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An Ethnography of Early Canadian Varsity Esports

Ben Scholl

University of Windsor, schollb@uwindsor.ca

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ABSTRACT

What follows is an ethnographic study of Canada's first varsity esports program. Esports – formalized competitive videogaming – is a cultural and industrial phenomenon taking root in North America. This research yields rich qualitative data, collected through participant observation and interviews with esports student-athletes, providing insider perspectives on the institutionalization of the organizational field. My interdisciplinary approach offers insight on institutional pressures and their relationship to stakeholders, player agency, and institutional work – broadly speaking the creation, maintenance, and disruption of organizational social institutions. In 2011, institutionalists Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca called for the refocused exploration of the relationship between individuals, their agency, and institutions. Additionally, they emphasized the importance of bridging the gap between critical and institutional views of organizational behaviour. Critical scholars, such as T.L. Taylor, declared the importance of researching esports, for its consequences on our understanding of socio-technical systems and evolving traditional institutions (Taylor, 2018). This thesis' discussion of Foucauldian power dynamics, in relation to its findings, rears significant questions pertaining to the perpetuation of biased institutions via normative isomorphic pressures, as well as meaning making and identity work. Thus, bridging critical and institutional views to explore the trends of progressing professionalization and gamer-identity in the field.

RESEARCH SUMMARY

The findings are structured by three essential themes: practice, competition, and community involvement (game-related and local). The two themes highlighted in the thesis are modes of interaction which categorize the majority of the players' involvement in the Saints Gaming program, practice and competition. Within each theme I have summarized the athlete's experience as I have observed it or as they have been described to me in interviews. Notably, what is entirely missing from this discussion is a fourth mode of involvement: educational studies. Participants' educational involvement was left outside the boundaries of this project, but it should not be forgotten or overlooked. It is important to remember that the participants are *student-athletes*. Thus, in addition to the demands of the varsity program, participants experienced the same demands as any other college student; with the addition of maintaining a 2.0 GPA, as per their NACE mandated contract.

Canadian Varsity Esports at a Glance

Between November 5th, 2019 and February 24th, 2020, I was embedded within the St. Clair College (Windsor, Ontario) varsity esports program, known as Saints Gaming. My first contact with the team was in their esports 'arena', a room on the main campus called 'The Nest'; named as a home for the college's athletic mascot, a griffin. The Nest is a far stretch from what most people likely imagine as an arena. There is no scoreboard, stadium seats, or playing field. The Nest consists of two former study rooms containing rows of Alienware gaming computers, DXRacer gaming chairs, Saints Gaming banners, and a broadcast setup. Professional esports are certainly scaling up,¹ and according to several players in Saints Gaming, varsity is too. During

¹ The concept of an arena is a broad one in esports. It can refer to spaces anywhere from the likes of The Nest up to the Philadelphia Fusion's new dedicated esports arena which broke ground in September 2019 (Wolf, 2019). Fusion Arena, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is budgeted to cost US\$50 million. It is located in the same

interviews, two players reported that the program is set to grow their esports facilities into the lobby outside the Nest, which could be renovated and expanded to include something closer to a live event space with a stage and broadcast setup. If my time within the program has taught me anything, it is not to underestimate the level of investment varsity esports programs are receiving. What began with observing practices in the cramped confines of The Nest, culminated in observing a weekend-long *Super Smash Bros.* (aka. *Smash Bros.*) tournament in Detroit, Michigan. Frostbite 2020, a community-run *Smash Bros.* tournament in its 5th year, hosted over 1,200 competitors from across North America and boasted a prize pool of over US\$12,000. In addition to this event, varsity esports teams travel regularly, generally to the greater-Toronto area, the furthest being to Montreal, Quebec (excluding a canceled trip to Dallas, TX). However, they just as often compete and practice from the comforts of their own homes.

In its third year of existence, the Saints Gaming program consisted of approximately 40 student-athletes, dedicated to nine different esports/games, including *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Siege*, *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, *Overwatch*, *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CSGO)*, *Rocket League*, *Hearthstone*, *Echo Arena VR*, *League of Legends (LoL)*, and *Fortnite*. The 7 participants in this study competed on the *Smash Bros.*, *Overwatch*, *CSGO*, *Hearthstone*, *LoL*, and *Fortnite* teams. They are college students between the ages of 19 and 23, some of whom have moved to Windsor to attend St. Clair and compete for the program. Each one is receiving a base scholarship of CAD\$500 per semester, to represent the school in competition.

While St. Clair College also has a student-run esports club, Saints Gaming is the varsity program officially representing the college, making St. Clair the first Canadian post-secondary institution to support a varsity esports program. The program matches Baker III & Holden's

complex as the city's 4 major North American sports franchises and will include 3,500 seats, a live event space, broadcast facility and team offices (Wolf, 2019).

(2018) definition of a varsity program. Saints Gaming “provide(s) players with scholarships, hires coaches and assigns administrators for them, and officially sponsor(s) the teams for competition in esports tournaments” (p. 64). However, while Saints Gaming may have been Canada’s first fully-fledged varsity program by definition, participants noted that Lambton College (of Sarnia, Ontario) has been offering players scholarships for some time as well. The two colleges have a budding rivalry that culminates in their biannual tournament, the ‘Border City Battle’, which they take turns hosting. Additionally, campuses across the country including, at the universities of McMaster, Ryerson, Toronto, and Waterloo, have been embracing esports to different degrees through student run clubs. Depending on the sport, and level of competition (regular season or playoffs), games have been conducted online or by traveling to compete ‘face-to-face’ with live audiences, as one would expect of traditional varsity sports.

Saints Gaming players signed contracts with the program and were dedicated to one team per semester, e.g. only to the *Overwatch* team. They were required to accept a number of stipulations, including maintaining a minimum 2.0 GPA. As of June 2020, Saints Gaming was the only Canadian member program of the National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE), a governing body seeking to control North American collegiate esports in both the United States and Canada. Saints Gaming teams competed in various leagues and tournaments for each sport including, the NACE-run CSGO tournament, Tespa’s *Hearthstone* and *Overwatch* leagues, and the Collegiate Starleague’s (CSL) *Fortnite* league. These varsity esports leagues (Tespa and CSL) do not compete directly with NACE to govern collegiate esports. However, they do provide the infrastructure and rules for the tournament’s that programs compete in. Furthermore, their agents are often directly in contact with the players to assist them and to facilitate games throughout the season. For example, two participants in the study were nominated as team

coordinators and it was their job to communicate with league organizers over Discord.² During the regular season and playoffs, teams needed to receive a unique code which provided them with access to the dedicated server for their matches. These codes were emailed to team coordinators or direct messaged via Discord.

While *Hearthstone*, *Overwatch*, and *Fortnite* enjoy the structure and legitimacy provided by the support of their game developers and leagues,³ one game/community's grassroots organization stood in stark contrast: *Super Smash Bros.*. The competitive scene for *Smash Bros.* is not supported by its developer, Nintendo, in the same way as other games, especially *Overwatch*, which Blizzard Entertainment keeps exclusive to their own Overwatch League and select collegiate leagues. When asked how aware participants were of traditional or e-sports governing bodies and whether or not they were reflected in the varsity experience, a *Smash Bros.* player said:

For smash, there's no current real governing body. Its basically just individual tournament organizers going, or tournament organizing companies that don't run circuits, just individual events, going "let's run and advertise it and see who shows up". Since there's no governing body like that, those are the only events that the school can send us to. So,

² Discord is a gaming-focused communication app which hosts public and private servers for communities, clans, events, etc. It was used by participants on a daily basis and plays a significant role in the gaming and esports community. See Appendix I for more observations.

³ The leagues played an essential role in the growing varsity scene by facilitating tournaments. They legitimized competition by registering teams, enforcing rules, recording and publishing results, garnering sponsors, financial rewards, and generating awareness through public relations and advertising campaigns. Additionally, both Tespa and CSL worked with game developers, Blizzard Entertainment and Epic Games, for permission to use the game's intellectual property (IP) and for in-game support/private servers, respectively. The leagues' relationship with game developers had undoubtedly contributed to the growth of the sport, by increasing legitimacy and growing prize pools. As lately as April 27th, 2020, CSL partnered with the popular social media app, Tik Tok, to host the 'Tik Tok Cup' – a tournament including Fortnite, LoL, CSGO, and Rocket League, offering CAD\$60,000 in prize (Morrow, 2020). Additionally, CSL recently announced a partnership with Dreamhack, a gaming lifestyle festival with events across North America, where they will host the best local collegiate teams competing on a live stage (CSL, 2020).

that's where we end up going, therefore, almost no interaction from collegiate governing bodies, like the CSL or any similar one.

Thus, the *Smash Bros.* team, community, and tournaments have provided an excellent insight into grassroots esports culture. With one of the busier schedules, the *Smash Bros.* team participated in weekly tournaments on campus, community-run tournaments in Windsor, and road tournaments in Waterloo and Toronto, Ontario. The *Smash Bros.* community is largely organized through online forums and Discord servers. A participant from the *Smash Bros.* team was very active in the Smash community, as a tournament organizer in their hometown, and sought to build a career in esports after earning their diploma in esports administration and entrepreneurship. The Smash community is organized less by league play and more by tournaments, which ranged from student-run to community organized. Players earned their rank and community reputation based on their performance at local and regional tournaments. Tournament tier lists and player-rankings were available on community-driven sites like bracket.com, smash.gg, and liquipedia.net, an esports wiki hosted by the professional club Team Liquid. Detroit, Michigan, which shares an international border with Windsor, Ontario, is home to two 'premier' level tournaments which Saints Gaming players attend, including the previously mentioned Frostbite.⁴

⁴ According to Liquipedia, "major tournaments feature a large prize pool and a good number of top-tier players" and premier tournaments "offer an outstanding prize pool and feature the best players from all over the world. They are commonly held by well-established franchises and are considered especially prestigious amongst the community. These tournaments are also referred to as 'Supermajors'" (Major Tournaments, 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

This research project has been successful in providing answers to the research questions established at its outset. The ethnographic fieldwork conducted at St. Clair College generated a considerable amount of data that describes how student-athletes perceive the demands of their involvement in varsity esports. I have described three themes or categories of demands that are experienced by participants, namely practice, competition, and community involvement. I understand these demands as institutions, which are influenced by isomorphic pressures, and as demands, which can be described by power, economics, and social pressures. A goal of this project, which I believe was accomplished, was to provide a similar quality of ethnographic findings as T.L. Taylor. The detailed findings I have provided here – of student-athlete’s involvement in practice and competition – echo many of Taylor’s findings of professional esports players and streamers in *Raising the Stakes* (2015) and *Watch Me Play* (2018). However, much of the data I collected has yet to be used, the participants’ involvement in their communities has yet to be described, and the themes that were covered could be illustrated in greater detail still.

What findings were presented, were briefly analyzed in the discussion section through a lens of critical cultural theory, including reference to Taylor’s gendered perspective and Foucauldian power dynamics, in conjunction with neo-institutional theory. I believe that ‘institutional work’ is a fruitful site within institutional theory to introduce feminism and critical social theory because it focuses on the contributions of stakeholders to the isomorphic process. In the discussion section, I explored two research sub-questions anchored in institutional theory. I believe I accomplished my goal of contributing to Lawrence et al.’s (2011) call for researchers to understand the individual’s role in institutional theory, their relation to institutions, and to

close the gap between institutionalism and the critical paradigm. Data gathered through observation and interviews provided evidence that participants' actions were partly explicable by institutions adopted under isomorphic pressures and that they had agency in the development of the varsity program. My incorporation of Foucauldian power dynamics, specifically normative and panoptic power, opens a dialogue where institutionalists and critical theorists may explore the role of power in the process of institutional isomorphism, as it contributes to institutional work through individual stakeholders.

Another goal of this research was to identify whether varsity programs perpetuate unjust institutions in an effort to legitimize themselves through isomorphism. While I discovered that specific institutions had been corrected, such as the athletes' right to profit from their success in competition, I found that the field is still very homogenous from a demographic perspective. Within the program there is very little cultural or sexual diversity and, as previously mentioned, this was a concern for some participants; although the culture within the program was unanimously described in positive terms. Homogeneity was expected, as years of research has levied criticism against gaming and esports in general (Pizzo et al., 2019; Shaw, 2015; Taylor, 2015, 2018). However, it did not appear that any conscious actions had been taken to avoid perpetuating masculine hegemonic values of sport, as described by Taylor (Taylor, 2015), or to encourage equal access to esports.

Limitations

This research had several limitations worth acknowledging. First and foremost, fieldwork was conducted at only one varsity program and with a small number of participants. Furthermore, I was only able to observe participants on six of the nine teams in Saints Gaming. For future studies, researchers should work with both varsity programs and esports clubs on

college and university campuses across Canada. Between these two organizational formats there is sure to be variation in the institutions affecting both administration and students. Furthermore, this research focused on the perspectives of a single stakeholder in the organization, the student-athlete. I learned through numerous conversations with the program's coaches that they too have a wealth of knowledge pertaining to the games, culture, the esports scene, leagues, and governing bodies. The majority of the program's coaches are former players and are just as well versed in the games as the players. I believe that future ethnographic research should include several stakeholders within a program, in order to gain a more holistic understanding of its functioning. As Pizzo et al. (2019) had suggested, this would also give a greater understanding of the institution's decision-making processes. Naturally, a multi-level ethnography would take advantage of the different areas of expertise that diverse stakeholders have to offer.

While I would advocate for a larger project, I believe another limitation of this research was that the fieldwork and analysis were carried out by a sole researcher. I relied on my supervisory committee for direction, but the work remained my own. If further research was conducted based on the above recommendations, I don't believe it could be accomplished by a sole researcher. Varsity esports programs are more complex than, for example, a varsity basketball program. Saints Gaming consisted of nine separate sports, and a five-tiered hierarchy; including college administration, program-coordinators, coaches, players and broadcasters. A single researcher would be hard-pressed to be in all places at once if they designed a study to more holistically explore a program, even more so if several organizations were involved. Lastly, from a conceptual perspective, this research was limited to my choice of institutional concepts and the limited critical cultural theories I utilized. I plan on creating a more in-depth critical analysis of my data in future works; however, I believe that there is a plethora of diverse

approaches that would provide enriching and productive analyses of this developing field. As the field is still young, future researchers may provide timely feminist and minority perspectives that I cannot.

Future Research

Looking forward, there is a list of artifacts and spaces that I would recommend researchers study; however, I will provide only a few in addition to concerns provided by participants as a part of their interviews. Participants suggested several topics of interest regarding the optics and functioning of their program. Two players felt it would be worthwhile to explore how their program is received by other students, faculty, college administration, and the competitive community. Two others thought it would be important to have a better understanding of how the programs are run from an administrative level. One participant highlighted travel as an important aspect of their varsity esports experience worthy of further exploration. Lastly, as previously mentioned, a participant felt it was important to question why there is not more sexual and cultural diversity in esports.

I found that third-party technology, which augmented participants' involvement in varsity esports, had become essential to their performance and is worthy of further exploration. Highlights include the Discord app, and community developed artifacts such as, *KovaaK 2.0: The Meta*, the *Hearthstone* meta tracking website hsreplay.net, and *Fortnite*'s user-generated in-game training arenas. From a conceptual perspective, I believe these apps could be investigated with institutional entrepreneurship in mind. This may provide new responses to Lawrence et al.'s (2011) call to understand the relationship between the individual and institutions.

Finally, I would recommend two new spaces for research. Firstly, as Pizzo et al. (2019) had suggested, I believe attention should be dedicated to the high school level, where the latest

development in the organizational field's path to professionalization are taking form. Secondly, future studies might inquire at the governmental level, that is for both esports governance, currently conducted by NACE, and at the federal and provincial levels, as they react to esports as a growing cultural phenomenon. The South Korean esports scene developed into the esports utopia of today, partially due to the government's support through legislation, partnerships, and investment. Additionally, North American collegiate sports have developed into a world class athletics system and entertainment industry, with a streamlined path to professionalization, largely due to the leadership of the NCAA. I believe that governing bodies will play a critical role in the development of North American esports, especially while questions regarding the use of videogame IP loom over the industry's future. As the field grows, governing bodies may look to the South Korean example, and build partnerships with game developers, or shape the future of intellectual property rights.