

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34768/r1.2021.v472.09>**Michał Jasny***

University of Physical Education in Warsaw

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5221-1251>e-mail: michal.jasny@awf.edu.pl**Tomasz Sodomirski****

University of Physical Education in Warsaw

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8311-7313>e-mail: sodomirski.tomasz@gmail.com**SPORT-RELATED ASPECTS OF PREPARATION FOR
PARTICIPATION IN E-SPORTS TOURNAMENTS BASED
ON THE GAME *MAGIC: THE GATHERING***

SPORT-RELATED ASPECTS OF PREPARATION FOR PARTICI-
PATION IN E-SPORTS TOURNAMENTS BASED ON THE GAME
MAGIC: THE GATHERING

Keywords: sport, e-sports, training, *Magic: The Gathering*.

Video game tournaments are an increasingly popular part of postmodern sport. While electronic sport, or e-sports, has a common functionality with traditional sport, it has not yet been recognised as a sports discipline due to the debatable nature of competitive gaming as an activity. The aim of this study was to investigate the attitudes of experienced competitive players of *Magic: The Gathering* and their training regimes for esports tournaments in order to determine whether such training is comparable to that in traditional sport. Twelve individual in-depth interviews were conducted.

***Michał Jasny** – Ph.D. in physical culture science; research interests: sociology of sport and e-sports.

****Tomasz Sodomirski** – MA in physical culture science; research interests: theory and methodology of sport and e-sports.

The results indicate that physical exercise, diet, sleep and pharmaceuticals do not play a significant role in the players' everyday training, which players typically consider to be a form of sports training. However, appropriate diet and increased sleep directly before a tournament are important. Some respondents clearly stated that taking care of their health improves their chances of success.

SPORTOWY WYMIAR PRZYGOTOWAŃ DO WSPÓŁZAWODNICTWA W E-SPORCIE: NA PRZYKŁADZIE GRY *MAGIC: THE GATHERING*

Słowa kluczowe: sport, e-sport, trening, *Magic: the Gathering*.

Współzawodnictwo w grach wideo jest coraz popularniejszym elementem krajobrazu ponowoczesnego sportu. Elektroniczny sport odzwierciedla sportową funkcjonalność, ale na drodze do uznania jego sportowego statusu stoi dyskusyjny charakter aktywności podejmowanej przez ludzi rywalizujących w grach wideo. Celem omawianych badań było poznanie postaw osób doświadczonych we współzawodnictwie w grze *Magic: the Gathering* w zakresie charakteru ich przygotowań do rywalizacji w e-sporcie, sprawdzenie, na ile podejmowane przez nich działania można porównywać z treningiem znanym ze świata sportu tradycyjnego. Przeprowadzono 12 indywidualnych wywiadów pogłębionych, z których wynika, że w ramach codziennych, systematycznych przygotowań, które badani gracze na ogół identyfikują jako rodzaj treningu sportowego, ćwiczenia fizyczne, dieta, sen lub środki farmakologiczne nie odgrywają istotnej roli. Odpowiedni sposób odżywiania się i dostatecznie długi sen nabierają jednak znaczenia tuż przed zawodami. Niektórzy respondenci wyraźnie wskazywali na to, że dbałość o własne zdrowie zwiększa szanse na zwycięstwo.

Introduction

Organised competitive gaming began in 1972, when 24 students from Stanford University took part in a tournament for the game *Spacewar!* The event was followed by the world's first press coverage about this type of competition. In 1980, Atari held the first mass e-sports event, with 10,000 participants playing *Space Invaders*. Every year, the global number of video game fans and players who are interested in organised competitive gaming, known as *e-sports*, grows. The 'e' in e-sports comes from the word *electronic*

and indicates a connection with electronically processed images generated on a computer screen, television screen or other multimedia device. In turn, 'sports' refers to playing according to set rules in order to win or achieve the best score. E-sports is an extremely popular and increasingly professionalised and commercialised part of global postmodern sport. In recent years, mass e-sports events have garnered keen interest from media corporations and other organisations previously unrelated to e-sports, such as sports associations and clubs or various educational institutions (Hindin et al. 2020). However, it remains debatable whether competitive gaming should be treated as a sport (Thiel, John 2018).

Nosal (2015) distinguishes three attitudes towards sport: 1) the attributive approach; 2) the contextual approach; and 3) structured contextualism. The attributive approach refers to a set of characteristic features that together determine the nature of sport. The advantage of this approach is that it shows the internal diversity of sport. Emphasising the multifaceted nature of sport makes it easier to take into account the many factors that affect its sociocultural significance. Conversely, the disadvantage is that the approach is slow to adapt to the 'liquid' (Bauman 2006) social reality. Moreover, the aforementioned features rarely constitute necessary or sufficient conditions for calling a given phenomenon *sport*. Nosal lists Jay Coakley (2007) and Florian Znaniecki (1973) among researchers who use the attributive approach.

According to the contextual approach, sport is defined socially, and the society in which it takes place is entitled to express its nature. Thus, sport is anything that society defines as such. The advantage of this approach is its focus on the social character of sport, which emerges as a result of human activity that is never detached from its cultural context. Nonetheless, the core of sport predominantly involves physical activity. Consequently, definitional contextuality has a wide but specific foundation. Contextualism also applies a humanist analytical perspective, underlining the importance of expressing the various meanings attributed to sporting activity. Nosal lists Pierre Bourdieu (1988) and Martin Roderick (2006) among researchers who use the contextual approach. However, extreme contextualism creates a hyper-exclusive set of sporting activities. If sport is everything that a given society defines as such, then this should apply not only to the popular and long-established disciplines and physical activities, but also to activities that resemble sport only in the athletic, competitive or developmental sphere. This disorganises both theoretical discourse and empirical exploration (Nosal 2015).

Lastly, structured contextualism views sport as a set of social practices that are defined as such by society but also have an established and universal structure, which is also defined by society as the fundamental common features required to call something *sport*. These features include 1) separation from a wider social context; 2) conventionality (subjection to rules and monitoring); 3) competitiveness; 4) performance of sporting actions by an individual and towards other individuals; and 5) physical activity. Nosal recommends using structured contextualism, which, through the aforementioned features of sport, makes it easier to reject non-sporting activities in the social context and suggests a relatively open formula that lays out moderately demanding requirements for an activity to be considered sport. This provides significant semantic leeway and organises empirical exploration (Nosal 2015).

Discussions about the social and sport status of e-sports have grown livelier in recent years not only among video game fans and players, but also among researchers (Reitman et al. 2019). E-sports mimics the functionality of sport, which can easily be observed in professional players and their teams, outfits, coaches, managers and agents, as well as e-sports leagues, tournaments, events, player transfers and media coverage, but also in the use of doping, match-fixing and gender inequality (Funk et al. 2018). According to all three approaches, the primary obstacle to the recognition of e-sports as sport is the debatable nature of video gaming as an activity. E-sports usually differs from intellectual competition *sensu stricto* in that physical activity has a lesser or greater effect on the outcome of a match. In a chess tournament, the players do not need to act directly in order to move the pieces. A grandmaster could tell an assistant which moves to make, and the outcome would be the same. Conversely, in e-sports, a player's motor skillset allows them to direct their avatar¹ in the game and thus usually determines the outcome (Hindin et al. 2020). A good example is the ability to aim at a target, which is the key part of gameplay in first-person shooters (FPSs), one of the most popular genres of video games. The nature of gameplay in FPSs is similar to that of archery, which also emphasises the stimulation and improvement of hand-eye coordination and is an Olympic discipline. On the other hand, a genre of video games inspired by card games, such as *Hearthstone* and *Magic: The Gathering (M:TG)*, is more similar to chess, scrabble or draughts in terms of motor engagement.

M:TG is a card game first published in 1993 by Wizards of the Coast. Its rules are provided by *Magic: The Gathering Comprehensive*

¹A computer-generated, electronically processed character or other agent that represents a real person in virtual reality.

Rules. In addition, *Magic: The Gathering Tournament Rules* contains the most important information about the organisation and procedure of tournaments. It is worth noting that *M:TG* was originally printed as physical cards, much like a traditional deck of cards. However, over time, matches gradually moved over to the Internet. *Magic the Gathering Online*, published in 2002, was Wizards of the Coast's first step into the world of e-sports and was designed to match the traditional game as closely as possible.

Whether we accept or reject e-sports as sport depends on what analytical perspective we assume and, consequently, on both the definition of sport we apply and the specificity of the particular video game or video game genre in question. In the case of the most debatable, nearly purely intellectual games such as *M:TG*, and based on Jakub Stempień's analysis of chess (2020), such games cannot be recognised as sport if sport is defined as requiring physical activity. Authors such as Maciej Demel and Alicja Skład (1970) or Wojciech Lipoński (1987) follow these definitions. If, however, we apply a more relaxed definition to sport that meets the other criteria, then intellectual video games can be identified as sport. Authors who follow a more liberal approach include Richard Giulianotti (2005) and Paul Weiss (1969). Thus, whether we accept skill development and the aim of achieving the best competitive results in video games as part of traditional sport ultimately depends on what paradigm we use.

Adam Dąbrowski (2011) underlines that not every player training for and participating in a tournament can be called an *esportsperson*. In this case, the characteristic feature is training, which should be professional, meaning it 1) is planned; 2) contains many psychosomatic exercises corresponding to different aspects of competitions; and 3) is supported by specialists.

The term *training* usually refers to exercises performed in order to improve performance in a given sports discipline. "Sports training is a targeted educational process that takes many years in which a sportsperson acquires and improves the technique and tactics involved in a given specialisation and develops his or her physical fitness, mental and intellectual capacities and personality. The goal of training is optimising the functions of the body and developing a specific physical adaptation to maximise performance and allow for effective participation in sports competitions, in accordance with the relevant regulations in a given discipline" (Sozański 2015, p. 28). Note that the term *training* is also used in reference to areas other than sport. "The intensification of sport in the beginning of the second half of the 20th century [...] also had an

impact on terminology. The narrow notion of training gradually expanded to also include mental and intellectual traits and shaping one's personality" (Sozański 2015, p. 27). Henryk Sozański (2015) emphasises that training "is a key term in sport. Its meaning changed and became more specific along with the development of sport. In early postmodernity, *training* simply meant participating in exercises. This rather vague term proved insufficient when the many (increasingly well-defined) disciplines began to form their own, characteristic, systematised sets of skills (and, consequently, sets of exercises) that were originally based on the nature of the motor task involved. In order to hone these skills, simply *exercising* was no longer enough, and instead, sportspersons had to *train*" (p. 27).

Specifying the notion of training seems particularly important for the analysis of the contentious topic of e-sports. Training is not about constant, nearly non-reflexive play for the purpose of entertainment. As previously mentioned, only self-reflexion and feedback from third parties, improvement of skills and abilities (such as reflexes, logical and strategic thinking or physical fitness) and systematic preparation for upcoming tournaments according to a well-thought-out regime transforms a video game player into an esportsperson (Dąbrowski 2011). Improvement of physical fitness is the foundation of sports training; however, sports training is not unilateral. Conversely, while competitive gaming mainly involves intellectual activity, it is not completely detached from physical activity. Andrzej Stepnik (2009) observes the importance of the theory of sport in improving the effectiveness of e-sports training. He adds, however, that "the theory of sports training should not be translated into e-sports automatically; rather, the process should be based on an analogy between e-sports and well-established and well-researched sports disciplines. It also requires empirical investigation focused on the effectiveness of various forms of training in e-sports" (p. 220).

Today, it is difficult to analyse sport in a comprehensive manner without taking into account its electronic aspect. The aim of this study was to investigate the attitudes of talented players and fans of *M:TG* in terms of their preparation for e-sports tournaments and determine whether their training regimes can be compared to training in traditional sport. By necessity, the study takes into account only some of the aspects of this complex issue, focusing on the following three topics: 1) preparation for tournaments as a type of sports training; 2) significance of physical training; and 3) significance of diet, sleep and pharmaceuticals.

Method

The study was qualitative. Non-probability sampling was used. The participants comprised experienced players of *M:TG* ($n = 12$) who had performed well in tournaments within the preceding several years. The participants were aged 25–38 years (mean age: 28 years). Their declared training experience was 7–15 years (mean experience: 10 years). Nine of the twelve players had higher education.

The data were collected in the first half of 2020 using individual in-depth interviews. The quotes presented in the study come from semi-structured interviews conducted using a multimedia device, the Internet, the Facebook messaging application and the Discord application. The authors of this study decided to conduct the interviews online using computers due to the limited possibilities to interact with the respondents because of the COVID-19 pandemic (the epidemiological situation did not allow for safe direct contact) and the fact that participants did not live near one another.

Results

Preparation for tournaments as a type of sports training

Eleven out of the twelve participants believed that their preparations for *M:TG* tournaments were a type of sports training. The respondents put forward several different arguments. Some considered intellectual competition to be the same as or similar to physical competition. ‘Intellectual competition is also sport’ (Interview 8). One of the respondents said, ‘You need to take certain steps to be good in *Magic*. It reminds me of volleyball, a discipline I used to train years ago. Of course, the form of activity is different, but in both *Magic* and volleyball, there’s a path that you need to take’ (Interview 6). A relatively significant number of respondents compared video games to games that are much more often associated with sport, such as chess or bridge. ‘For me, it’s completely natural. I used to play competitive bridge, which is also a logic game. [Playing] both games is like training’ (Interview 11); ‘Intellectually, [*M:TG*] is a bit like chess’ (Interview 5).

The respondents also pointed out the complexity of their preparations for tournaments. Achieving mastery in *M:TG* takes time and requires specialised knowledge about the game, including strategies of play. Furthermore, players must take into account the regulations governing organised competitions at various levels. ‘You definitely have to improve, because you can’t one day just decide to be good. You have to work for a long time for your future success’ (Interview 8). One of the respondents

underlined that ‘training is especially important at the beginning of your competitive carrier. You need theoretical preparation. Everyone I know who had good results would mark playing online, and playing a lot at that, on their list of priorities. And once you reach a certain level, it’s easier to come back after a break and achieve a good result, compared to other sports disciplines’ (Interview 10).

A respondent who did not consider his preparations for tournaments as sports training explained that the steps he takes before a tournament are too spontaneous to be compared to something as systematised as training. ‘No, my testing² process is too spontaneous to be considered training. I don’t have a daily schedule. I just play a lot and share my observations with other players’ (Interview 9).

Significance of physical training

Ten out of the twelve respondents declared that physical preparation (for instance, improving stamina or strength) can affect performance in *M:TG*. Six of these ten respondents reported engaging in sport every day. However, the respondents usually did not explicitly state that they engaged in physical exercise in order to improve their video game performance. They associated recreational and sporting activity with staying healthy, rather than with gaining an advantage over other e-sports players. The respondents usually stated that having good health helped them to perform well and maximise and maintain focus in tournaments (i.e. to maximise their intellectual potential). ‘Tournaments last 10–12 hours daily over two days. No one wants to drop out from exhaustion at the end. Chess players, snooker players – they all work on their stamina before tournaments. Why shouldn’t *Magic* players do the same?’ (Interview 5). One of the respondents emphasised that ‘Intellectual competition and physical preparation are tied to each other. Good stamina helps you make it through the long tournaments’ (Interview 4).

In Interview 11, the respondent said, ‘during major tournaments, I’ve heard other players complain about headaches and feeling sick after a whole day of playing. These people always either look unkempt or are holding chips and a cola. Staying fit helps you make it through the long tournaments. When it comes to physical activity, I stay active for my own sake, to stay fit, not for the sake of the game alone. But I also know that it helps me [with *Magic*], too’. Another respondent believed that physical preparation ‘does have an effect. For instance, my back has stopped hurting ever since I took up regular physical activity. During major tournaments, I used to

²Tactical preparation.

lose focus due to pain' (Interview 6). Other participants said, 'theoretically yes, but in practice, I'm not sure. But I assume that if you exercise and are in good health, you'll do better in tournaments. I myself work out to stay healthy, not because of the tournaments' (Interview 12); 'Sport is to stay healthy, not for the sake of *M:TG*. Maybe having good stamina helps you make it through major tournaments, but I'm not sure' (Interview 7).

Significance of diet, sleep and pharmaceuticals

The respondents clearly distinguished between their everyday diet and their diet during tournaments. None of the respondents changed their regular diet for the purpose of *M:TG* tournaments. Four respondents reported that they try to adjust the type and amount of food they consume to the needs of their body, although they do so primarily to stay healthy: 'I care [about my diet], but mostly to stay healthy' (Interview 12).

It is worth noting that according to seven of the twelve participants, eating habits are very important in tournaments. The dominant practice is to eat food that is easily digestible (food that does not 'make you feel stuffed'), such as fruits and nuts. The majority of respondents also indicated the importance of staying hydrated. 'It's extremely important. If you're hungry, then you can't think at all about the game. That's why you should eat between the matches to keep your sugar level up. And drink a lot of water' (Interview 11). Another respondent said that maintaining an appropriate diet during tournaments 'is very important for me. I drink a lot of water, and I eat nuts and bananas' (Interview 4). Yet another said, 'I never overeat. I only eat easy-to-digest food, like bananas and nuts, and I drink a lot of water' (Interview 10).

Three respondents declared that their tournament diet was not very important. 'It can affect your performance. You shouldn't eat heavy foods. I also drink a lot of water' (Interview 1). 'It might have an effect, but I'm not sure. I eat fruits and cabanossi and I drink water' (Interview 12). Conversely, two respondents said that their eating habits are completely unimportant to them. One of these two respondents reported having difficulties eating anything due to stress. 'I don't pay attention to it. I always forget about eating during tournaments because of stress' (Interview 7).

With respect to the significance of sleep, the responses showed a clear distinction between everyday and tournament sleeping habits, as with diet. As far as testing before tournaments is concerned, the respondents usually did not regard the length, quality or regularity of sleep as a means of improving the effectiveness of their training. However, two respondents stated that these factors could be significant, for example, for tournaments

held on a different continent. In such an event, the two respondents would attempt to modify their biological clock according to the different time zone.

The respondents had a completely different attitude with respect to the night preceding a tournament. The largest proportion of respondents believed that this factor was a very important part of preparations because insufficient sleep could impact their performance. In this case, sleep ‘is absolutely the most important. Before a tournament, I try to get at least eight hours of sleep. I play worse without it’ (Interview 8); ‘It’s one of the most important things. Seven and a half hours, minimum’ (Interview 4).

Two respondents mentioned the impact of age in recovering strength through sleep. ‘I sleep badly because of stress, anyway. On the other hand, I’m relatively young, so I manage somehow. But I prefer to have a good night’s sleep than not’ (Interview 10); ‘When I was younger, I’d win tournaments even after a three-day marathon. Now that I’m older, I can’t imagine doing that’ (Interview 2). In addition, one of the respondents stated, ‘it’s the same with sportspersons. They don’t party. They want to sleep well before a tournament. That’s exactly what *Magic* players should do, too’ (Interview 3).

All of the respondents declared that they had never used pharmaceuticals to aid their performance in *M:TG* tournaments. However, half of the respondents had heard about individual cases of pharmacological doping in e-sports. The only substance the respondents mentioned in this context was Adderall, a drug prescribed to patients with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder to improve their emotional control and focus.

Final remarks

The conducted interviews indicate that physical exercise, diet, sleep and pharmaceuticals do not play a significant role in the respondents’ everyday preparations for *M:TG* tournaments, which most respondents identify as a form of sports training. However, appropriate diet and sleep become more important directly before a tournament. In this case, being tournament-ready involves not only tactical preparation, but also the development of psychomotor capacity. Some respondents clearly emphasise that staying healthy improves the chance of success in competitive *M:TG*. Furthermore, some respondents were physically active and reported regular engagement in sport and physical recreation, which contradicts the stereotypical image of video game players. However, the responses did not contain examples of improving physical fitness for the purpose of improving performance in *M:TG*.

The results of this study are partially consistent with those obtained

among players during the finals of the Intel Extreme Masters 2018 World E-Sports Championships, which indicated that physical culture, as an immanent part of culture, is an inseparable part of human activity and also plays an important role in the context of competitive gaming (Jasny 2019).

In e-sports, as with chess (Stempień 2020), a more significant problem than the use of pharmaceuticals is technological doping in the form of *cheats* – breaking the rules of a game stipulated by its manufacturer by modifying the mechanics of the game (using forbidden software) (Consalvo 2007). The greatest scandal related to pharmacological doping in the history of e-sports took place in 2015 and involved the use of Adderall, which was mentioned in the interviews conducted in this study (Jasny 2020).

This research is far from exhaustive with respect to the subject matter. Rather, it constitutes a starting point for a discussion on the role of the theory of sport in competitive gaming (Dąbrowski 2011, Stepnik 2009). Regardless of whether a given cultural context acknowledges e-sports as sport, e-sports continues to be a dynamically developing, socially significant and scientifically inspiring phenomenon in postmodernity. The humanities and social sciences will likely find it increasingly difficult to omit e-sports in research on sport. In this respect, e-sports may become one of the most important research perspectives in the future (Hindin et al. 2020).

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