**Beyond the esports horizon in sport psychology: An introduction to the special issue**

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Welcome to this special issue in Case Studies in Sport and Exercise Psychology, which focuses on the applied sport psychology practice landscape, within the world of esports. In this prologue, we aim to provide a contextual backdrop regarding the unprecedented growth of esports, elucidate the current status quo of sport psychology practice in the world of esports, and highlight the growing call for case studies to bridge the research–practice gap to better inform practitioners operating in esports. In this prologue, we also provide brief commentaries on the four case studies contained in this special issue, to give readers an insight on what to expect. Finally, in this special issue, we offer an epilogue that shares key reflections from the four case studies, as well as future research and practice opportunities in the exciting world of esports.

Keywords: applied sport psychology, sport psychology professionals, electronic sports, prologue

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Since 2010, the esports industry has grown rapidly in terms of value, viewership, and participation, with esports now being considered a digital melting pot shared by media, entertainment, and sport (Scholz, 2020). Indeed, the esports global fan growth increased from 397 million viewers in 2019 to 474 million in 2021, with viewership projections estimated to grow in excess of 640 million by 2025 (Newzoo, 2022). Moreover, some are comparing League of Legend World Finals as more significant than the Super Bowl (Pei, 2019). Although esports continues to grow exponentially, scholars have yet to reach agreement on how esports is best defined (see Bubna et al., 2023). Although the lack of a consensus on how esports is defined can create ambiguity, our intention is not to add to this; yet, we believe that it is necessary to share how we define esports for the purpose of this prologue. As such, we align with the widely cited definition offered by Pedraza- Ramirez et al. (2020, p. 6), who defined esports as “the casual or organized competitive activity of playing specific video games that provide professional and/or personal development to the player.” Furthermore, Pedraza-Ramirez et al. (2020) stated that esports is facilitated by electronic systems (e.g., computers, consoles, mobile phones) wherein teams or individuals practice and compete online or local-area-network tournaments at either a professional or amateur level. Importantly, to distinguish esports from gaming, within esports, the majority of games have established ranking systems and competitions that are regulated by official leagues.

Despite the increased attention on esports, there continues to be widespread debate on whether esports should be recognized as a sport (see Naraine, 2021; Parry, 2019). Although it is beyond the scope of this prologue to provide a critical discourse on the similarities and differences between esport and traditional sport, several noteworthy parallels can be drawn between esport and traditional sport that are relevant for sport psychology practitioners (SPPs) to consider. First, the most striking similarity between esports and traditional sports is that both are characterized by their achievement-oriented cultures that place competition center stage (Jenny et al., 2017). As such, a strong performance narrative can evoke several pressures, demands, and stressors on esports players, coaches, and the wider support staff, which if not managed effectively, could negatively impair their performance and wellbeing. Second, much like their traditional sport counterparts, esports utilize a range of psychological skills (Himmelstein et al., 2017) and coping strategies (Smith et al., 2021) to perform optimally. Nevertheless, due to the reduction of nonverbal communication during gameplay, the importance of verbal communication has been highlighted as a key determinant for success (Poulus et al., 2022). Moreover, with the online nature of esports, coaches and players can often be found engaging in extended hours of practice, often known as the “grind” culture of esports (Abbott et al., 2022). Therefore, it seems plausible to suggest that esports players require support systems, such as SPPs, to help navigate the performance culture of esports. Indeed, this notion supports the growing call for SPPs to be employed in organizations to support individuals in an esports context (Cottrell et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2021).

Given the increased professionalization of esports, which is evidenced through the rapidly expanding number of full-time players and lucrative tournaments, there has been a natural increase in investment regarding support structures, such as multidisciplinary teams, and importantly, SPPs. Nevertheless, while the application of sport psychology into the world of esports may still be considered in its infancy, now seems an important time to encourage trainees and qualified practitioners to step into the realms of esports. From our experience, the skills of a SPP are well-suited to the challenges faced within professional esports teams, with team cohesion (Swettenham & Whitehead, 2022), stress (Poulus et al., 2022; Leis & Lautenbach, 2020), and mental ill-health (Birch et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2022) being just some of the performance challenges reported within the esports literature. This makes it vital to increase the presence of trainee and qualified SPPs within esports who are able to operate in an ethical and effective manner at all levels within an organization (e.g., players, coaches, CEO).

To successfully navigate the esports landscape, contextual awareness is integral. Esports is truly unique, from the language used (e.g., tilt, scrims, draft) to the team structure and day-to-day processes of a team (e.g., often a blend of online and offline work). Of course, SPPs enter an array of performance environments regularly and are required to approach the culture with curiosity and an open mind to understand the intricacies of each system. Despite this, the shift into esports can be wildly different to what has previously been experienced within traditional sport. For example, factors such as youthful management, the ability for anyone to start an esports team, lack of esports coaching training or qualifications, and a wide array of esports titles and genres can make navigating the esports environment a minefield.

Although SPPs are well-suited to operating in esports, several entering this frontier are arguably ill-prepared. Added to this, few studies (Cottrell et al., 2019) exist that provide guidance on working ethically and effectively within an esports context. Much like traditional sports, there also exists a number of “mental coaches” in esports. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to better educate individuals working in esports on what it means to be a qualified SPP and ensure high ethical standards are always upheld. By empowering SPPs to explore the unique world of esports, we hope to promote ethically sound and effective practice which in turn, will be recognised and sought after from esports organizations and coaching staff. Therefore, esports has the potential to generate new career opportunities for trainee and qualified SPPs, as well as advance a profession in what is already a saturated market within traditional sports.

In drawing this prologue to a close, we offer brief summaries of the four case studies that feature in the special issue. We begin this special issue with a case study by Bubna et al. (2024) which features the application of a constraints-led approach to a semi-professional LoL team. Specifically, the case study outlines a performance coach’s manipulation of the training environment to develop the coordination and communication of the team in question. The authors also share key reflections in how to effectively implement a constraints-led approach when working in an esports context.

We then transition to a novel case study by Pedraza-Ramirez et al. (2024), who draw on a holistic ecological approach to talent development with an elite League of Legends (LoL) team. Through interviews and observations with esports players and coaches, the authors provide insights into the structures and influences on an elite LoL environment. Again critical reflections are shared highlighting the importance of understanding a team’s organizational culture and how to foster a strong organizational culture amidst a domain characterized by its volatility and dominating performance narrative.

The next case study comes from Brain et al. (2024) who share three confessional tales as trainee sport psychologists when working with a national Overwatch esports team during the preparation period for a World Cup. Contained within the confessional tale are critical reflections related to the limited time afforded to offer sport psychology support, the misalignment in values experienced with the players and staff in the organization, and the challenges of providing sport psychology support without the presence of visual cues. In addition, recommendations for best practice are offered when seeking to work with elite esports teams and ensure effective and ethical practice.

In concluding the special issue, Agrawal et al. (2024) share multicultural reflections from the lens of a trainee sport and exercise psychologist working with a professional, multicultural esports team. Critical reflections are centred around the T-R-E-E-S model (see Gupta, 2022) highlighting the multicultural context when working in esports, customizing interventions from a multicultural perspective, exploring how language and culture impact team cohesion, and considering individual boundaries in personal-disclosure interventions. Applied practice recommendations that promote multicultural practice in esports are offered. Through this special issue and the four case studies contained within, we hope that we can support the expansion of sport psychology into the exciting world of esports and advocate for effective and ethical practice that upholds professional standards.

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