Loading
The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association

Taking College Esports Seriously

Nyle Sky Kauweloa and Jenifer Sunrise Winter

Volume 12, Number 20, Fall 2019

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065896ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1065896ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Canadian Game Studies Association

ISSN

1923-2691 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Kauweloa, N. & Winter, J. (2019). Taking College Esports Seriously. *Loading*, *12*(20), 35–50. https://doi.org/10.7202/1065896ar

Article abstract

This study examined how collegiate esports players conceptualized their own competitive gameplay as situated between work and play. Using interviews guided by Stebbins' (2007) serious leisure perspective, 16 collegiate esports players described how belonging to a collegiate esports team has shaped their identity, and how they experienced gaming within the structured environment of a collegiate esports team and club. Stebbins' description of skill and knowledge development was supported, and the findings are in accord with Stebbins' conceptualization of "personal rewards," such as self-expression, self-image, and self-actualization.

Loading… The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association
Vol 12(20): 35-50
http://loading.gamestudies.ca

Taking College Esports Seriously

Nyle Sky Kauweloa
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa
nsk@hawaii.edu

Jenifer Sunrise Winter
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa
jwinter@hawaii.edu

Abstract

This study investigated how belonging to a collegiate esports team shaped the identity and experiences of 16 collegiate esports players within a scholarship esports program and student club in North America. Using face-to-face interviews with players, the authors used Stebbins's (2007) serious leisure perspective to investigate how players increased skill development, formed identifies around their participation in college esports, and found ways to persevere through unique challenges in the collegiate esports space. However, the findings around identify formation, skill development, and perseverance were also contingent upon the novelty of esports as a team-based activity in schools, perceptions of esports as an activity and its associations to gaming culture, and the significant investment in technologies by colleges to create esports programs.

Keywords

Esports; leisure; videogames; college; students

The Growth of Collegiate Esports

Videogames played at colleges by students are not a new thing (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). The first videogame tournament ever held was a college affair, when in 1972, students gathered to play *Spacewar* at Stanford University with the winner getting a subscription to Rolling Stone magazine (Baker, 2016). Traditionally, when college students wanted to play videogames against other college students, they formed causal teams to compete against each other (Kow, Young, & Tekinbas, 2014). Today, opportunities to take a more serious orientation towards playing videogames competitively happen in a more structured environment involving student clubs and scholarship-based esports programs.

With much of the focus upon professional esports, less attention has been directed at esports at university and college campuses. At the start of 2017, 40 collegiate esports programs began in North America, with over $4 million in college funding for esports. A year later, nearly 200 schools have some type of varsity support for esports with $15 million of scholarships in the collegiate scene (Heilweil, 2019). Robert Morris University (RMU), the University of California at Irvine (UCI), and the University of Utah (UT) all have varsity-based collegiate esports programs. RMU was the first school to offer esports scholarships in 2014 and the first college to

deem esports as a sport in their college. In 2016, an important shift occurred when UCI announced its esports program, making it the first public research university to offer esports scholarships (Szoldra, 2016). The University of Utah started its program in 2017, making it the first university in the Power Five athletic conferences to offer esports scholarships. The connection between traditional athletic conferences and collegiate esports have become an important avenue for gaming developer Riot Games (Riot), for instance, to build relationships with universities as part of their mission to establish esports as a college varsity sport.

Scholarship-based programs provide financial assistance to esports teams through scholarships that can be a few thousand dollars per student each year, to complete full-ride scholarships. Students in clubs, however, also have opportunities to earn prize money through college esports competitions. For instance, Riot held the North American Collegiate Championships (NACC) in 2016 for the *League of Legends* (LoL) game. The competition ended with a match between the University of British Columba's (UBC) student-led esports club and RMU's esports scholarship team. UBC won $180,000 for their team in 1st-place money. The 2016 win by UBC was a back-to-back win, as they also won the 2015 championship, earning a total of $360,000 for the UBC team (Meadow, 2016).

With opportunities to earn scholarships and occupy varsity slots on collegiate esports teams, students belonging to university clubs or varsity teams have started to take playing videogames in college seriously. Taking a dedicated turn towards videogames in college exists alongside entrenched public perceptions of harms associated with the use of popular media (Markey & Ferguson, 2017; Screen, 2010). Early academic work on videogames examined the influence gaming plays in the socialization of youth, fostering addictive habits to games, and the exposure to videogame violence (Griffiths, 1999; Selnow, 1984). Decades later, results from videogame research are more positive. Studies indicate that time spent in MMOs allows for the development of team-building skills (Lu, Shen, & Williams, 2014), personal initiative (Adachi & Willoughby, 2013), and the management of feelings of boredom, frustration, and anger (Olson, 2010).

Within the aforementioned context, this paper examines the perspective of college students who were players in either a student-based esports club or in a collegiate esports scholarship team. Specifically, the authors are interested in finding out what a dedicated orientation towards playing videogames looks like. This study addressed how participants saw their gaming within the context of work, play, and leisure. Specifically, the study employed the serious leisure framework (Stebbins, 1982) as committed leisure to examine how players transformed their dedication towards competitively playing videogames in college.

The Work of Videogames

Academic research on play as work in esports has illustrated what a dedicated orientation towards gaming looks like for gamers. Research has explored how dedication towards becoming a better gamer required work that existed outside of being technically proficient at playing videogames. Taylor (2003) wrote early about *EverQuest* "power gamers," finding them to be reflective, goal-oriented, and social. Labor with videogames involves being flexible to changes, open to communication, and a cooperative team member (Rambusch, Jakobsson, & Pargman, 2007; Taylor, Bergstrom, Jenson, & de Castell, 2015). Professionalization in esports requires

skilled players to exert greater effort to master their gameplay (Seo, 2016). As leisure in videogames has translated into work, professionalization has meant players need to be institutionally aware of the industry and the career choices they make. This requires understanding contractual law, knowing what a transition to a different team will mean for a player's career, and being responsible for personal finances in an environment where players can make a lot of money at very young ages (Taylor, 2012). Current research shows that the type of labor associated with dedicated gaming now involves media production in esports and the performance of being a professional player. Streaming has become an important component to esports spectatorship and practices. Because of these changes, streaming of professional esports has added extra layers of performative demands. Johnson and Woodcock (2017) describe the work of professional esports as the "re-aestheticization" of competitive videogame play. Games, such as *Defense of the Ancients 2* (Dota 2), require performative acts through media to make esports understandable to audiences. Taylor (2018) explored how affective labor constitutes a significant part of professional streaming and professional esports work. Not only do players have to consider the work of being technically proficient at competitive gaming, but professional esports players also need to cultivate a media workflow that highlights the players as content producers as well as media personalities.

Where scholarship on esports has started to explore the corrosive effects a work-like orientation can have on gaming, it has also looked at how financial pressures and market-based rationalized play in esports can perpetuate systems of social control, aggressive competition, and destabilizing elements in employment (Brock, 2017; 2018). With the advent of collegiate esports, the community has only started to understand its challenges with regards to issues of work, play, and monetary compensation within the context of colleges and universities. The history of how the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has treated compensation to student-athletes shares similarities with problems raised in the early gaming literature about how play and the labor of gaming can be usurped by third parties for monetary gains and market profit (Kücklich, 2005; Postigo, 2003).

The NCAA, Gaming Publishers, and Governance

Questions have been raised over whether esports fits within what is considered sports (Hallmann & Giel, 2018; Witkowski, 2012). Ever since the first collegiate esports program began in 2014, those same questions were also asked when RMU made esports a varsity college sport. Concerns soon focused upon how esports would be governed as a college sport, with the NCAA possibly playing a regulatory role. The NCAA decided to step back from involving itself in collegiate esports as of April 20th, 2019 when the NCAA's board of governors voted to table discussions about governance in esports (Hayward, 2019). While the NCAA has been curious about the role collegiate esports could play in updating the image and offerings associated with NCAA athletics, the organization also expressed concerns over the violence present in popular esports titles and the possible problems collegiate esports programs will face with being Title IX compliant (Hollist, 2015).

What specifically complicates the involvement of the NCAA in college esports is the principle of amateurism. To be governed by the NCAA, institutions are required to commit to the principles of amateurism, where "participation should be motivated primarily by education and by the

physical, mental and social benefits to be derived" (2017–2018 NCAA Division I Manual, 2017, p.4). With certain exceptions, students involved in NCAA athletics are disallowed from being remunerated for participation in sporting activities (except for NCAA scholarships). If students violate this rule, they lose their amateur status as student-athletes, their ability to participate in NCAA athletics, and their scholarships.

The entrance of the NCAA into college esports could remove avenues to retain monetary winnings gained through tournaments or online streaming platforms. Previous court cases involving student-athletes and the NCAA highlight the range of control the NCAA exercises over the labor of players, with courts traditionally siding with the NCAA on not compensating students for participating in college sports or allowing students to profit from their associations with collegiate athletics (Crabb, 2017). With new media technologies playing an important role in the lives of students in college sports, legal conflicts continue between student-athletes and the NCAA. For the collegiate esports community, the fear is that the regulatory framework that defines NCAA sports could stifle an emerging culture of collegiate esports.

The decision by the NCAA to remove itself as a governing entity in college esports has created space for publishers to assert an active role in regulating their games in college esports. Soon after the decision by the NCAA to table conservations about governance, Riot created the Riot Scholastic Association of America (RSAA). Taking a student-centered approach to esports, the organization is comprised of various stakeholders in college esports with the "long term commitment to LoL, and it's development as an inclusive, multi-generational, college and high school sport" (Sherman, 2019). With the NCAA no longer a concern for colleges, the regulatory environment in collegiate esports is undergoing significant changes with publishers having a clearer understanding about the NCAA, amateurism, and the path forward with governance.

Serious Leisure

Stebbins' (2004) research on serious leisure provides a useful framework to understand the overlapping commonalities between activities regarded as work and play. Conceptualizations of work have framed the activity as being different from activities understood as leisure (Grint, 2005). Some forms of work, however, afford individuals with a self-enriching and fulfilling purpose, in the same way that some leisure activities afford the benefits of self-development and enjoyment. For instance, consulting, skilled-trade, and custom work can generate benefits associated with meaning, such as "success, achievement, freedom of action, individual personality, and activity (being involved in something)" (Stebbins, 2004, p. 2). For Stebbins, serious leisure offers the same type of commitment, meaning, and devotion found in work. Contrasted with casual leisure, serious leisure requires a committed pursuit of an activity that eventuates in the acquisition of skills through perseverance, knowledge of an activity, and a career path marked by turning points. The type of benefits accrued over time include self-actualization, self-enrichment, feelings of accomplishment, a community ethos, and a sense of identity (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014).

Given that the serious leisure framework looks at the dedicated orientation of amateurs, how applicable is the serious leisure perspective when looking at college esports players who receive compensation through scholarships? For Stebbins (1992), conceptually defining "amateur"

meant asking sociological questions, not monetary ones. Pay does not disqualify someone's amateur status. While economic truisms provide context around what it means to be an amateur (i.e., amateurs earn under 50% of their total income through an activity), economic definitions about amateurism are too simplistic of an approach. Rather, the serious leisure perspective defines amateurism by exploring issues around confidence, effort, perseverance, and commitment to an activity.

Larger arguments about whether the centrality of leisure in people's lives fosters a sense of relief and escapism in a modern capitalist society, while important, are beyond the scope of this paper. Relevant questions have been raised over whether serious leisure does cultivate the ideals of "choice," "freedom," and "self-determination" found only in a committed orientation towards leisure (Rojek, 1995). Leisure is not separate from its surrounding context and culture but is largely defined by it. Everyone engaging in leisure is positioned by his or her relationship to resources and wealth that ultimately influences how they enjoy leisure activities (Rojek, 2010).

Stebbins (2007) states that the serious leisure perspective has a "built-in class bias, skewing overall participation towards the more moneyed and educated groups" (p. 62). Because esports is embedded in technology use, differences can emerge between individuals who have access to technologies and those differences can influence how far players can seriously take their leisure activities. Access to technologies and the differences in financial investments from schools is where the serious leisure framework may lack the scope in understanding how people can orient themselves as serious leisure participants. The motivation for using the serious leisure framework comes from exploring the personal efforts (through perseverance, effort, skills, knowledge, a career, and identity) to transform competitive video gameplay into something more serious (Taylor, 2012). With those theoretical limitations in mind, the serious leisure framework can start to offer the conceptual vocabulary to speak about what a serious orientation towards videogames looks like for college esports players.

Method

This study used in-person, semi-structured interviews with collegiate esports players to explore how players conceptualized their competitive gameplay through the serious leisure framework (Stebbins, 2007). Participants were selected based on their membership in a North American competitive esports team at one of two institutions: a small private university known for its esports scholarship program (Site 1) and a large research university known for its successful, competitive student gaming club (Site 2). The esports program at Site 1 is officially under their college athletics department, with players on their varsity and junior varsity teams given scholarships so long as they maintain a 2.5 GPA. Alternatively, Site 2 was selected based upon the successful standings of its student-led esports club in competitive collegiate tournaments in North America. In 2015, both institutions competed at the NACC for a grand prize of $180,000 in scholarship money for the winning LoL team. Coaches/coordinators were contacted to help with recruitment at each university. The age range for the interviewees was 18–24 years old, and we sought participants with a diversity of perspectives based on age, ethnicity, and gender. Interviews were conducted on-site at the universities and specifically at the player's choice of a meeting place.

The development of interview questions was guided by Stebbins' (2007) serious leisure perspective, a framework that classifies leisure activities based on form, intensity, and duration. After each player's personal gaming history was explored, interviews addressed how players experienced their gaming, how belonging to an esports team has shaped their identity, and how the players experienced gaming within a scholarship-based team or student club. Interviews took place in person at two locations: 1) Site 1's esports arena located on campus; and 2) Site 2's "Nest" (student club space), which was in a large student building. Interviews lasted for 45–60 minutes each and were recorded with a digital audio recorder and then transcribed. Summary transcripts were sent to participants to review for accuracy and to provide agency back to the participants in the research. Coding was guided by Stebbins' serious leisure characteristics (perseverance, effort, career, skills, knowledge, and identity). A thematic analysis of the data was used to arrive at a set of over-arching themes associated with how seriously students were taking their gaming in college.

Results and Discussion

Participants

A total of 16 players were interviewed. Nine were on esports scholarships at Site 1, and seven were members of an esports student club at Site 2. Table 1 notes players' affiliation, their preferred game, their status as players, and time of competitive play. Only one player (8) identified as a woman, and three players (7, 11,12) were coaches or directors of teams, as well as players.

Player	University	Game(s)	Player Status	Competitive Play (time)
1	Site 1	LoL	scholarship	5 years
2	Site 1	LoL	scholarship	3 years
3	Site 1	CS:GO	scholarship	2 years
4	Site 1	LoL	scholarship	5 years
5	Site 1	LoL/Dota 2	scholarship	3+ years
6	Site 1	LoL	scholarship	1 year
7	Site 1	LoL/CS:GO	scholarship/ coach CS:GO	2 years
8	Site 1	LoL	scholarship	1 year
9	Site 1	CS:GO	scholarship	1 year
10	Site 2	Dota 2	Captain	3 years
11	Site 2	Hearthstone	captain & director	4 years
12	Site 2	CS:GO	Coach	4 years
13	Site 2	LoL/CS:GO	Club	2+ years
14	Site 2	CS:GO	Club	10 months

15	Site 2	CS:GO	Club	3 years
16	Site 2	Hearthstone	Club	1.5 years

Table 1: Collegiate esports interviewees

College Esports as Scheduled Practice and Teamwork

A crucial component in taking a serious leisure orientation is how much effort and perseverance is directed towards an activity (Stebbins, 2007). At both sites, esports players dedicated time and effort to collegiate esports. When speaking about their commitment to college esports at Site 1, scholarship players referenced how different it was to play under a schedule. A typical "set practice" required Site 1 players to be on campus on Tuesdays and Thursdays. After morning class, Player 1 started streaming from 1:00 to 3:00, with team practice lasting from 3:00 to 8:00 p.m. With intermittent breaks, that is seven hours of gaming-related activities and practice during the weekends, even though weekend practice was technically not required by the program.

Player 2, who was on the substitute team, self-imposed extra practice as part of his efforts to prepare beyond what was required by the program at Site 1. Finding the official schedule insufficient, Player 2 explained, "We practice on Tuesday and Thursday from 6 to 9… me and my team didn't think we were getting the amount of growth that we wanted to see, so we doubled our practice days, so we practice Mondays through Thursdays." The intense work ethic of the outside world of professional esports can permeate into the culture of younger gamers who may over train, incur physical injuries, or ultimately burnout at young ages (DiFrancisco-Donoghue, Balentine, Schmidt, & Zwibel, 2019). For Player 2, the desire to double his (and the team's) training was important. While player 2 did not talk about aspiring to get onto the varsity team, the reason for wanting to increase his training was to "to get better at the game, and to be part of a team environment." Because Site 1 recruited players onto their junior varsity and varsity teams, there was a mix of players from lower as well higher ranks on the team. The collegiate esports program at Site 1 offered players the chance to train with top esports players, and player 2 wanted to take advantage of that unique training environment by training as much as possible.

While consistent schedules were a novel part of collegiate gaming, so was physically being on a team. Player 1 explained the mentality of individual play before joining a collegiate esports program, saying: "When you're playing solo queue, the typical mindset is here's what I want to do, here's the position I want to play…it's never [we] will work together for an objective." For Player 1, (and Players 2–6), online "solo queue" incentivizes people to be uncooperative and selfish. LoL players have a long history of venting their frustration about having to be matched online into teams with strangers who may have no intent to play as a team and are intensely toxic (Kou & Nardi, 2013). Therefore, the transition to physically being on a team with other players who were committed to maintaining healthy team dynamics represented a significant change in competitive gaming for participants in the study. The popularity of the games *League of Legends*, *Dota 2*, and *CS: GO* at Sites 1 and 2 meant varsity and club players sorted themselves into groups, as all three videogames are team-based. The constant reminder that mainstream collegiate esports is mostly team-based is reflected in Player 7's comment that "It's definitely different than working on your own. You have to take into thought that you have four other

people around you." Part of the effort and perseverance of belonging to a collegiate team comes from controlling one's behavior. The physical proximity players have to each other throughout their day shaped how players felt about confrontation and team etiquette. For instance, if there are problems with teammates, according to Player 1, "It's like you have to see these guys for the next 30 weeks. You're living with these people. So, no, you're not going to cuss them out." Although problems do surface between teammates, the overriding goal for collegiate esports players is to solve personal frictions with other teammates because ultimately this is the only way to be successful at collegiate esports.

While participants spoke about the effort of being on an esports team, Player 16 provided a different account of team play. An active *Hearthstone* club member at Site 2, Player 16 explained that his challenges with gaming on a team were significant enough for him to abandon the popular esports game LoL. As Player 16 stated, "I found that I could not tolerate incompetent teammates…This is one of the reasons why I started to play Hearthstone, because it was a very individual game." In choosing to play a game that was more "individual," Player 16 touches on the larger issue of which esports games are considered institutionally attractive for colleges, with certain games counting as "esports."

At Site 2, several different types of games are represented at the club level. Educators and administrators who see value in collegiate esports through its association with enhanced short-term memory, development of problem-solving skills, increased trust, and greater prosocial behaviors (Freeman & Wohn, 2017; Kyle, Meyer, & Griffiths, 2013; Tobias, Traut-Mattausch, & Osswald, 2012), largely look to team-based esports because of the similarities between team-based esports and traditional college sports. Team-based games such as LoL are very popular at the club and scholarship level of college esports. However, non-team-based games such as *Hearthstone* also enjoy a tremendous amount of support by college gamers. Presently, the educational focus around esports in schools overwhelmingly focuses upon a certain set of esports titles that have attracted greater media visibility (Schwartz, 2018), leaving videogames that do not fit into the mold of mainstream team-based esports out of the discussion. With the growth of collegiate esports (and the repertoire of games offered), students are taking their collegiate esports experiences with non-team-based gaming seriously, but presently non-team-based games lack the visibility of team-based esports. This becomes important to note because non-team-based games, such as the *Super Smash Bros*. franchise, have communities that are regarded as some of the hardest-working, passionate, and diverse gaming communities in esports today (Bailey, 2018).

Community and Identity in Collegiate Esports

Part of the consequence of taking a serious leisure orientation is forming an identity that is defined by an activity (Stebbins, 2007). For the players at both schools, the negotiation of those identities as collegiate esports gamers varied. Site 1 provided students with significant institutional support, from a dedicated esports arena, scholarships, and jerseys that signaled their identification with the program. Participants at Site 1 noted that gamers fought various stigmas associated with committed gaming, such as social isolation, obesity, or the perception of being "That Guy" gamer who is imagined as having the worst characteristics of the hardcore gamer (homophobic, sexist, or antisocial) (Bergstrom, Fisher, & Jenson, 2016). Coming to a school with a collegiate esports program, however, allowed Player 3 to express his satisfaction with

being accepted as someone interested in esports. As he stated, "I can be myself around these guys…I wear my jersey around, but before, I wouldn't. I had a competitive COD jersey; I wouldn't wear it in public. The day I got my [varsity esports] jersey, I wore that when I went to get food." Interviews with Site 1's competitive gamers revealed the validation of their identity as gamers from the friends they made, but also from the fact that they were given institutional support for esports from their university. The sense of community described by player 3 aligned with the experiences of other students at Site 1, with college esports players gaining an enhanced self-image and a greater sense of belonging as they committed to their chosen leisure activity (Stebbins, 2007).

Being selected into the first college esports program in the United States was a significant event for players at Site 1. Player 8, being the only woman in the study, expressed how meaningful it was to be a part of her university's esports program. At first, Player 8 explained how unsure she felt about being on a competitive esports team. After being accepted into the esports program, however, Player 8 explained this was all "a huge confidence boost coming into this." Player 8 presents an interesting case in the study because she is the first (of two women) to have joined a college esports program in the United States. She was both deeply grateful for the opportunity to belong to the collegiate esports community on her campus, and among all participants, she identified strongly with how seriously she took her role as a scholarship player, saying *"*How I see it, I should be professional here, this is my job."

At the same time, Player 8 made it clear that she was willing to pivot from her role as an esports player by participating in collegiate esports in a different capacity. Site 1's esports program created an eco-system of roles for students to fulfill that were not only geared towards being a competitive player. In her interview, Player 8 was anticipating that she may end up not being the best or most skilled collegiate esports player for the team. However, instead of saying she would stop the program, she imagined herself in alternative roles that included "coaching or organization or team manager." Similar to the wider gaming culture, college esports suffers from a lack of girls and women participating in the space, with stakeholders arguing that programs need to provide a wider range of activities for marginalized (women, POC, and LGBTQ) groups to interface with (AnyKey, 2016). Even when anticipating that she may end up leaving the team due to unforeseen obstacles, Player 8 continued to look for ways to ground her participation, identity, and commitment into the collegiate esports program in whatever capacity she could.

At Site 2, Players 10, 11, and 12 described being proud of the grassroots gaming club they created at their university. However, for these collegiate gamers, the topic of identity took on a slightly different tone compared to Site 1. Several Site 2 students specifically referred to the prestige of their esports student club as being a point of pride because students often did not find support from the university when it came to the recognition of their achievements. For Player 10, having the student club gaming tag on him, typically on a competition jersey, instilled a sense of confidence. People knew the student club's name and its reputation. Player10 said that "When we are playing with the…tag, and a lot of people know the…esports organization, it is kind of a big deal, and then I feel an inflated sense of worth. I kind of feel like… if I were playing for EG [Team Evil Geniuses] for example. You feel good that you are on team EG.*"*

The sentiments expressed by Player 10 revealed the respect this student has for his university esports club, and the self-worth Player 10 draws from in association with his club was apparent.

The player compared his student team to Team EG, a professional competitive *Dota 2* team that won the world *Dota 2* championships in 2015. Although Site 2 has not received media attention like Site 1, its esports club is respected among the collegiate and professional esports community, even if it was not given institutional recognition by their university.

Although several players spoke openly about their gamer identity as collegiate esports players, Players 15 and 16 at Site 2 offered a different perspective about the public articulation of benefits associated with the self-expression of their gamer identity. A 3rd-year student in the school of medicine, Player 16 was clear about his professional identity, and when speaking about his priorities in college, noted, "For me, it [esports] does not shape my sense of self or identity. Of course, I am proud of the accomplishments I have made, but…I see myself as a future physician, as a researcher, as a good friend to talk to." While Player 16 is an accomplished player, a well-known quantity in the *Hearthstone* community, and the winner of a notable esports tournament (DreamHack), he wanted to separate his professional self and his activities in esports. While being a gamer in college was a personal passion of his, his future identity as a physician was always privileged and guided how he wanted others to recognize him.

Player 15 explained the difficulties he had in keeping his academic identity separate from his gaming identity. In his first year at Site 2, Player 15 balanced the benefits of college esports with the costs of selectively revealing his identity to classmates. The social and academic world of Player 15 called for a certain type of persona, and it was important to create the right impression at school. As he explained:

> I wish I could be public about it, but I can't really, without seeming like I am obsessed, geeky, or whatever. I think a compromise for that would be not only [to be] selective, but probably to do it in moderation and say I play a few games here and there, instead of saying I'm playing on a team, 60 hours a week.

Player 15 was hesitant to speak about his passion for college esports as a student who needed to be aware of how his business classmates perceived him as a future business partner. Also, it was not only being selective about whom he talked to about his collegiate esports, but even when being public about his gaming pursuits, Player 15 crafted his gaming image as not being too serious. This insight offers a counter-perspective from the serious leisure literature, which asserts that serious leisure participants are "proud of what they do, and generalizing from research on the former, they seldom hesitate to talk about it to anyone who will listen" (Stebbins, 2004, p. 77).

The selectivity Player 15 spoke about when he said "The reality of it, it's not by choice, but I have to be selective about how public I am" taps into discussions around the ownership over a gamer identity. Shaw (2013) reported on ways individuals accepted the gamer label by playing a variety of games, purchasing game-related products, socializing with others about games, and dedicating more time than others to gaming. However, her study also showed why the gamer label was carefully embraced depending upon the context. As Shaw argued, "claiming gamer cultural capital, for anyone, has social repercussions. Like other identities, choosing to identify as a member of a particular group affects one's relationship to others" (p. 13).

Player 15 spoke about his dream of being accepted into Site 2 as a student, having spent three years preparing himself academically. Site 2 is a well-recognized public research university in

North America with a large and diverse student body of more than sixty-thousand students. While Player 16 had a clear idea of his professional identity and kept the two identities separated even while committed to gaming, Player15 was willing to talk about his passion for esports with others but was aware of how his peers could perceive him as a serious gamer. Falsehoods around gaming culture, such as gamers having few social skills and being isolated from the outside world (Kowert, Griffiths, & Oldmeadow, 2012), can prejudice perceptions. The combination of a lack of university support for the esports club, fears of prejudices associated with being too committed to esports, and the overall prestige and reputation of the university where the esports club is located at Site 1 lead some Site 2 players to consider a more nuanced approach to how they revealed their commitment to collegiate esports.

Leveling Up in Collegiate Esports

A serious leisure pursuit of an activity requires effort over time that marks out a career characterized by periods of development (Stebbins, 2007). In-game rank progression informed the college esports players about what it meant to have a career in collegiate esports, and players understood their careers as markers of achievements in their respective games. The interviewees mentioned certain turning points that demarcate periods of growth. Players referred to their ranks as they spoke about themselves. At Site 1, players of all ranks are recruited into the scholarship esports program, not just elite players. Because Site 1's program includes a diversity of skill levels, several players spoke about skill development when asked about the trajectory of their career in college esports. Player 3 (LoL) spoke of the "severe growth" in his own skills since joining Site 1. Initially, he was only a "Gold 5." After arriving at Site 1 and meeting all his teammates who were Diamond, Master, and Challenger ranks, he wondered "how I got accepted into this." Player 3 (CS: GO) at Site 1 had similar views about an intense leveling-up. Before coming to Site 1, Player 3 characterized himself as an "ok" player. After entering the college esports program, Player 3 said he "gained more ranks there, than I would have with 4 months at home."

In speaking about "effort" as one of the principal characteristics that define a serious leisure orientation, Stebbins (2007) described the characteristic as a personal application of knowledge and skill. Efforts at becoming a better collegiate esports player involve commitment to practicing according to a schedule, learning from other elite collegiate players on the team, and abiding by what coaching and staff recommend to players to stay competitive. However, when Player 3 from Site 1 spoke about his skill development as a college esports player, personal effort and skill development was also contingent upon the technologies the school provided to the students by way of high-end personal gaming computers. For instance, Player 3 explained, "I was playing at 60 hertz at home. That's one of the big reasons why I was at a low skill level. I came here playing on 144 hertz and it was game-changing… pretty much I ranked up all the time here, just because I was playing on that monitor."

Competitive gamers have developed refined sensitivities to how technologies display information that measures in milliseconds (Deleuze, Christiaens, Nuyens, & Billieux, 2017). For Player 3, the gaming monitors purchased by his university, because of their higher refresh rates, were significant enough to have meaningful impacts on his skill development. While personal effort plays a factor in skill development for serious leisure participants, it is important to

acknowledge how non-human, technological artifacts can work together with humans to affect change (Bruno, 2005). In his study of competitive gaming, Taylor (2009) argues that even the less visible technologies around gaming, such as the length of cables and the type of gaming controllers used, can have meaningful impacts on the outcome of competitive play.

When players at Site 1 described the opportunity to practice and train in a dedicated esports arena outfitted with the latest SteelSeries computer peripherals and DXracer gaming chairs, the gamers were tangentially touching upon the larger topic of how significant investments are being made by colleges and universities in esports infrastructure. Site 1's esports arena houses over a dozen top-end iBuyPower gaming personal computers with Intel i7 Core processors and NVIDIA graphics cards. Schools continue to invest in esports infrastructure, approaching millions of dollars in investments, which can influence how students approach their gaming in a more serious manner. Player 1, for instance, argued that the institutional (and financial) support from his college made a difference in how students saw themselves as players, saying with "the esports arena, we have these awesome computers, so it makes it more like a serious setting. It makes you feel like you're there for a reason."

While Player 3 spoke about the significant benefits afforded to players through the use of high-end gaming computers at his school, it is important to note that all college esports players at Site 1 benefited from a type of technological advantage when Riot moved their LoL servers from Portland to Chicago in 2015, where Site 1 is located. Moving the Riot server to Chicago restructured the technological landscape of collegiate esports. Player 6 at Site 1 elaborated further on the point about how important technologies are to skill development, with improvements to server locations leading to experiences where "we are playing on these super machines, at 9 ping. This is flowing like butter. The game plays itself almost, so it's really nice." The significance of Player 6's comment about ping is about the incredibly low number of 9 milliseconds (ms). The closer a player is to a server, the more responsive (less delay) the gaming experience becomes, with anything in the rage of 10 ms being an excellent response time. The comment about how the game almost plays itself speaks to the link between the development of expertise and the role technologies play. Taylor and Elam's (2018) study on how players get better at LoL explored the nexus between the importance of human mechanical skills (timing and precision) coupled with the responsiveness of technologies in creating "expertise as automation" (p. 244). To have that significant of a response time through the school's location to Riot servers was to operate in an environment of such seamless and automatic competitive play that skill development for some of the college esports player was almost assured.

Moving Riot's LoL servers to Chicago reveals that part of the infrastructure of collegiate esports ultimately depends upon the larger corporate rationale of gaming publishers as businesses. The purpose of moving the LoL servers by Riot was to provide a more equitable gaming experience for its player base more centrally located in North America and to even out the disparities on the coastal regions of the United States. However, the movement to Chicago also deeply disadvantages competitive gaming communities that were already on the geographical periphery of Riot's competitive scene. For example, gamers in Hawaii already operate with a handicap due to its location in the Pacific Ocean; moving servers to Chicago created a situation where ping fluctuates as high as 200ms, making it almost impossible for gamers on Riot's geographical competitive margins to be competitive in LoL (Jeffries, 2018). While Stebbins (2007) provides guidance on what a serious orientation towards videogames can look like, the geographies and

technologies of play can interrupt the paths between greater effort, knowledge, experience, and skill development, because so much of collegiate esports is deeply embedded into the technologies and networks of gaming. With the continued development of college esports, digital divides – whether through investments (between collegiate esports programs) or the technological landscape of network transmissions – will continue to be an important issue to address as a way of understanding how students are able to transform their leisure in gaming into something more serious.

Conclusion

Guided by Stebbins' (2007) serious leisure perspective, the authors examined how 16 collegiate esports players at two North American universities reflected on their experience of team-based collegiate esports, how belonging to a collegiate esports scholarship team or club shaped their identity, and the ways in which skills are developed in the collegiate scene.

While collegiate esports players affirmed Stebbins' serious leisure characteristics, the benefits were contextualized by: 1) the novelty of physically being on a team with other college gamers as being an unfamiliar gaming experience; 2) the careful expression of one's gamer identity for college esports players at Site 2 as a nuanced undertaking about how participants wanted to be seen by peers; and 3) esports skill development as a technological process aided by high-end gaming computers and the advantageous location of gaming servers that allowed for low rates of ping.

This paper contributes to research on player perspectives about digital gaming, work, and leisure. It expands the academic discourse around esports by exploring how college esports players conceptualized gaming as committed and serious leisure. Future research about college esports programs may garner deeper insights into the differences in access to gaming technologies and how that may shape player experiences. In addition, future research could investigate ways public perceptions about gaming and esports may shift how players perceive themselves and their commitment to college esports and their identity as college gamers.

References

Adachi, P.J., & Willoughby, T. (2013). Do video games promote positive youth development? *Journal of Adolescent Research, 28,* 155–165.

AnyKey. (2016). Diversity & inclusion in collegiate esports whitepaper. *AnyKey*. Retrieved from https://www.anykey.org/wp-content/uploads/Diversity-and-Inclusion-in-Collegiate-Esports.pdf

Bailey, K. (2018). How Smash Bros became one of Nintendo's most important franchises. *USgamer.* Retrieved from https://www.usgamer.net/articles/how-smash-bros-became-one-of-nintendos-most-important-franchises

Baker, C. (2016). Stewart Brand recalls the first "Spacewar" video game tournament. *Rolling Stone*. Retrieved from https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/stewart-brand-recalls-first-spacewar-video-game-tournament-20160525

Bergstrom, K., Fisher, S., & Jenson, J. (2016). Disavowing 'that guy' identity construction and massively multiplayer online game players. *Convergence, 22*, 233–249.

Bonagura, K. (2017). Ex-USC player Lamar Dawson's lawsuit again NCAA, Pac-12 overpay dismissed. *ESPN*. Retrieved from http://www.espn.com/college-sports/story/_/id/19242998

Brock, T. (2017). Roger Caillois and e-Sports: On the problems of treating play as work. *Games and Culture*, *12*, 321–339.

Brock, T., & Fraser, E. (2018). Is computer gaming a craft? Prehension, practice, and puzzle-solving in gaming labour. *Information, Communication & Society*, *21*(9), 1219–1233.

Bruno, L. (2005). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Crabb, K. C. (2017). The amateurism myth: A case for a new tradition. *Stanford Law & Policy Review*, *28*(2), 181–214.

Deleuze, J., Christiaens, M., Nuyens, F., & Billieux, J. (2017). Shooting at first sight! First person shooter players display reduced reaction time and compromised inhibitory control in comparison to other video game players. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *72*, 570–576.

DiFrancisco-Donoghue, J., Balentine, J., Schmidt, G., & Zwibel, H. (2019). Managing the health of the esport athlete: An integrated health management model. *BMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine*, *5*(1).

Dyer-Witheford, N, & de Peuter, G. (2009). *Games of empire: Global capitalism and video games*. University of Minnesota.

Elkington, S., & Stebbins, R.A. (2014). *The serious leisure perspective: An introduction*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Freeman, G., & Wohn, G.Y. (2017). Social support in esports: Building emotional and esteem support from instrumental support interactions in a highly competitive environment. In *Proceedings of the Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play: CHI PLAY '17*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands (pp. 435–447): ACM Press.

Griffiths, M. (1999). Violent video games and aggression: A review of the literature. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, *4*, 203–212.

Grint, K. (2005). *The sociology of work: An introduction*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Hallmann, K., & Giel, T. (2018). Esports–Competitive sports or recreational activity? *Sport Management Review*, *21*(1), 14–20.

Hayward, A. (2019). NCAA votes to not govern collegiate esports. *The Esports Observer*. Retrieved from https://esportsobserver.com/ncaa-nogo-collegiate-esports/

Heilweil, R. (2019). College esports players are cashing in big. *Wired*. Retrieved from https://www.wired.com/story/infoporn-college-esports-players-cashing-in-big/

Hollist, K. E. (2015). Time to be grown-ups about video gaming: The rising esports industry and the need for regulation. *Arizona Law Review*, *57*, 824–847.

Jeffries, A. (2018). Hawaii's online gaming curse. *The Outline*. Retrieved from https://theoutline.com/post/1424/hawaii-s-online-gaming-curse?zd=1&zi=j2vvd55g

Johnson, M. R., & Woodcock, J. (2017). Fighting games and Go: Exploring the aesthetics of play in professional gaming. *Thesis Eleven*, *138*(1), 26–45.

Kou, Y., & Nardi, B. (2013). Regulating anti-social behavior on the Internet: The example of League of Legends. In *Proceedings of iConference 2013*, 616–622.

Kow, Y. M., Young, T., & Tekinbas, K. S. (2014). Crafting the metagame: Connected learning in the StarCraft II community. *Connected Learning Working Papers*, 1–46.

Kowert, R., Griffiths, M.D., & Oldmeadow, J.A. (2012). Geek or chic? Emerging stereotypes of online games. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, *32*, 471–479.

Kücklich, J. (2005). Precarious playbour: Modders and the digital games industry. *Fiberculture*. Retrieved from http://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precarious-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-games-industry/

Kyle, F., Meyer, J., & Griffiths, M.D. (2013). Competitive and professional gaming: Discussing potential benefits of scientific study. *International Journal of Cyber Behavior, Psychology and Learning*, *3*, 67–77.

Lu, L., Shen, C., & Williams, D. (2014). Friending your way up the ladder: Connecting massive multi-player online game behaviors with offline leadership. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *35*, 54–60.

Markey, P.M., & Ferguson, C.J. (2017). *Moral combat: Why the war on video games is wrong*. Dallas, TX: BenBella Books.

Meadow, B. (2016). UBC students win $180,000 playing esports League of Legends. *Daily Hive*. Retrieved from https://dailyhive.com/vancouver/ubc-esport-league-of-legends-collegiate-championship

Olson, C.K. (2010). Children's motivations for video game play in the context of normal development. *Review of General Psychology*, *14*, 180–187.

Postigo, H. (2003). From Pong to Planet Quake: Post-industrial transitions from leisure to work. *Information Communication & Society*, 6, 593–607.

Rambusch, J., Jakobsson, P. and Pargman, D. (2007). Exploring e-sports: A case study of game play in Counter-Strike. In *3rd Digital Games Research Association International Conference*: Paper presented at "Situated Play", DiGRA 2007 Tokyo, JP (pp. 157–164).

Rojek, C. (1995). *Decentring leisure: Rethinking leisure*. Sage Publications.

Rojek, C. (2010). *The labour of leisure: The culture of free time*. Sage Publications.

Schwartz, S. (2018). Gamers are the new high school athletes: The rise of esports. *Education Week*. Retrieved from https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2018/05/24/gamers-are-the-new-high-school-athletes.html

Screen, K. (2010). *No fun*. New York, NY: Screen Media.

Selnow, G. (1984). Playing videogames: The electronic friend. *Journal of Communication*, *34*, 148–156.

Seo, Y. (2016). Professionalized consumption and identity transformations in the field of esports. *Journal of Business Research*, *69*, 264–272.

Shaw, A. (2013). On not becoming gamers: Moving beyond the constructed audience. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, 2, 1–27.

Sherman, M. (2019). Introducing the RSAA. *RSAA*. Retrieved from https://rsaa.riotgames.com/2019/05/20/introducing-the-rsaa/

Stebbins, R.A. (1982). Serious leisure: A conceptual statement. *The Pacific Sociological Review*, *25*(2), 251–272.

Stebbins, R.A. (1992). *Amateurs, professionals, and serious leisure*. McGill-Queen's Press.

Stebbins, R.A. (2004). *Between work and leisure: The common ground of two separate worlds*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Stebbins, R.A. (2007). *Serious leisure: A perspective for our time*. Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Szoldra, P. (2016). UCI is building a competitive gaming arena. Business Insider. Retrieved from https://www.businessinsider.com/uci-gamers-arena-2016-3

Taylor, N., Bergstrom, K., Jenson, J., & de Castell, S. (2015). Alienated playbour: Relations of production in EVE online. *Games and Culture*, *10*(4), 365–388.

Taylor, N., & Elam, J. (2018). 'People are robots, too': Expert gaming as autoplay. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, *10*(3), 243–260.

Taylor, N.T. (2009). Powerplay: Digital gaming goes pro (Doctoral dissertation). York University, Toronto, CN.

Taylor, T.L. (2003). Power gamers just want to have fun. Paper presented at DIGRA 2003 – Level Up, Netherlands. Retrieved from http://digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/05163.32071.pdf

Taylor, T.L. (2012). *Raising the stakes: E-sports and the professionalization of computer gaming*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Taylor, T.L. (2018). *Watch me play: Twitch and the rise of game live streaming*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Tobias, G., Traut-Mattausch, E., & Osswald, S. (2012). How to ameliorate negative effects of violent video games on cooperation: Play it cooperatively in a team. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *28*(4), 1465–1470.

2017–2018 NCAA Division I Manual. (2017). *NCAA Publications*. Retrieved from http://www.ncaapublications.com/productdownloads/D118.pdf

Witkowski, E. (2012). On the digital playing field: How we "do sport" with networked computer games. *Games and Culture*, *7*(5), 349–374.