
NON-FORMAL LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER IN ESPORTS: PROFESSIONAL MOBILITY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF DIGITAL COMPETENCES

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Abstract: The rapid development of digital technologies is creating new professional fields in which knowledge and competences are acquired predominantly outside traditional educational institutions. Esports provide a representative example of such an environment, as they combine individual practice, team interaction, competitive activity and participation in international digital communities. This article examines non-formal and informal learning and the conditions for the transfer of professional knowledge in esports by analysing the career trajectory of the Bulgarian professional *League of Legends* player Pavel ‘Nazrat’ Yotov. The study was conducted as a qualitative single-case study based on documentary analysis. It draws on publicly available digital sources, including official announcements by esports organisations, specialised databases, tournament archives, media publications, statistical profiles and publicly available statements by the player. The analysis covers the main stages of his professional career, his individual and team results, his movement between organisations, and his participation in national and international competitive environments. The findings identify four interrelated dimensions of professional development: individual gaming proficiency, participation in team-based practice, international professional mobility, and conditions for the exchange and application of knowledge across different organisational and national contexts. The career trajectory encompasses teams and leagues in Spain, the Czech Republic, Greece, the Benelux region and Bulgaria. Movement between these environments creates opportunities for exposure to different training regimes, communication norms, role distributions and approaches to strategic analysis. The achievement of Challenger rank and the documented team results indicate a high level of professional development, but do not directly reveal the mechanisms through which the relevant competences were acquired. Nazrat’s participation in the A1 Gaming League and the Bulgarian Challengers League shows that the Bulgarian competitive environment represents a recurring component of his professional trajectory. This creates potential conditions for gaming, strategic and communication practices acquired in foreign organisations to be applied within a national context. Owing to the limitations of publicly available sources, knowledge transfer is not presented as a directly demonstrated outcome, but as an analytically grounded possibility arising from team-based practice, international mobility, and participation in different organisational contexts. The findings indicate the need for systematic approaches to documenting and assessing competences acquired through esports and other emerging digital professions.

Keywords: esports, non-formal and informal learning, knowledge transfer, professional mobility, digital competences.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technologies is changing the ways in which knowledge is acquired, professional competences are developed, and careers are built. Alongside traditional professions, new forms of digital work are emerging whose development takes place largely outside established education and qualification systems. Within these fields, learning, work, competition, and participation in online communities are intertwined, while professional skills are acquired through independent practice, observation, feedback, digital data analysis, and real-time problem-solving.

Esports are a representative example of this transformation. They have evolved from a gaming activity into an organised professional ecosystem encompassing players, coaches, analysts, managers, commentators, technical specialists, and digital content creators. Professional participation requires a combination of technical, cognitive, communicative, and social competences. Players process dynamic information, recognise patterns of play, make decisions under time pressure, and coordinate their actions with those of other team members. Discipline, self-regulation, receptiveness to feedback, and adaptation to changes in rules, team composition, and the competitive context are also required.

Research considers esports a potential environment for the development of critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving. Zhong et al. (2024) found that the integration of esports into higher education can support skills development and an interactive learning culture, but is constrained by individual, interpersonal, and organisational factors. A subsequent study associates esports activities with opportunities to develop twenty-first-century skills, including critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity (Zhong, Guo, et al., 2025). These competences, however, do not arise automatically from gaming activity but

depend on the nature of the practice, the quality of the feedback, and the environment in which training takes place.

A substantial proportion of this training occurs outside formal education. Non-formal learning is intentional and organised but does not usually lead to a formally recognised qualification. In esports, it may include team training sessions, match analysis, mentoring, and organised preparation. Informal learning emerges through everyday practice and may take place through Solo Queue, observing professional matches, discussing strategies, and analysing mistakes. The recognition and validation of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning are an important component of lifelong learning policies, particularly in professional fields in which competences are acquired outside traditional institutions (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2012).

In team-based disciplines such as *League of Legends*, professional development cannot be reduced to individual performance indicators. It requires coordination, role allocation, information sharing, and the development of shared decision-making models. Some professional knowledge can be articulated through rules and strategies, while other knowledge is acquired through sustained practice, observation, and participation in real competitive situations. The team environment thus creates conditions for learning through interaction and shared activity.

International mobility further expands these opportunities. Moving between teams in different countries places players in environments characterised by different training regimes, communication norms, and approaches to game analysis. Movement between organisations may therefore also be regarded as a potential channel for the circulation of knowledge between organisations and national esports ecosystems. Mobility alone, however, does not demonstrate that such transfer has actually occurred.

Despite growing interest in the educational potential of esports, professional careers as sequences of situations involving learning and adaptation remain comparatively under-researched. The present study addresses this gap through a documentary analysis of the career trajectory of the Bulgarian professional *League of Legends* player Pavel ‘Nazrat’ Yotov, who has participated in teams and leagues in Spain, the Czech Republic, Greece, the Benelux region, and Bulgaria.

The study aims to identify observable conditions for non-formal and informal learning and knowledge transfer. The analysis traces the main stages of professional development, individual and team results, and international mobility. In the absence of interview data, the evidence does not permit the reconstruction of the player’s personal learning strategies. Knowledge transfer is therefore regarded as an analytically grounded possibility rather than a directly demonstrated outcome.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted using qualitative documentary analysis applied to a single analytical case: the professional trajectory of the Bulgarian *League of Legends* player Pavel ‘Nazrat’ Yotov. Documentary analysis is a systematic procedure for selecting, evaluating, and interpreting written, electronic, and audio-visual materials in order to extract empirical information and identify meaningful relationships (Bowen, 2009).

The empirical corpus comprises publicly available sources published up to 24 August 2026: official announcements by esports organisations and tournament operators, specialised player and tournament databases, statistical profiles, media publications, and the player’s public statements. Searches were conducted using combinations of the player’s name and aliases with the names of the relevant teams, leagues, and tournaments. The principal search terms were ‘Pavel Yotov’, ‘Nazrat’, ‘Alien’, ‘League of Legends’, ‘FC Barcelona’, ‘Panathinaikos AC’, ‘Inside Games’, ‘mCon LG UltraGear’, and ‘TQD’.

Sources were included in the analysis if they contained verifiable information relating to at least one of the following indicators: team affiliation, role within the team, period of participation, professional transfer, tournament performance, individual award, competitive rank, or a public statement concerning professional development. Materials without an identifiable author or publisher were excluded, as were publications unrelated to the professional trajectory under investigation that did not refer to a verifiable primary or secondary source. Data were drawn from official announcements, tournament archives, and publications produced as close as possible to the event concerned.

The analysis was conducted in three consecutive stages. In the first stage, the data were organised chronologically by team, country, competitive period, role, and documented results. In the second stage, the content was coded into four predefined categories: individual professional development, participation in team-based practice, international professional mobility, and conditions for the exchange and application of knowledge across different organisational and national contexts. In the third stage, the relationships between the four analytical categories were interpreted through the concepts of non-formal and informal learning and knowledge transfer. The process of initial review, detailed examination, and interpretation of documents proposed by Bowen (2009) was followed.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, facts were cross-checked across different types of sources. Wherever possible, information concerning team participation, transfers, and results was considered confirmed when it was identified in at least two independent sources. The analytical conclusions were limited to evidence

observable in the publicly available materials. No conclusions were drawn regarding the player's personal motivations, subjective experiences, or specific learning strategies in the absence of direct public evidence. The study draws exclusively on information published in the context of the player's public professional activity and does not include personal or sensitive data. The single case does not permit statistical generalisation to all professional esports players. Its purpose is analytical, as it enables the identification of manifestations of and conditions for non-formal learning, professional mobility, and knowledge transfer that may be examined in subsequent comparative studies.

3. RESULTS

The documentary analysis identifies four interrelated dimensions in the professional trajectory of Pavel 'Nazrat' Yotov: individual professional development, participation in team-based practice, international professional mobility, and conditions for the exchange and application of knowledge across different organisational and national contexts.

At the beginning of 2022, Nazrat was included as a substitute *mid laner* in FC Barcelona's *League of Legends* roster (FC Barcelona, 2022). This stage provided him with access to an established professional organisation, although the available evidence does not indicate regular participation in official matches.

Between June and October 2022, he competed for the Czech organisation Inside Games in the Hitpoint Masters 2022 Summer. Tournament statistics and media reports document his participation and strong individual performances (Games of Legends, n.d.; Gong.bg, 2022a, 2022b). This represents the first consistently documented period of his active participation in a foreign professional league.

At the end of 2022, Nazrat joined Panathinaikos AC and competed in the Greek Legends League in the spring of 2023. The team reached the play-offs and finished in fourth place (Leaguepedia, n.d.). Following the victory over Pentagon Rejects in February 2023, he was named the most valuable player and linked the result achieved to the development of the team as a whole (Gong.bg, 2023).

In October and November 2023, Nazrat competed for the Dutch organisation mCon LG UltraGear in the Elite Series 2023 Benelux Masters. Tournament archives record his participation in the group stage and the play-offs (Liquipedia, n.d.). His involvement with organisations in Spain, the Czech Republic, Greece, and the Benelux region indicates the need to adapt to different competitive and organisational contexts.

During the 2023 season, Nazrat reached the Challenger rank on the European server, with a recorded peak of 944 LP, 123 wins, and 88 losses, representing a 58%-win rate. By comparison, his highest achievement in 2022 was Grandmaster with 623 LP, while in 2024 he reached Master with 599 LP (LOLPros.GG, n.d.). Thus, 2023 emerges as the strongest publicly documented period in his individual development. These indicators confirm a high competitive level but do not reveal the mechanisms through which the relevant skills were acquired.

His professional trajectory also includes participation in Bulgaria. Publications from 2022 describe Nazrat as a finalist and runner-up in the A1 Gaming League with TAKEOVER (Gong.bg, 2022a, 2022b), while the tournament archive records the team as finishing in second place (Esports Earnings, n.d.).

In the spring of 2026, Nazrat competed with TQD in the Bulgarian Challengers League. The team won the title following a 3–2 victory over Definitely Not Washed Up and qualified for the EBL (TDB Play, 2026). This represents his highest documented team placing in Bulgaria.

The trajectory examined does not follow a linear progression from the national to the international competitive scene. Nazrat's participation in Bulgarian and foreign competitions alternates and partially overlaps. His performance in 2026 therefore represents a continuation of his earlier involvement in the Bulgarian competitive environment rather than his first return to it.

The principal stages, competitive environments, and documented results for the period 2022–2026 are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Main stages in the professional trajectory of Pavel 'Nazrat' Yotov

Period	Team or form of participation	Country/region	Documented results and characteristics
Early 2022	FC Barcelona Esports	Spain	Included as a substitute <i>mid laner</i>
June–October 2022	Inside Games	Czech Republic	Participation in the Hitpoint Masters 2022 Summer
2022–2023	TAKEOVER	Bulgaria	Second place in the A1 Gaming League
Late 2022–spring 2023	Panathinaikos AC	Greece	Fourth place in the Greek Legends League and an MVP performance
2023	Solo Queue	European server	Challenger, 944 LP and a 58% win rate
October–November 2023	mCon LG UltraGear	Benelux region	Participation in the Elite Series 2023 Benelux Masters
Spring 2026	TQD	Bulgaria	Bulgarian Challengers League champion and qualification for the EBL

Source: Author's own research

The findings outline a professional trajectory shaped by individual practice, team participation, and mobility across different national and organisational contexts. Observable manifestations of development include a high individual rank, tournament placings, an MVP performance, and participation in European teams. International mobility creates opportunities for exposure to different training regimes, communication norms, and approaches to game analysis, as well as for the application of acquired practices within the Bulgarian context.

Publicly available sources do not reveal the training process, the ways in which skills are acquired, or the interactions between team members. Non-formal learning and knowledge transfer are therefore not directly demonstrated but are identified as possibilities arising from sustained practice, team participation, and professional mobility.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The findings indicate that professional development in esports cannot be explained solely by individual talent or accumulated playing time. The trajectory analysed reveals an interaction between deliberate practice, team participation, competitive experience, and international mobility. This interpretation is supported by research indicating that high performance in esports depends not only on technical skills but also on the quality of preparation, organisational support, and the team environment (Poulus et al., 2025).

A high individual rank and sustained participation in different leagues suggest prolonged preparation involving the repeated resolution of in-game challenges, adaptation to changing conditions, and immediate feedback. Ranking indicators, however, do not reveal the specific organisation of learning and do not make it possible to determine the extent to which it is self-directed, mentored, or structured by the team.

Scheduled training sessions, match analysis, and strategy discussions may be classified as forms of non-formal learning, while Solo Queue, observing other players, and analysing mistakes create opportunities for informal learning. The systematic review by Zhong et al. (2022) indicates that participation in esports may support the development of communication, collaboration, strategic thinking, and problem-solving; however, evidence concerning the transfer of these skills beyond the gaming context remains limited.

This is also consistent with the opportunities and constraints identified in relation to the integration of esports into higher education (Zhong et al., 2024). Competence development is not an automatic consequence of participation in gaming but depends on the nature of the practice, the quality of feedback, and the organisational conditions. Findings from a study of school esports programmes also indicate that positive effects on participants' self-regulation and development are associated with how the activities are structured and supported (Trotter et al., 2022).

In a team-based discipline such as *League of Legends*, individual gaming proficiency is necessary but insufficient for sustained professional performance. Players must develop a shared understanding of strategy, role allocation, and situational decision-making. Some of this knowledge can be articulated through instructions and game analysis, while other knowledge is acquired through collaborative practice, observation, and participation in real competitive situations. The study of high-performance esports environments by Poulus et al. (2025) similarly highlights the role of communication, team culture, coaching support, and deliberate preparation in achieving sustained results.

Nazrat's statement following Panathinaikos AC's victory, in which he linked his own performance to the team's development, supports the interpretation of professional achievement as collectively shaped (Gong, 2023). It does not demonstrate a specific mechanism of knowledge exchange, but it indicates the importance that the player attributes to team dynamics. From a pedagogical perspective, the team may be regarded as a learning environment based on observation, collaborative activity, feedback, and the gradual assumption of professional responsibilities.

International mobility broadens the context of this learning. Moving between organisations requires adaptation to different training regimes, communication norms, and approaches to game analysis. Nazrat's participation in Bulgarian and foreign teams indicates that his career does not follow a linear progression from the national to the international scene. Movement between organisational environments creates opportunities for practices acquired in one context to be adapted to another.

This interpretation should be approached with caution. The experimental study by Zhong, Fryer, et al. (2025) indicates that the transfer of skills from a competitive gaming environment to near and more distant contexts is possible, but depends on the similarity between tasks and the conditions supporting such transfer. Changing teams does not, therefore, in itself demonstrate the circulation of knowledge. Opportunities are required for experience to be shared, adopted, and adapted within the new environment.

The case analysed also raises the question of recognising competences acquired outside formal education. Professional participation in esports requires gaming proficiency, communication, team coordination, adaptability, self-regulation, and decision-making under time pressure. Research acknowledges the potential of esports to develop critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity, while emphasising the influence of game genre, practice, and the social environment (Zhong, Guo, et al., 2025).

Professionalisation is also associated with risks arising from intensive training, short careers, and insufficient organisational support. Kang and Kim (2025) found that deliberate practice can develop cognitive and interpersonal skills, but that early specialisation and excessive workloads increase the risk of burnout. This highlights the need for training to encompass not only improvements in gaming performance but also sustainable workload management, mentoring, and support for future professional development.

From an educational perspective, competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning should be documented and assessed. In esports, this may be achieved through a portfolio comprising competitive results, analyses of in-game situations, evidence of team roles performed, and reflective self-assessment. Such an approach is consistent with UNESCO's principles for the recognition and validation of knowledge and skills acquired outside traditional educational institutions (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2012).

The principal limitation of the study is its reliance on publicly available digital sources. These provide information about participation, placings, and individual performance indicators, but do not reveal the content of the training process or the player's subjective experience. Furthermore, the analysis of a single player does not permit generalisation across the esports ecosystem as a whole. Future research combining documentary analysis with interviews, observation, and internal team documentation would enable a more direct examination of the mechanisms of learning and knowledge transfer.

5. CONCLUSIONS

A professional career in esports may be viewed not only as a sequence of competitive engagements but also as a dynamic learning environment in which individual practice, team interaction, and organisational mobility complement one another. The analysis of Pavel 'Nazrat' Yotov's trajectory indicates that professional development outside formal education leaves observable traces in individual achievements, team results, and participation across different national and organisational contexts.

Participation in teams and leagues in Spain, the Czech Republic, Greece, the Benelux region, and Bulgaria creates opportunities not only to accumulate competitive experience but also to adapt and apply professional practices in new environments. The alternation between Bulgarian and international participation demonstrates that professional mobility does not follow a one-way pattern but connects different parts of the esports ecosystem.

Publicly available sources do not permit the specific mechanisms of knowledge acquisition and transmission to be demonstrated. The principal conclusion, therefore, is not that knowledge transfer has been directly established, but that team-based practice and inter-organisational mobility create verifiable conditions for it to occur.

The study's contribution lies in presenting the professional trajectory as a potential analytical model for examining learning and competence development in emerging digital professions. This highlights the need for gaming, communication, teamwork, and adaptive competences to be systematically documented and assessed, while future research incorporating interviews, observation, and internal team data should investigate the mechanisms through which professional experience is transformed into transferable knowledge.

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