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# **Esports Game Changers Impact Society Following the Path of Traditional Sports**

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## **Abstract**

The concept of sport as a social institution as espoused by the father of the sociology of sport, Dr. Harry Edwards, implies that sport has the capacity to change society. As the sport environment changes, society must also change. The technological changes felt within our society has changed the way sport as an institution affects society. Of note and importance is the rapid ascent and domination of electronic gaming (esports) in our society. The question of whether esports can be simply defined into the category of sport has been debated across scholarly journals previously. Suffice to infer here that esports is a sport for purposes of this paper. Sport as a social institution was charged with making societal change to social classifications including race, gender, and economics. If we accept the premise that esports is a sport, then the likely presumption and expectation is that gaming will also have similar impacts on social classifications. Albeit, where gaming may approach classifications such as gender and race without impact as gaming has started on a level playing field there; other classifications such as economics, business relations, media and viewership, marketing to consumers, social events, and academia have seen significant change as a result of the escalation of esports into the mainstream of society.

Dr. Edwards' comments from 1973 found within his seminal textbook, *Sociology of Sport*, "What is happening in sports today results from the impact of the twentieth century, with its affluence, its speed, its mass communications — all of which have combined to create a much smaller world and new definitions of reality" could neatly fit within the current state of 21<sup>st</sup> century society. (Edwards)

Greater affluence (and influence) from esport stars, faster speed, mass communications from various sources within our digital age characterizes the society in which we live. Thus, as this paper presents and argues, esports has met the burden of changing society in a similar fashion to the way traditional sport has done since its inception. The only difference is the magnitude and the speed in which the esport game changers have impacted our society.

Understanding the essential premise that sport is a societal institution worthy of study, sport researchers can examine the impact sport has on society and at times, the impact society has on sport. (Macri 2012) The essence of society can be identified by the sports its members consume in participation and spectatorship. The cultural characteristics that dominate the current state of the social community have been shown to reflect the popular sports played and observed. Sport as a microcosm of society will often adopt the current social norms of the community and transfer them into the dominant sport of its time. For years, the agricultural and rural society in the United States dictated that baseball would be the sport of choice for its societal members. Its characteristics of playing in a park and within a peaceful setting fit the qualities of the early American sports fan and athlete.

This acceptance of baseball as the national pastime lasted for many years until society began to change. Once our community transformed from rural to urban, peaceful to harried, and from the parklike setting to the city streets, the natural evolution for the sport spectator and player went from baseball to football. The sport fan's choice reflects these social changes. For the past few decades, the increased popularity of football at the expense of baseball has been related to the physicality and the raw excitement from the play on the gridiron. The common complaint for youth during this change in sport popularity was the slow paced and boring nature of baseball as compared to football.

Accepting this premise that sport reflects societal characteristics, we look to identify those people, events, or acts that impose change upon society. These changes can only be facilitated when society acts as a reflection of the institution being changed.

The millennial generation has its own unique set of characteristics and their behaviors are reflective of a changing society in terms of technology and its relationship to sport participation and spectatorship. Competitive gaming, known as electronic sports, or esports, has become a global phenomenon and its popularity is at its highest with the members of this new generation. With the advances made in technology and the decreased participation of children playing competitive traditional sports, the millennial generation has turned to electronic gaming to satisfy its cultural need for sport involvement. The technological changes found in our smartphones, online communications, availability of second and third screen observations of sport, combined with the game player's complete control over the action and the natural instant gratification received from playing has created a correlation with the millennial and the sport it seeks to represent its generation.

The functionalist theory of social study of sport provides that change to the relationship between sport and society will occur as sport adapts to the new status quo. Change under the fundamentalist theory is slow and gradual. Studies under the fundamentalist theory are normally done through a quantitative research method.

Game changers have been defined as an event, idea, or procedure that effects a significant shift in the current manner of doing or thinking about something. Game changer can also describe a person who is a visionary or a company that alters its business strategy and conceives an entirely new business plan. (Dictionary) A game-changer changes the way that something is done, thought about, or made. (Kenton) Traditionally we have seen game changers or influencers in traditional sports such as baseball, football, and college athletics have an impact and cause societal change to our society.

Jackie Robinson, arguably the most influential athlete of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, broke the color barrier in baseball in 1947 and single-handedly changed race relations in sport and society. Today every minority athlete owes their success, salary, and influence to Jackie's courage. Jackie Robinson played his first major league baseball game for the Brooklyn Dodgers on April 15, 1947, a date that is celebrated today and is remembered for opening the color barrier in baseball. Despite the Civil War having ended over 80 years before Jackie's historic debut in Brooklyn, NY, the reaction of society had not changed much as discrimination continued in restaurants, hotels, buses, in schools and the workplace. Jackie Robinson bore the tremendous weight of equality for black athletes and his accomplishment eventually led to changes in society as baseball's integration of black athletes helped similarly society move towards equality and integration.

One such change, the 1954 Supreme Court decision, Brown vs. the Board of Education, was another step towards this societal change. The Court ruled that schools could not segregate white and black students holding that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." As a result, racial discrimination was ruled a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution. (Supreme Court) With this decision, the Civil Rights movement was able to gain momentum. Many point to Jackie Robinson playing baseball for the Dodgers as the impetus to change society. The Courts realized that if sports became integrated then all of society must follow.

Through his steadfastness, courage, and intelligence, Jackie Robinson changed the game. He almost single-handedly changed how American society looked at Black athletes and in turn how they looked at Black Americans. The stature of Black athletes in American sports represents a vitally important social concern for many Americans, particularly African Americans who see sports as a barometer for social acceptance in American society. Now, sports sociologists and sports historians look back on that era to understand the effect Jackie Robinson had on society at large.

In college athletics, Title IX changed the game, literally, for female athletes. In 1972 this legislation deemed that women were to be treated equitable and fairly as to their male counterparts in athletics. This opened the door to equality in education, in the workplace, and in society. More women enrolled in college and entered the work force as a direct result of Title IX.

The passage of State and Federal legislation has also had an impact on sports and society. The passage of Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 gave women an equal playing field with men by banning sex discrimination in academics and athletics at any educational institution that receives federal assistance. Title IX states:

"No person in the U.S. shall, on the basis of sex be excluded from participation in, or denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving federal aid." (Title IX)

The social impact of Title IX has had a similar effect upon women as Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier had upon African-American athletes. Prior to Title IX, women's issues such as their health and fitness to specially-designed clothing were not even on the sporting radar. The stereotype that women athletes were all lesbians was exposed as women athletes were getting married and having children. In fact, women athletes have now come full circle where many are considered sex symbols because of their looks, their body shapes, and the outfits they wear in competition and outside of sports. Administrative positions and coaching positions for women have increased dramatically since the inception of Title IX. Media coverage of women's sports has improved but if the sport does not draw ratings and sponsors, media outlets will still ignore the women's game.

Outside of sports, Title IX also has had a significant impact on society. Prior to the enactment of Title IX, women were outright refused admission to schools while other schools had a limit on the number of women that would be admitted. Society held women back and did not afford them the same opportunities offered to males. Title IX had a tremendous impact on women's ability to attend higher education and enter the professional fields of medicine law and business.

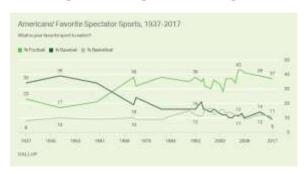
Women now comprise nearly half of the U.S. labor force at 46.8 percent. In 2018, there were 75,978,000 women aged 16 and over in the labor force, representing 46.9% of the total labor force. 57.1% of women participate in the labor force, compared to 69.1% of men. (Women's Labor Force Participation)

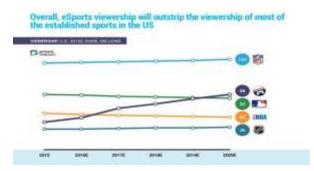
Title IX changed the game for women in society as its enactment began to ensure equality of treatment and opportunity in athletics within the framework of student body interest, geographic influence, budget restraints, and gender ratio. Society is better off when all persons have equal opportunities to succeed and those opportunities are not denied because of differences in sex, race, or religion.

The biggest social event of the year takes place the first week of February in the United States when the National Football League hosts the Super Bowl, pitting the respective champions from their two conferences in a winner-take-all championship game. The social impact of the Super Bowl cannot be dismissed as simply another football game. While the Super Bowl was traditionally thought of as a game for die-hard football fans, socially, the game has transformed into a mega-event bringing together people from all walks of life to witness its spectacle, pomp, and pageantry. Despite its popularity today, the Super Bowl was not always the most anticipated and watched sporting event around the world. That title went to the Olympics and soccer's World Cup. The first two Super Bowl games won by Vince Lombardi's Green Bay Packers in dominant fashion were considered ho-hum affairs with the expected result of the more powerful representative of the more established NFL convincingly defeating the younger upstart AFL representative. The result was low attendance, lack of viewer interest, and absolutely no social impact.

Super Bowl III changed all of that. On January 12, 1969, Joe Namath led the NY Jets of the AFL to a stunning upset of the heavily-favored NFL Baltimore Colts. Following this memorable upset, the Super Bowl as we know it today began to take shape. 54 years later Super Bowl Sunday with its traditions, social and economic impact, and global viewership is celebrated around the world. Just a few years later, Gallup surveys showed, for the first time, that football surpassed baseball as the country's most popular sport — a status that continues today, with more than 37 percent of people saying that professional football is their favorite sport. American society would never be the same, until the introduction of esports and gaming events. (Norman)

Ironically, esports will soon take that mantle from the NFL. Newzoo predicts by the end of 2020, esports viewership will outstrip the viewership of most of the established sports in the U.S.(Newzoo) (See charts below).





Socially, more people have watched the Super Bowl than any other televised programming. The 2020 Super Bowl broadcast on Fox attracted an average TV audience of 99.9 million people, according to Nielsen data. The average viewership reached 102 million when the network added people watching a Spanish-language simulcast and streaming the game on Fox, NFL, and Verizon platforms. (Coster)

Data such as this would have been unthinkable fifty years ago. For these reasons, Super Bowl III will always be remembered as the game that forever changed professional football and put the Super Bowl on the path to becoming the biggest annual sporting event in America.

While traditional sports have had their share of game changers, the relatively new sport of electronic gaming has also now seen its own share of people and events that have impacted our society.

## The Social Impact of Esports

As mentioned above, esports has become a part of the mainstream of society, where once esports was only a small subset of sports culture, it has grown into its own stand-alone industry. Esports has hit this lofty level primarily due to the social engagement found uniquely to gamers. Live streaming their own game play has turned each gaming participant into their own content curator and procurer. Despite not being face-to-face with their audience, gaming-specific streaming platforms like Twitch and YouTube Gaming give fans a direct connection to the players and teams. (Reyes)

Traditional sports cannot compare or compete with the social component of gaming. Society has been known to dictate the popularity of our sport viewing and engagement. The technological society of the 21st century makes esports the natural leader in sport viewing and participation in society today. The days of football and our industrial society and baseball and our agrarian lifestyle are now things of the past. Esports will be the dominant sport in our society until society shifts again.

Similar to traditional sports, game changers exist in the history of esports and gaming. Many people have seen the explosion of esports across the globe but few recall when the first game changing moment occurred in esports and gaming. No, Ninja was not involved. The first game changer of the esport industry took place on October 19th, 1972 when the first video game tournament in the sci-fi rocket combat game, Spacewar, was held at the Stanford Artificial Intelligence Lab in Los Altos, California. The event unleashed to an unsuspecting world the enormous potential of computers to unleash creativity and change society. No one could have expected how impactful that event would be nearly 50 years later. (Brand)

The change was not immediate, but the impact is no less impressive. From its humble beginnings, the world of esports has grown faster than any traditional sport ever did. Now competitive computer gaming as a spectator sport is a worldwide phenomenon that not only rivals traditional sports, but in many cases has surpassed them.

Popularity increased in the 1990's with internet-enabled online competitions and corporate-sponsored video game world championships. Today, the Global Starcraft 2 League (GSL) is the largest game in the RTS category, with over 50 million viewers. (GSL) Total global audiences for eSports are over 320 million viewers and over \$110 million in awards, with anticipated viewership to reach 600 million by 2020. (Newzoo) The International Olympic proposals Committee considering include is eSport gaming the 2024 Olympics (www.olympic.org/olympism-in-action/new-frontiers-esports).

Although some debate whether eSports are sports within the traditional meaning of the term, it is clear that the business impact is significant and creates unique industry challenges.

A 2019 report on the growth of esports by market research firm Newzoo lends statistical credence to esports' impact. As the charts below will indicate, 2019 marked a major milestone for the global esports market, which will for the first time exceed the billion-dollar revenue mark. (Pannekeet) In fact, revenues will reach an impressive \$1.34 billion in 2020 and \$1.56 billion in 2021 showing year-to-year growth of over 20%. The highest-grossing individual esports revenue stream worldwide is sponsorship, generating \$456.7 million in 2019. (Pannekeet) The global esports audience grew to 453.8 million worldwide in 2019, with expected growth to reach 645 million by 2022. (Pannekeet)



A closer look at the esports industry will reveal different game changers in the form of people, philosophy, and business enterprise. These game changers have altered the trajectory of esports in areas such as the economy, social impact, business opportunities, sponsorships, events, and academics.

# The Esports Economy

The transformation and game changing element that created the esports economy occurred with the maturation of the gaming industry. As a result, business leaders decided the time was right to invest in the esports ecosystem. Venture capitalists and private equity firms have doubled the number of investments in esports since 2017, going from 34 in 2017 to 68 in 2018, per Deloitte. (Bradley)

In terms of total dollars invested, Investments are up to \$4.5 billion in 2018 from just \$490 million the year before, a staggering YoY growth rate of 837%, per Deloitte. These investments touch upon the entire esports ecosystem: from esports organizations, to tournament operators, to digital broadcasters. (Bradley) By making these financial investments into the esports economy, these financiers are betting on the economics of esports to continue to rise and to continue to bring them a return on their investment.

# **Esports Business Opportunities**

In traditional sports, business opportunities abound in media, merchandise sales, sponsorships, player endorsements, team value, and mega-events. From this model, esports now offers similar business opportunities to entrepreneurs to create their own niche in the esports industry. Justin Dellario, the Head of Esports at Twitch since 2016, has been instrumental in making Twitch the world's leading streaming service and community for gamers. He is responsible for Twitch Esports programs' business and strategy in operations, strategic partnerships, development, and innovative growth. (The Esports Observer) In a recent interview, Justin stated, "Esports and Twitch are kind of synonymous—it's very much in our DNA. The growth of esports and the growth of Twitch have pretty much moved along at the same pace." To further his mission to create business opportunities in esports, Justin added, "We don't just think about our role in esports as one to just be strictly a distributor, but we think in a lot of ways about how we can help grow the space and create value for other segments as well." (The Esports Observer)

Traditional sport athletes have also pursued opportunities in esports. Former Los Angeles Laker star, Rick Fox, has become an advocate for esports, and the opportunities present in the industry. As a gamer and esports franchise owner, Fox is changing the game by making esport business ventures more mainstream. Meanwhile, prominent professional sport owners such as Robert Kraft along with Fred and Jeff Wilpon have seen the financial value of esports from fan engagement to competitions and have all invested or own their own esports franchises.

Meanwhile famous sport venues such as Barclay's Center and Madison Square Garden in New York City and the Staples Center in Los Angeles are selling esports competitions to capacity. In Texas, where everything is bigger, Esports Stadium Arlington, with 100,000 square feet, is the largest dedicated esports facility in North America, with esport event hosting and production capabilities.

# **Esports Sponsorships**

The world's largest brands have taken notice of the rise of esports and the rising participation and viewership numbers. Sponsorship opportunities continue to rise. Sponsorships of teams, players, and events continue to drive sponsorship revenues. Nike and the League of Legends Pro League have entered into a \$144 million deal with similarities to traditional sports where the players, coaches, managers, and refs wear only Nike gear during game play. (Carp) Coca-Cola also has partnered with Riot Games as sponsors of the League of Legends World Championship. One unique element of the sponsorship included having over 200 cinemas host simultaneous viewing parties for the 2016 League of Legends World Championships throughout the U.S., Canada, and Europe. (Meola)

The biggest game changer in esports sponsorships is streamer Tyler Blevins, known to his fans "Ninja". He became the first gamer to truly capitalize on his popularity by signing various endorsement deals. While many of his deals were endemic (products and/or services found directly in the esports industry) in nature, the game changer occurred with his deal with Adidas, the world's second largest sports brand. For the first time, a gamer/influencer crossed over into non-endemic brands (businesses whose products and/or services are not directly linked to the industry) more commonly found endorsing athletes and spending their sponsorship dollars in traditional sports. Through this endorsement/sponsorship, Ninja has the same or bigger name recognition as the world's greatest athletes, Roger Federer and LeBron James. The unique game changer of this sponsorship has Adidas looking to add "products" in both the physical and virtual world. (Snider)

Adidas made the deal with Ninja because of his impressive social media following. Before his move to Microsoft Mixer, he had over 14 million Twitch followers, and his Twitch videos were receiving tens of thousands of views. (Liao) His Twitter page has 6.1 million followers. (Social Blade) While the Mixer platform recently merged with Facebook gaming, Ninja's largest video streaming influence can still be found on YouTube with 21 million subscribers. (Ninja) By creating his own content, brands have flocked to him for endorsement deals to allow them direct contact and connection with Ninja's loyal fan base. (Influencer Marketing)

The esport personality crossover into mainstream media was reinforced when Sasha Hostyn, better known as Scarlett, one of the top Starcraft players in the world and the most accomplished woman in the history of esports, recently commanded a lengthy profile in the *New Yorker*. (Taylor)

Whether of a team, league, player or event, sponsorships have changed the game in the esports industry. User content, social engagement, and star power have all combined to make gamers highly sought after properties for both endemic and non-endemic brands within the esports industry.

#### **Events**

The game changer for esports events happened in 2019 in Queens, NY. While there have been bigger events and larger crowds at other esport events around the globe, Epic Games' Fortnite World Cup Finals changed the game in the United States. The esports industry suddenly was on everyone's radar. Even non-gamers were attracted to the size of the crowds and the \$30 million prize pool. The Fortnite Finals selected the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center's Arthur Ashe Stadium, home of the U.S. Open in tennis, connecting esports to traditional sports in their choice of venue. The 23,000 seat capacity facility sold out for all three days and the nearly 70,000 fans watched a 16 year-old from Pennsylvania, Kyle Giersdorf (aka Bugha) earn the winner's share of \$3M. More than 2 million concurrent live-stream viewers watched the Finals. (Spangler) In comparison, the League of Legends (LoL) World Championship was the most watched esports event of 2019, with 137 million hours of viewership according to digital streaming data published by Esports Charts. (Sportspromedia)

Increased prize money has significantly helped the growth of esport events. In 2000, the total prize money from 27 tournaments barely topped half a million dollars. 14 years later, organizers shelled out more than \$35 million in prize money over nearly 2,000 tournaments, not counting lucrative sponsorships. (Taylor) In 2019, the abovementioned World Finals of Fortnite offered \$30M all by itself.

As prize money continues to increase, the mega- event will continue to shape the future of esports competitions, signaling that esports is the future of sports entertainment.

# **Collegiate Academics**

Becker College changed the academic game when they announced a new Bachelor of Science in Esports Management in 2018. Recognizing the economic and professional opportunities generated by the burgeoning esports, or competitive gaming, industry, Becker's Esports Management major will equip students with the knowledge and experience needed to excel in one of the fastest-growing sectors in the sports and entertainment industries. (Becker)

Following this, Caldwell University, in their School of Business and Computer Science, developed the first Esports Business Management (B.S.) major degree program in the State of New Jersey. (Kiefer) As Caldwell Esports Professor Neil Malvone stated, "The esports business management focus is to provide a program that prepares students to lead and manage in the business of Esports Management through hands-on and experiential learning". (Adubato) Following the lead of Becker College and Caldwell University, more colleges are now preparing students for careers in esports through courses and degree programs.

## **Future Studies and Conclusion**

In this paper, the premise that electronic gaming can have the same game changing impact has been explored. Further research can focus on the true impact from sociological, economical, and cultural perspectives. An ethnographic study can provide direct observation of the participants and spectators of electronic gaming to elicit data for better understanding of the impact and change described.

As we are now in the midst of another societal sports revolution causing its members to switch their allegiances again to another new sport, game changers within society should be readily identifiable, and more importantly significantly impactful. This paper has identified those game changers which foretell the revolution is upon us and we that change will directly impact all of society in the same way that traditional sports have previously accomplished.

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