

The Olympics and Esports: Who Needs Who?

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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

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

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

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

Currently there is not a single organization that represents the esports community, but the Esports World Cup Foundation (EWCF) has been designated as the founding partner for the Olympic Esports Games. The EWCF is a nonprofit organization funded by the Saudi Arabia's Investment Fund. Unlike the Summer and Winter Olympic Games, which countries bid on to host in their country, it is the IOC's intent to keep the Olympic esports in Saudi Arabia for the next 12 years (International Olympic Committee 2024a).

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

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

While both the IOC and esports have achieved individual success, their announced partnership would appear, on the surface, to be an unusual match. This descriptive

paper seeks to better understand why the IOC and esports have partnered together to offer an Olympic Esports Games. Through an analysis of news releases and websites, we examined each organization's history, mission and vision. Our objective was to look for common ground and themes between the organizations suggesting partnering with each other was a good fit. We also looked at other partnerships that the IOC has formed over the years to look for those common themes leading to the partnership. We then conclude on the fundamental reasons why each believes that the arrangement is a win and who may benefit most from the arrangement.

Data Collection

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

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

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

Organizational Decision Making

Throughout the world individuals are quite used to cheering on their respective country every two years as they compete against other countries in the Olympic

summer and winter games. The Olympics is arguably the most prominent overall sporting event in the world.

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

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

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

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

In negotiations, Fisher and Ury (2011) suggest that understanding the interests of all parties is key in successful negotiations. Recognizing shared goals and values will help to establish a framework where negotiations are more apt to be a win-win. Ultimately, through balanced negotiations, it is possible to come to mutually agreeable solutions that benefit all organizations involved.

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

Stakeholder theory has been used in the past studies on the Olympic Games (Hautbois et al. 2012) and the bidding process a country goes through to become the winning bidder. In their review of stakeholder theory, Mahajan et. al (2023, p. 1) defined it as:

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

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

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

The International Olympic Committee and Olympic Games

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

History of the Olympic Games

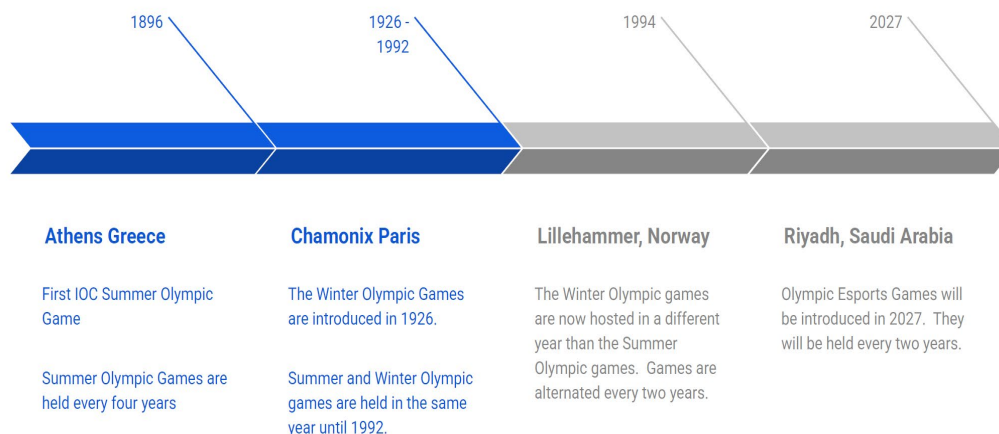
The Ancient Olympic Games started in 776 BCE and lasted for approximately 12 centuries (International Olympic Committee 2025f). These games were quite brutal and often resulted in severe injuries or even death.

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

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

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

Image 1. *The Growth of Olympics*



Becoming an Olympic Sport

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

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

Viewership and Financial Impact

Viewership was, not surprisingly, limited to live audiences for the early modern Olympics from 1896 to the early 1920's. The Olympic Games held in Chamonix in 1924 had limited global media access (International Olympic Committee 2013). In 1936, the Olympics tested television for the first time with the first live television broadcast occurring in 1956 at the Winter Games in Italy (International

Olympic Committee 2013). It was not until 1964 when the Olympics were held in Tokyo, Japan, that audiences around the world were able to see the competitions live via satellite with only seconds in delays.

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

A more detailed scan of the viewership through various websites suggests that while viewership may be remaining strong, they tend to be older with one study suggesting that in 2010, ages 55 plus had a significantly higher viewership than those 18 to 49. The age group 12 to 17 had an even lower viewership (Nielson Insights 2010). Another study suggests that 30% of individuals under the age of 18 watch the Olympics, and 28% of individuals aged 18-24 watch the Olympics (Center for Digital Future 2018). In contrast 41% and 43% of individuals aged 55-64 and 65-74 respectively watch the Olympics (Center for Digital Future 2018). A review of the IOC website revealed that the IOC does not have statistics on viewership by age, but by its own admission in 2024, the IOC stated that it was imperative that they reach out to both a younger audience and younger athletes (Grohmann 2024). The IOC has further stated its prioritization for a digital revolution through its Agenda 2020+5 document. In this document, they listed 15 recommendations with digital engagement growth and virtual sports being two of the key recommendations (International Olympic Committee 2023b).

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

The Olympic Movement and Strategy

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

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

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

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

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

Recommendation 9: Encourage the development of virtual sports and further engage with video gaming communities.

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

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

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

The Paralympic Organizational Fit

The IOC oversees the Olympic movement which includes the rules that govern the Olympics and spearheading the bids that countries make to host the Olympic Games. However, not all Olympic events are overseen by the IOC even though they bear the familiar five Olympic rings. The Paralympics is discussed

here as they provide an important comparison as we examine the relative fit between the Olympics and esports.

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

The IPC oversees the Paralympic movement. This includes the organization of the Paralympic Games and as the international federation for the nine paralympic sports (International Paralympic Committee 2025). In 2016, the IOC and the IPC signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to work together to ensure the future success of the Paralympic Games (International Olympic Committee 2016). This MOU extends previous agreements until 2032, noting, among other key points, that the agreement seeks to “Deepening existing cooperation, specifically on the implementation of Olympic Agenda 2020, the strategic roadmap for the future of the Olympic Movement” (International Olympic Committee 2016). The news release also quoted the then IOC President Thomas Bach. “The IOC and IPC share the same goal of making the world a better place through sport, and I look forward to our two organisations working closely together to achieve this. The IPC’s focus on sport for all and on high-level performance will enable it to reach more and more people around the world, and to ensure the organisation’s long-term success.” (International Olympic Committee 2016).

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

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

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Esports World Cup Foundation (EWCF)

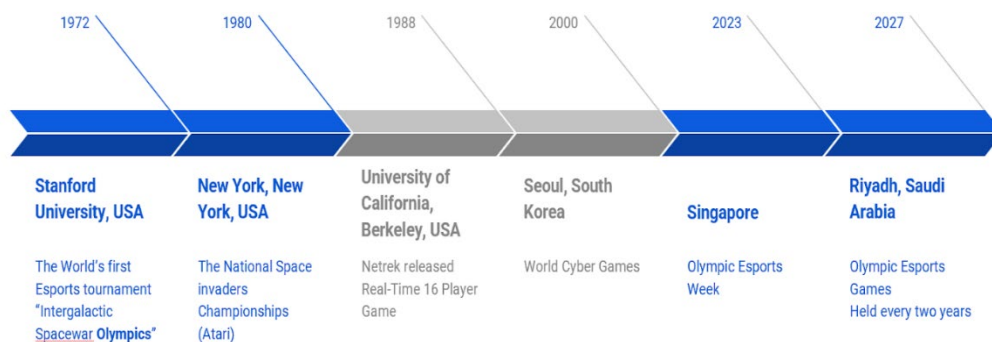
The Esports World Cup Foundation (EWCF) organizes the Esports World Cup and was established in 2023. The EWCF is the main organizer of the annual esports tournament and is a non-profit funded by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund.

History of Esports

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

Starting in the 2000's, esports grew to have a more traditional sports structure with players, coaches and trainers. In 2022 the League of Legends had 70 million viewers (Telefonica 2024). See image 2 for a visual timeline of esports.

Image 2. *Timeline of Esports*



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

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

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

Viewership and Financial Impact

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

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

Who needs who?

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) is a not-for-profit independent organization that is committed to building a better world through sport. The IOC is the leader of the Olympic movement and is responsible for the collaboration among all entities within the Olympic family (International Olympic Committee 2025).

The Esports World Cup Federation (EWCF) is a non-profit organization established in 2023 to advance and professionalize the esports industry on a global scale. The EWCF is funded by a sports grant from the Saudi Arabian government's Public Investment Fund (PIF). The EWCF is part of Saudi Arabia's broader National

Gaming and Esports Strategy, aligning with its Vision 2030 objectives of diversifying the economy, growing the tourism sector, creating jobs, and providing world-class entertainment (Dixon 2024).

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

In contrast, the Esports Olympic Games are going to be held every two years, in between the Summer and Winter Games. In addition, the Esports Games are not open for host city bidding but rather will be held in Saudi Arabia for the foreseeable future. Clearly, there are differences in this partnership from past partnerships.

Is there also a risk that since the Olympic rings will be visible in some fashion every single year those famous five rings may lose some of their hype or impact? Marketing studies suggest that increasing the use of a logo can have positive effects including an increase in areas such as brand recognition, brand identity, credibility and loyalty. Studies also suggest the potential for negative effects such as dilution of the brand, a loss of exclusivity, and potential confusion (American Marketing Association 2025 & Wheeler 2017). The Olympic rings logo is well established and arguably as iconic as the Nike Swoosh logo. However, the rings are not part of a commercial company but rather a non-profit organization. Is it possible that confusion (as noted above) will set in with viewers about whether the Olympics are indeed non-profit or leaning towards commercialization? Time will most likely tell the story.

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

In reviewing information about demographics, Olympic viewers tend to be older than esports viewers and that younger Olympic viewers are using streaming platforms to watch both events. Interestingly, one survey suggested that there is growth in esports viewership among Olympic viewers with 39% of Olympic viewers stating that they watch professional esports (Integrated Service-Portfolio Organization 2023). There is also data discussed earlier suggesting that Olympic viewers are also watching esports games; but there is little data to suggest that esports viewers watch

Olympic events. Why is that? In part, it could be that it is difficult to separate the two; however, there is demographic information to support this. For example, in addition to the above, a recent article noted the demographic differences between the two sports. Esports viewers are typically younger and are much more inclined to use streaming platforms. The ability to access the esports content on these platforms and to engage with them, often for free, is distinctly different from the Olympics (Millions 2025). This same article also suggests that younger viewers are not as drawn to traditional sports (tennis, football, basketball), instead showing more interest in mental agility sports such as Counter-Strike (Millions 2025). This has also not gone unnoticed by the IOC as one of their 15 recommendations was to 'grow digital engagement with people' along with developing virtual sports as previously mentioned (International Olympic Committee 2023b). They also recommend developing what the IOC termed 'phygital' experiences where they would have both physical and digital portions during the games (International Olympic Committee 2023b). So, while we cannot conclusively state that esports viewers do not watch the Olympics, the IOC is clearly targeting digital content, and younger viewers which suggests strongly that they believe this is a key area of future growth.

Given the aging demographics of the Olympic viewers, having esports as an Olympic event may allow the IOC to tap into the younger esports audience to increase its own viewership. This increase in viewership may have a positive impact on broadcast revenues in the future primarily benefiting the IOC.

What does all this imply? Direct financial impact (in terms of dollars) does not appear to be a driving force in this partnership. The IOC uses money raised from broadcast rights to give back to sports organizations and the EWCF is a non-profit organization. However, since broadcast contracts will be based on popularity (viewership) in future negotiations, decreasing Olympic viewership in key demographic categories, namely the younger age groups, could result in reduced future broadcasting revenues for the IOC. The platforms used for esports streaming (e.g. Twitch) could have a direct positive impact on the IOC as currently the IOC only streams the Olympics on NBC's Peacock. Increased Olympic viewership is important to the IOC. Access to esports viewers and platforms could be a key step in this potential increase.

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

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

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

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

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

We think that overall, both the IOC and esports may ultimately get a win-win from this new partnership but that some risks are present. One could argue that there is potential risk for esports should their stakeholders place diminished value on the partnership because it may appear to be mainstream. However, we believe most of the risk rests with the IOC. There is the risk that they may reduce the overall anticipation of the Olympics with their yearly Olympic competitions and potential oversaturation of the Olympic brand (Wheeler 2017). In addition, while the line between traditional sports and esports may be somewhat blurring (with strong esports games such as soccer, hockey, and football being supported by their respective leagues), the choice of esports games at the Olympics may ultimately be the biggest risk factor. Esports viewers are drawn to the games noted in this paper (League of Legends, Counter-strike) which is in direct contrast to the historical stance of the IOC of non-violence. Given these points and the sheer work of the IOC to attempt to blend and weave the games of esports into the Olympic fabric suggests the ultimate risk lies with the IOC.

Conclusion

This paper explored the history of the Olympic Games and esports by searching the internet for relevant information for both sports. The history, viewership, missions and strategic directions of both were examined. This examination was important as it allowed for a comparison of both organizations, in turn, allowing for similarities and differences to become apparent that may impact the partnership.

Through the information gathered, the impacts of both the Olympics and esports were discussed. Based on information obtained, we determine that the IOC and esports would initially have a win-win in this partnership but there were some

near-term risks and some longer-term risks that would most likely reside with the IOC. In the near term, the choice of esports games and how this information is transmitted to potential viewers will have an important impact on the success. In the longer term, there could be a risk that the overall aura of the Olympic rings and its brand will be diminished with over saturation or an unsuccessful launch of the esports games. Conversely, while it is too early to tell, there is also a potential risk that esports viewers will see the partnership between the two organizations as an attempt to mainstream esports.

This paper was limited by data. While data does exist on Olympic viewers and data also exists for esports viewers, there is limited information on cross viewership. While we know that esports viewers are mostly younger and that traditional sports and Olympic viewers are typically older, the data does not pinpoint if esports viewer 'A' is also an Olympic viewer or if Olympic viewer 'B' is also an esports viewer. However, we do know that the IOC has digital platforms and events on their recommendation list which does support the importance of this discussion.

Since the initial announcement, a change in date to 2027 has already occurred for the first Esports Olympics. It remains to be seen how this new partnership makes out. Future research may examine the lead up to the 2027 Games and how both organizations use each other to further their own goals. Particularly, we will be interested to continue to watch how this partnership unfolds and how the demographics of each organization's viewership may change.

In answer to our original question of who needs who? We conclude that at least, in this early stage, that it may be more of a want than a need - they want each other!

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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

