Save the Children

SEPTEMBER 2026



9 CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

PROTECTING CHILD RIGHTS IN ESPORTS

A study of the participation of children in competitive gaming, through the lens of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

NINE CHALLENGES. NINE OPPORTUNITIES.

This report examines the participation of children in competitive gaming through the lens of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Drawing on six stakeholder consultations and a desk review of 274 studies, it identifies nine challenges, and a matching set of opportunities, for the esports sector to better uphold the rights of Youth Esports Athletes.

3.6B

GAMERS, 2025

People playing digital games globally, growing ~4.4 % a year.

300M

EST. CHILD ESPORTS PLAYERS

Of the ~800 M people who play esports titles regularly.

<1%

GIRLS IN PRO ESPORTS

Share of professional players, despite 15–20 % of gamers being female.

6–8

CAREER YEARS

Typical professional career span for an esports athlete starting young.

THE NINE CHALLENGES

01 BEST INTERESTS BEYOND AGE REQUIREMENTS

02 SCHOOL, REST & LIFE OUTSIDE GAMES

03 GIVING YOUTH ATHLETES A VOICE

04 ACCESS, GENDER & BELONGING

05 THE UNCLEAR PATH TO GOING PRO

06 MAINTAINING PHYSICAL & MENTAL HEALTH

07 HARASSMENT, ABUSE & PROTECTION GAPS

08 PREVENTING ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION

09 RISKS AT LIVE EVENTS

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OUR APPROACH

The research for this report happened in three phases. First, we conducted desk research to summarise the academic research on esports and analyse the current industry practices to identify key topics related to the protection of child rights for Youth Esports Athletes. Second, we performed in-depth stakeholder consultations with key industry experts to gain deeper insight. Third, we conducted a thematic analysis of the stakeholder consultations and combined it with our findings from the desk research to uncover nine challenges for upholding child rights in esports.

Step 1. Desk Research

To identify key topics and questions related to the protection of child rights for YEAs, child rights experts from Save the Children collaborated with academics from the University of Oxford and esports psychology professionals from the Association of Esports Psychology (AEP). A scoping review resulted in 274 academic articles. After scanning the titles and abstracts for relevance, 46 articles were identified for full-text analysis. The analysis of these articles together with several other sources (see additional sources) resulted in the identification of 15 key topics, which formed the foundation of the research and informed the interview guide. The interview guide was developed in alignment with the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and aimed to explore current practices, gaps, and recommendations across these topics. The full interview guide can be found in appendix B.

Step 2. Stakeholder Consultation

The objective of the stakeholder consultations was to have in-depth dialogues with senior leaders in the esports ecosystem about the physical, mental, spiritual, and socio-emotional well-being of elite child esports athletes. The aim was to gain insight into the current industry standards and practices that uphold child rights and to identify gaps where improvements could be made. A series of 6 semi-structured interviews were conducted between June and September 2024 with a sample of informants who currently work in an esports team (two informants), for a national and global esports federation, as a tournament organiser, game developer, and league owner. Attention was given to including perspectives from a broad geographical scope, by selecting informants from South Korea, the EU, the UK, and the USA.

Step 3. Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis of the interview data followed Braun and Clarke's six[1] phases: familiarization, generating initial codes, identifying themes (child rights challenges in esports), reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The first author generated 221 initial codes through an inductive process, iteratively refining them into potential challenges supported by the desk research. These were reviewed and modified collaboratively by all authors. The second author verified code alignment with the revised challenges, and a blind inter-coder test by the third author ensured consistency. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, finalizing the dimensions. This rigorous process ensured accurate and robust coding of the challenges, reflecting the expert's insights.

Limitations

This report acknowledges that the interviews conducted primarily reflect the perspectives of organisational representatives within the esports industry. While these viewpoints offer valuable insights into current practices, gaps, and recommendations, they do not fully capture the experiences and needs of the YEAs themselves. Incorporating the voices of YEAs would add a crucial dimension to the findings, providing a more comprehensive understanding of their unique challenges, concerns, and aspirations.

OVERVIEW OF THE WORLD OF ESPORTS

The Scale of Gaming

To understand esports, it is essential to first grasp the broader context of gaming. Gaming has evolved from a niche pastime into a global phenomenon, with close to 3.6 billion people playing video, computer, or mobile games regularly in 2025. This market continues to grow, with an annual growth rate of approximately 4.4% (see Figure 1).

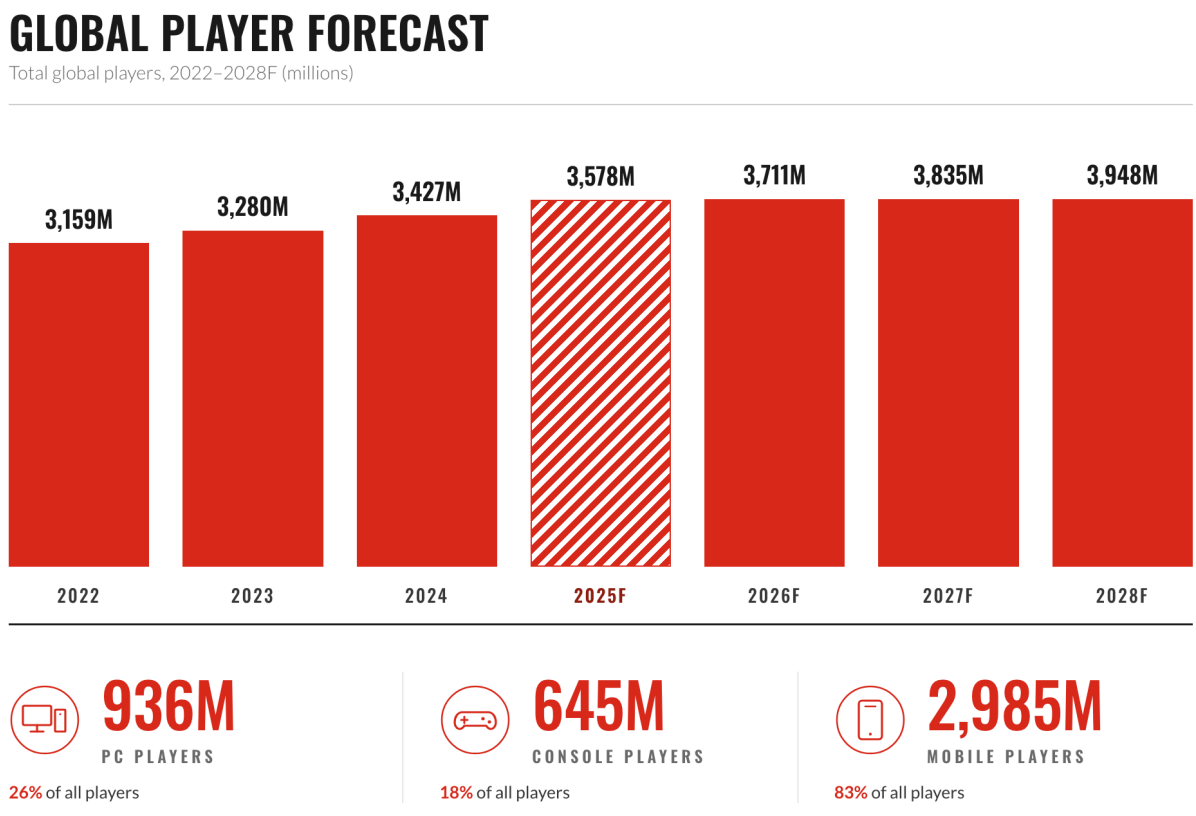


Figure 1. Global player Forecast. Source: Newzoo. Global Games Report 2025.

For children specifically, gaming has become synonymous with childhood and their right to play. In the Western world, which has the highest adoption, between 80-95% of children play digital games regularly. As the mobile smartphone market has evolved, gaming has become more accessible. Today it's best described as the modern-day playground. A playground where children of all walks of life gather and play, in digital spaces designed for children as well as in spaces that are designed for, and shared, with adults.

The Rise of Esports

Out of this interest in gaming, esports emerged. While gaming encompasses any game played, esports are a popular subgenre of games defined by their competitive elements and the audience watching the competitions in them. Unlike casual gaming, esports feature structured tournaments and leagues where teams or individuals compete in games specifically designed for competitive play. There are professional esports players, but esports, like any other sport, has a far greater number of children and youth playing it recreationally, with the prospects of potentially going down the professional pathway later in life. It is estimated that 800 million people play esports titles regularly, out of which we estimate that 250-300 million are children.

Common esports titles are *League of Legends*, *Fortnite*, *Call of Duty: Warzone*, *Valorant*, *Dota 2*, *Counter-Strike 2*, *EA Sports FC*, *Tekken 8* and *Mobile Legends: Bang Bang*. Many of these are amongst the most popular games watched on the streaming platform Twitch (see Figure 2).

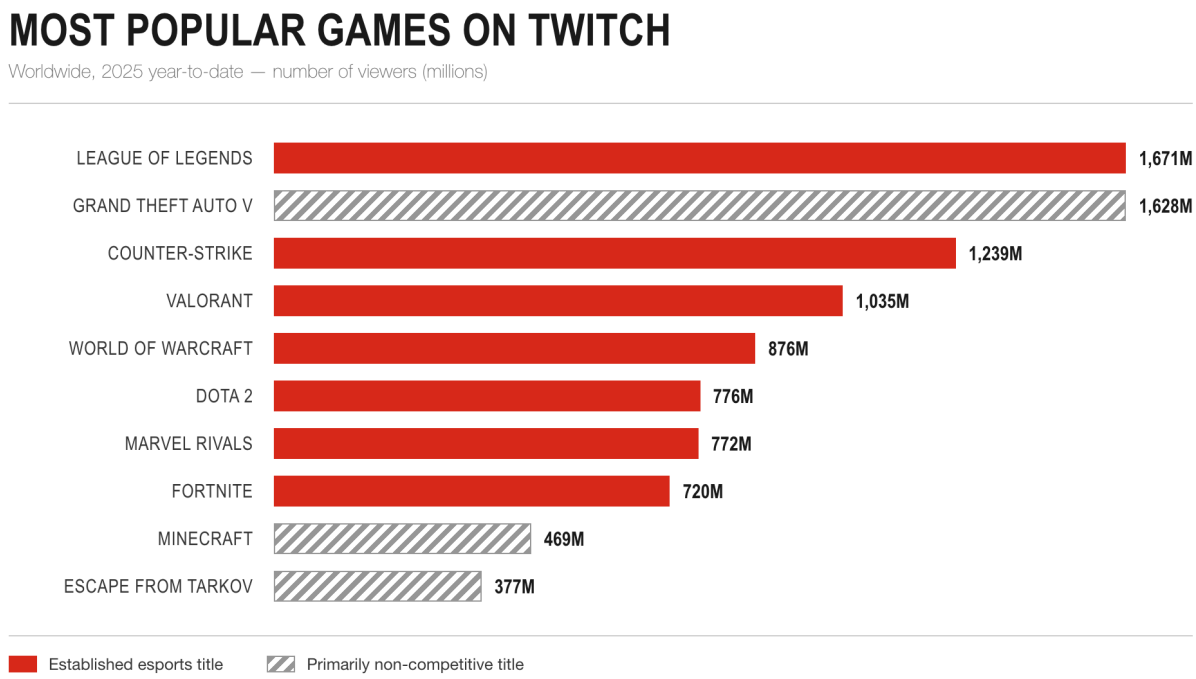


Figure 2. Most popular games on Twitch worldwide in 2025 (year to date), by number of viewers. Source: Statista.

Although most esports games didn't start out as such, nowadays, many of them are increasingly designed from the outset with competitive play in mind. This intentional design extends the games' profitability and longevity while also fueling a growing esports audience. Unlike traditional sports, however, esports are intrinsically tied to intellectual property owned by game developers. These companies retain exclusive control over the games, including the ability to modify rules, formats, and competitive structures, often treating esports as a business unit within their broader operations.

The Esports Ecosystem

Understanding the nature of the esports ecosystem is complex, as it is a fast-changing field that mixes technology, culture, sport, and business. Many different actors interact (see Figure 3). At the professional level, players sign contracts to compete for esports teams, which are typically owned by larger franchises or organizations funded by investors. These teams pay fees to participate in competitive leagues or tournaments, often organized by game publishers who own the rights and necessary infrastructure (e.g., servers) to the games. These events are broadcast online or held in-person at multi-purpose venues or purpose-built esports arenas, integrating sponsorships and advertising to fund the ecosystem. The entire system operates under the oversight of local laws and regulations, facilitating broad geographical differences in professionalism. It is a complex system to navigate, especially for young people.

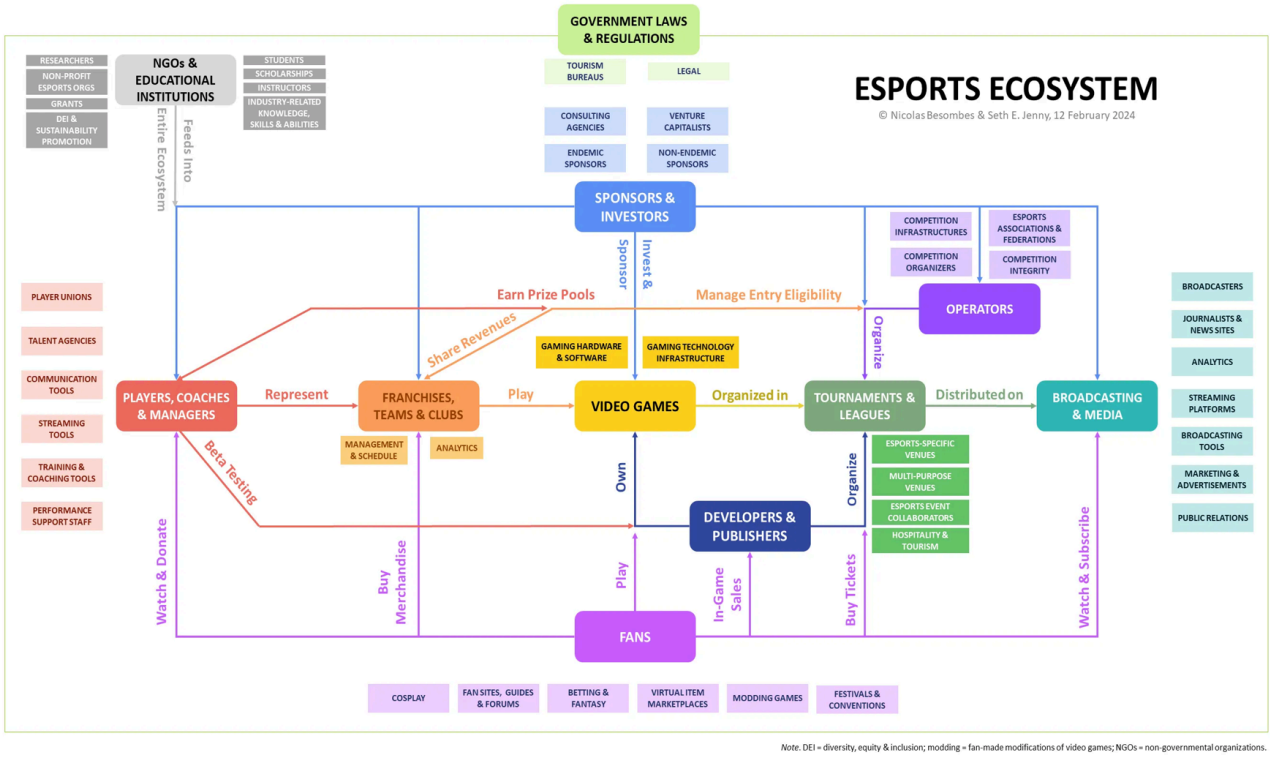


Figure 3. A holistic map of the esports ecosystem. Source: Nico Besombes & Seth E. Jenny, 2024.

Esports Event and Competition Staging

Esports event and competition staging usually involves many different actors. A common way of organising esports competitions is the “outsourced tournament-oriented model” (see Figure 4). In this model, a roster of players represent a team (Team Vitality) and play a video game (Counter-Strike: Global Offensive) whose intellectual property belongs to a publisher (Valve). In this case, the game publisher delegates most of the organization of the competitive circuit (ESL One) to a third-party operator specialized in esports events (ESL) whose tournament is broadcast on a streaming platform (Twitch).

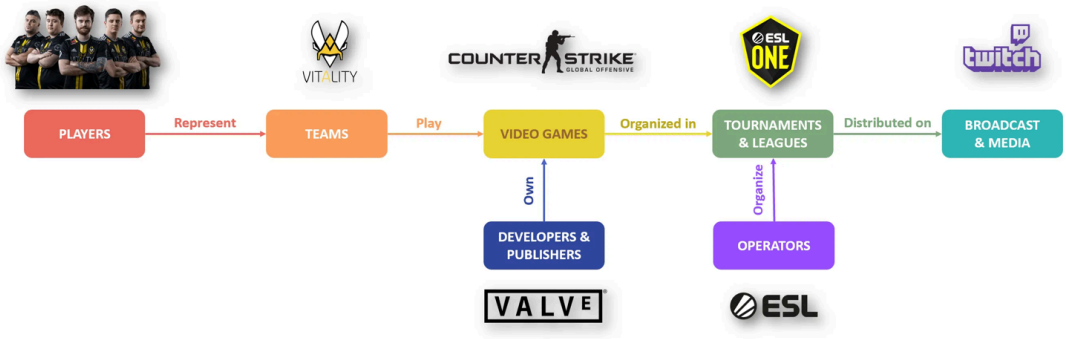


Figure 4. The outsourced tournament-oriented model of esports competition with an example of Counter-Strike: Global Offensive.

THE NINE CHALLENGES

The fragmented ecosystem, multitude of actors, and lack of unified rules and infrastructure lead to several challenges in protecting children's rights. This report benchmarks the current experience of Youth Esports Athletes (YEAs) against the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the international framework that sets out the fundamental rights of every child, to map the key risks and issues the esports sector needs to address going forward. The convention is only binding for nation states, but they in turn can and should hold organizations responsible. The UNCRC should be considered in its entirety, and we must always consider the four general principles when interpreting individual articles. These are the following: Non-Discrimination (Article 2), Best Interests of the Child (Article 3), Right to Life, Survival, and Development (Article 6), and Respect for the Views of the Child (Article 12). In this guide (see Appendix A), the UNCRC articles that are relevant to the common experiences of YEAs will be included, where each article is presented in relation to how it affects YEAs. There could still be other articles that are relevant in specific cases but not included in the guide. A full definition of all the articles can be found on this website: Convention on the Rights of the Child | OHCHR. Throughout this report, symbols created by UNICEF mark which UNCRC articles are raised in each theme. Figure 5 shows an example of what these symbols look like.

Figure 5. Article 1, which states that a child is any person under the age of 18.

The nine challenges that follow are the most pressing issues the esports ecosystem must address to uphold these rights for YEAs. Each is paired with a set of opportunities for how the sector can respond and move forward responsibly.

01

CHALLENGE 1

ENSURING THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILD BEYOND AGE REQUIREMENTS



The Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasizes that the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children (Article 3). It further establishes that anyone under the age of 18 is considered a child (Article 1). However, in the esports industry, this distinction is often overlooked, with children, particularly those close to adulthood, frequently treated the same as adults.

> *"When we're training them, we don't really differentiate between training an adult and a young kid. We follow general laws, but there's no specific differentiation in our training approach."*
>
> — DIRECTOR, GLOBAL ESPORTS ACADEMY

Age ratings and limits in esports are intended to protect children by ensuring that games and competitions are appropriate for their age group. Many organizations rely on systems like the Pan-European Game Information (PEGI) ratings to set minimum ages for participation. For example, games like Fortnite adhere to a PEGI-12 rating, requiring players to be at least 12 years old, and some leagues, such as the League of Legends EMEA Championship, have raised the minimum age for professional competition from 17 to 18. However, these age limits present significant challenges in their application, enforcement, and relevance to the competitive esports landscape.

One of the key issues is that PEGI ratings are designed for recreational gaming, guiding parents and caregivers rather than addressing the demands of professional esports. Competitive players need to begin practicing long before they are eligible to participate in tournaments, meaning that age restrictions based on game ratings often fail to align with the realities of the YEA's development. Instead of protecting children, these age limits risk becoming mechanisms for deflecting responsibility, as they do not ensure the necessary safeguards for young players. Compounding this issue is the lack of effective age verification methods within the industry. Many verification systems are easily bypassed by children, allowing them to play games well below the recommended age without appropriate protective measures, often without parental awareness.

The inconsistent application of age limits across events further exacerbates these challenges. While PEGI ratings provide general guidelines, enforcement is often flexible, particularly when parental consent or supervision is involved. This leads to a lack of uniformity, with some tournaments relaxing age requirements to accommodate younger players, creating grey areas in regulation. Questions arise about whether tournament organizers or regulatory bodies should be responsible for enforcing age ratings and whether sufficient oversight exists to ensure compliance.

> *"Some tournament guidelines allow anyone aged 14 and above into a Counter-Strike event. If you're below 14, it's fine as long as you're accompanied by an adult. Even though CS under the PEGI ratings is either 16 or 18. So again, is it a grey area? I don't know. What are the right standards? I don't know."*
>
> — VP, NATIONAL ESPORTS FEDERATION

Another challenge stems from the fragmented nature of age regulation in esports, which often varies by region and is influenced by cultural sensitivities. Unlike traditional sports, which are governed by international federations with standardized rules, esports age restrictions are largely determined by game developers who hold intellectual property rights. These developers independently set age limits for their games, resulting in inconsistent guidelines and significant regional variation. This decentralized approach complicates efforts to protect young athletes and creates a regulatory environment that lacks cohesion and accountability.

OPPORTUNITIES

YEAs should be viewed through the lens of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the industry should recognise that anyone under the age of 18 is considered a child with rights that differ from and go beyond those of adults. Game developers, regulatory bodies, and child rights organizations should therefore collaborate to create flexible yet consistent guidelines that account for regional and cultural differences while maintaining core protections. Furthermore, a robust and tamper-proof age verification system should be developed.

02

CHALLENGE 2

BALANCING SCHOOL, REST, AND LIFE OUTSIDE THE GAME







Much like professional youth athletes in traditional sports, YEAs require training plans suited to their age and stage of development. However, unlike most traditional sports, esports games are accessible around the clock with minimal barriers to prolonged play. Many children start their journey toward becoming professional esports players by playing games recreationally, blurring the lines between leisure and professional development. This lack of clear boundaries, coupled with the culture of "grinding" in esports, where players dedicate extensive hours to improving their skills, can lead to issues similar to those associated with excessive gaming. For example, in the popular game *Dota 2*, players are considered to be beginners for the first 1000 hours of playtime, emphasising the time-intensive nature of the industry.

> ***"I think one thing that is becoming more prevalent is the level of sophistication involved in becoming a pro player. The idea of coming home from school and playing endless hours of solo queue is not going to make you a better player."***
>
> — EXTERNAL AFFAIRS MANAGER, GAME DEVELOPER

While society has made significant adaptations to accommodate the needs of traditional sports athletes, similar structures for esports athletes are largely absent. Schools and educators often have a better understanding and acceptance of the commitments associated with general sports than with esports. This disparity means YEAs may face challenges in securing flexible schedules or accommodations, increasing the risk of stress from managing excessive demands or even dropping out of school. A good practice to follow is the University of California, Irvine, which offers scholarships for esports athletes, emphasising the importance of balancing education with competitive gaming.

There is also a growing recognition of the need to make education a formal part of an esports career path. For example, France has implemented policies that require young esports athletes to complete their schooling as part of their professional journey, integrating both education and training into their daily routines. Similarly, in the UK, some schools and universities are beginning to embed esports within their curricula, providing pathways that combine both education and gaming.

OPPORTUNITIES

Lessons learned from traditional sports can be adapted to esports to better support young athletes. For instance, some countries have successfully integrated esports programs into upper secondary schools, allowing professional development to occur alongside formal education. This helps YEAs balance training with study and lowers the risk of dropping out.

Additionally, coordination between academic and tournament scheduling is crucial. Tournament schedules should be aligned with school calendars to prevent conflicts during exam periods, ensuring that students can continue their gaming pursuits without sacrificing their academic obligations.

03

CHALLENGE 3

GIVING YOUTH ESPORTS ATHLETES A VOICE



Children's voices are integral to safeguarding their interests, as recognized in Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which grants them the right to be heard in matters that affect them. While interviewees in this study universally acknowledged the importance of consulting YEAs, formal mechanisms for meaningful engagement are scarce. There are, however, some practices that provide promising examples of fostering player participation, such as the players' associations in games like *Valorant*[2] and *League of Legends*[3] in the United States. These forums enable players to collectively advocate for their needs, share feedback, and request changes on issues ranging from scheduling and match-day processes to equipment and communication regarding updates in the games that could have impact on performance and strategy. Another example is the player council that is run by a professional league, as mentioned in one of the interviews, where designated representatives from all teams speak at regularly scheduled meetings. Such structures can inspire broader efforts to ensure YEAs' voices are heard across the industry. However, a remaining issue even in instances where feedback is collected is that it is often unclear to what extent it is acted upon and evaluated. The fragmented nature of the esports industry, with stakeholders such as game developers, tournament organizers, and teams, further complicates the implementation of cohesive strategies for consultation and participation.

> ***"Just thinking about it now, that's one thing we could be looking at doing. Actually, getting a Youth Advisory Board for the championships, that would be a pretty cool thing to do."***
>
> — VP, NATIONAL ESPORTS FEDERATION

While the examples mentioned above are promising, they might still not be adapted to the specific needs of children. For example, consider that children need specific forums to feel that they are safe and able to speak freely, as well as giving them the option to speak in their native languages. One potential framework for ensuring meaningful consultation with children is "The Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Children's Participation" (see Figure 6). It was created more than 20 years ago and has evolved over the years, in dialogue with children and professionals working with children. The Basic Requirements is meant to be used in all decision-making processes affecting children. It states that to properly gather children's views, the methods used should be 1) transparent and informative, 2) voluntary, 3) respectful, 4) relevant, 5) child friendly, 6) inclusive, 7) supported by training, 8) safe and sensitive to risk, and 9) accountable. In the esports context, this would among other things involve creating an environment where YEAs can speak freely without fear of repercussion, such as losing their spot on a team. It also requires appointing adults who are not only responsible for listening to these views but also empowered to act upon them and provide feedback on the results.

THE NINE BASIC REQUIREMENTS

For meaningful and ethical children's participation — Save the Children



1 TRANSPARENT AND INFORMATIVE

Children know what their participation is for, how their views will be used, and what they can influence.



2 VOLUNTARY

Taking part is the child's own choice, and they can withdraw at any time.



3 RESPECTFUL

Children's views are taken seriously, and their time and other commitments are respected.



4 RELEVANT

Participation focuses on issues that matter to children's own lives and draws on their knowledge.



5 CHILD-FRIENDLY

Methods, language, and settings are adapted to children's age and abilities.



6 INCLUSIVE

All children can take part; participation challenges rather than reinforces existing patterns of discrimination.



7 SUPPORTED BY TRAINING

The adults who facilitate participation are prepared and trained to do it well.



8 SAFE AND SENSITIVE TO RISK

Risks are assessed and minimised, and children know where to turn for help.



9 ACCOUNTABLE

Children receive feedback on how their views were interpreted, used, and acted upon.

Figure 6. The Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Children's Participation, developed and refined between 2005 and 2021 by Save the Children.

OPPORTUNITIES

There is currently no consistent industry-wide approach for engagement with youth athletes in a format that allows them to disclose their concerns and needs without fear of retaliation. Identify ways that YEA can express their opinions, such as player councils, Youth Advisory Boards and focus groups, where they feel confident and competent to speak up, with an audience to listen to them and implement changes accordingly with proper feedback to the changes that have been made. Other measures can be implemented to lower the threshold, such as anonymous systems of raising concerns as well as direct channels to speak to coaches and trusted adults. Discord is a social media platform where you can talk through private messaging, voice chat and public forum threads and it is used by almost all gamers when gaming or when just spending time with their friends. As YEA commonly use Discord in their everyday life and it is a natural environment for them to operate in, utilizing that tool could facilitate the dialogue. For example, a specific server could be created on Discord with information on how to make your voice heard in different matters, and with a direct channel to the right person to speak to.

04

CHALLENGE 4

ACCESS, GENDER, AND BELONGING IN ESPORTS





Diversity, equity and inclusion are particularly important for the well-being and child rights of YEA, as Article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, underscores that children should not face exclusion or preferential treatment based on race, sex, language, or religion. While esports attract a growing and globally diverse audience large disparities based on access, gender, race, LGBTQIA+, and disability persist, particularly at the professional player level. These disparities differ between types of esports, individual titles, and across different marginalised communities.

Unequal access to the digital gaming ecosystem poses a significant challenge for (aspiring) YEAs, particularly those in marginalized regions (see Figure 7).

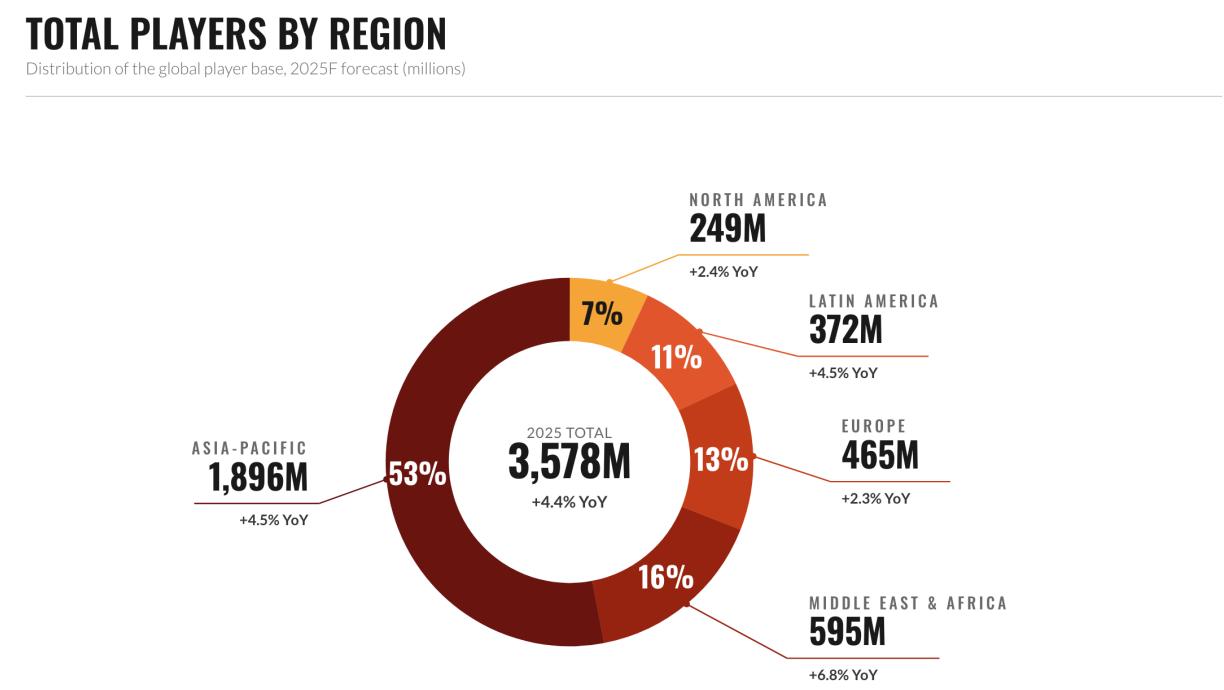


Figure 7. Total players by region. Source: Newzoo Global Games Market Report, 2025.

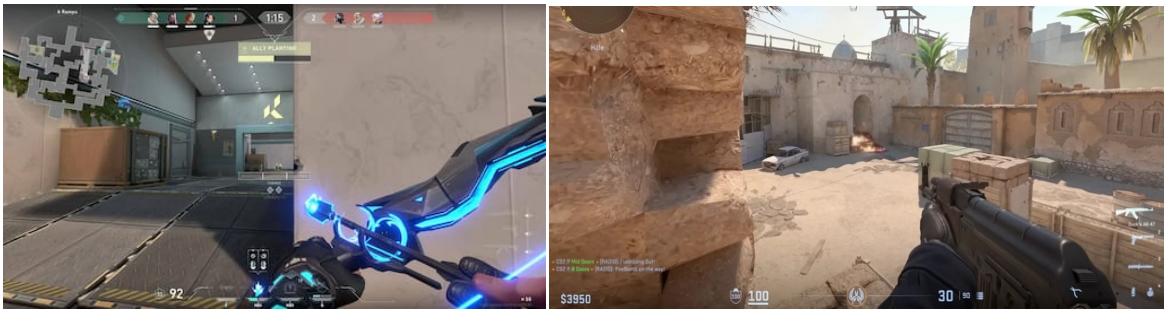
While 63 percent of the global population was online by the end of 2021, only 34 percent of young people in the least developed countries had Internet access, compared to near-universal connectivity in Europe and Asia. These disparities, compounded by economic and infrastructural inequalities, limit access to devices, games, and reliable Internet, which are key prerequisites for participation in esports. For instance, national blackouts in South Africa disrupt children's ability to engage with digital games, further isolating them from competitive opportunities. Without addressing these gaps, the esports ecosystem risks excluding potential talent from underserved regions.

Furthermore, while research on girls' experiences in gaming is limited, studies focusing on adult women players consistently reveal high levels of targeted sexual harassment[4]. For example, a study of 271 women gamers found that 57% experienced some form of harassment, 54% were asked for sexual favours, and over 22% encountered rape "jokes" during gameplay[5]. Such pervasive harassment leads to significant consequences for women in gaming communities. Many women apply strategies for coping with harassment, such as choosing to remain invisible by adopting male usernames, registering accounts under male relatives, playing alone offline, or avoiding in-game communication altogether[6].

> *"They [girls] have a much harder time and have to be thick-skinned. It's not the positive community that many boys experience. So, right now, unfortunately, even though it could be even, physically there's nothing stopping it, but culturally there's a lot of bad stuff that makes it necessary [to have segregated leagues]."*
>
> — MANAGER, ESPORTS TEAM

There are stark differences in representation between various types of esports. In physical esports (e.g., motion-controlled or VR games), girls are relatively well-represented at 30-40% and often compete on an equal level with boys. Simulated esports (e.g., sports and racing simulations) are male-dominated and show a 15-20% presence of girls. However, professional esports highlight the most significant gap, where girls are vastly underrepresented, making up less than 1% of players. This is despite the fact that 15-20% of players in relevant game titles are female. Women and girls YEAs are largely concentrated in a handful of titles, driven by the efforts of developers to support female leagues or tournaments. These are:

- **Hero-shooters/Unrealistic shooters:** Valorant, Fortnite
- **Realistic, lifelike shooters:** Counterstrike, Rainbow Siege Six, PubG
- **Other:** League of Legends, Mobile Legends: Bang Bang, Rocket League



Valorant (Hero-shooter), Counter-Strike 2 (Realistic shooter)

Although there is a strong desire within the esports ecosystem to increase women and girls' participation, most initiatives have failed to deliver lasting positive change. This is primarily due to systemic cultural barriers. The absence of exclusive professional leagues or regular competitions for women, financial incentives, sponsorship, and visible role models, aspiring female athletes are often faced with limited opportunities in esports.

Lastly, there have been multiple success stories regarding the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ and disabled players. Esports athletes are some of the most visible representatives of the entire gaming community, and as such who they are speaks volumes about who games are made for. As such, role models can play a transformative part in challenging stereotypes and inspiring future generations of players. Scarlett, one of the most successful *StarCraft* players and a prominent trans esports figure serves as a powerful example of how diverse representation at the elite level can normalize inclusion and encourage marginalized groups to participate. Another major development the esports ecosystem has seen is the inclusion of individuals with disabilities. In 2019, Japan held its first national esports competition opportunities for disabled gamers[7]. More impressively is that due to accessible controllers and controllers in general, players with disabilities have long competed with able-bodied athletes, even at the highest competitive levels[8].

OPPORTUNITIES

Efforts to improve diversity and inclusion in esports for YEAs should focus on investing in accessible infrastructure. Localized gaming hubs and inclusive leagues are required to reach players from marginalized communities and regions. This includes exclusive professional leagues and regular competitions for girls, at the very least as a transition period in order to create a space where girls can thrive to reach proper representation in mixed competitions in the future. Furthermore, showcasing and spotlighting diverse role models across different titles and platforms can help dismantle cultural barriers. By addressing these opportunities holistically, the esports ecosystem can evolve into a space that celebrates diversity, promotes equity, and champions child rights.

05

CHALLENGE 5

THE UNCLEAR PATH TO GOING PRO



The career development of YEAs is an underexplored area, we currently have a limited understanding of how young players enter the esports ecosystem, transition into professional roles, and navigate challenges along their journey. This lack of clarity hinders the development of an effective grassroots pathway to support aspiring YEAs, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation as there is little oversight or support.

> *"We've had significant numbers of approaches from parents since the IOC announcement about the Olympic Esports Games. Parents contacting us at our info email addresses saying: My son or daughter is an avid gamer. How can they get selected for the national team? How can they get a career in this area?"*
>
> — VP, NATIONAL ESPORTS FEDERATION

Globally, the absence of formalized coaching systems for esports is a critical issue. Many teams rely on ex-players as coaches, who, while technically skilled, often lack formal training in youth development, safeguarding, and (mental) health awareness. However, some promising practices are emerging, such as British Esports Coach Development Framework and Duty of Care program. However, without standardized qualifications or certification pathways, the quality of coaching will remain inconsistent.

Bootcamps and gaming houses, commonly used as intensive training hubs for aspiring YEAs, often jeopardize children's right to a standard of living that supports their physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development (Article 27). These high-pressure settings frequently operate without adequate oversight from qualified professionals, exposing young players to risks of burnout and neglect.

The role of parents in the athlete path of YEAs is equally limited. Despite the essential role parents could play in guiding and supporting young athletes, many remain unaware of the demands, risks, and opportunities within esports, hindering their ability to effectively support their children. Few organisations have taken steps to bridge this gap.

> *"We also advise parents to integrate themselves into the game, sit down and play with their child, ask questions, and be curious. We always say, if this were a football game, you would drive half an hour and stand in the rain to watch a not-so-great game, right?"*
>
> — EDUCATION LEAD, INTERNATIONAL ESPORTS TEAM

Despite these challenges, emerging practices such as High School esports programs are beginning to address the need for structured support. These initiatives combine education with competitive gaming, providing a framework where YEAs can develop their skills while maintaining academic balance. Such programs also introduce elements of safeguarding and coach training, setting an example for how esports pathways can prioritize well-being alongside performance.

OPPORTUNITIES

Any effort to improve the grassroots development pathway from casual or amateur play to the professional level should start with formulating a better understanding of the career development of YEAs. This baseline understanding will support policymakers, practitioners and managers in making more effective decisions on improvements to key regulatory issues (e.g., athletes' rights and protection), disciplinary matters, governance (e.g., competition policy and regulations), and rights-respecting and safe YEA development (e.g., talent management, coaching, and development programs). A key finding, however, would be the importance of promoting YEAs to finish their schooling alongside, or prior to, engaging in their professional careers.

06

CHALLENGE 6

MAINTAINING PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH





The health of YEAs is a growing area of research, yet much remains unknown due to the limited and fragmented nature of existing studies. So far, esports participation has been linked to both positive and negative health outcomes, with studies highlighting key areas such as physical activity, sleep, mental health, and musculoskeletal issues. This highlights one of the core principles of the UNCRC, which states that children have the inherent right to life, survival and healthy development (Article 6). Contrary to stereotypes associating esports with sedentary lifestyles, many professional esports players report satisfactory physical activity levels, often exceeding those of the general population. Higher-ranking players particularly emphasise physical fitness to maintain overall health, although training practices often remain unstructured and unsupervised. Still, prolonged gaming sessions and poor posture contribute to musculoskeletal problems such as neck, shoulder, and wrist pain, underlining the need for ergonomic training and professional oversight.

> *"There aren't guidelines in terms of hours played or types of training. We do talk about screen breaks, healthy diets, sleep, and hydration. But these are practices we've found best from different researchers and brought together ourselves. There isn't yet a centralized body trying to bring this together."*
>
> — VP, NATIONAL ESPORTS FEDERATION

Furthermore, esports players generally exhibit healthy lifestyle habits, such as limited alcohol consumption, low smoking rates, and attention to diet. However, some challenges remain, including higher body-fat percentages and poor sleep quality. Sleep disturbances, often linked to late-night gaming schedules and competitive demands, can negatively affect cognitive performance, mood regulation, and overall well-being.

When it comes to mental health, the demanding nature of esports, coupled with online toxicity, can create significant mental health challenges for YEAs. Stress, anxiety, and depression are common, exacerbated by intense competition and the lack of robust support systems. While some esports federations and teams already require team staff to obtain mental health first aid certifications, this practice is not yet widespread across the industry. The absence of consistent, accessible mental health resources leaves many young athletes without the support they need to navigate these challenges.

Balancing esports with other essential aspects of life, such as education, leisure, and time with family and friends, remains a persistent issue. Excessive training hours, often driven by the "boot camp" culture of esports, can overshadow other critical developmental needs.

> *"We're doing things with our 15- and 16-year-old esports players that we wouldn't dream of doing with our footballers who are physically in our academy. We wouldn't be allowed to put them through the same number of training hours."*
>
> — HEAD OF SAFEGUARDING, SPORT AND ESPORTS CLUB

OPPORTUNITIES

While esports players generally display better lifestyle habits than expected at the elite level, the lack of comprehensive and consistent health support, particularly for lower-tiered players, remains a significant gap. Collaborating with health and exercise professionals to implement structured physical activity programs, promote ergonomic awareness, and address musculoskeletal risks could enhance player health and performance. Additionally, integrating mental health resources, such as access to counsellors, mandated staff mental health first aid training, and stress management training, is essential for fostering well-being.

07

CHALLENGE 7

HARASSMENT, ABUSE, AND THE GAPS IN PROTECTION



YEAs are not only competitors in games but also digital personalities who build personal brands and interact with vast audiences online. Their dual role as athletes and content creators exposes them to unique challenges and risks that require tailored safeguards, particularly concerning their rights as children. YEAs engage with their audiences through multiple channels:

1. Within the individual games, using in-game chat and social interaction tools;
2. On online communities designed for players (e.g., Discord);
3. Through services where players stream and comment on gameplay (e.g., Twitch and YouTube); and
4. On different social media and discussion boards around specific games (e.g., Instagram, Reddit, etc.).

These spaces allow YEAs to expand their influence but also expose them to significant risks, including cyberbullying, privacy violations, and financial exploitation.

While some organizations provide basic online safety guidance and resources for parents, these efforts are often outdated and insufficient to address the specific challenges YEAs face. Media training, for instance, is critical, as many young players are thrust into public-facing roles they are unprepared for: navigating high-stakes interviews, livestreams with massive audiences, and the pressures of online scrutiny. Without structured guidance, these young athletes are vulnerable to making missteps that could harm their future both personally and professionally.

> *"They need a lot of media training because we're talking about young guys who might not have excelled in other areas—maybe not in school or socially—and then suddenly, they're being put on a big stage, given a microphone, or doing a Twitch interview with 500,000 viewers. They need to be closely aligned with the communication department."*
>
> — EDUCATION LEAD, INTERNATIONAL ESPORTS TEAM

Safeguarding YEAs from interpersonal violence is a pressing issue in the rapidly evolving esports ecosystem. Currently, the responsibility for safeguarding often falls on teams, voluntary organisations, parents, and schools. While National Esports Federations (NEFs) are beginning to take on these duties, their capacity to effectively implement safeguards varies widely. Differences in organisational structures,

regulatory frameworks, and funding levels across countries create inconsistencies in protections for young athletes. Smaller, newly established NEFs, in particular, struggle with limited resources and expertise, leaving significant gaps in safeguarding.

Although federations like the International Esports Federation (IESF) and the Global Esports Federation (GEF) are working to create consistent regulations and frameworks, their impact is limited without a unified international governing body to coordinate efforts. Some NEFs have taken proactive steps, establishing safeguarding policies that include designated safeguarding leads, mandatory annual staff training, background checks, and clear reporting mechanisms. However, these efforts are not universal, and many organizations focus narrowly on competitive integrity rather than addressing broader concerns such as bullying, harassment, and exploitation.

> *"I think we need a movement like in football, where there's an international federation taking responsibility and certifying national federations. They should have the power and authority to safeguard and support the grassroots and players. We need an international federation and organised national federations taking charge and having the budget to back it. Until that happens, nothing will."*
>
> — EDUCATION LEAD, INTERNATIONAL ESPORTS TEAM

Young players often lack accessible and independent channels for reporting abuse or harassment, a gap that is particularly concerning in semi-professional (Tier 2) esports, where oversight is weakest.

> *"I think there is a plan, but I don't think the youth would know where to go, to be honest. I don't think there is a clear channel for them."*
>
> — EDUCATION LEAD, INTERNATIONAL ESPORTS TEAM

OPPORTUNITIES

Comprehensive media training programs are necessary to equip young athletes with the skills to manage their online presence responsibly, protect them from harm, and safeguard their privacy. This includes providing clear guidance on online conduct, emphasizing the long-term impact of recorded content, and fostering a safer and more transparent ecosystem for YEAs. Mandatory safeguarding training for all staff, certified by accredited organisations such as the Child Protection in Sport Unit, should become a standard practice. Independent reporting channels, like anonymous hotlines modelled after the U.S. Center for SafeSport, are vital for enabling young athletes to report abuse safely. Comprehensive safeguarding protocols must address abuse, harassment, and exploitation, with clear enforcement mechanisms for reporting, investigation, and disciplinary actions. Regular audits and whistleblowing mechanisms will further strengthen protections.

08

CHALLENGE 8

PREVENTING ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE





The career span of an esports athlete is considerably shorter than that of traditional sports athletes, with many retiring in their early to mid-20s. For those who start young, this leaves a narrow window of 6–8 years at the professional level. Financial exploitation poses a significant threat to YEAs. Unlike many of the popular traditional sports, where young athletes benefit from well-established financial protections and systems of accountability, esports lacks equivalent safeguards. Teams, agents, and even parents sometimes exploit young players, taking advantage of non-transparent contracts and unequal power dynamics. While initiatives like Riot Games' salary regulations and Overwatch League's benefits packages offer a glimpse of progress, these remain exceptions rather than the rule.

> *"There's no organization in society saying, 'OK, you're a talent here, we're going to support you financially,' as you see in other sports."*
>
> — EDUCATION LEAD, INTERNATIONAL ESPORTS TEAM

Streaming platforms also serve as an income source for YEAs, but this path is not without risks. Streaming often reinforces harmful gender stereotypes, particularly for female players, and exposes individuals to online harassment, hate speech, or the sexualization of their content. An analysis of chatrooms during 302 gameplay segments from the top 20 streamers on Twitch, one of the most popular platforms for esports and gaming-related streaming, revealed troubling patterns of harmful language. The study found that 62% of streams included sexist language, 37% included racist language, 84% included ableist language, and 97% included violent language[3].

Ethical sponsorship guidelines are also crucial, especially given the prevalence of gambling sponsorships, which disproportionately impact young audiences. For example, the UK Gambling Commission reported that 39% of 11–16-year-olds had gambled in 2019, underscoring the need to prohibit harmful associations in esports sponsorships.

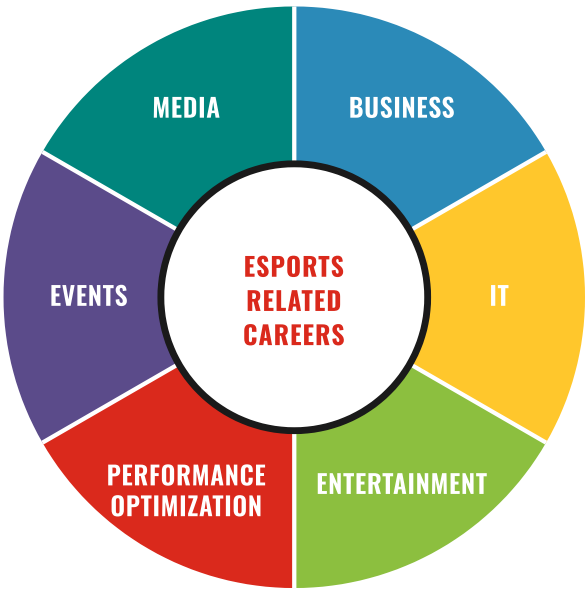


Figure 8. Professions related to esports.

Many YEAs ultimately transition to other roles within the esports ecosystem, such as commentators, event managers, or coaches (see Figure 8). However, a lack of formal education can limit their options. The French Esports Federation emphasizes that while some esports-related careers do not require formal qualifications, completing secondary education significantly expands opportunities, particularly for roles requiring technical expertise or management skills. Without a strong educational foundation, retired athletes may struggle to secure stable secondary careers.

OPPORTUNITIES

Several initiatives could significantly improve the environment for YEAs as they balance their careers as athletes and content creators with prospects for secondary careers. Standardizing contracts with clear and transparent terms is crucial to protect YEAs from financial exploitation and ensure fair compensation. Upcoming talent also needs to be financially supported or trained

To support YEAs in navigating the financial challenges of their careers, several initiatives can be implemented. Standardizing contracts with clear and transparent terms is vital to prevent financial exploitation and ensure fair compensation. Additionally, ethical sponsorship guidelines must be established to protect young players and audiences from harmful associations. Aligning sponsorship practices with values that promote health, education, and well-being can help create a safer and more sustainable industry. Lastly, supporting YEAs in completing their education and offering structured career planning resources will further ensure that they are well-prepared for life beyond their competitive years and prepare for secondary careers.

09

CHALLENGE 9

CHAPERONES, SCHEDULES, AND SUBSTANCES: THE RISKS AT LIVE EVENTS



When organizing esports events, several rights of the child must be upheld to ensure the safety and well-being of YEAs. As shown by the symbols, there are many articles that are relevant. While esports events employ various approaches to player safety, the division of responsibility for upholding YEAs' rights often remains unclear, with uncertainty surrounding the responsibilities of the event organizers, venues, teams, game developers, and players themselves. For live events, safeguarding policies and safeguarding requirements can differ per title, game company, competition, venue, age rating, tournament organiser, and country.

> *"As a tournament organiser we provide the accommodation, ground transport, and move them as a unit. So, if I'm moving a team around, their 16-year-old player would be with their chaperone and management. We provide the outlines, but ultimately they take responsibility for their care."*
>
> — VP, TOURNAMENT ORGANISER

This fragmented approach increases the risks posed to YEAs. A primary concern is the inconsistent approach to chaperones. Because YEAs are often underage, all reviewed agreements for tournament participation currently require a chaperone. However, identifying a suitable chaperone can be challenging due to the absence of clear standards for what constitutes a qualified or effective guardian. Parents, legal guardians, or staff members often step into this role, but their ability to provide appropriate care varies widely. Without formal requirements or training, this lack of consistency can leave YEAs vulnerable to inadequate supervision.

Anti-doping measures present another significant challenge. There is no universal agreement on which substances should be prohibited, and testing protocols remain undefined and largely unregulated. While some tournament organizers have introduced random drug testing, these efforts tend to focus on narcotics rather than substances that might directly enhance gaming performance. Organizations such as the Esports Integrity Commission (ESIC) and the International Esports Federation (IESF) have begun to address these gaps, but their efforts are inconsistent and lack widespread adoption. This lack of protection and education strongly undermines YEAs protection from exposure to harmful drugs and substances (Article 33).

Another challenge is the risk of overloaded schedules, particularly around their schedules and educational commitments. While some events, like the *Fortnite World Cup*, have demonstrated consideration for YEAs, by scheduling the *Fortnite World Cup* qualifiers and finals during school holidays to minimise disruption to young participants' education, there are no universal guidelines to prevent overburdened schedules. Without clear regulations, YEAs risk significant academic disruptions.

OPPORTUNITIES

To improve event and competition staging in esports, it is essential to implement standardised practices that prioritise the rights of YEA. First, clearer guidelines must be introduced regarding the roles and responsibilities of chaperones. These guidelines should include criteria for selecting, vetting, and training chaperones to ensure they can adequately support YEAs. Second, robust anti-doping policies, featuring educational programs, shared violation databases, and standardized punishments should be mandated and enforced to promote fair play and player health. Finally, standardized scheduling practices should be introduced, mirroring those in traditional sports. These guidelines should limit the number of games or hours YEAs are allowed to compete, ensuring that their educational commitments are not compromised. Additionally, implementing ethical standards through mandatory codes of conduct, such as Riot Games' Esports Global Code of Conduct, ensures integrity and inclusivity in esports. These measures, supported by monitoring bodies and strict enforcement, present a significant opportunity to create a safer, more equitable competitive environment for YEAs.

LOOKING AHEAD

The esports ecosystem holds immense potential as a positive and inclusive environment where billions of people connect through a shared passion. However, despite its rapid growth, the industry remains in its infancy, with fragmented initiatives and inconsistent efforts to uphold children's rights. For YEAs, more structured, formal, and holistic approaches are necessary to ensure consistent standards are applied, safeguarding their rights and well-being at every stage of their journey.

Esports have already demonstrated their ability to foster social inclusion, bridge cultural divides, and empower young people from diverse backgrounds. Community-driven events have showcased how esports can engage underserved communities and contribute positively to society. Yet, this potential as a tool for social development and justice remains largely untapped. To unlock this opportunity, greater investment is needed in grassroots initiatives that nurture young talent, prioritize accessibility, and promote participation from underrepresented groups.

When addressing children in esports, the industry must adopt a child-rights-focused perspective aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The distinction between children and adults is critical, as minors require additional legal and ethical protection. A 17-year-old athlete, for example, cannot be treated the same as an 18-year-old in terms of responsibilities, expectations, and safeguards. Unfortunately, this nuanced understanding is often absent, leaving minors vulnerable in an industry lacking robust protections.

To build a safer and more equitable environment for YEAs, there is an urgent need for more research to better understand their unique experiences and challenges. This research should focus on areas such as mental health, education, financial literacy, and the risks of exploitation. Establishing comprehensive regulatory frameworks, akin to those in traditional sports, will be crucial in addressing these gaps and ensuring that YEAs are supported, protected, and empowered to thrive in the esports ecosystem.

By adopting a unified approach and prioritizing child rights, the esports industry can evolve into a sector that entertains audiences while also supporting and safeguarding its youngest participants.

A CALL TO ACTION: STRENGTHENING CHILD RIGHTS IN ESPORTS

Ensuring the rights and well-being of Youth Esports Athletes requires coordinated action across the whole ecosystem. Progress is being made, but it is patchy. Drawing on the nine challenges in this report, this is where each actor can start.

GAME DEVELOPERS AND PUBLISHERS

- Build age verification that is hard to bypass, and design competitive titles with under-18 players in mind.
- Require minimum safeguarding standards from every league and tournament that runs on your games. The licence gives you that leverage.
- Keep gambling sponsors and other age-inappropriate advertisers away from youth competitions and broadcasts.

TOURNAMENT ORGANISERS AND LEAGUE OPERATORS

- Publish clear duty-of-care rules for minors at live events, with vetted and trained chaperones whose responsibilities are agreed in advance.
- Plan qualifiers and finals in school holidays and cap match hours for under-18s.
- Give young players a way to report problems that does not run through the people they may need to report.

TEAMS, COACHES, AND TALENT ORGANISATIONS

- Make finishing school part of every youth contract and training plan.
- Train coaches and staff in safeguarding, youth development and mental health first aid.
- Write contracts in plain language so players and their parents understand what they are signing.
- Ask players for their views, act on them, and tell them what changed.

ESPORTS FEDERATIONS (NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL)

- Align age rules and safeguarding standards across titles and borders, so that protection does not depend on where a child competes.
- Build accreditation for coaches, following models like the British Esports Coach Development Framework.
- Invest in grassroots pathways and girls' competitions so talent from every community has a way in.

SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION SYSTEMS

- Give esports commitments the same recognition and flexibility as school sports, while keeping education first.
- Combine schooling with structured play, as high school esports programmes and upper-secondary integrations already do.

PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

- Learn the games your child plays and get to know the people around them. Informed parents are the first safeguard.
- Keep sleep, school, friends and rest in balance with practice hours.
- Read contracts carefully and get independent advice before signing anything on your child's behalf.

POLICYMAKERS AND PUBLIC AUTHORITIES

- Clarify how existing child protection and labour law applies to competitive gaming.
- Consider following France, which ties professional esports participation to completed schooling.
- Fund research on the health, education and careers of Youth Esports Athletes.

UNDER-18 PARTICIPANTS ARE CHILDREN FIRST AND COMPETITORS SECOND. EVERYONE IN ESPORTS SHARES THE RESPONSIBILITY TO ACT ON THAT.

KEEP READING

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

All three authors of this report are well-oriented in the gaming space, through both their personal and professional lives. They have all played various online games and worked with different areas of gaming and esports.



Thomas Hakman is a researcher at the University of Oxford, and an expert in video games research. His work is grounded in the fields of psychology and data science, with a primary focus on understanding the impacts of digital technologies (e.g., video games, social media, and AI) on mental health and well-being to inform evidence-based global policy. His work has led to academic collaborations with Nintendo, Xbox, Steam, iOS, Android, and game publishers like Epic Games, Ubisoft, EA Games, Riot, Roblox, and more.



Nichlas Hellmark is leading the work on gaming for Save the Children Sweden. He initiated the project "AI-driven support for children online", which aims to improve the mental health among children and teenagers through online gaming. He previously played esports professionally, primarily World of Warcraft.



Licensed psychologist Theo Toresson works for Save the Children Sweden, focusing on gaming as a positive force as well as addressing challenges within the gaming world. In his work he interacts with parents, children, and game developers. He previously worked as a school psychologist, as well as within psychiatry where he provided CBT treatment for Internet Gaming Disorder.

APPENDIX

A: Articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child relevant to esports

A child is any person under the age of 18. In the esports industry, this distinction is often overlooked, with children, particularly those close to adulthood, frequently treated the same as adults.



Children should not face exclusion, discrimination or preferential treatment based on e.g. race, sex, language, or religion. There is for example a big gender gap in esports and sexism is common.



In all actions concerning children the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration. This means that the esports industry needs to view their athletes differently if they are under 18 years of age than if they are above.



Parents have the rights and duties to provide the child with appropriate direction and guidance on how to exercise their rights. As many parents have little knowledge of the esports industry and what their children might encounter, this is a challenge.



Children have the inherent right to life, survival and healthy development. Depending on the circumstances, practicing esports can both promote and inhibit the possibilities of a child growing up and reaching their full physical, mental and social potential.



Children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, and the views of the child has to be considered in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. Many esports organizations lack formal mechanisms for gathering feedback from YEAs.



Every child has the right to privacy. YEAs are not only competitors in games but also digital personalities who build personal brands and interact with vast audiences online, which exposes them to unique risks.



The child's parents have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. For example, in the context of age-appropriate participation in esports where the age limit is negotiable, parents have duties and responsibilities to make decisions in the best interest of the child.



Children have the right to be protected from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment. In the esports world that could mean online bullying and harassment.



Every child with a disability should enjoy the best possible life in society. The esports world is perfectly set up for this kind of inclusion, as you can enjoy gaming in many different ways.



Children have the right to the best health care possible. Being a YEA can be stressful and involve a lot of pressure, both long term and short term. They particularly need access to mental health support when needed.



Children have the right to food, clothing and a safe place to live so they can develop in the best possible way. If YEAs are living away from their families or are away travelling, they need these basic needs fulfilled.



Children have the right to education. For example, tournament schedules and everyday practice should show consideration to educational commitments.



Children's education should help them fully develop their personalities, talents and abilities. This could mean not forcing YEAs to choose between regular education and professional gaming.



Every child has the right to rest, relax, play and to take part in cultural and creative activities. For example, the schedule for YEAs needs to incorporate time for leisure and relaxation as well as other activities outside of gaming and regular education.



Children have the right to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. Many YEAs quit their careers early as they are very stressful and too demanding.



Appropriate measures should be taken to protect children from the illicit use of narcotic drugs. This includes performance enhancing drugs in the context of esports and could also mean they should be protected from gambling, as it is classified as potentially addictive and is not permitted for anyone under the age of 18.



Children have the right to be protected from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. Esports organizations need systems to make it easy to detect and report incidents.



Children have the right to be protected from all kinds of exploitation. This is important as it covers all other potential exploitation that’s not explicitly mentioned in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

ENDNOTES

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