

Collegiate E-sports as Work or Play

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how collegiate E-sport athletes conceptualize the process of their own competitive game play as situated between work and play. Using interviews guided by Stebbins' (2007) serious leisure perspective, 12 active, competitive, collegiate E-sport players described how they experience their gaming as work or play, how belonging to a collegiate E-sports team has shaped their identity, and how they experience gaming within the structured environment of a collegiate E-sports club team. This study extends the serious leisure perspective by applying the framework to collegiate E-sports. Overall, Stebbins' description of skill and knowledge development of serious leisure was supported and the findings are in accord with Stebbins' conceptualization of "personal rewards", in particular self-expression, self-image, and self-actualization. Additionally, competitive gamers frame their development as skilled players by integrating the idea of "gamesense." The study also found differences between players' experiences in a more structured program (scholarship-based) and less-structured one.

Keywords

e-sports, digital labor, play, serious leisure

INTRODUCTION

The world of competitive video-gaming (E-sports) has started to receive a tremendous amount of attention by media outlets. The world of E-sports gaming includes celebrity-like professional gamers, E-sports tournaments, gaming publishers, and fans who form a crucial component of this world of professional personal computer (PC) and console (Xbox and PlayStation) gaming. Presently, the E-sports scene is dominated by two genres of games: multiplayer online player arena (MOBAs) and first-person shooters (FPS). *League of Legends* (Riot 2009) and *Dota 2* (Valve 2013), both MOBAs, are the most popular games in the gaming industry (Grubb 2015), each being a 5-player, team-based game where players control a hero (in *Dota 2*) or champion (in *LoL*) with the ultimate goal of destroying an enemy's base. At the professional level, this type of teamwork requires constant communication between players to achieve a team's goal. Alternatively, *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (CS:GO, Valve 2012) is a popular FPS E-sports title, a game where individuals join either a team of counter-terrorists or terrorists, with the aim

Proceedings of 1st International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG

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of eliminating all of the opposing team members, or executing a stated mission to win the game. Currently, Counter-Strike: Global Offensive is the most popular game title of the FPS genre (Leack 2015). Over the last few years, MOBAs and FPS have brought in global revenues exceeding \$1 billion dollars (eSports Market Brief 2015).

E-sports have also built up a significant base of gaming fans. Spectators are investing staggering amounts of time in simply watching their favorite professional gamers play on streaming sites, such as Twitch. In 2014, Twitch registered 16 billion minutes dedicated to spectating each month, with 100 million unique viewers visiting the site, twice the number of unique viewers in 2013 (Leslie 2015). League of Legends drew in 27 million online viewers for its championships in 2014. To put this into perspective, 27 million gaming fans spectating League of Legends is more than what the 2014 NBA finals drew in viewership, at 15.5 million viewers, and the Major League Baseball World Series, at 13.8 million viewers (Casselmann 2015).

The professionalization of competitive E-sports has led to the emergence of the professional gamer, or the E-sports player. Some of the media interest into the phenomenon of E-sports has focused upon the players themselves: their lifestyles as professional gamers, the money they are making (at the higher echelons of this sport), and the training they endure to become champions. South Korean gamers are regarded as some of the most technically proficient competitive gamers in the world (Mozur 2014); yet, they are not the highest earning professional players. According to the latest statistics on player earnings (Highest Overall Earnings 2015), the top five players come from the United States, Canada, and Pakistan, respectively. The top player is an American player (player ID: ppd), who plays Dota 2, with total earnings around \$2 million dollars. Some cases, however, highlight the sudden “rags-to-riches” narrative that can confront players at a very young age. In the summer of 2015, Sumail "SumaiL" Hassa quickly found himself playing in front of thousands of cheering Dota 2 fans in Seattle, as he helped his team, Evil Geniuses, win the 1st prize of \$6.5 million dollars. Sumail had moved to the United States from Pakistan only a year earlier in 2014, to pursue his career as a professional gamer. A year later, Sumail became the youngest player at 16 years old to have earned \$1 million dollars in a competitive E-sports event, and the youngest player to have won Dota 2's The International tournament (Daultrey 2015).

Generally, by their early twenties, professional players have had experienced a few years of competitive gaming, and by their mid-twenties, the specter of retirement starts to loom (Stanton, 2015). Although competitive gamers take training quite seriously, professional E-sport players maintain uniquely arduous training regimens. For example, South Korean StarCraft player Lee Jung-hoon is notorious for having spent up to 20 hours per day perfecting his skills as a gamer (Stutter 2012). At the most extreme, competitive gamers do three things daily: eat, sleep and train. In some cases, sleep accounts for a little as four hours a night. Besides practicing with one's teammates, the South Korean players understand that the “work” outside of training includes activities such as reviewing competitive footage, outlining strategies, and playing against other online players (Fields 2008). Over the years, this “work” ethic has become the standard measure for many competitive teams. Team Liquid, for instance, is a Western European-based competitive E-sports team located in the Netherlands. Team Liquid players sometimes practice up to 50 hours a week. However, even with 50 hours per week, the South Korean players on Team Liquid are pushing that limit with their own practice extending to 12 to 14 hours per day (Jacobs 2015).

The College Scene

The inclusion of officially recognized E-sports teams or clubs into the collegiate scene is a rather new development in the world of competitive gaming. The organization of collegiate E-sports on college campuses largely revolves around the creation of gaming clubs, teams, or associations. The spread of college E-sports includes both co-curricular student clubs and formal programs sponsored by universities. For example, in the former category, Harvard University, the University of California at Berkeley, and the University of British Columbia have competitive E-sports clubs and associations. In the latter category, Robert Morris University (Chicago), the University of Pikeville (Kentucky), and San Jose State University have started to offer their own formal programs for competitive gaming and E-sports. At the more competitive end of this spectrum, the University of British Columbia has one of the most successful collegiate E-sports associations in North America, largely focused around the games League of Legends, Dota 2, and *StarCraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 1998). Due to its tremendous success, it boasts such players as Sung Min Park (Stalife), Kurtis Ling (Au_2000), Alberto Rengifo (crumbz) as some of its most famous alumni. Although lesser known, Robert Morris University's E-sports program has garnered a significant amount of media interest when it became the first American university to offer academic scholarships to their League of Legends E-sports players, after having integrated E-sports into their traditional sports athletics program (Olaniyan 2014).

Overall, there is a burgeoning relationship between gaming companies and college E-sports when it comes to building a community of competitive gamers. Gaming companies and professional E-sports teams see that universities can offer a potential pool of gamers to draw into the professional E-sports scene, and they find value in investing into the scene. In total, around 10,000 college students are active in E-sports competitions with other students from different universities (Wingfield 2014). Recognizing the growth of collegiate E-sports, sponsors, outside the traditional gaming-oriented companies, such as Coca-Cola, are starting to take notice of the potential growth prospects of collegiate E-sports, and are offering scholarships as prizes. For instance, gaming company Blizzard brought college student gamers together to play for \$5,000 dollars in scholarship money (Wingfield 2014). The goal in exchanging pure cash prizes for scholarships is to motivate students to maintain a balance between their serious commitment to gaming as E-sports players, and to the dedication of finishing their education. Again, the need to balance the tension between the "work" of gaming and one's life as a student can be seen by the requirements by the University of Pikeville that all E-sports players maintain a certain grade point average to remain on the team, just as with traditional college sports teams in the United States.

Understanding Play

Play is fundamental to human experience. The etymology of the term "play" suggests that it is associated with activities often appreciated as more leisurely. When people think of play, it is often within the context of being carefree and unguarded, acting creatively and without consequence, or simply being spontaneous (Wall 2013). Although the study of play over time has evolved to encompass alternative ways of framing the topic, the relevant literature about play continues to highlight the importance of keeping the notion of frivolity, openness, fun, and non-seriousness central to the study of play, showing how it also evolves adopt to the evolution of human action.

Some of the earliest conceptualizations of play can be traced to 18th century writings by Emmanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller. Kant's *Critique of Judgement* speaks to the unencumbered nature of play, where play is understood to create the conditions of

thought free from the constraints of human faculties, instrumentality, and material pursuit (Kant et. al 1987). Equally important to the notion of play is the role that aesthetic judgment serves in constructing the serious side of play. The critical components of aesthetic judgement, for Kant, hold the key to play's association with being indeterminate, unpredictable, and random. Similarly, Schiller (1794/2004)'s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* also frames the act of play as liberating. Play, for Schiller, occupies a special place since it allows individuals the freedom to think, feel, or act within a context that leaves individuals free from consequences. It should be noted, however, that it wasn't until Huizinga's (1955) *Homo Ludens* book was published, on play, that we see a more mainstream acknowledgement about the two dichotomous worlds where play and non-play exist. For Huizinga, like Kant and Schiller, play occupies an independent and differentiated space from everyday life and work. There's something fun, open, free, and unserious about play. However, Huizinga also notes that there is something serious about play. Writing "we might call it a free activity," Huizinga situates play as being something that consumes "the player intensely and utterly" (Huizinga 1955, 13). The "seriousness" of play is a component that continues to draw attention, and it is an important element in creating a more nuanced definition of play.

For researchers, there is an imperative to tap into the internal world of feelings and interpretations to understand how individuals are experiencing the world – and not just through the observation of physical behavior. For instance, Suits (2005) argues that any definition of play requires an acknowledgement of the autotelic (i.e., internally motivated) nature of play. Conceptualized by desire, play is defined by investigating reasons and motives behind the purpose of engaging in an activity. If an activity is pursued for its own sake by internal motivations and intent, and not extrinsic incentives, claims Meier (1988), then this activity can be rightly regarded as play.

It is clear that play is also slightly more complex than simply requiring that an individual engage in an activity for its own sake. It's not beyond the stretch of the imagination to summon counter-examples of this rule. Freezell (2013) argues, for instance, a purely autotelic requirement for play confuses between "an activity and an attitude" (p.17). It would be nonsensical, argues Freezell, to accept that play is taking place, while an individual is actually doing nothing. For Suits, equally, autotelicity functions as a base condition of play, given that narrowing down the definition of play to doing something for its own sake can collapse serious and the frivolous activities onto themselves (Sicart 2014). There appears to be a definitional need to include a configuration of play that includes taking into account the features of an activity in play, and not only the subjective values and interpretations of the play. Schmitz (1998) argues that play can be categorized along a scale, from less formal types of play, such as child-like playful behavior, to moral formalized and organized types of play, such found in sports and games. It is useful to conceptualize play along the lines of a spectrum of being formal or informal, in that it allows one to investigate questions about whether competitive sports can be regarded as play.

Kohn (1992) posited that the very nature of competition makes it incompatible with the notion of play. There is the perception that professional sports players are not "playing", that what their activities can not be rightly at being engaged in for their own sake, and it might be better to regard their activity as work. However, this view falls short of fully understanding play in its varied manifestations, as both intrinsic reward and as a formalized feature of activities. Certain types of activities may resist being regarded as strictly play or work. Part of the problem is that critics fail to see the "mixed motives" that accompany sports. In reality, the nature of sports presents a multitude of motivations,

and within that mix. Freezell (2013) argues there are “playlike” elements, such as “freedom, separateness, absorption, and purposeless” (28) that rightly fall into the category of play. Framing play as a mixture of motivation is a useful way to understand the complex nature of play, given that people engaged in competitive activities may find themselves shifting in-and-out of a certain competitive frame of mind. Some elements of competition may create situations where players utterly lose their sense of self in the flow of the activity. In other cases, the notion of winning may not be the ultimate purpose; instead, players may be enjoying the more creative side of play, even at the cost of taking risks that could cost them a win.

Work

Grint (2005) regards work as an activity that “transforms nature” within the context of social interactions. However, what is regarded as work is often determined by the particular social and cultural understandings of a particular time. Any definition of work also needs to account for the power dynamics at play. Work is not simply an absolute, but is shaped by “temporal, spatial and cultural conditions” (6). Anthony (1977) speaks to the power dynamics of work as dominant ideologies in practice. Those who occupy positions of authority impose these ideologies vertically upon others. Historically, ideologies about work have essentially been accepted as “axiomatic” but the reality is that their ideological foundations have always been to control the behaviors of other.

Technologies have further complicated our understanding definitions of work, and our understanding of the existing power structures and demands placed on modern workers who rely information and communications technologies (ICTs) in the workplace. Part of the problem stems from the perception that digital labor doesn’t actually look like the type of traditional labor associated with work. As Scholz (2013) argues, digital labor comes off as looking like a kind of “cognitive surplus” (2), or a type of activity where someone expending time and effort to develop skills in creating digital content is regarded as just having fun. Mistaking work for pleasure has created an environment where it is becoming harder and harder to separate these once more distinct domains. In the area of competitive gaming, one finds the same messiness in talking about E-sports. The world of E-sports straddles traditional notions of video-game playing, on the one end, and intense work-like training and rigorous scheduling on the other. To sort through some of the mess between work and play, Taylor (2015) calls for a need to frame future discourse about E-sports in a way that takes account both these realities. Taylor finds Stebbins (2004) particularly useful as a frame of reference and a vocabulary to understanding professional game play. The serious leisure perspective (SLP), a theoretical framework that categorizes and synthesizes different types of leisure (serious, casual, and project-based). Serious leisure is distinguished from casual leisure by six characteristics: 1) a “need to persevere at the activity, 2) availability of a leisure career, 3) need to put in effort to gain skill and knowledge, 4) realization of various special benefits, 5) unique ethos and social world, and 6) an attractive personal and social identity” (Stebbins et al. 2011, 9).

METHOD

This study examined how collegiate E-sport athletes conceptualize the process of their own competitive game play as situated between work and play. Collegiate E-sports athletes were chosen for analysis because this is a growing, but not well understood, population. This population of gamers on college campuses represents a growing trend at universities, where video gaming clubs, and more specifically, official E-sports gaming programs are starting to emerge as viable opportunities for students to fund their education by allowing students to become E-sport athletes. Participants were selected

based on their membership on a competitive E-sports team one of two institutions: a small private university in North America known for its E-sports scholarship program (Site 1) or a large research university in North America known for its successful gaming club (Site 2). The E-sports program at Site 1 is officially under their college athletics department. Alternatively, Site 2 was selected as a research site based upon the successful collegiate standings of its team in competitive collegiate tournaments in North America. In 2015, both institutions competed at the North American Collegiate Championship for a grand prize of \$180,000 dollars in scholarship money for the winning League of Legends team (Michaels 2015). Coaches/coordinators were contacted to help with recruitment at each university. The age range for the interviewees was 18-24 years old, and the researcher sought to include participants reflecting a diversity of perspectives based on age, ethnicity, and gender. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were administered with the players. Interviews were employed so that the same sets of questions could be addressed in each interview, while allowing the flexibility to follow unanticipated paths as they emerged. Interviews were conducted on site at the universities in the teams' practice areas and lasted between thirty and forty-five minutes.

The development of interview questions and analysis was guided by Stebbins' (2007) serious leisure perspective (SLP), a framework that classifies leisure activities based on form, intensity level, and duration. After each player's personal gaming history was explored, interview questions addressed how players experienced their gaming as work or play, how belonging to a collegiate E-sports team has shaped their identity, and how the players experienced gaming within the structured environment of a collegiate E-sports club team. Interviews took place in person at two locations: 1) Site 1's E-sports Arena, and 2) Site 2's "Nest" (gaming club space) and were recorded with a digital audio recorder and then transcribed. Summary transcripts were sent to participants to review for accuracy, in order to strengthen objectivity and credibility and allow for elaboration. Qualitative analysis and inductive coding of the complete transcripts was employed to develop themes as they emerged. After coding was finalized, data were summarized thematically.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participant Profiles

A total of 12 players were interviewed. Nine were on E-sport scholarship at Site 1, and three were members of E-sport teams at site 2. Table 1 notes the players' affiliation, their preferred game, their role on their respective team(s), and their length of competitive play. Only one player (participant 9) was female, and two players (7, 11) were coaches and directors of their teams, as well as players.

Player	University	Game(s)	Role	Length of competitive play
1	Site 1	LoL	scholarship player	5 years
2	Site 1	LoL	scholarship player	3 years
3	Site 1	CS:GO	scholarship player	2 years/(8 months CS:GO)
4	Site 1	LoL	scholarship player	5 years
5	Site 1	LoL/Dota 2	scholarship player	3+ years
6	Site 1	LoL	scholarship player	1 year
7	Site 1	LoL/CS:GO	Scholarship player/ coach of CS:GO team	2 years
8	Site 1	LoL	scholarship player	1 year
9	Site 1	CS:GO	scholarship player	1 year

10	Site 2	Dota 2	captain of Dota 2 team	3 years
11	Site 2	Hearthstone	Hearthstone team director	4 years
12	Site 2	CS:GO	captain, coach and analyst	4 years

Table 1: Collegiate E-Sport interviewees

Site 2

Play as Winning

Player respondents were asked questions about how they understood their video-game play as contextualized as college E-sports. Overall, participants understood their involvement in E-sports as being “fun” and “exciting,” when talking about play. Different players revealed nuanced understandings of what play means to them and their respective communities. Play can be fun and exciting; however, the players also framed sentiments about fun and excitement around the reality that there is also serious side to collegiate E-sports and competitive gaming that may complicate the conceptualization of play in E-sports at their universities.

A repeated theme emerged from the interviews suggesting that an important component of play within competitive gaming is that E-sport gamers need to be winning competitions as well: Winning is fun. Aspects of play are coupled with the need to win. For some players, competitive E-sports become enjoyable when one is practicing with his or her team, often over multiple weeks in preparation for a competition. Playing other schools, coming to practice, “theory-crafting” (collaborative deconstruction of game mechanics), and coming up with “strats” (game strategies) are all areas of competitive gaming that were discussed as being fun. Sometimes, the bigger picture perspective on competitive gaming and college E-sports was framed with the reality that simply being able to play video-games for college is once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. How can you not have fun? Or as one League of Legends player exclaimed, “I’m living the dream!”

For other players, play as excitement was also conceptualized in how gameplay is executed. Although Site 1 is known for its scholarship program through its League of Legends club, the program also hosts a first-person shooter game called Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO). Counter-Strike is an online team-based shooting game, where individuals choose sides, referred to as the “T-side” (terrorist) and the “CT-side” (counter-terrorist), with the objective of preventing the CT-side in planting a bomb on the map, or of destroying the enemy.

For Player 3, new to Site 1’s CS:GO team, being “clutch” was an important aspect of the fun and exciting side of play. To be clutch is to be triumphant in a moment of uncertainty in the game. The outcome of being clutch, however, shares the same enjoyment that comes from preparing to be clutch. That could mean preparing a certain strategy with one’s team for weeks, and pulling off the strategy at the right moment in time to win. Even more so, being clutch could refer to the imbalance between teams, as in one team having three players, and another team having one player. In such circumstance, the ability to execute a “strat” with a “flickshot” (quickly flicking your gun in another direction to get a kill in a fraction of a second) against enemy players, and to get the win, is to be clutch – and is very enjoyable.

Play as Creativity

Players expressed that creativity is also a fundamental part of competitive E-sports. To be creative allows players to get better, to better anticipate changes in the game, and to keep themselves innovating against predictability in competitive environments. Various players referred to the idea of a “meta” when speaking about their games. Most often, the term came up with respect to League of Legends and Dota 2 games. Some players choose

to experiment with new game characters during certain times of the year. This becomes a period of increased experimentations with new builds (trait and skill selections) and picks (character selections) for most players. However, given the increased visibility of the collegiate competitive players on the tournament scene, along with their presence on streaming services such as Twitch.com, sometimes taking on the present meta could become a point of weakness and predictability as a source of strategy.

To counter the current meta, Player 5, with semi-professional E-sports experience in the past (also known as the “Mad Scientist” by his team), expressed the idea of choosing to play non-meta characters. This requires some creative thinking about how non-meta Champions could fit into the present meta climate:

I like to play around with things like that. Most of the Champions that I play are all, they call them non-meta, basically in most people's mind not good. Like, I'm main York, who isn't even in the champion rotation, you can't even get played if you don't know. But I think those characters who are non-meta are the most fun, and most experimental, and just play around with them, and make them more than people see them as. I am the 64th best York in the world, ranked. It's just fun to experiment and play around with the builds, with champions, and see them for more than what others see them.

The meta in a game is the current strategies and methods that take into account updates made to player characters or in-game items. For League of Legends players, this becomes an opportunity to be creative. When patches to games are updated, items may be released, and Heroes (Dota 2) or Champions (League of Legends) are buffed or nerfed. To buff or nerf something is to add a boost to a characters performance (buff), or to take it away (nerf). The unique assemblage of these items to the advantage of players becomes the “new meta.”

Work in College E-sports

Participants were queried about “work” aspects of competitive gaming. Unlike, questions about play, here interviews sought to look at how players framed their understanding of work with respect to collegiate E-sports gaming in organized settings, their opinions about gaming with a coach, gaming on a team, and their gaming schedules. One of the more salient points expressed by some of the players at Site 1 reveals a more nuanced and blurred distinction about how they view their gaming as work.

Players acknowledged that the organized environment of Site 1 fosters a tone of seriousness to their gaming. Site 1 gamers collectively practice in an area called the “Arena”. The Arena is the training ground for student E-sport athletes, where four different games are hosted: League of Legends, Dota 2, *Hearthstone* (Blizzard Entertainment 2014), and Counter-Strike: Global Offensive. Sponsors’ names are painted on the walls outside of the Arena, while inside, professional gaming equipment, such as SteelSeries computer peripherals and DXracer gaming chairs, are supplied to the students. The more organized tone of the environment at Site 1 led some students to note that they “should be professional here” (Player 8).

Other players expressed that playing with a coach feels like work. Both sites have coaches for each of the games they host. Player 3 expressed that working with a coach is similar to working with a boss based upon the directions that gamers have to follow and dynamics of the relationships between the gamers and coach. Further questions about the role of a coach revealed that the work-like quality of coaching also depends on how the coach operates on a team.

Some players differentiated between the collegiate and professional E-sports scene by outlining how, in the professional world of E-sports, players may have to operate under a stricter form of control compared to the collegiate scene. The more work-like aspects of the professional scene suggests that players could have less room to express disagreement or have less choice in selecting particular Champions or Heroes. However, Site 1 players made it clear that the coaches at their school are far more open to hearing the concerns of the student players. At Site 1, the leadership and coaches are focused upon player improvement and growth. At the lesser-skilled end of the spectrum of players, coaches aren't likely to demand they play certain characters; instead, players can select the Champions they want, and it is the job of the coaches to supplement these choices with instruction and guidance in order to help him or her improve.

When further probed to explore how they understand gaming in organized settings, a slightly more nuanced picture started to emerge with respect to work, coaches, and organized gaming. For Player 6, coming to Site 1 has changed his life by giving him a structure to follow. The organized setting at Site 1 allows him to indulge his love for League of Legends, nearly guilt free. Before becoming a Site 1 student, this gamer's schedule required him to work a full-time job at 60 hours a week, along with being a full-time college student at his local community college. Almost addicted to the game, he found it difficult to balance work and school:

You could imagine 3 or 4 hours of sleep at night on average, I was stressed out of my mind. I wasn't happy, unless I was playing the game. When I was at work, I was dead tired all of the time. I wasn't a happy person, unless I was playing the game, I was so competitive, at the time. Now, if I'm not playing the game, I'm still happy, even sitting in class, I'm just happy, cause I'm happy about what's going on in my life.

Presently, under the Site 1 E-sports team, this player is significantly happier with where he is. Although he does have a busy gaming schedule (E-sports schedule), he expressed pleasure in the thought that he could, if he wanted to, play 8 hours a day. The "work" that could perhaps beset some students who are having to operate in a gaming environment that is intensely competitive does not bother this student who wishes to belong to an organized setting where he is allowed to indulge this side of his interests.

One of the stronger themes to emerge challenges the narrative of the coach as strictly a boss. Several Site 1 students expressed positive opinions about the presence of a coach or leader who is knowledgeable about the game. In one respect, a coach provides structure and focus. A coach provides feedback, not simply criticism. Playing under a coach provides a different gaming paradigm in some respects. Player 2 suggested that gaming alone or with friends is too casual of an environment if someone wants to grow as a player. Player 9 reflected that, after gaming with friends, people do not necessarily talk about strategies, or do not necessarily go over failures, and it is rare to personally reflect about game play.

Similarly, another perspective that reframes the role of the coach as someone who is not simply a "boss" looks at how coaches can be cognitive aids to players who need help during gameplay. Coaches tend to be age peers and are also players themselves. Player 3 suggested that the benefits of having a coach comes from their knowledge about what to do, when to do it, and their eagerness to help that completely changes how the game is played. For Player 7, a member of Site 1's Counter-Strike team, the presence of a coach can almost be an extra player. For in-game leaders (IGLs) in Counter-Strike, the coach can serve the function of the "shotcaller" and can call off other strategies during the

game. IGSs in Counter-Strike are in-game leaders responsible for thinking about the big picture, cognizant where enemies could be, where they are going, and where the player's team needs to rotate to within the game.

Site 1's E-sport program officially belongs to the athletics program at their university, and players and coaches operate in a highly structured environment. Site 2, on the other hand, has an E-sports Association, which is collection of various gaming clubs, with volunteer directors. Site 2's E-sports Association operates without direct institutional support. This less-structured environment manifests in the way that teams interact at the Nest. Figure 1 depicts some of the more creative and free-flowing interactions found on a community board in one of the gaming rooms.



Figure 1: Community board in Site 2's "Nest"

Collegiate E-sports as Serious Leisure

Personal and Social Identity

Identification with the roles the student players have as collegiate E-sport gamers was varied and multifaceted at both universities. At Site 1, there are visible markers that identify players as being in an E-sports program (clothing, as discussed below), and a visible symbol of the team, in the form of the Arena. This fostered pride among a number of number of Site 1 gamers. For example, Player 2 referenced that when he first arrived on campus, he had no friends, and knew few students. Belonging to the E-sports program, however, allowed him to have conversations with random students along the hallways of the school. The program at Site 1 provides students with jerseys and backpacks that signal their membership in the program. The jerseys have the school mascot on the front (an Eagle's head), and students are supplied with DxRacer backpacks with their summoner's name (their League of Legends in-game name) embossed on the pack. Given the visibility that is part of belonging to their program, it is not uncommon for kids to come up to students asking them about their associations with the E-sports program out of curiosity, and E-sports in general. Now, as the student explains, when he walks around school, or is on his way to campus, some students know him as the "E-sports guy."

Player 7, a Site 1 student who plays Counter-Strike: Global Offensive shared similar sentiments about belonging to the program. The program allows students like him to find social networks that share the same passion and interest about competitive video gaming and gaming youth culture as they do. As had been expressed by a couple of participants at

Site 1, although gaming is growing in popularity, gamers still often have to fight a type of stigma against being regarded as nerds, and as a result, kids passionate about gaming still find themselves objects of ridicule during high school. For them, high school was often a time where they had to suppress their interests in gaming. However, coming to a school with an E-sports program has allowed one new student, Player 3, to express his satisfaction in being accepted as a gamer:

I can be myself around these guys, and not feel... not kind of embarrassed, honestly. That's one of the things that's still frowned upon, and with these guys, it kind of helped boost my confidence, where I am proud to actually say I play competitive gaming, and be myself. It's... I wear my jersey around, but before I wouldn't. I had competitive COD jersey; I wouldn't wear it in public. The day I got my jersey, I wore that when I went to get food... I was so happy I had it... and I was, it's just a great feeling. The guys here, they raise your confidence, cause you're with your friends -- you're thinking, why was I not proud of this?

What became apparent in the interviews with Site 1's competitive gamers is the validation of their identity as gamers came not only from the friends they made. Having a larger circle of like-minded teammates, either in the League of Legends team, or the Counter-Strike Team, reinforced their choice in coming to the Site 1 program, and many mentioned the friendships they have made. As Stebbins (1982) highlighted in his own research into the durable benefits of serious leisure, amateurs often gained both an enhanced self-image and a greater sense of belonging to the group. However, confidence in their identities as gamers was also informed, to some extent, by the belief that they were participating in the first ever E-sports scholarship in the United States. Simply being chosen for what is an unprecedented program in collegiate gaming, regardless of rank (some were not highly ranked), became a source of pride.

At Site 2, all three of the players (Players 10, 11, 12) noted that the school's competitive gamers have a worldwide reputation as an elite team, acknowledging the status and legacy of their E-sports program. They described being proud of their university, proud of the E-sports association that they have created, and they were aware that gamers, both at the collegiate level and in the professional scene, were also aware of their program and presence as a powerhouse of competitive college gamers. However, for Site 2's collegiate gamers, the topic of identity and confidence took on slightly different significance.

Most of the students interviewed at Site 2 had previous gaming experience before coming. For some, that experience was quite extensive, and meant competing in local gaming competitions. Site 2 gamers reflected similar feelings of acceptance and of finding comfort in friendships made at Site 2 with other gamers. Also, a number of students referred to the prestige of their E-sports program as being a point of pride in their gaming identity. For Player 10, having the institution's tag on him, typically on a shirt or competition jersey, instills a sense of personal confidence. People know the institution's name and its reputation. Just playing under the tag, says the student, creates the feeling that he is just better than the person or team he is going to compete against:

When we are playing with the [Site 2] tag, and a lot of people know the [Site 2] E-sports organizations, it is kind of a big deal, and then I feel an inflated sense of worth. I kind of feel like... like if I were playing for EG for example. You feel good that you are on team EG.

The sentiments expressed about Site 2 by this player reveal the respect this student has for their university E-sport program. The player compares his team to Team EG (Evil Geniuses), one of the best competitive Dota 2 teams in the world, who won the world

championships in 2015 (total grand pool prize: \$18 million). Although Site 2 hasn't drawn the type of international and national media attention that Site 1 has, Site 2's E-sports program is well regarded among the collegiate and professional E-sports gaming community. For both groups, this accords with Stebbins' (2007) conceptualization of "personal rewards", in particular self-expression, self-image, and self-actualization.

Career as In-Game Rank Achievements

In regards to gaming as a career, respondents spoke about the evolution of their gaming histories in their programs. Many players understood their career as moments of achievements in their respective games, often in the form of progress as measured by ranks. The interviewees mentioned certain turning points in their gaming histories that demarcate periods of growth, a "before and after."

Players often referred to their ranks as they spoke about themselves, either as League of Legends players or Counter-Strike players. At Site 1, players of all ranks are recruited into the official League of Legends E-sports program. Because Site 1's program includes a diversity of players with different levels of skill, a number of Site 1 E-sport players spoke of "growing" as a player when asked about the trajectory of their career.

In the game of League of Legends, ranks are ordered from lowest to highest: Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum, Diamond, Master, and Challenger. One League of Legends player (Player 2) spoke of the "severe growth" in his own skills since joining Site 1. Initially, he was only a "Gold 5." Arriving at the program, and after meeting all his teammates who were Diamond, Master, and Challenger ranks, he wondered "how I got accepted into this." Now, he's a "Platinum 4." Another interview with a Counter-Strike player at Site 1 (Player 3) echoed the same theme with respect to an intense leveling-up in rank. Before coming to Site 1, he characterized himself as an "ok" player, but after coming to Site 1 and training with the program, his skills just "skyrocketed." As he stated:

For me [when] I joined here, I was, I believe, MGE [a rank in CS:GO]. That's average. That's just about average. So I come here MGE... it goes MGE, DMG (Designated Master Guardian), and then Legendary Eagle Master. I went from MGE to LEM, which is three ranks, and then Supreme Master Guardian, which is one below Global Elite, which is the highest rank in the world. From [Site 1] ... I gained more ranks there, than I would have been with 4 months at home.

Turning Points and Skill Effort

Two distinctive themes emerged related to the skill and effort needed to become a better player. Players suggested that a sense of maturity related to a person's understanding of the game begins to develop that goes beyond simple mechanics. League of Legends players at both sites either directly or indirectly spoke about team dynamics. In League of Legends, Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, and Dota 2, each team is comprised of five players who need to execute some type of objective to win the game. Normally, each person in the game has a role to play. For MOBAs, such as League of Legends and Dota 2, those roles consist of "carries" and "support." As the names may imply, a carry in a game is the person that will ultimately win the game for their team, whereas a support is there to create the conditions to make it possible for the carry to win. Nearly all of the most popular E-sport titles right now are team-based games.

In speaking about the evolution of their understanding of the game, some of the lower-level-skilled players of League of Legends at Site 1 described a turning point when they realized, in some sense, playing only "SoloQ" was part of the problem in gaining a deeper understanding of their game. SoloQ, or solo queue, is a feature of League of Legends where players are matched into teams by the game with strangers on the

Internet. Players who mentioned problems with respect to SoloQ often mentioned that “things changed” once they got away from this more isolated mode of play. A Counter-Strike player at Site 2 (Player 7) also shared similar sentiments about the disadvantages of SoloQ-ing in his game. For him, in a SoloQ environment, there can be times when there is little incentive to be helpful to your teammates, if it is possible to get away with it. He describes the process of “baiting” fellow teammates to attain an advantage:

CS:GO uses a term called baiting, where you're about to enter into a site, which means going to A site or B site. You let the other team members go first, then they all die. After that, you know where the enemy is. They all died, so you can kill them all yourself. When I play by myself in match-making with four other random players, I would go ahead bait them, have them give me all the information and kill everyone else. It's kind of hard to do that [now] just because they are my team – you have to work with them, instead of working alone. At the end of the day, it's easier to work together than alone.

Players relying on SoloQ would not develop the type of team-player dynamics required to become an elite player. To counter this type of play, a number of players suggested that working and gaming with your team was always a better option – trust fellow teammates, instead of becoming “rogue.” The importance of discussing some of the intricacies of the game with teammates was also important: After learning the mechanics of the game with some of the higher- level players in the program, the game, as one CS:GO player stated, becomes “more enjoyable” and “much easier” (Player 12). Rambusch et al. (2007) similarly note that “The social nature of learning in CS becomes particularly evident when players join a team; new levels of communication and strategic thinking skills become necessary and “available” only through sustained interaction within and between teams” (160).

Another turning point for players touches upon what some of the respondents referred to as “gamesense.” Players who spoke about gamesense often contextualized it in the larger activity of “thinking deeply” about a game. To be a better player takes effort and time outside of gameplay, reviewing and contemplating on the game itself. For some of the players at both sites, developing a type of intuition or “naturalness” became a point in their gaming career when they started to take gaming seriously. To have gamesense is to be keenly aware of a game at an instinctual level. At Site 1, one player described it as “thinking about the game more, and not just playing it” (Player 6). This came down to controlling his impulse of wanting to go into a game and just shoot everything. Some of the players admitted that one of the major “N00b” mistakes they would make in CS:GO was being way too aggressive. Developing a sense of patience, sometimes measured by inaction, signaled maturity, and even skill.

Other players who referenced gamesense spoke about it in a strictly strategic manner. A repeated theme with respect to thinking carefully about the game and intuition developed in response to the question about skill development. Stebbins (2007) argues that serious leisure is often pursued through the building of skills and development of knowledge through hard work and effort. One the one hand, simply playing the game repeatedly gives you some idea of what to do, but it's not until someone starts to think about, or get a feel for, the details that things change. As one of the Site 2's CS:GO players (who is also a coach) remarks:

It isn't until you force yourself to start to think more deeply about the game, the more technical aspects about the game, the technical aspects being how long does it take for someone to run from one area to the next. If you can figure out how

long it takes a player to run from one area to the next, you can exploit it. How their team is going to start moving around. If you get a kill one area of the map, it means someone else is going to start rotating over to help that area of the map. But if you can figure how long, or if you know about how long it takes, then it might be, that timing might be the opportunity for you to take for you to succeed in winning the round, right (Player 12).

Gamesense brings a different dimension to skill and knowledge development, moving beyond the idea of simple physical mechanics (e.g., timing, getting clicks off at the right moment, movement of the mouse).

Overall, players noted the immense dedication required to develop gamesense. Taylor (2003) observed similar patterns of dedication to understanding games in an early ethnographic study on power gamers:

This kind of intentionality extends to all aspects of play, even failed encounters and mistakes. One player I spoke with suggested that average players don't confront failure as a learning opportunity in the same way power gamers do saying, "When we die we say 'What went wrong?' and try to understand what happened." While it is certainly not unusual to hear even casual gamers talk about trying something a few times to "get it right" the level of attention power gamers give to understanding mistakes is notable" (303).

CONCLUSION

This study examined how collegiate E-sport athletes conceptualize the process of their own competitive game play as situated between work and play. Using interviews guided by Stebbins' (2007) serious leisure perspective, 12 active, competitive, collegiate E-sport players at two North American universities known for their E-sports teams reflected on their experience of gaming as work or play, how belonging to a collegiate E-sports team has shaped their identity, and how they experience gaming within the structured environment of a collegiate E-sports club team. Overall, Stebbins' description of skill and knowledge development of serious leisure was supported. For both groups, these findings accord with Stebbins' conceptualization of "personal rewards", in particular self-expression, self-image, and self-actualization. One major finding in the study is how competitive gamers frame development and skill by integrating the idea of "gamesense" into maturing as a gamer. However, differences were observed between the more structured, scholarship-based program at Site 1 and the less-structured Site 2 program. Students at Site 1 spoke of the pride and acceptance of being competitive players, and found confidence in just being part of an unprecedented program in college gaming. Site 2 students, alternatively, were aware of their program's reputation for producing top college gamers, and they had a sense of being part of a larger legacy. Possible future research needs to explore the benefits of collegiate E-sports by looking at player self-image and gratifications. Additionally, looking at the structural differences between highly competitive gaming clubs and institutionally recognized E-sports programs may garner deeper insights into the type of support the players receive, and how that informs the gains or "durable benefits" (Stebbins 2007) that E-sport players receive from belonging to these gaming groups.

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