

# Module 4. Esports Challenges: past, present, and future

Through this module, we will discover a few challenges the esports ecosystem is facing and that could have a major impact on its progress in the upcoming years. Most of the challenges are the same we could find in traditional sports, but with some specificities, mainly due to the use of the internet.

Now, integrity and professionalism are the two main goals of the esports ecosystem, the purpose being to give video games well-deserved serious good image, and reputation.

In this module, we will see the following main challenges:

- betting on esports,
- cheating and doping,
- age rating and minors' protection,
- status of the esports athlete,
- health, and
- diversity and inclusion.

## 1. Betting on esports

In module 3, we saw that a few companies that specialized in betting are now focusing on esports. It is true that thousands of esports matches are played every day, of all video games genres, which make the ecosystem really appealing for betting activities.



Figure 1: The best Esports Betting Sites

<b>1</b> 	<b>100% MATCH DEPOSIT BONUS</b> Up to 200€//\$ or equivalent	<b>GG.bet Review</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Wide range of esports markets</li><li>• Available in EN, PT, ES and JA</li><li>• Top Esports bookmaker &amp; odds</li></ul>	<b>BET NOW</b>
<b>2</b> 	<b>100% UP TO €/\$200</b> with your first deposit	<b>Thunderpick Review</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Social Crypto and Esports Betting</li><li>• Exclusive VIP Club with unique Rewards</li><li>• Bitcoin, Ethereum, Litecoin, XRP, USDT &amp; more accepted</li></ul>	<b>BET NOW</b>
<b>3</b> 	<b>UP TO 10% CASHBACK</b> Play and Get Rewards	<b>Bitcasino.io Review</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• First-licensed Crypto Casino</li><li>• Instant withdrawals and multiple crypto accepted</li><li>• Zero wagering: only real money rewards</li></ul>	<b>BET NOW</b>

The best Esports Betting Sites according to Esports.net, From <https://www.esports.net/betting/sites/>

But currently there is a lot of criticism coming from the actors of esports (mostly by the community and the publishers) because:

- Betting is possible on any genre of video games, including video games where the age rating is low (under 18), meaning that players of a young age can have easy online access to betting on esports, without any control.
- Esports betting can involve fantasy betting as well as money betting. Regarding money betting, the question of how we can address the potential addiction facilitated by the internet is a real challenge.
- Betting companies active in esports can be shady, i.e. “offshore” firms based in tax havens: Who are they? Is it corruption money, money laundry? What about crypto betting?
- Betting on esports can lead to match fixing, and there is no global and official authority of control for now.
- In addition, the activity of “scamming” is facilitated online and quite recurrent in esports. The market is still young and sometimes very speculative. It can attract many opportunists. Regularly, companies and players are involved in money dramas and the betting is also a risk of scamming.

Figure 2: Esports Integrity Commission



Esports Integrity Commission. (Producer). (2020). [Logo]. <https://esic.gg/>

The Esports Integrity Commission (ESIC) was established in 2016 with the purpose of managing integrity topic with the process of investigation and prosecution of cheating in esports, in all forms, such as match-fixing and doping.

This non-profit organization would like to be recognized as the “guardian of the integrity of esports”. They are willing to help tournament organizers, publishers and betting operators offering esports. If you want to benefit from the services of the ESIC, you must join the membership and pay a fee.

The ESIC is very active on Counter-Strike: Global Offensive and DotA in particular (tournaments operated by ESL) and is now trying to extend to other games.

Betting on esports will be a major challenge in the future since, as we have seen in module 3, a lot of betting companies are investing in esports, sponsoring and partnering with everyone: players, esports clubs, talents and even tournament organizers. We can expect a multiplication of institutions and unions created to protect integrity.

## 2. Esports integrity: cheating and doping

Unfortunately, esports are not spared from cheaters. Like in traditional sports, players can use doping products. They can also cheat through the equipment they are using (which is less possible in traditional sports, considering the regulations, the standards and the controls), and use a cheating software or hardware or any programs that are accessible online (you do not have to go on the dark web to find these).

**Doping in esports.** Even if esports are not the most physical competition, the use of drugs to increase players’ performance still exists. Most of them will not focus on the physical performance, but will more likely help with stress management, focus and decision-making. However, doping in the esports industry is still a taboo and for years was not even considered as a threat by esports organizers.

In fact, and unlike sports, there was no systematic doping control during competitions. Many reasons could explain this situation:

- Doping in esports is mainly focused on mental performance; therefore, it is more difficult to detect unusual performance than in sports. For instance, a player who manages their stress thanks to drugs will have less chance to be accused of doping than a cyclist that will bike too fast.
- Traditional sports competitions occur “on-site” where it is easy to implement doping controls, whereas esports competitions can be played on the internet. There is no effective way to control someone who plays from home.
- Dealing with the health of the players involves confidentiality management and judicial protocols. This question was not necessarily a top priority for the tournament organizers or the esports clubs.

The situation started to change in 2015. Semphis, a player on Counter-Strike from the team Cloud9 in North America, revealed during an interview that all the players (including his team and himself) have used a doping drug called “Adderall” to increase their performance. This statement from the player created a scandal in the esports industry, as it was the first time this question was raised in public.

**Figure 3: Kory “Semphis” Friesen**



From *The Gamer’s Guide to Staying Healthy and In Shape*, by I. Dimitrijevic, n.d., in *Lifhack*. Retrieved on April 18, 2022, from <https://www.lifhack.org/387793/the-gamers-guide-staying-healthy-and-shape>

ESL, organizer of the biggest competition on Counter-Strike, decided to tackle the situation. They signed a partnership with the German anti-doping agency called NADA (National Anti-Doping Agentur) and the world anti-doping agency called WADA (World Anti-Doping Agency). The aim is to use the knowledge of NADA and WADA in sports to implement an effective anti-doping strategy for their competitions. As a result, all

competitions hosted by ESL (IEM, ESL One et ESL ESEA Pro League) now have anti-doping tests.

Controlling all players is not enough (and is expensive) and some products used as doping are legal in some countries. For instance, Adderall is forbidden in France, but is available in North America through a medical prescription. The esports industry is working on creating a list of forbidden medicines in esports' competitions.

Many professional players also started to testify regarding doping in esports. This is important as it puts under the spotlight an unfair practice that was unknown for a long time. It shows that taking medicine, even legal ones, is not a good practice. It also allows players to freely speak out about the consequences of doping on their health, which is something that nobody would take into consideration.

Use of a cheating software. Compared to traditional sports, it is easier to cheat with the equipment in esports. First, esports have a strong BYOC (Bring Your Own Computer) culture, all players usually bring their own equipment to the competitions. It is effortless then to integrate a cheat inside the equipment (computer or even inside the keyboard or the mouse).

The most popular cheats are:

- Aimbot: a cheat increasing the aim at shooters. The bot is targeting the heads more easily or any other part of the character (depending on the settings).
- Wallhack: a cheat offering the possibility to the user to see their opponent through the walls. It is very useful for tactical FPS, such as Counter-Strike or Valorant, as it will give crucial information (position of players, weapons use, etc.).

Tournament organizers are now providing computers, mostly to avoid cheating during competitions, but with the implementation of "macro" (a program that configures automatically the mouse or keyboard with some specific settings). Regardless, it is still too easy for the players to find a way to cheat.



**Figure 4: Forsaken cheats in CSGO**

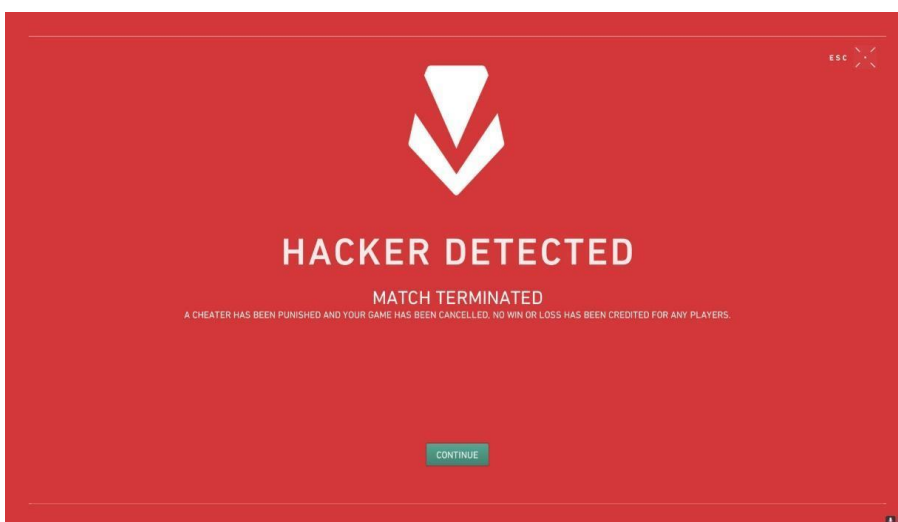


From CSGO: Should Forsaken Be Forgiven for Cheating? by R. Nair, 2021, in *Essentially Sports*. Retrieved on April 18, 2022, from <https://www.essentiallysports.com/csgo-should-forsaken-be-forgiven-for-cheating-esports-news/>

One of the most famous cheating situations occurred during the “Extremesland 2018 Asia Finals”, one of the most important tournaments on Counter-Strike: Global Offensive in Asia. During the finals, Forsaken, a player for Optic India was caught cheating red-handed. He even tried to delete the cheating software in real time, but the tournament admins stopped him.

If the players can use a software to cheat, the publishers can also implement anti-cheat programs in their games to detect the cheaters.

**Figure 5: Anti-cheat program, Valorant**



From Valorant player ReFleck banned for hacking on live stream, by F. Bhatti, 2021. Retrieved on April 18, 2022, from <https://win.gg/news/valorant-player-refleck-banned-for-hacking-on-live-stream/>

Riot Games has built its own anti-cheat program for Valorant, called Riot Vanguard. Other publishers like Epic Games, for instance, contracted a third-party software provider (Easy Anti-Cheat). In addition to these anti-cheats, the publishers have implemented a system of reports made by the community directly in-game through “tickets”.

The publishers have different ways to sanction the use of cheats:

- The most obvious one is the banishment of the user's account. Since the launch of Call of Duty Warzone, a battle Royale developed and published by Activision, the publisher has banished more than 50000 players.
- Publishers can also decide to ban the player from all tournaments. Most of the time, they can do both, in-game and tournaments. But in practice, it is not always easy to apply a ban because the player can recreate a new account or try to register to a tournament that is not sufficiently controlled.
- Another possibility is to create a specific matchmaking (the system used by the game to gather the players and create a match) with only people who cheat. This is a solution that was used by Square Enix for its MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) Outriders.

There is another form of cheating that is less known by the public, but very negative for the integrity of a competition. The “boosting” is related to the rank of the player (depending on the number of wins or losses). In this situation, the player wants to increase the in-game rank artificially to access a higher level of competition. To do so, a player can team up with a stronger friend that will be too strong for the opposite team (free win). A more radical way of boosting is through account sharing, a practice that is banished by many publishers. Once again, a player will ask another stronger player to play not with him/her this time, but with his/her account. Account sharing is also a way for a toxic player to avoid the toxicity check, a process used by the publishers to remove toxic players from their competition.

There are multiple ways to cheat in esports, probably more than in traditional sports because of the online aspect again, and cheating and doping will be major challenges in a near future.

### **3. Age rating and minors' protection**

Considering the cliché of “video games are making children violent”, the question of minors' protection is becoming essential in the video games and esports industries.



Esports need to keep a good public image, a safety environment for young adults and kids.

In esports, each publisher is free to implement their own minors' protection program. The best example is the restriction applied during the subscription for a tournament or the creation of a valid account to play the game. For instance, you would need to be at least 13 years old to create a Riot account to play League of Legends or Valorant. However, since video games are played in many countries, there is no global legal obligation related to the access to a game.

Same as a film, the video games' industry has its own rating system.

### **The rating system**

The key about the age rating challenges in video games is that the systems are a guidance to consumers and do not create absolute restrictive access to games. This philosophy is actually the opposite of the cinema industry. To make it clear, a film is forbidden under a certain age, but a game is "discouraged" or "not recommended" for children under a certain age.

In practice, a cinema cannot allow a 12-year-old child the access to a film forbidden for children under 16 years old, but this same child can buy a video game online rated "from 16 years old" without any problem.

Around the world, there are multiple rating systems and the most known are:

- PEGI (Pan European Game Information) used by 38 countries in Europe.
- ESRB (Entertainment Software Rating Board) used in the US, Canada and Mexico.
- USK (Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle) used in Germany.
- CERO (computer Entertainment Rating Organization) used in Japan.

Each system has a different scaling order. ESRB and CERO use letters, while PEGI and USK use figures. Whereas the letters and the figures may be different, most of these systems will mostly divide the video games' audience into 5 categories:

- children (between 3 and 6 years old)
- everyone (between 6 and 12 years old)
- teenagers (between 12 and 16 years old)
- mature (between 16 and 18)



- adults (more than 18 years old)

There is not a global consensus, which means that a game can be rated into 2 different categories, depending on the local rating system. For instance, Halo (a sci-fi shooter published by Microsoft) is rated PEGI 16 in Europe, but in Germany, the game is rated USK 18.

In addition to the scaling, the rating system will also bring information about the content of the game. Once again, there are different ways to do it depending on the rating system.

**Figure 6: Scaling system and pictogramms used by PEGI**



From What do the labels mean? By Pan European Game Information, n.d. Retrieved on April 18, 2022, from <https://pegi.info/what-do-the-labels-mean>

### Consequences for the esports industry

Compared to the traditional sports, the rating system is not used to create categories of players within a tournament. In a football competition with children, teenagers and adults, there will be a section for children between 8 - 10 years old, another one for those who are between 12 – 14, etc.

Figure 7: Football PES 2021



[Untitled image of PES 2021]. (n. d.). Retrieved on April 20, 2022, from [https://www.pesrus.ru/\\_nw/0/04229554.jpg](https://www.pesrus.ru/_nw/0/04229554.jpg)

During an esports tournament on Pro Evolution Soccer, for instance (a football game), there will be a minimum age requirement, but then a 13-year-old player could face a 26-year-old player. For traditional sport, splitting participants by age is a way to guarantee the competitiveness of the tournament (a player of 8 years old will certainly run slower and be weaker than a 15-year-old player). In video games, the age difference will rarely impact the competitiveness of the tournament.

As we explained before, video games' age rating is not followed by a global legal obligation to be applied by the publishers. Nonetheless, the publishers will adopt a different strategy depending on the rating and especially if the game is rated PEGI 16 or PEGI 18.

In Esports, the PEGI of a game will mainly have an impact on the minimum requirement to play in a tournament. For instance, Riot Games or Ubisoft could do what they want regarding the access, but they will mostly follow the PEGI as the minimum age requirement for the players to participate. Riot Games allows 16-year-old players into their Valorant's tournaments since the game is PEGI 16, and Ubisoft only allows players who are older than 18 years old to play Rainbow Six: Siege because the game is PEGI 18.

In some cases, the publisher can decide to lower the age to open the tournaments to more participants. If it is the case, usually, the tournament is not that "official" and does not involve a large amount of prize pool, and the organizer will request an authorization from an adult (parental authorization).

The publishers will follow the rating system mainly to protect themselves from bad communication and reputation. For instance, if Ubisoft allows 13-year-old players, PEGI administration could (and will mostly) publicly communicate this and even reach out to local politics who may refuse to host the tournament in their cities.

The PEGI has an impact on who can participate in a tournament, but it is also critical to understand that it does not prevent some categories of players to play the game. Currently, any game can be downloaded online and most esports-oriented ones are “free to play”, meaning that the players do not have to pay to download or even register a credit card.

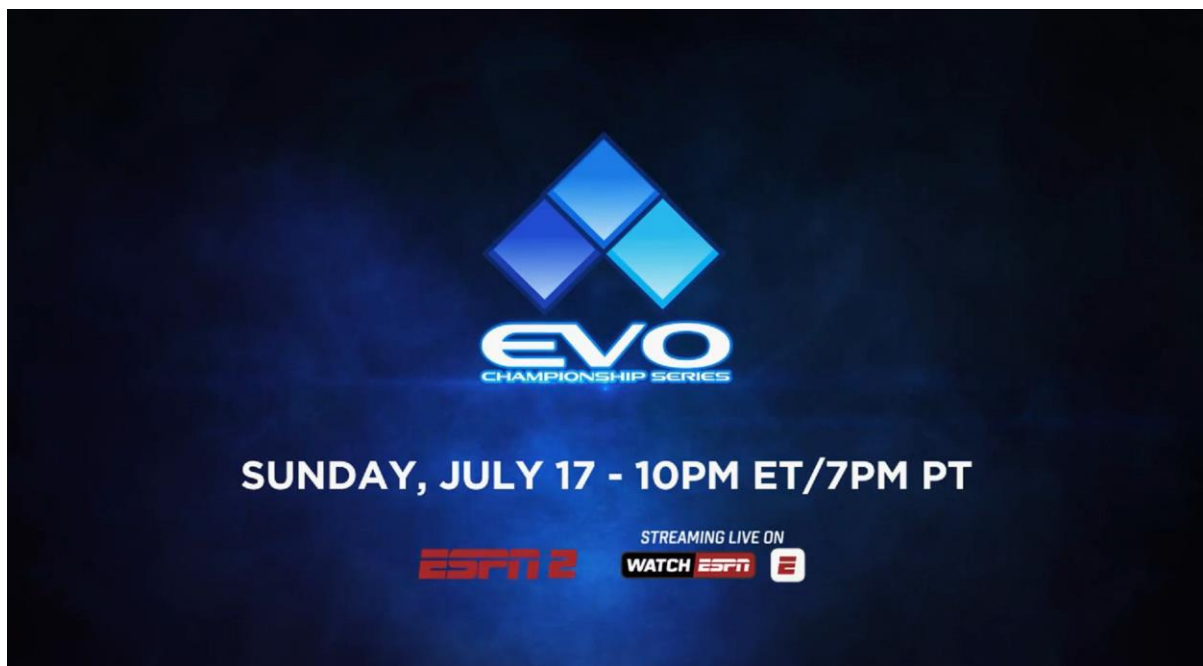
The only action taken by the publishers to avoid too many young players on their games is using this rating system when they will implement the minimum age required to create an account on their game. Since most of the publishers have multiple games with different PEGI rates, they will mostly target 13 years old as the minimum requirement to cover as many games as possible. It means that a 13-year-old player (minimum requirement on Riot website) can create a Riot account to play Valorant, which is PEGI 16, and this same player will not be able to participate in a tournament.

We saw that the main challenge of the rating system is related to the protection of minors, leading to the protection of the reputation and the public image of the video game. There is also a more direct economic impact on the rating. We saw that one major way to earn money for a publisher is through a broadcast deal with a streaming platform or a tv channel. When it comes to television, the rules can be stricter.

On the platform Twitch, there is no impact if the game is PEGI 16 or 18 (maybe the channel will have a warning message), but on television, it is not allowed to show footage of a PEGI 18 video game during the day. The potential competition audience is directly impacted by the PEGI rating as well as any negotiated sponsorship deal.



**Figure 8: Evo Championship Series**



Evo Championship Series. Street Fighter V Evo Tournament To Be Televised On ESPN 2, By M. Joest, 2016, in Game Tyrant. Retrieved on April 18, 2022, from [https://gametyrant.com/news/street-fighter-v-evo-tournament-to-be-televised-on-espn-2?utm\\_source=gametyrant.com&utm\\_medium=related](https://gametyrant.com/news/street-fighter-v-evo-tournament-to-be-televised-on-espn-2?utm_source=gametyrant.com&utm_medium=related)

One of the best-known examples of this kind of situation is the EVO, a fighting game tournament in the US. In 2016, ESPN, an American sport channel on television, decided to broadcast the final of the competition. They broadcasted the final of Street Fighter V which is PEGI 12 and not the one from Mortal Kombat which is PEGI 18.

For now, esports on television is not a common thing, but it will be a real challenge in the future. A competition that could be broadcasted at any time of the day on TV will be more attractive and profitable for sponsors and advertisers than a competition that can only be seen on TV late at night. There is a real economic interest for the publishers to design more games with a low PEGI (PEGI 12 or 16).

#### **4. The status of the professional player: employee or contractor?**

Another big challenge for esports is the path to pro for the players.

First, the ecosystem is very volatile, and a team can perform well during 3 months and fall at the bottom after. The path to pro needs a significant investment for the teams in terms of money as well as organization and human resource. The balance is very fragile, and it is not necessarily relevant to recruit the players as classic employees.

In addition, in most of the countries, there is no specific regulation or status to address the pro-players concerns. Therefore, most of the pro-players are classed as contractors and not employees because being an employee has a bigger financial and legal impact for both the players and their teams (minimum wage, more taxes, minimum number of days off, sick leave, hiring and firing rules, maximum working hours, which is very tricky in esports, etc.).

If the players are signed as contractors, it is mainly because the employee status is very complicated and is not appropriate for esports athletes. Having players as contractors is less burdensome for the business (more freedom regarding contractual obligations and laws).

The main concern is that most of the structures are avoiding employment contracts, but in practice, they are sometimes enforcing rules that are similar to the employment status. For instance, a player can be full-time, paid based on a “salary”, exclusive to the team, and very controlled by the staff members, which is incompatible with the status of simple “contractor”.

Some countries tried to create a specific contract for the esports pro-players, but the model was so disconnected from the esports reality that it is not even used by the esports clubs. For instance, in France, they tried to create a specific fixed-term contract that could be signed only by the esports clubs that have a specific “certification” given by the government. The certification was made of a process that was so difficult (time and money consuming) that the majority of the French esports clubs decided to continue their activity with contractor/freelance contracts only.

Some other countries (like Japan) decided to tackle the status of the pro-players with pragmatism, by creating specific VISA processes or an official recognition as an “esports athlete” with some advantages regarding immigration or taxes.

Within the franchise model of League of Legends, we can find more players who are directly employed by the teams. It has something to do with the fact that the team owns the slot in the competition and is, by definition, more stable. The publisher is also pushing the teams to contract the players as employees to add a layer of social protection (and thrive in the league).

In Europe, we are not yet that close to increase the use of employee-employer contract, especially because of the taxes. For example, income tax rates (paid by players), ‘social security contributions’ (paid by players) and additional social security contributions on top of the player’s own paid by the team varies per territory.



**Table 1. Income tax rates, social security contributions and additional social security contributions on top of the player’s own paid by the player and team in different countries**

Country	Average income Tax (paid by players)	Average social security (paid by players)	Average social security (paid by teams)
UK	20-45%	12%	14%
Germany	15-45%	20%	20%
France	14-45%	30%	43%
Sweden	20-25%	7%	31%

Note. From Esports Players as Employees: What European Teams and Players Need to Know, by J. Purewal, 2017. Retrieved on April 18, 2022, from <https://medium.com/@purewalandpartners/esports-players-as-employees-what-european-teams-and-players-need-to-know-dc2e156cb684>

The main issue is that the tax rules are not unified so far and an esports club can be forced to pay taxes in its own country, as well as in the country of residence of the player, as well as in the country where the tournament took place! You would really need a lawyer and a specific support to avoid the tricky situations triggered by the employee-employer status in Europe.

Like in traditional sports, we saw many rules applying naturally in esports and not confirmed by a law or not even compatible with the employment law. For instance, transfer rights, buyouts fees, and sponsorship revenues can be real obstacles for esports to use a classic employment contract.

The general reasoning behind the necessity to create or adapt a specific status for the pro-players is that we need to stabilize the practice and address the future of the esports athletes. What about retirement or social security? How could we make sure we can protect the pro-players if they are always contracted as “independent freelancers” which is, in most of the cases, not realistic at all. On the other side, depending on the game and the tournament ecosystem, not all players should become employees, or it could have a terrible effect on the business of esports (which is meant to grow).

## **5. Esports and health**

Esports is a young industry and with its professionalization, the topic of health prevention appeared a few years ago, mainly in esports organization such as clubs. At the beginning of esports, players only focused on their performance. The prize pool and the winnings were the only metrics that mattered at that time. But just like sports, it is a practice that, at a professional level, can lead to injuries or diseases if players do not take care of their health. The consequences of the lack of prevention can create both physical and psychological risks for the players.



## Physical injuries

A player will spend most of the time in front of a computer, playing and training. The practice was considered as safe and less dangerous as regular sports. Of course, a footballer is more likely to have physical injuries during a match than an esports player during a tournament, but the risks are nonetheless very real.

Many injuries come from the repetition of the same movement for thousands of hours, and visual fatigue due to the time spent in front of a screen.

Currently, the main physical injuries that many players are facing are:

- “De Quervain's tenosynovitis”: this injury is a thumb tendonitis that comes from the repetition of the same gesture with the fingers, wrist and arm. When the players get injured, the use of mouse, keyboard, stick or controller is no longer possible because of the pain.
- Neck pain: players can have a specific way to look at their screen, and some of them create a hyper solicitation of their back and neck.

**Figure 9: Bondik player Windstrike - don't have a good sitting position on this picture**



From Winstrike part ways with Bondik, Krizzen, by L. Biazzi, 2020. Retrieved on April 18, 2022, from <https://www.hltv.org/news/30880/winstrike-part-ways-with-bondik-krizzen>

- Carpal tunnel syndrome: this injury affects the wrist and the hand. Depending on the severity of the injury, players can face a loss of sensitivity, strength and pain that make them unable to use a mouse.

Figure 10: Evgenii “Blizzy” Ri



From Vega's Blizzy: In scrims we were destroying all the CIS teams, by Abelle, 2018. Retrieved on April 18, 2022, from <https://www.join dota.com/news/66672-vegas-blizzy-in-scrims-we-were-destroying-all-the-cis-teams>

- Visual fatigue: like any other athlete, esports players spend many hours per day in front of a computer. In addition, many of them play very closely to their screen and increase the risk of vision diseases. In 2019, Evgenii “Blizzy” Ri, players for Natus Vincere (NAVI) explained during the International (the biggest competition on Dota 2 as mentioned in module 1) that his vision was worse than before, and that he is not seeing well currently.

The previous list of injuries is only the regular one and is not exhaustive. With the professionalization of the esports industry, teams began to think of solutions to protect their players.

Muscular warm up was one of the first things that the teams and the players have implemented in their routine to protect their fingers, arm and wrist. The players already had the habit to do some warm-up exercises to activate their “muscular memories” and have a better aiming and better reflex, but these exercises were only for the performance. None of these exercises were really made to train the muscle at the beginning. Like in traditional sports, the esports athletes are now doing such exercises for their muscles and body, before any training session or matches.

Equipment and setup also changed throughout the years to offer to players the right way to practice and play in the right position. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Yellow Star, a support player on League of Legends for the French Team LDLC had to play

on a garden table because he could not play in the LDLC's facilities, and he did not have the right equipment at home.

**Figure 11: YellowStar on his special setup**



[Online image]. Retrieved on April 20, 2022, from <https://twitter.com/Dalxs/status/1259559369966071809>, screenshot by author.

If the picture was funny (especially because he won the game with this setup), he explained that he would not play in this situation every day because it is not comfortable, and it is also dangerous for his health.

The esports cliché of having a bad setup (like if you only need your skill to win and the equipment is not that important) is not the standard any more. If you want to be pro and to do a career in esports, you have to take care of your health.

With the increasing number of players that want to take care of themselves, many companies dedicated to "gamers" customers like Razer or HyperX now have esports equipment that brings features which should help the players to focus on their performance, with less injuries.

However, this equipment can be expensive (from €300 to €1000 for a good gaming chair), and only affordable for the sponsored players or teams.

**Figure 12: Example of a gaming chair distributed by Razer**



[Untitled image of gaming chair]. (n.d.). Retrieved on April 18, 2022, from <https://phantom.pe/silla-gamer-razer-iskur.html>

Physical injuries are the most visible health trouble a player can be confronted to. It is also the easiest one to prevent with the use of adequate equipment and a good warm up routine. It is not the only risk: in every activity where there is passion and strong dedication, there is a risk of mental issues.

The first mental trouble an esports player could face is sleeping issues. A player can spend hours in front of the computer with a strong focus within a long period of time, and it can lead to difficulties for the brain to create melatonin, the substance that helps to regulate day/night cycle and sleep.

Production of melatonin is also affected because esports athletes are playing during the night, whether it is because they must work, or to study during the day, or because the game is only accessible online at that time! The combination of an active use of the brain and the lack of rest for it can lead to severe fatigue that has an impact not only on the in-game performance, but also on the risk of physical injuries.

Fortunately, coaches also understand that the rest is as important as the practice and that one hour of sleep can lead to better results than an additional hour of practice. Many coaches now spend time with their players to work on health practices, sleeping routine, etc.

Esports players, just like sports athletes, endure a lot of pressure during competitions. If the consequences can be the same (depression, anxiety, etc.) the reason and how it happened may be different.

Sports athletes are mostly playing in front of a public in a stadium, and they can hear insults and the toxicity in real time. In esports, even if players are playing on stage, they are wearing headsets that create “white noise” that prevent players from losing focus because of sounds outside of the game. However, esports players are not protected from toxicity either.

**Figure 13: Stage during The International on Dota 2**



From Valve’s Dota 2 Tournament Stage Looks Pretty Cool, by G. Vas, 2015. Retrieved on April 18, 2022, from <https://www.kotaku.com.au/2015/08/valves-dota-2-tournament-stage-looks-pretty-cool/>

When a match is over, the insults towards athletes stop, or at least they do not have to hear them outside the stadium. Esports players have a bigger presence on online platforms such as social media channels or streaming platforms. Most of the time, they manage their own account, and they receive insults in private messages or on the chat on Twitch. When they go on Twitter to check the latest news, stream their games or review them, players read insults straight away.

In addition, unlike a sport athlete who is on the field with the teammates who could give moral support, esports players mostly read these negative comments when they are alone without any support. For many years, esports players were not prepared for that, and they have had to deal with this toxicity by themselves without any outside help. This toxicity can lead to depression and burn out, especially when a player is not performing well. Players are trained to be good at video games, but not trained on how to deal with the negativity that comes from a defeat.

The esports industry is late to this topic, but many teams are beginning to take this question very seriously. They understand that not only physical performance is important,



and that a good spirit and mentality are necessary to perform well. They are working on teaching the players how to deal with pressure, stress and anxiety.

On Counter Strike or Valorant the coach is allowed to talk during the match only during the time breaks (around 2 minutes in total per match that can be 40 minutes long). It means that the players need to be able to keep a good mood and manage by themselves the negative aspects of a match to keep showing their best.

Esports also lack knowledge on this topic. This is the reason why esports teams are recruiting former professional sportsmen as consultants on mental management. For instance, Excel recruited Dele Alli, a striker from Tottenham, as an ambassador to help their players deal with the mental aspect of esports.

**Figure 14: Dele Alli during the partnership announcement with EXCEL esports**



[Untitled image of Dele Alli]. (n.d.). Retrieved on April 20, 2022, from <https://www.dexerto.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/02/excel-dele-alli.jpeg.webp>

Teams also recruit psychologists and specialists to follow their players daily. Astralis, an esports organization mostly known for its Danish roster on Counter-Strike, is one of the pioneers in the esports industry regarding players mental management. They recruited Lars Robl, former military and member of the Danish special forces as a psychologist as well.



**Figure 15: Lars Robl – psychologist for Astralis**



From Lars Robl: From the Special Forces to Esports Psychology, by EarlyGame, n.d. Retrieved on April 18, 2022, from <https://earlygame.com/lars-robl-from-the-special-forces-to-esports-psychology/>

The Esports industry still has a lot to do regarding mental issues and is inspired by the sport's good practices.

**Food and beverage.** As explained before, players are spending a lot of time practising, meaning that they do not have much time to cook or to think about healthy menus. For years, gamers conveyed the image of people eating junk food, which led to the cliché of the “fat gamers”. In addition to the bad food eaten by the players, they can also drink a lot of coffee or energy drinks to compensate.

The practice of drinking energy beverages is encouraged by the presence of sponsors like Monster or Red Bull. Red Bull is one of the biggest sponsors in esports (module 1), especially in the fighting game community, in which they have their own tournament “The Red Bull Kumite”. The players have to show the brand on their clothes, but they also have to show that they drink the product during a competition.

For years, since esports were not so popular and interesting for the brands, the teams and the players did not have numerous choices regarding sponsorship deals. A brand like Red Bull was the only big brand interested in esports for the young audience.

**Figure 16: Olivier “Luffy” Hay - professional player on Street Fighter V sponsored by Red Bull**



From Luffy: “The obstacle of versus fighting is its wealth!”, by A. Hellin, 2019. Retrieved on April 18, 2022, from <https://esport-insights.com/luffy-le-frein-du-versus-fighting-cest-sa-richesse/>

If drinking Red Bull energy drink or coffee is not a danger for a player at first, it can create a real one if the intake is too high. Since the players have to deal with a lot of fatigue, they can quickly neglect this aspect.

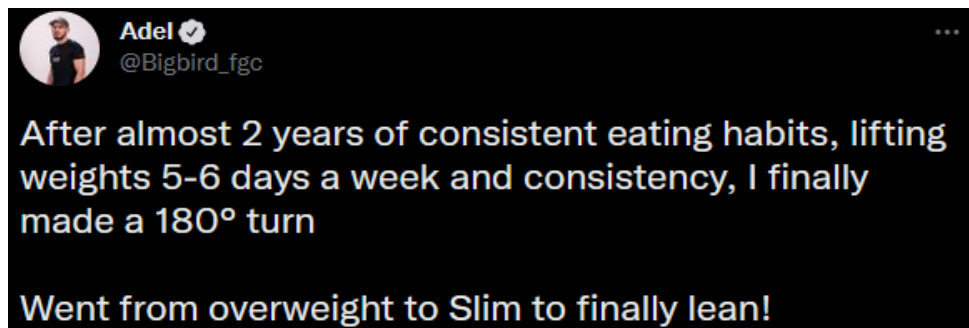
But the professionalization of the industry has brought awareness about the food situation and, as a consequence, the biggest esports organizations also have “chefs” in their staff to cook healthy meals for the players.

Esports has become more popular and more “mainstream” nowadays. Different brands are now interested in investing, such as bank companies, car constructors, clothes retailers. Esports organizations have now more flexibility to select a sponsor that could fit their needs.

With the inspiration of Cristiano Ronaldo or Paul Pogba refusing to drink some beverages (respectively Coca-Cola and Heineken), we may see in the future some esports organization rejecting some sponsorship deals because of that kind of stakes, even if the brands are the official sponsors of competitions.

Eventually, esports players are starting to speak out about their experience regarding health issues and promote a healthy way of life. In a recent tweet, BigBird, a professional player on Street Fighter V for NASR Esports (in the Middle East and North Africa org), showed the result of his change of lifestyle.

**Figure 17: Tweet from Adel “Bigbig” Anouche**



Tweet from Adel “Bigbig” Anouche. [online image]. Retrieved on April 18, 2022, from [https://twitter.com/bigbird\\_fg?lang=esv](https://twitter.com/bigbird_fg?lang=esv) screenshot by author.

## **6. Diversity in esports**

Diversity and inclusion are an important challenge for the esports community and especially for the publishers because, innately, esports are open to everyone without discrimination. We saw in module 1 that it was first a niche community, mainly composed of young white men (video games were made and marketed by men, for men). The question of diversity and inclusion was raised following different movements:

- The development of the esports market and its awareness have led to discussions about the interest and opportunity of opening the doors to a larger public (in terms of players, but also of spectators)
- The social phenomenon of the “Me too” movement (#MeToo) has been a driving force for the minorities in esports to speak out about their own experience and the feeling of exclusion they may have felt.

The lack of diversity and inclusion is caused by the fact that, for years, the community itself and the publishers were claiming that esports is an open playground and that there is no discrimination. Everyone (almost) can play video games. No one was actually doing something to promote diversity and inclusion (or the initiative was minimal and not supported by many actors).

But in practice, after 20 years of non-action to promote diversity and inclusion, we have been able to observe that there is indeed an under-representation of the following categories and that it must change:

- women and other marginalized genders,
- people of different sexual orientations,
- people from a different colour than white,
- people who do not have money to buy a console or a computer, and
- people with disabilities.

In the last few years, many non-profit organizations and associations tried to reverse the statistics in esports by promoting initiatives and partnerships with esports companies.

For this section, we will take the example of gender diversity where things are slowly changing these last few years, thanks to multiple actions driven by organizations, players, influencers, and publishers.

- Women and other marginalized genders represent half of the population on earth: the esports market is missing an opportunity.
- Women and other marginalized genders represent around 50% of the total number of gamers: the cliché of the women who dislike video games is not true.
- Women and other marginalized genders represent 30 to 35% (Jeong, 2020) of the total number of gamers playing in ranked games: the cliché of women who dislike esports-oriented games is not true.
- But only 5 to 10% of the esports players (competitions participants) are women and marginalized genders: the issue concerns esports, and we needed to understand the reasons to be able to take the good actions.

The former reasons to explain the lack of women esports players were made of the following clichés:

- Women are not competitive enough.
- Women dislike video games and esports.
- Women are too weak to do esports.
- Women are not good enough to compete.
- Women want to avoid taking risks, etc.



Thanks to some research and statistics agencies, we were able to confirm that the gender is not in itself a reason explaining the issue, and we could also identify the exact causes of the under-representation of women (and other marginalized genders).

Causes are multiple and can be summarized as follows:

- Social clichés in the 1970s explaining that video games are for men only.
- Associated marketing targeting men.
- Social construction and education, from parents and at school: not encouraging little girls to play video games (example of the “Game Boy”) or even to take risks.
- Parallel with sports, with clichés saying that a woman’s brain cannot work the same way.
- Sexism and machismo when some women tried to join esports.
- Strong toxicity targeting women with sexual insults.
- Lack of interest from the brands and organizers towards women and marginalized genders.
- Lack of actions from the publishers to make their games more diverse and inclusive.
- Consequences of 20 years of mistakes, leading to a lack of women and marginalized genders in the industry, we need to attract more women to find more women in esports on a professional level.
- Lack of self-confidence for the women because of this construction. Now, the lack of self-confidence is a vicious circle that leads the women to give up sometimes, or to feel more pressure on their shoulders than a man would feel.

It could be difficult to reverse this problematic and find solutions. To do so, we would have to act on different topics, at different levels (women characters in video games, solutions for the toxicity, increase the opportunities for women, etc.). We would need all actors of the industry to promote and encourage gender diversity.

Nowadays, most of the initiatives that have an impact on gender diversity and inclusion come from non-profit organizations, influencers (“role models”), or the publishers themselves.

Gender Diversity initiatives



During the last 10 years, we saw many initiatives to promote gender diversity and inclusion, but the ecosystem was pretty new and such organizations were missing visibility and money.

**Figure 18: AnyKey**



AnyKey. (Producer). [Logo]. <https://www.anykey.org/>

Today, we can mention the AnyKey initiative which is one of the biggest currently active in Esports. "AnyKey is a non-profit organization that fosters change and empowers the champions making a difference in esports, competitive gaming, and live-streaming" (AnyKey, n.d.). They create guidelines and resources, they organize conferences and other events amplifying the voice of women and marginalized genders.

**Figure 19: Women in Games**



Women in Games. (2022). (Producer). [Logo]. <https://www.womeningames.org/>

There are also the Women in Games organizations that promote gender diversity in the video games' industry. Women in Games exist through different entities, not legally connected, in different countries (France, Norway, UK, Italy, etc.). These non-profit organizations regroup thousands of women experts of the industry to organize events, conferences, networking, and prevention programs for schools and universities.

Women in Games France has a specific Esports department created in 2018 to promote gender diversity in esports. They have created an "incubator" program dedicated to talented women players who are supported individually (personal coaching, meeting with pros, participation in tournaments with men, etc.). This incubator will open a Season

4 this year, to support new women players who would like to become professional players. So far, they have helped more than 20 women, most of them are currently participating in tournaments (with men or women) or have found a job in esports.

**Figure 20: WIG Esports incubator players Season 2**



From Women in Games Support French Esports Incubator Programme, by Women in Games, 2020. Retrieved on April 18, 2022, from <https://www.womeningames.org/women-in-games-support-french-esports-incubator-programme/>

The last movement in favour of gender diversity and inclusion is made indirectly by the influencers (players, streamers or others) who are becoming “role models” for the women and marginalized genders.

**Figure 21: Marie-Laure « Kayane » Norindr**



From Kayane – The French Queen of SoulCalibur, by Red Bull, 2021. Retrieved on April 18, 2022, from <https://www.redbull.com/ch-fr/kayane-soul-calibur-joueuse-pro-portrait>

Kayane (French player) started to play fighting games in competitions when she was young (around 9 years old) and never gave up. She is now 32 years old and is still very active in esports, organizing tournaments and streaming events or animating shows. She is a real model for women and marginalized genders, but also for men, since she is one of the oldest players within the fighting community!

**Figure 22: Stephanie “MissHarvey” Harvey**



From Female Gamers Who Dominate The Online Gaming Community, by J. J. Foster, 2019. Retrieved on April 18, 2022, from <https://bridesblush.com/beauty/female-gamers-fb/v>

The Canadian Stephanie Harvey was a champion on Counter-Strike during several years within a woman's team (10 years ago). She was also a game developer and has created different initiatives and community hubs to promote gender diversity. She is now still doing business in esports.

Diversity and inclusion are becoming such important topics that the publishers have created internally some initiatives and hired dedicated teams. It is not the first challenge, and it will not be the last one. The good thing is that we understood that it can take several years to change things and that we need the help of everyone. It will take investments in terms of money and human resources to create a safe environment for everyone, but we can say that there is a global consensus, which is an excellent sign. There will probably be other challenges that will emerge in the future of esports. For instance, we can expect to hear more and more about ecological issues raised by esports (computer, data consumption, etc.). As you have seen, the esports ecosystem is very complex, flexible and changing which makes it fascinating and exciting regarding opportunities, especially when you already have an experience in a traditional sport!

We can definitely expect esports to take more inspiration from sports, but also sports to take inspiration from esports, for instance, regarding the use of social media, online influencers, and the platforms for the broadcast and promotion of content.

## References

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