

Esports in 2016 and beyond: An industry roundtable



Esports executives like Mr. Aljander, Kristian Segrestrale, Dennis Fong and Michele Attias. From left to right: Christian Aljander, Michele Attias, Kristian Segrestrale, Dennis Fong. Photo by AP.

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Esports grew from a regional story to a worldwide phenomenon in 2016, breaking records, drawing huge expectations and fueling mainstream media coverage. While people from outside its radius were surprised to find the phenomenon too big to be ignored, those on the inside had a different perspective of its past, present and future.

ESPN sat down with four esports industry leaders from NA and EU to get their thoughts on this past year and exciting developments for 2017.

The panel

Christian Aljander, GM of ELeague and VP of Esports at Turner Sports. ELeague launched Season 1 of its Counter-Strike: Global Offensive league in May, the first time a major U.S. television cable network had ever produced and broadcast a professional esports league.

Michele Attias, Co-founder and CEO of FACIT. FACIT is the largest competitive platform for online multiplayer games and creator of the [Esports Championship Series \(ECS\)](#).

Kristian Segrestrale, COO and Executive Director of Super Evil Megacorp. SESMC is the developer and publisher of [Vainglory](#), the world's leading mobile sport.

Dennis "Thresh" Fong, CEO of PlayNix. PlayNix is a popular platform for esports video game highlights. Fong previously co-founded Kixin and was dubbed the "first professional videogamer" by Guinness World Records.

Where do you think esports failed and succeeded in 2016?
Aljander: This past year was amazing for esports, with broader exposure than ever before and a phenomenal date of events that kept the community engaged throughout 2016.

The lack of true player representation still remains some concerns throughout the industry. While there are a few entities to show, they are disparate from one another and often have competing agendas.

Attias: The esports scene is still so young, has such a passionate and strong community and has grown a huge amount in 2016, so I think that it is very difficult to "fail" in a way that even would be able to say, "Yes, esports did not achieve this milestone..."

[There were] new leagues [like ECS] that share revenue with everyone involved, driving huge improvements in stability to players and teams. [a] massive increase in mainstream media and broadcast uptake, and most recently, [a] dramatic rise in mainstream sports and advertising investments.

Another notable story that often goes under the radar... is the more regular use of qualifiers open to the community... [They] bridge the gap between professional and amateur players and [give] dedicated up-and-coming teams a clear path to becoming professionals.

22 Esports execs FACIT's ECS Season One. Can they repeat? Provided by Esports Championship Series.

Segrestrale: 2016 was a breakout year for esports in many ways — from the first major tournaments on cable channels in the USA, to the first big name traditional sports team acquiring esports teams around the globe, to mobile making out its claim as a rapidly growing part of the market. In addition, Facebook and YouTube both made big bets into the broadcaster market...

A lot of new money, new excitement, new games, new leagues and tournaments have entered the scene in 2016. In 2017, it will be important to ensure this translates into improved overall health of the ecosystem of players, teams and tournament organizers, as well as growing revenue through more spend by sponsors who see value for their spend... [Esports also] needs to continue to level up management and its overall level of professionalism as an industry. This won't necessarily mean assuming that esports becomes like traditional sports — it rather needs to find its own path to grow up.

Fong: I think esports has made incredible headway in gaining more widespread acceptance by mainstream media and investors, and I fully expect that trend to continue in 2017... I think one thing we can do better collectively in the space is be more willing to cancel fans of people who don't quite understand the ethos of esports — the barrier to entry is still a bit high... [We] can always do more to improve the experience from a spectator's point of view.

Aside from the big three of Dota, Counter-Strike, and League of Legends, which sport would you invest in for 2017 and beyond?

Aljander: Fighting games have huge potential in esports, and some even consider them the original esports. They are easy to grasp and understood at a base level, enabling you to extend outside of the hard-core fan and further grow the reach of esports to a broader audience.

Attias: We obviously have high expectations across the board for [Blizzard International's] Overwatch after its highly successful Overwatch Open in June. Combined with ELeague earlier this year, and we can't wait to get some Overwatch content produced for the community in 2017. In addition, there are some exciting existing esports titles as well as some rising emerging games which we have playing and can't wait to look into from a content production standpoint.

The 2016 Vainglory summer season kickoff. Provided by Super Evil Megacorp.

Segrestrale: I'm biased, but I would look to mobile. PC-based esports titles have an incredibly bright future and we will grow them for a long time. That said, the potential for mobile devices is far higher, and, with over three billion touch screens out there, the sky's the limit as to [how] this industry will evolve in the coming 5-10 years. In addressable audience alone, the difference is between perhaps 200 million or so game-capable PCs in the world and north of three billion touch screens with processing power often exceeding that of a PS3.

Vainglory, as the standard bearer for mobile esports, gathered 25,000 concurrent viewers on Twitch alone during its world championship in December, beating more than quadrupled its audience through the year.

Fong: It may seem like the obvious answer, but Overwatch is clearly missing from the list. It has all the makings of a top esports title — it's easy to pick up and play, tough to master and keeps you coming back to play just one more round. From a spectator's point of view, it's fun to watch because there is a lot of action from the get-go. The pace is quick from start to finish and there are many opportunities for highlights, even though the matches are relatively short. I play Overwatch all the time, and I see it becoming just as popular an esports title as League or CS:GO in the coming years.

You all work in various different parts of esports. What do you see that is consistent across your experience/passion?

Aljander: Passion.

Attias: [We] do share some consistent driving factors, primarily the success and growth of esports as a whole. At FACIT through I am sure this will be echoed across the industry, we are inspired by the passion of the community and players... After all, we can't grow and succeed without the support of the community. On top of that, we are all working our hardest to help get esports "out there" and keep breaking down these barriers between the "gamers" and the "businessmen."

Segrestrale: My biggest passion has consistently been the rapidly growing excitement across the player base for watching and participating in competitive play. We see this as a broader sea change among gaming culture on all devices. Whereas PC has been there for a while, mobile and other platforms are rapidly catching up, boding well for the whole industry.

Fong: When I started out, there weren't many resources to watch and learn, so I got better by playing. That today, with services like Twitch and PlayNix, gamers can improve much more rapidly because of all the information available. It surprises me that gamers often spend as much time watching other people play as they do playing the game themselves, but this is a trend that is clearly happening and will continue.

The talk about globalization for esports teams is ramping up. What are your thoughts on globalization for esports teams?

Aljander: I've noticed to see how the Overwatch League does with globalized teams. There is something to be said about cheering for your hometown team.

Haring said that, the thing I love about esports and video games in general is [their] power to connect people from all over the world. The fact that I can play video games with my friends scattered all over the world, and, I've never met enough [we are definitely all at each other], could participate on a team together makes it something very special. It's connecting cultures through like-mindedness and it's what makes esports special.

Attias: Blizzard's introduction of the Overwatch League has definitely accelerated this globalization movement. Including others with a community of fans large enough to sustain esports teams is going to be the next big challenge... There is also a risk of alienating the global fan bases that existing teams have cultivated and somehow [limiting] the growth of their international supporters.

This system will hopefully encourage large sporting organizations to pick up esports players and further the growth of the industry. It is the right time to make such a bold move! Only time will tell. [the DotaTV Championship Gaming Series] had something similar in the past, but it was mixed with so many other elements at the time that it was hard to judge.

Three Dota 2 champions: Rick Fox and his League of Legends team G2 at a meeting during the 2016 MLCS summer split. Provided by Riot Games.

Segrestrale: I think esports can benefit a lot from building more ties with local community and to build physical events to connect with fans. I also think it is a mistake to try to force a fundamentally online culture into a pre-internet mold. I think the esports culture will over time graduate to become a mix of the old and the new, where we can combine the best of being something that anyone can participate in anywhere, regardless of geography, but strengthened by the local ties that can be built through local community.

Fong: I think globalization, like many issues that have come up over the past few years, is just another example of the space growing and maturing, and players, teams, developers and publishers will all need to weigh in. I don't think there's an easy answer as to what's best for esports, because we're just getting started and basically figuring things out along the way... It would be what is needed to make esports truly mainstream and we will see how it pans out. I just hope it doesn't cause the space to become too fractured as a result.