



Players and clubs: The spirit of Esports





With millions of dollars in prize money and a global audience, talented individuals and clubs are shaping the industry's future.



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Executive summary



Esports has evolved from a niche hobby into a global phenomenon, with skilled players and well-established clubs becoming industry superstars.

Players like **Johan "N0tail" Sundstein**, the highest-earning Esports player of all time[1], and **Lee "Faker" Sang-hyeok**, often hailed as the greatest League of Legends (LoL) player, have achieved iconic status. Faker, in particular, has led his team to five World Championship victories, cementing his legacy as a global celebrity[2].

Prominent global clubs, such as T1, Team Liquid, G2, Team Vitality, Gen.G, and FaZe Clan, among others, provide the necessary infrastructure and support for players to thrive[3]. In the Middle East, clubs like Team Falcons, Twisted Minds, Nasr, and Geekay Esports are also gaining reputations on the global circuit[4]. The rise of regional players, such as **Amjad "AngryBird" Al Shalabi** and **Mohammed "trk511" Alotaibi**, showcases the increasing competitiveness of the Middle Eastern Esports scene.

As the industry grows, key challenges must be addressed, including player welfare, financial stability, and standardised regulations. Despite these, the future of Esports looks promising, with emerging technologies, games and evolving platforms driving growth and innovation.



Introduction: The world's leading players and clubs

The world of Esports has undergone a remarkable transformation in recent years. From humble beginnings in basement **LAN (local area network)** [5] parties and online forums, Esports has become a global phenomenon, captivating audiences and generating billions of dollars in revenue. At the forefront of this revolution are talented players and clubs that have dedicated themselves to pursuing excellence in competitive gaming and become the industry's superstars.

In the early days, **Dennis "Thresh" Fong** shone in video games such as Doom and Quake. And no discussion of Esports superstars would be complete without mentioning Johan "N0tail" Sundstein and Lee "Faker" Sang-hyeok. N0tail, who primarily competes in **DOTA 2**, has accumulated an impressive \$7.18 million in earnings throughout his career, making him the highest-earning Esports player of all time [6].

Sundstein's success can be primarily attributed to his incredible performances at The International, the premier DOTA 2 tournament. As the captain of OG, Sundstein led his squad to back-to-back victories at The International in 2018 and 2019, a feat that had never been accomplished before. Although he is currently not actively competing, N0tail's legacy remains intact.

While Sundstein holds the title of highest-earning Esports player, Lee "Faker" Sang-hyeok is considered the most iconic figure in Esports history. Competing with T1 in **LoL**, Faker has led his team to five World Championship victories (2013, 2015, 2016, 2023, and 2024) [7], solidifying his legendary status. Renowned for his exceptional gameplay and strategic insight, Faker has consistently excelled on the global stage.

Nicknamed the **"Unkillable Demon King,"** Faker's decade-long career has set the standard for success and longevity in Esports. His influence goes far beyond LoL and the **Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA)** genre, inspiring players worldwide and shaping the Esports landscape. His legacy continues to define what it means to be a true Esports icon.



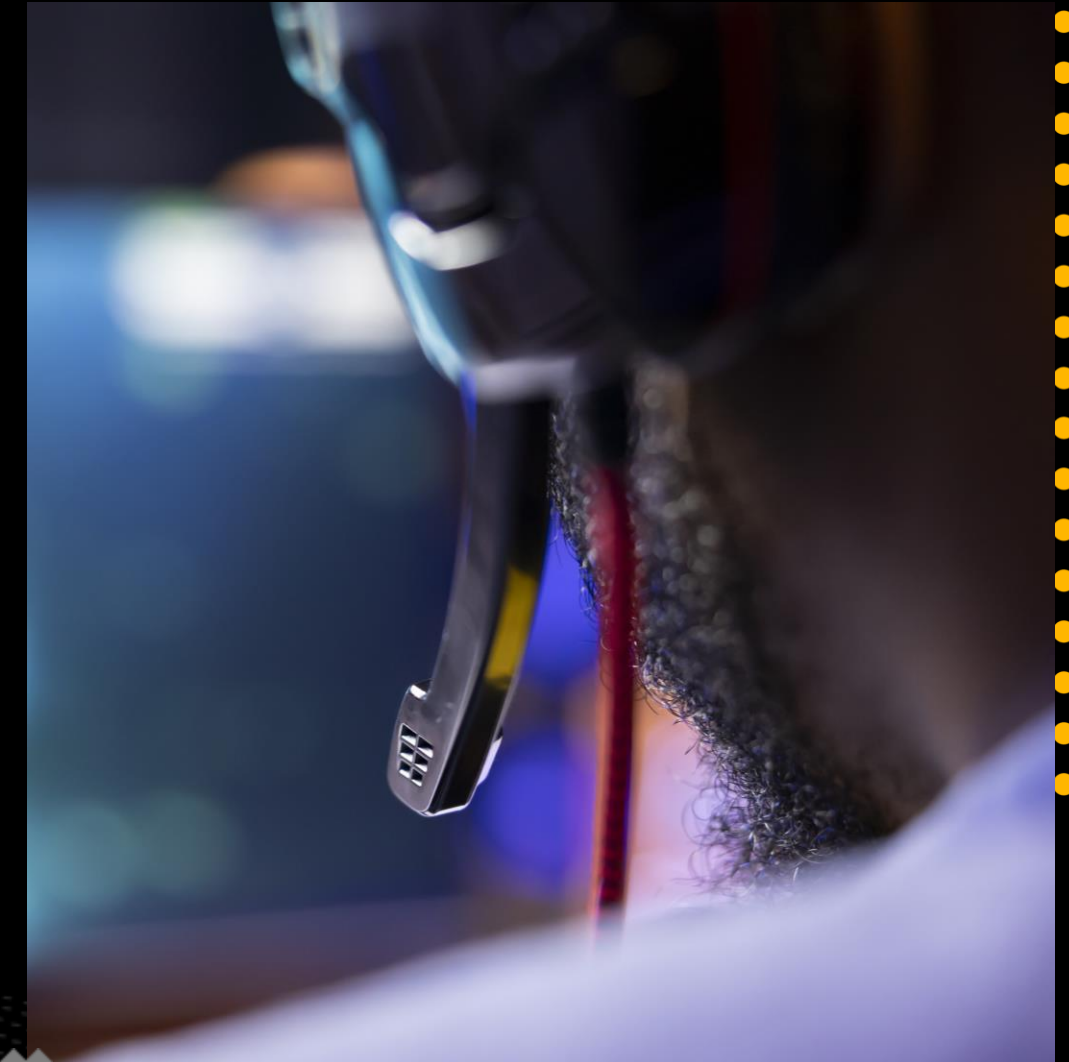


In 2024,

Faker further solidified his legacy by leading **T1** to victory at the inaugural **Esports World Cup (EWC)**, in July, and once more at the LoL World Championship in November[8]. Faker's exceptional gameplay earned him the **Most Valuable Player (MVP)** title at both tournaments [9].

It's important to stress, however, that Esports serves many genres and game varieties. N0tail and Faker are known for playing in the **MOBA genre**, but other stars shine in different genres that are not as popular.

For instance, in **Counter-Strike (CS)**, part of the tactical **first-person shooter (FPS)** genre, the player who stands out above the rest is **Oleksandr "S1mple" Kostlyiev**. Known for his incredible aim and strategic mindset, the Ukrainian player has solidified himself as one of the greatest CS players in history, representing **Natus Vincere (NAVI)** and winning many top tournaments, including the 2021 PGL Major Stockholm [10].



Similarly, in **PUBG: Mobile**, part of the battle royale genre, **Zhu "Paraboy" Bocheng** has risen to the top as one of the most successful and influential players, leading **Nova Esports** to multiple top tournament victories, including winning the PUBG Mobile Global Championship in both 2020 and 2021 [11]. S1mple and Paraboy's achievements demonstrate that Esports excellence is not confined to any particular game genre but thrives across the entire competitive gaming landscape.

Top clubs in Esports

While individual players like N0tail and Faker, may grab the headlines, Esports clubs provide the infrastructure and support necessary for these superstars to thrive. Some of the most successful clubs in the world include:



T1

Formerly known as **SK Telecom T1**, T1 was founded in 2003 in South Korea and has since become a powerhouse in the LoL scene. With a roster that includes legendary player **Lee "Faker" Sang-hyeok**, T1 has won multiple LoL World Championships and has become one of the most successful Esports clubs in the world.



Team Vitality

Founded in 2013 in France, Team Vitality has grown into one of Europe's most prominent Esports organisations. Competing across major titles like CS:GO, Valorant, Rocket League (RL), and LoL, the team has achieved notable success, including winning the **2023 RL World Championship** and their first CS:GO Major title at the BLAST Paris Major 2023. With world-class facilities like the V.Hive in Paris and a performance center at Stade de France, enabling their continued dominance and innovation on the global Esports stage.



OG

The organisation that helped to make **Sundstein** a household name, OG has become synonymous with success in the DOTA 2 scene. In addition to back-to-back victories at The International, OG, established in 2015 in Denmark, has won numerous top tournaments and expanded into other games including CS and Valorant. Other notable OG players include **Jesse "JerAx" Vainikka** and **Topias "Topson" Taavitsainen**.



Team Liquid

Founded in 2000 in the Netherlands, Team Liquid is one of the **world's oldest** and most successful Esports organisations. With teams competing in various games, including DOTA 2, LoL, and Counter-Strike, Team Liquid has become a global brand with numerous achievements; including winning DOTA 2's pinnacle event, The International, in 2017 and 2024. Team Liquid is also the proud owner of **Liquipedia**, the most comprehensive Esports wiki, which has received numerous awards for its contributions to the industry and is a go-to resource for players, fans, and analysts.

Top clubs in Esports



Natus Vincere (NAVI)

Founded in 2009 in Ukraine, NAVI has found success across multiple games and is best known for its dominant CS team. Led by superstar player **Oleksandr "s1mple" Kostylev**, NAVI has won numerous top CS tournaments and 2 Majors, becoming one of the most feared teams in the game.



Fnatic

Fnatic, founded in 2004 in the UK, has a long track record of success. Known for their early dominance in CS, including a win at the **ESL Major Series One Katowice 2015**, they've also been a major force in LoL, winning the inaugural World Championship in 2011 and multiple LEC titles. Fnatic has also had strong showings in DOTA 2, consistently competing at The International and other global tournaments, proving themselves as a versatile and top-tier Esports team.



G2 ESPORTS

A prominent European Esports organisation known for its success in LoL, CS, and other major titles. Founded in 2014 in Germany, they've consistently competed at the highest levels, including reaching finals and semifinals in global tournaments such as the **PGL Major Championships** and **LoL World Championship**.



Gen.G

Founded in 2017 in South Korea, Gen.G Esports is a global Esports organisation with headquarters in Los Angeles, Seoul, and Shanghai. Competing in titles like LoL, Valorant, and PUBG, its achievements include winning the **PUBG Global Invitational 2018**, LoL Mid-Seasonal Invitational 2024, and consistent top-four finishes at LoL Worlds. Gen.G is known for initiatives like the **Gen.G Global Academy**, the first integrated academic Esports program, and **#TeamBumble**, supporting women in gaming, driving an inclusive future for Esports.

Top clubs in Esports



FaZe Clan

One of the most recognisable brands in Esports, FaZe Clan emerged in 2010 in the United States and quickly gained fame through its success in **FPS games** like Call of Duty, CS, and Fortnite. Alongside its competitive achievements, the organisation built a massive following with a lifestyle brand and popular merchandise line. In April 2024, FaZe Clan revamped its operations, refocusing on Esports and streamlining its content creation efforts.



Evil Geniuses

Founded in the United States in 1999 as a Quake clan, Evil Geniuses is one of the **longest-standing** Esports organisations. Known for success in LoL and CS, they won titles like CS ESL One New York and the LoL League Championship Series. Recently, they exited LoL (November 2023) and CS (January 2024) but remain strong in **DOTA 2**, winning **The International 2015**, and in Valorant, securing the 2023 **Valorant Champions** title.



Karmine Corp

Founded in 2020 in France, KCorp is one of the fastest-growing Esports organisations in the world. KCorp has achieved regional milestones, including multiple **LoL European Masters titles** and a strong presence in VALORANT. KCorp is known for its incredibly passionate fanbase, often referred to as the **"Blue Wall."** This vibrant community is one of the most enthusiastic and loyal in esports, consistently filling arenas to support KCorp at live events and KCorp's signature event, **KCX**. KCXs are annual show matches that showcase KCorp's Esports teams and are a celebration of their loyal fans.



Team BDS

Founded in 2020 in Geneva, Team BDS is a Swiss Esports organisation known for its achievements across multiple titles. Their Rainbow Six Siege team ranks among the best globally, winning the **Esports World Cup 2024**, Gamers8 (2023 and 2022), and the Six Jönköping Major 2022, with consistent top-four finishes in other majors. Their **Rocket League** team won the 2022 and 2024 World Championship and secured 2nd place in 2023, while their LoL team competes at the highest level in the **LEC**. Team BDS remains a **dominant force** in Esports.

These clubs, along with many others, have helped to shape the Esports industry as it is today. Through their success on the virtual battlefield and ability to build global brands and attract major sponsors, these organisations have paved the way for the next generation of Esports superstars.

Middle Eastern players making their mark

While much of the focus in the Esports world has been on players and clubs from North America, Europe and Asia, the Middle East is quickly emerging as a hotbed of talent in the competitive gaming scene. In recent years, several Middle Eastern players have made their mark on the global stage, showcasing their skills and proving that they can compete with the best in the world.

One such player is **Mosaed "MSdossary7" Al-Dossary**, a Saudi Arabian FIFA player, who gained international recognition after winning the FIFA eWorld Cup in 2018 [12]. With over \$650,000 in earnings, he represents Team Falcons and is regarded as one of the top players in the world [13]. His success has significantly contributed to the rise of Esports in the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, where he founded Team Falcons and is seen as a key figure in the Esports scene.

Another top Middle Eastern player is **Amjad "AngryBird" Al Shalabi**, an Abu Dhabi resident who recently won the Street Fighter 6 tournament at EVO; a prestigious fighting game tournament. The three-day competition, held in Las Vegas in August 2023, attracted more than 9,000 competitors from around the globe [14].

Mohammed "trk511" Alotaibi, is a talented Saudi Rocket League player who represents Team Falcons, one of the leading esports teams in the region. He has achieved significant success in international tournaments, including securing **second place** at the **EWC 2024 Rocket League tournament** held at the SEF Arena in Riyadh, and finishing **fourth place** at the **Rocket League Championship Series (RLCS) 2024 World Championship** [15].

The region's growth in Esports was evident in November 2023, when Saudi Arabia, represented by Saudi-based club Twisted Minds, won the 2023 Overwatch World Cup hosted during Blizzcon in California. This success continued at the EWC 2024, where clubs from the region, such as Team Falcons, secured multiple victories in titles like Call of Duty: Warzone and Free Fire, as well as runner-up finishes in **Mobile Legends**, **Apex Legends**, **Rocket League**, and **Tekken 8** [16]. These achievements helped Team Falcons rise in the Club Championship leaderboards and win the prestigious "Esports Organisation of the Year" award. Alongside these wins, Team Falcons claimed victory at the **World Series of Warzone 2024 Global Finals** in September 2024 and triumphed at the **Overwatch Champions Series 2024 World Finals** in November 2024, further establishing the region's growing dominance on the global stage [17].

This wave of success, driven by players and clubs such as Al-Dossary, Al Shalabi, Alotaibi, Team Falcons, and Twisted Minds, highlights the deep pool of talent in the Middle East. As more young people in the region discover Esports and participate in competitive gaming, greater numbers of players are expected to emerge from the region in the years to come.



The growing Esports industry: Key challenges and a promising future for competitive gaming



As the Esports industry continues to grow and evolve, several key issues will need to be addressed to ensure its long-term sustainability. One of the most pressing concerns is player welfare, with issues such as burnout, mental health, and financial stability becoming increasingly important as the stakes continue to rise [18].

The success of **Riot Games** in the 2010s sparked a surge of large investments into Esports, attracting funding from both game publishers and the broader investment industry. However, as the industry matures in the 2020s, this investment-driven growth-focused approach is shifting toward a more profit-focused approach. Clubs, particularly in Western and Middle Eastern regions, are now prioritising diversified revenue streams, like content creation, to build sustainable business models [19].

Unlike in East Asia, where Esports clubs can sustainably operate based on revenues from gaming activities alone, due to large and engaged audiences, Western and Middle Eastern clubs have not yet reached this level of market maturity. This disparity has prompted clubs in these regions to innovate aggressively in areas like **content creation**. Content creation has proven to be a lucrative strategy because it not only generates direct revenue but also enhances fan engagement, which indirectly supports the clubs' primary Esports activities.

Global and regional clubs, such as FaZe Clan, 100 Thieves, R8, Powr, and The Ultimate exemplify this shift, operating as much as media companies as they do as Esports organisations. The rapid adaptations within such clubs underscores the dynamic nature of the Esports industry as it continues to mature and seek profitability through varied channels. This approach has proven lucrative, supporting primary Esports activities and creating a pathway to **financial stability** for clubs in less mature markets.

As these regions continue to develop their audience base and commercial strategies, a closer alignment in business models across global Esports markets may emerge. Despite these challenges, the future of Esports is exceptionally bright. With new games, platforms, and technologies constantly reshaping the landscape, the potential for growth and innovation is limitless.

As more people worldwide discover the excitement of competitive gaming, the profile of players and clubs will only rise, cementing Esports' place as one of the most exciting and dynamic industries of the 21st century.

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