

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326372787>

E-sports are Not Sports

Article in *Sport Ethics and Philosophy* · July 2018

DOI: 10.1080/17511321.2018.1489419

CITATIONS

66

READS

16,268

1 author:



Jim Parry

Charles University in Prague

99 PUBLICATIONS 677 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

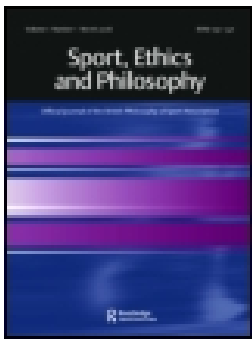
Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Spirituality of movement and spiritual health [View project](#)



Physical Education and Sport [View project](#)



E-sports are Not Sports

Jim Parry

To cite this article: Jim Parry (2018): E-sports are Not Sports, Sport, Ethics and Philosophy

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2018.1489419>



Published online: 12 Jul 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



E-sports are Not Sports

Jim Parry^{a,b}

^aFaculty of Physical Education and Sport, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic; ^bFaculty of Physical Culture, Palacky University, Olomouc, Czech Republic

ABSTRACT

The conclusion of this paper will be that e-sports are not sports. I begin by offering a stipulation and a definition. I stipulate that what I have in mind, when thinking about the concept of sport, is 'Olympic' sport. And I define an Olympic Sport as an *institutionalised, rule-governed contest of human physical skill*. The justification for the stipulation lies partly in that it is uncontroversial. Whatever else people might think of as sport, no-one denies that Olympic Sport is sport. This seeks to ensure that those who might wish to dispute my conclusion might stay with the argument at least for as long as possible. Secondly, the justification for the stipulation lies partly in its normativity—I have chosen an Olympic conception of sport just because it seems to me to offer some kind of desirable version of what sport is and might become. Thirdly, I give examples which show how prominent promoters of e-sports agree with my stipulation, as evidenced by their strenuous attempts to comply with it in order to join the Olympic club. The justification for the definition lies in the conceptual analysis offered—an 'exhibition-analysis' which clarifies the concept of sport by offering 'construals' of the six first-level terms. The conclusion is that e-sports are not sports because they are inadequately 'human'; they lack direct physicality; they fail to employ decisive whole-body control and whole-body skills, and cannot contribute to the development of the whole human; and because their patterns of creation, production, ownership and promotion place serious constraints on the emergence of the kind of stable and persisting institutions characteristic of sports governance. Competitive computer games do not qualify as sports, no matter what 'resemblances' may be claimed. Computer games are just that—games.

KEYWORDS

Computer games; e-sports; exhibition-analysis; Olympic

1. Introduction

You can call your health promotion programme a health education programme, if you like; but the naming of it does not make it into an educational programme. To assess your health promotion programme, we would need a concept of education against which to test whether it really is a health education programme. Similarly, you can call computer games e-sports if you like, but we really should test this usage, to see if e-sports really are sports. For this, we will need a concept of sport.

Let me begin by offering a stipulation and a definition. I shall stipulate that what I have in mind, when thinking about the concept of sport, is Olympic Sport.¹ And I shall define an Olympic Sport as an *institutionalised, rule-governed contest of human physical skill*.

The justification for the stipulation lies partly in that it is uncontroversial. Whatever else people might think of as sport, no-one denies that Olympic Sport is sport.² This seeks to ensure that those who might wish to dispute my conclusion might stay with my argument at least for as long as possible. Secondly, the justification for the stipulation lies partly in its normativity—I have chosen an Olympic conception of sport just because it seems to me to offer some kind of desirable version of what sport is and might become. I make no apology for this—indeed I claim credit for being up-front and explicit about the basis of my account, and I give examples which show how prominent promoters of e-sports agree with this basis, as evidenced by their strenuous attempts to join the Olympic club.

The justification for the definition lies in the conceptual analysis offered—an ‘exhibition analysis’ which clarifies the concept of sport by offering ‘construals’ of the six first-level terms. The conclusion is that competitive computer games do not qualify as sports, no matter what ‘resemblances’ may be claimed.

2. Conceptual Methodology

People use the word ‘sport’ to refer to all sorts of things. Hunting, shooting and fishing are ‘field sports’; bull-fighting is a ‘blood sport’; jogging is a ‘recreational sport’; chess and bridge are ‘mind sports’; dance wants to be dance-sport; yoga wants to be yoga-sport. Our question is: are all these things really sports? Does anything count as a sport, if someone wants to call it a sport? Does e-sport count as a sport, just because someone *wants* to call it a sport?

To address these questions, we need a methodology, and I shall employ the technique of conceptual analysis, which involves the search for ‘logically necessary conditions’ for the use of a word. I shall suggest six such logically necessary conditions for ‘sports’. To begin with, they are all **human** activities. Animals might play, but they don’t have sport. Secondly, they are **physical** activities—by which I mean that the physical element is crucial to direct engagement in the activity, and to its outcome, and thirdly it is physical **skill** that is at issue. Fourthly, all sports are **contests** (competitions) and, fifthly, they are governed by **rules**. Finally, sports are **institutionalised**, with national and international federations administering their affairs.

If we put these six ‘criteria’ together, we arrive at a simple definition of sports, as: ***institutionalised rule-governed contests of human physical skill***. As well as providing defining features (characteristics) of sport, they also provide a ‘demarcation criterion’ (that is, they also tell you what sport is *not*). This is illustrated as follows:

human	(not animals)
physical	(not chess)
skill	(not jogging)
contest	(not mountaineering)
rule-governed	(not ‘field sports’)
institutionalised	(not hula-hooping)

An objection to this project might suggest that the motivation to provide such an account (a conceptual analysis) arises merely from a kind of academic tidiness—harmless enough, but useless—allied to a barely concealed penchant for conceptual prescription (which, of course, assumes what it purports to demonstrate). If this were true, it would apply not only to me, but to everyone else: for anyone who wishes to talk about (or do research about) any other kind of sport—such as recreation sport, exercise sport, sport training, blood sports, outdoor sports, dance-sport, yoga-sport, board-games sport, card-games sport, etc.—owes us just such a conceptual analysis. For research purposes, for example, the researcher stands in need of an operational definition of the kind of sport he or she intends to research—and this will involve at least an element of conceptual analysis and stipulation. No-one can research ‘sport’ *simpliciter*. The term applies across so many different kinds of activity, that we shall stand in need of some kind of specification, or qualification.

Sometimes those seeking a value-neutral analysis might attempt to clarify the meaning of a concept through investigating its etymology, taking the view that a definition should not provide an account of what a word *should* mean, but what it actually *has meant*, and in this way hoping to avoid the introduction of prescriptive elements. However, this version of the ‘genetic fallacy’ will not do the job required of it, since it commits the very offence against which it seeks to alert us: it asserts that what a word actually *has meant* is what it *should mean*. Notoriously, then, here is a normative activity dressed in value-neutral clothing.

Another way of escaping the requirement upon any researcher to offer their own account of their central concept(s), together with an explanation and justification of their preferred analysis, is to rely upon some authority. This is the route chosen, for example, by Jenny et al. (2017) and Llorens (2017), who both settle on two authoritative pronouncements regarding the definition of sport, those of Guttman (1978) and Suits (1988 or 2007). Their tactic is a simple one: first rehearse the authoritative version of what counts as ‘sport’, together with some announced definitional criteria; then show that e-sports conform in some way to this version. However, it is open to the following objections: firstly, neither of these accounts (from the history of the sociology of sport, and the history of the philosophy of sport) has been justified by the authors who use it – each is simply accepted as an authoritative account of the concept of sport. It is therefore vulnerable to any successful objection to the account, which would collapse the argument built upon it. Secondly, any (re-)application of any one of the ‘authoritative’ criteria stands in need of construal and explanation—not just *any* sense of ‘physical’, for example, will do.

A further objection to this project queries the stipulation. It can always be asked: why did you start here? I shall try to answer by describing perhaps the most outstanding example of this sort of enquiry – that of Flew (1954), Baier (1955) and Benn (1958), amongst others, into the concept of ‘punishment’, resulting in Hart’s widely accepted summary (1962, 4–6). It might be objected that the philosophers of punishment mentioned above were all working in a commonly-accepted and very well understood normative context which took for granted that the concept of punishment under investigation was a jurisprudential concept. They were all talking about ‘punishment’ *under the law*. This enabled them to sidestep many usages of the word that are perfectly acceptable in extra-judicial contexts (five of which are mentioned by Hart on his p. 6), but that become confusing when trying to meet the lawyers’ requirements.

So they had a very particular starting-point. When concentrating on fixing their normative jurisprudential usage, these philosophers were overlooking the many ‘ordinary language’ conceptions of punishment, which seem to us perfectly acceptable in non-judicial contexts.

This is because their interest lay in discovering a justifiable and useful concept for their purposes.

I shall be doing something similar in this essay, where I insist upon fixing a particular concept of sport, and showing the consequences that flow from it. This involves distinguishing ‘Olympic’ sport from activities sometimes called sport, such as blood sports, outdoor sports, mind-sports, etc. I regard the exercise as one of explication—of clarification—of making clearer to oneself (and to others) what one is talking about by providing a conceptual ‘map of the logical terrain’ by using the Wittgensteinian method which Stephan Körner called ‘exhibition-analysis’.

Exhibition-analysis consists in making indicative or normative propositions which are more or less implicitly accepted by a person or a group of persons fully explicit. (Körner 1990, 130)

So I take it as my first task here to make fully explicit what ‘Olympic sport’ means, as it is more or less implicitly understood and accepted by those who accept that Olympic sport is, paradigmatically, sport, and I shall begin this task in the next section. As a final preliminary we should, however, point out some limitations of the technique of exhibition analysis, and anticipate some objections:

(1) It cannot yield an analysis of *the* concept of sport

It can only yield an analysis of *a* concept of sport. We are all situated in time and place. ‘Sport’ in eighteenth century England might have meant ‘killing animals in the countryside’. In sixteenth century England it might have meant ‘an amusement’. In contemporary Russia, the word might mean, ambiguously, ‘sport and game’. Since I am situated in Europe in the twenty-first century, I am aiming at an analysis of the meaning of sport, here and now, without prejudice to what it might have meant historically, or what it might mean elsewhere.

(2) It is also a conditional exercise

If you are not prepared to go along with my initial stipulation, and to grant me your patience whilst I exhibit (what seem to me to be) its consequences, then this paper will have little to offer you. Remember, however, that you must perform just such an exercise for yourself (and for others) if we are to learn anything from you—if we are to be able to discern what would be the consequences of adopting your alternative view.

(3) It is also a necessarily incomplete exercise

This is because one concept, sport, can only be explicated in terms of other concepts—and I suggest six: sports are *institutionalised, rule-governed contests of human physical skill*. However, each one of these second-level explanatory components is itself a concept, standing in need of its own explication, which can only be achieved via a further conceptual analysis, and a third-level explanation. This exercise could plainly proceed ad infinitum, although in practice we usually settle for much less. The point is: each second-level concept (e.g. ‘physical’, or ‘contest’, as a component of ‘sport’) requires construal. Not just *any* interpretation of ‘physical’ will do, as an adequate specification what is required to secure the meaning of ‘sport’.

(4) There will always be ‘borderline’ issues

Birds fly and lay eggs, whereas mammals are land-living and vivaporous. But the ostrich doesn't fly, the platypus lays eggs, and dolphins live in the sea like fish. The desire to classify inevitably throws up hard cases such as these, which require second-level explanations, and sub-categories (for example, dolphins are 'marine mammals'). And if we *must* provide an account of 'sport' (which national funding bodies must do, in order to determine who is and is not eligible to receive funding) then we give ourselves borderline issues. Why is ice-dance sport, if ballet is not? Why is darts (which is like small-javelin-throwing) not sport, whereas javelin is? Football and chess are both games—why should one receive funding, and not the other? At the borderlines, some categorisation decisions must be (to some extent) 'arbitrary'. However, the existence of a certain arbitrariness at the borderlines does not vitiate the whole exercise. We still know (by and large) a bird from a mammal from a fish. What we are trying to do it to find good reasons, where good reasons are possible, and to reduce arbitrariness to a minimum.

(5) Some object to conceptual imperialism

I reject the accusation that I am trying to force everyone to acknowledge my own preferred concept of sport. I claim merely to be mapping the logical geography of Olympic sport, which I think most people nowadays would agree to be archetypically sport.

I concur with Waismann, who argued that '... the ideal of correctness is a deadening one, it is vain to set up a language police to stem living developments.' (1968, 186) I am not (*per impossibile*) railing against the historical development of the concept of sport; but that does not mean that *any* suggested development is a sensible one. In the present case, I will be arguing against the idea that computer gaming is sensibly to be described as sport.

(6) This essay is not 'against' computer games

Finally, it is most important to point out that this essay is not 'against' computer games. Let a thousand flowers bloom. This essay simply argues that competitive computer games should not be confused with sports. Whether or not computer games are in some sense 'desirable' pursuits is a separate question.

The Concept of (Olympic) Sport

'Sport' means (and moreover has meant) many things to many people, across time and space – in history and geography. It is possible to find some similarity or connection between something that someone at one time or place had wanted to call sport, and whatever it is that you might want to call 'sport' in the here and now.

Dictionary definitions give sport (as a noun) as diversion, recreation, pleasant pastime, jest, fun, mirth, pleasantry, mockery, ridicule, derision, and more. Also (as a verb): to amuse oneself; to play, frolic, or gambol; to trifle or treat lightly; to sport (as with another's emotions); to mock, scoff, or tease. And this is without even mentioning the question of translatability across languages. We might even be tempted to say that one could call almost anything 'sport'.

All this is nothing to do with us. We are interested only in what sport means now—in that meaning, also found in dictionaries, that begins to be captured as 'an athletic activity

requiring skill or physical prowess and often of a competitive nature'. This begins to rule some activities out, as non-sport. For example, we do something *like* sport when we take physical recreation (walking the dog, or jogging in the park), or when we exercise (mountain biking with friends on Sundays), or when we are being trained/coached for sport (involving perhaps a small-sided conditioned game of football). But none of these is sport. They are recreation, exercise and training.

Notice, also, that a particular activity (e.g. football, tennis, netball, running, etc.) might be the occasion for any of these – recreation, exercise, or training. If I take a ball into my garden, and juggle it for a while, alone on the lawn, there is a sense in which I am playing football. Or a football event might be simply a kick-about amongst the family—not even football in its game-form. Or it might be an informal game of football in the park, with four coats as 'posts', 4 players against 5, and some ad hoc rules to suit circumstances. Or it might be Manchester United vs Manchester City in the Premiership. All four are examples of 'football'; but only the last is an example of football played as a sport.

However, the above assertions must be justified, and to attempt this, I shall propose six logically necessary conditions for the use of the word 'sport' (understood as 'Olympic sport').

2.1. Human

Sport is a human enterprise. Whilst it is true that many animals (as well as human animals) frolic, gambol and play, other animals do not organise sports for themselves. And whilst it is true that animals sometimes participate in sport, they do so always and only at the behest of humans. The same is true of machines: where they are part of sport, they are always and only under the control of humans.

There is also an issue regarding the *degree* of human control, or the *significant contribution* of animal or machine involvement. Equestrian events are part of Olympic sport, but not greyhound racing or hare coursing. One reason for this is that in equestrian events the horse is always under the direction of the human, whereas in the latter events the animal is 'let off the leash'.

Olympic sport does not include motor sport. It includes sailing, but not motor-boating. Amongst other reasons, this is because the 'motor' element might be seen as making too significant a contribution to the result, whereas sailing (even though it does include technologies to enhance wind assistance) remains to a greater extent in the hands of the human. This observation is reinforced by the practice, in Formula 1 car racing, of showing separately the outcomes of two competitions: the drivers' championship and the constructors' championship. This is an admission of equally important contributions, which detracts from the human, as illustrated by the inevitable debates about whether the champion driver is the best driver, or merely the driver of the best car. This is motor sport, not (Olympic) sport.

In Robot Wars,³ a BBC TV show, teams of contestants build a robot within strict Build Rules, which give detailed information on the specifications of robot design, including weight, power, weapons and 'drive-train'. Then they fight a remote-controlled battle to the 'death'—the aim being to disable (and, preferably, destroy) the opposition. This makes for exciting and entertaining TV, but it is not sport. The main reason is that the contest is between machines, not between humans. To be sure, the humans controlling the movements of their robots have been highly involved in the creation and operation of these machines, and experience the intense emotions of battle (as do the spectators and viewers, such as me). But they are not, huddled as they are behind their controls in their sealed and bullet-proof enclosure, direct competitors. They are distanced remote-controllers, not allowed to touch their robots

during the contest. This is not sport (although, I suppose, you could call it robot-sport, if you wanted to), because the contest is only indirectly, and therefore inadequately, 'human'.⁴

Later, I will consider the contribution of the concept of the 'athlete' to the idea of sport, but we can already see its emergence in this required sense of 'human'.

2.2. Physical

Just as we had to construe the idea of the human, in order to explain its significance for our concept of sport, so we must construe the idea of the 'physical'. In what *sense* is sport physical? If I say that chess is not a sport, because it is not physical, an objection might run as follows: when I move a chess piece, I must make a physical movement, and the physical movement might be more extended (or more gross) than that required for squeezing a rifle's trigger. My response would be, firstly, that the physical movement is not necessary (since I might alternatively simply tell someone else where to move a piece on my behalf) and, secondly, that even if I moved it myself, the actual movement is irrelevant to the outcome of the game.^{5,6}

To take another example, in a recent case, Sport England refused to recognise duplicate bridge as a sport, and the English Bridge Union appealed. The judge, Mr Justice Mostyn, granted permission for the Union to bring a judicial review against Sport England's decision. The judge, who is himself a bridge player, is reported to have said, 'You are doing more physical activity playing bridge, with all that dealing and playing, than in rifle shooting'. (New Law Journal 2015a). I refer the reader to my comments above.⁷ There is more physical activity in gardening than in bridge, but that doesn't make competitive gardening a sport, either.⁸

Sport is physical just in the sense that the actual physical movement produces the outcome, as in shooting.⁹ Furthermore, in regard to shooting, it is false that the required movement involves merely squeezing a trigger. This fails to take into account the total-body control required of a shooter, including balance, stance, rifle hold, controlled breathing, etc., all of which contribute directly to the outcome.

Let us briefly consider an intensely 'physical' competitive event: the speed-eating contest¹⁰, in which (for example) contestants consume as many hamburgers as they can in a specified time period, under rules that regulate chip-munking (holding food in the mouth in the final moments of an event), dunking (softening food in liquid) debris (requiring a clean eating surface) and vomiting. Is this a sport? Speed-eating might be seen to meet the *human, institutionalised, rule-governed* and *contest* criteria of sport, but the spirit quails at the acceptance of the *physical* and *skill* elements. As intensely (even disgustingly) 'physical' as it might seem, this is not physicality (in the required sporting sense), because speed-eating is not a physical movement activity - its primary aim is consumption.

2.3. Skill

All sports require the development and exercise of human physical skill. This rules out those many activities that exercise human physicality, without demanding any significant level of skill learning from the participant. Examples would include walking (not race-walking, which does require the learning of a prescribed and very specific set of skills), jogging, exercise-cycling, speed-eating, basic training routines, etc. Some might like to say that their daily dog-walking, or thrice-weekly jogging are their 'sport'—but I think most of them could be persuaded that this is more like their exercise than their Olympic 'sport', since a mere exercise routine does not require a significant skill component, and neither does it require the next component—contest.

2.4. Contest

All sports are contests. They are constructed as essentially contested activities. In sport, there is no pong without ping.¹¹ This rules out activities such as mountaineering, which is a challenge (or test¹²), rather than a contest. There is no answer to the question: if I make this or that move, what will the mountain do next? It is not contesting with me. 'It' (or, rather, possibly, the weather conditions) may set challenges for me, but that's different. I think that this rules out not just mountaineering, but many other 'Outdoor Activities' or 'Outdoor Pursuits'. In fact, they are so called just because participants wish explicitly to deny that they are 'sports', given their ethos which rejects competitiveness, regulation and institutionalisation. As Krein remarks, regarding 'nature sports':

... I argue that adapting nature sports to fit into formal competitive frameworks is problematic because, when we do so, the focus shifts from athletes interacting with natural features to athletes using natural features to outdo other athletes. (2015, 271)

It also rules out dance, which is not an essentially contested activity. A tango might be performed as a ritual, a display, a celebration, or as part of a social event, without its being compared to, or judged against, any other performance (indeed, this is most usually the case). Such a non-contest instance of dance might be performed identically to a competition performance, when various performances are judged one against another in a dance contest. This shows that dance is not an essentially contested activity.

Of course, you can *make* a contest out of anything, including dance. Piano playing is not essentially contested, but the famous Leeds International Piano Competition¹³ has demonstrated that music competitions are both possible and desirable. However, despite the high levels of human physical skill (of a kind) being contested, no-one would dream of calling this 'sport'.¹⁴ The International Olympic Committee held art competitions at the Olympic Games between 1912 and 1948, awarding gold, silver and bronze medals.¹⁵ This does not mean that art was considered to be sport. There were sporting events and separate art competitions, consisting of five disciplines: architecture, literature, music, painting and sculpture. Art was recognised as an important cultural companion to sport, but the two were not confused.

2.5. Rule-governed

I assume that it is uncontroversial that all sports are rule-governed (although this is of the first importance both for the concept of sport and for the normative status of sport). If so, this rules out all those activities which do not require rule specifications to determine the outcomes. Field sports, for example, are a matter of going out of the house and killing animals. How you do that is up to you.¹⁶ Jogging can be done as and when the spirit takes you—no rules apply. Resisting the imposition of rule structures upon surfing is at the heart of the 'soul surfing' versus 'competitive surfing' debate.

The (counterculture discourse) holds on to an ethos of informality, and even an anti-establishment 'rebel' identity ... the ocean and its ecology forge a spiritual experience. Others refer to surfing as creative expression, an art. Others still just see it as something fun to do. The vast majority of surfers have no interest in surfing as sport. (Evers 2016)

In rejecting the idea of surfing as a sport, surfers had to deny one or more of the logically necessary conditions suggested in this article. Surfers reject rules and the institutions that claim to represent surfers and surfing.

2.6. Institutionalised

Sports are those rule-governed contests of human physical skill that have achieved institutionalised status. Again, of course, we have to construe this term—to say more about what kind and level of institutionalisation is required for our concept of sport. Later, I shall explore the nature and status of efforts towards the institutionalisation of computer games but, for now, it should suffice to say that a sport has achieved institutionalisation if it has managed to provide a coherent representation of itself to its national and international constituencies, evidenced by national and international federations. In the case of surfing, the jury is still out, despite its recent acceptance as an Olympic sport. Many surfers argue that the various organisations with competing claims to represent them are only representing their own commercial interests.

To conclude this section, let me re-emphasise that my suggestion of these six logically necessary conditions is just that: a suggestion for discussion. It is just my attempt to map the logical geography of ‘Olympic’ sport, and of course this is open to criticism and improvement.¹⁷ The next section will seek to assess the claims of computer games to be (Olympic) sport, as described above.

3. Competitive Computer Games as Sports?

For the purposes of this paper, I shall consider e-sports to be ‘competitive computer games’.¹⁸ This enables me to concentrate primarily on the kind of e-sports that are currently most popular, and that are currently being touted as sports. Some of them are actually seeking recognition as Olympic sports, and I shall consider this development in the next section. This does leave aside, though, the separate question of the status of ‘physical gaming’; or ‘kinetic e-sports’, in which physical activity is an important component, and which I will address in a separate paper to follow.

I have defined sports as *institutionalised, rule-governed contests of human physical skill*. In the context of computer gaming, the idea of ‘contest’ requires a moment’s construal. Llorens makes an important point regarding the element of competition in certain computer games (2017, 467)

... not all video games engage in eSport gaming sports practice. World of Warcraft or Diablo, for instance, are highly popular competitive and online video games. However, they are not fundamentally constituted as competitive personal interaction, but rather as a ‘profile upgrading’ exercise. ... Therefore, it may be argued that ... the result-oriented competition requirement for sport is not met.

In agreeing with her disinclination to accept a ‘profile upgrading’ exercise as a genuine contest, and so as a sporting practice, I accept the refinement of my idea of ‘competitive computer games’ as those involving ‘essentially contestive practices’. In thus accepting that competitive computer games are rule-governed contests, that leaves open for discussion four remaining criteria: *human, physical, skill, and institutionalisation*. I shall take them in turn.

3.1. Human

Just as, in Robot Wars, the contestants are physically distanced from the action, so are computer game contestants. They are remotely contesting over what they can make happen on

a screen as a result of their manipulations of a console. The contest is indeed (in a sense) a human vs human contest, but only in the way that a spelling contest is also human vs human. However, a spelling bee is not sport, and the interactions in computer games are also inadequate for sport, on a human level.

Computer gamers (like the Robot Wars controllers) also experience the intense emotions of battle (as do the spectators and viewers). But they are not, coddled in their special arm-chairs, direct competitors. They are distanced, image-manipulating remote-controllers. This is not sport - although, I suppose, you could call it e-sport (analogously to robot-sport), if you really wanted to - because the contest is only indirectly, and therefore inadequately, 'human'.

3.2. Physical

To be sure, there might be plenty of physical action and effort in computer gaming—but the question is whether the physical exertion involved is adequately physical in the required sense. For example, Kane and Spradley (2017) rely on a spurious stipulation and a failure adequately to construe second-level concepts. 'Physical exertion' is accepted as a criterion just because the dictionary says so; and the kind of physical exertion appropriate for 'sports' is unexplored. Of course, levels of physical exertion, thus unconstrued and unspecified, can easily be demonstrated, just as they can in gardening, coal-mining, cookery or sex.

As noted earlier, the sporting sense of 'physical' requires that the movements bear a direct relation to the outcome of the event. The actual movements made must directly produce the result. This was one reason for our disqualification of chess and Robot Wars from sport. In the present context, considering computer games, Holt makes an interesting distinction between a *domain of execution* and a *domain of application*.

The domain of execution is subject-specific, a matter of where the execution occurs; by contrast, the domain of application is object-specific, where the action's outcome is meant to obtain. (Holt, 2016, p. 8)

Holt goes on to assert (see p. 9) that a crucial difference between sports and computer games is that the technological nature of computer games necessarily separates the two domains. Whereas in sport the two realms coincide (where I take my shot is the same actual realm in which I aim to score a goal), in computer games the skills executed in the actual domain must necessarily be transposed into a virtual domain. (From my \$399 gaming throne,¹⁹ I operate my console so as to achieve digital effects on a screen.)

This is one way of clarifying, specifying, exhibiting the lack of direct physicality in computer games, that argues against its status as sport.

3.3. Skill

Whilst all sports require the development and exercise of human physical skill, not all human physical skills qualify as sporting skills, such as those skills required for gardening, art or craft production, sex, or playing a musical instrument. So it is not enough to claim that, because computer gaming requires human physical skill (of some kind) that this qualifies it as a sport.

To be sure, there is plenty of skill involved in manipulating those little buttons, and doing so faster (with more hits) than others—but the question is whether this counts as skill of the required kind, and the comments in the last two sections argue that it does not. But there

is a further consideration, relating to the distinction between fine and gross motor skills as a means of distinguishing sports from non-sports (or, in our case, to distinguish the relatively fine motor skills of console control from the relatively gross skills of Olympic sport).

I concur with Holt's admonition (Holt, 2016, 7–8) of Meier (1988) and Hemphill (2005) for their too-ready acceptance of the difficulty of 'drawing a line' between gross and fine motor skills. Often it is suggested that, because of the supposed difficulty in drawing a precise line between the two, this disqualifies it as an indicator. This is false. Difficulties at the margins do not disqualify. There is no precise line to be drawn between men and women, and borderline issues are the source of well-acknowledged problems for women's sport. However, this does not mean that we cannot tell a man from a woman; nor that we cannot make borderline decisions (difficult and somewhat arbitrary though they may be).

So the gross/fine distinction, focussing on the use of large/smaller muscle-groups, does not seem to me to be unhelpful, as a general indicator. However, the intuition underlying this distinction might be recast in terms of 'whole-body' skills, as follows. Even in shooting, it is the exercise of whole-body control and whole-body skills that are decisive. Here, again, the image of the Olympic athlete floats before us: the skills required in Olympic sports are the 'whole-body' skills of the athlete.

Furthermore, these are skills that are not only *required for successful engagement* in the sport, but that also contribute to the *development of the whole human*. To be sure, engaging and practising my jiggling and joggling skills will improve my ability to jiggle and joggle, just as my practice of keyboard skills will improve my ability to type - but neither can contribute to the development of the whole human in the way that Olympic sport does, in its valuing of 'whole-body' engagement.²⁰

3.4. Institutionalisation

All sports are founded on rules; and so are computer games. This suggests some level and kind of organisation behind things, but the problem lies in construing just *what* level and *what* kind of organisation are we looking for here, to count as 'institutionalisation'?

Abanazir (2018) calls the sets of rules the 'source', and he points out that the source of sports and the source of computer games differ in important respects. In sport,

'... the source is created by the rule-making powers of an organisation having the power to lay down the rules of the game. But in computer games, '... the source is the video game, which consists of the "code" (so the code developer is the rule-maker) and the audiovisual representations (controlled by the publisher, who is an incorporated body within a particular jurisdiction).'

This means that there are no associations overseeing computer games, consisting of members or joint ventures of sports team owners creating a legal person with a view to laying down the rules of the source and the tournaments. Instead, we see a 'dispersed production process', where publishers organise tournaments for their own games.

When we consider the number of computer games and the number of publishers (which are actually industry rivals), we can see that the chances of establishing an umbrella organisation (institution) determining the production of video games and the tournaments based on them in a cohesive manner is almost impossible. (Abanazir 2018).

These observations are supported by Karhularti's notion of 'executive ownership':

Since sports can only be administered, organized, and overseen (but never owned) by companies, the statuses of those sports cannot be compared to those of esport, which are defined by

executive ownership (2017, 49). For an organized competitive practice to be considered esports, it should rely on a commercial play product that is governed by an executive owner. (2017, 52).

Another problem is the fast pace of change in e-sports fashion. Tournament organisers rapidly drop any game that loses popularity, to be replaced by a competitor. The fluid and fast-paced commercialised development of computer games, and the competitive production process, place serious constraints on the emergence of the kind of stable and persisting organisational structures characteristic of sports governance. As Abanazir says: 'This situation ... calls for another take regarding the analysis as to whether e-sports would qualify as a sport or not.' At the very least, '... judgements passed upon the institutionalisation of e-sports are, at present, premature.'

4. Olympic Sports Re-visited

I have attempted an 'exhibition-analysis' of the concept of Olympic Sports, arriving at a first level of six criteria: *institutionalised, rule-governed contests of human physical skill*. Each criterion should be regarded as a starting-point, requiring construal at a second level, and maybe even further. I accepted Körner's account (1990, 130): 'Exhibition-analysis consists in making indicative or normative propositions which are more or less implicitly accepted by a person or a group of persons fully explicit.'

I began by proposing the view that Olympic Sports were undeniably sports. However, life (and concepts) do not stand still, and my proposal raises interesting questions regarding the future direction of 'Olympic' sport itself. My initial stipulation now comes back to bite me, for 'Olympic sport' is a designation that itself requires clarification, since what has been included on the Olympic Programme has varied over time. Just which activities are to be called 'Olympic Sports' (and therefore to constitute the subject-matter of our analysis)?

To begin with, there is an as-yet-unacknowledged historical dimension. Some events of the classical Olympic period (running, jumping, javelin) did re-appear in the modern period; but some did not (including chariot-racing, the hoplite race and pankration). Even in the modern period, some events have remained constant (running, jumping); some that appeared in the early years were dropped (target javelin, tug-o'-war, cricket, etc.); and some sports came, went and came again (rugby). This shows that 'Olympic Sport' cannot be specified in terms of what has happened to be on the Olympic Programme at any one time; so I would like to construe it as: '... activities that have appeared on the Olympic Programme from time to time, together with *any other sufficiently similar activities*, whether or not they have actually appeared on any Olympic Programme.'

Of, course, we now have to specify what counts as 'sufficiently similar'; but let's offer some easy first solutions. If football is acceptable, so is (in principle) any invasion game, such as netball, korfbal and lacrosse. If tennis, then any racquet game (Real tennis, squash). If weight-lifting, then Atlas Stones and Giant Log Lift. If athletic field events, then Caber Toss and Weight Throw.²¹ So, for our purposes, 'Olympic Sport' means 'Olympic-type Sport'. For various reasons, kabaddi, sumo, kick-boxing, Australian Rules football, muay thai and jai alia have never appeared on the Olympic Programme. But they are all Olympic-type Sports they all conform to the concept of sport, as outlined in this paper.

Now, this has become a central philosophical problem for the International Olympic Committee (IOC), in considering what should (and should not) count as an Olympic-type Sport, and what should (and should not) be on the future Olympic Programme. This is the

job of the IOC Programme Commission,²² whose responsibilities include specifying the criteria for acceptance, remembering that, although only 28 sports are currently on the Programme, there are hundreds of sports that qualify as Olympic-type Sports.

What many 'new sports' are doing (and what they *must* do), as they scramble for IOC recognition, is to evidence compliance with these criteria, as they strive to convert previously non-sport (or even anti-sport) activities into sports. There are many examples, including climbing, yoga, dance, aerobics and parkour. In order to 'sportify' these activities into sport climbing, yogasport, dancesport, sport aerobics and 'obstacle course sprint', organisers have had to demonstrate that their 'new' sport conforms to the criteria for Olympic sport that we have described. They have had to show, for example, how these activities have been made into 'competitive' activities (sometimes in the teeth of bitter opposition from the originators of the activity, as with surfing and parkour), or how they have been adequately 'institutionalised'.

In his judgement with reference to the card game, bridge, Mr. Mostyn

... said it was 'significant' that in 1999, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) acknowledged that bridge and chess should be considered sports. The IOC recognised these as 'mind sports' which should be separately categorised and excluded from participation in the Olympic programme but still recognised them as sports. (Vinall, 2015).

This decision of the IOC prefigures its ambivalence over e-sports. Esports was a demonstration event at the 2017 Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games in Ashgabat, and seeks entry to the Asian Games programme in Hangzhou in 2022, driven by a partnership between the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) and Alisports, a division of Alibaba, recently announced as an IOC TOP sponsor. The Asian Electronic Sports Federation Board includes Kuwait's Sheikh Fahad Al-Sabah, the son of OCA and Association of National Olympic Committees President Sheikh Ahmad Al-Fahad Al-Sabah. United States Olympic Committee chairman Larry Probst is also the chairman of video game publisher Electronic Arts, whose products include the hugely successful FIFA game (see Butler 2017). Recent reports tout e-sports as under consideration for the 2022 Asian Games and the 2024 Paris Olympic Games. (see Etchells 2017 and Bradley 2017).

And it is not hard to discern the motivation underlying the efforts of those who want to claim sport status for computer games. It is the exploitation of these activities for the commercial opportunities and other rewards associated with membership of sporting bodies and access to sporting markets. Their values, in attempting to redefine these activities as sports, are transparently obvious—they seek the commercial spoils of inclusion into (or even association with) the Olympic club. They have a vested interest in larking around with our concepts.

My view is that, if the IOC decided to exclude mind-sports from the Programme, it must have been working on some conception of 'Olympic Sports', similar to my own. Presumably, the IOC means: call mind-sports sports if you want to (and motor-sports, blood sports, recreation sports, exercise sports, fitness sports, etc.), but they don't count as Olympic Sports.

This, I believe, will be the eventual position of the IOC with regard to computer games. Anxious though they might be to capture their share of the 'youth market', and keen to forge alliances with new media and new forms of sport consumption, they will not confuse this with sport.

I predict that their final position will be: e-sports are not (Olympic) sports.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that e-sports are not sports because they are inadequately ‘human’; they lack direct physicality; they fail to employ decisive whole-body control and whole-body skills, and cannot contribute to the development of the whole human; and because their patterns of creation, production, ownership and promotion place serious constraints on the emergence of the kind of stable and persisting institutions characteristic of sports governance.

I acknowledge the temptation to jump towards a ‘youth interest’—but the Olympics is about sport first and foremost. Competitive computer games do not qualify as sports, no matter what ‘resemblances’ may be claimed.

Computer games are just that—games.

Notes

1. This is not the first time that an author has taken the Olympic Games as suggestive, or authoritative. Meier (1988, pp. 14–16) is critical of two previous attempts, those of Suits and Osterhoudt.
2. Any denier would be someone with whom it would be difficult to initiate a conversation.
3. See Robot Wars website at: <http://www.robotwars.tv/the-show/>.
4. Lopez Frias and Triviño, in their article *Will robots ever play sports?* propose a kind of Turing test to distinguish between a robotic performance and a human sporting performance (2016, 78–79).
5. Another way in which chess can be played remotely is, for example, by mobile phone connected to a smart chessboard which moves the pieces on command (see BBC News, 2018).
6. This point is considered by Paddick (1975, 14).
7. The High Court later held that bridge is not a sport. “Ruling in *R (English Bridge Union) v Sport England* [2015] EWHC 2875 (Admin), Mr Justice Dove held that Sport England and other sporting bodies are legally correct in using the European Sports Charter’s definition of sport as “all forms of physical activity”. Therefore, while bridge is often referred to as a ‘mind sport’, it did not satisfy the requisite of physical activity.” (New Law Journal 2015b).
8. Just in case you thought there was no such thing, see: <https://storify.com/jem1ller/the-wacky-world-of-competitive-gardening>.
9. Shooting is often (and I think erroneously) mentioned as an example of a relatively non-‘physical’ sport, e.g. Jenny et al, 2017, p. 10, Llorens, 2017, p. 468).
10. E.g. see: <http://www.majorleagueeating.com/>. Their events have many resemblances to sporting events. For example, like e-sports events, they are attended by thousands of spectators.
11. This is a joke. It trades on the name of the first computer game, which was called Pong. ‘It was as simple a game can be: just two paddles and a virtual ball that can be hit across a two-dimensional screen. ... one could see in this game the simulation of table-tennis.’ (van Hilvoorde, 2016, 1). Pong is a computer game, but not a sport. Ping-pong is a sport.
12. For the test/contest distinction, see Kretchmar, 1975.
13. See: <https://www.leedspiano.com/2018-competition/>. This year, it provides live free-to-view international streaming.
14. Papineau (2015, 2017) stresses that the primary purpose of sport is the exercise of physical skills, whilst the primary purpose of music, dance and other arts lies elsewhere. Indeed, Papineau takes the extreme view that sport is ‘any activity whose primary purpose is the exercise of physical skills’. (My emphasis)
15. The Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the reviver of the modern Olympic Games, anonymously won gold for literature (poetry) in 1912.
16. What I mean by ‘field sports’ is something pretty informal. Of course, when, for example, fishing becomes more formalised, angling contests might qualify as sport. Clay-pigeon shooting (a sport) uses a shotgun, but wild boar hunters (field sport) can use anything they like.

17. For example, there may well be other putative logically necessary conditions worthy of discussion – such as ‘shared values and commitments’. At present I think that, while this is an important feature of sport, it is an outcome of criteria 5. and 6. rather than another and separate criterion.
18. For a detailed discussion of various definitions of e-sport, see: Karhularti 2017, 44–45.
19. For a gaming throne, see: <https://usa.clutchchairz.com/product/pewdiepie-edition-throttle-series/>.
20. This is a reference to the philosophy of ‘Olympism’ – but space does not permit further explication (see Parry, 2006).
21. These last four are all events in World’s Strongest Man contests (see: <http://www.theworldsstrongestman.com>).
22. IOC Programme Commission website: <https://www.olympic.org/olympic-programme-commission>

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This paper was supported by the GACR project ‘Models of bodily experience in the theoretical foundations of experiential education and its kinanthropological context’ (GAČR 16-19311S).

References

- ABANAZIR, C. 2018. Institutionalisation in e-sports. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*. Advance online publication.. doi: 10.1080/17511321.2018.1453538.
- BAIER, K. 1955. ‘Is punishment retributive?’ *Analysis*, 16: 25–32 (1955-6)
- BBC NEWS. 2018. CES 2018: Square Off smart chessboard moves its own pieces. BBC News website 12.1.2018. Available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/technology-42657084/ces-2018-square-off-smart-chessboard-moves-its-own-pieces> (accessed 12 January 2018).
- BENN, P. 1958. An Approach to the Problems of Punishment. *Philosophy* 33 (127): 325–341.
- BRADLEY, L. 2017. Paris Open To Esports Being An Olympic Sport In 2024 Summer Games. SportTechie website, 11.08.2017. Available at <https://www.sporttechie.com/paris-open-esports-olympic-sport-2024-summer-games/> (accessed 5 January 2018).
- BUTLER, N. 2017. Esports take big step towards Olympic recognition. Inside The Games website, 28.10.2017. Available at <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1057203/esports-take-big-step-towards-olympic-recognition> (accessed 5 January 2018).
- ETCHELLS, D. 2017. E-sports to become official medal sport at 2022 Asian Games. Inside The Games website, 18.4.2017. Available at <http://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1049340/e-sports-to-become-official-medal-sport-at-2022-asian-games> (accessed 5 January 2018).
- EVERS, C. 2016. Why adding surfing to the Olympic Games is bad news for surfers. Huck website, 8th August, 2016. Available at <http://www.huckmagazine.com/perspectives/surf-olympics-bad-idea/> (accessed 5 January 2018)
- FLEW, A.G.N. 1954. The Justification of Punishment. *Philosophy* 29 (111): 291–307.
- GUTTMANN, A. 1978. *From ritual to record: The nature of modern sports*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- HART, H.L.A. 1962. *The Concept of Law*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- HEMPHILL, D. 2005. Cybersport. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 32 (2): 195–207. doi:10.1080/00948705.2005.9714682.
- VAN HILVOORDE, 2016. Guest Editorial: Sport and play in a digital world. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, 10 (1): 1–4.

- VAN HILVOORDE, I., and N. POT. 2016. Embodiment and fundamental motor skills in eSports. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 10 (1): 14–27. doi:10.1080/17511321.2016.1159246.
- HOLT, J. 2016. Virtual domains for sports and games. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 10 (1): 5–13.
- JENNY, S.E., R.D. MANNING, M.C. KEIPER, and T.W. OLRICH. 2017. Virtual(ly) Athletes: Where eSports Fit Within the Definition of “Sport?”. *Quest* 69 (1): 1–18. doi:10.1080/00336297.2016.1144517.
- KANE, D. and SPRADLEY B.D. 2017. Recognizing Esports as a Sport. *The Sport Journal*, 2017. Available at www.thesportjournal.org/article/recognizing-esports-as-a-sport/ (accessed 5 January 2018)
- KARHULARTI, V.-M. 2017. Reconsidering Esport: Economics and executive ownership. *Physical Culture and Sport. Studies and Research*. LXXIV, 43–53. doi:10.1515/pcssr-2017-0010.
- KÖRNER, S. 1990. On Wittgenstein's Conceptions of Logic and Philosophical Grammar. In Haller, R. and Brandl, J. (eds), 130–141. *Wittgenstein: Towards a re-evaluation*. Vienna: Springer-Verlag.
- KREIN, K. 2015. Reflections on Competition in Nature Sports. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 9 (3): 270–286.
- KRECHMAR, R.S. 1975. From Test to Contest: An Analysis of Two Kinds of Counterpoint in Sport. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 2: 23–30.
- LLORENS, MARIONA L., 2017. eSport Gaming: The Rise of a New Sports Practice. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 11 (4): 464–476.
- LOPEZ FRIAS, F.J., and J.L.P. TRIVIÑO. 2016. Will robots ever play sports? *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 10 (1): 67–82.
- MEIER, K.V. 1988. Triad Trickery: Playing with Sport and Games. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 15 (1): 11–30.
- NEW LAW JOURNAL. 2015a. Could bridge be a sport? NLJ website, 1 June 2015. Available at [https://www.newLawjournal.co.uk/content/could-bridge-be-sport](https://www.newlawjournal.co.uk/content/could-bridge-be-sport) (accessed 5 January 2018).
- NEW LAW JOURNAL. 2015b. Bridge: a mind game but not a sport. NLJ website, 22 Oct 2015. Available at: <https://www.newLawjournal.co.uk/content/bridge-mind-game-not-sport> (accessed 5 January 2018)
- PADDICK, D. 1975. What makes physical activity physical? *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 2: 12–22.
- PAPINEAU, D. 2015. Sports and Games. Lecture in Toroto, March 27, 2015. Available at https://www.humanities.utoronto.ca/uploaded_files/content/1630/file/Papineau_Sports_and_Games.pdf (accessed 3 February 2018).
- PAPINEAU, D. 2017. *Knowing the Score - What Sports Can Teach us about Philosophy (and what Philosophy Can Teach us about Sports)*. London: Constable and Robinson.
- PARRY, J. 2006. Sport and Olympism: Universals and Multiculturalism *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 33: 188–204. Also published as: Sport, Universals and Multiculturalism (in Muller A, ed, *Concepts of Culture: art, politics and society*, Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2006, pp. 267–290).
- SUITS, B. 2007. The elements of sport. In *Ethics in sport*, edited by W.J. Morgan. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics: 9–19.
- VINALL, M. 2015. Is Bridge a Sport? Sports Law Bulletin. Available at <https://www.sportslawbulletin.org/is-bridge-a-sport/> (accessed 5 January 2018).
- WAISMANN, F. 1968. *How I See Philosophy*. London: Macmillan.