

Negotiating Legitimacy and Strategy in a Maturing Esports Ecosystem: Introduction to the Esports Minitrack

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Abstract

Esports research continues to expand rapidly, integrating perspectives from multiple academic disciplines and employing increasingly sophisticated theoretical and methodological approaches. For HICSS-59, we received high-quality submissions covering diverse topics such as the cultural and institutional legitimacy of esports education, the systemic persistence of toxic behaviors, AI-driven human-machine collaboration in gameplay, and advanced generative AI methods for strategic modeling. These studies, while varied in scope, share a common concern with how legitimacy, strategic complexity, and socio-technical systems interact to shape the present and future of esports. This introduction reviews the accepted research and situates it within broader scholarly debates on legitimacy negotiation, cultural framing, and the role of AI in competitive gaming.

Keywords: electronic sports, esports, legitimacy, toxicity, artificial intelligence, strategy, esports education

1. Introduction

Since its debut as a standalone minitrack at HICSS-56, the Esports minitrack has grown into a key venue for advancing interdisciplinary scholarship on competitive gaming (Siuda et al., 2023; 2024a; 2025). Early esports research sought to define the phenomenon and distinguish it from adjacent practices such as casual gaming or traditional sports. More recent work, reflected in the contributions to HICSS-59, addresses nuanced questions about legitimacy, governance, socio-technical infrastructures, and the

complex interactions between human and non-human actors in competitive play.

The esports ecosystem in 2026 is both culturally mainstream and persistently contested (Jenny et al., 2024; Joseph et al., 2025; Siuda et al., 2024b). On one hand, global tournaments, collegiate programs, and professional leagues signal institutional recognition; on the other, debates over player welfare, toxic behavior, sportswashing, and the legitimacy of esports as sport or educational pathway remain active. These tensions are mirrored in our accepted papers, which variously explore how legitimacy is constructed or eroded, how strategies evolve in complex competitive contexts, and how AI reshapes both play and analysis.

2. The 2026 Esports Minitrack

This year's minitrack centers on a unifying theme: "Negotiating Legitimacy and Strategy in a Maturing Esports Ecosystem." The papers examine legitimacy across cultural, institutional, and behavioral domains, while also pushing the boundaries of strategy analysis through AI-driven tools and frameworks. Together, they illustrate that esports is no longer simply emerging—it is consolidating into a mature yet still dynamically contested field.

3. HICSS-59 research review

The first paper, *Between Stigma and Support: How Esports Students and Teachers Experience and Negotiate Societal and Parental Attitudes Towards Esports* (Overå, Talberg), is a qualitative study that investigates how students and teachers in a Norwegian upper secondary esports program navigate societal skepticism and parental concerns. Drawing on theories of technological domestication, social identity, and

boundary work, the authors reveal how legitimacy is negotiated in everyday interactions, identifying strategies that align esports with educational and cultural norms.

The second paper, *Why Toxicity Persists in Esports: Introducing the Concept of Toxicity Legitimacy* (Chang), addresses one of esports' most persistent challenges. This conceptual paper applies institutional theory to explain the endurance of toxic behaviors. The authors propose the notion of toxicity legitimacy, showing how pragmatic and cognitive legitimacies—driven by stakeholder interests and cultural norms—allow harmful behaviors to persist despite moral disapproval.

The third paper, *Modeling Strategic Drafting in Esports: A Generative AI Approach Using BERT for Ban/Pick Prediction in Dota 2* (Liu, Samiec, Chen), is a methodological contribution that leverages transformer-based generative AI to model and predict ban/pick strategies in Dota 2. By treating drafting as a “strategic language,” the authors provide both predictive accuracy and interpretability, offering a framework adaptable to other complex multi-agent competitive environments.

Finally, the fourth paper, *Serendipity in E-sport: Understanding How Complementary and Redundant Information from Robotic Game Companions Influence Game Satisfaction* (Chen, Yang, Gui, Wang, Sun), explores human–AI collaboration in multiplayer online battle arena games. This experimental study examines how different types of information from AI-driven robotic game companions affect player satisfaction via perceived serendipity. Findings highlight the nuanced interplay between information quality, player performance, and emotional engagement in high-stakes play.

4. Conclusion

The four papers accepted for HICSS-59 reflect a maturing esports research landscape in which legitimacy, governance, and advanced analytics converge. Whether examining cultural negotiations in educational programs, systemic enablers of toxic behavior, AI-mediated player experiences, or deep learning approaches to strategic prediction, these studies expand our understanding of esports as a socio-technical, cultural, and strategic domain.

As esports continues to integrate into mainstream culture while retaining its distinctive technological and competitive edge, the interplay between legitimacy and strategy—shaped by both human

actors and AI systems—will remain a defining concern for researchers and practitioners alike. The contributions presented here not only advance academic discourse but also hold practical implications for educators, developers, team managers, and policy makers engaged in shaping the future of esports.

5. Funding

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