



E-SPORTS AND OLYMPIC GAMES: A JOURNALISTIC CRITICISM

Abstract – E-sports can be considered a current sporting phenomenon, as they have gone through several historical processes, transformations, ruptures, continuities and discontinuities from the second half of the 20th century onwards. That said, the research had as general objective to understand the possibility of E-sports being inserted in the Olympic Games, thus, positive and negative nods on this issue were debated with a contemporary journalistic article. The study had specific objectives: i) to contextualize Esports; ii) present concepts, degree of popularity and legitimacy of the modality; iii) investigate the practice and its relations with youth and industry. This study presented itself methodologically as an opinion article in essay format. It was concluded that E-sports still have some resistance on the part of agents in the sports field, with a view to entering the Olympic Games - there is a need for more maturity in the relations between E-sports and IOC.

Keywords: E-sports; Olympic Games; electronic games; journalistic criticism.

E-SPORTS E JOGOS OLÍMPICOS: UMA CRÍTICA JORNALÍSTICA

Resumo - Os E-sports podem ser considerados como um fenômeno esportivo atual, na medida em que passaram por diversos processos históricos, transformações, rupturas, continuidades e descontinuidades a partir da segunda metade do século XX. Dito isto, a pesquisa teve como objetivo geral compreender a possibilidade dos E-sports serem inseridos nos Jogos Olímpicos, assim, debateu-se com uma matéria jornalística contemporânea acenos positivos e negativos sobre essa questão. O estudo teve como objetivos específicos: i) contextualizar os E-sports; ii) apresentar conceitos, grau de popularidade e legitimidade da modalidade; iii) investigar a prática e suas relações com a juventude e a indústria. Este estudo se apresentou metodologicamente como um artigo de opinião em formato de ensaio. Concluiu-se que os E-sports possuem ainda certa resistência por parte de agentes do campo esportivo, com vistas ao ingresso nos Jogos Olímpicos – há a necessidade de mais amadurecimento nas relações entre os E-sports e COI.

Palavras-chave: E-sports; Jogos Olímpicos; jogos eletrônicos; crítica jornalística.

E-SPORTS Y JUEGOS OLÍMPICOS: UNA CRÍTICA PERIODÍSTICA

Resumen - Los E-sports pueden considerarse un fenómeno deportivo actual, ya que han pasado por varios procesos históricos, transformaciones, rupturas, continuidades y discontinuidades a partir de la segunda mitad del siglo XX. Dicho esto, la investigación tuvo como objetivo general comprender la posibilidad de que los E-sports se inserten en los Juegos Olímpicos, por lo que se debatieron guiños positivos y negativos sobre este tema con un artículo periodístico contemporáneo. El estudio tuvo como objetivos específicos: i) contextualizar los E-sports; ii) conceptos actuales, grado de popularidad y legitimidad de la modalidad; iii) investigar la práctica y sus relaciones con la juventud y la industria. Este estudio se presentó metodológicamente como un artículo de opinión en formato de ensayo. Se concluyó que los E-sports aún tienen cierta resistencia por parte de los agentes del ámbito deportivo, con miras a ingresar a los Juegos Olímpicos - se necesita mayor madurez en las relaciones entre E-sports y el COI.

Palabras-clave: E-sports; Juegos Olímpicos; juegos electrónicos; crítica periodística.

*Bruna Santana
Anastácio*

brunaanastacio@hotmail.com

*Federal University of
Santa Catarina, Brazil*

*Gabriel Almeida
Savonitti*

*University of São Paulo,
Brazil*

*Marcelo Alberto de
Oliveira*

*University of São Paulo,
Brazil*

*Rafael Carvalho da
Silva Mocarzel*

*Federal University of
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*

*University of
Vassouras, Brasil*

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Introduction

The Olympic (OG) and Paralympic (PG) Games are, in an indisputable way, the greatest agonistic and sporting manifestations of humanity, crossing times and geographic, political, religious and cultural borders, embracing peoples and nations in a fraternal way¹⁻³. It is clear that the current Olympic movement, which in turn draws from millenary sources from the ancient Olympic Games⁴, undergoes transformations as a whole, since human society is in constant change⁵ it provides, sooner or later, the process of change in the sporting world in general, after all, sport is just a smaller universe (micro-sociological) within the human universe (macro-sociological)⁶. This relationship is called socio-sports bilaterality⁷.

In this line of thinking, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has also carried out movements and changes in the organization of the OG and PG. Transversal themes have been increasingly discussed and addressed in recent years, such as: education, pacifism, environment, sport for development and peace, religious freedom, gender equality, technology, racism, immigration, sports agents and institutions, Olympic and humanitarian values⁸⁻¹². The latter has gained even more relevance with the widespread worldwide of the so-called E-sports (also Esports or E-sports), which are electronic sports that involve professionally organized competitions¹³. Thus, this sports phenomenon arises from the professionalism of digital games, better said, from the rise of electronic sports, transforming them into a competitive phenomenon^{14,15}. At this juncture, E-sports refer to organized video game competitions and have components similar to other sports: players, spectators, referees, agents, leagues, tournaments, sponsorships and the culture of professional gaming¹⁶.

Nevertheless, two undoubted factors bring relevance to this sport practice. The first is the massive presence of young people around the world, something that would bring an incredible youth presence to the global viewership of the OG and PG. It is important to say that the significant decrease in the number of young spectators of the OG and PG has been worrying the IOC for some years now¹⁷. The second is the economic power of the games industry, which in turn drives huge amounts of money in sales, sponsorship, media, marketing and awards around the world¹⁸. However, recent statements by Paulo Wanderley, president of the Brazilian Olympic Committee (COB), published in March in *Folha de São Paulo* by Sabino¹⁹, frustrated the public that

practices and spectators of E-sports, who envisioned the presence of the modality integrating the OG and PG. In the same article by Sabino¹⁹, Paulo Wanderley discards the inclusion of games as an Olympic modality and, on the other hand, the director of Relations with the National Olympic Committees and Olympic Solidarity of the IOC, James Macleod, states that soon the E-sports must be on the Olympic modalities framework and that this is a matter of time.

Thus, this study presents itself methodologically as an opinion article in essay format aiming at two key points. First, we will seek here to bring light and reflections to various aspects that concern the practice of E-sports in contemporary human society in a sketch of the state of the art. Second, a fruitful debate on the subject will be fostered through the expository-argumentative method. It is important to say that there is no intention here to approach the name or even the intentions of Paulo Wanderley in a pejorative way. However, after the journalistic publication of his speeches, we see here a unique and relevant opportunity for a healthy reflective debate on the discussed topic.

Contextualizing E-sports

According to Summerley²⁰, Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937) dazzled the resuscitation of the OG in modern times as a means of uniting different nations under the moral lessons that sport could provide. In this thought, the amateur ideal was valued in contrast to the professional movement. The IOC was mainly mobilized by the desire to moralize sport.

At first, the topic that dominated the discussions referred to amateurism, a basic and necessary condition for an athlete to compete in the Olympic Games. This objective discussion hid between the lines social and class issues that predominated among the representatives. Aristocrats and nobles dominated the instances of power of the sports and Olympic federations and had no intention of popularizing or massifying that institution that was born to refer to itself (p. 31)²¹.

In this train of thought, according to Summerley²⁰, in an attempt to further legitimize the JOs, the effort to bring them closer to mythology, in this case the Greek, became fundamental. In this sense, for this author, E-sports institutions should be inspired by the initial process in which the IOC was shaped, that is, supported by philosophies close to what Coubertin aspired to. A historical example of this is the

World Cyber Games (or World Cyber Games – WCG), which were shaped as an ‘OG edition’, in this case for computer games, defending ideas similar to those of Coubertin. Another example is related to the development of EVO. More specifically from 2002 onwards, EVO aimed to preserve the arcade tournament culture, where fighting games had their genesis and were financed and organized by the community itself and arcade owners. Another issue, EVO²⁰ did not necessarily seek to conserve arcade culture (i.e., games and attractions in coin-operated or token-operated machines).

In a panel on the tournament’s history Tom Cannon, one of the founding members of EVO, outlined the mission statement of EVO organized under three principles that aspire to preservation: Preserve and grow the arcade competitive culture [Evo’s Mission]; All competitors are equal, regardless of skill [Competition]; The drama of humans under pressure [Hype]; Every player’s personal journey to get stronger [Struggle] (p. 56)*.

While regulated competition is a concern of the institution, other moral qualities can also be found supporting EVO as they are in traditional sports institutions²⁰. According to Butler²², for E-sports to be fully recognized by the IOC, they must ensure that the modality does not infringe the Olympic values. A regulatory body must also be created to ensure compliance with the rules and regulations of the Olympic Movement, including in areas such as anti-doping and match fixing.

According to Jensen²³, in the first half of 2016, the International E-sports Federation (IeSF), a South Korean institution, ended up having a promising response with the IOC. At that moment, it was suggested to the IeSF how the steps should be taken to recognize E-sports as an Olympic sport. In this sense, E-sports can be considered searching for a place in the Olympic program, but, at the same time, it is necessary to monitor its development after an appeal for a more organized body²².

That same year, 2016, the British government supported the International eGames Committee (IeGC). Thus, there was cooperation with the IOC, under the ideals that there would be no cash prizes and that each interested country would have the opportunity to represent itself at the event, taking non-Olympic medals (gold, silver and bronze). In addition, on April 19, 2017, it was announced that the E-sports modality

* For more details, consult: Evo2kvids <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQWn2bBDmMQ>>.

would participate in the Asian Olympic Games in Hangzhou (China), which will be held in the year 2022, predicting medals in the awards^{23,24}.

Concepts, popularity and legitimacy of E-sports

In the text by Sabino¹⁹ published in *Folha de São Paulo* in March 2022, the president of the IOC, James Macleod, states that E-sports will soon be in the OJs and emphasizes the relationship between the modality and youth, recognizing that “[...] the game industry is constantly evolving (p. 1)”, looking at games in which there is physical activity and which are virtual reality. It should be noted that virtual reality is defined as a computer-generated digital environment that can be interactively experienced as if it were real²⁵. These games that use virtual reality are exergames, understood as electronic games that capture and virtualize the real movements of users²⁶.

It is worth mentioning that the text published as an article “IOC plans E-sports at the Olympics, and director talks about rejuvenating the Games (w/p)”, in Sabino¹⁹, presents a confusion of concepts that mix exergames and E-sports, emphasizing that the first are the games that capture and virtualize the real movements and the second are the electronic sports as a professionalism of the digital games. The so-called e-games in the text of the published article suggest a perspective of games without movement. In this sense, there is a significant difference between exergames and E-sports. The exergames are understood as the combination of physical exercise with the game, allowing the fascination of games to be used as much as the practice of physical exercise²⁷ (27). That said, in the research carried out by Vagheti and Botelho²⁸, it is highlighted that Physical Education teachers have been using exergames in Physical Education classes and also reveals that physical therapists also make use of them for the rehabilitation of their patients, as it is an activity that provides caloric expenditure and entertainment. On the other hand, E-sports are associated with competitions in a professional way, as they are electronic sports that have been studied by several areas of knowledge.

To highlight the phenomenon of E-sports, Gough²⁹ highlights that this modality reached a total audience of 495 million people in 2020 and forecasts for 2023 point to a total number of around 646 million viewers. In addition, there are sponsorship forecasts that could reach close to 1.6 million dollars in 2023.

According to Summerley²⁰, the history of E-sports is linked to several factors in relation to its growth. Here we can mention, for example, the base promoted by the Evolution Championship Series (EVO) and the sports organization developed by the Overwatch League (OWL). E-sports must additionally consider intellectual property information and ratings. Most E-sports institutions are also in dialogue with game developers – the software industry. The structure by which E-sports was formed did not take into account divisions, that is, gender, race, age and ability – with a few exceptions related to gender and age. Currently, there has been an investment in mainstream penetration, eventually managed by established sports institutions. Regarding longevity, the modality has a precarious situation, since it depends on technology and commercials to survive²⁰.

According to Kim, Nauright and Suveatwatanakul³⁰, although they are not like traditional Olympic sports (athletics, fencing, among others), E-sports athletes are increasingly coveted by the IOC. In this way of thinking, the more organizations recognize the legitimacy of E-sports, the more the audience increases. Such recognition can be associated with the concept of symbolic capital that the institution ends up acquiring as it consolidates³¹⁻³². It is worth noting that countries with higher GDP (Gross Domestic Product) show promise for E-sports, insofar as free time, leisure and the offer of entertainment are closely related (30). According to Butler²², in a meeting of the main interested parties (or stakeholders) of the Olympic Movement, they concluded that E-sports could be considered as a sporting activity. That's because the players involved play with an intensity that can be comparable to athletes in traditional sports. This combination contributes to the release of tensions (catharsis) not only in the players, but also in society³³.

This is where the 'cyber athletes' are constituted³⁴. Depending on the degree of visual stimulation by the game, the emotions that are triggered in this activity would resemble the same ones felt and observed in specific serious life situations such as, for example, at risk of death. This issue is easily associated with the concept of mimesis proposed by Elias and Dunning³⁵, where the excitement generated by real/serious life situations would have similarities with those aroused by leisure events.

Also, according to Kim, Nauright and Suveatwatanakul³⁰, many traditional sports brands are investing massively in E-sports properties, even as a consequence of

the COVID-19 Pandemic, thus placing greater barriers to the sports phenomenon as it was constituted before. At this point, it is worth noting that major international football brands and US professional sports teams have started operating E-sports teams, or even bought stakes in existing teams.

Games: relations with youth and industry

In contemporary times, children and young people are in intense contact with technologies, intensely inserted in the digital universe. On a daily basis, we refer to children and young people as the ‘digital generation’ or even as the ‘digital natives’. Such terminologies were cited by Prensky³⁶ understanding that they represent the first generations that grew up with new technologies, such as: the use of computers, video games, digital music players, cameras and cell phones. Nomenclatures such as these emphasize the skill of young people in operating computers, cell phones, among countless other electronic devices, for the most diverse purposes – entertainment, learning, information, consumption, participation in social networks³⁷.

In this flow, we find electronic games or digital games that are understood as a playful activity, limited by rules and the universe of games that have characteristics such as: goals to be achieved, rules to comply with, voluntary participation and the presence of feedbacks throughout the act of playing³⁸⁻³⁹.

According to Moita⁴⁰, there is a cultural curriculum mediated by the images and sounds of electronic games that have implications for the experiences of contemporary youth. In this perspective, Rodrigues⁴¹ discusses the use of electronic games as a means of teaching, proposing to redirect the critical look at the virtual space, presenting cyberspace as a real territory of (re)construction of learning. More deeply, Savonitti⁴² highlights that one of its benefits is the specific learning of words. In addition, his research was focused on language teaching, understanding that within the universe of games, various fantasies, such as myths, for example, are used. In this thinking, a game will not only bring linguistic learning, but also if the fantasy is inspired by a myth or legend, all this context is interpreted with the help of the different situations that the player experiences within the game, facilitating their understanding and learning.

In the National Curricular Common Base or BNCC, electronic games appear in the school subjects of Arts and Physical Education. In the first, it emerges in the field of

skills, exploring different technologies and digital resources for the 1st and 5th grades. In the second, it is presented as a thematic unit of Games and Games aimed at the 6th and 7th grades. In this context, it also appears in the field of Physical Education skills⁴³.

More specifically regarding learning related to the use of electronic (or digital) games, other authors highlight: the improvement of executive functions^{44,45}, the increase of motivation to learn⁴⁶ and the exercise of cognitive skills in a more general way – such as attention, memory, problem solving, among others^{44,47}. From the educational perspective, there is a research carried out by Cruz, Ramos and Albuquerque⁴⁸ which aimed to know the opinions of young people about electronic games and their learning in a school context and the results highlight that they believe they learn different contents, also identifying skills developed through the use of games.

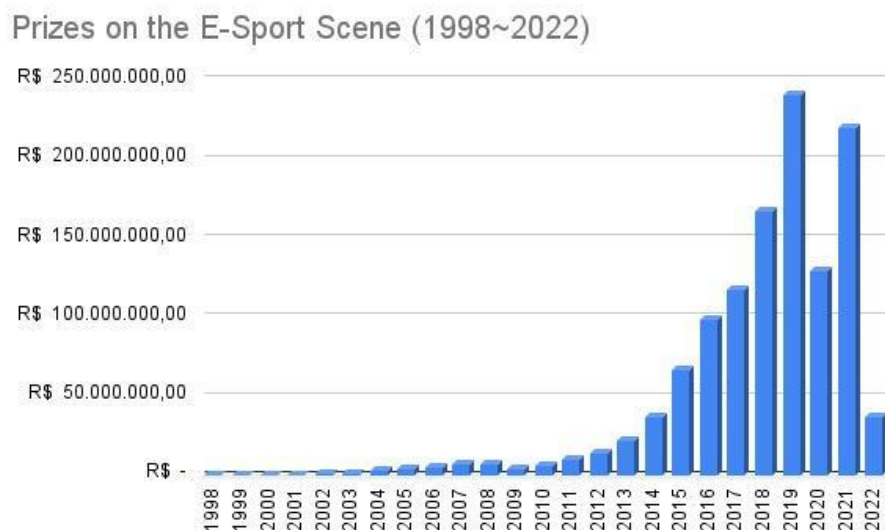
Given the numerous potentialities of digital games, the games industry has significant relevance and stands out among the creative and cultural industries, in the financial sphere and in terms of growth over the years⁴⁹. It is noteworthy that the games industry is an economic segment aligned with the creative economy, innovation and cutting-edge technology, consolidated worldwide⁵⁰, being defined as the companies responsible for game production activities, with different stages: design, creation, development, testing, and quality control⁵¹. In the Brazilian context, Diniz and Abrita⁵⁰ point out that a group dedicated to analyzing the games industry in the world presented figures that place Brazil as the 13th largest world market in this segment (in 2018), covering a total of 75.7 million players.

In close relationship with the games industry, E-sports stand out, which have grown quite intensely, attracting a large audience of players, spectators and athletes¹⁸. This modality has evolved a lot in recent years, presenting itself as a complex ecosystem of consumers, players, organizations, which impact the business area⁵², involving high financial values and arousing the interest of entertainment giants¹⁸.

According to a study carried out by Newzoo in 2020 – a consultancy specializing in the gaming and mobile market – Brazil represents the 3rd largest global audience for E-sports, behind only China and the United States of America (USA). In financial terms, with an audience in Brazil estimated at 30 million people by 2021, E-sports should generate BRL 1.5 billion in the country over the next two years⁵³.

The study developed by Reitman et al.⁵² finds that the phenomenon of E-sports crosses many themes, such as: Business, Sports Science, Cognitive Science, Informatics, Law, Media Studies and Sociology. Because it is intrinsically related to the dynamics of supply and demand, presenting itself as a promising and distinctive product in contemporary times. It is noticed that this phenomenon has developed through numerous confrontations, that is, power disputes between agents and institutions, which culminated in its popularity in a relatively autonomous field in dialogue with the sports field, something that approaches a thought Bourdieusian⁵⁴. It is proposed that, possibly, the increase in research in relation to E-sports and their relationships with different themes, impact on popularity, players, competitions and also on awards. Thus, it stands out (Table 1).

Table 1 - Prizes on the E-Sport Scene (1998~2022).



Source: Made by the authors, data taken from: E-SPORTSEARNINGS. History Navigation. E-sports Earnings, 2020. Available in: <https://www.E-sportsearnings.com/history/2022/games>.

It is possible to observe the said growth on the table 1 above, with a brief oscillation between 2008 and 2009. Due to the financial crisis that stagnated the scenario, ending up several television programs that were starting to broadcast championships of the modality⁵⁵. But soon the scene recovered and from 2011 onwards an increasingly dizzying growth can be observed. This growth may be linked to the success of streaming platforms (such as Twitch and YouTube) in disseminating E-sports

to the world, whether with championships or casual “games” of professional players or stars of the sites^{56,57}. This new approach, combined with the companies that created the games (such as Riot Games, Valve, Epic Games, among others), which in turn began to invest more and more in the great championships and world circuits of great games (such as League of Legends, Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, Dota 2, Valorant, Fortnite, among others), is one of the major factors in the rapid rise of E-sports¹⁸.

Final considerations

When the research work began, it was found that E-sports are considered a contemporary sports phenomenon, endowed with meanings and in accordance with the supply and demand of a highly profitable sports field in expansion. Furthermore, the modality has great worldwide visibility, covering aspects of leisure, entertainment, media, technology and, of course, sports competition. With its solid financial movement around the world, E-sports gained more and more space and drew the attention of giants, including companies and sports entities, which provided a real beginning of approximation of the Olympic movement.

It appears that the general objective was met, considering that the work effectively managed to demonstrate that the possibility of E-sports being inserted in the Olympic Games exists. However, there was a need for agents, both in the field of E-sports and in the field of the Olympic Games, to mature the agreements.

The first specific objective brought a contextualization about E-sports, as it presented data about Coubertin's ideals. In this case, it was commented on the amateur ideal contrasting with the professionalization movement and on how the IOC acted in a moralizing way on the sport. It was noted in the IOC's initial strategy, when using Greek mythology for inspiration, an idea that the field of electronic games or E-sports could explore. Dialogue with the Olympic values and the creation of a regulatory body of rules and regulations, it is important for E-sports to become Olympic.

The second specific objective presented some concepts about exergames, understood as games that capture and virtualize the real movements of the practitioner. This was necessary, given that Sabino's article (2022) showed confusion when portraying the concepts of exergames and E-sports. The popularity of E-sports was also commented, which showed an audience of 495 million people in 2020. It was estimated

that for 2023 the numbers point to 646 million viewers. Investments via the mainstream were observed and the IOC has shown a lot of interest in the modality. Legitimacy factors of these electronic games were also identified, as their symbolic capital increased over time, especially with the approximation and interest of the IOC.

The third specific objective was to investigate games and their relationship with youth and industry. In this case, this question was answered when it was understood that children and young people are part of the ‘digital generation’. In addition, it was noticed that electronic games enable a rich interaction of meanings and learning in a cyberspace. It is a field that brings countless benefits and that develops vocabulary in its practitioners. Games also, by bringing in their plot myths and legends, facilitate understanding and language learning. At this juncture, the study also showed that electronic games are in line with the BNCC, appearing among the disciplines of Arts and Physical Education. It was noted that the games industry has significant relevance, since it is aligned with the creative economy, innovation, technology worldwide. It was commented that Brazil has great representation in the international scenario, given that it is the 13th largest market in the world, with about 75.7 million players.

In this perspective, E-sports still appear as a target of caricature by some, which makes it suffer resistance in being seen as a sport – as demonstrated in the article by Sabino (19). However, the speeches highlighted here in this study seem to suggest that the political, economic and social transformations that permeate the Olympic movement, together with the characteristics that constitute the E-sports scenario today, would make it possible for this modality to enter the Olympic gallery. Anyway, *tantum futurum narrabit*[†].

[†] Traditional Latin expression meaning ‘only the future will tell’ (our translation).

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