7. Esports and their Audiences

how audiences and players express the "e" in esports

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Masaya Heywood, a college student, explores how the needs of esports athletes differ from traditional sports, generating different fan cultures, for better and for worse. Masaya is a graduating senior from New York University's Game Center. He helped start the University's entry into competitive gaming and continues to help smooth the process of building a collegiate gaming program downtown.

I love seeing students gather to talk about games. We're not here just to study, right?

Viewing games through an oh-so-serious academic lens may seem counterintuitive, almost like we're missing the point. Certainly, esports isn't known for being academic. However, esports can be a hub for serious thoughts about games.

Let's start by looking at some of the key differences between esports and traditional sports, focusing on three areas: the delicate space of professional play, building teams, and player attachment and legacies.

Regarding the delicate space of professional play, esports audiences interact with their games and its players differently from traditional sports audiences due to the environment esport games demand. Let's do a thought experiment regarding bubbled players and open fields.

Two different public events: esports on the left, soccer on the right.

Players on the left are in a structural bubble, while players on the right are on an open field.

Imagine, instead, we put a glass dome over the soccer field. The physical experience of both the players and their audience would immensely change. When a soccer player only hears muffled cheers, how would that shift how they play? When a spectator can no longer yell their displeasure, would they feel less attached to the game?

Traditional sports carry many moments with real and imagined chances of audience participation. For example, if you yell at Cristiano Ronaldo to kick the soccer ball harder, he'll likely not hear the command. The crowd's murmur could dim, however, and your voice may be loud enough to reach him. Or perhaps others feel the way you do, and hearing your yell reinforces the tide of "kick the ball harder" throughout the stadium. What matters here is that you might have an impact. You can walk away feeling that your cheers and jeers might have influenced the game. You may leave with a sense that personal connection was made with one of the players. This is a great feeling to have and a cherished part of many traditional sports.

Esports, on the other hand, does not offer the same capacity for audience interaction. There's a current understanding between players, the audience, and game designers that the best and most genuine plays have minimal exterior interaction. Whether players are in a noticeable dome, as in the image above, or wearing headsets, there are obvious measures to sever the player-audience connection. Compared to traditional sports, this greater divide is born from the electronic medium of play. Video games like League of Legends and Overwatch don't require teammates or audiences to be physically close. Additionally, audience input can easily disrupt communication between team members. Information in video games is often complex and needs to be expressed quickly and precisely. Thus esports primarily aims to create a delicate playspace that makes audience members pure spectators, even when occupying the same physical space.

Since popular esport games and their tournaments have traded audience participation for player focus, there's never a chance, say, to see a fan run on the field during an esports match. However disruptive in a game of soccer, this can be seen as a fun cultural phenomenon among traditional sports

that highlights its intimate nature with its viewers. Having something similar happen in esports would be challenging and greatly disliked.

While esports builds barriers, it can also tear them down.

Players and their fans often share a close connection in esports, despite the bubble around them during official matches. An esports athlete likely doubles as a streamer, especially if they are on a team.

The online environment champions players who know how to connect with their fans and network with others. While the chance to interact with players has little room during a competitive match, the opportunities expand outside them. Interacting with stream chats, making Youtube videos, and attending community events lets fans, players and managers achieve their goals. Fans want to feel connected and learn from players, and maybe influence how they play. Players want to be known and be recognized for their skills, unlocking more opportunities to compete. Finally, managers like players who can command lots of attention for their teams and venues to increase revenue.

Moving on to the second subject, rising to the top in esports can be the opposite of how it functions in traditional sports. Take a football player. The athlete must practice hard to showcase why they're a good fit for a team. They do this in relative obscurity and may never be well known, even if they play in the NFL. This lack of initial popularity will never work if a player wants to compete in esports, such as at the League of Legends World Championship.

When managers are building esports teams, they want to see a personality. I recently attended PAX East. The esports managers and their recruiters wished to see Twitch viewer counts. Whenever a prospective professional player asked what esports teams like to see, the answer would be skill and views. They wanted to know that you are a streamer, that you're actively pursuing viewers, and that you can bring a brand to their company. Since esports spawned from the internet age, its players share more similarities with Instagram celebrities than traditional sports celebrities.

Finally, the newness of esports and the differences highlighted above put the future of its players in question. Internet celebrity is often fast to come and fast to go. Esports undergoes a regular churn due to new game releases

and players aging. The game industry is a fast-paced market with companies desiring to topple market-leading games. A top player in one game may need to switch games when new releases occur. The leading player's skills may not transfer one-to-one, and they must rebrand themselves in a new area. If the player does not switch, they face a smaller audience or no audience at worst. Furthermore, most esports champions do not have the time to keep up with trends. The prime-age window closes quickly, with most players retiring in their 20s.

As a result, there's less opportunity to get attached to players in esports. When players and games quickly come and go, long-lasting legacies become harder to make. It's tough to compare famous esports players to Michael Jordan or Tom Brady who have benefited from long careers that launched them into superstardom. It's yet to be determined if esports, as it is now, will produce the same kind of staying power for its future stars.

Another interesting aspect of this, as you can see below, is that older video games usually have an older audience. In comparison, younger video games have a younger audience. So we may see the games, audience, and players grow up together. As a result, the lasting player legacy may not end up as stardom but as a tight-knit community around a beloved game.
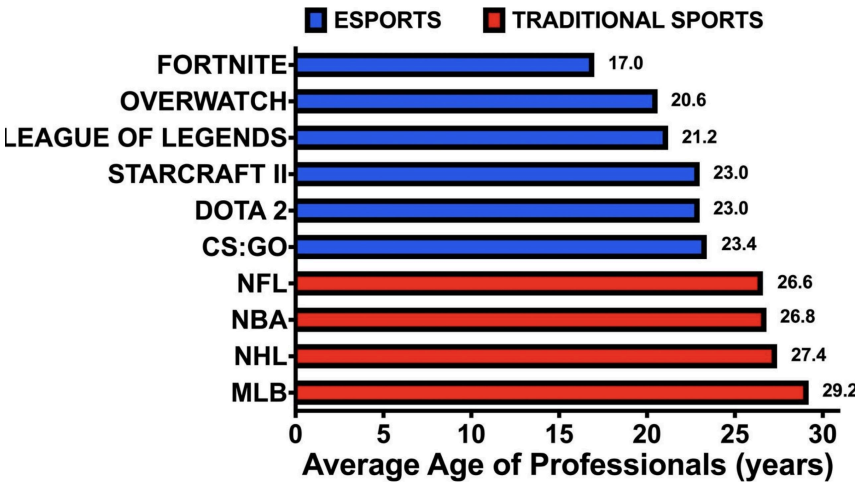
Age of esports professionals versus traditional sports professionals.

The future of esports is full of unknowns. For example, we currently see platforms like Twitch trying to break the player-audience divide by integrating tools that allow audience participation. The malleability of video games means designers can reinforce the bubble or pop it. Likewise, internet trends and the evolution of social media will dictate how esports players build connections with their fans outside of the game. It becomes further tricky to foresee future developments as both esports and traditional sports have counterfactuals to the statements I've made above. Tennis, for example, is a traditional sport that forms something akin to a bubble around its players. The silence asked for on the court lets players focus, just like giving esports players a soundproof booth during a game tournament.
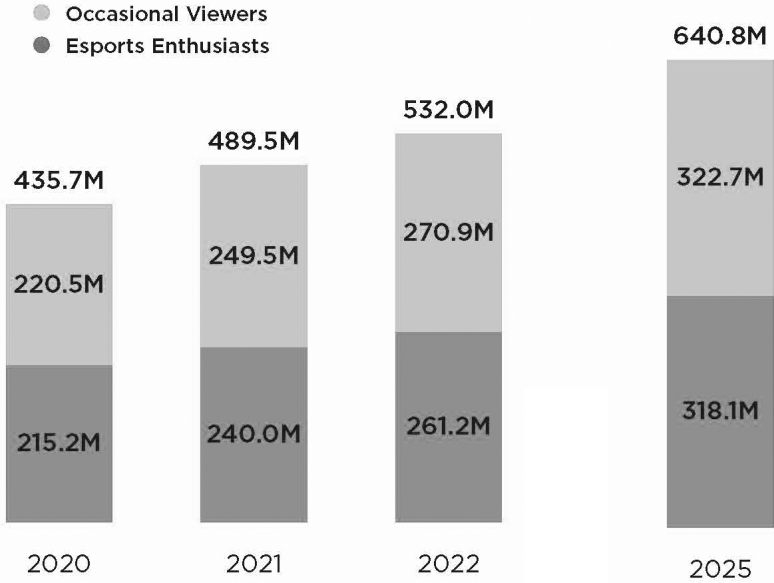
Everything outlined above are trends in esports that are not absolute. The esports audience and its players are trailblazers in an electronic environment that'll likely take many years to settle. It's important to start building a new lens to look at esports rather than using the one from traditional sports.

To begin maturing the field, it's essential that all its participants, from fans to CEOs, begin to form terminologies and frameworks to identify the unique pillars of esports.

Esports Audience Growth
Global | 2020-2025

○ Occasional Viewers
● Esports Enthusiasts

2020 — 435.7M
- Occasional Viewers: 220.5M
- Esports Enthusiasts: 215.2M

2021 — 489.5M
- Occasional Viewers: 249.5M
- Esports Enthusiasts: 240.0M

2022 — 532.0M
- Occasional Viewers: 270.9M
- Esports Enthusiasts: 261.2M

2025 — 640.8M
- Occasional Viewers: 322.7M
- Esports Enthusiasts: 318.1M

In 2022, the global esports audience is expected to grow +8.7% year on year to reach 532 million. Additional game-related research and reports can be found at Newzoo, who provided the above information.