

The Olympics and Esports: Who Needs Who?

The International Olympic Committee has a long history of organizing summer and winter sporting events for the world stage. Esports has a shorter history with its roots dating back to 1972. In 2017, both organizations began to discuss the potential for the inclusion of esports as an Olympic event running separately from the other two events. With both organizations having worldwide appeal but with potentially vastly different demographics and interests, the question becomes: Who needs who? This paper explores the motivations and implications of integrating esports into the Olympic framework, analyzing the potential benefits for both the esports industry and the Olympic brand. This paper will explore the history of the Olympics and the International Olympic Committee. It will examine the history of esports and the path to becoming an official Olympic sport, its impact on the Olympic movement and the sport itself and the question of who needs who most.

Keywords: *esports, e-sports, E-Sports, Olympics, IOC.*

Introduction

Esports, short for electronic sports, is a billion-dollar industry that is garnering the attention of organizations and enthusiasts worldwide. While it has more recently gained immense popularity, its origins can be traced back to around 1972 (Integrated Service-Portfolio Organization 2023). Today there are tournaments where players engage in games ranging from first-person shooter games to sports games such as football and basketball and post-secondary institutions globally offering programs in Esports Management. The sheer size of the revenues generated by esports is causing many organizations to take notice. One of those organizations is the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

In 2017, the IOC first began to discuss the potential for the inclusion of esports in the Olympics (International Olympic Committee 2018). The IOC appears to be seeking ways to engage younger audiences and to modernize the games by including games relevant to a generation comfortable with using online platforms. The IOC first introduced the streaming of Olympic events at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Streaming is now an integral part of the Olympic Games, and the younger audience expects to be able to view the games using digital platforms (NBC 2024). The improvement of technology since 2008 opens the door to creating the Esports Olympic Games which will increase virtual engagement with an audience familiar with the technology and streaming platforms (Hackney 2025). Ultimately, this led to the introduction of the inaugural Olympic Esports Games, originally scheduled for 2025 in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Xu 2025). This decision, made during the 142nd IOC Session in Paris (International Olympic Committee 2024a), follows the success of the Olympic Esports Week 2023, held at the Suntec Singapore Convention & Exhibition Centre (International Olympic Committee 2023a). The event, which attracted over 20,000 attendees and featured nearly ten esports' titles, demonstrated the vast potential of esports to engage multiple audiences and demographics. The creation of the Esport Olympic Games shows the IOC's intent to keep pace with the digital revolution

1 (International Olympic Committee 2024a) and provide a venue to engage a younger
2 audience. The IOC has recognized the need to create a new structure within its
3 organization for the Exports Olympic Games. The IOC will take a different approach
4 to the organization and financing of these games (International Olympic Committee
5 2024a).

6 In early 2025, it was announced that there would be a delay in introducing the
7 Olympic Esports Games until 2027 and then running them every two years from that
8 point on (Xu 2025). This means that there will be the Olympic Games every year for
9 the next 12 years. This is a different strategy from the Summer and Winter Olympic
10 Games. Setting up Esports as a separate Olympics reduces the potential impact on
11 the Summer and Winter Olympics. The IOC is aware that digital transformation is
12 happening at a fast pace and the esports world is very dynamic so a two-year cycle will
13 help to keep the Olympic Esport Games relevant to stakeholders. The IOC has
14 targeted a younger audience with this strategy (Kim, Kihan et al. 2025).

15 The IOC has partnered with the National Olympic Committee (NOC) of Saudi
16 Arabia to create the Olympic Esports Games. The NOC of Saudi Arabia is the Saudi
17 Olympic and Paralympic Committee which is an independent higher sports
18 organization supported by the Saudi government (Saudi Olympic Committee 2025).
19 This partnership is based on the Olympic Charter and the Olympic values (International
20 Olympic Committee 2024a).

21 Currently there is not a single organization that represents the exports community,
22 but the Esports World Cup Foundation (EWCF) has been designated as the founding
23 partner for the Olympic Esports Games. The EWCF is a nonprofit organization
24 funded by the Saudi Arabia's Investment Fund. It is the IOC's intent to keep the
25 Olympic esports in Saudi Arabia for the next 12 years (International Olympic
26 Committee 2024a).

27 This move by the IOC could be seen as a groundbreaking shift in the global sports
28 landscape, responding to evolving audience preferences and the rise of digital
29 entertainment. At the same time, the agreement by esports to join the Olympic
30 movement could be seen to attempt to legitimize esports as a sport in the eyes of more
31 traditional sports enthusiasts.

32 The Olympic movement has an historical timeline that cannot be challenged by
33 other sporting avenues. While the IOC may be embracing esports as a way of
34 increasing viewership of the Olympic Games, esports would also expect to gain
35 viewers and interest in the digital gaming industry by the arrangement. A key question
36 in this unique arrangement is who needs who most?

37 This descriptive paper seeks to better understand why the IOC and esports have
38 partnered together to offer an Olympic Esports Game. The paper begins by discussing
39 the methodology used in the paper followed by a theoretical framework. Next, the
40 paper will discuss the history of the Olympics and the history of esports followed by
41 an examination of why each would agree to work together to form an Olympic Games
42 with esports. The paper will then conclude on the fundamental reasons why each
43 believes that the arrangement is a win and who may benefit most from the
44 arrangement.

45

1 **Methodology**

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3 To find out who might expect to gain more from this partnership, we examined
4 the historical timeline of the Olympic summer and winter games, paying special
5 attention to the addition of new sports into the Olympics and major events within the
6 Olympic timeline. In examining the historical information of the Olympics, we were
7 interested in capturing information related to demographics, the signing of news
8 outlets covering the Olympics, overall viewership and financial information. We were
9 particularly interested in the mission and strategic direction of the Olympics through
10 the IOC and what was required for a sport to become an Olympic sport. Finding this
11 information required us to take a closer look at who found the decisions of the IOC
12 important. In other words, who is the IOC really responding to, who are those
13 stakeholders and what would be important to them when considering the addition of
14 new events.

15 For esports we were interested in examining the historical information related to
16 the introduction and growth of esports along with the demographics of its viewers.
17 We were also interested in how esports was organized, and what foundations, if any,
18 existed. Other important information that we were seeking to find included strategic
19 direction, disciplinary actions or consequences for infractions such as drugs and other
20 areas congruent with the IOC and the Olympic Movement. The addition of esports as
21 an Olympic event is new and there remains many unknowns about how it will be
22 organized; especially since it does not appear to conform to what would be considered
23 a normal Olympic event.

24 Information was obtained by examining the IOC website in detail for information
25 on history, events, strategic plans and others. Esports tended to be not deposited within
26 one central area. That meant that a survey of Internet sites and articles was required to
27 gather information. The objective was to attempt to triangulate the strategic
28 needs/wants of the IOC with those of esports to determine if this partnership was a
29 win-win or if one group ultimately needed the partnership over the other group.
30

31 **Organizational Decision Making**

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33
34 Throughout the world individuals are quite used to cheering on their respective
35 country every two years as they compete against other countries in the Olympic
36 summer and winter games. The Olympics is arguably the most prominent overall
37 sporting event in the world.

38 It would not then be surprising that many papers have been written over the years
39 on the Olympics with themes such as the economics of the Olympics, Olympic
40 viewership and Olympic culture being prominent (Rathke and Woitek 2008) (Baade
41 and Matheson 2016) (Pop 2013).

42 Given that the Olympics is firmly entrenched in societies worldwide, what then
43 would the International Olympic Committee (IOC) want to accomplish by extending
44 its reach beyond the traditional form of physical sport to a digital sport in the form of
45 esports?

1 In comparison, even if one argues that the first tournament dates back to 1972
2 Stanford University (Integrated Service-Portfolio Organization 2023), esports is still
3 in its infancy. The worldwide explosion in the popularity of esports, however, is
4 undeniable. Why would esports wish to partner with the IOC? What does it wish to
5 achieve?

6 Negotiations between individuals, governments, and/or organizations often
7 result in either a win for one party or a balanced negotiation where both parties feel as
8 though they have won. Essentially a win-lose or win-win conclusion. In a key
9 textbook on negotiations (Fisher and Ury 2011), Fisher and Ury discuss negotiations
10 and best practices. They discuss that a good agreement is one in which all parties in
11 the negotiations are satisfied. In their book, they suggest four principles to follow in
12 negotiations: people, interests, options, and criteria (Fisher and Ury 2011).

13 In negotiations, Fisher and Ury suggest that understanding the interests of all
14 parties is key in successful negotiations. Recognizing shared goals and values will
15 help to establish a framework where negotiations are more apt to be a win-win.
16 Ultimately, through balanced negotiations, it is possible to come to mutually
17 agreeable solutions that benefit all organizations involved.

18 In applying a negotiation framework to the partnership between the IOC and
19 esports, if a win-win is to be accomplished, there would ultimately need to be a shared
20 interest between both organizations and a common solution that would benefit both.

21 Stakeholder theory has been used in the past studies on the Olympic Games
22 (Hautbois, Parent et al. 2012) and the bidding process a country goes through to
23 become the winning bidder. In their review of stakeholder theory, Mahajan, Lim, et.
24 al (2023) defined it as:

25
26 “...a theory that (i) encourages organizations to acknowledge and consider their
27 stakeholders, which exist internally or externally to the organization, (ii) promotes
28 understanding and managing stakeholder needs, wants, and demands, and thus (iii)
29 represents a holistic and responsible framework that goes beyond the focus of
30 shareholders in decision-making processes, which, in turn, (iv) enables organizations to
31 be strategic, maximize their value creation, and safeguard their long-term success and
32 sustainability.” (Mahajan, Weng et al. 2023, pg 1).

33
34 In key works on companies and stakeholders, it was argued that companies cannot
35 focus simply on their shareholders but must also focus on all stakeholders to
36 ultimately add value to a company (Freeman 1984).

37 The IOC as an organization does not have shareholders but would have internal
38 stakeholders. However, given the international reach, and mission of the IOC and the
39 Olympic Games, external stakeholders are paramount to their future success. For the
40 Olympics, these stakeholders would include the athletes and the sport federations they
41 compete in, countries, and potentially broadcast organizations. In contrast, esports is
42 comparatively newer with potentially different stakeholders. Esports stakeholders
43 would include its athletes and its federations along with its viewers and broadcast
44 media. Stakeholder analysis can be used to analyze the needs of each of these
45 organizations. By doing so, the goal is to determine if the choice made to partner with
46 each other results in one stakeholder group being better off than another.

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1 **The International Olympic Committee and Olympic Games**

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3 The International Olympic Committee (IOC) oversees the Olympic Games and
4 was created on June 23, 1894 (International Olympic Committee 2025b). The first
5 Olympic Games of the modern era was held in Athens, Greece, in 1896.

6
7 *History of the Olympic Games*

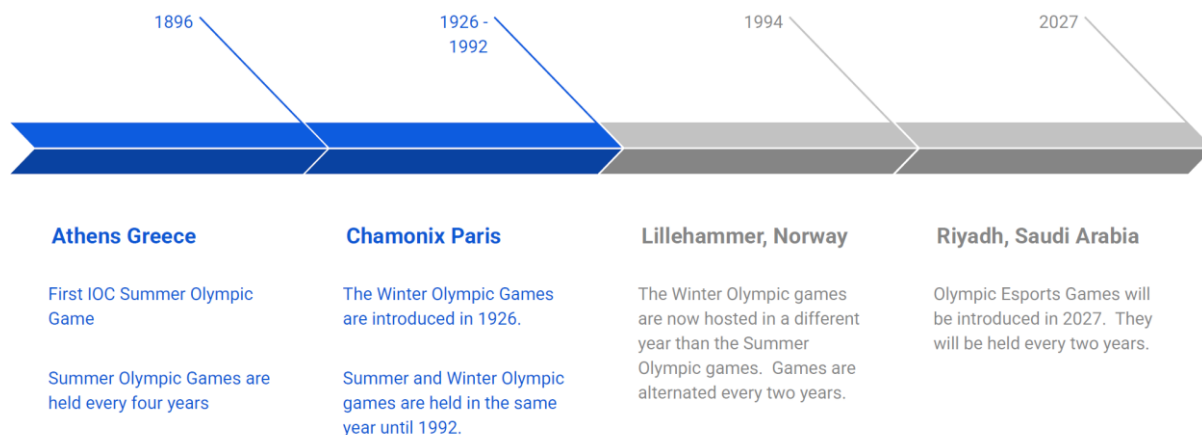
8
9 The Ancient Olympic Games started in 776 BC and lasted for approximately 12
10 centuries (International Olympic Committee 2025f). These games were quite brutal
11 and often resulted in severe injuries or even death.

12 The concept of the Modern Olympic Games dates back to 1894 with the first
13 games being held in Greece in 1896 (International Olympic Committee 2025a). The
14 first modern Summer Olympics featured athletes from 14 nations and 43 events
15 (International Olympic Committee 2025b). The vision of these games "...is to build
16 a better world through sport – to inspire, by being the best that we can be"
17 (International Olympic Committee 2025g) which is in conflict with the esports "killer
18 games" which are bloody and violent (BBC 2018) similar to the Ancient Olympic
19 Games. The organizing committees will have to include esports games that are in line
20 with the Olympic Vision. To date, no official notice has been announced on the games
21 that will be included in the Esports Olympics. The IOC has recognized that they must
22 address the interest of the esports community while respecting the Olympic values
23 (International Olympic Committee 2024a).

24 Since 1896 the Summer Olympic Games have been hosted every four years
25 except when cancelled for war or delayed due to a pandemic. In 1926 the Winter
26 Olympic Games were introduced (International Olympic Committee 2025c).
27 Summer and Winter Olympic Games were hosted in the same year until 1992. In 1994
28 the Winter Olympic Games were separated from the Summer Olympic Games and
29 continue to be hosted in a 4-year cycle. Olympic Games are hosted every two years
30 alternating between Summer and Winter Games.

31 In July 2024 the 142nd IOC session decided to create the Olympic Esports Games
32 (International Olympic Committee 2024b). In February 2025 the IOC announced that
33 the inaugural Olympic Esports Games will be introduced in 2027 (International
34 Olympic Committee 2025e). The Esports World Cup Foundation (EWCF) will
35 become the founding partner of the Olympic Esports Games. The Olympic Esports
36 Games are not part of the Summer or Winter Olympic Games. Esports will have its
37 own Olympic Games which will be hosted every two years in between the Summer
38 and Winter Olympic Games (MinterEllisonRuddWatts 2024). See image 1 for a
39 visual of the key dates in the growth of the Olympics.

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1 **Image 1.**

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4 *Becoming an Olympic Sport*

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6 Over the years, Olympic sports have been introduced and then removed from
 7 Olympic programming. For example, baseball and softball have been added to the
 8 games, removed, and then added back to the Olympic Games. As a part of their
 9 Agenda 2020+5 report, the IOC added the ability of Olympic organizing committees
 10 to add sports to their Olympic program (International Olympic Committee 2023b)
 11 (Fenton 2023).

12 Olympic sports must be governed by an international federation. For example,
 13 the World Aquatics federation is a sport of which there are multiple disciplines such
 14 as diving, polo and freestyle swimming. The federation must also have anti-doping
 15 policies to be included in the games (International Olympic Committee 2025a).

16

17 *Viewership and Financial Impact*

18

19 Viewership was, not surprisingly, limited to live audiences for the early modern
 20 Olympics from 1896 to the early 1920's. The Olympic Games held in Chamonix in
 21 1924 had limited global media access (International Olympic Committee 2013). In
 22 1936, the Olympics tested television for the first time with the first live television
 23 broadcast occurring in 1956 at the Winter Games in Italy (International Olympic
 24 Committee 2013). It was not until 1964 when the Olympics were held in Tokyo,
 25 Japan, that audiences around the world were able to see the competitions live via
 26 satellite with only seconds in delays.

27 The first Olympic Games to be streamed were the 2008 Beijing Summer
 28 Olympics. Streaming has continued to grow over the years and the 2024 Paris
 29 Olympics took advantage of the improved streaming opportunities. NBC Olympics
 30 even had a FAQ section for questions on how to stream the 2024 summer Olympics
 31 (NBC 2024). The IOC and NBC have extended their media rights until 2036 and will
 32 provide Olympic coverage on linear streaming and digital platforms (NBC 2025)
 33 which opens up new markets and coverage areas. Additional viewership data was
 34 collected on other Olympic Games and that information is detailed in Appendix I.

1 A more detailed scan of the viewership through various websites suggests that
 2 while viewership may be remaining strong, they tend to be older with one United
 3 States study suggesting that in 2010, ages 55 plus had a significantly higher
 4 viewership than those 18 to 49. The age group 12 to 17 had an even lower viewership
 5 (Nielson Insights 2010). Another study suggests that 30% of individuals under the age
 6 of 18 watch the Olympics, and 28% of individuals aged 18-24 watch the Olympics
 7 (Center for Digital Future 2018). In contrast 41% and 43% of individuals aged 55-64
 8 and 65-74 respectively watch the Olympics (Center for Digital Future 2018). A
 9 review of the IOC website revealed that the IOC does not have statistics on viewership
 10 by age, but it would not be surprising to see a decline in viewership from younger
 11 viewers who are drawn more towards digital platforms.

12 Why is viewership important? For the IOC, viewership provides confirmation to
 13 broadcast companies (traditional or streaming) that there are revenues available. This
 14 results in companies bidding on broadcast rights, which in turn are shared with the
 15 IOC. Viewership now, and in the future, is important to the IOC.

16

17 *The Olympic Movement and Strategy*

18

19 According to the IOC website, “The mission of the IOC is to promote Olympism
 20 throughout the world and to lead the Olympic Movement.” (International Olympic
 21 Committee 2025a). The mission is expanded to 18 different roles that IOC has with
 22 respect to the Olympics. The IOC defines Olympism as “a philosophy of life, exalting
 23 and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending
 24 sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the
 25 joy of effort, the educational value of good example, social responsibility and respect
 26 for internationally recognised human rights and universal fundamental ethical
 27 principles within the remit of the Olympic Movement.” (International Olympic
 28 Committee 2025a ,pg.8). This definition is a key principle of IOC stakeholders
 29 meaning that any additional sporting events would have to adhere to this definition.

30 According to the IOC website, the Olympic Movement is defined as “...the
 31 concerted, organised, universal and permanent action, carried out under the supreme
 32 authority of the IOC, of all individuals and entities who are inspired by the values of
 33 Olympism.” (International Olympic Committee 2024c).

34 Throughout the Olympic document and websites there is also a clear message
 35 that the Games should be free of politicisation. The Olympic Charter states:

36

37 “The mission of the IOC is to promote Olympism throughout the world and to lead the
 38 Olympic Movement. The IOC’s role is: (...) to oppose any political or commercial abuse
 39 of sport and athletes.” (International Olympic Committee 2025a) (International Olympic
 40 Committee 2024e)

41

42 The IOC published its updated Olympic Agenda in November 2023, laying out
 43 its approved plan to take the organization to 2025 (International Olympic Committee
 44 2023b). Outlining world issues such as COVID and financial pressures, the strategic
 45 document outlines 15 recommendations meant to grow and protect the Olympic
 46 Movement. Of note, recommendation 9 of the plan relates to digitization. The excerpt
 47 from the Agenda is as follows:

1 **“Recommendation 9**

2 **Encourage the development of virtual sports and further engage with video**
3 **gaming communities.**

4
5 Leverage the growing popularity of virtual sport to promote the Olympic
6 Movement, Olympic values, sports participation and grow direct relations with youth.

- 7
8
 - 9 ▪ Strengthen the roles and responsibilities of IFs in establishing virtual and
10 simulated forms of sports as a discipline within their regulations and strategies.
 - 11 ▪ Launch unique Olympic products and experiences through virtual and
12 simulated forms of sports, in support of the IOC’s digital engagement strategy.
 - 13 ▪ Consider the addition of physical virtual sports in the Olympic Programme in
14 cooperation with the respective IFs.
 - 15 ▪ Support local partnerships between sport and video gaming communities to
16 encourage youth to engage in physical activity and with the Olympic Movement.
 - 17 ▪ Make available Olympic athlete-related online programmes and digital tools
18 to the competitive video gaming community to support their physical and
19 mental well-being.” (International Olympic Committee 2023b, pg.21)

20 It is clear from the IOC strategic document that they have placed an emphasis on
21 virtual sports as an area of growth.

22
23 *The Paralympic Organizational Fit*

24
25 The IOC oversees the Olympic movement which includes the rules that govern
26 the Olympics and spearheading the bids that countries make to host the Olympic
27 Games. However, not all Olympic events are overseen by the IOC even though they
28 bear the familiar five Olympic rings. The Paralympics is discussed here as they
29 provide an important comparison as we examine the relative fit between the Olympics
30 and esports.

31 In 1960, approximately 400 athletes from 23 countries participated in, what
32 became, the Paralympic Games (International Paralympic Committee 2025). The
33 Paralympic Games are for individuals with varying degrees of disability and the
34 summer games have been held every four years since 1960. The Paralympic Winter
35 Games were first held in 1979 and are also run every four years. According to the
36 International Paralympic Committee (IPC) website, since 1988 (summer) and 1992
37 (winter), the Paralympic Games have been hosted by the same country that hosted the
38 related Olympic Games.

39 The IPC oversees the Paralympic movement. This includes the organization of
40 the Paralympic Games and as the international federation for the nine paralympic
41 sports (International Paralympic Committee 2025). In 2016, the IOC and the IPC
42 signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to work together to ensure the future
43 success of the Paralympic Games (International Olympic Committee 2016). This
44 MOU extends previous agreements until 2032, noting, among other key points, that
45 the agreement seeks to “Deepening existing cooperation, specifically on the
46 implementation of Olympic Agenda 2020, the strategic roadmap for the future of the

1 Olympic Movement” (International Olympic Committee 2016). The news release
2 also quoted the then IOC President Thomas Bach. “The IOC and IPC share the same
3 goal of making the world a better place through sport, and I look forward to our two
4 organisations working closely together to achieve this. The IPC’s focus on sport for
5 all and on high-level performance will enable it to reach more and more people around
6 the world, and to ensure the organisation’s long-term success.” (International Olympic
7 Committee 2016).

8 Arguably, the key stakeholders for the IPC would be the Paralympians from
9 across the world seeking to compete with athletes from other countries. A separate
10 governing body, the IPC, works separately, but in concert with the IOC to meet the
11 needs of its stakeholders. As the lead organizer of the Paralympics, the IPC is looking
12 for a partnership to support the Paralympic movement and increase the worldwide
13 audience to the Paralympics by accessing the organization aspects of the IOC. By
14 doing so the IPC is also able to make use of the same location and facilities as the
15 Summer and Winter Olympic Games.

16 For both organizations, the fit appears to be a win-win. The IPC stakeholders get
17 world class sporting facilities and housing, a worldwide sporting event every four
18 years, and the backing of the IOC and the Olympic movement. The IOC can expand
19 its audience, and facilities use while adhering to the key principles of the Olympic
20 Movement.

21 22 23 **History of Esports**

24
25 The first esports event called the “Spacewar Intergalactic Olympics” was held in
26 1972 at Stanford University (Integrated Service-Portfolio Organization 2023). It was
27 not until 1980 that the first official and registered major tournament in video games
28 was held. Atari chose Space Invaders as the game for the competition which attracted
29 20,000 players in New York (Telefonica 2024). A decade later came the Nintendo
30 World Championships which had qualifying events in 30 American cities and the
31 winners participated in the World Finals in Los Angeles (Telefonica 2024).

32 Starting in the 2000’s, esports grew to have a more traditional sports structure
33 with players, coaches and trainers. In 2022 the League of Legends had 70 million
34 viewers (Telefonica 2024).

35 Today, tournaments are popular, and the most common game genres are
36 Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA, First Person Shooter (FPS), Fighting
37 Games, Card, Battle Royals, and Real-Time Strategy (RTS). Popular esports
38 franchises include Fortnite, League of Legends, Dota, Counter-Strike, Overwatch,
39 Super Smash Brothers, and StarCraft (Wikipedia 2025).

40 There are two foundations that play prominently in the field of esports. The
41 Esports World Cup Foundation (EWCF) which organizes the Esports World Cup and
42 the International Esports Foundation (IEF). The EWCF is the main organizer of the
43 annual esports tournament and is a non-profit funded by Saudi Arabia’s Public
44 Investment Fund. The IEF focus is on the global development and promotion of
45 esports. The IEF clearly states that there are anti-doping regulations in force for
46 esports events (International Esports Federation 2025).

1 In 2017, the IOC and esports began discussions with the National Olympic
2 Committee of Saudi Arabia to introduce esports as a part of the Olympic Games
3 (International Olympic Committee 2024a). At the time of writing this paper, esports
4 was scheduled to hold its inaugural Olympic event in 2025. Subsequently, an
5 announcement was made that the first Olympic Esports Games would be held in 2027
6 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia with support from the Saudi Olympic and Paralympic
7 Committee (SOPC) (International Olympic Committee 2025e).

8 While the summer games and winter games are held on even years, the esports
9 games will be held on odd years, and they are planned for every two years (unlike the
10 summer and winter which are held every four years). The IOC has partnered with the
11 EWCF for the Esports Olympic Games having stated that the EWCF has experience
12 in organizing large esports events such as this (International Olympic Committee
13 2025e). Currently, the details suggest that Olympic medals and diplomas will not be
14 awarded to esports participants; instead, trophies will be awarded. The expectation is
15 that the initial competitions to qualify for the Esports Olympics will begin in 2025.
16 Unlike the Summer and Winter Games, there was no bidding process for the host
17 country. Instead, the IOC partnered with the Saudi Olympic and Paralympic Committee
18 for the organization of the Esport Olympic Games for 12 years (International Olympic
19 Committee 2025e).

20 21 *Viewership and Financial Impact*

22
23 Viewership for esports has a much shorter history in comparison to the Olympics
24 with some news releases suggesting that 2010 was the first year that any statistics
25 were tracked. Since esports is by its very nature an electronic sport, viewers may be
26 at an in-person event or may be watching through a live stream. Those in-person
27 viewers may be deemed to be more dedicated viewers than others who may watch the
28 live stream; however, there may be limitations on the number of in-person viewers
29 depending on location and capacity constraints.

30 According to one source, approximately 90 million individuals watched esports
31 in 2010. It is estimated that in 2025 there would be a global esports audience
32 exceeding 640.8 million fans with 318.1 million dedicated fans and 322.7 million
33 occasional viewers (Kumar 2025). It is worth noting that there is some disparity
34 between sources as to the potential audience with other sources suggesting that the
35 number of viewers is expected to hit 1 billion by 2025 (Pankarkar 2025). This last
36 figure seems significantly higher than other estimates and might refer to a broader
37 definition of ‘viewers’. What cannot be disputed is the rapid growth in esports with
38 reports of it growing from 2020 at approximately 437.7 million viewers to 640.8
39 million viewers by 2025 (Kumar 2025). Of the total esports viewers reported by
40 Kumar (2025), 57% are from countries in Asia, 16% from Europe and 12% from
41 North America (Kumar 2025).

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1 Who needs who?

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3 The Olympics has by far the longest history of the two organizations yet the
4 question of who needs who is more complex when looked at in detail. Both
5 organizations can rationalize that their strong positions make it enticing for the other
6 organization to partner with them; yet this is not a typical IOC partnership. The IOC
7 historically accepts sports for either the Summer or Winter Olympic Games, yet the
8 Esports Olympic Games will be arguably isolated from the other sporting events and
9 has very different needs as far as infrastructure, space, and streaming platforms. While
10 the Paralympic Games are separate from the Olympic Games, they are held at the
11 same time and at the same venue. The historical partnership between the
12 Paralympians and the IOC suggests that the stakeholders of both organizations are
13 benefiting and that it is a win-win for both.

14 In contrast, the Esports Olympic Games are going to be held every two years, in
15 between the Summer and Winter Games. In addition, the Esports Games are not open
16 for host city bidding but rather will be held in Saudi Arabia for the foreseeable future.
17 Clearly, there are differences in this partnership from past partnerships. There is also
18 a risk here that the Olympic rings will be visible in some fashion every single year
19 resulting in the famous five rings not having the same impact or hype.

20 Based on an examination of publicly available information, Olympic viewership
21 fluctuates between 1.9 and 10 billion views over the last decade. Viewership peaked
22 in Lillehammer (1994) with 10.7 billion viewers and since 2012 have remained
23 between 2 and 5 billion viewers. In comparison, esports had 134 million viewers in
24 2012 and have steadily increased viewership to 611 million viewers in 2024. It is
25 forecasted that viewership will increase to 1 billion viewers by 2032, and the market
26 value will be 9.29 billion US dollars. From a strict viewing perspective, while esports
27 is increasing at a much faster rate than the Olympics, both still enjoy strong viewership.

28 In reviewing information about demographics, Olympic viewers tend to be older
29 than esports viewers and that younger Olympic viewers are using streaming platforms
30 to watch both events. Interestingly, one survey suggested that there is growth in
31 esports viewership among Olympic viewers with 39% of Olympic viewers stating
32 that they watch professional esports (Integrated Service-Portfolio Organization 2023).
33 There is also data discussed earlier suggesting that Olympic viewers are also watching
34 esports games; but there is no data to suggest that esports viewers watch Olympic
35 events. Given the aging demographics of the Olympic viewers, having esports as an
36 Olympic event may allow the IOC to tap into the younger esports audience to increase
37 its own viewership. This increase in viewership may have a positive impact on
38 broadcast revenues in the future primarily benefiting the IOC.

39 What does all this imply? Direct financial impact (in terms of dollars) does not
40 appear to be a driving force in this partnership. The IOC uses money raised from
41 broadcast rights to give back to sports organizations and the EWCR is a non-profit
42 organization. However, since broadcast contracts will be based on popularity
43 (viewership) in future negotiations, decreasing Olympic viewership in key demographic
44 categories, namely the younger age groups, could result in reduced future
45 broadcasting revenues for the IOC. The platforms used for esports streaming (e.g.
46 Twitch) could have a direct positive impact on the IOC as currently the IOC only

1 streams the Olympics on NBC's Peacock. Increased Olympic viewership is important
2 to the IOC. Access to esports viewers and platforms could be a key step in this
3 potential increase.

4 What about the other key factors within the IOC Charter? Esports have an
5 international federation and antidoping rules which are two of the main requirements
6 for the IOC to be an Olympic sport. The IOC has partnered with the EWCF which is
7 funded by the Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund. This is arguably a different
8 partnership than other IOC agreements. The Saudi Arabia Public Investment Fund is
9 used strategically by Saudi Arabia for commercial projects. This notion of
10 commercialism may conflict with the IOC's mandate on not politicizing the Olympic
11 Games.

12 If we look at this from a stakeholder theory perspective, IOC will want to balance
13 the needs, wants and demands of its internal and external stakeholder group. For the
14 IOC, we argue that the external stakeholders are the most important group. They want
15 to see that the IOC is making decisions that bring sustainability to the Olympics while
16 maintaining the values that the Olympics uphold. The traditions of the IOC, including
17 their opening and closing ceremonies that celebrate local culture, are key to their
18 stakeholders.

19 The esports stakeholders are interesting. Most are either the esports participants
20 themselves or the viewers that watch them either in person or via streaming services.
21 Even the awards given to esports winners will be different (trophies instead of medals
22 and diplomas). It is difficult to state that these stakeholders hold the same value of the
23 Olympics and the overall Olympic Movement.

24 So, who wins? On one hand, the IOC potentially gains the younger esports
25 viewers, thereby creating a new era of Olympic watchers and ultimately strong
26 broadcasting revenues but they run a risk of having organized Olympic Games every
27 year. The Olympics have always had a buildup 'hype' to them, creating increasing
28 excitement as the anticipation of the Games begins to grow. While the esports games
29 are clearly different from what most viewers would deem to be more traditional
30 Olympic Games, is that enough to increase viewers in the younger demographic, or
31 would the aura of the Games overall diminish if the famous Olympic rings were
32 advertised every year?

33 Esports gains the Olympic rings in its Olympic sports competition with trophies
34 instead of medals, appearing to cater towards that younger demographic. However, if
35 this younger demographic has a lower interest in the Olympics, do those rings and
36 IOC values really matter to them? In addition, does the introduction of a partnership
37 with commercial ties potentially taint the overall mission of the IOC?

38 We think that overall, both the IOC and Esports may get a win-win from this new
39 partnership, but there is the risk that they reduce the overall anticipation of the
40 Olympics with their yearly Olympic competitions. The risk to esports, in our opinion,
41 is not at issue; the risk to the special nature of the Olympic rings and the brand may
42 be the bigger risk.

43

1 Conclusion

2
3 This paper explored the history of the Olympic Games and esports by searching
4 the internet for relevant information for both sports. The history, viewership, missions
5 and strategic directions of both were examined. Through the information gathered,
6 the impacts of both the Olympics and esports were discussed. Based on information
7 obtained, we determine that the IOC and esports would initially have a win-win in this
8 partnership but at risk is the overall aura of the Olympic rings and brand. Since the
9 initial announcement, a change in date to 2027 has already occurred for the first
10 Esports Olympics. It remains to be seen how this new partnership makes out. Future
11 research may examine the lead up to the 2027 Games and how both organizations use
12 each other to further their own goals. In answer to our original question of who needs
13 who? We conclude that at least, in this early stage, that it may be more of a want than
14 a need - they want each other!

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1 **Appendix I. Selected Olympic Games Viewership**

Olympic Game	Global Viewership	Type
Paris 2024 (International Olympic Committee 2024d)	5 billion viewers	Summer Olympics
Beijing 2022 (International Olympic Committee 2022)	2 billion viewers	Winter Olympics
Tokyo 2020 (Reeves 2024)	3 billion viewers	Summer Olympics
PyeongChang 2018 (Statista 2025)	1.92 billion viewers	Winter Olympics
Rio 2016 (Reeves 2024)	3.2 billion viewers	Summer Olympics
Sochi 2014 (Statista 2025)	2.1 billion viewers	Winter Olympics
London 2012 (Reeves 2024)	3.6 billion viewers	Summer Olympics
Vancouver 2010 (Statista 2025)	1.2 billion viewers	Winter Olympics
Beijing 2008 (Reeves 2024)	4.7 billion viewers	Summer Olympics
Torino 2006 (Sport Marketing Survey 2006)	3.1 billion viewers	Winter Olympics
Athens 2004 (Reeves 2024)	3.9 billion viewers	Summer Olympics
Salt Lake City 2002 (Sport Marketing Survey 2006)	2.1 billion viewers	Winter Olympics
Sydney 2000 (Reeves 2024)	3.6 billion viewers	Summer Olympics

2