

Guest editorial: Building sustainable esports teams: what it takes to build teams that last

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Esports has evolved from its grassroots beginnings into one of the most dynamic and rapidly professionalizing sectors of contemporary media and sport (Jenny *et al.*, 2025; Cranmer *et al.*, 2021; Scholz, 2019). In little more than two decades, competitive gaming has transitioned from small LAN (Local Area Network) gatherings and hobbyist leagues to packed arenas, multimillion-dollar prize pools and global audiences rivaling major traditional sports. This meteoric rise has fundamentally altered how we understand not only gaming but also media consumption, community building and competitive performance in a digital-first world.

Yet this rapid growth brings its own set of challenges. The esports ecosystem is characterized by volatility: teams rise and fall within seasons, rosters change frequently, financial models remain precarious and players face immense pressures leading to burnout and short careers. Even as esports attracts significant corporate and state investment, questions remain about how to build teams that are not only competitive today but resilient for the future. Sustainability is no longer an optional aspiration; it is a pressing necessity for the stability and legitimacy of the entire industry (Nyström *et al.*, 2022).

When we issued the call for this special issue on Building Sustainable Esports Teams, our ambition was to move beyond documenting esports' rapid expansion and to instead interrogate what underpins its long-term viability. We invited contributions that would cross disciplinary boundaries, bringing together sport psychology, organizational studies, management, fan research and political economy, to paint a holistic picture of sustainability at the team level. In doing so, we hoped to position esports not simply as an object of study but as a laboratory for understanding teamwork and organizational resilience in the digital age.

The eight papers featured in this issue reflect that ambition. They provide empirical insights, methodological innovations and conceptual frameworks that illuminate different facets of team sustainability, ranging from trust and coordination to fan identification and geopolitical investment. Importantly, they also speak to broader questions about how teams function in digital environments, how they interact with global-local dynamics and how they adapt to constant technological and cultural change.

Rationale for the special issue

Sustainability in esports is a multifaceted challenge precisely because the industry's defining features, digital immediacy, global reach and rapid innovation, also generate instability. Esports organizations must navigate constant game updates and shifting competitive metas, while managing diverse rosters spread across regions and time zones. Traditional stabilizing mechanisms in sport, such as long-term player development pathways, governing bodies and standardized contracts, are still nascent in many esports ecosystems. This creates unique pressures on teams and underscores the need for research that goes beyond the individual player or macroeconomic level to examine the team as the core unit of analysis.

Existing scholarship has tended to fragment along disciplinary lines (Brock, 2025): psychology focusing on performance and wellbeing (Behnke *et al.*, 2022; Pedraza-Ramirez *et al.*, 2020),



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management on business models (Scholz, 2019), fan studies on community dynamics (Cote *et al.*, 2024) and political economy on global investments (Xiang and Yuan, 2025). Yet the challenges teams face, including burnout, financial precarity, shifting fan expectations and geopolitical influence, cannot be addressed in isolation. They intersect in complex ways. A financially stable team may still falter if it cannot foster trust and cohesion among players; a team with a strong internal culture may be destabilized by external political or market forces.

This special issue aims to bridge those gaps. By curating contributions that span micro-level team dynamics, meso-level organizational practices and macro-level cultural and geopolitical contexts, we sought to generate a holistic understanding of what makes esports teams sustainable. The following discussion synthesizes the eight papers, highlighting not only their individual contributions but also the broader patterns and insights that emerge when they are considered together.

Contributions of the special issue

The first paper, *Team Dynamics in Esports and Traditional Sports: Similarities and Differences* by Charlotte Behlau, Dennis Dreiskaemper and Bernd Strauss, offers a comparative lens on the psychological foundations of teamwork. Drawing on survey data from both esports players and traditional athletes, the authors explore trust, collective efficacy and shared mental models as predictors of performance. Their findings challenge lingering stereotypes about esports teams lacking cohesion: despite digital mediation, similar psychological mechanisms underpin teamwork across both contexts. This invites a rethinking of how sport psychology frameworks can be adapted and extended in the study of esports.

Complementing this, *Exploring Esport Players' Perspectives on Sport Psychology Support: An Interview Study* by Oliver Leis, Nicolas Meichsner and Laura D. Swettenham provides qualitative insights into how professional players perceive sport psychology practitioners (SPPs) and the benefits they bring. Interviewing six male professional players from League of Legends and Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, the study found generally positive attitudes toward psychological support, with trust, empathy and personalization emerging as key practitioner qualities. Reported benefits included improved team cohesion, individual performance and well-being, highlighting the role of SPPs in fostering both the person and performer, with the potential to support the longevity and sustainability of player performance and well-being in a volatile ecosystem.

From Rising Stars to Early Retirees: The Accelerated Career Trajectories of League of Legends Esports Players by Jimoon Kang tackles the critical issue of player sustainability through the lens of career progression. Using a mixed-methods design that combines statistical modeling of over 4,000 global players with interviews and academy curriculum analysis, Kang identifies a sharp performance peak around age 21, followed by rapid decline. The study introduces a five-stage career model, Entry, Growth, Maturity, Decline, Transition, that captures the compressed life cycle of esports athletes. Findings highlight the dual pressures of mechanical decline and organizational preference for younger talent, compounded by limited mental health support and unstructured retirement pathways. The paper offers actionable recommendations for academies, teams and policymakers, including structured transition programs, financial literacy training and role adaptability strategies, framing player welfare as central to building sustainable teams.

In Towards a Geopolitical Economy of Esports: Saudi Arabia's Investments by Daniel James Joseph, Tom Brock and William Clyde Partin, the focus shifts to the macro-level. This paper situates esports within the global political economy, examining Saudi Arabia's state-led

investments through Vision 2030 and the Savvy Gaming Group. By framing esports as part of a broader soft power strategy, the authors reveal how team sustainability is shaped not only by internal factors but also by external geopolitical currents. Such investments provide capital and infrastructure yet raise ethical questions about governance, cultural diplomacy and dependency.

Fan engagement emerges as a central theme in Sustainability in Esports Teams: Fan Identification and Regional Franchise Systems written by Se Jin Kim. Analyzing Korean fans of the team T1, the study demonstrates how attitudes toward host cities mediate fan loyalty and behavioral intentions, from event attendance to online viewership. This research highlights the promise and complexity of regional franchise models: while localization can deepen fan identification, it must be balanced with the inherently global nature of esports fandom.

Esports also offers unexpected applications beyond competition. *Exploring Esports as a Platform to Develop Organizational Teams: The Case of Valorant* by Brian McCauley uses auto-netnography to examine how Valorant gameplay can inform corporate team development. The paper identifies parallels between competitive gaming and organizational teamwork, rapid decision-making, digital communication, adaptive learning, suggesting esports can serve as a training ground for skills increasingly vital in hybrid and remote work settings.

The comprehensive review *Taking Aim at Research on Esports Teams: A Systematic Literature Review and Cross-Disciplinary Agenda* by Sebastian Raetze, Christian Staedter and Joschka Andreas Hüllmann maps the field through the Input-Mediator-Output-Input (IMOI) framework. Synthesizing 92 studies, the authors highlight four major themes, team composition, leadership and resources, emergent states and team processes, while identifying persistent gaps such as psychological safety and stress management. Their agenda-setting work calls for interdisciplinary approaches and innovative methodologies, particularly leveraging esports' unique digital trace data.

Finally, *Cultivating Teamwork in Esports: A Framework for Assessment and Training* by [Boettcher et al., 2025](#) addresses the practical challenge of measuring and improving teamwork. By introducing metrics such as convergence, view coverage and colocation, the authors move beyond individual performance indicators to capture collective behaviors. This framework equips coaches and managers with actionable tools for training and roster decisions, while also offering researchers a robust methodology for studying team cohesion in real time.

Toward a holistic understanding

Taken together, these papers create a layered picture of esports teams – from the individual player's mindset to the geopolitical forces shaping the industry – and show that esports teams cannot be understood without zooming in and out of these socio-ecological layers. A holistic understanding of sustainable esports teams requires recognizing how micro-level dynamics, meso-level organizational practices and macro-level forces are deeply intertwined (also see [Brock, 2025](#)).

At the micro level, [Behlau et al.'s \(2025\)](#) study on team dynamics confirms that trust and shared mental models are as critical in esports as in traditional sports. Yet these internal processes do not occur in a vacuum. [Kang's \(2025\)](#) study on accelerated career trajectories shows that players often peak by age 21 and retire early, making sustainability a temporal challenge, as the lack of structured pathways for role adaptation or post-retirement transition fuels rapid turnover. They are influenced by meso-level organizational practices, such as training regimes, support structures and fan engagement strategies. [Kim's \(2025\)](#) paper on

regional franchise systems, for instance, shows how community ties can reinforce or undermine player motivation and team identity. These meso dynamics are, in turn, shaped by macro-level forces like geopolitical investments, as explored in the Saudi Arabia case. A surge of capital can stabilize organizations financially but may also introduce new cultural and ethical tensions that affect both players and fans.

Another emergent theme is the interdependence between data and practice. [Boettcher et al.'s, \(2025\)](#) teamwork assessment framework demonstrates how in-game telemetry can be harnessed to evaluate collective behaviors with unprecedented granularity. When combined with the literature review's call for interdisciplinary data use, this points toward a future in which esports serves as a natural laboratory for team research, a setting where real-time behavioral, psychological and performance data can be integrated in ways rarely possible in traditional organizational contexts.

The diversity of topics also reveals tensions and gaps. While these papers advance understanding of trust, fan engagement and geopolitical context, issues of inclusion and diversity remain underexplored. Gender and racial disparities, pathways for emerging talent and standardized governance structures are critical to long-term sustainability yet appear only tangentially in this issue. Moreover, while the regional franchise study focuses on Korea, comparative research across regions could reveal different cultural logics of fandom and sustainability.

In synthesizing these contributions, one message becomes clear: sustainability in esports is not a single variable to be optimized but an ecosystemic property. It emerges when individual wellbeing, team cohesion, organizational strategies and external environments align, something far easier to describe than to achieve. This complexity, however, is precisely what makes esports so valuable as a research context. It forces scholars to confront the realities of high-performance teamwork in volatile digital environments, realities that increasingly characterize not only competitive gaming but also contemporary work and society more broadly.

Company esports and the future of digital teamwork

The holistic insights from this special issue naturally lead to broader questions: what can esports teach us about teamwork and sustainability beyond gaming itself? Here, the concept of Company Esports offers a compelling frame. Already discussed in emerging scholarship ([Büßecker et al., 2025](#)), this idea highlights the parallels between esports teams and project-based teams in corporate and creative industries. Both are temporary, high-pressure and highly specialized; both must form quickly, perform under uncertainty and adapt continuously to changing conditions.

Esports thus functions as a future lab for the digital society ([Pizzo et al., 2022](#); [Scholz and Nothelfer, 2022](#)). The practices and pressures faced by esports teams, such as distributed collaboration, data-driven performance analysis and balancing individual stardom with collective goals, are anticipated challenges that many industries are only beginning to encounter. Insights from sustainable esports teams can inform HR strategies, leadership development and organizational resilience in sectors ranging from technology startups to global media enterprises. In this light, Company Esports could also provide meaningful second careers for retired professionals, allowing them to leverage their competitive expertise in organizational contexts where digital teamwork and adaptive play are increasingly valued. Conversely, applying established frameworks from organizational behavior, knowledge sharing, career pathways, psychological safety and inclusive leadership can enhance sustainability within esports itself (e.g. [Büßecker et al., 2025](#), [Piggott and](#)

Tjønnal, 2024; Yue *et al.*, 2022). This reciprocal relationship underscores esports' growing relevance far beyond entertainment.

Conclusion and future directions

This special issue marks an important milestone in the scholarly exploration of sustainable esports teams. By bringing together empirical studies, methodological innovations and conceptual frameworks, it moves the conversation beyond fragmented insights toward a more integrated understanding of sustainability in digital team environments. The contributions underscore that sustainable esports teams are not merely about winning matches; they are about fostering wellbeing, building resilient cultures, engaging communities and navigating complex global ecosystems.

Looking forward, several research priorities emerge. Future work should deepen interdisciplinary collaboration, leveraging esports' unique data environments to test and refine theories of teamwork and organizational performance. Comparative studies across regions and titles can illuminate how cultural and structural differences shape sustainability. Greater attention is also needed to inclusion, governance and long-term career pathways, areas essential to ensuring that esports is not only sustainable but also equitable.

Ultimately, esports offers more than a glimpse into the future of competition; it offers a laboratory for understanding the future of work and society. As industries across sectors grapple with digital transformation, hybrid collaboration and globalized talent networks, the lessons from esports teams will become increasingly relevant. Building teams that last, in esports or beyond, requires us to rethink what sustainability means in a world defined by constant change.

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