

Facilitating Collegiate Esports: Limiting and Legitimizing Competitive Gaming

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ABSTRACT

The global phenomenon of esports (or competitive gaming) unquestionably continues to grow. However, spaces, facilities and infrastructure remain understudied. Using U.S. collegiate esports as a microcosm of the broader industry, our work addresses perceptions of facilities, equipment, and infrastructure through in-depth interviews with teams, administrators and game makers in order to demonstrate how material conditions meaningfully limit expectations of what constitutes competitive play. We find that while administrators and players legitimize gameplay through their official facilities, the ad-hoc historical foundations of collegiate and professional esports push against institutional desires. This research therefore begins to reveal a picture of collegiate esports facilities that are still highly reliant on gaming norms and social capital, rather than trying to challenge the limits of competitive digital play.

Keywords

Collegiate esports, esports, facilities, infrastructure, in-depth interviews

INTRODUCTION

The global phenomenon of esports (or competitive gaming) unquestionably continues to grow because of fans, brands and athletes. However, spaces, facilities and infrastructure equally shape how and by whom matches are played, consumed, and perceived. Consequently, through the example of U.S. collegiate esports, we will illustrate how facilities limit and marginalize athletes by paradoxically legitimizing gameplay while still adhering to a more exclusive and ad-hoc gamer culture.

ESPORTS AND SPACE

Gaming spaces circumscribe cultural play: their placement in the home reinforced gendered divisions (Bryce and Rutter 2005), causing non-male players to “*feel abnormal*” (Vossen 2018); mainstream esports reify and affirm these cultural assumptions about games and play, with men and boys dominating competitive spaces while women spectate at the periphery (Law 2016; Law 2019). Exclusivity also extends to material conditions. Gaming PCs and peripherals, high-speed cables for internet competition, and even modes of data collection (e.g., Pargman and Svensson 2019; N. Taylor 2020; Watson 2021) dictate spatial and technological barriers impeding access to professional competition.

Such barriers assume new dimensions with U.S. collegiate esports. This growing industry sector has seen the development of over 175 programs as of 2022 (Varsity Esports 2022). University programs can be viewed as a microcosm for comprehending how administrators, players, and gamemakers structure esports’ material and spatial dimensions, especially in response to more institutionalized campus ball-and-stick activities. The way universities construct, fund, house and use esports facilities serves multiple purposes, from legitimizing programs through dedicated space, to marketing a larger vision of guiding students into “the esports ecosystem, the people and the jobs that make the industry run” (Hayhurst 2022). The opposite can also be true, when lounges and training areas are given less attention, funding, and staff than major university sports.

Despite the possibility of such facilities opening up accessibility to a more diverse student body and the ease by which schools can convert and utilize such spaces from ball-and-stick counterparts (Camputaro et al. 2022), collegiate esports researchers express concern about how facilities can create two-tiered systems of exclusion based on gender (N. Taylor and Stout 2020), where those who are not official team members are denied entry. This is especially disconcerting considering the disproportionate representation of particular demographics in esports (primarily male, White and Asian in the U.S.) and could even raise legal issues by violating Title IX edicts which mandate gender equity in educational institutions. Issues regarding access based on other criteria, like class or disability, are even less understood than those related to gender or race, warranting further study.

With these concerns as a foundation, our work addresses perceptions of facilities, equipment, and infrastructure from collegiate esports teams, administrators and game makers in order to demonstrate how material conditions meaningfully bound expectations of what constitutes competitive play.

METHODS

This work is part of a larger project examining U.S. collegiate esports. We conducted thirty-one in-depth interviews with players, program directors and administrators, as well as associated students, such as those doing livecasting. Interviews ranged from 60 to 120 minutes, and participants came from nine different programs. Interviews were conducted online, transcribed and cleaned for clarity and then analyzed in the qualitative software Dedoose. One member of the research team coded each interview using a grounded theory approach (i.e., generating themes from patterns in the data; Glaser and Strauss 1967). The process of grounded theory is iterative; as new codes emerge from the data, researchers return to previous transcripts (as well as the overall research process) to update and retheorize analysis accordingly. Themes around the subject of facilities emerged with such frequency in early interviews that it not only motivated this work, but also provoked us to reframe our questions to more directly address the issue, particularly with administrators and tournament organizers as interviews continued.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

We found administrators and players legitimized gameplay through space, envisioning dedicated esports facilities as a means to establish and foster opportunities for programs at their schools. Some of these were social: training facilities were a way to promote inclusivity and participation and to bring players together; as a student put it, "... if the community has a place, you have these events happening. You have friendships being made. You have networks being built. It's just awesome from that standpoint." At the same time, legitimacy was tied to professional and economic gains. The spaces exposed varsity players to the wider esports community and tied teams to sponsors. A director stated, physical places can be sponsored (as opposed to student dorms) which would add "a layer of legitimacy" to operations. Altogether, collegiate esports facilities professionalized activities by cultivating responsibility and accountability giving a place for students to "be more professional and more cohesive as a unit."

At the same time, the ad-hoc historical foundations of collegiate (Kauwelo 2021) and professional esports (T.L. Taylor 2015) pushed against institutional desires. Students were not reliant on school equipment, but usually had their own home PCs on which to play. With some interviews held during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, players were discouraged from using official facilities all together. Furthermore, universities regulations limited how spaces could be used. Directors and administrators did not have protocols for equipment purchases, facility development and maintenance.

Furthermore, without significant investment in personnel, how spaces were used was left to the purview of athletes who concentrated on training rather than recruitment.

This research, therefore, begins to reveal a picture of collegiate esports facilities that still are highly reliant on gaming norms and social capital, rather than trying to challenge the limits of competitive digital play. That the culture of gaming can extend into the material and infrastructure of universities not only speaks to its saliency, but also suggests the need for significant intervention by institutions if they aim to expand rather than restrict opportunities surrounding competitive gaming for their students.

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