

Esports are taking off and the Commonwealth Games needs to catch up

Written by Sarah Jane Kelly, Associate professor, The University of Queensland

The Gold Coast Commonwealth Games have finally kicked off, but esports have been left out of the schedule. Esports are video game competitions – generally strategy and fighting games, but also sports. It is a [burgeoning field](#), especially among younger demographics and in Asia Pacific and the United States.

Including esports in the Commonwealth Games will not only ensure the event stays relevant to these fans, it will also engage others with sports that don't have gender barriers and showcase new technologies facilitating fan engagement, like virtual and augmented reality.

The demarcation between sports and esports is increasingly irrelevant. Many of the hallmarks of professional sport are already evident, and the International Olympic Committee is [considering adding esports to the Olympic sport portfolio](#)

The Olympic Council of Asia [recently confirmed](#) esports will be a medal event at the 2022 Asian Games in China. The decision is based upon several criteria, including viability, participation levels and whether it reflects Olympic values.

Recent ratings on Twitch, an online platform for live-streaming video games, show esports viewers are [more likely to follow traditional sports than non-Twitch viewers](#).

This suggests sport and esports are not mutually exclusive.

Established professional sports teams [such as FC Barcelona](#) are also investing in esports teams and players in an effort to target the younger demographics.

In Australia, the A-League and AFL clubs Essendon and Port Adelaide have [recently invested](#) in esports teams. Cinema chain Hoyts is set to [host a national esports league](#) later this year.

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It is [estimated](#) that over 4 million Australians watched esport streams in 2017. According to a [recent report](#), 47% of Australians aged 18-24 years watch esports at least monthly, and about 67% of these viewers are male.

Due to all of these factors, esports are fast becoming one of the [largest entertainment industries in the world](#), [worth over](#) \$US690 million in 2017 and with an audience of almost 400 million globally.

Major brands like Red Bull and McDonald's have [become major tournament, team and league sponsors](#). This is especially notable as McDonald's recently [ended](#) its decades-long sponsorship of the Olympic Games.

Read more: [The rise of the pro-player as Australia hosts its richest computer gaming event](#)

Despite chair manufacturers such as Chairs4gaming and Herman Miller being [key sponsors of esports](#), it is far from a purely sedentary pastime. Playing esports is [very physical](#) and professional gamers undertake training to ensure spatial awareness, reasoning, reflexes and endurance. This mirrors the training required of any athlete.

Esports also has the advantage of being an immensely lucrative sport that poses [no gender](#)

[barriers](#) for participants, spectators or the media. Performance requires skill and strategy rather than physical domination, so female gamers can compete alongside males.

On top of there being no gender barriers, esports have also [been linked](#) with skill development in STEM areas.

Changing consumption of sport

Since the Delhi Commonwealth Games four years ago and even the Rio Olympics in 2016, [a lot has changed](#) in how sports content is accessed, when and by whom.

While millennial viewership of linear television is declining, live streaming and other Over the Top (OTT) services are growing in reach and depth of engagement. This is driving [alliances](#) among online streaming platforms, such as Twitch, traditional broadcasters and social media.

The International Olympic Committee [launched the Olympic Channel](#) during the Rio Games, for example, as a way of reaching younger audiences and to serve content on demand rather than through linear programming.

Olympic sponsor Intel [used virtual reality](#) to reach audiences during the recent Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang.

All of this shows how the consumption of sport has changed dramatically – mobile live streaming of content is king and we want it customised and right now please. The acceptance of video gaming as a sport is the next step.

[Fan-based gamification](#) and rapidly evolving technologies like augmented and virtual reality are changing the consumption experience for all sports and drawing audiences closer to the game.

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If sport is to continue as a form of entertainment it must compete with the bells and whistles of live music, cinema and video gaming to resonate with and capture the next generations.

Significant and increasing investment by traditional sporting brands in esports signals that these sports are complementary. Sporting franchises in the AFL, NBA and FIFA are betting that exposure to their codes through playing or viewing esports will make them more appealing.

There is no doubt that some of our future elite Commonwealth Games athletes are in training at home or at their desktops, but there is a strong chance that they might also be narrowcasting their favourite AFL or EPL team and heading off to real-life training during gaming breaks.

The sports market has grown, not diminished, and associated sports consumption has evolved, rather than disappeared. It is time for the Commonwealth Games to catch up.

Sarah Jane Kelly does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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