CHAPTER 7.

THE CHALLENGE OF COLLEGIATE ESPORTS INSTITUTIONALIZATION REQUIRES PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

SAMANTHA CLOSE AND QUENTIN GRIFFIN

ABSTRACT

Universities are missing the chance to develop truly innovative, participatory esports spaces and cultures–the only thing that can combat the challenges they face. We performed semi-structured interviews with professionals from universities developing esports programs and broader institutions (such as TESPA and athletic conferences) attempting to guide and govern collegiate esports development. Our findings suggest that theoretical discussions about whether esports are a "real" sport or not are also playing out on an administrative level, esports programs' diffusion is crucially impacted by key actors in the universities with subcultural knowledge, and that toxic gamer culture is a serious obstacle to esports growth. Esports are at a crucial point in their institutionalization—recognized as important but not clearly understood or settled. This moment is a chance to fully realize the potential of participatory culture in

mainstream institutions, but it can only be realized through partnership between students, faculty, staff, and administration.

Introduction

In 2015, ESPN 2 aired the championship round of the collegiate Heroes of the Storm national competition, organized and put on by the game's publisher Blizzard. As this was one of the first high-profile sports outlets to cover esports in a major way, the two-hour broadcast inspired a flurry of reactions online, from excitement to disgust to confusion (Makuch, 16:21:19 UTC). As regular ESPN sports reporter and host Michelle Beadle put it when praising the announcers on Twitter, "I don't have a damn clue what I'm watching, but they won't let me leave." This mix of confusion and understanding, not knowing what is going on but knowing that it is deeply important and exciting to others, is an apt description for American colleges and universities' embrace of esports.

In this sections that follow, we briefly review the on-going academic conversations around esports as a sport, the diffusion of innovation through institutions, and subcultural youth organizing. This provides essential background for analyzing our interviews with collegiate esports professionals at varying schools and organizations. We ultimately argue that colleges and universities are missing the chance to develop truly innovative, participatory esports spaces and cultures–the only thing that can combat the challenges they face in managing toxic gamer subcultures.

Literature Review

This analysis draws together three distinct bodies of literature and academic theory. First, studies of video games and esports have long argued over whether esports could (or indeed should) be understood as a "sport" in the traditional sense. Traditional sports are highly integrated into collegiate institutions and structures from their very early development, and so this existential question–are esports sports?–has very practical importance. Second, as a cultural practice based on video games, esports fall under the heading of “new” media and innovative technologies. The question of how innovation diffuses throughout society and culture has long been of interest to both organizational communication as well as media and cultural studies, if from largely different perspectives. Third, as a subcultural youth practice that is rapidly becoming mainstream in the global digital age, there are many parallels with the development of media fandom and other youth subcultures. The remainder of this section will explain the relevant central theories in each of these disciplines before concluding with an explanation of why it is essential to draw these connections between different theoretical traditions in different disciplines in order to understand collegiate esports.

The fastest way to start an argument (or produce heartfelt groans) in most any subculture is to ask if something new “counts” or not–it may be pretty, but is it Art? For an academic example of this debate in relation to esports, the journal Sport, Ethics and Philosophy hosts dueling articles with titles from “eSport Gaming: The Rise of a New Sports Practice” to “E-sports are Not Sports” to “Embodiment and fundamental motor skills in eSports” (Hilvoorde & Pot, 2016; Parry, 2019; Rosell Llorens, 2017) As these titles and the references in articles like “Virtual(ly) Athletes: Where eSports Fit Within the Definition of ‘Sport’” suggest, a main area of contention is how physical and embodied esports are, whether they require physical training to create hegemonic, elite bodies or encourage the exact opposite, such as weight gain, eye strain, and sedentary lifestyles (Jenny, Manning, Keiper, & Olrich, 2017).

In esports, the question has particular resonance in relation to masculinity and access to resources. Popular culture often pits stereotypical “nerds” (i.e. players of video games) against stereotypical "jocks" (i.e. players of traditional sports) (Jenkins, 1992; Kendall, 1999; Pascoe, 2007; Wilson, 2002). Traditional athletes are often associated with hegemonic masculine ideals, excluding women as well as people who identify with more subordinated or oppressed masculinities from participation in sport (Anderson, 2011; R. Connell, 2008; R. W. Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Kidd, 2013; Pascoe, 2007). Esports challenges these historic cultural formations by asserting that some video game players (nerds) are in fact athletes (jocks) and deserving of the same cultural respect and practical resources that jocks traditionally receive.

We do not have a position on whether esports "count" as traditional sports or not. Rather, we argue that this debate's existence heavily impacts esports' collegiate institutionalization by directing where esports programs should be located, who should lead (and fund) them, and raising concerns about how esports might impact campus culture and reputation, particularly on the level of gender.

As a cultural practice premised on new media technologies, the spread of collegiate esports can be usefully understood through the diffusion of innovation theory. Rogers (2003) codified this theory in 1962 and created an influential model arguing that different categories of individuals and institutions will begin to use innovations at different times in the innovation's life cycle, contrasting groups like "early adopters" and "late majority." Mintrom (1997, p. 739) added to this model, arguing that policy entrepreneurs, "political actors who promote policy ideas," are essential catalysts for an innovation to make it onto the agenda of a large institution in the first place, no matter what category it falls into. Policy entrepreneurs remain essential catalysts for diffusion to proceed, rather than losing momentum or getting lost in the shuffle of a busy organization. Although Mintrom (1997) focused on governments, contemporary colleges and universities are also large, complex organizations whose governance involves both executive leaders and deliberative bodies, such as a faculty council.

Diffusion of innovation theory has also been critiqued. For instance, it assumes a relatively homogeneous adoption population who act rationally, which is rarely found in the field (Lundblad, 2003; Lyytinen & Damsgaard, 2001; MacVaugh & Schiavone, 2010). It also focuses on the diffusion of a single innovative technology, such as a television set or a particular pesticide, rather than a complex cultural and technological process. Lyytinen and Damsgaard (2001) argue that researchers interested in the diffusion of a complex and networked technology, like esports, develop localized theories at the site and with multiple levels of analysis. MacVaugh and Schiavone (2010) recommend that researchers pay careful attention to the social and cultural features of the adoption population, rather than focusing on the technological innovation itself.

At this point in 2019, an esports team or club existing at a university is not exactly an innovation. But official, institutional support for esports from that university very much still is. For example, Ruth Watkins, President of the University of Utah, tweeted her congratulations to the Utah Overwatch team for making it to the ESPN Collegiate Esports Championship final. Those replying to and re-tweeting Watkins overwhelmingly expressed their joy that the college president noticed and acknowledged the team, writing things like “Grateful to have such support!! #GoUtes” For most any organization but esports, this would be a bizarre response: of course the university administration would be supportive of an official student team doing well on the national stage.

What makes esports arguably different is its status as a complex subculture. It is still often perceived as niche despite increasingly widespread participation, with audience counts for major tournaments often exceeding those for traditional sports.

These audiences are largely composed of youth, particularly male teenagers and young adults. This is a large part of what makes esports attractive to colleges (and marketers), but it means there is a significant gap in communication and mutual understanding between people involved with esports and senior university figures, from administration to faculty to staff. A similar gap has been observed in other participatory youth cultures, such as media fandom, leading to strange situations where young people feel they learn more about important skills, such as writing or coding, outside school than inside it (Itō, 2010; Jenkins, 2006, 2008; Jenkins, Itō, & boyd, 2015). Young people increasingly mobilize their subcultural networks and interests to impact the world around them, be it through political action or a different channel (Cohen, 2010; Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Arely Zimmerman, 2016).

Another helpful comparison case is the international spread of Japanese manga, often considered a nerdy or geeky subcultural interest in the West despite manga's broad audience in Japan and other East Asian countries. Brienza (2016) analyzes that process of exchange and domestication from an anthropological perspective. Like Mintrom (1997), she emphasizes the importance of work done by key individuals within the organizations. Brienza (Brienza, 2016, p. 76) identified a spectrum of policy entrepreneur-esque mindsets, from Evangelists, who identified strongly with the subculture, to Opportunists, who saw the energy and potential for business success around it, to Specialists, who have experience in the relevant industry as well as a personal identification and love for the product.

Methodology

We conducted semi-structured interviews with seven professionals involved with collegiate esports. The interviewees' affiliations and positions varied: some were associated with a specific college or small set of colleges, others were employed by larger collegiate organizations, both esports-focused and not. To protect the privacy of our participants, we will refer to them using these general designations.

The interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom and lasted forty-five minutes to an hour on average. With the participants' permission, we audio-recorded and then transcribed the interviews for coding. Some example structuring questions were 1) How participants first heard of esports in a professional setting, 2) What challenges they came across in their work with collegiate esports, and 3) If you could imagine the perfect collegiate esports program, what would it look like at an organizational level.

Findings and Discussion

Collegiate esports generally begin from both the bottom-up and the top-down. Students are usually the first on a campus to organize, often gathering together based on their shared game of interest; for example, Apple College Overwatch or Banana College Mascot-ies League of Legends Club. Some of these student-run organizations include teams, which play unofficially against teams from other schools or within the same university. Conversely, in the Big East conference, the top-down discussions began with the university Presidents. Students' grassroots enthusiasm is significant in the Presidents taking notice and proceeding, but the connection between administration and students is generally indirect and often extremely limited. This is truly a shame, as it limits esports' potential to be an example of organizing differently. The strong student-led organizational structures and interest from high levels of collegiate administration could, ideally, cohere into a community-oriented and equality-minded program in the participatory culture tradition. Instead, it gives credence to

Brienza's (2016, p. 9) argument that innovative cultural forms "ultimately cannot challenge durable relations of inequality because it succeeds only by traveling through those very same hierarchical structures".

The Presidents typically task their athletics directors and departments with incorporating esports. Interviewees were split about whether esports fit in athletics or not. For example, one Student Services professional based at a single college argued that it has much more in common with club sports or debate teams, while another asserted just as strongly that "it just needs to be under athletics." In this on-going debate, the athletics directors and departments are generally skeptical and not at all interested in building esports programs. As one staff member who oversees esports at a few different colleges put it, "the athletics department's interest only goes so far as the Big East attachment and name." This sometimes results in esports being largely housed elsewhere in the university, such as Student Affairs or a particular academic college like Engineering or Media and Design. A professional with one of the collegiate esports governing bodies told us that almost every single person he works with on esports at their university has a different job title and organizational home.

What this makes clear is that policy entrepreneurs are incredibly important to the collegiate institutionalization of esports. Programs organized from the top-down by unenthusiastic athletics directors tend to gravitate towards whoever has subcultural gaming knowledge, similar to Brienza's Evangelist, or who has just enough to understand the basics of esports while seeing its potential, similar to an Opportunist. Ironically, this is almost never the students who created the pre-existing organizational structure. The tasks of managing university resources and making the financial allocations required to help support esports growth, as well as "student unreliability," pushed campus leadership to administration, staff, or faculty members.

All of these points are complicated and nuanced by our final finding. Interviewees from both colleges themselves and the esports governing bodies referenced the challenge of combating toxic culture within esports and cultivating a welcoming, inclusive space–particularly for female students, people of color, and new gamers. Despite the wide variety of organizational structures and leadership, a student affairs professional explained, "pervasive toxicity consistently appeared across institutions." Much of these problematic interactions occur on the student-to-student level in platforms like Discord chats or other social media and digital communication. The top-down organizational structures that has evolved has difficulty negotiating these environments, understanding the lingo and norms. As that structure absorbs or supplants student-run clubs, the students lose authority (and reward) for moderating these spaces or developing cultural norms of respect and competition.

There is no "definitive code of conduct" or "governing ethics" that is agreed upon across games, schools, and locales–or even within them. School missions also impact esports in a unique way. While traditional sports certainly can be violent or harmful, this is not widely acknowledged or seen as a problem (outside of sports studies). The impression that games can be addicting or encourage violence, on the other hand, is remarkably stubborn in its persistence. Colleges with religious or social justice missions, in particular, sometimes ban M-rated games or particular controversial titles from their gaming lounges and esports centers.

Conclusion

We argue that rather than duplicating or absorbing the student-run esports organizations on campus, professionals in the collegiate scene should explore partnering with and supporting them. In fact, while most (though certainly not all) esports players and fans are male, female students disproportionately take on the leadership of esports clubs and student-run organizations like TESPA chapters. Recognizing such leadership roles, to which we would add shoutcasting, game analysis, coaching, and community moderation, to be as essential as the competitive players is the next step forward.

The collegiate esports scene is unlikely to assume the same pipeline role that it holds in traditional sports. Professional esports competitors often become so at the same age they would traditionally attend college, and the time demands of professional esports and college are not compatible. But what it can be is a space that mirrors the complex world into which students are entering after graduation and in which colleges and universities exist. It can be a space that demonstrates how equitable, equality-minded organizational structures and cultures evolve.

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