

Esports Is Not a Sport

A Structural Analysis of Why Competitive Gaming Follows the Cultural, Economic, and Governance Logic of the Music Industry



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Table of Contents

Page 1.	Cover
Page 2.	Contents
Page 3.	Introduction
Page 4.	1. Methodology Framework
Page 6.	2. Legal Existential
Page 9.	3. Value Systems
Page 12.	4. Traditional Esports Is Not a Sport
Page 13.	5. Definitional Scope and Categorical Distinction
Page 15.	6. The Framing Error
Page 17.	7. A Structural Comparison
Page 20.	8. Common Objections and Structural Rebuttals
Page 22.	9. Intellectual Property
Page 24.	10. Creator Psychology
Page 26.	11. Distribution, Platforms, and Audience Behaviour
Page 28.	12. Why Traditional Sports Federations Cannot Govern Esports
Page 30.	13. The Need for a New Class of Governance
Page 33.	14. Implications for Governments, Institutions, & Cultural Policy
Page 36.	15. Conclusion

Introduction

This paper originates from a decade spent observing the fractured architecture of the modern esports landscape, particularly the proliferation of governing bodies, the persistent fragmentation of institutional authority, and the recurrent failure of such bodies to establish coherent alignment with game developers and publishers. These phenomena are frequently treated as managerial shortcomings, political disputes, or matters of organisational immaturity. This paper proposes a different diagnosis.

Following an extended period of industry analysis, it became evident that these structural tensions do not arise from poor governance alone, but from a deeper conceptual error: esports has been systematically misclassified.

Despite its classification, esports is not a sport in the institutional, legal, or cultural sense. Traditional sports, such as running, swimming, cricket, or football, are not owned. Their rules are part of the cultural commons, evolving through collective practice rather than proprietary control. No individual, corporation, or federation can withdraw them from existence, redesign their physics, or revoke access to their arenas.

Game-based esports operates under fundamentally different conditions. Its competitive formats are proprietary. Its rules, mechanics, environments, and even its continued existence are contingent upon the decisions of private rights-holders. In this respect, esports resembles not sport, but the music industry: an ecosystem structured around intellectual property, creative authorship, platform dependency, licensing regimes, and cultural performance.

Just as songwriters, record labels, and artists control the circulation of musical works, game developers and publishers control the worlds in which esports competition occurs. This distinction is not semantic. It is structural and it reshapes every dimension of governance, labour, legitimacy, and cultural meaning.

1. Methodological Framework

Comparative Institutional and Cultural Structural Analysis

This paper employs a methodological approach best described as comparative institutional and cultural structural analysis. Rather than treating esports as a discrete or abnormal phenomenon, the paper situates it within a broader categorization of cultural systems, examining how different forms of organised competition emerge, stabilise, and are governed across historical and legal contexts.

This method is not concerned with surface similarities, aesthetic forms, or popular metaphors. Instead, it focuses on what may be termed deep structures: the underlying legal, economic, cultural, psychological, and institutional logics that shape how a system operates, how it evolves, and how authority is constituted within it.

The central question guiding this analysis is not whether esports resembles sport in outward form, but whether it functions according to the same structural principles.

Structural Rather Than Phenomenological Comparison

Most contemporary discussions of esports rely on phenomenological comparison, that is, they compare what esports looks like to what sport looks like: competition, teams, spectators, tournaments, rankings, sponsorships, and media coverage. While such features are descriptively useful, they are analytically insufficient.

This paper instead adopts a structural lens. It asks:

- Who owns the format?
- How does value circulate?
- What kind of labour is being performed?
- How do careers form and dissolve?
- How does legitimacy emerge?
- What stabilises continuity?
- What governs change?

These questions are not aesthetic. They are institutional.

By examining these dimensions, the paper evaluates whether esports belongs to the same structural class of phenomena as traditional sport, or whether it aligns more closely with other cultural systems, most notably, the global music industry.

Institutional Typologies and Governance Logics

The method further draws on institutional typology: the classification of systems according to the logics by which they are organised and governed.

Traditional sport represents what may be described as a commons-based competitive system. Its core formats are not privately owned; its rules emerge historically; its legitimacy is inherited; and its governance structures evolved to stabilise continuity.

The music industry, by contrast, is a rights-based cultural system. Its formats are proprietary; its works are legally authored; its value is mediated through platforms; and its governance institutions exist primarily to coordinate ownership, distribution, attribution, and cultural circulation.

Esports is evaluated against both institutional models.

This approach allows the paper to avoid normative assumptions about what esports should be and instead examine what it already is, structurally speaking.

Analytical Scope and Limits

This methodology is diagnostic rather than prescriptive. It does not seek to design new governance institutions, propose regulatory frameworks, or recommend policy reforms. Its purpose is prior to such efforts: to determine whether the category within which esports is currently understood is conceptually coherent.

In this sense, the paper belongs to a tradition of classificatory scholarship: work that seeks to correct category errors before they produce institutional dysfunction.

It therefore does not ask:

“How should esports be governed?”

It asks:

“What kind of thing is esports?”

This distinction is foundational.

Justification of the Comparative Frame

The choice to compare esports with the music industry rather than with other entertainment sectors is not arbitrary. Music provides the most analytically relevant parallel because it exhibits the same core structural characteristics:

- Proprietary formats
- Platform dependency
- Creator-centric labour
- Non-linear career formation
- Transnational audiences
- Cultural, not physical, performance
- Rights-based governance

By contrast, traditional sport exhibits almost none of these as defining features.

This paper therefore does not claim that esports is like music metaphorically. It argues that esports is governed by the same institutional logics that have historically structured music as a cultural industry.

Neutrality and Non-Normativity

Finally, this methodological approach is deliberately non-normative. It does not claim that one system is superior to another, nor that esports should replace traditional sport, nor that existing institutions are illegitimate.

Its aim is analytical clarity. Misclassification is not a moral failure; it is an epistemic one. But epistemic errors have institutional consequences.

This paper seeks to correct such an error.

2. Legal Existential

Commons-Based Versus Rights-Based Cultural Forms

To govern any system coherently, it must first be categorised correctly. Governance is not merely a set of rules; it is an expression of what a system is. This section introduces a legal-existential distinction that is central to the thesis of this paper: the difference between commons-based cultural forms and rights-based cultural forms.

This distinction is not metaphorical. It is juridical. It concerns the legal conditions under which cultural practices exist, persist, and are reproduced.

Commons-Based Cultural Forms

Commons-based cultural forms are those whose core formats, rules, and practices are not privately owned. They emerge through collective use, evolve through shared participation, and persist independently of any single rights-holder. Traditional sports belong to this category. No one owns football, boxing, wrestling, surfing, or running. Their rules are not patented. Their arenas are not proprietary worlds. Their existence does not depend on licensing agreements. While organisations may own brands, broadcast rights, or tournament names, the sport itself remains part of the cultural commons.

The legal implications of this are profound:

- No single entity can withdraw the sport from existence
- No single entity can unilaterally redefine its core mechanics
- No single entity can revoke access to participation
- Governance must therefore be collective, stabilising, and stewarding

This is why traditional sports governance evolved as it did. Federations were not designed to manage ownership disputes; they were designed to coordinate participation in a commons. Their role is not to license access, but to stabilise continuity.

Rights-Based Cultural Forms

Rights-based cultural forms operate under fundamentally different legal conditions. Their core formats, expressions, and environments are subject to ownership. They are legally authored. Their circulation is mediated through licensing. Their reproduction depends on permission. Music, film, software, and video games belong to this category.

A song does not exist as a commons. It exists as a copyrighted work. A film is not a shared cultural artifact in the legal sense; it is a protected intellectual creation. A software environment is not a public arena; it is a licensed system.

These forms do not persist through tradition. They persist through rights regimes.

The institutions that govern these forms, copyright offices, performance rights organisations, licensing bodies, collecting societies, and intellectual property courts, exist not to stabilise rules, but to mediate ownership, circulation, attribution, and remuneration.

Governance here is not stewarding of a commons. It is coordination of rights.

Esports as a Rights-Based Cultural Form

Game-based esports exists entirely within the rights-based paradigm.

Every competitive format is proprietary. Every arena is a licensed environment. Every rule is a design decision. Every physics engine is authored. Every mechanic is copyrighted. Every modification requires permission. Every tournament exists at the discretion of a rights-holder. In this respect, esports is not merely similar to the music industry. It is legally homologous to it.

The competitive world in esports is not discovered. It is authored. This single fact destabilises any attempt to govern esports as though it were a commons-based activity.

No sports federation can govern what it does not own, and no rights-holder can surrender what the law compels them to protect.

Why Commons-Based Governance Fails in Rights-Based Systems

Sports governance presupposes a world where:

- Formats cannot be withdrawn
- Rules cannot be privately altered
- Access cannot be revoked
- Cultural continuity is inherited

These presuppositions collapse in rights-based systems.

When a game publisher updates a title, the competitive environment changes. When a server is shut down, the arena disappears. When a license expires, participation ends.

These are not governance failures. They are the lawful operations of rights-based systems.

Trying to regulate such systems as if they were commons-based creates chronic friction:

- Federations seek stability; rights-holders require mutability
- Institutions seek continuity; platforms prioritise iteration
- Governance seeks neutrality; ownership implies control

This mismatch cannot be solved through reform. It is ontological.

Cultural Consequences of Legal Misclassification

Legal categories shape cultural legitimacy.

When an activity is governed as a commons-based practice, it is treated as heritage, tradition, and public good. When it is governed as a rights-based practice, it is treated as authored, licensed, and remunerated.

Esports currently exists in a legal contradiction: it is culturally framed as sport but legally structured as creative IP.

This contradiction produces:

- Confusion over jurisdiction
- Fragmented governance
- Precarious labour
- Institutional illegitimacy
- Cultural instability

These are not pathologies of immaturity. They are consequences of misclassification.

Implications of Legal Ontology

If esports is correctly understood as a rights-based cultural form, then:

- Its governance must resemble that of creative industries, not athletics
- Its labour must be treated as creative, not bodily
- Its continuity must be archived, not inherited
- Its legitimacy must be legal, not traditional

This does not devalue sport. It distinguishes it.

Esports is not merely culturally closer to music than to sport. It is legally categorised alongside music, film, and software. It is a rights-based cultural system operating under intellectual property law, not a commons-based competitive practice operating under tradition.

This distinction is not philosophical. It is institutional.

3. Value Systems

Performance Metrics Versus Cultural Metrics

Every organised competitive system is underpinned by a value regime: a set of assumptions about what counts as success, what should be measured, and what forms of achievement are culturally meaningful. These regimes shape not only how participants are evaluated, but how institutions are constructed, how careers are legitimised, and how historical memory is preserved.

This section argues that traditional sport, the music industry, and game-based esports operate under fundamentally different value logics. These differences are not superficial. They are constitutive.

Value in Traditional Sport: Physiological Performance and Quantifiable Output

Traditional sports are governed by what may be described as physiological performance metrics. Value is primarily derived from measurable bodily output: speed, strength, endurance, precision, reaction time, and physical dominance.

Achievement is formalised through:

- Records
- Medals
- Rankings
- Win–loss ratios
- Physical milestones
- Statistical comparability

The body is the medium, and its optimisation is the primary site of value production.

This value system presupposes:

- Stability of format
- Standardised rules
- Longitudinal comparability
- Physical risk
- Finite bodily careers

This is why sports governance prioritises:

- Anti-doping regimes
- Safety protocols
- Equipment standardisation
- Fairness mechanisms
- Physiological classification

Sport measures what bodies do.

Value in Music: Cultural Impact and Expressive Resonance

The music industry operates under a radically different value logic. Here, performance is not merely instrumental. It is expressive. Value is not derived from bodily output, but from cultural resonance.

Success is measured through:

- Cultural reach
- Identity formation
- Aesthetic influence
- Emotional connection
- Longevity
- Generational memory
- Reinterpretation and revival

Unlike sport, music does not primarily value optimisation. It values meaning. Two artists can perform the same song and produce radically different cultural effects. Technical perfection does not guarantee cultural relevance.

This is why music governance focuses on:

- Attribution
- Authorship
- Rights management
- Cataloguing
- Royalties
- Archival continuity

Music measures what performances *mean*, not what bodies *do*.

Esports and the Misapplication of Physiological Metrics

Esports is frequently evaluated using the language of sport: reaction time, endurance, hand–eye coordination, hours of training. While these elements exist, they are not the primary generators of value.

What distinguishes significant esports figures is not merely their mechanical skill, but:

- Playstyle
- Persona
- Narrative presence
- Community meaning
- Memetic influence
- Cultural recognisability
- Identity formation

The most influential esports participants are not merely competitors; they are cultural figures. This aligns esports not with the physiological value system of sport, but with the cultural value system of music.

Why This Matters for Governance

Governance systems evolve to protect what a culture values.

Sports institutions evolved to:

- Protect bodily integrity
- Ensure fairness of physical competition
- Stabilise formats
- Preserve statistical continuity

Music institutions evolved to:

- Protect authorship
- Mediate rights
- Enable circulation
- Preserve cultural memory

If esports is governed using a physiological metric system, it will fail to protect what actually matters in its ecosystem: identity, community, expression, continuity, and cultural meaning. This is not a moral claim. It is a structural one.

The Problem of Measurement

When a system is evaluated using the wrong metrics, it becomes illegible to itself.

If esports is measured as sport, it appears unstable, unprofessional, fragmented, and immature.

If esports is measured as a cultural industry, it appears dynamic, generative, and socially embedded. This difference in measurement produces difference in interpretation, and interpretation shapes policy.

Cultural Memory Versus Statistical Memory

Sports preserve memory through records, while music preserves memory through songs. Esports currently preserves neither coherently. Formats disappear, statistics become meaningless, cultural memory fragments.

This is not an accident. It is a consequence of governance misalignment.

Traditional sport values bodily performance and quantifiable output. Music values cultural resonance and expressive meaning. Esports aligns structurally with the latter.

Until this distinction is recognised, esports will continue to be governed using the wrong metrics, evaluated by the wrong standards, and misunderstood by the institutions that claim to support it.

4. Traditional Esports Is Not a Sport

A Structural Analysis of Why Competitive Gaming Follows the Cultural, Economic, and Governance Logic of the Music Industry

Over the past two decades, competitive digital gaming, commonly termed esports, has been consistently framed, governed, and discussed as an emergent form of sport. This classification has shaped institutional responses, regulatory proposals, federation structures, and cultural narratives. Yet, despite its intuitive appeal, this framing remains largely unexamined at the structural level. This paper argues that traditional esports does not, in fact, conform to the fundamental economic, legal, cultural, or governance logics that historically define sport. Instead, it aligns far more closely with the operational architecture of the global music industry.

This misclassification has produced persistent tensions: between publishers and federations, between creators and institutions, between platform ecosystems and national governance models, and between cultural participation and regulatory frameworks. By applying comparative institutional analysis across ownership structures, intellectual property regimes, career pathways, monetisation systems, distribution logics, audience relations, and governance traditions, this paper demonstrates that esports shares its most defining characteristics not with physical sports, but with music: a sector governed by proprietary formats, creative authorship, platform dependency, globalised audiences, and star-driven cultural economies.

Unlike traditional sports, whose rules are collectively owned, whose formats evolve slowly, and whose governance institutions emerged prior to the existence of modern intellectual property law, esports exists entirely within a high-IP environment. Its core “disciplines” are owned, licensed, modified, withdrawn, and monetised by private entities. Its competitive structures are mutable, its rules patchable, and its cultural value inseparable from platform infrastructures. These conditions mirror the music industry far more closely than any athletic model.

This paper does not advocate for specific policy reforms, institutional replacements, or new governance bodies. Rather, it seeks to establish a conceptual correction: that esports must first be understood correctly before it can be governed effectively. It is an exercise in reframing, not prescription.

By diagnosing the structural mismatch between esports and the sporting frameworks imposed upon it, this paper aims to open a new scholarly and institutional conversation, one that repositions competitive gaming within the broader context of creative industries, cultural production, and intellectual property driven economies. This reframing has profound implications for governments, international organisations, cultural ministries, educators, and the future of global competitive culture.

5. Definitional Scope and Categorical Distinction

Game-Based Esports Versus Electronic and Mechatronic Sports

The term *esports* has, in recent years, expanded beyond its original referent. What initially denoted competitive video gaming has increasingly been applied to a broad array of technologically mediated competitions, including drone racing, robotic combat, e-motorsports, and other battery-powered or electronically assisted physical activities. While this semantic expansion reflects genuine innovation, it has also produced categorical ambiguity. Distinct forms of competition, governed by different physical, technological, cultural, and institutional logics, are now frequently conflated under a single label. This paper addresses this ambiguity directly.

It is concerned exclusively with game-based esports, that is, competitive practices occurring entirely within virtual environments, mediated through software systems, and constituted by proprietary, digitally simulated worlds. These include, but are not limited to, multiplayer online games, tactical shooters, strategy games, fighting games, and similar formats in which the competitive arena itself is a computational construct.

This paper does not address what may be described as electronic, mechatronic, or battery-powered sports: competitive activities involving physical vehicles, robotic systems, drones, exoskeletal devices, or other materially embodied technologies operating within physical space. Although such activities may be digitally augmented, their competitive dynamics remain fundamentally corporeal. They involve real-world kinematics, mechanical engineering constraints, spatial physics, and embodied risk. This distinction is not semantic. It is structural.

Virtual Competition Versus Technologically Mediated Physical Competition

Game-based esports are ontologically virtual. Their worlds, physics, and interaction rules are not discovered but designed. Every element of the competitive environment, from gravity and speed to hitboxes and cooldowns, is authored. These environments exist only as long as their code is executed and maintained.

By contrast, electronic or mechatronic sports operate within the physical world. While technologically enhanced, they remain subject to real-world physics, material limitations, and embodied risk. Drone racing, robotic combat, and e-motorsports retain core characteristics of traditional sport: bodily danger, mechanical endurance, spatial navigation, and physical training.

These differences have profound implications for governance.

Virtual competition is not constrained by nature. It is constrained by design decisions.

Proprietary Worlds Versus Physical Arenas

In game-based esports, the competitive arena itself is proprietary. It is owned, licensed, modified, and potentially withdrawn by private entities. A change to the code alters the world. A patch rewrites physics. A balance update transforms viability. A server shutdown erases a universe.

This condition has no true analogue in physical sport.

In contrast, drone racing or robotic competitions take place within the physical world, even if augmented by software. Their environments persist independently of corporate maintenance. A drone track does not vanish if a company folds. A robot does not cease to exist if a server goes offline.

The proprietary nature of game-based esports worlds places them firmly within the domain of creative industries, not athletic ones.

The Nature of Skill

In physical and mechatronic sports, skill is ultimately embodied. Even when technology is involved, the human body remains central: reaction time, muscular coordination, endurance, and spatial awareness are physically instantiated.

In game-based esports, skill is cognitive, perceptual, and symbolic. It is the mastery of systems, interfaces, probabilities, abstractions, and designed environments. The performer's body is a conduit, not the medium. The medium is code.

This distinction matters. Sports institutions evolved to regulate bodies. Creative industries evolved to regulate expression, authorship, and representation.

Governance Implications of Category Confusion

Conflating game-based esports with physically embodied technological sports risks importing the wrong governance logic.

It leads to assumptions about:

- Physical risk where none exists
- Bodily enhancement where none is relevant
- Embodied training where cognitive performance dominates
- Environmental stability where designed mutability prevails

As a result, regulatory frameworks developed for motorsport, aviation sport, or mechanical athletics cannot simply be repurposed for virtual competition. They address different problems.

Scope of This Paper

This paper therefore adopts a narrow, precise scope. It examines only game-based esports: competitive practices that occur entirely within virtual, proprietary environments and whose governing dynamics are shaped by software design, platform infrastructure, intellectual property ownership, and digital audience cultures.

This scope is not a limitation. It is a necessity.

Without such precision, the analysis that follows would collapse under its own generality.

Where electronic and mechatronic sports resemble traditional athletics, through embodied risk, mechanical endurance, and physical space, they may indeed align more closely with conventional sporting governance models. No such claim is made here.

The argument advanced in this paper applies only to virtual competitive systems, systems whose arenas, rules, physics, and even existence are authored rather than inherited.

6. The Framing Error

How Esports Was Misclassified

The categorisation of esports as a form of sport emerged not from structural analysis, but from surface-level analogies. Competitive gaming appeared to resemble sport in several visible respects: professional players, teams, spectators, tournaments, prize money, sponsorships, and global audiences. These outward similarities encouraged commentators, investors, and institutions to treat esports as a digital continuation of athletic competition rather than as a fundamentally distinct cultural and economic phenomenon.

This initial framing was understandable. Historically, societies have tended to categorise new forms of mass competition using existing cultural templates. When cinema emerged, it was initially treated as filmed theatre. When radio developed, it was framed as disembodied print. Such transitional metaphors provide temporary cognitive comfort but often obscure the deeper logics of new systems. In the case of esports, the sports metaphor has persisted long past its explanatory usefulness.

Traditional sports evolved in environments characterised by three defining conditions: the absence of intellectual property ownership over the rules of play; the primacy of physical embodiment; and the gradual, community-led evolution of competitive formats. Football, athletics, wrestling, boxing, and similar disciplines were not invented by corporations, nor could they be withdrawn from circulation by a single rights holder. Their governance structures developed in response to these realities, prioritising rule stability, national representation, and institutional continuity.

Esports, by contrast, emerges from an entirely different historical and legal environment. Its disciplines are proprietary. Its rules are subject to unilateral modification. Its formats can be retired, reissued, franchised, or monetised through licensing agreements. Its arenas are digital platforms. Its distribution is algorithmic. Its labour markets resemble creative industries more than athletic professions. Its stars operate as performers, streamers, brand ambassadors, and community figures simultaneously.

Yet, despite these differences, esports has largely been forced into sport-derived institutional frameworks. This has produced persistent friction. Federations attempt to standardise disciplines that are structurally non-standardisable. Regulators struggle with ownership questions that sports law was never designed to address. National representation models clash with platform-native global communities. Talent pathways borrowed from athletics fail to reflect the creator-centric dynamics of gaming culture.

This paper refers to this phenomenon as the framing error: the long-standing assumption that esports is best understood as an extension of physical sport, rather than as a distinct cultural form with its own institutional requirements.

Framing errors are not merely semantic. They shape funding models, legal interpretations, public policy, labour rights, educational pathways, and cultural legitimacy. When a system is framed incorrectly, the institutions built around it will tend to malfunction, regardless of their intentions.

To assess whether esports truly belongs within the category of sport or whether it more closely resembles another cultural system, this paper applies a comparative structural approach. Rather than focusing on surface features, it examines the deep logics that govern ownership, labour, value creation, distribution, and institutional formation. As will be shown, these logics align far more closely with the music industry than with traditional athletics.

7. A Structural Comparison

Sport, Music, and Esports

To determine whether esports is more structurally aligned with traditional sport or with the music industry, it is necessary to move beyond surface level resemblances and examine the deeper institutional logics that govern each domain. These logics include ownership regimes, value creation mechanisms, labour structures, distribution systems, cultural formation, and governance traditions. This section conducts a comparative structural analysis across these dimensions, demonstrating that esports consistently aligns more closely with music than with sport.

Ownership and Intellectual Property Regimes

One of the most fundamental distinctions between sport and music lies in their relationship to intellectual property. Traditional sports emerged long before modern IP law. Their rules, formats, and core mechanics are not owned by any single entity. Football cannot be withdrawn from existence by FIFA; athletics cannot be patented; boxing is not licensed. While leagues may own branding, broadcast rights, and trademarks, the underlying sport itself remains part of the cultural commons.

The music industry, by contrast, is built entirely upon proprietary ownership. Songs, compositions, recordings, performances, and even artistic personas are protected by complex IP regimes. These rights determine who may distribute, remix, monetise, and perform a given work. The entire industry is structured around licensing, rights management, and contractual control.

Esports mirrors the music model almost perfectly. Every esports discipline is proprietary. The rules, mechanics, characters, maps, and even the possibility of competition itself are owned by a rights holder. Publishers may alter or remove a game at any time. Tournaments operate under licensing agreements. Broadcasts depend on platform permissions. Competitive formats are not communal traditions but corporate assets.

This single factor alone places esports outside the traditional logic of sport. Governance structures designed for rule-commons environments struggle when applied to rights-controlled systems. Music has spent over a century developing institutions to manage precisely these conditions. Sport has not.

Format Evolution and Stability

Traditional sports exhibit extraordinary stability. The core rules of football, cricket, tennis, and athletics change slowly, if at all. This stability enables long-term training regimes, generational continuity, and historical comparison. Athletes compete within frameworks that predate them and will likely outlast them.

Music, conversely, is defined by rapid genre evolution. New styles emerge, hybridise, and dissolve. Formats are constantly reinterpreted. What constitutes “pop,” “rock,” or “hip-hop” is historically fluid. This mutability is not a flaw but a defining characteristic of creative industries.

Esports behaves like music in this regard. Competitive metas shift monthly. Balance patches reshape entire professional scenes. New genres of gameplay emerge. Older formats are abandoned. Player skill is not merely physical mastery but adaptive creativity. The “discipline” itself is unstable.

Attempting to govern such systems as though they were static athletic formats creates institutional friction. Music governance has long accepted that cultural formats evolve. Sports governance is built around preserving continuity.

Labour Structures and Career Pathways

In traditional sport, athletes follow relatively standardised pathways: junior leagues, academies, national development systems, professional contracts, and retirement. The athlete's labour is primarily physical, time-bound, and institutionally mediated.

In music, careers are non-linear. Artists may emerge from obscurity, build audiences independently, sign with labels, self-produce, pivot genres, become influencers, producers, or entrepreneurs. Their labour is not merely performance but identity construction, audience cultivation, and continuous cultural production.

Esports professionals resemble musicians far more than athletes. Their careers are hybrid: part competitor, part entertainer, part influencer, part brand. Income derives not only from tournament winnings but from streaming, sponsorships, content creation, merchandise, and personal branding. Many never pass through formal institutional pipelines. Talent discovery is decentralised, algorithmic, and community driven.

Sports governance assumes institutional control over talent pipelines. Music governance assumes decentralised emergence. Esports aligns with the latter.

Distribution and Platform Dependency

Sport developed in a pre-digital era. Stadiums, clubs, and national federations formed its physical infrastructure. Broadcasting arrived later and was layered on top.

Music, however, has always been distribution-driven: from sheet music to vinyl, radio, cassettes, CDs, streaming platforms, and algorithmic discovery. The medium has always shaped the market.

Esports is natively platform dependent. Twitch, YouTube, Discord, Steam, and proprietary game clients are not merely distribution channels; they are the arenas themselves. Algorithmic visibility determines success. Community engagement is continuous rather than event bound. This mirrors music's relationship with platforms like Spotify, Apple Music, and SoundCloud. In both cases, platform logic shapes cultural value, not merely commercial reach.

Audience Relationships and Cultural Identity

Sports fandom is historically tribal, geographically rooted, and generational. Teams represent cities, nations, or institutions. Loyalty often precedes individual players.

Music fandom is relational, parasocial, and identity driven. Fans follow artists, not institutions. They feel emotional intimacy. Communities form around personalities, aesthetics, and values. Esports fandom behaves like music fandom. Fans follow streamers, teams, or personalities across games. Loyalty is fluid. Identity is performative and participatory. Community discourse is constant.

This has profound implications for governance. Sports institutions govern leagues. Music institutions mediate creator–audience relationships. Esports requires the latter.

Governance Traditions

Sports federations exist to stabilise formats, regulate physical safety, ensure fairness, and manage national representation. Their legitimacy arises from continuity.

Music governance bodies exist to manage rights, royalties, authorship, attribution, and global licensing. Their legitimacy arises from legal coherence.

Esports governance, if misclassified as sport, becomes structurally incoherent. Its actual needs IP mediation, creator protection, platform neutrality, format preservation, cultural continuity, are closer to those of music.

Comparative Summary Table

Dimension	Traditional Sport	Music Industry	Esports
Core format ownership	Public commons	Proprietary	Proprietary
Rule stability	High	Low	Low
Format evolution	Slow	Rapid	Rapid
Career pathways	Linear	Non-linear	Non-linear
Value creation	Physical performance	Cultural production	Hybrid
Platform dependency	Secondary	Primary	Primary
Audience loyalty	Team/nation-based	Artist-based	Personality-based
Governance logic	Continuity	Rights management	Rights-dependent
Institutional origin	Pre-IP era	IP era	IP-native

Across every deep structural dimension, esports aligns more closely with music than with sport.

8. Common Objections and Structural Rebuttals

Any attempt to reclassify an established cultural form will inevitably encounter resistance. Such resistance rarely arises from malice; more often, it emerges from reliance on surface-level analogies, inherited metaphors, and intuitive but unexamined assumptions. Because esports has long been framed through the language of sport, objections to its reclassification tend to invoke visible similarities rather than structural correspondences.

This section addresses the most common objections to the central thesis of this paper and demonstrates why they fail at the level of institutional, legal, and cultural structure.

Objection 1: “But esports involves competition”

It is true that esports involves competition. However, competition alone is not sufficient to define a phenomenon as sport.

Competition is a feature of many domains: music charts, academic publishing, startup ecosystems, fashion, theatre, and social media influence. Yet none of these are considered sports. Competition is a mode of interaction, not a structural category.

What distinguishes sport is not the presence of competition, but the nature of the competitive substrate: embodied physicality, commons-based rules, physiological risk, and stable formats. Esports competition takes place within proprietary, authored environments. The arena itself is a designed artifact. The rules are mutable. The physics is programmable. The existence of the competition depends on rights-holders.

Therefore, while esports is competitive, it is not competitive in the way sport is competitive. It is competitive in the way creative industries are competitive.

Objection 2: “But fans treat it like sport”

Audience behaviour is an unreliable guide to structural classification.

Fans also treat musicians as heroes, form tribal loyalties, attend live events, wear merchandise, and follow seasons of releases. These behaviours resemble sports fandom superficially, yet no one confuses music for sport.

What matters is not how fandom feels, but what it does.

Sports fandom is historically institutional: loyalty to clubs, nations, or leagues. Music fandom is relational: loyalty to artists, personas, and identities. Esports fandom overwhelmingly follows the latter pattern. Viewers follow personalities, streamers, and playstyles more than institutions. Communities form around creators, not governing bodies.

Therefore, while the affective experience of spectatorship may resemble sport, its social organisation more closely resembles creative fandom.

Objection 3: “But esports has teams and leagues”

Organisational similarity does not imply structural identity.

Film studios, orchestras, theatre companies, and record labels all organise people into teams. They have seasons, contracts, schedules, and hierarchies. None of these features make them sports.

Teams and leagues are organisational solutions, not ontological markers.

What distinguishes sports leagues is that they govern activities whose rules are not owned and whose formats are inherited. Esports leagues govern activities whose rules are proprietary and whose formats are contingent.

This distinction transforms governance from stewardship to licensing.

Objection 4: “But players train physically”

Physical effort is not exclusive to sport.

Musicians train physically. Actors rehearse physically. Dancers condition their bodies. Surgeons maintain fine motor skills. None of these professions are categorised as sport.

The defining feature of sport is not that bodies are involved, but that the body is the medium of competition. In esports, the body is an interface. The medium is computational.

This distinction matters for governance. Sports institutions evolved to regulate bodies. Esports requires regulation of systems.

Objection 5: “But it looks like sport”

This objection is perhaps the most revealing.

Surface resemblance is often mistaken for structural equivalence. Yet history is filled with examples of such errors: early cinema was treated as filmed theatre; radio was treated as disembodied print; streaming was treated as digital television.

In each case, governance lagged behind reality.

Esports may resemble sport in its outward ritual, but its deep structure aligns with rights-based, platform-native, creator-centric systems.

The question is not: Does it look like sport?

The question is: Does it function like sport?

Structural Versus Surface-Level Features

This paper distinguishes between:

- Surface features - competition, teams, fans, events
- Structural features - ownership, governance logic, labour type, cultural memory, value systems

Surface features are shared across many cultural forms. Structural features are not. Esports shares surface features with sport, and it shares structural features with music. Classification must follow structure, not spectacle.

Why These Objections Persist

These objections stick around because they feel right on the surface. They focus on what’s visible to the eye rather than how the system actually functions. However, the organizations in charge have to govern based on how things work, not just how they look. Getting these definitions wrong isn't just a technicality; it creates real-world chaos, leading to unstable careers, leadership crises, legal headaches, and a culture that feels like it's constantly on edge.

Interim Conclusion

The most common objections to reclassifying esports rely on surface analogies rather than structural analysis. When examined at the level of ownership, labour, governance, and value production, these objections collapse.

Esports is not misclassified because people misunderstand it, it is misclassified because people mistake what they see for what it is.

9. Intellectual Property

Ownership and Format Control

The most consequential structural distinction between traditional sport and esports lies in ownership. While sport evolved in a pre-intellectual property environment, esports is native to an IP-saturated world. This difference is not incidental; it is foundational. It reshapes governance, labour relations, economic flows, cultural continuity, and institutional legitimacy.

Sport as a Commons-Based Cultural Form

Traditional sports developed as communal cultural practices. Football, cricket, running, swimming, and similar activities were not invented by corporations, patented, or licensed. Their rules were collectively refined over time, often emerging from informal play before becoming codified through custom and consensus.

Because no single entity owned these formats, governance structures evolved to stabilise and coordinate, not to control. The earliest sports federations were not rights-holders but stewards. Their authority derived from cultural legitimacy, not legal ownership.

This distinction matters profoundly. When a format is owned by no one, governance must be collective. When a format is owned by someone, governance becomes contractual.

Music as an IP-Native Industry

The music industry developed within modern intellectual property systems. Songs, recordings, performances, lyrics, and even stage names are protected, licensed, monetised, transferred, and inherited. The industry's institutions including labels, publishers, collecting societies, performance rights organisations, exist precisely because creative works are proprietary.

This legal structure produces a very different governance logic. Authority arises from rights management, not tradition. Value flows through licensing chains. Cultural continuity is mediated through catalogues, archives, and reissues rather than through immutable formats.

Music governance does not attempt to freeze culture; it attempts to coordinate its circulation.

Esports as an IP-Native Cultural System

Esports is not merely IP-intensive, it is IP-total. Every competitive format exists entirely at the discretion of a rights-holder. A game can be patched, rebalanced, redesigned, franchised, sold, or discontinued without public consent. Tournaments require permission. Broadcasts require licenses. Even the act of competitive play may be contractually restricted.

This reality places esports fundamentally outside the commons-based logic of sport. No traditional sport can be withdrawn from existence by a corporate decision. No federation owns football. No athlete must license the right to practice sprinting. Yet in esports, these are everyday realities.

This leads to a major conflict: esports is governed as if it's a public space for everyone, yet it functions like a private estate where the owners have the final say.

The Consequences of Misaligned Governance

When IP-native systems are governed as if they were commons-based, several predictable tensions arise:

Institutional Instability

Federations cannot stabilise formats that can be unilaterally altered. This undermines long-term planning, athlete development, and historical continuity.

Jurisdictional Ambiguity

Who governs what when a format is owned privately but culturally public? This question has no analogue in traditional sport but is central to music and film.

Labour Precarity

Players often lack long-term security because the format itself is unstable. Entire careers can disappear with a patch or a publisher decision.

Fragmentation

Each publisher acts as a de facto micro-sovereign. No unifying cultural governance layer exists. These are not accidents; they are structural outcomes of misclassification.

Why Sports Federations Cannot Solve This

Sports federations were not designed to manage proprietary formats. Their legitimacy arises from neutrality. They assume that the format itself belongs to the public. This assumption collapses in esports.

Music governance, however, evolved precisely to handle this problem. It mediates between private ownership and public culture. It coordinates between rights-holders, performers, distributors, and audiences. It stabilises cultural production without freezing it. Esports requires this kind of governance logic, but it has not yet developed it.

Format Control and Cultural Continuity

One of the least examined issues in esports is cultural continuity. In sport, the same disciplines persist across generations. This enables intergenerational comparison, historical narratives, and collective memory.

In music, continuity is maintained not through format stability but through catalogues, archives, covers, reinterpretations, and re-releases.

Esports has neither system fully developed. Games disappear. Formats vanish. Records become meaningless. Entire cultural histories evaporate.

This is not merely a nostalgia problem, it is a governance failure.

10. Creator Psychology

Identity Formation, and the Meaning of Performance

To understand why esports aligns more closely with the music industry than with traditional sport, it is not sufficient to examine ownership and economic structures alone. One must also consider the psychology of participants, the nature of identity formation, and the meaning attributed to performance. These dimensions reveal deep differences between athletic labour and creative labour, differences that place esports firmly within the latter category.

Athletic Identity Versus Creative Identity

In traditional sport, the athlete's identity is largely instrumental. While individual personality may matter, the athlete is primarily defined by performance metrics: speed, strength, accuracy, endurance. The body is the medium, and achievement is measured through quantifiable outputs. The athlete's persona is secondary to the act of competition.

In creative industries such as music, the performer's identity is inseparable from the work itself. A musician is not merely executing a task; they are expressing a persona, a worldview, an aesthetic, and an emotional register. Fans do not merely observe; they identify, project, and form attachments. The artist is the medium.

Esports participants resemble musicians far more than athletes in this respect. They do not simply "play well"; they perform. Their style, humour, temperament, emotional responses, and communicative presence are central to their value. A professional gamer is not merely a competitor but a character within a shared narrative ecosystem.

This is why so many esports careers blur into streaming, commentary, content creation, and personal branding. These are not peripheral activities. They are central to how value is produced.

Performance as Expression Rather Than Execution

In sport, performance is fundamentally instrumental: the goal is to win, to outperform, to achieve physical dominance or precision. Aesthetic appreciation may exist, but it is secondary. In music, performance is expressive. It is not reducible to correctness or technical mastery. Two musicians may play the same notes yet produce radically different experiences. Expression, interpretation, and emotional resonance are essential.

Esports performance exhibits the same qualities. The same game mechanics can produce wildly different performances depending on playstyle, creativity, improvisation, risk-taking, humour, or narrative framing. Spectators do not merely want optimal play; they want engaging play.

This explains why highly skilled players do not always attract large audiences, while charismatic or stylistically distinctive players often do. This is not a sports phenomenon. It is a creative one.

Parasocial Dynamics and Audience Intimacy

Sports fandom is historically collective and tribal. One supports a team, a nation, or a club. Individual athletes matter, but loyalty is often institutional.

Music fandom is relational and parasocial. Fans develop emotional attachments to artists. They feel as though they know them. Identity formation is reciprocal: fans use artists to articulate who they are.

Esports fandom overwhelmingly follows the latter model. Viewers do not merely support teams; they follow personalities. They form long-term parasocial relationships with streamers, players, and content creators. Community discourse is continuous, not seasonal.

This dynamic fundamentally alters the meaning of competition. It becomes narrative rather than purely outcome driven. Therefore, sports governance is not designed for parasocial ecosystems, but music governance is.

Career Meaning and Psychological Motivation

Athletes often frame their careers in terms of achievement, legacy, and physical mastery. The psychological arc is typically linear: training, peak performance, decline, retirement.

Creative workers frame their careers differently. They seek self-expression, cultural impact, audience resonance, and creative evolution. Careers may wax and wane. Reinvention is normal. Legacy is not merely statistical but cultural.

Esports careers mirror the creative model. Players reinvent themselves as commentators, streamers, coaches, analysts, entertainers, or entrepreneurs. Their psychological investment is not merely in winning but in relevance, influence, and audience connection. Attempts to force esports into athletic career frameworks misunderstand this reality.

Community as Co-Creator

In sport, spectatorship is mostly passive. Fans watch. In music, audiences co-create meaning. Fan cultures, remixing, covers, memes, and reinterpretations are part of the ecosystem.

Esports audiences behave similarly. They clip, remix, meme, commentate, mod, and shape the cultural narrative. The boundary between creator and consumer is porous. This again places esports within the logic of creative industries, not athletic ones.

Psychologically, culturally, and socially, esports participants behave not as athletes but as creators. Their value emerges not merely from competitive success but from expression, identity, audience intimacy, and cultural resonance. These are the defining characteristics of music, not sport.

Any governance framework that fails to account for this will misunderstand the very nature of the labour it seeks to regulate.

11. Distribution, Platforms, and Audience Behaviour

One of the clearest indicators of esports' structural alignment with the music industry lies in how it is distributed, experienced, and socially embedded. Distribution is not merely a logistical concern; it shapes how value is created, how communities form, and how cultural legitimacy is constructed. Traditional sports and the music industry operate under fundamentally different distribution logics, and esports follows the latter, not the former.

Physical Venues Versus Platform-Native Arenas

Traditional sports emerged in physical spaces: fields, courts, stadiums, and arenas. These locations were not merely sites of competition but focal points of community identity. Distribution occurred locally before being extended outward through radio, television, and later digital broadcast.

Music, by contrast, has always been mediated by distribution technologies. From sheet music to vinyl, radio, cassette, compact disc, MP3, and streaming platforms, the industry's structure has been repeatedly reshaped by shifts in how content circulates. Distribution is not an accessory to music, it is its architecture.

Esports is natively platform-based. Its primary "arenas" are not physical venues but digital interfaces: Twitch, YouTube, Discord, proprietary clients, and streaming overlays. Physical events exist, but they are secondary to the continuous digital presence.

This places esports squarely within the distribution logic of music rather than sport.

Algorithmic Visibility and Cultural Formation

In traditional sport, institutional recognition largely precedes audience formation. One becomes a professional athlete through leagues, clubs, and federations. Spectatorship follows.

In music, audience formation often precedes institutional recognition. Artists gain followings through platforms, virality, or grassroots communities before being formalised by labels or contracts.

Esports follows this second path. Players often become culturally significant long before they are institutionally recognised. Streaming metrics, community engagement, and algorithmic discoverability determine prominence.

This creates a radically different power dynamic. Authority is bottom-up rather than top-down. Sports governance assumes top-down legitimacy. Music governance assumes bottom-up emergence.

Temporal Structure: Seasons Versus Continuous Presence

Sport is seasonal. There are defined calendars, breaks, and cycles. Visibility is episodic.

Music culture is continuous. Artists release content irregularly. Engagement is ongoing. Community interaction is daily.

Esports follows the music model. Streamers and players maintain persistent presence. There is no off-season for personality-based engagement. Communities are always active.

This has governance implications. Systems designed for seasonal oversight cannot regulate continuous cultural systems effectively.

Globalisation Without Borders

Sports globalisation is mediated through national federations. Representation is geographic.

Music globalisation is platform native. Songs travel without passports. Cultural influence is not territorial.

Esports behaves like music here as well. A player in one country may have a fanbase across dozens. Language barriers matter less than platform mechanics. Identity is transnational.

This breaks the national-representation logic of sports federations. It mirrors the transnational logic of creative industries.

Audience Behaviour as Participation

Sports audiences primarily observe. They may chant, wear colours, and follow news, but their influence on the game itself is limited.

Music audiences participate. They remix, comment, meme, reinterpret, and co-create meaning. Esports audiences behave similarly. They clip moments, remix content, shape narratives, create in-jokes, and influence play styles.

This participatory dynamic is central to creative industries. Sports governance was never designed for it.

Esports' distribution logic, platform-native, algorithmic, continuous, transnational, and participatory, aligns almost perfectly with that of the music industry. This further destabilises attempts to govern it under frameworks designed for geographically rooted, seasonally structured, institutionally mediated sports.

12. Why Traditional Sports Federations Cannot Govern Esports

The persistent difficulties faced by existing esports federations, regulatory bodies, and international sporting institutions are often attributed to poor execution, internal politics, or insufficient funding. This section argues that such explanations are insufficient. The core issue is not managerial but structural. Traditional sports federations were never designed to govern systems like esports, because esports violates the foundational assumptions upon which those institutions are built.

The Governance DNA of Traditional Sport

Sports federations did not emerge arbitrarily. They evolved to solve specific historical problems:

1. Standardisation – Establishing uniform rules across regions
2. Fairness – Preventing local manipulation of formats
3. Safety – Protecting physical bodies
4. Continuity – Preserving formats across generations
5. Representation – Structuring national and international competition

These institutions presuppose several conditions:

- That the sport itself is not owned
- That its rules are collectively maintained
- That its formats evolve slowly
- That its cultural legitimacy is inherited
- That its labour is embodied and finite

None of these conditions hold true for esports.

Esports Violates Every Core Assumption of Sports Governance

Esports is not merely a “new” sport. It is a fundamentally different category of activity; this mismatch creates chronic instability.

Sports Governance Assumption	Esports Reality
The format is a common	The format is proprietary
Rules are stable	Rules change frequently
Institutions precede culture	Culture precedes institutions
Athletic labour is physical	Labour is cognitive, expressive, performative
Safety is bodily	Safety is psychological, social, economic
Representation is national	Identity is transnational
Legacy is statistical	Legacy is cultural

Why Federation Models Fail Repeatedly

Sports federations attempt to:

- Stabilise formats that cannot be stabilised
- Nationalise cultures that are platform-native
- Regulate IP they do not own
- Enforce standards on systems designed for mutation

These are not solvable problems. They are category errors.

This is why:

- Federations fracture
- Legitimacy is contested
- Publishers bypass them
- Players distrust them
- Governments struggle to classify them

This is not because esports is young, it is because it is not a sport in the institutional sense.

The Myth of “Esports Will Mature Into Sport”

A common argument is that esports will eventually resemble traditional sport as it matures. This belief is historically unfounded.

Creative industries do not converge toward athletic models as they age. Music did not become more like sport. Film did not become more like sport. Theatre did not become more like sport. They developed their own governance logics.

Esports will not become sport-like. It will become more platform-native, more IP-centric, more creator-driven, more algorithmic, and more participatory. Governance must evolve accordingly.

Institutional Legitimacy in IP-Native Systems

Sports federations derive legitimacy from cultural inheritance. Music institutions derive legitimacy from legal coherence. Esports, being IP-native, cannot derive legitimacy from tradition.

It must derive legitimacy from:

- Rights mediation
- Cultural stewardship
- Platform neutrality
- Creator protection
- Continuity mechanisms
- Format preservation

None of these are central functions of sports federations.

Why the Mismatch Is Not Reformable

This is not a matter of updating sports federations. Their internal logic is incompatible with the needs of IP-native cultural systems.

One cannot reform a commons-based institution into a rights-based one without changing its identity.

This is not evolution, it is category transition. Traditional sports federations are not failing esports. They are being asked to govern something they were never designed to understand. This is not incompetence. It is incompatibility.

13. The Need for a New Class of Governance

The preceding sections have established that esports is neither structurally nor culturally aligned with traditional sport. It is IP-native rather than commons-based, platform dependent rather than venue based, creator centric rather than institution centric, and culturally mutable rather than format stable. These features are not anomalies; they are constitutive. Any attempt to govern esports effectively must therefore begin with a recognition that it requires a fundamentally different class of governance, one that does not yet formally exist.

This section does not prescribe specific institutional designs. Instead, it identifies the structural characteristics such a governance class must possess if it is to align with the realities of esports as a cultural system.

Governance as Structural Alignment

Governance is often misunderstood as a set of rules or authorities, where in reality, governance is an expression of deep structural assumptions about what a system is, how it changes, and what it exists to protect.

Traditional sports governance is optimised for:

- Format stability
- Physical risk
- National representation
- Institutional continuity
- Public ownership of rules

Music governance is optimised for:

- Rights management
- Cultural circulation
- Attribution and authorship
- Economic mediation
- Platform neutrality

Esports requires a governance logic more closely aligned with music than traditional sports.

The Limits of Regulatory Imitation

Many attempts to govern esports have relied on institutional mimicry: adopting the forms of Olympic committees, national sport federations, or athletic codes of conduct. These efforts often fail not because they are poorly designed, but because they import assumptions that do not hold.

For example:

- Codes of conduct assume stable labour relations.
- Eligibility rules assume format permanence.
- Anti-doping regimes assume bodily enhancement as the primary risk.
- National team structures assume territorial belonging.

In esports, these assumptions are systematically violated. Effective governance cannot be achieved by imitation. It must be architected.

Governance in Creative Industries

Creative industries have historically required governance models that do not attempt to stabilise culture, but to stabilise relations within culture: between creators and distributors, between rights-holders and performers, between platforms and audiences.

Music governance bodies, though imperfect, emerged to address:

- Attribution
- Royalties
- Rights disputes
- Cross-border licensing
- Cultural preservation

They do not attempt to control artistic evolution; they attempt to manage its consequences. This distinction is critical. Governance in creative systems is reactive, not prescriptive. Esports demands this same logic.

The Problem of Format Extinction

One of the least examined issues in esports is the phenomenon of format extinction. Entire competitive ecosystems can vanish when a game is discontinued, when a publisher withdraws support, or when a platform deprioritises visibility.

In sport, this is nearly impossible. Football does not disappear.

In music, however, genres, scenes, and movements often dissolve, leaving behind archives, recordings, and cultural traces.

Esports currently lacks any systematic method of cultural preservation. Records become meaningless when formats vanish. Historical continuity collapses.

This is not merely a cultural issue. It is a governance issue.

Governance as Cultural Stewardship

If esports is a creative industry rather than a sport, then governance must be redefined as stewardship rather than regulation.

Stewardship does not impose static rules. It preserves conditions for cultural continuity.

This includes:

- Archival practices
- Rights mediation
- Historical preservation
- Format documentation
- Attribution systems
- Community memory

These functions are alien to traditional sports federations but central to creative institutions.

The Danger of Misgovernance

Misaligned governance does not merely fail; it actively distorts the system it governs.

In esports, this has already produced:

- Labour precarity
- Exploitative contracts
- Jurisdictional confusion
- Cultural fragmentation
- Institutional illegitimacy

These outcomes are not aberrations. They are structural consequences.

Esports does not need better sports governance. It needs a different category of governance altogether, one aligned with IP-native cultural systems, not with commons-based athletic traditions. The failure to recognise this has produced decades of institutional confusion.

14. Implications for Governments, Institutions, and Cultural Policy

The misclassification of esports as a form of sport has not merely distorted industry governance; it has shaped public policy, legal frameworks, educational pathways, and cultural legitimacy in ways that increasingly conflict with empirical reality. This section examines how this framing error propagates through state institutions, international bodies, and cultural systems, producing outcomes that are not only inefficient but structurally incoherent.

The Administrative Consequences of Misclassification

Governments govern by categories. Ministries, departments, funding schemes, visa regimes, labour laws, education systems, and regulatory authorities are all structured around definitional boundaries. When an activity is placed in the wrong category, the consequences cascade.

When esports is classified as sport, it is typically routed through:

- Ministries of Sport
- National Olympic Committees
- Physical education frameworks
- Athletic visa categories
- Sports grant programs
- Anti-doping authorities
- Sports injury and safety regimes

Yet esports does not primarily involve:

- Physical training infrastructures
- Bodily risk management
- National representation systems
- Rule-commons formats
- Long-term physical conditioning

As a result, policy tools designed for athletics are applied to systems that resemble creative labour markets. This mismatch produces administrative friction.

Esports as a Cultural and Creative Industry

From a policy perspective, esports aligns far more closely with sectors typically governed under:

- Culture
- Creative industries
- Digital economies
- Media and communications
- Youth and innovation portfolios

These domains already possess regulatory frameworks designed for:

- IP ownership
- Platform mediation
- Non-linear careers
- Cultural exports
- Transnational audiences
- Digital labour

- Content moderation
- Community governance

Esports exhibits all of these characteristics. Treating it as sport forces it into bureaucratic architectures that neither recognise nor protect its actual modes of production.

Funding Misalignment

Public funding regimes are designed around policy goals. Sports funding typically prioritises:

- Physical health
- National representation
- Community participation
- Olympic pipelines
- Medals and international prestige

Creative industries funding prioritises:

- Cultural export
- Innovation
- IP creation
- Platform growth
- Audience development
- Global reach

Esports aligns with the creative industries.

Misclassification therefore diverts esports into funding channels that misunderstand its value proposition. This has downstream consequences for talent development, sustainability, and institutional legitimacy.

Education and Human Capital Formation

Sports education focuses on:

- Physical training
- Coaching
- Physiology
- Sports science
- Athletic psychology

Creative industry education focuses on:

- Media literacy
- IP law
- Platform economics
- Community building
- Digital performance
- Creative entrepreneurship

Esports professionals require creative industry education far more than sports education. Misclassification produces training programs that fail to prepare participants for the actual realities of their careers.

Cultural Legitimacy and Public Understanding

The category under which an activity is governed shapes how it is perceived. Sport is often associated with physical exertion, discipline, and bodily excellence. Creative industries are associated with cultural production, identity, and expression.

Esports participants frequently experience a legitimacy gap: they are neither fully recognised as athletes nor fully acknowledged as cultural workers.

This ambiguity affects:

- Public respect
- Mental health
- Career sustainability
- Social support
- Legal recognition

This is not a cultural accident. It is a policy artifact.

International Institutions and the Problem of Classification

International bodies such as UNESCO and WIPO have well-developed frameworks for:

- Cultural heritage
- Creative industries
- IP protection
- Cultural labour

By contrast, the IOC is designed to govern bodily competition under commons-based formats. The question is not whether esports “belongs” in the Olympics. The deeper question is whether the Olympic governance model is capable of representing an IP-native cultural form. That question has not yet been formally asked.

Misclassifying esports as sport distorts not only governance, but law, funding, education, and cultural legitimacy. Governments are not failing esports; they are governing it under the wrong category.

Correct classification is not semantic. It is infrastructural.

15. Conclusion

Toward a New Global Understanding of Competitive Culture

This paper has argued that esports has been systematically misclassified. While commonly framed as a digital extension of traditional sport, competitive gaming does not conform to the structural, legal, cultural, psychological, or economic logics that define athletic systems. Instead, across every deep dimension of analysis, ownership, labour, distribution, audience behaviour, identity formation, and governance, esports aligns more closely with the music industry and, more broadly, with creative, IP-native cultural systems.

This misclassification is not a minor conceptual error. It is foundational. Categories shape institutions, and institutions shape outcomes. When esports is governed as sport, it is placed within frameworks designed for commons-based formats, physical embodiment, national representation, and rule stability. These frameworks cannot coherently regulate proprietary formats, platform-native cultures, non-linear creative careers, and algorithmically mediated audiences. The persistent instability, fragmentation, and legitimacy crises observed across the esports ecosystem are not incidental. They are predictable structural consequences.

This paper has not proposed solutions, new federations, or alternative institutions. It has instead sought to perform a prior task: to establish a correct diagnosis. Before esports can be governed effectively, it must be understood correctly.

Esports is not merely:

- Competitive, it is performative.
- Rule-bound, but expressive.
- Athletic, but cultural.
- National, but transnational.
- Physical, but identity-driven.
- Stable, but evolutionary.

These characteristics are not anomalies to be corrected; they are the essence of the form.

Historically, societies have repeatedly misclassified emergent cultural systems by forcing them into inherited institutional categories. Cinema was once treated as theatre. Radio was once treated as print. Streaming was once treated as broadcast television. Each time, governance lagged behind reality, producing friction, distortion, and resistance—until a new conceptual framework emerged. Esports now stands at such a moment.

The central claim of this paper is therefore not that esports should replace sport, nor that it should displace existing institutions. It is that esports represents a different category of human activity, one that requires its own conceptual foundations before it can develop coherent governance structures, cultural legitimacy, and sustainable career systems.

To continue governing esports as if it were sport is to misunderstand its nature.

To understand its nature is the first step toward governing it well.