

French esports institutionalization

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Abstract:

Electronic sports, more commonly known as "esports", has seen increasing popularity and media coverage since the early 2010s. The interest of the generalist and specialized media for this phenomenon goes hand in hand with the recent recognition of esports by the French public authorities. Indeed, since April 2016, the association France Esports, an entity resulting from the "Digital Republic" bill, is officially supported by the Ministry of Economy and Finance. The association has set itself the task of structuring and promoting esports at the national level by drawing up technical regulations relating to the practice, establishing a membership policy, setting up rules for the organization of championships or the protection of minors. However, since the late 1990s, esports French development is independent of any public authority. How has esports been structured in France over time? What are the supervisory bodies involved in the organization of the French esports area? Thus, this contribution aims to report on the structuring of esports in France and its institutionalization.

1. Context: A global enthusiasm for esports?

Promoted as the "future of sport" by the Electronic Sports League (ESL), esports refer to a "competitive (pro and amateur) video gaming that is often coordinated by different leagues, ladders and tournaments, and where players customarily belong to teams or other 'sporting' organizations who are sponsored by various business organizations" (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Esports seems to become rapidly institutionalized at a national level, in particular by putting into perspective a large number of attributes similar to those of "modern and traditional sport".

However, the esports' recognition as a sport is not without problems. Although esports have entered a process of institutionalization (Seo, 2013), there are many questions about the recognition of esports as sports (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010). Some work then aims at promoting the integration of esports competitions in the traditional sports sphere (Funk, Pizzo, & Baker, 2017), on the contrary of certain authorities, which seem to express the willingness to turn their back on this integration, notably ARJEL (Autorité de Régulation des Jeux En Ligne; i.e Online Gaming Regulatory Authority) and the French Ministry of Sports. This is why it will be very interesting to analyze the French institutionalization.

2. Literature Review

First, it is important to note that there is little research on the esports' institutionalization (Thiborg, 2009; Salice, 2010), particularly that relating to the French case (Besombes & Vansyngel, 2017; Garcia Bardidia, Nau & Velpry, 2017). Thus, this state of the art tends to present the contributions of neo-institutional theory in the analysis of the legitimization process and structuring of esports in France.

2.1 *From institutional theory to neo-institutional theory*

According to Suchman (1995), institutions can be defined as the rules of the game that shape and normalize behavior and distinguish what is legitimate from what is illegitimate. The literature seems to suggest that institutional theory is proving to be a theoretical framework for understanding the development, protection and resilience of social structures and institutions (Humphrey, 2010). More specifically, it examines the organizational environment and helps to understand how individual actors, firms and markets achieve or maintain a certain level of legitimacy (Grayson & al., 2008; Handelman & Arnold, 1999; Humphreys, 2010).

This theory then implies observing and understanding the coordinated efforts of individual actors who tend to build these social structures. This would help to better understand the process of legitimizing new consumer practices, such as esports for example. Although the concept of legitimacy has three facets (Scott, 1995): regulatory, normative and cognitive. Some researchers (Deephouse & Carter 2005, Ruef & Scott 1998) have expanded past research by incorporating the legal dimension as the 'root' of legitimacy.

The major evolution of neo-institutional theory lies in explaining institutional change through the recognition of actors, entrepreneurs and consumers, the ability to change institutions and, subsequently, to initiate a new cycle of stability and continuity (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Thus, the neo-institutionalist grid would put the dialogue and tensions between the agency and the structure into perspective.

2.2 *Favor the concept of institutional work over that of institutional entrepreneurship*

Beyond the notion of legitimacy, institutional theory highlights two other concepts. The first refers to the institutional logic (Thornton, 2002, 2004) socially constructed on the basis of beliefs that individuals, in specific contexts, will give meaning to social reality (Thornton, 2004). The second is institutional entrepreneurship, which underlines that some actors are not satisfied with certain aspects of the current situation, such as the legitimacy or illegitimacy of certain consumer practices.

Nevertheless, recent research (Lawrence Suddaby & Leca, 2011) shows that this notion has undergone some transformations. Indeed, the idea that market superheroes simply want to change the structure of markets to legitimize and institutionalize them has been widely contested in favor of the concept of institutional work. Research on institutional entrepreneurship has tended to focus more on institutions than individuals (Maguire et al., 2004). This research then systematically highlighted institutional change as an object rather than an explanation, rather than the experience or motivation of individuals involved in the legitimization process. Moreover, this research seems to be based on a structural determinism,

reflecting a set of structural characteristics (Maguire et al., 2004) or a vision based on the particular skills of the agent (Fligstein, 1997).

Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca (2011) suggest focusing on the concept of institutional work rather than institutional entrepreneurship. In their work, they define institutional work as a physical or mental effort to affect an institution or set of institutions. In addition to defining the concept of institutional work, Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca (2011) also suggest that it could help solve long-standing problems in institutional research.

The concept of institutional work would make it possible to highlight and analyze the complex relationship between individuals and institutions, in other words, to analyze the relationship between agency and structure. Second, the concept of institutional work emphasizes the need to take into account the recursive and permanent dialectical interaction between the organization and the institution. Third, the concept of institutional work is based on the analysis of actors' contextual and reflective practices about the institutions around them, and then give more intent to the actors. Thus, it suggests neither determinism nor heroism and remains potentially sensitive, on the one hand, to the oppression of cultural, social and material structures, and, on the other hand, to the potential for the emancipation of the actors of some of these structures.

To conclude, it would appear that the institutional work concept is intended to encourage researchers to take a different view of their research topic and to divert their attention from the 'organizational field'. This would then make it possible to foster the relationship between the institutions and the actors that populate it by promoting an approach based on an understanding of practice and procedures rather than on results. Implementing institutional work would relocate the agency by diverting attention from the heroic entrepreneur's dramatic actions to the small worlds of institutional resistance and maintenance, in which institutionalization and institutional changes are promulgated in the daily evolution of individuals and groups.

The neo-institutionalist grid and the concept of institutional work seem to favor an understanding of the mechanisms underlying the institutionalization of esports in France. This is why, through two field surveys on the respective scenes of *Mortal Kombat X* and *Hearthstone*, we tried to apprehend the institutional crumbling and the dichotomy of the French esports scene to the prism of neo-institutional theory.

3. Methodology

Our pluridisciplinarity leads us to describe our method as 'mosaic' (Clark, 2005). Indeed, the use of different field methods allows us to focus on the commitment of esports actors. Thus, we propose three methods to approach the esports' institutionalization, namely (Table 1):

- The ethnography of 33 offline videogames tournaments;
- 10 interviews with French actors with different functions within the French esports ecosystem;
- A corpus composed of legal and parliamentary documents and press articles on esports.

Table 1. Methods and fields

Observations and ethnographies		Semi-directives interviews	Corpus and documentations
33 LAN	Officials actors' gatherings and competitions	10 interviews with politics, industrials, and esports actors	Laws and parliament documentations
20 Hearthstone 11 MKX	Associative (Stunfest, general assembly of France Esports...)		
2 Starcraft II	Professionals (E-sport Summit, Dojo E-sport...)		Press specialized (interviews and datas)

First of all, the ethnographic approach consists of immersing oneself in the esports scene through practice and to understand as well as possible what 'doing esports' means. This immersion in two esports scenes (Mortal Kombat X and Herathstone) allowed, on the one hand, to highlight the tensions and the stakes of the definition of esports for the actors of this ecosystem. On the other hand, tournaments and teams' ethnography show the structure at 'two speeds' of esports in France (Besombes, 2016). Thus, observations and interviews from these two ethnography reveal a kind of "institutional fragmentation" (Besombes & Vansyngel, 2017). The choice of these two esports scenes as research field is mainly due to the appearance of new video games mobilizing players who create competitive events. Indeed, for both ethnographies, the researchers were able to participate in the mobilization of their actors and observe their structuring.

This institutional fragmentation seems to have resulted in the impressive rise in number of competitions, tournaments and championships – professionals and amateurs. However, this multiplication seems to obstruct the understanding of competition circuits and their rules, for the media, the authorities, the public and sometimes even for competitors. Then the interviews relate the testimonies of the actors involved in the creation of the association France Esports and the reasons behind the initiative of the Ministry of Finance – which aim is to build a legal framework. Finally, the corpus analysis was divided into two parts. These two parts deal respectively with what was voted by the government in 2016 and how the esports is treated in the newspaper Le Monde. The analysis of the press articles highlights three distinct periods during which the media discourse evolves and testifies to the appeal of the development of video game competitions as a market.

From these three methods, we analyze the results of prisms from our three scientific perspectives – sports science, sociology and marketing. We develop an interdisciplinary vision of issues related to the esports' institutionalization in France, with a view to objectifying the ongoing institutionalization process. Therefore, we believe that this attempt at cross-analysis between methodologies from the sports, marketing and sociological spheres puts into perspective a multidimensional interpretation of the esports' acknowledgement. Our objective is to analyze the recognition of esports by the French government and to understand the mobilization of stakeholders by developing a 'competitive gaming industry' (France 24, 2017).

4. Case study: singularity of French institutionalization

In France, the esports' institutionalization raises a lot of questions as to the nature of this practice, but also questions relating to its governance. Indeed, the boundaries between 'traditional sport' and 'electronic sports' are not clearly delimited (Besombes, Joncheray & Richard, 2015). While the French Ministry of Sports does not wish to recognize esports as a sport, the French public authorities seem to contribute to its recognition and professionalization. Indeed, the unprecedented gathering of three major actors in the sector (publishers, players, promoters) organized by the association France Esports had helped promote actors' dialogue with public authorities. Thus, the professionalization of competitive video games practice was envisaged by the legislator through two decrees:

- Decree n°2017-871 of 9 May 2017 on the organization of video game competitions, supervised by the Ministry of the Interior;
- Decree n°2017-872 of 9 May 2017 on the status of salaried professional players of competitive video games, supervised by the Labour Ministry.

The latter aims respectively to set financial equilibrium thresholds and ratios that a video game competition must comply with, the procedures for reporting video game competitions to the central races and games department and the conditions for participation by minors in video game competitions. They also define the conditions for obtaining the required accreditation for the employment of professional video game players, the conditions under which a contract may be concluded during the season, and establish detailed rules for determining the start and end dates of video game competition seasons. The legislator then provides a new legal framework which aims, on the one hand, to encourage the organizers of competitions which were previously prohibited by ARJEL, and, on the other hand, to provide a status adapted to the esports' specificities.

Table 2. The “two speed” world of French esports scenes.
Hearthstone and Mortal Kombat X examples.

	Associative teams		Professional teams	
Media Coverage	Weak		High	
Participate at	Amateur Competitions		Professional & Invitational Competitions	
Type of event	Local, regional or national Tournaments		International Tournaments	
Who organized competitions?	Communities	Associations	Private Companies	Game Publishers
Examples for <i>MKX</i>	Kayane session (Kayane) Born 2 Fight (YUZU Clan)	Stunfest (3 Hit Combo) Armor Break (GameLine)	EVO (Shoryuken) MKX Pro League (ESL)	Fatal 8 Exhibition (Warner) MK Cup (Warner)
Examples for <i>Hearthstone</i>	Mad Cup (Mad Corps) Wanna War (Wannawar)	INSALAN (Insa) GA (Futurolan)	ArmaCup (ArmaTeam) GOCS (Gamers Origin)	Hearthstone World Championship (Blizzard) Hearthstone Global Games (Blizzard)

However, as we see in Table 2, there are two facets of esports practice: (i) associative practice and (ii) professional practice. Two distinct models seem to coexist, whether for organizing events or managing teams. On the one hand, we observe an associative model, where the practice of amateurs is dominant, supported by many communities, associations of local and national players specialized in online esports events. On the other hand, there is an entrepreneurial model, mainly international, much more spectacular and widespread than the first practice model, and which favors the elite of professional players.

From now on, the French government and private actors (two large associations and eight professional founders of France Esports) have set up a normative and legal framework which has imposed a normative way of practicing esports, thus contributing to its institutionalization. The creation of the France Esports association brought together fragments of the French esports scene, while its affiliation with the Ministry of Economy seems to mark a break with the two pre-existing sports models. This collaboration transforms esports by imposing its institutionalization on the political agenda. In one year of existence, the "groupement d'intérêt économique" (i.e economic interest group) has become an "association", open to all esports enthusiasts in France and promotes dialogue between the esports' actors and the French authorities.

Despite this democratic act of the founding members, questions arise as to the divergent interests between the political sphere, non-profit organizations and professional actors. The public recognition of esports in France can then be seen as the desire to consider esports more as an industry rather than a sport. An interest that converges with that of industrialists outside the esports sphere (Red Bull, McDonald's, Coca Cola...) or that of the "traditional media" (such as television channels): since it is indeed a young practice of "young man users and spectators are easy to target for who wants to get involved in esports" – said a man representing a banking group at the Esports Summit 2017 in Paris. If the traditional sports model can be adapted to esports practice, the logic of the French actors seems to favor the development of an industry. As a result, certain players and associative actors seem to have been disavowed by the Ministry of Sports, even if today three ministries (economy and finance; internal affairs; and labour) supervise the esports' institutionalization.

The esports' institutionalization in France raised a lot of political (organizational model), economic (industry growth) and social (educational and professional training, monitoring of players) issues. This is why the government wishes to establish a legal framework for the players, whereas the actors of the sports scene and its industry rather wish economic support of their activity and their development. For companies outside the sphere of esports, the objective is clearly to (re)conquer young consumers, whereas for sportives, the main challenge is to legitimize a way of living and practicing a common passion in everyday life - a task in which they do not seem to be invested.

Conclusion

While France participates in a worldwide movement of recognition of esports by the public authorities and thus of "sportivisation" (Bordes, 2008) of competitive video games, the lack of interest of the French Ministry of Sports distinguishes it from the South Korean "sportification" process (Parlebas, 1986), which highlights cultural differences. Unlike the French institutionalization, the South Korean government is concerned with the development of esports and has created an entity specific to esports, the Korea e-Sports Association (KeSPA) since 2000.

If the current results tend to show that institutional legitimation by the traditional sports sphere seems blocked in favor of the development of economic activities. However, the apprehension and analysis of the institutional work under way on the French scene point to the emergence of new prospects, as evidenced by recent investments in esports by professional clubs, notably football clubs such as Paris Saint-Germain and Olympique Lyonnais. The discussions initiated with sports authorities such as the International Olympic Committee at the international level, seem to mark the beginning of the recognition of activity by the modern sports world despite the partial disinterest of the French sports authorities.

As we underline in this presentation, the esports' recognition by the public authorities, wanted by the prime actors of France Esports in 2015 tends to mark the establishment of a market and an industry. The French example of the esports' recognition does not allow action and consultation on other works than the construction of its market. This overlooks then what concerns the body and health of the players, the learning of the esports profession, or the integration of esports in school and university training. This is what the recognition of esports as a sport allows; for example, in Geneva, at the end of a school day, children will be able to try their hand at esports from September 2018 through extracurricular activities.

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