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Esports and the Military

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Executive Summary

Electronic sports, known as esports, are video games played like competitive sports online with a significant presence on social media sites frequented by young Americans. In response, military outreach methods to include presences on esports streaming platforms, using them to connect with service members on military service. Veteran organizations leverage social communities within esports to engage veterans. This landscape analysis identifies uses of esports platforms to date by the Department of Defense, military and veteran-serving nonprofits, and provides considerations for future esports engagement.

The following analysis of the esports landscape identifies four trends regarding the esports community:

Given the demographic intersection of the esports and military communities, the military should consider the inherent in the esports community.

As the services engage esports platforms for recruitment, developing familiarity with platforms and using such platforms effectively for recruitment.

There is no quick fix to recruiting and social science concerns about violent video games. However, esports games should be taken into consideration by the military when assessing individuals' fitness for service.

Esports can provide an avenue for connecting communities of veterans and providing veterans with opportunities.

Introduction

Popular culture has long been a method used to bridge the gap between the military, veterans, and the public. Service Organizations (USO) tours and Department of Defense-sponsored films serve to connect the military with Americans as well as educate Americans. These undertakings have been used to recruit new service members and reintegrate returning veterans to their communities. As the military services continue to expand outreach efforts, esports of esports provide an avenue for continued evolution.

Esports—encompassing games, communities, platforms, and competitions—engaged millions of Americans, making esports a lucrative growth area for companies, as the sector is anticipated to earn \$1.5 billion in 2021, enabling streaming and communication in real time, such as advancements in mobile phone usage, increasing the popularity, lowering the threshold for engagement with viewers. The esports market is of similar opportunities for sponsorship, personalities, and large events drawing a significant audience.

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While esports provide a new frontier in the evolution of engagement between populations, the relationship between esports and the military is limited. There is little information beyond anecdotal evidence. This report first explores the emerging esports landscape and provides an overview of available demographic data. It then examines level efforts to engage esports as a tool for military recruitment and veteran connection. The report concludes with possibilities for future research, and recommendations for esports companies, military recruiting agencies, and the military.

Esports Explained

Esports are an evolution of video games played competitively in an organized fashion. They range from casual playing for money to casual matches between individuals; just as with other sports, a game can be played in an intramural style group, or play on a professional team. Due to technological limitations, competition can be played with multiple controllers plugged into a console, or through internet-connected accounts and streaming platforms has allowed players to organize on a mass scale and created opportunities for growth. Unlike with traditional sports, esports has its own terminology and language, made more complex by the lack of a unified standard available.¹⁰ The military services would benefit from a baseline understanding of the esports landscape, participation trends as they further engage on existing platforms, particularly since the Department of Defense is subject to different standards and laws than private companies.

Like film production, the gaming market is divided into video game developers, publishers, and distribution teams. Three of the largest companies, Activision Blizzard, Epic Games, and Ubisoft, act as the primary publishers. Like esports are similar in that they exist on computer-facilitated platforms, the esports sector is also highly competitive, and forms of engagement make it an incredibly diverse field.

Two data points matter in esports—the number of viewers and the level of revenue. According to a report by Newzoo, the industry estimated 495 million viewers and \$1.1 billion in annual revenue, marking a significant increase from 2019 (385 million viewers, \$800 million in revenue). The industry is largely driven by young people, as digital literacy is critical not only for understanding the market but also for participation in the youth market, and potential for growth into other demographics, make esports a lucrative market.

While the military services cannot participate in esports to generate revenue, they can leverage the market's diversity offers opportunities to expand reach and engage subgroups with niche interests. Without proper guidance and resource constraints, military recruiting commands must understand trends and avoid social media missteps.

This section provides an overview of esports demographics, organizational structure, and the challenges associated with esports.

Who Engages with Esports?

Esports participants can engage with streaming platforms as a viewer, gamer, streamer, or content creator. For military services to most effectively leverage esports as a recruiting tool, they not only must understand the market in each way. The following section provides an overview of esports participation.

In 2020, the global esports community was comprised of approximately 189 million people. While the industry is growing, though video gaming is stereotyped as a pastime for men, of these gamers, almost half were women. Those who play competitively tend to be younger than at-home gamers; on one of the largest platforms, Twitch, 65 percent of players are under 35. As previously noted, the majority of streamers are between the ages of 18 and 49, with an average age of 28. Twitch is more than female, with Twitch's demographics being comprised of 65 percent men and 35 percent women. The industry's high engagement among the youth population.¹⁸

platforms, with Twitch ranking as the most popular platform and Facebook working to expand its reach. Recruiters are reaching out to a variety of professional and amateur streamers via these growing platforms. Recruiters from the military and other organizations are gaining a better understanding of the trends and patterns of engagement on each of the esports platforms.

There are three main categories of multiplayer online esports: first-person shooter, battle arena, and strategy-based games, each with their own competition and viewership trends. Popular first-person shooter games include *Call of Duty: Warzone*, *Halo Infinite*, and *Overwatch*. Battle arena games, or strategy-based games, are *League of Legends* and *Dota 2*. Popular battle arena games, include *Fortnite* and *Apex Legends*. Other game categories include sports simulation games and arena battles can be more competition driven than role-playing games, though video game play. Weekly trends vary regarding which games and channels are most popular, a reflection of the ever-changing nature of the esports community.²⁶

Esports content can further be divided into two categories: personality- and gameplay-driven content. Personality-driven content relies on individuals generating a following, similar to influencers in traditional media. Content creators include collaborations and fan-favorite pairings. Military esports can capitalize on personality-driven content, as well as “personality.”

The evolution of esports competitions and tournaments has led to the creation of esports teams, which compete for prize money. The creation of competitive teams combined with expanded streaming opportunities has led to the growth of esports. Traditional sports teams, professional esports teams are scouted, recruited, and go through the same process as traditional sports teams, negotiate contracts, and manage teams. As esports have rapidly expanded, the support system has also grown, with major management companies, production companies, and sponsors. The growth of esports has led to the creation of high school and university-level teams to ones developed by professional sports teams.²⁹ Some of the most successful esports professionals. The military services also field teams and have put out calls for soldiers to compete. The esports professionals who engage in esports are covered in more depth below.

Esports Market Overview

Esports revenue trends appeal to investors and other parties interested in gaining a foothold in the market. As investments in esports increase, new streaming platforms emerge and new infrastructure is created to support the growth of the market. Participation and drives further growth in the market. Coupled with the rapid market expansion, the market surrounding esports is lucrative.³¹

Esports revenue streams are varied, including mobile ticket sales, advertising and sponsorship. The growth of esports teams.³² The sponsorship segment, in particular, dominated the global esports revenue.

The continuous growth of the esports market illustrates the ever-changing nature of the market. Compared to television viewership of sports finals, esports tournaments garner significant viewership. The National Football League.³⁴ Diverse options and varied subsectors has made esports an attractive market for capital firms, private equity, and strategic investors, investments in esports have increased in recent years.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has minimally affected esports—by June 2020, more than 100 esports events were postponed.³⁶ Pre-pandemic, a hurdle for growth was limited virtual presence. However, market watchers expect the pandemic to accelerate the virtual aspect of esports. Though the services have been slow to expand virtual recruiting presence, outreach through virtual platforms, a shift from more traditional recruiting to virtual recruiting. Though the services have been slow to expand virtual recruiting presence, outreach through virtual platforms, a shift from more traditional recruiting to virtual recruiting. Though the services have been slow to expand virtual recruiting presence, outreach through virtual platforms, a shift from more traditional recruiting to virtual recruiting.³⁷

As companies work to tap into demographic groups for marketing purposes, esports is becoming a more mainstream activity. For instance, the esports community has developed a lifestyle, with its own culture and identity. The esports community has developed a lifestyle, with its own culture and identity. The esports community has developed a lifestyle, with its own culture and identity.

The primary focus of these studies is illuminating the impact that exposure to “virtual violence” has on increased aggressive and antisocial behaviors.⁴³ The findings raise questions, given the military context, as most studies focus on the most extreme gaming behaviors and consumption.

One study showed that after playing a violent video game, individuals associated the game with aggression in an assessment, suggesting that “playing violent video games can lead to the automatic learning of aggressive responses.” Individuals who played 20 minutes of violent video games every day for three days displayed increased aggression for three days.⁴⁵ Other studies examined the link between violent video games and decreases in prosocial and moral engagement.⁴⁶ They found that college students who played violent games and were exposed to violent images responded with decreased levels of these socially desirable behaviors.⁴⁷

The concern about exposure to virtual violence largely focuses on younger children who are more likely to experience the purported long-term negative effects of violent video games. The American Academy of Pediatrics has called for legislation about children’s exposure to virtual violence.⁴⁸ Similarly, legislation to limit virtual violence exposure has been introduced. However, research shows that adults are likewise impacted. In adults and adolescents, those who played violent games, aggressive, see the world as a scarier place, become more desensitized to violence in media, and are less likely to behave prosaically.⁵⁰

The link between violent video game exposure and aggressive behavior, one body of research shows consistency across multiple analytical methods. In an effort to mitigate these concerns, some pediatricians introduce “media diets,” which would evaluate the amount and type of media exposure as part of standard pediatric care.⁵¹

An opposing body of research argues that the overall link between video games and aggression is weak. Some argue the only significant association is in individuals who play four or more hours of video games per week. The causal links between video games has interchanged “violence” and “aggression,” muddying the waters. Some argue video games truly correlate to any traits at all.⁵³ Simulated scenarios meant to allow level playing field, where participants reported answers or a pain-inflicting auditory device provided to study participants—have been used to create situations to accurately reflect reality.⁵⁴

In recent years, the theory that violent video games do not, in fact, have any significant impact on aggression has gained prevalence. The benefits of video gaming have been similarly studied with research revealing that video games can improve team forming teams, social interaction, and communication, that “mitigate” the short-term effects of aggression. Some aggression argument claim that these shortcomings in the research and arguments for prosocial effects. If this body of research is considered, the linkage between virtual violence and aggression is “well supported.”

While the literature identifies potential negative outcomes resulting from gaming, some research suggests that negative in civilian contexts might make gamers ideal military recruits. Service members not only play video games, but they are required to train as first-person shooters. A 2017 study showed that frequent players of video games had faster reaction times and required lower levels of neural resources to complete task performance.⁵⁷ It concluded that “video game experience,” characteristics that could be both a benefit and liability for the unique ethical requirements of military service, exposed to violent video games are more likely to become aggressive, which may be necessary for military services continue to incorporate video games and simulations into training, recruitment, and retention. Video game experience may be prepared for the motor skills required in advanced simulations.⁶⁰

Tensions and concerns about screen usage also affect service members. As shown in the literature, excessive screen use is associated with poor mental health. In one study, a group of Marines exhibited sleep deprivation, depression, and anxiety disorders, which was correlated with excessive video game usage.⁶¹ The cohort reported sacrificing sleep for 30 to 60 hours per week. They reported experiencing low mood, poor concentration, inability to focus, and decreased motivation.

The services have expanded their involvement in video games to be more participatory (and 2010, and currently of prime recruiting age) prefers interaction over propaganda and is bolstered by the COVID-19 pandemic, which heightened the use of esports as a recruiting tool. After losing down 5,500 recruits in April 2020, it had significant success drawing recruits via video game. The military reach a broader audience in the post-pandemic world, as esports present a non-traditional recruiting channel to a broader society.⁶⁸

Questions remain regarding the services' vision and strategy for launching their esports teams. Esports communities are comprised of complex informal norms and expectations for which the military services have marketing offices and contracts that develop materials to appeal to young adults in the esports realm. It is unclear if the services conducted an in-depth analysis of such norms and expectations. While shooter games are some of the most visible and popular, if the services only provide a team presence, limiting their recruiting impact to the demographics of the platform, which are more likely to be young adults.

The DoD and military service esports teams are not beholden to sponsorships for revenue. While it is unclear what costs the military incurred from the development and maintenance of their esports teams, in online games, they largely avoid tournament costs by only participating in free tournaments. The following section covers service efforts to engage on esports platforms and the challenges they face.

Service-Specific Efforts

While each service engages in esports, no two services approach esports the same way. Recognizing the need to expand into new markets, the Army started an esports team, the U.S. Army Esports Team. The Army has invested over \$1.5 million to create a team comprised of members from the "Regular Army" and "Reserve Army" for competitive gaming pursuits.⁷⁰ The Army has seen a return on their investment, citing the team's exposure and associated esports advertising, for meeting its 2019 recruiting goals.⁷¹ While the team members are recruiters per se, they are part of an outreach team that sits under the Marketing and Engagement Division, based at Fort Knox.⁷²

Navy Recruiting Command also launched its own esports team, "Goats & Glory," or "ANG," to help expand recruitment in the esports market.⁷³ The Navy asserts that esports team members focus on "building rapport and connecting with a new audience by highlighting the opportunities it provides in order to 'make Sailors more relatable and approachable in their everyday life.'" ⁷⁴ The team also allows the Navy to build rapport and connect with a new audience by highlighting their experiences in the Navy: "We want people to understand that Sailors are just like everyone else. Being in the Navy doesn't preclude those things."⁷⁵

For both services, outreach efforts extend beyond the official Army and Navy esports teams. The services encourage esports team members to engage with social media esports influencers in their own right. The services encourage esports team members to share their experiences, but such exposure also poses potential future cybersecurity challenges.

The Air Force currently uses esports exclusively as an extracurricular, internal communication tool. Air Force Gaming's mission is "to create an inclusive gaming organization for all locations."⁷⁶ The Air Force intramural esports league offers competitive gaming opportunities for service members to participate in competitions with non-service members. While the Army and Navy esports teams play games like *Duty: Modern Warfare* and *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, the Air Force plays games that are less violent, such as *Brothers in Arms* and *Dragon Ball FighterZ*.⁷⁷ The Air Force's success in using less violent games suggests that esports games as potential avenues for outreach and recruitment in the future.

The Marine Corps not only has the smallest annual recruiting target, but also the smallest esports team.

use.⁸² Furthermore, at a time when the services—particularly the Navy—are seeking to attract individuals with skills in technology, engineering, and math (STEM), they may be missing those individuals in prior military service. There is some overlap in women who game and those with an interest in STEM degrees, but as illustrated, with

Beyond giveaways, game variety and market size present opportunities to flexibly adapt. If esports games serve as a proxy for interest and nominal skillsets or aptitude, the services could promote games that require strategic thinking, or theme-based games that would screen for the critical skills that the military requires. They could identify individuals who have demonstrated a degree of interest in military service. In order to expand recruitment, they could focus on the types of games that may appeal to individuals who may not have considered military service.

Furthermore, there appears to be an assumption that digital literacy among gamers equates to technical proficiency. While the struggle to attract and retain “cyber talent,” and look to esports as a potential avenue for recruitment, the services’ extension of social media platforms that do not require a high degree of technical cyber skills to participate in esports represents a degree of technical cyber proficiency.⁸⁴ The Army and Navy could use esports to identify individuals possessing specific skills to meet requirements, such as coding.

The process to convert gamers into soldiers, sailors, airmen, or marines will require the services to engage with the esports community and any overall health and fitness discrepancies that may exist between the gaming community.⁸⁵

Recruiting Controversy

The military services’ presence on streaming platforms has received some pushback from critics concerned about recruiting access. Some members of Congress have argued that the military’s use of video games to recruit “children” made war seem like a game. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez introduced an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 which would have blocked the military from doing any type of online recruiting with video games. “The military’s use of streamers largely encompassed viewers ‘far’ younger than recruiting age and that the Army and Navy’s ‘up’ style games and contests.”⁸⁷ Ocasio-Cortez’s amendment was ultimately defeated.

The services’ teams have faced free speech criticism as well. Both the Army and Navy have been criticized for control or limit discourse on their streaming platforms, arguably violating free speech principles. The Army’s controversial questions regarding war crimes in Twitch’s chat.⁸⁸ While Twitch permits users to report inappropriate behavior, as government entities, complicating their actions. The Army stood behind their decision to ban a user for asking a question as a violation of Twitch’s harassment policy and banned the user.⁸⁹ However, the Army’s decision to ban speakers in a government-operated public forum violated First Amendment rights. After a brief period of time, the Army lifted the ban to all banned players. Since then, both the Army and Navy have been criticized for allowing recruitment on Twitch platforms. The Army and Navy could look into best practices from other government agencies and accepted ways of exerting narrative control without running into controversy.⁹⁰

Veteran Context

Within the broad esports ecosystem, companies have sought to appeal to niche identities. Some have focused on the altruistic benefits of supporting veterans from a community and mental health standpoint. Other approaches such as community building, collaboration, and virtual socializing to connect veterans with esports. Some veteran service organizations (VSOs).

The Military Gaming League (MGL) focuses on building esports communities among military veterans with the following pitch: “You’re already American heroes, now become an Esports hero.” The MGL references military culture, noting, “When it comes to competition, there’s no community like the military.”

military service. As the services innovate their approaches to military recruitment, they may find them in their goal of meeting recruitment targets. Similarly, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs may leverage interests in esports among their target populations to create community among veterans.

For the DoD:

The DoD should comprehensively review the services' esports teams by examining their outreach, and consider ways to operate more as an esports team and less as recruiters who leverage esports to include:

- Expand engagement with existing esports infrastructure, such as tournaments, pro gaming events, and leagues;
- Build teams that specialize in niche esports games, expand the games current team member base, and explore new genres;
- Use data analytics to build rapport with a broader audience of people, including women and non-traditional gamers;
- Consider allowing soldiers and sailors to be self-created esports and social media influencers;
- Establish guidelines for individual service members that would be beneficial to the military and esports community;
- Develop protocols for recruiters using esports to reach potential recruits, including protocols for dealing with violent video games.

For the Department of Veterans Affairs and Veteran-Serving Nonprofits

Although little information is known about veteran gamers in particular and veteran esports in general, the esports community, esports may be an avenue to support post-9/11 veterans. Some ways to foster community and support include:

- Examine the connection between service member and veteran online communities and esports, and how that help with transition and veteran support can better leverage their presence on esports platforms;
- Study research looking at esports as a tool for addressing PTSD and as something the VA can support;
- Offer community gaming and esports spaces in VA centers and in VSO chapters and positions.

For Esports Companies

Because the military is an inexperienced participant on esports platforms, the growing competition for military and veteran esports to a greater degree with the DoD. To support national security through improving recruiting, esports companies should:

- Consider investing in the online community component of esports, as this aspect of the industry is most likely to attract new populations to the esports industry;
- Expand collaboration and partnership with the military esports teams; and
- Share data analytics to military recruiting commands to support their efforts on esports.

The field of esports appeals to younger market segments. The demographics of the younger population are more likely to recruit and the majority of current service members. The DoD and veteran-related organizations have many opportunities in esports, but have thus far limited engagement. There is significant room for growth in esports marketing, and community development.

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