The Limits of Influence: Negotiating the Hegemony of Game Companies in Collegiate Esports in The U.S.

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INTRODUCTION
This study explores game companies' power and hegemony within the playing field of US collegiate esports. Built on interviews with players, university administrators, tournament organizers and game companies, our work highlights how collegiate esports provide a vital lens for seeing how game companies, institutions and players set game culture. As the field is trying to find its footing on campuses, fundamental questions of political (regarding policies of tournaments), structural and cultural control remain unclear, particularly when game publishers own intellectual property rights and organize tournaments within which colleges compete. In this field of unequal power relationships, hegemony of game companies emerges at different moments of policy, structure, and culture.

As issues of institutionalization and participation (Harris et. al. 2022) sustain collegiate esports, conflicting and corresponding interests between communities, university administrators and industry often manifest through the formation of and investment in teams which are historically sustained through grassroots on campuses (Hoffman, Pauketat, and Varzeas 2022). With the growth of collegiate esports, more structured forms of play (larger prize pools, higher numbers of participants, or longer-running tournaments) are regulated by game developers in terms of who can participate, how and when. Developers therefore significantly influence the hegemonic norms associated with the wider esports industry.

What started with grassroots was further taken up by game companies dictating the ways in which games are played and wider students' participation (Kauweloa & Winter, 2019). The role of the industry is, however, both significant and unclear, particularly because studios continue to not only play a key role in establishing tournaments—with companies like Riot establishing their own competitive association

outside of university structures—but also can easily delimit and control play through their ownership of intellectual property and (more importantly) the game code itself. Unlike their ball-and-stick counterparts, publishers can literally change the limits and rules of the game at a whim, leaving players (including those at the collegiate level) no choice but to adjust their play.

Therefore, our research aims to better understand:

1) How do collegiate players (and those affiliated with teams) set normative expectations with and against game companies?

2) How do universities set normative expectations with and against companies?

METHODS

As a pilot study, we conducted 31 in-depth interviews with collegiate esports players, student workers, university admins, and private industry professionals, which we will expand upon before the conference. Interviews lasted between 60 to 120 minutes, and each was anonymized and transcribed by one member of the research team. Transcriptions were then analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The interviews are part of a larger project; this particular study focuses on excerpts coded to themes such as "Game Company," "Professional Esports," "Collegiate Esports Organization," "Industry" or "Organizational Issues" to understand the hegemony of game companies in US colleges.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

While research is ongoing, three themes emerged when it came to game companies, particularly around policy, structural, and cultural control. Actors in the field (third party tournament organizers and university admins) were very aware of studios' corporate power, and therefore their need for profit, outreach and market integration.

While some titles, such as *Rocket League* (or its developer, Psyonix), are celebrated for their lax regulations over tournament governance, others are criticized for trying to monopolize the playing field through exclusive partnerships with tournament organizers. Tespa (Texas eSports Association) was founded in 2012 as a community-based esports events counseling group based in the University of Texas. It quickly grew into a national presence before being acquired and terminated by Activision Blizzard several years after the acquisition.

> No licenses for you Tespa. Also, we're gonna try and bring you all in house. And then they have been radio silent… But *Rocket League* on the other hand,

> do not give a shit what you do. Just don't say it's an official tournament and that's literally their rules (P26, age 26, industry professional).

This quote reveals two different positions of game developers towards collegiate esports—which inherently shapes ad-hoc tournaments. The material conditions of the field in terms of infrastructures are still missing both on the end of game companies and actual management. Lack of organizational structure creates a vacuum where entrepreneurs try to cash in.

As different actors start to take part in this growing industry, issues of toxicity, sexism and class continue to exist in the field even if some are discussed more than others: "[i]n Overwatch League, just like a week ago, one of the professional players typed in chat, 'sex, big dick,' and he got fined like $10,000." (P2, age 19, student player). While tournament organizers are attentive to sexism and toxicity, another woman participant received so much hate speech during gameplay that they stopped playing (P12, age 20, student worker). While collegiate esports is still very gendered in accordance with wider gaming culture, the need for game companies to provide structural and policy control over gameplay is apparent.

Ultimately, the picture painted by these findings is a system in which game companies exert significant power over both the ideological, economic and structural forms of collegiate esports. Studios set the limits by which players and universities often adhere, and which fall in line with the norms (whether problematic or not) of professional esports culture. While the strong influence of game companies may lead to opportunities in terms of partnerships with universities, much of what exists beyond control of the game is haphazard, unclear and lacks clear regulation, which takes on particular importance when considering university policies with other forms of club and athletic sports. Finally, this lack of clarity is more representative of the larger esports industry, which similarly subsists in an environment that must always succumb back to studio control.

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