communicate effectively, and cope with defeat [13].

Traditional athletes, however, face a combination of mental and physical demands that esports cannot completely reproduce. A professional footballer must make complex tactical decisions while running at high speed, maintaining balance, controlling a ball, avoiding opponents, and coping with physical fatigue. Tennis players may compete for several hours while repeatedly performing explosive movements under intense psychological pressure [14]. Marathon runners must maintain concentration while their bodies experience extreme exhaustion. Traditional sports therefore require the simultaneous integration of cognitive skill and substantial physical performance. This physical component remains one of the strongest arguments in favour of traditional sports [15]. Regular participation provides significant health benefits, including improved cardiovascular fitness, muscular strength, bone density, flexibility, balance, and weight management. Sports also help reduce the risk of numerous chronic illnesses associated with sedentary lifestyles. In a world where people increasingly spend long periods sitting in front of screens, physical activity has become more important rather than less important. Esports raise concerns precisely because competitors may remain seated for many hours every day. Professional players often maintain demanding practice schedules involving extended periods in front of computers. Without appropriate lifestyle management, this behaviour can contribute to back and neck discomfort, eye strain, poor posture, reduced physical fitness, and other health problems associated with prolonged inactivity. Recognising these risks, professional esports organisations increasingly encourage players to exercise regularly, eat nutritious food, maintain healthy sleep schedules, and take structured breaks from screens. Interestingly, this development has begun to reduce the apparent divide between esports and traditional athletics. Many elite gaming teams now recognise that physical health directly influences cognitive performance. Regular exercise can improve concentration, mood, sleep quality, and stress management, all of which benefit competitive gaming. Some professional esports players therefore follow structured fitness programmes alongside technical practice. The stereotype of the unhealthy gamer spending every waking hour in front of a computer is becoming less accurate at the professional level, even though sedentary behaviour remains a genuine concern. Another major difference between the two forms of competition involves accessibility. Traditional sports often require physical facilities, equipment, appropriate weather conditions, and sometimes considerable financial investment. A young swimmer needs access to a swimming pool, a tennis player requires a court, and an aspiring golfer may need expensive equipment and club membership. Geography can also limit opportunities. Children living in isolated areas may have little access to specialised coaches or organised competitions. Esports remove some of these barriers because competition can take place online. A talented player living far from a major city can theoretically compete against skilled opponents from around the world without leaving home. Online ranking systems allow ability to be demonstrated directly, potentially enabling talented individuals to attract attention regardless of their location. This global accessibility represents one of esports' greatest strengths.

However, esports are not completely equal or universally accessible. Competitive gaming requires suitable hardware, reliable high-speed internet, software, and often additional equipment such as gaming monitors, keyboards, headsets, or controllers. These costs may be substantial, particularly in lower-income countries. Digital inequality therefore creates barriers just as economic inequality affects participation in traditional sports. Access may be different, but it is not necessarily universal. The age of participants also distinguishes esports from many traditional sports. Young people frequently develop gaming skills extremely early because digital technology forms a normal part of childhood. Professional esports competitors are often relatively young, with some reaching elite levels during their teenage years. Rapid reaction times and the ability to learn complex game mechanics provide younger competitors with advantages, while the constantly changing nature of games demands continuous adaptation. Traditional sports also produce young champions, particularly in gymnastics, swimming, and other disciplines, but many athletes can remain competitive well into adulthood. Endurance athletes may even reach their peak later than competitors in speed-based events. The relatively short careers experienced by some esports professionals raise important questions regarding education, financial security, and life after competition. A player who retires in their twenties may need to build an entirely new career,

making long-term planning essential. Despite these differences, esports and traditional sports share one fundamental characteristic: both create communities. Supporters develop loyalty to teams and players, discuss strategies, celebrate victories, and experience disappointment after defeats. Esports tournaments can fill arenas with enthusiastic spectators wearing team merchandise and chanting for their favourite competitors. Online communities allow millions more to participate from home. The emotional reactions may look remarkably similar to those seen in football stadiums or basketball arenas. This similarity suggests that the future may not involve a simple battle in which esports replace traditional sports or traditional sports prevent esports from growing. Instead, both forms of competition may continue evolving alongside one another, appealing to different interests while increasingly borrowing ideas from each other. To understand which will shape the future more strongly, however, it is necessary to examine their economic power, technological development, cultural influence, educational potential, spectator experience, and ability to adapt to a rapidly changing world.

Perhaps nowhere is the rapid development of esports more apparent than in its economic growth. What was once a relatively small entertainment sector has developed into a complex industry involving professional teams, tournament organisers, game developers, streaming services, advertisers, sponsors, and millions of consumers. Major competitions can offer substantial prize pools, while successful players earn money through salaries, sponsorship agreements, streaming, advertising, and merchandise. Professional esports organisations increasingly operate like traditional sports clubs, employing coaches, analysts, marketing specialists, medical professionals, and content creators. This professionalisation demonstrates that competitive gaming is no longer simply a hobby for enthusiastic players but an established commercial activity with considerable global influence. Traditional sports, however, remain economic giants. Football, basketball, cricket, tennis, baseball, Formula One, and other major sports generate enormous revenue through broadcasting rights, ticket sales, sponsorships, advertising, tourism, and merchandise. Some professional sports teams have developed into internationally recognised brands with supporters scattered across numerous countries. Major competitions can influence entire national economies by attracting tourists, creating employment, and encouraging investment in infrastructure. Esports may be expanding rapidly, but traditional sports possess commercial ecosystems built over many decades and, in some cases, more than a century. The difference between their business models is particularly interesting. Traditional sports generally depend on physical venues and broadcasting networks, although digital streaming has become increasingly important. Esports, in contrast, were born in the digital environment. Their audiences are accustomed to watching competitions online, interacting with other spectators in real time, and consuming short clips, statistics, interviews, and commentary through multiple platforms. This makes esports particularly well suited to the media habits of younger generations, who increasingly prefer flexible digital content to traditional television schedules. Interactivity may become one of esports' greatest competitive advantages. A television viewer watching a conventional football match normally experiences the event from camera angles selected by the broadcaster. In esports, spectators can sometimes choose between different players' perspectives, follow particular sections of the competition, access detailed statistics, and communicate with other viewers simultaneously. The distinction between spectator and participant therefore becomes less clear. Someone who watches a professional gaming tournament in the afternoon may play the same game that evening, using exactly the same rules and virtual environment as the professionals they admire. Traditional sports are increasingly adopting similar approaches. Football clubs communicate with supporters through social media, athletes stream training sessions, and leagues produce interactive digital content designed specifically for younger audiences. Advanced statistics are displayed during broadcasts, while augmented and virtual reality technologies promise to create more immersive viewing experiences. Rather than allowing esports to dominate digital entertainment, traditional sports organisations are adapting rapidly to technological change. Technology is likely to transform both industries in ways that are currently difficult to predict. Virtual reality could create entirely new forms of competition combining physical movement with digital environments. Instead of sitting at a computer, future esports competitors may run, jump, dodge, and interact with virtual objects while wearing sophisticated headsets and motion-tracking equipment. Such activities would challenge the conventional distinction between physical sports and digital gaming. A virtual

reality competition requiring endurance, coordination, strategy, and rapid decision-making might reasonably be described as both an esports and a traditional athletic activity.

Augmented reality could create similar possibilities by placing digital information or objects into physical environments. Imagine basketball training in which athletes see real-time performance statistics through smart glasses, or competitive games where players physically move through an arena while interacting with virtual opponents and objects. As technology becomes more advanced, the question of whether esports qualify as "real sports" may become increasingly irrelevant because the boundaries between the two categories could gradually disappear. Artificial intelligence is also transforming competitive performance. In traditional sports, AI systems analyse enormous quantities of data to identify tactical patterns, evaluate players, predict injuries, and personalise training programmes. Coaches can examine movements with extraordinary precision and make evidence-based decisions that would have been impossible several decades ago. In esports, AI performs similar functions by analysing strategies, identifying opponents' habits, and helping players understand complex patterns within games. Both industries are therefore becoming increasingly dependent on data science and technological expertise. Education represents another area in which esports and traditional sports are beginning to overlap. Schools and universities have traditionally used sports to promote physical fitness, teamwork, discipline, and leadership. Athletic scholarships provide talented students with opportunities to continue their education while competing at a high level. In recent years, some educational institutions have introduced organised esports programmes and competitive gaming teams as well. Supporters argue that these programmes can develop communication, strategic thinking, problem-solving, digital literacy, and teamwork. Esports may also provide opportunities for students who do not participate in conventional athletics. Not every young person possesses the physical characteristics or interest required for football, athletics, basketball, or swimming. Competitive gaming can offer an alternative environment where different abilities are valued. A student with exceptional strategic thinking, rapid decision-making, or technical skill may discover confidence and a sense of belonging through esports in much the same way another student finds these qualities through a football team. Nevertheless, educational institutions must carefully balance gaming with physical activity. Children and adolescents already spend considerable amounts of time using screens for entertainment, education, and communication. Encouraging additional sedentary activity without promoting exercise could contribute to health problems. The most effective educational approach may therefore involve treating esports as a complement to physical sports rather than a replacement. Students can develop digital and cognitive abilities through competitive gaming while still participating in regular exercise necessary for physical health.

The question of inclusion also deserves attention. Traditional sports have gradually expanded opportunities for women, athletes with disabilities, and participants from diverse social backgrounds, although inequalities remain. Esports theoretically offer a different form of accessibility because physical characteristics such as height, body size, or muscular strength generally provide fewer direct competitive advantages. This could create more opportunities for people who face limitations in certain traditional sports.

However, the esports industry has its own inclusion challenges. Female professional players remain underrepresented in many major competitions, and online gaming communities sometimes struggle with harassment or discriminatory behaviour. Access to expensive equipment and reliable internet connections can also exclude lower-income participants. Consequently, digital competition should not automatically be assumed to create equality. Like traditional sports, esports require deliberate policies and cultural change to ensure that participants from different backgrounds receive genuine opportunities. Traditional sports maintain a particularly strong advantage in their relationship with public health. Governments around the world encourage citizens to exercise because physical inactivity contributes to obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and other health conditions. Football, running, swimming, cycling, and numerous recreational sports provide enjoyable methods of achieving recommended levels of physical activity. Even if esports become enormously popular, they cannot entirely replace this function unless future gaming technologies require substantially more physical movement. This distinction is crucial when considering what the "future" of sport should mean. If the question refers exclusively to entertainment audiences,

esports have enormous potential. If it concerns physical health, traditional sports remain indispensable. If it refers to technological innovation, esports may lead the way. If cultural tradition and community identity are considered, established sports maintain advantages developed across generations. The answer therefore changes depending on which aspect of sport is being examined. There is also little evidence that younger people's enthusiasm for gaming automatically eliminates their interest in traditional sports. The same individual can spend an afternoon playing football and an evening competing online. A basketball supporter can also enjoy a strategy game, while a professional athlete may relax by playing video games with teammates. Human interests are not necessarily exclusive. The growth of cinema did not eliminate books, television did not destroy radio, and streaming services have not completely replaced cinemas. New forms of entertainment generally transform existing industries rather than causing their total disappearance. Indeed, cooperation between traditional sports and esports is already becoming increasingly common. Football clubs have established esports divisions, professional athletes invest in gaming organisations, and sports video games create digital versions of established competitions. These partnerships allow traditional organisations to reach younger audiences while giving esports access to famous sporting brands. The relationship is therefore becoming increasingly interconnected rather than purely competitive. Motorsport provides an especially interesting example. Racing simulators have become sophisticated enough to reproduce many aspects of real driving, including vehicle handling, tyre behaviour, weather conditions, and track characteristics. Some talented simulation racers have successfully transferred skills developed virtually into real-world motorsport environments. During periods when physical competitions could not take place, professional drivers also participated in virtual races watched by large online audiences. Such developments demonstrate how digital and physical competition can support rather than oppose one another. The spectator experience itself is likely to become increasingly hybrid. Future supporters may attend physical stadiums while receiving personalised digital statistics through augmented reality devices. Others may watch matches through virtual reality systems that create the sensation of sitting beside the field despite being thousands of kilometres away. Fans might move seamlessly between watching a professional football match and entering a digital recreation of the same stadium to compete with friends. In such an environment, the separation between gaming and traditional sports becomes increasingly artificial.

Yet esports face one unusual challenge that traditional sports rarely encounter: individual games can disappear. Football's fundamental rules may evolve slowly, but the sport itself is unlikely to vanish because a company stops supporting it. An esports, by contrast, usually depends on software owned by a particular developer. Games can lose popularity, servers can close, updates can dramatically change gameplay, and new titles can replace established ones within relatively short periods. Professional players may therefore build careers around competitive environments whose long-term survival is uncertain. This dependence on private companies raises important questions regarding governance. Traditional sports are generally overseen by federations and associations responsible for maintaining rules and organising competitions. Although these organisations can face controversy, the basic sport is not normally owned by a commercial corporation. In esports, the developer frequently owns the intellectual property, controls game updates, and possesses considerable influence over professional competition. As the industry matures, establishing stable and transparent systems of governance will become increasingly important. Traditional sports also face significant challenges of their own. Concerns surrounding concussion and long-term brain injury have affected contact sports, while corruption, doping, financial inequality, environmental impact, and excessive commercialisation continue to generate criticism. Hosting enormous international tournaments can place financial pressure on governments and communities. Climate change may also affect outdoor sports by producing extreme temperatures and unpredictable weather conditions. Traditional sports therefore cannot rely solely on history and popularity; they must continue adapting to changing social expectations. Esports similarly need to address player health, excessive gaming, career instability, online toxicity, and responsible participation among young people. If these problems are ignored, rapid commercial growth could create serious social consequences. However, stronger professional standards, improved health programmes, age-appropriate competition structures, and better regulation could help the industry develop sustainably.

So, which is the future? The most convincing answer is probably **both**. Esports are unlikely to replace traditional sports, just as traditional sports are unlikely to prevent digital competition from becoming increasingly influential. Instead, the future appears to involve coexistence, interaction, and gradual convergence. Traditional sports will continue satisfying humanity's desire for physical movement, athletic excellence, cultural tradition, and face-to-face community. Esports will continue providing innovative forms of competition suited to a connected digital world. More importantly, each can learn from the other. Esports can adopt traditional sport's emphasis on physical health, structured coaching, professional governance, and long-term athlete welfare. Traditional sports can learn from esports' digital accessibility, interactive broadcasting, global online communities, and ability to engage younger audiences. The strongest future may therefore emerge not from determining which form of competition wins, but from combining their greatest strengths.

4. Conclusion

The comparison between esports and traditional sports demonstrates that both forms of competition possess unique strengths, challenges, and long-term potential. While traditional sports continue to provide irreplaceable benefits related to physical health, cultural heritage, and social interaction, esports have established themselves as a rapidly growing global industry driven by technological innovation, digital accessibility, and new forms of competitive engagement. The analysis indicates that esports require high levels of cognitive ability, strategic thinking, teamwork, and psychological resilience, whereas traditional sports combine these mental demands with sustained physical performance and health benefits. Rather than competing for dominance, both sectors are increasingly influencing one another through shared professional practices, technological integration, and evolving spectator experiences. Emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and augmented reality, are expected to further reduce the distinction between physical and digital competition by creating hybrid forms of sport and entertainment. At the same time, challenges such as player health, digital inequality, governance, career sustainability, and responsible participation must be addressed to ensure the continued development of esports. Traditional sports also face ongoing issues related to commercialization, athlete welfare, and environmental sustainability, requiring continuous adaptation. Therefore, the future of competitive entertainment is unlikely to be defined by the replacement of one form of sport by another. Instead, esports and traditional sports are expected to coexist, complement each other, and contribute to a more diverse and inclusive sporting ecosystem. Future research should investigate the long-term social, educational, and economic impacts of this convergence while exploring effective strategies for integrating digital innovation with the enduring values of traditional athletic competition.

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