

POTENTIALS OF ESPORTS AND THE GAMING INDUSTRY FOR STIMULATING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH IN RURAL AREAS

Review paper
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Dejan Dašić

Information Technology School, Belgrade;
Faculty of Sport, University “Union-Nikola Tesla”, Belgrade, Serbia;
e-mail: dejan.dasic@its.edu.rs, ORCID: 0000-0002-8245-1117

ABSTRACT: *This paper explores the potential of esports and the gaming industry as drivers of economic development in rural areas. As part of the digital economy, esports is characterized by platform-based models, network effects, and event-driven activities that enable rural regions to participate in global markets without spatial concentration. The analysis identifies key development mechanisms, including job creation in digital and creative sectors, local economic effects through events and tourism, integration into platform economies, and the development of human capital. At the same time, significant challenges are highlighted, such as the digital divide, limited infrastructure, and weaker institutional capacities in rural areas. The paper concludes that esports and gaming can contribute to rural development only if integrated into broader strategies of digital and creative transformation, supported by infrastructure investments, institutional coordination, and local entrepreneurship.*

Keywords: *esports, gaming industry, rural development, digital economy, regional development*

POTENCIJALI E-SPORTA I GAMING INDUSTRIJE ZA PODSTICANJE EKONOMSKOG RAZVOJA I RASTA U RURALNIM PODRUČJIMA

SAŽETAK: *Ovaj rad istražuje potencijale e-sporta i gaming industrije kao pokretača ekonomskog razvoja u ruralnim područjima. Kao deo digitalne ekonomije, e-sport se odlikuje platformskim poslovnim modelima, mrežnim efektima i aktivnostima zasnovanim na događajima, što omogućava ruralnim regionima da učestvuju na globalnim tržištima bez potrebe za prostornom koncentracijom. Analiza identifikuje ključne razvojne mehanizme, uključujući stvaranje radnih mesta u digitalnim i kreativnim sektorima, lokalne ekonomske efekte kroz događaje i turizam, integraciju u platformsku ekonomiju i razvoj ljudskog kapitala. Istovremeno se ukazuje na značajne izazove, kao što su digitalni jaz, ograničena infrastruktura i slabiji institucionalni kapaciteti u ruralnim sredinama. zaključuje se da e-sport i gaming industrija mogu doprineti ruralnom razvoju samo ukoliko su integrisani u šire strategije digitalne i*

Gradanska uprava

kreativne transformacije, uz podršku ulaganja u infrastrukturu, institucionalne koordinacije i razvoja lokalnog preduzetništva.

Ključne reči: e-sport, gaming industrija, ruralni razvoj, digitalna ekonomija, regionalni razvoj

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the video game industry—and particularly esports—has experienced exceptionally dynamic growth, transforming from a marginal activity into a global phenomenon with significant economic, social, and cultural implications. Today, esports represents a complex ecosystem that includes professional players, tournament organizers, media platforms, sponsors, and a broad audience base, thereby generating substantial revenue and stimulating the development of the digital economy (Dašić, 2025).

The development of the esports industry is closely linked to the advancement of digital infrastructure, internet accessibility, and the globalization of media content, which enables its expansion even into less developed and rural areas. Contemporary research indicates that esports not only contributes to economic growth through direct revenue streams but also fosters innovation, human capital development, and digital inclusion (Kashcha et al., 2022).

In the context of regional development, the role of esports events and the gaming industry as drivers of local economies is particularly significant. The organization of major esports tournaments can generate multiplier effects through tourism, employment, and the development of complementary service sectors, including hospitality, catering, and the IT industry (Liu, 2025). These effects are analogous to those of traditional sporting events, but with an additional dimension of the digital economy and global audience reach.

Esports' unique potential is demonstrated by its applicability in rural places, where it can help lessen regional disparities. Studies reveal that audiences and fan communities are substantially present in rural locations, where esports plays an important social and integrative function, despite the professional esports industry being primarily centered in metropolitan settings (Molnár & Müller, 2025). This raises the prospect of utilizing esports as a means of fostering youth involvement and social cohesiveness in rural areas.

Furthermore, integrating esports into local development strategies can contribute to the diversification of rural economies, which are often dependent on agriculture or traditional industries. Similar to sports tourism, the development of digital and esports events can enhance the visibility of rural destinations, increase investment, and stimulate entrepreneurship (Đorđević & Jeličić, 2025). At the same time, the development of infrastructure necessary for esports—such as broadband internet and digital platforms—has long-term positive effects on the overall digital transformation of rural areas.

However, despite its enormous potential, the growth of the esports ecosystem in rural areas is constrained by a number of issues. Inadequate infrastructure, a lack of funding, and a lack of institutional support are major obstacles (Esiri, 2023). These elements emphasize the necessity of a comprehensive strategy that includes public policies, educational initiatives, and cooperation between the public and commercial sectors. In this regard, esports and the gaming sector can be seen as components of

the larger digital economy, which has been demonstrated to benefit rural rejuvenation by boosting economic activity, productivity, and innovation (Zhang, 2025). The integration of these sectors into development strategies can contribute to the creation of so-called “smart villages,” where digital technologies play a key role in economic and social progress.

Based on the above, this paper aims to analyze the potential of esports and the gaming industry as instruments for stimulating economic development and growth in rural areas. The focus will be on identifying key economic effects, analyzing development mechanisms, and determining the conditions under which esports can contribute to the sustainable development of rural communities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Though it is still theoretically dispersed, recent work on esports and the game business indicates that this is a quickly institutionalizing academic topic. While one set of studies looks at business strategies, audiences, platforms, and market processes, another focuses on defining esports and how it relates to sport, media, and digital entertainment. According to Hamari and Sjöblom (2017), esports spectatorship is linked to particular audience motivation patterns, demonstrating that esports is a media product with significant market potential in addition to being a gaming activity. While highlighting the fact that research has not yet fully established a common theoretical framework for analyzing the economic effects of this sector, more recent business and management literature suggests that esports' commercial potential is tied to increased academic interest in the industry. (López-Cabarcos et al., 2024).

Studies on the video game industry highlight that it is one of the most dynamic sectors of the modern digital economy, coinciding with the growth of esports. A conceptual framework of value creation in the video game industry is developed by Marchand and Hennig-Thurau (2013), who demonstrate how a complex interplay between producers, distribution channels, users, and complementary market actors generates value. Similar to this, Rong et al. (2018) stress that network effects are essential for the expansion of online gaming ecosystems since platform success hinges on its capacity to draw in users, content, and complementary services all at once. Landoni et al. (2020) further show that mobile gaming firms within the cultural and creative industries develop business model innovations throughout their life cycle, which is particularly important for understanding how digital products can become long-term sustainable sources of revenue and employment. Goh et al. (2023) synthesize this literature by concluding that the video game industry is a highly innovative and economically significant sector, although existing research remains dispersed across several disciplines.

For the topic of rural economic development, it is especially important that the gaming industry and esports do not depend exclusively on traditional industrial concentration, but rather on digital infrastructure, connectivity, and the ability of local actors to participate in the platform economy. The literature suggests that network effects, digital distribution, and content scalability create conditions under which geographically peripheral areas may participate in value chains that are not strictly tied to major urban centres (Rong et al., 2018; Goh et al., 2023). This does not mean that location becomes irrelevant; rather, the nature of spatial advantage changes. Instead of physical proximity to markets, key factors become internet connectivity, access to

digital tools, skills development, and the capacity of local entrepreneurship to connect with global consumer and media flows (Landoni et al., 2020; Khlystova & Kalyuzhnova, 2023). This shift is particularly relevant for rural areas seeking new development niches beyond traditional agriculture and low-profit service activities.

The event-based and tourist aspect of esports is one of the most developed literary subgenres. According to Thompson et al. (2022), esports fandom can transition from the virtual world to in-person event attendance, giving esports the traits of tourism and the experience economy. This discovery is significant because it implies that, like traditional sports and cultural events, esports events may provide local consumption through lodging, hospitality, transportation, retail, and related services. Research on esports events and regional economic effects, which demonstrates that investments and event clustering may result in intra- and inter-regional spillover effects (Hlee et al., 2023), further supports this claim. Additionally, recent empirical work on esports tournaments confirms their significance for regional economic activity. (Liu, 2025). For rural areas, this opens the possibility of developing smaller, specialized, or thematically focused events, gaming festivals, camps, educational tournaments, and hybrid events that combine digital content with local tourism and cultural offerings.

In addition to direct consumption and market flows, the literature also points to the relevance of esports for human capital development. Zhong et al. (2022), in a systematic review, emphasize that participation in esports may be associated with the development of several twenty-first-century skills, including communication, collaboration, problem-solving, and digital competencies. For rural areas, this finding is especially important because development strategies in such communities often face youth outmigration, insufficient digital inclusion, and a lack of attractive career pathways for generations socialized in digital environments. In this sense, esports and the wider gaming economy should not be viewed solely as entertainment, but also as potential development infrastructure for training, informal learning, media and IT skills, and the creation of new professional roles in content production, event organization, marketing, design, analytics, and community management (Zhong et al., 2022; Goh et al., 2023).

The literature on the creative economy and regional resilience further strengthens the argument that gaming and esports may have developmental significance beyond a narrow sectoral framework. Roberts and Townsend (2016) demonstrate how cultural and digital wealth from the creative sector can strengthen rural communities' resilience. Their claim that the emergence of new cultural-digital activities may improve local communities' adaptation, fortify social networks, and generate new economic opportunities in outlying areas makes it especially pertinent in this context. In a similar vein, Khlystova and Kalyuzhnova (2023) discover that the creative industries interact with digitization to support successful business and regional resilience. When these findings are applied to the gaming industry, it is reasonable to conclude that rural areas could use esports and gaming as part of a broader strategy of creative-digital diversification of the local economy, especially where opportunities for capital-intensive industries are limited.

However, it is crucial to stress that simple or linear optimism is not supported by the evidence. Business models, technology access, regulatory frameworks, monetization stability, relationships with platforms, and the capacity to draw audiences

and investment are just a few of the complex institutional and market conditions that are necessary for the expansion of esports and the gaming industry, according to business and economic studies (Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013; Landoni et al., 2020; López-Cabarcos et al., 2024). This indicates that just because video games are popular does not mean that rural areas would automatically see development consequences. Outcomes will depend on whether local actors can build an ecosystem connecting digital infrastructure, educational institutions, youth and cultural centres, entrepreneurial support, and local government. In other words, the potential exists, but its realization requires planned institutional coordination rather than spontaneous market development.

The majority of esports research is still concentrated on definitions, audiences, commercialization, legitimation, and market organization, while the spatial dimension of development is far less studied, according to literature evaluations in business and management (López-Cabarcos et al., 2024). This is a significant study gap because the main question is not only whether esports is expanding as a global industry, but also under what circumstances its effects can be dispersed geographically. There is enough evidence in the literature to assume that the gaming industry and esports may support rural development in four ways: by fostering local entrepreneurship, strengthening human capital, developing events and associated consumption, and creating digital and creative jobs. Nevertheless, more empirical studies are still needed to test these mechanisms specifically in rural areas, particularly in smaller and peripheral communities (Roberts & Townsend, 2016; Thompson et al., 2022; Zhong et al., 2022; Molnár & Müller, 2025).

It may be inferred from the examined literature that esports and the gaming sector have genuine theoretical and practical potential to be included in rural development efforts, but not as a stand-alone phenomenon. Instead, they ought to be viewed as parts of a more comprehensive digital and creative revolution in local economies. The financial potential of esports, the inventiveness of the gaming industry, the significance of network effects, the worth of the event economy, and the contribution of creative-digital activities to regional resilience are all amply demonstrated by prior research. For this reason, further research is justified into how these mechanisms can be adapted to rural contexts and under which institutional, infrastructural, and social conditions they can become sustainable sources of economic growth and development.

3. ECONOMIC MECHANISMS AND DEVELOPMENT EFFECTS OF ESPORTS AND THE GAMING INDUSTRY IN RURAL AREAS

Esports and the gaming sector are a part of the modern digital economy, where value is generated through platforms, digital distribution, data, user communities, intellectual property, and complementary services in addition to physical production. In this way, the generation and capture of value through a complex relationship between content creators, distribution channels, technology intermediates, and end users constitutes the fundamental economic mechanism of the gaming industry. According to Marchand and Hennig-Thurau (2013), video games create value as market systems that have an impact on advertising, distribution, user communities, and supplementary services in addition to being individual items. This structure is particularly important for rural areas, as it shows that part of the economic benefits can be created outside

traditional urban production centers, provided that adequate digital connectivity, access to platforms, and local actors capable of participating in the value chain are present.

One of the key economic mechanisms of gaming industry development is network effects. Rong, Ren, and Shi (2018) show that the success of online game ecosystems depends on a platform's ability to attract a sufficient number of users, partners, and complementary actors simultaneously, whereby growth on one side of the market increases value for the other side. For rural areas, this means that geographical peripherality no longer has to imply market peripherality (Dašić et al., 2024; Mladenović, 2025).. When high-quality internet infrastructure is available, local teams, small studios, tournament organizers, streamers, or educational centers can participate in broader digital networks that are not limited by local demand. In this way, gaming and esports create opportunities for rural communities to participate in economic flows that are global in reach but local in their effects on employment, entrepreneurship, and the retention of young digitally competent residents.

A particularly significant mechanism is the event economy of esports. Hlee and Lee (2023) analyze the spatial and industrial effects of investment in esports events and show that such events can generate output, income, employment, and value-added effects, as well as interregional spillovers. Their study is especially relevant to this topic because it directly demonstrates that esports events can produce measurable multiplier effects, similar to other forms of the event economy. Although their analysis refers to a developed cluster, the logic of the findings is applicable to the rural context: smaller regional tournaments, gaming festivals, LAN events, youth camps, and educational competitions can increase local consumption in hospitality, transport, accommodation, retail, and technical services. In other words, esports may become an instrument of local economic activation, particularly in areas seeking alternative development models beyond seasonal agriculture or low-accumulation sectors.

The tourist mechanism and the event dimension are directly related. Thompson, Taheri, and Scheuring (2022) clearly allude to the potential growth of a separate esports tourism subsector by demonstrating how fandom and live attendance experiences might encourage players and spectators to travel to esports events. Because it implies that esports need not be restricted to big cities and arenas, this study is extremely pertinent to rural places. Conversely, rural locations might create specialized offerings, such as competitions linked to regional festivals, themed weekend events, instructive youth camps, hybrid events that combine local tourism with digital entertainment, or esports events held outside of the main tourist season. The economic effect therefore does not end with ticket sales, but spills over into the broader local service sector. In areas with a limited number of development drivers, this form of event tourism may be disproportionately important for local entrepreneurs and small family businesses.

However, the ability of rural areas to capitalize on these effects depends on digital and organizational infrastructure. Anderson, Wallace, and Townsend (2016) show that information and communication technologies, particularly broadband connectivity, can empower small rural creative businesses precisely because such activities are less dependent on physical proximity to markets than traditional sectors. This finding is highly important for understanding the rural potential of gaming and

esports activities. If broadband and digital tools enable rural creative firms to operate sustainably, then a similar logic applies to game studios, content production, streaming, online competition organization, community management, visual design, editing, marketing, and other activities within the esports ecosystem. At the same time, the authors warn that ICT does not automatically produce a “development miracle”; rather, it enables new forms of sustainable small business activity and local economic survival. This is particularly important for a realistic assessment of esports’ contribution to rural development: the strongest effects can be expected where gaming is embedded in a broader strategy of digital entrepreneurship, rather than treated as an isolated entertainment industry.

From the standpoint of development effects, at least four mutually connected channels of influence can be identified. The first is the direct employment and entrepreneurship channel, through the creation of new jobs in event organization, digital production, marketing, IT support, streaming, and design. The second is the indirect local consumption channel, generated through events and tourism flows. The third is the platform integration channel, since network effects allow rural actors to access broader markets without requiring demand to be concentrated locally. The fourth is the long-term transformation of the local development base, as gaming and esports may increase the attractiveness of rural places for young people, develop digital skills, and create space for small creative firms. These channels do not operate separately but reinforce one another: the better the local digital infrastructure, the easier it is to organize events; the more developed the event offers, the greater the local consumption; and the stronger the integration into platforms and networks, the greater the chances of developing sustainable business models.

Nevertheless, literature also points to limitations. Marchand and Hennig-Thurau (2013) indicate that value in the gaming industry is distributed through complex relationships among multiple actors and markets, while Rong et al. (2018) show that network effects can also lead to the concentration of power among platforms that control access to users and revenues. This means that rural communities may benefit from participating in gaming and esports, but part of the value created may also be extracted from the local economy toward large platforms, publishers, and central markets. Therefore, development effects will not depend only on the popularity of esports, but also on the local capacity to retain as much activity as possible within the community through local event organization, workforce training, support for micro-enterprises, and cooperation among schools, cultural centers, youth organizations, and the private sector. Without this, there is a risk that rural areas will remain merely consumers of digital content rather than active producers of economic value.

Based on the analyzed literature, it can be concluded that esports and the gaming industry have significant potential to stimulate the economic development of rural areas, primarily through a combination of digital infrastructure, the event economy, platform connectivity, and local entrepreneurship. Direct empirical evidence on rural esports models remains limited, but the existing literature clearly identifies the basic mechanisms: the gaming industry creates value through digital chains and platforms, esports events generate multiplier economic effects, esports tourism can produce additional local consumption, and ICT creates opportunities for sustainable creative businesses in rural areas. For this reason, esports and gaming may be understood as a potential development niche for rural areas, if they are integrated into

a broader, strategically managed process of digital and creative transformation of the local economy.

4. CHALLENGES, LIMITATIONS, AND STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTEGRATING ESPORTS INTO RURAL DEVELOPMENT

The integration of esports into rural development first faces the problem of structural mismatch between the rapid growth of the industry and the slower development of institutional frameworks. Recent research shows that esports, although an economically expanding sector, is characterized by insufficiently developed regulatory mechanisms, fragmented governance structures, and inconsistent standards. These challenges include issues of legitimacy, governance, participant protection, market regulation, and intellectual property (Candeo et al., 2025). In rural areas, where institutional capacity is often limited, such instability may further complicate the implementation of esports initiatives.

A second key problem concerns the insufficient empirical grounding of the social and developmental effects of esports. Although there are indications of positive effects in the areas of socialization, motivation, and education, the literature shows that findings remain fragmented and insufficiently contextualized (Riatti & Thiel, 2022). This means that policymakers in rural areas still lack a sufficiently reliable evidence base for making long-term development decisions based on esports as a development instrument.

One of the most significant limitations is the urban-rural digital divide, which directly affects the possibility of developing esports activities. Research shows that the quality of internet infrastructure (Franjić, 2022; Lunić, Česarević, 2025), the availability of digital technologies, and the level of digital literacy are key factors for the successful implementation of digital initiatives (Feurich et al., 2024). In many rural areas, limited access to high-speed internet and technological resources represents a fundamental barrier to the development of esports events, streaming activities, and digital production.

In addition to infrastructural limitations, a significant challenge is the lack of local business and organizational capacity. Anderson et al. (2016) emphasize that digital technologies can enable the development of rural creative businesses, but only when adequate skills, knowledge, and institutional support are present. In the context of esports, this implies the existence of organizers, technical staff, educators, and entrepreneurs capable of developing a local ecosystem. Without this, esports remains primarily a consumer activity, with limited economic impact.

An additional challenge is competition between territories for attracting digital and innovative activities. Digital transformation may increase the attractiveness of certain regions, but it can also intensify competition between urban and rural areas (Hagsten & Falk, 2024). Urban centres have advantages in terms of more developed infrastructure, a larger pool of professionals, and stronger connections with investors, which makes it more difficult for rural areas to attract significant esports-related investment.

Despite these challenges, literature points to important strategic opportunities for integrating esports into rural development. The first opportunity concerns the use of esports as a tool for the digital transformation of rural areas. Investments in digital infrastructure motivated by esports development can have broader positive effects on

the local economy, including the growth of other digital activities and increased digital inclusion (Feurich et al., 2024).

The second opportunity is the development of local creative-digital ecosystems. Anderson et al. (2016) emphasize that ICT enables rural areas to develop sustainable small businesses connected to wider markets. In the case of esports, this includes activities such as content production, event organization, marketing, and community management, which may contribute to the diversification of the local economy (Jeličić, Vljaković, 2023; Vučić, 2024). The institutionalization and local control of esports constitute the third strategic dimension. Clear governance structures, regulations, and standards are necessary for sustainable esports development, as demonstrated by Candeo et al. (2025). To ensure the long-term viability of esports efforts in rural areas, this may need the creation of local policies that involve collaboration with educational institutions, youth organizations, and the corporate sector.

Finally, it can be concluded that integrating esports into rural development is a complex process that requires overcoming infrastructure, institutional, and market limitations. At the same time, there are significant opportunities to use esports as an instrument of digital transformation, human capital development, and local entrepreneurship. The key to success lies in a strategic approach that connects technology, education, and local development policies (Feurich et al., 2024; Hagsten & Falk, 2024).

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the conducted analysis, it can be concluded that esports and the gaming industry represent a significant, yet still underutilized, potential for stimulating the economic development of rural areas. Their developmental capacity stems from the combination of digital business models, network effects, and the event economy, which enable rural communities to integrate into broader global flows without the need for spatial concentration.

However, the realization of this potential depends on overcoming key constraints, primarily the digital divide, insufficient infrastructure, weaker institutional capacities, and limited local entrepreneurial resources. At the same time, the fragmentation of existing research highlights the need for further empirical studies, particularly in the context of rural communities.

In this regard, esports and the gaming industry should not be viewed as a standalone solution for development, but rather as part of a broader strategy of digital and creative transformation in rural areas. Their effective integration requires coordinated action between the public and private sectors, investments in infrastructure and human capital development, and clearly defined institutional frameworks. Only under these conditions can esports evolve from a predominantly entertainment activity into a sustainable instrument of local economic growth and development.

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