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Esports Integration in Traditional Sports Federations: A Multi-Genre Approach to Esports Integration

This article analyses the integration of esports into traditional sports federations, highlighting the importance of diversity in video game genres in digital communication and audience engagement. Based on academic literature and semi-structured interviews with representatives of Lithuanian sports federations, the study reveals that some organisations are already actively implementing esports strategies, particularly through sports simulation games, while others are only beginning the process or encountering institutional barriers. The analysis shows that sports federations are increasingly exploring non-simulation game genres, such as League of Legends, Fortnite, and Roblox, to reach a wider audience and adapt their communication to the media habits of digital natives. Genre diversity enables organisations not only to tell their stories in more interactive formats but also to unlock new sponsorship opportunities, strengthen engagement, and gradually develop a sustainable digital strategy. The article demonstrates that the integration of esports requires not only technological solutions but also shifts in organisational culture and educational efforts. Such changes are becoming essential for federations seeking to remain relevant in the evolving landscape of sport, media, and entertainment.

Keywords: esports, sports innovation, organisation development.

Straipsnyje analizuojama e. sporto integracija į tradicines sporto federacijas, išryškinant žaidimų žanrų įvairovės svarbą skaitmeninėje komunikacijoje ir auditorijos įtraukime. Remiantis moksline literatūra bei pusiau struktūruotais interviu su Lietuvos sporto federacijų atstovais, atskleidžiama, kad kai kurios organizacijos jau aktyviai taiko e. sporto priemones, ypač naudodamos sporto simuliacinius žaidimus, o kitos dar tik žengia pirmuosius žingsnius arba susiduria su institucinėmis kliūtimis. Analizė parodė, kad sporto federacijos vis dažniau pradeda domėtis ir ne sporto žanrų žaidimais, tokiais kaip „League of Legends“, „Fortnite“ ar „Roblox“, siekdamos pasiekti platesnes auditorijas ir pritaikyti savo komunikaciją prie skaitmeninės kartos vartojimo įpročių. Pastebėta, jog žanrų įvairovė leidžia organizacijoms ne tik efektyviau interaktyviai pasakoti savo istorijas, bet ir sukurti naujas rėmimo galimybes, stiprinti įsitraukimą bei ilgainiui plėtoti tvarią skaitmeninę strategiją. Straipsnyje atskleidžiama, kad e. sporto integracijai reikia ne tik technologinių sprendimų, bet ir organizacinės kultūros pokyčių bei edukacinių pastangų. Šie pokyčiai tampa neišvengiami federacijoms, siekiančioms išlikti aktualioms šiuolaikinėje sporto, medijų ir pramogų aplinkoje.

Raktiniai žodžiai: e. sportas, sporto inovacijos, organizacijų plėtra.

Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has significantly reshaped contemporary entertainment landscapes, with video games emerging as one of the most influential forms of media consumption. What once began as a niche

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recreational activity has evolved into a complex and culturally embedded global industry. Video games are now widely regarded not only as entertainment but also as tools for socialisation, competition, and even professional development (Halbrook et al., 2019; Johannes et al., 2021). The transformation of gaming into a mainstream phenomenon is evidenced by its expansive economic impact, diversity of game genres, and the rise of competitive gaming, known as esports.

Esports, or electronic sports, represents a formalised and professionalised sector within the video game industry, characterised by organised tournaments, structured leagues, and the presence of large-scale audiences both online and offline (Bányai et al., 2019). Unlike casual gaming, esports is distinguished by its institutional frameworks, competitive rigour, and economic integration, often mirroring the structures of traditional sports organisations (Ramirez et al., 2020; Mangeloja, 2019). As esports continues to gain traction, it presents a unique convergence of media, technology, and sport – capturing the attention of sponsors, fans, and media platforms alike. I. Picton et al. (2020) emphasise the significance of video games as an influential cultural and artistic medium, wherein various forms of art – such as narrative, design, and sound creation – are intricately intertwined. According to L. Tang (2023), esports, also known as electronic sports, refer to organised and primarily competitive video gaming that encompasses a range of platforms, including consoles, personal computers, and even mobile devices. While esports typically involve team-based competition, the format may vary depending on the game type, with some titles emphasising individual rivalry. At the highest level, professional athletes regularly compete for top rankings and monetary prizes in their chosen games. Based on the scholarly work of M. Larch (2023), the first recognised esports event took place on October 19, 1972, at Stanford University in the United States. The event, titled the Intergalactic Spacewar Olympics, featured 24 participants competing in the video game Spacewar, with the winner receiving a one-year subscription to Rolling Stone magazine.

In response to the shifting patterns of media consumption among younger generations, many traditional sports organisations and federations have begun strategically engaging with esports, particularly through sports simulation video games, to maintain relevance and attract new audiences. For example, the NBA's creation of the NBA 2K League serves as a prominent brand extension that allows the professional basketball league to tap into a younger, tech-savvy demographic, diversify fan engagement, and generate new revenue streams (McGehee et al., 2023). Similarly, European football clubs such as Paris Saint-Germain, Manchester City, and AS Monaco have launched esports teams to compete in FIFA tournaments, aligning digital gameplay with their existing sports brands (McGehee et al., 2023). These initiatives highlight a broader trend where traditional sports institutions view esports not as competition, but as a complementary platform for audience development and brand innovation.

Despite the rapid expansion and growing significance of esports within

the global sports industry, traditional sports federations often struggle with integrating esports effectively into their organizational structures and marketing strategies. There remains a gap in understanding how esports integration can strategically enhance traditional sports federations' growth, audience engagement, and market relevance, particularly concerning younger demographics.

The aim of this article is to explore and evaluate the potential and challenges of integrating esports into traditional sports federations. Specifically, the study seeks to analyse how esports influences marketing communication and audience engagement, identify key integration practices, and propose strategic recommendations for optimising esports integration within traditional sports federations.

The research object of this study is the process of esports integration within traditional sports federations. The research focuses on how national and international sports organisations approach, implement, and manage esports-related initiatives.

The research methods. This study utilises a qualitative-descriptive methodology supported by secondary data analysis and primary qualitative insights. The secondary data includes relevant literature from peer-reviewed academic sources, industry reports, and statistical databases to contextualise the evolution of esports and its intersection with traditional sports governance. In addition to the literature review, the study incorporates a semi-structured interview method aimed at gathering first-hand perspectives from professionals actively involved in the integration of esports within sports organisations. The interview guide was constructed based on a synthesis of relevant academic sources focusing on esports integration, digital communication in sport organisations, and innovation adoption frameworks (Gill et al., 2008; Kallio et al., 2016). The guide included twelve open-ended questions, grouped into three thematic blocks: (1) current practices in esports engagement, (2) perceived challenges and organisational readiness, and (3) strategic vision and future plans. Each interview lasted approximately 35–50 minutes and was conducted either in person or via video conferencing platforms, depending on the interviewee's preference. The collected data were analysed using an inductive coding approach, following V. Braun and V. Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis methodology. Codes were generated iteratively and clustered into broader themes that reflected recurring patterns across cases. To ensure the credibility of findings, interview transcripts were re-examined after initial coding to validate the consistency of thematic categorisations.

A total of six experts were interviewed, each representing a different Lithuanian national sports federation: football, basketball, automobile sports, ice hockey, boxing, and golf. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure heterogeneity in both sport type and organisational experience with esports. While the sample consisted of one expert per federation, this design was guided by the principle of maximum variation sampling to capture a broad range of institutional contexts and strategic approaches. All participants held mid- to senior-level positions

(e.g., marketing manager, communications director, development officer) and had between 6 and 10 years of experience within their respective organisations, supporting the validity of their insights as informed perspectives on institutional decision-making and esports implementation.

The objectives of the article are:

1. To analyse the structure of the esports ecosystem by identifying its key stakeholders and their interrelations.
2. To evaluate the role of video game genres in shaping competitive formats, audience preferences, and market segmentation.
3. To identify key challenges and successful practices of esports integration within traditional sports structures and propose strategic recommendations aimed at enhancing growth, audience relevance, and market positioning.

The esports industry

In today's digital landscape, video games have become a prominent form of entertainment for many individuals (Halbrook et al., 2019). According to other scholars, video games are now a highly popular and profitable leisure activity in contemporary society (Johannes et al., 2021). Over the past five decades, video games have evolved into a substantial component of popular culture and developed into a multibillion-dollar industry. The scope of this medium now ranges from simple mobile games to vast, persistent online worlds accessible via next-generation consoles and personal computers (Arjoranta, 2019).

L. Franco (2024) argues that esports play a significant role in society by fostering community, friendship, team spirit, and numerous other beneficial qualities. Whether participants engage in a shared virtual environment or a physical setting such as an esports arena, esports bring individuals together and cultivate a sense of belonging. Moreover, esports have influenced popular culture by introducing new forms of entertainment and contributing to the expansion of the gaming industry.

Electronic sports also promote the development of social skills, as they require players to enhance their communication, collaboration, and creative thinking abilities. Similar to traditional sports, esports involve teamwork and coordination, demanding effective interaction and cooperation among team members. Esports encourage young people to seek out and build communities within spaces they already inhabit. As M. Walczak (2022) notes, widely popular games within the esports domain appeal to children and offer opportunities to engage and interact with classmates, peers they might not typically socialise with, and even older gaming enthusiasts. This dynamic provides a platform for individuals to connect and collaborate with others who share similar interests and passions. Furthermore, esports can serve as a foundation for relationship-building and the formation of friendships, as players often form bonds through their shared enthusiasm for gaming. Research conducted by Pew Research Centre indicates that video games, including esports, play a crucial role in the formation of adolescent

friendships, particularly among boys. According to S' Holland (2024), participation in esports activities enables individuals to develop and refine their social skills.

Recently, video gaming has taken on an increasingly professional dimension, offering career opportunities for a portion of its enthusiasts through competitive gaming. This emerging professional sphere is referred to as "esports" or "electronic sports" (Bányai et al., 2019). Esports can be defined as either casual or organised competitive activities involving specific video games, offering opportunities for professional and personal development. These activities are facilitated by electronic systems – computers, consoles, tablets, or mobile devices – through which teams and individual players train and compete online or in local area network (LAN) tournaments, at either amateur or professional levels. Rankings and competitions are governed by official leagues (Ramirez et al., 2020). According to E. Mangeloja (2019), esports refer strictly to organised competitive video gaming among professional players. The author highlights that casual home gaming, pursued as a hobby, does not qualify as esports. Esports are typically structured in tournament formats with clear objectives or rewards, such as winning championship titles or monetary prizes. It is characterised by professional-level gameplay, often accompanied by audience spectatorship via online streaming or television broadcasts.

Y. Palanichamy et al. (2020) note that, unlike traditional sports such as ice hockey, baseball, or football, esports represent a convergence of various platforms, computing technologies, gaming, and media into a cohesive sports event. W. Jang and K. K. Byon (2020) support this by describing esports as a competitive sport that takes place in virtual environments and is mediated through human interaction with electronic devices. These authors emphasise several distinctions between esports and traditional sports, including accessibility and game duration. Virtual games are more readily accessible and typically shorter in length. Younger audiences are increasingly shifting from linear media formats, such as cable and satellite television, to streaming platforms like Netflix (Būdaitė & Raišienė, 2023). As this trend continues, sports organisations must seek innovative methods to engage and attract the new generation of consumers – esports being one such avenue. Although esports continue to attract substantial investment and public interest, it may also elicit resistance within the traditional sports industry. The rapid emergence of esports, along with its capability to generate large audiences and revenues, can be difficult to fully grasp. These challenges are compounded by the fact that esports is largely driven by youth, with adolescents and young adults playing vital roles as both viewers and entrepreneurs (Pizzo et al., 2019).

In recent years, esports have become increasingly integrated into traditional sports clubs. These clubs view esports as an opportunity to diversify their offerings, enhance brand visibility, and attract new consumers – an especially relevant strategy given the difficulty many traditional sports face in engaging younger audiences (Scholz et al., 2021). According to T. M. Scholz, esports provide a valuable means of introducing younger

generations to traditional sports through a digital lens. F. Block and M. Haack (2021) argue that conventional competitive sports are now frequently challenged by esports, which is preferred by younger demographics. A. D. Pizzo et al. (2018) emphasise that esports constitute a significant component of today's digital world. The industry focuses heavily on increasing public capital and expanding its consumer base. Esports' popularity has become a major phenomenon in the tech sector. According to official data from Statista (2023), the global esports market reached $996 million in 2020 and expanded to over $1.384 billion by 2022, representing a 39% increase. Projections suggest that by 2025, the global esports industry will generate revenues of up to $1.87 billion. Moreover, spectators contribute significantly to the industry's growth by following tournaments and supporting teams and players. Statista (2023) data reveal a rapid annual increase in viewership: from 435.7 million in 2020 to 532 million in 2022. Projections indicate that the esports audience will reach approximately 640.8 million viewers by 2025.

Video game genres

Refer to stylistic categories within literature, music, and other forms of art or entertainment events, characterised by distinct forms, content, themes, and conventions. Genres serve as tools for identifying, selecting, organising, and engaging with creative works. The classification of genres involves the grouping of such works based on stylistic similarities (Jiang & Zhen, 2023). In the context of game analysis, identifying the genre is often the initial step (Faisal & Peltoniemi, 2018). Video games are predominantly regarded as a form of entertainment media and exist in various forms and genres (Reynaldo et al., 2021). For instance, Y. K. Choi et al. (2020) identify five main video game genres:

1. Traditional games (e.g., puzzle, card, and board games).
2. Simulation games, including sports, driving, and community-based simulations such as The Sims.
3. Strategy games, played on a global map with an emphasis on visual information and planned tactics.
4. Action games, which require alertness, skilful rapid responses, and continuous monitoring of on-screen action.
5. Fantasy games are typically characterised by slower pacing and exploratory gameplay.

Other researchers offer different classifications. G. F. Tondello and L. E. Nacke (2019), for example, list nine genres: strategic resource management, puzzles and brain teasers, sports and card games, role-playing games (RPGs), virtual goods-based games, real-life simulation games, action games, and educational games.

F. Pallavicini et al. (2021) provide an even broader classification, identifying eleven distinct video game genres. They further define the key characteristics of each genre and offer representative examples of games within each category (Table 1). According to data provided by Escharts (2023), the esports tournament

that attracted the highest number of viewers in 2022 was Worlds 2022. This event, which is regarded as the premier global event for the game League of Legends, accumulated over 142 million hours of watch time. While this figure represents a 19% decrease compared to the previous year, the grand final of Worlds 2022 marked a historic moment by attracting over 5.1 million concurrent viewers during the broadcast, setting a new all-time viewership record in League of Legends esports.

Some sports organisations enter the esports ecosystem by adopting non-sports genres, especially highly popular titles such as Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) games. For example, Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) operates a League of Legends team in partnership with Talon Esports in Asia, while Vitoria Baskonia and Kaunas Žalgiris have also participated in non-simulation esports such as League of Legends and CS:GO. These organisations aim to connect with younger audiences and diversify their fanbase beyond traditional sports, leveraging the massive viewership and global appeal of these titles. League of Legends, in particular, has become a dominant force, with its World Championship (Worlds 2022) reaching a record 5.1 million concurrent viewers and accumulating over 142 million watch hours (Escharts, 2023).

Conversely, other sports entities begin their esports ventures through sports simulation games, aligning more directly with their core brand identity. This approach is evident in the NBA's creation of the NBA 2K League, where teams like the Los Angeles Lakers and Atlanta Hawks operate digital counterparts, participating in competitive NBA 2K tournaments. Similarly, football clubs like AS Monaco have focused on FIFA competitions, reflecting a more organic extension of their real-world operations (McGehee et al., 2023). This brand extension strategy allows for easier audience crossover, as existing fans are more likely to engage with familiar sports-based virtual formats (Pizzo et al., 2022).

These differing approaches underscore the strategic considerations behind esports integration. While sports simulations offer safer alignment with existing values and fan expectations, non-simulation genres such as MOBAs and shooters provide access to much larger global audiences. The latter, however, may require a reconfiguration of brand identity and internal culture to align with the aesthetics and community norms of genres like League of Legends or Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (Ye et al., 2020; Xenopoulos, 2020). As such, the choice of genre is not merely a content decision – it reflects the broader strategic orientation of the sports organisation toward esports. Those seeking immediate synergy often turn to sports simulation titles, while those prioritising market expansion and youth engagement may invest in high-viewership genres like MOBA and FPS (Pallavicini et al., 2021; Watanabe et al., 2022). Regardless of genre, the integration process presents both opportunities and challenges that require tailored communication, brand positioning, and cultural adaptation strategies within sports federations.

The esports ecosystem and its industrial growth

The esports industry has emerged as one of the fastest-growing sectors globally over the past decade, driven by the proliferation of online video games, advancements in live streaming technologies, and the expansion of competitive tournaments (Chiu et al., 2021). This rapid growth can be attributed to a well-functioning ecosystem composed of interconnected stakeholders. According to J. Bousquet and M. Ertz (2021), the esports ecosystem consists of six key components: game publishers, media platforms, players and teams, competitions and tournaments, sponsors, and fans.

As the commercial and cultural relevance of esports continues to expand, more and more traditional sports organisations are expressing interest in entering the esports space. Motivated by the opportunity to attract younger audiences and secure new sponsorship deals, these organisations are actively exploring ways to integrate esports into their broader strategic frameworks. However, this transition is not without its challenges. Many federations face barriers such as limited expertise, resistance from traditional stakeholders, unclear return on investment, and a lack of coherent governance models suited for the digital environment.

Game publishers play a central role in the esports ecosystem, providing access to video games and controlling the rights to organise competitions and distribute broadcasting licenses (Bousquet & Ertz, 2021). As reported by Esportsresults (2023), the most influential publishers include Valve Corporation, Riot Games, Blizzard Entertainment, Electronic Arts, Activision, Epic Games, Tencent Games, Psyonix, Nintendo, Capcom, and Hi-Rez Studios. Media platforms serve as crucial intermediaries between participants and audiences. They broadcast esports content and function as vital tools for advertising and sponsorship (Bousquet & Ertz, 2021). Live streaming has played a significant role in discovering new talent and enhancing esports visibility. According to Statista (2023), the most popular live streaming platforms for esports in 2022 were Twitch (5.71 billion hours watched in Q3), YouTube Gaming Live (1.17 billion hours), and Facebook Gaming (383 million hours).

Players and teams are motivated to participate in video games for reasons such as social interaction, escapism, enjoyment, achievement, and competition. Esports is a subdomain of video gaming involving individual players or teams who compete using human-computer interaction (Pluss et al., 2022). Depending on the game, competitions may be one-on-one or team-based. K. Werder (2022) emphasises that professional teams regularly participate in organised tournaments, mirroring traditional sports structures. These events aim for victory and financial rewards. Competitions and tournaments are essential to the esports industry. While game quality is important, esports titles only realise their full value when played in competitive environments. Thousands of tournaments take place annually, often as part of structured series hosted across multiple countries and weeks or months apart. Like traditional sports, different esports genres have distinct tournament circuits, prize pools, organisers, and

sponsors (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021). As T. L. Taylor (2012) notes, esports tournaments have become a critical component of the gaming industry, with popularity continuing to rise for several reasons:

1. **Competitive platform**: Tournaments allow players to showcase their skills and compete at a professional level.
2. **Spectator appeal**: Esports events attract global audiences via online platforms, enabling fans to watch and support their favourite teams.
3. **Revenue generation**: Events attract sponsors, and players can earn substantial income through prize winnings and brand partnerships.
4. **Community building**: Esports cultivates strong communities around shared interests and team loyalties.
5. **Career opportunities**: The industry supports professional roles such as players, coaches, analysts, commentators, and event organisers.

Thus, esports tournaments provide platforms for competition, viewership, revenue, community development, and career growth.

From these examples, it is evident that esports presents an attractive environment for brand integration. Tournaments and teams generate significant viewership numbers. According to A. Freitas et al. (2020), the esports audience is highly engaged and growing, making sponsorship, product placement, and branded content appealing strategies for companies. Brands can collaborate with teams, players, or event organisers to promote their products to the esports audience. These events offer access to young, hard-to-reach consumers who often elude traditional advertising.

Established sports sponsors such as Samsung, Red Bull, Microsoft, Google, Nissan, Audi, Sony, Manchester City, Paris Saint-Germain, Coca-Cola, and Vodafone have entered the esports space to boost brand awareness. Research has shown that esports sponsorships are effective; 66.9% of viewers correctly recalled major sponsors from selected tournaments (Freitas et al., 2020).

Given these dynamics, traditional sports organisations are increasingly positioned to leverage esports as a strategic tool for organisational renewal, youth outreach, and market expansion. By embracing esports, sports federations and clubs can diversify their content offerings, establish direct digital engagement channels with younger audiences, and attract new commercial partnerships. As T. M. Scholz et al. (2021) emphasise, esports provides a "valuable extension to traditional sport ecosystems," offering sports entities new formats for fan interaction and digital brand development. F. Block and M. Haack (2021) further argue that esports enables sports organisations to stay culturally relevant in a media environment dominated by interactive entertainment. Moreover, the integration of esports into sports marketing strategies has been found to boost brand visibility and fanbase diversification, particularly when executed in synergy with digital media platforms (Pizzo et al., 2019; Palanichamy et al., 2020). While challenges such as governance structures, staff competencies, and stakeholder buy-in must be addressed, the potential benefits of esports adoption – as a platform for youth engagement, innovation, and sponsorship growth – are increasingly evident. As such, esports should be

regarded not merely as a trend but as a long-term strategic instrument for sports organisations adapting to the digital age.

Results and discussion

The research was conducted between January 2024 and April 2025. Interviews focused on capturing the perspectives of stakeholders regarding current practices, potential benefits, and challenges of incorporating esports into traditional sports federations' operational frameworks. Respondents included representatives from the Lithuanian Football Federation, Basketball Federation, Automobile Sports Federation, Ice Hockey Federation, Boxing Federation, and Golf Federation, selected to represent a diverse range of traditional sports sectors (Table 1).

The qualitative findings from expert interviews conducted with representatives of Lithuanian sports federations provide valuable insights into the current state of esports integration within traditional sports structures. These findings align with and reinforce broader trends identified in existing international scholarship on the topic.

Respondents from the Lithuanian Football (A) and Basketball Federations (B) demonstrated relatively high levels of esports integration: "*The organisation's activities related to esports are running smoothly and producing only positive outcomes. They help attract new users and are generating growing interest in the organisation's initiatives*" (A) and "*We participate in FIBA esports championships (NBA 2K) and are delving deeper into the esports market. We aim to offer the audience new projects and ideas in this field, and we are currently developing an esports strategy through to 2030.*" (B.)

These organisations recognised esports as a strategic tool to expand brand visibility, engage younger audiences, and diversify their content delivery. Such motivations are consistent with prior research. T. M. Scholz, M. Barlow, and R. Smith (2021) identified that esports offers traditional sports entities new channels for fan engagement and digital innovation, particularly when targeting digitally native demographics. Similarly, A. D. Pizzo et al. (2019) emphasised that

Table 1. **Lithuania's sports federations' experts**

Federation	Role	Experience (Years)
Football Federation (A)	Marketing Manager	8
Basketball Federation (B)	Communications Director	10
Automobile Sports (C)	Digital Strategist	7
Ice Hockey Federation (D)	Event Coordinator	6
Boxing Federation (E)	Operations Manager	9
Golf Federation (F)	Development Officer	7

esports integration supports the strategic objectives of sports organisations by opening new revenue streams and enhancing reach among underserved market segments.

In contrast, federations such as those representing automobile sports and boxing reported lower levels of esports involvement, often limited to experimental or promotional activities. These organisations cited uncertainty regarding return on investment, lack of specialised staff, and scepticism among stakeholders as primary barriers. This hesitancy reflects challenges outlined in existing literature. F. Block and M. Haack (2021) noted the prevalence of cultural resistance and organisational inertia in traditional sports bodies, which often view esports as incompatible with established values and practices. Likewise, D. C. Funk et al. (2022) identified the absence of internal expertise and institutional support as significant barriers to esports adoption.

A recurring theme in the interviews was the generational divide within organisations. Younger staff members were generally more supportive of esports integration, while older executives tended to exhibit scepticism or a lack of understanding. This finding mirrors the conclusions of W. Jang and K. K. Byon (2020), who observed that perceptions of esports legitimacy are strongly influenced by generational factors and professional background. Furthermore, F. Bányai et al. (2019) argued that this generational gap often inhibits strategic innovation and creates friction in governance and resource allocation processes.

Importantly, the interviews also revealed that sports federations recognise esports as a potentially powerful mechanism to attract younger demographics and secure new sponsorships – particularly in an era where linear media consumption is in decline: "*Esports can share beneficial similarities with traditional sports, such as strategic thinking, reaction time, leadership, and teamwork. These skills are important in traditional sports as well, so esports can help young people develop them*" (A), also "*Yes, it helps attract the younger generation – children and youth are eager to try driving and compete with each other. One of the best examples is the* Gran Turismo *story, where selections for real-life races were conducted through simulators.*" (C).

As noted by Y. Palanichamy et al. (2020), the digital infrastructure of esports aligns well with current media consumption habits, offering sports organisations opportunities to extend their influence and remain relevant in an increasingly competitive entertainment landscape.

Overall, the empirical findings of this study not only validate existing theoretical frameworks but also provide localised, practical perspectives from Eastern European sports institutions. These insights underscore the need for targeted education, institutional adaptation, and cross-sector collaboration to successfully integrate esports into traditional sports frameworks. Future research should investigate the longitudinal outcomes of such integration efforts and explore best practices in managing the cultural and operational convergence of physical and digital sport (Table 2).

Table 2. **Key results of interviews**

Federation	Main Motivations	Reported Benefits	Primary Challenges
Lithuanian Football	Youth engagement, brand expansion	Higher youth participation, sponsor attraction	Governance, budget constraints
Basketball Federation	Audience diversification, revenue growth	Increased brand visibility, digital presence	Limited esports-specific expertise
Automobile Sports	Promotional reach, audience engagement	Limited short-term promotional success	Cultural acceptance, strategy clarity
Ice Hockey Federation	Youth connection, event diversification	Improved digital fan engagement	Lack of dedicated esports staff
Boxing Federation	Exploration, understanding esports dynamics	None reported yet	Resource constraints, lack of a clear ROI
Golf Federation	Modernisation technology utilisation	Moderate increase in youth interest	Technical know-how, stakeholder resistance

The findings reinforce that esports is a viable method for traditional sports federations to rejuvenate their audience bases and innovate their operational and marketing strategies. Expert interviews notably corroborated statistical data showing distinct age-based preferences for specific game genres, reinforcing that esports provides a targeted approach to engage youth demographics who are disengaged from traditional sports consumption models.

Significant interview contributions indicated that federations actively incorporating esports, such as the Lithuanian Football and Basketball Federations, experienced tangible benefits, including greater visibility and strengthened ties with younger fans. This supports the idea that esports can significantly enhance organisational visibility and provide meaningful opportunities for deeper fan engagement, particularly in digital spaces. Yet, the research also highlighted critical organisational barriers. These include resistance stemming from generational divides and cultural biases within traditional sports governance frameworks. Overcoming these issues will require dedicated educational initiatives, targeted stakeholder management strategies, and comprehensive organisational commitment to integrating esports.

Building on the interview findings, Lithuanian sports federations – and federations internationally – can look to the best-practice playbooks of pioneering clubs for guidance. Two contrasting roads into esports have emerged. By adopting a multi-genre strategy, sports federations can increase their visibility among younger, digitally native audiences who may not consume traditional sports content. This approach allows federations to reach segments of the population that engage with esports not through familiar sports formats, but through popular entertainment titles that prioritise real-time strategy, immersive storytelling, or participatory creativity. Research has shown that these genres often foster deeper engagement due to their dynamic gameplay, team-based mechanics, and

high community involvement (Ye et al., 2020; Pallavicini et al., 2021). Moreover, platforms such as Fortnite and Roblox enable federations to craft bespoke virtual experiences – such as interactive sports environments or educational mini-games – that can convey the values, history, and culture of a given sport in innovative ways (Brulé & Steen, 2024).

Integrating a broader spectrum of genres also enhances the commercial viability of esports projects. A wider genre portfolio attracts a more diverse range of sponsors, particularly those outside the traditional sports marketing ecosystem. Non-endemic brands have demonstrated growing interest in esports properties with substantial reach in popular game titles, especially those with entertainment-focused or sandbox characteristics (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2023). From a risk management perspective, multi-genre engagement mitigates overreliance on single publisher agreements or the lifecycle of one simulation franchise, thereby creating a more resilient and adaptive esports strategy (Table 3).

In summary, federations that limit their esports integration into sports simulation titles may forgo significant opportunities for innovation, engagement, and long-term strategic positioning. Embracing a multi-genre model aligns with evolving media consumption patterns, expands narrative and commercial potential, and positions federations at the intersection of sports, entertainment, and digital culture. The integration of diverse game genres should therefore be seen not as a departure from the core mission of sports organisations, but as a necessary evolution to ensure sustained relevance

Table 3. **Action steps for sports federations**

Step	Tactical Action	Short-Term KPI	Long-Term Outcome
Pilot a non-simulation genre	Run a LoL community cup or co-brand a Fortnite Creative Island themed around national championships.	Participant sign-ups, stream hours	Establish proof-of-concept; attract youth media coverage.
Leverage story-driven platforms	Commission a Roblox "digital museum" where players complete quests about the sport's history.	Average session length, social shares	Deepen heritage storytelling; build educational value.
Form cross-sector partnerships	Collaborate with experienced esports clubs (e.g., PSG Talon) for joint bootcamps or show-matches.	Co-branded content views	Knowledge transfer and credibility leap-frog.
Upskill internally	Create an Esports Genre Task-Force: simulation lead + non-simulation lead + content designer.	Training hours; employee satisfaction	Reduce the generational knowledge gap highlighted in the interviews.
Iterate & evaluate	Use dashboards to compare ROI between simulation and non-simulation activations – token drops, sponsorship CPM, youth-follower growth.	Quarterly analytics review	Data-driven budget allocation and sustainable genre mix.

and audience connectivity in a rapidly transforming media environment.

Conclusions

This study has explored the strategic potential and organisational challenges associated with the integration of esports into traditional sports federations. Drawing on both theoretical insights and qualitative data from expert interviews, the findings underscore that esports represents a compelling avenue for federations seeking to modernise their engagement strategies, reach younger audiences, and diversify their communication and branding activities. Federations that have already adopted esports – most notably those in football and basketball – demonstrate measurable benefits such as increased digital visibility, youth participation, and enhanced sponsor interest. These outcomes align with existing scholarly literature, which identifies esports as a relevant medium for audience development and brand innovation in the contemporary media landscape.

Nevertheless, the study also reveals that the degree of integration remains inconsistent across federations. Structural and cultural barriers, including internal resistance, limited technical expertise, and uncertainty regarding return on investment, continue to impede broader adoption. These challenges are particularly pronounced in federations representing individual or traditional sports disciplines that lack established digital engagement infrastructures. Furthermore, the generational divide within organisations – wherein younger professionals express greater enthusiasm for esports than their senior counterparts – emerges as a significant factor affecting organisational readiness and decision-making.

Importantly, the findings highlight that an overreliance on sports simulation games such as FIFA or NBA 2K may constrain the long-term strategic impact of esports integration. While such titles provide a familiar entry point, they may not fully capitalise on the breadth of audience segments available within the wider esports ecosystem. This study, therefore, advocates for a multi-genre approach, whereby federations explore alternative titles and formats – including sandbox, battle royale, and MOBA games – as tools for interactive storytelling, experiential branding, and participatory engagement. Successful cases from international sports clubs, such as Paris Saint-Germain's League of Legends initiative or NBA clubs' ventures into Fortnite and Roblox, illustrate the potential of this diversified strategy.

In conclusion, esports integration should be viewed not as a peripheral or promotional activity, but as a transformative process requiring institutional adaptation, cross-sector collaboration, and an openness to genre experimentation. Federations that invest in the necessary structural capabilities and embrace the cultural logic of digital-native audiences will be better positioned to sustain relevance, foster innovation, and generate long-term strategic value in an increasingly competitive and fragmented sports media environment.

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E. SPORTO INTEGRACIJA Į TRADICINES SPORTO FEDERACIJAS PASITELKIANT ŽAIDIMŲ ŽANRŲ ĮVAIROVĘ

S a n t r a u k a

Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjama e. sporto integracija į tradicines sporto federacijas, analizuojant strategines galimybes, organizacinius iššūkius ir žanrų įvairovės svarbą. Tyrimui taikyta kokybinė aprašomoji metodologija, siejant antrinę duomenų analizę su ekspertiniais interviu, atliktais su Lietuvos sporto federacijų atstovais.

Tyrimo rezultatai rodo, kad vis daugiau federacijų pripažįsta e. sportą kaip vertingą priemonę jaunajai auditorijai pasiekti, skaitmeniniam matomumui didinti ir naujų rėmėjų pritraukti. Futbolo ir krepšinio federacijos išsiskiria pažangesnėmis integracijos iniciatyvomis, o kitose – pavyzdžiui, bokso ar automobilių sporto – pastebimas atsargumas, kurį lemia vidinis pasipriešinimas, kartų skirtumai, kompetencijos trūkumas ir abejonių keliantis investicijų atsiperkamumas.

Vienas iš pagrindinių šio tyrimo indėlių – rekomendacija sporto federacijoms neapsiriboti vien sporto simuliacijomis (pvz., FIFA, NBA 2K), įtraukti ir populiarius ne sporto žanrus, tokius kaip MOBA (komandiniai mūšiai), atviro pasaulio („sandbox“) ar „battle royale“ žaidimai. Tarptautinių sporto klubų pavyzdžiai – „Paris Saint-Germain“ dalyvavimas „League of Legends“ turnyruose ar NBA komandų iniciatyvos „Fortnite“ bei „Roblox“ platformose – rodo, kad žanrų įvairovė leidžia didinti gerbėjų įtrauktį ir kurti naujas sporto pasakojimo formas.

Daroma išvada, kad e. sportas turėtų būti vertinamas ne kaip papildoma reklaminė priemonė, o kaip transformacinė galimybė, reikalaujanti institucinio mokymosi, suinteresuotų šalių įtraukimo ir ilgalaikio strateginio įsipareigojimo. Federacijos, kurios įsitrauks į žanrų įvairovę ir prisitaikys prie skaitmeninės kartos vartojimo įpročių, turės daugiau galimybių išlikti aktualios ir konkurencingos šiuolaikinėje sporto ir pramogų ekosistemoje.