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eSport – A Socio-Political Challenge

eSport – Eine gesellschaftspolitische Herausforderung

The Federal Government declared in its Coalition Contract in 2018 that competitive video and computer games, the so-called eSports, should be recognized as a type of sport and that it would promote their inclusion in the Olympic program. Since then there are an increasing number of reports in the media which suggest that eSports are sports in a real sense. The impression arises more and more that eSports really have characteristics which justify their classification as sport. Even if increasing pressure is thereby generated in public opinion that competitive video and computer games should be recognized as sports, there are good reasons to resist this pressure and to delineate sports clearly from eSports.

eSport is not Sport

Sports – viewed sociologically – involve the communication of physical performance which has no other purpose than itself (see details (2)). We observe such communications of physical performance and we can distinguish whether it is sport or not. For example, we can see the difference whether someone is jogging or just running to catch the bus. We recognize whether someone is engaged in light athletics, or whether he is throwing a javelin to kill his prey. These examples show: not every physical activity is sport. A pianist doubtlessly performs highly-complex physical movements, but he does not communicate how virtuoso his working the keys is, he is not engaging in sport, he is making music.

eSport is in this sense not a sport! In eSport, there is a body-related act – namely operating the controller - but this act is not a sports-specific motor activity. eSport participants do not communicate: "I can click" or "I can click better than you!", but their activity only becomes meaningful in the virtual event, that is by the movement of an avatar. The assignment of victory and loss is not made in eSport via how many clicks per minute one achieves, or what key combinations are coordinatively covered, but how many goals an avatar makes in soccer simulations, how many enemy monsters he kills, terrorists he shoots, or tanks he destroys to gain terrain and conquer the enemy base. The motor activity of clicking does not identify the game events. What should one then call such a type of sports: Mouse clicking or key pressing?

eSports Endanger the Social Legitimation of Sports

If eSports were recognized as sport, there would also be a danger that sport would lose its social legitimation. Computer games are often brought into associate with violence, sexism, game addiction, adiposity, lack of exercise as well as motor deficits in children and adolescents, and this negative communication damages the image of health-promoting and pedagogically-valuable sports. Vice-versa, inclusion of eSport organizations in organized sports is desirable for them because they would not only obtain the possibility of participating in public sports promotions, but they would also have a great gain in legitimation and image. In times in which scientific studies disclose lack of exercise and motor deficits as essential problems in the development of children and adolescents, it would be really negligent with respect to the legitimation of sports to even consider including computer games which are limited to movement of the fingers and further promote the general lack of exercise by sitting in front of the computer.

In addition, there are pedagogic legitimation problems, which result especially from the fact that those computer games which dominate the competition area in eSports and attract the most players and audiences are those in which the main thrust is killing, destroying and conquering, that is emphasis on a meaning context which has nothing – absolutely nothing! – to do with sports and which cannot be brought into line with its ethical values.

Social-Political Consequences

Nearly all areas of modern society – headed by economics, mass media, politics, science, education, military, medicine and health – are confronted by profound changes resulting from a progressive digitalization, changes which must be successfully molded in the sense of maintenance of capability for the future and competitive strength. In this, however, it must be taken into account that digitalization processes cannot be considered as a requisite for the possibility of system maintenance and future security in all areas of society. When current representatives of politics, media and economy, which now form a powerful eSport lobby, accuse organized sports of being "hide-bound", "old-fashioned" and "traditionalistic" because it doesn't welcome digital eSports, that it is "missing a big chance" ›

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GERMAN JOURNAL OF
SPORTS
MEDICINE
Deutsche Zeitschrift für Sportmedizin
VOLUME 70

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or even will "no longer reach the youth of the world", one can only counter that these voices do not see – or do not want to see - the function which sports has in society and what its enormous inclusion capacity and history of success gives rise to as the broadest volunteer league in this country. The fascination of sports lies, after all, in the fact that immediacy and authenticity are experienced using the body, something which is increasingly suppressed in other areas of society (1). The further digitalization spreads in society and accelerates the processes of "body suppression", the greater the importance of social areas which still enable immediate and authentic body experiences, and which society urgently needs to buffer the effects of digitalization – a human being is and remains an analog creature! In this sense, with respect to preservation of sports and maintenance of its social importance, it would be completely counterproductive to promote a "digitalization of sport participation" with the integration of eSports.

This also holds true because we are feeling the consequences of body suppression and digitalization directly at the psycho-physical levels in the form of problems in development and health. To react to this by promoting competitive computer games with public funding and declaring them to be sports creates legitimation problems at all levels: not only that level concerning social legitimation of sports, but also with respect to the legitimation in facing parents, who, if eSports become recognized as sports, will find it even more difficult than it already is to motivate their children to not spend any more time with video and computer games. And the legitimation facing the many volunteer trainers and exercise coaches in the more than 90,000 sports clubs, who invest great effort to keep their training groups and competitive teams, while alternative offers are established in their own club and set children and adolescents in front of the computer or console so they can engage in "sports".

From a social-political perspective, therefore, only one logical conclusion is possible: sports must be strictly and actively distinguished from eSports. Such a strict limitation can be observed, for example, in the positioning of several state sport leagues. The German Olympic Sports League (DOSB) missed the chance of a strict separation by the "partial integration" of "sport-type simulations", which cannot be plausibly justified. From politicians, pressure has been thus far exerted on organized sports to open up to eSports. Apparently, economic interests and self-interest in courting young voters were more important here than bearing responsibility for the development of sports in Germany. With that, they have made themselves creators of legitimization for the largely commercially-directed eSport organizations and thus promote the spread of eSports along with the attendant problems at the health and pedagogic level. ∎

References

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