Psychology in Esports: Breakdown under Pressure

Special Issue Guest Editors:
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Information about the special issue

Aligned with contemporary dialogues about esports presented in academic literature, stories in the media, professional practice, and the competitive landscape, there has been a discernible shift in recent years in the thinking and behaviours among players, coaches, spectators, and organisations about the health and wellness of esports players at all levels. Stakeholders are strategically redirecting attention towards issues such as mental health, overall well-being, player longevity, sustainability, and both the potential positive and negative impacts of esports and video games on human functioning and development.

For example, recent research (Smith et al., 2019; 2022; Sharpe et al., 2023) within the esports environment, has identified various sources of pressure that have the potential to (1) benefit or impede performance for esports hobbyists, grassroots, or elite-level competitors; (2) influence player and coach well-being; (3) and/or lead to individuals potentially quitting the competitive scene or stop player altogether. The pressure to perform well may manifest in the form of internal stressors, including interpersonal issues within teams and the burden of performance expectations, as well as external stressors, such as performing in front of an audience, engaging in media interviews, or juggling a work/school-life balance, all of which can exert an influence on performance outcomes (e.g., Behnke et al., 2020; Poulus et al., 2022). Beyond the competitive esports landscape, pressures in video games such as never-ending one-upping others through faster and faster speed-running activities, the need to be the best or most successful player, and various in-game settings and opportunities (e.g., levels of difficulty, smurfing, highly skilled competitors) may equally lead to negative outcomes for those that are unable to cope and overcome these types of challenges. More specifically, pressures have been demonstrated to negatively influence subjective experiences (e.g., anxiety), behaviours (e.g., gaze behaviour), and action performance (e.g., accuracy; Sharpe et al., 2023). Likewise, pressures may even predict mental ill health outcomes (e.g., depression; Smith et al., 2022), well-being (e.g., sleep quality; Rudolf et al., 2022), and psychiatric symptoms and gaming disorder (Bányai et al., 2019). Ongoing research endeavours employing a combination of methodologies persist in examining this subject, underscoring its pivotal role in safeguarding the enduring viability of esports, the players involved, and the sustainability of their professional careers. Yet, more investigation is certainly needed from perspectives beyond performance, behavioural, and cognitive psychology, including but not limited to, clinical psychology, organizational psychology, educational psychology, and neuroscience.
As esports have witnessed a substantial surge in players, funding, opportunities to win prize money, and spectatorship in recent years (Hallmann & Giel, 2018; Jenny et al., 2018), it is unsurprising that esports players and teams are increasingly seeking the expertise of practitioners, notably psychologists and coaches to help players and the organisations be more successful. This strategic engagement aims to mitigate the adverse effects of pressure on competitors across various skill levels. The dynamic nature of the esports and gaming ecosystem, characterized by continual evolution in games, technology, and stakeholder dynamics (including players, fans, and governing bodies; Hedlund et al., 2021), underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of how and why pressure is generated, received, and impacts individuals at any level of engagement (e.g., competitors, hobbyists, coaches) - especially if esports and gaming aspire to become an increasingly international and inclusive activity. Despite the urgency of examining and addressing issues in esports, the current landscape lacks a substantial number of experiments, longitudinal research, and interventional studies specifically designed to explore the psychological impact of competition and pressure in a range of contexts (Cottrell et al., 2019; Leis et al., 2023).

In line with the emphasis on ‘Performance under Pressure in Sports’ at the European Congress of Sport and Exercise Psychology (FEPSAC) 2024 that explicitly refers to ‘esports’ as a topic of interest, this special issue of the Journal of Electronic Gaming and Esports (JEGE) solicits contributions from diverse disciplines (e.g., behavioural, cognitive, clinical psychology). Given the multitude of directions that can be taken to explore pressure within a competitive or non-competitive landscape, submissions are invited with a focus on topics that broadly or specifically address the intricate dynamics of pressure.

Potential topics may include, but are not limited to:

- Perceived pressure (e.g., personal expectations)
- Objective pressure (e.g., gaze behaviour)
- Performance (e.g., action and/or outcome)
- Stress responses and coping strategies
- Mental and physical health
- Measurement (e.g., heart rate variability)
- Prejudice, stigmas, toxicity, and inequalities
- Interventions (e.g., think aloud)
- Cultural pressures on the esport ecosystem
- General health, illness, and injury
- Gaming lifestyles, sustainability, and player longevity

Open science

We encourage submissions to follow open science best practices (e.g., preregister hypothesis) to ensure transparency of scientific processes.
Important Special Issue Dates:

Full paper submission deadline: On or before Monday, May 13, 2024

Manuscripts submitted through ScholarOne: https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/hk_jege

General questions can be directed to JEGE’s Chief Editor, David P. Hedlund, PhD (hedlundd@stjohns.edu), while content-specific questions can be directed to the Special Issue lead Guest Editor Benjamin Sharpe (b.sharpe@chi.ac.uk).

References:
