

An Ethnography of Early Canadian Varsity Esports

By

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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.

DEDICATION

To the memory of my Godfather,

Tim Chevalier

Your unceasing hard work, strength, and dedication to God and family will
forever be an inspiration to me. I love and miss you.

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I'd like to acknowledge the support of my parents Mark and Linda Scholl, as well as my grandparents Hattie & Lou, and Jean & Alec, I love you all and strive to find vocation in my research that lives up to the examples you've made for me.

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Let's hope the following makes you all proud!

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS/SYMBOLS

CQB: Close-quarters combat

CSGO: *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*

CSL: Collegiate Starleague

DOTA: *Defense of the Ancients*

ESL: Electronic Sports League

IOC: International Olympic Committee

KeSPA: Korean Esports Association

LAN: Local area network

LoL: *League of Legends*

MCN: Multi-channel network

NCAA: National Collegiate Athletic Association

NACE: National Association of Collegiate Esports

REB: Research ethics board

Smash Bros.: *Super Smash Bros.* (Ultimate, Brawl, or Melee)

TTK: Time to kill

VoD: Video on demand

NOMENCLATURE

Agency: an “individuals’ ability to intentionally pursue interest and have an effect on the social world, altering the rules or the distribution of resources” (Scott, 2001, as cited in Battilana, 2006, p. 657).

Athlete: a person who is physically adept in sports and competition

Demand: a thing that somebody/something makes you confront, e.g. things that you find difficult, make you tired, worried etc.

Emic: insider analyses, provided by research participants (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 16)

Epistemology: study of knowledge and how we come to learn what can be learned (Reid et al., 2017).

Esports: formalized competitive videogaming

Ethnography: a research paradigm “predicated upon remaining in the field for a lengthy period, staying flexible in terms of what to study and how to study it, and avoiding deception” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 3). Ethnographic data is “obtained by participating subjectively in a world of meanings created by individuals” (Reid et al., 2017, pp. 11-12).

‘Frustration of Power’: resistance against power dynamics.

Gaming: “the act of playing video games, or games with a digital interface” (Bhaduri, 2016, p. 141).

Homogenization: being made the same.

Institution a: an organization infused with value that provides shared rules and typifications (Selznick, 1957; Barley & Tolbert, 1997, as cited in Nite et al., 2019).

Institution b: “more or less taken-for-granted repetitive social behavior that is underpinned by normative systems and cognitive understandings that give meaning to social exchange and thus enable self-reproducing social order” (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008, as cited in Nite et al., 2019, p. 380).

Institutional Entrepreneur: organized actors with sufficient resources to develop new institutions in order to fulfill the opportunity to realize interests that they highly value (DiMaggio, 1988, p. 14, as cited in Battilana, 2006, p. 657).

Institutional Work: a branch of institutional research which calls for a nuanced understanding of an organization’s meaning making systems and acknowledges/questions the role of an individual’s agency in the creation, maintenance, and disruption of institutions (Suddaby, 2010).

Irrationality: “a spring of action or belief that is not readily susceptible of rational explanation, invariably from observer’s position, and not infrequently from that of the subject as well” (Sica, 1990, p. 5).

Isomorphism: “a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 149).

Meta: a community sourced best practices or what most competitive gamers are using.

Noncolonial: (verb) avoiding the imposition of one’s own opinions or practices over the participants’; avoiding bias or overidentification in one’s analysis (Reid et al., 2017, p. 146).

Organizational Field: “organizations that, in aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148).

Perceive: the way one interprets or understands something.

Stakeholder: refers to individuals, groups, or organizations that have a direct or indirect relationship with an organization, and that can be impacted by its policies, actions, and decisions (Bissonette, 2012).

Student-Athlete: a person who is enrolled to study at an educational institution who is physically adept in sports and competition and plays for a varsity team.

Varsity: the sports team representing an educational institution.

INTRODUCTION

“Esports” – the term used to describe formalized competitive video gaming – is an emerging twenty-first century cultural phenomenon whose once niche fanbase is now rapidly growing and is on the verge of becoming mainstream popular culture. Yet, according to T.L. Taylor – author of the canonical esports text: *Raising the Stakes* – competitive gaming finds its North American roots as far back as the 1970’s arcade scene. Esports, as we currently recognize it, was sparked by the popularity of early first-person shooters, such as *Quake* and *Doom* (Taylor, 2015, pp. 5-6). This led to initial face-to-face local area network (LAN) tournaments; the most prominent being the 1996 *Quakecon*, known for its impressive sponsors, prize pool, and venue (p. 7).

The 2000’s were marked by pioneering international projects such as the World Cyber Games, launched in 2000 and sponsored by Samsung and the Government of South Korea. The event was fashioned as the “Olympics of gaming” (Taylor, 2015). The current scene hosts behemoth international tournaments such as the 2018 ‘*DOTA 2 International*’, reportedly boasting a prize pool of over US\$25 million. The reward for first place was valued at approximately US\$11 million (Fernandez, 2019). Furthermore, total North American esports viewership is expected to grow from 454 million in 2019 to 646 million in 2023 (Reyes, 2019). Elsewhere, in the summer of 2014, Robert Morris University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania became the first university to recognize esports as a varsity sport, offering over US\$500 thousand in athletic scholarships (Jenny, Manning, Keiper, & Olrich, 2017). Since its founding in July, 2016, the National Association of

Collegiate Esports (NACE), seeks to govern varsity esports in both Canada and the United States, and elected its first board of directors to pass bylaws improving their ability to enforce their rules (Morrison, 2019). This sequence of formalization suggests that esports has truly arrived in North America and will continue to take root in culture and industry.

Still, one does not simply discuss esports without a nod to the pioneering South Korean scene. In 2007, the South Korean market for esports was estimated to include 10 million regular followers, 225 professional players, 11 clubs, (Taylor, 2015, pp. 17-18) and a dedicated television channel (Jenny et al., 2017, p. 2). The South Korean government embraced their citizens' passion for gaming and esports in 1999, creating the Korea Game Development and Promotion Institute as a part of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. They chose to support the development of the industry through a series of comprehensive policies (Taylor, 2015, p. 20)¹. Meanwhile, the industry benefited from corporate sponsors, such as Samsung and major South Korean mobile phone companies KTF, SK Telecom, and Pantech, who eagerly tapped into the South Korean pastime to generate new customers (p. 23). Private industry still works closely with the government through the intermediary organization KeSPA, the Korean esports Association, which is approved by the Ministry of Culture and managed by leading corporate executives. KeSPA is involved with the regulation and organization of Korean esports professionals

¹ More information on South Korean esports policy is available in *Raising the Stakes* (2015) Table 1.1 (Taylor, 2015, p. 21).

and tournaments (p. 25). South Korea is relevant to my research as a referent case for institutional theory, due not only to the size and scale of the South Korean esports market, but also the essential support provided by public institutions. The result is an illustrative example of a fully institutionalized esports industry in juxtaposition to the emerging Canadian varsity context in which teams, leagues, governing organizations, and institutions are still being developed.

Fortuitously, as a student at The University of Windsor who is interested in the development of esports, Windsor, Ontario's own St. Clair College recently became the "first post-secondary institution in Canada to fully recognize and embrace esports with varsity teams and campus events" (St. Clair College, 2019).² As there is a dearth of existing research on the development of varsity esports in Canada, this project is a unique opportunity to conduct an ethnographic study of an emerging varsity esports program and, in so doing, generate a rich, qualitative description of the phenomena.³ The overarching research question underpinning my project is: *How do student-athletes perceive the demands of their involvement in varsity esports?*⁴ The reason for this broadly framed research question is to assist my entry into the field free of *a priori* assumptions of what needs to be observed. By conducting fieldwork without pre-existing notions of

² According to a survey conducted by Baker III & Holden (2018) there are three categories of collegiate esports teams including, teams representing varsity programs, club teams, and privately formed recreational teams. Varsity programs recruit players to the school, which distinguishes varsity teams from private recreational pursuits in court. Furthermore, they provide players with scholarships, hire coaches and assign administrators for them, and officially sponsor the teams for competition in esports tournaments (Baker III & Holden, 2018, p. 64).

³ See operative definition of 'ethnography' in the nomenclature section.

⁴ See operative definitions in the nomenclature section.

what one is looking for, one may allow participants the leeway to guide my research towards issues of importance. Consequently, a second goal of this research is to seek answers to the following sub-questions:

- i. *in what ways, if at all, do student-athletes display evidence of action explicable by ‘institutions’⁵ and adopted under ‘isomorphic pressures’ – which are forces driving a process of homogenization – and,*
- ii. *in what ways, if at all, do student-athletes have ‘agency’⁶ in the development of the organization?*

Answers to these questions may help bolster our understanding of how institutions are adopted and how they affect institutional work.⁷ Furthermore, they converge with social justice-driven concerns regarding student-athlete’s agency in the perpetuation of potentially exploitative and/or predatory varsity institutions (Baker III & Holden, 2018). A related and final goal of this research is to determine if unjust institutions are adopted through isomorphism and institutional work in varsity esports programs.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

To break ground on this new site of research, I chose to follow T.L. Taylor’s example and implement an ethnographic study of the St. Clair College program. My methodological approach straddles the ethnographic, qualitative, and critical paradigms. As described by Read, Grieves, and Kirby, the ethnographic paradigm is one in which

⁵ See operative definitions in the nomenclature section.

⁶ See operative definitions in the nomenclature section.

⁷ See operative definition of ‘institutional work’ in the nomenclature section.

qualitative knowledge is derived by lived experience and “obtained by participating subjectively in a world of meanings created by individuals” (Reid et al., 2017, pp. 11-12). From an ontological perspective, the ethnographic paradigm subjects knowledge of existence to people’s perception of existence (p. 12). This means that when conducting an ethnography, one must allow informants to define their situation, and weigh the informant’s perspective more heavily than one’s own. Regarding issues of social justice, the ethnographic paradigm is important because, epistemologically,⁸ it grants participants the agency to construct knowledge of their own experiences, while also encouraging the researcher to participate and share in those experiences. Thus, ethnographers grant primacy to ‘emic’ (or insider) analyses, conducting research not just to mine data but to learn about participants theoretical and pragmatic insights (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 16). This shows a higher degree of empathy and willingness to understand issues of social justice from the perspective of those most impacted. Ethnographers provide what Gilbert Ryle calls ‘thick descriptions’; an influential concept in ethnography, popularized by Clifford Geertz, referring to accounts of behaviour that provide rich context, without which meaningful interpretation is impossible (p. 16). Through interviews and participant observation, I will attempt to provide thick descriptions of the program’s institutions, how they have come to be, the ways in which they affect players ‘work’, and the role players have in creating, disrupting or maintaining said institutions.

⁸ See operative definition in the nomenclature section.

My guide in understanding ethnographic research methods has been *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor, 2012). The authors are all well accomplished ethnographers whose research takes place in virtual worlds, such as *World of Warcraft*, and *Second Life*. While my research does not take place in a ‘virtual world’, it is only a step removed, and requires many of the same considerations. The lessons presented in *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds* (2012) remain applicable to ethnographers situated in the ‘real world’ because, as the authors mention, the ethnographic paradigm does not undergo any fundamental changes in its translation to virtual worlds. This is due to the practice of constant iteration and the customization of methods to unique field sites as research develops (p. 4). However, to say that “my methodology or research method is an ethnography” is not so straight forward. Boellstorff et al. (2012) describe an ethnographer’s role as a combination of both the fieldworker and the theorist/writer, claiming that this unified role of method and theory is central to understanding ethnography. Thus, ethnography is not a clearly defined method; it is not in the same category as interviews and surveys. Rather “ethnography is the written product of a palette of methods, but also a methodological approach in which participant observation is a critical element, and in which research is guided by experience unfolding in the field” (Boellstorff et al. 2012, p. 15). As such, my ‘palette of methods,’ so to speak, will consist of participant observation and one-on-one interviews.

Firstly, according to Boellstorff et al. (2012), participant observation is the cornerstone of ethnography and entails “the embodied emplacement of the researching self in a field site as a consequential social actor” (p. 65). Furthermore, it is through

participant observation that we can immerse ourselves in a social context, in which the activity of our research takes place, in order to gain an intimate view of its substance and meaning (p. 65). For the purposes of my research, I have attained research ethics board (REB) clearance, from both my home institution and St. Clair College, to conduct participant observation from within Saints Gaming. In addition to REB clearance, I also acquired the permission of the Saints Gaming program coordinator, and the informed consent of student-athletes.

Naturally, when carrying out participant observation, my participation is required to an extent. Given the nature of esports as an assemblage of the player and videogame, participation is essential in order to fully understand the activity. Participant observation is an appropriate methodological choice in line with ethnographic and games studies scholarship (Aarseth, 2003; Consalvo & Dutton, 2006; Karppi & Sotamaa, 2012). Although, issues arise due to the competitive aspect of this form of play, and boundaries should be drawn to delineate when it is appropriate for the researcher to participate through play. However, as Boellstorff et al. note, one need not conduct brain surgery to understand surgeons (p. 65); likewise, I do not need to compete in esports to understand the competitors. Still, practicing with players, attending meetings, and other day-to-day events can yield fruitful insights. Boellstorff et al. emphasize the importance of taking extensive fieldnotes and suggests methods for doing so while actively participating, especially in gameplay. They recommend quickly noting interesting occurrences such as: encountered individuals, events, surroundings, and resources in use. Furthermore, using shorthand during participation and expanding on the experience in depth afterwards, so as

not to disrupt others, is recommended. Yet, Boellstorff et al. also stressed that recording participant's statements as accurately as possible is crucial in creating a convincing ethnography (pp. 82-83). In my experience, conducting observation, for the majority of the time spent in the field, generated a significant amount of detailed and accurately recorded data. Lessons learned through observation were later reinforced and expanded on during scheduled participant observation meetings with the student-athletes.

Secondly, I have conducted seven face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Data collected from interviews are considered invaluable to any ethnographic study, but according to Boellstorff et al. they are not enough on their own to constitute a legitimate ethnography; they must be used in addition to participant observation which helps clarify the relation between what participants say and do (p. 92). Interviews provide an opportunity to understand informants' perception of social experiences, their social dynamics and cultural conventions, and to hold private discussions which may reveal otherwise difficult to access opinions and beliefs (pp. 92-93). I conducted semi-structured interviews, which allowed for variation in questioning and more 'give and take' between interviewer and interviewee (Reid et al., 2017, p. 149). Furthermore, interviewing works hand-in-hand with participant observation, by completing a feedback loop in which participant observation helps identify topics to focus on in further interviews and vice versa (p. 94).

Boellstorff et al. describe three valuable sources of data which interviews help an ethnographer obtain. First, is the "opportunity to learn about people's elicited narratives and representations of their social world". Second, is to "study social dynamics and

cultural conventions from a range of perspectives that may not always see the light of day in group interactions”. And third, is to access beliefs and opinions only privileged to private discussions (p. 93). As previously mentioned, these types of data, once collected, can help to identify more focused points of interest for further participant observation. I have utilized this feedback loop in my ethnographic study by beginning, as noted, with observation/participant observation, building a rapport with the team and following up with one-on-one interviews to glean more in-depth understandings of their experiences. This method is appropriate for my research question because it allows me to seek access to more private opinions of those involved in the varsity esports community. Addressing personal topics, such as participants’ agency, can be tricky to approach in a critical conversation, because participants are reliant on the program/college for their scholarships and education, among other benefits. It is important to protect the participant from repercussions that could result from sharing a critical perspective; this requires privacy and nuance which a semi-structured, one-on-one interview can provide.

Once removed from the field, I began expanding upon, analyzing, and referencing fieldnotes and artifacts. Efforts have been made to protect the team’s strategies as well as the privacy of participants. A common approach to doing so is encoding notes and withholding sensitive data from the final report. It is also essential to remain ‘noncolonial’, meaning the researcher must not impose their opinions or practices on the participants, which is part of avoiding bias or overidentification in one’s analysis (Reid et al., 2017, p. 146). Proper analysis of field notes involves identifying themes and patterns, or as Bell, Blythe and Sengers put it: to “make strange” our field site once again,

allowing us to trace our work back from outsider to insider, and note moments of curiosity and confusion (as cited in Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 168). Moments of confusion, or observations that directly negate our findings, are not to be discarded or dismissed. These notes often lead to discoveries and deeper understandings of cultural phenomena (p. 169). It is important to keep in mind that these are discoveries to be highlighted and learnt from, that they are not necessarily negating or defeating.

The analysis of my fieldnotes and interview data was conducted based on the explanatory qualitative approach used in a similar project by Pizzo, Jones, and Funk and popularized by Braun and Clarke, in their widely cited 2006 publication “Using thematic analysis in psychology”. Furthermore, I have drawn upon a similar method described by Boellstorff et al. To be consistent with the ethnographic paradigm, I ensured my thematization of the data was conducted in an inductive fashion, maintaining the integrity of the participants’ perceptions and emic insights. Braun and Clarke recommend six phases to the process, familiarizing yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). Similarly, Boellstorff et al. (2012) recommend a 5-step process beginning with, first, refamiliarizing one’s self with the data. Second, they systematize the dataset by initially annotating, tagging or labeling it. The third step involves coding based on higher-level constructs. Fourth, they recommend thematizing the data by, once more, coding and looking for patterns or critical moments present throughout the set, which ultimately leads to the fifth step, the forming of high-level themes (pp. 164-167). The two processes, henceforth referred to as thematic analysis and

ethnographic analysis, by Braun & Clarke and Boellstorff et al. respectively, are quite similar and as a result I utilized a hybrid of the two as described in the following data analysis section.

These methods worked to answer my ethnographic research question because they helped me build a foundational understanding of the social context in which varsity esports programs are emerging on Canadian post-secondary campuses, a terrain which is under-examined in existing academic research. Epistemologically⁹, many may argue against participant observation, because the method positions the researcher too close to the subject involved in the observation. However, as Boellstorff et al. have noted, this works in favor of an ethnographer in helping to understand the subject position of the participants, since this can be partially informed by one's own position. They noted that practical knowledge, appropriate behavior, and challenges faced by a culture or group can be best understood by membership (p. 66). Finally, fieldnotes from participant observation are very useful, once analyzed, to identify a focus for interview questions. I intended to carry out preliminary observations in order to 'lay the groundwork' for interviewing, thus taking advantage of the aforementioned feedback loop.

Data Generation

Work on data collection began in the summer of 2019, beginning with the process of applying for clearance from The University of Windsor and St. Clair College research

⁹ Epistemology: regarding one's theory of knowledge and how we come to learn what can be learned (Reid et al., 2017)

ethics boards (REBs). This process shaped the fieldwork to come in several ways beginning with, the timeline for data collection, the methods to be deployed, and the ways in which they were eventually carried out. Overall, the REB clearance process was informative and had positive impacts on each aspect of the project they affected. Originally, the fieldwork was set to unfold over a single semester, beginning in September and ending in December 2019. However, because the process of gaining clearance took longer than expected, fieldwork was delayed and began on November 5th in the midst of the esports program's fall season. This turned out to be beneficial because the end date was push back to February 2020 and, as a result, I was able to capture the players experiences during regular season, playoffs, the fall-winter tryouts, and a major road tournament scheduled in February.

Lastly, the REB process helped refine the administration of my ethnographic methods in a formalized, respectful, and ethical manner. I found the formalities required to gain clearance, such as the use of 'consent to participate' forms,¹⁰ led to creating an immediately understood formal relationship between myself and participants. Furthermore, it lent structure and formality to the implementation of my methods, e.g. reviewing the participants' rights at the opening of the interview script and asking for participant's consent for observation. These actions helped avoid forming dual relationships throughout the duration of fieldwork. This is not to say that, as a researcher, I believe participants viewed me as cold or unfriendly, but that there was a clear

¹⁰ See Appendix A

understanding that, while building a friendly rapport, I was conducting my research with all respect and seriousness.

As mentioned, fieldwork began in earnest on November 5th, 2019, with clearance from, The University of Windsor and St. Clair College REBs, the Saints Gaming program administrator, and the program's Senior Operating Group. Participant recruitment was carried out, with the coaches' permission, during a break in the team's practice when students were welcome to stay or leave. In order to avoid passing undue influence onto participants, the relationship between myself and program administration/coaches was kept to an administrative end throughout the course of the study; although coaches frequently and freely offered input on questions asked during observation. Seven students responded to my recruitment efforts via email and subsequently agreed to meet, discuss, and sign the consent to participate forms. Saints Gaming operates similar to an Olympic team or a track and field team, in that they compete under the college's 'Saints Gaming' banner but in their respective sports/games. Thus, in the same way the Canadian Olympic team consists of mutually exclusive basketball, soccer, and volleyball teams, the Saints Gaming program consists of nine different teams; of which the consenting participants represented two-thirds.¹¹

In order to protect the participants' confidentiality, each was assigned a code to be referred to in all observational notes and interviews. However, as they were informed in

¹¹ Comparisons to traditional sports institutions, such as this, are an example of what Pizzo et al. (2019) refer to as cognitive strategies utilized by collegiate esports directors in the United States, as a means to legitimize and situate their program within the values of athletics departments.

the consent form, anonymity would be impossible to protect due to the small size of their program, individual teams, and the information regarding their involvement with Saints Gaming made publicly available online. Furthermore, while it would be ideal to have all teammates participating, this was an unlikely scenario and thus, those consenting to participate could be easily identified by their non-consenting teammates. This being the case, the rights of all bystanders were protected through the use of a coded note taking system, in which individuals not assigned a code were excluded from fieldnotes. Each extract used in this study was required to have an accompanying participant code. This was another essential tool inspired by REB review.

The first instance of observation began on November 17th, 2019. Participants were most frequently observed during their practice time, other activities included regular season competition, playoffs, a LAN event, and road tournaments. Observational notes were recorded by hand in a dual-page entry journal format, meaning participant codes and observations were recorded on the left page and expanded notes on the right. These notes were then digitized, away from the field, and kept securely encrypted when not in use. Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were scheduled with each participant starting in January 2020. Interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes on average; running as short as 25 minutes (when a participant ran late) and as long as 75 minutes. Private study rooms were booked on St. Clair's campus for each interview. An interview script was used to provide consistency to the introduction; which reminded participants of their

right to refuse any questions and to ask questions of their own.¹² Additionally, participants were asked to restrain from providing any identifying information in their answers, in order to protect bystander confidentiality.

Participants were also asked for permission to have the interview recorded before commencing and were provided the option to review the transcript afterwards in a follow-up interview. Each transcript was initially generated with voice-to-text software and was later reviewed and edited by myself to ensure word-for-word accuracy. The interview questions were designed to be open-ended and began with a ‘warm-up’ section to help participants settle-in to what can be an intimidating setting for some. These questions were short and based on the participant’s life. Several were simple demographic questions. Others were meant to be fun such as, “what does your gamertag mean? Or why did you choose it?”, which was inspired by Adrienne Shaw’s work in *Gaming at the Edge* (2015). The main body of the interview included questions inspired by the ethnographic research question and sub-questions. Lastly, interviews were wrapped up by asking participants whether they believed anything had been overlooked, or if there were any questions they thought should be asked in the future.

It was originally planned to do a second round of ‘gaming-interviews’, also inspired by Shaw’s work. Gaming-interviews would involve the participant and interviewer playing a game together during a semi-structured interview, in order to create a relaxed and familiar environment. However, time ran short and on February 24th, 2020,

¹² See interview schedule and questions in Appendix B

I left the field as per the scheduled REB end-date. Yet, this is a method that I believe may be very well suited to this particular field of research, as it combines several interesting dynamics for both the researcher and participant. For the researcher, such an interview format would combine the participant observation, and interviewing methods. For the participant, a gaming-interview combines the familiar activities of gaming, and streaming. To be clear, that is not to say the interview should be live-streamed, but that conducting an interview with a participant while gaming creates a conversation similar to one a live streamer conducts with their audience.

Towards the end of the scheduled fieldwork, mid-February, participant observation meetings were scheduled with participants. Due to time constraints only two sessions occurred, providing insight into competitive play for the long-running franchise *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* and the incredibly popular *Fortnite*. Interestingly, I had experience playing both of these games, although only at a casual level. During participant observation, notes were taken in the same dual-entry journal format.¹³ Participation was carried out in a format specific to the game being played.

For *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, which is an animated fighting party-game featuring a large cast of famous Nintendo characters (e.g. Mario, Luigi, Link, and Donkey Kong), the participant and I played in the conventional competitive format: a one-on-one, best of 3, 3-stock matchup. This means a total of 3 rounds could be played, within which each player is given 3 stocks (or lives) to defeat their opponent. Once a

¹³ See Appendix C

competitor has depleted their opponent's 3 stocks, they win the round. The participant was told not to hold back during participant observation so that the difference in our skill level would be evident. After being soundly defeated, landing only one attack over three rounds, we discussed the match and the participant provided insights on my gameplay. We then moved to the in-game practice mode, so that the participant could teach me what they considered to be the basics of the game and the fundamentals of competitive play. Afterwards, returning to the competitive head-to-head format, we gauged my ability to implement the fundamentals and further discuss competitive play.

For participant observation of *Fortnite*, the participant allowed me to log into their 'update account'. The game is free to play in its base format, so the participant had created several free accounts, enabling them to log in and install weekly hot-patches on each of the program's computers at once. *Fortnite* is a 'battle royale'-style game, meaning it places a large number of competitors onto an arena-style map, which consists of a large virtual landscape with defined borders, in this case an island. Competitors begin each match with no possessions and are meant to search the map for 'loot', which consists of an array of weapons and resources. They eliminate their opponents by 'killing' them in militaristic firefights. A key game mechanic is that the outer border of the arena slowly collapses inwards and forces the competitors into a more confined space, resulting in more fighting and eliminations. In *Fortnite*, this mechanic comes in the form of a storm, at the beginning the entire island is in the eye of the storm and as the game progresses the eye of the storm collapses inwards. Varsity *Fortnite* is popularly played in duos, teams of two, and a match ends once one or two players representing a single team

are the last living competitor(s) on the map. With this in consideration we began participant observation for *Fortnite* by entering a user-generated practice map, designed to help competitive players practice game mechanics. Here, the participant taught me the basics of competitive play and strategy. We then entered what we thought to be the typical public matchmade game mode, against random players. However, as we played, we came to realize that matchmaking was skill-level based and the participant's update account had never actually been played on, thus was at the lowest skill-level. Our experience was hampered by the fact that there were very few actual human opponents in the match, but rather non-player, artificially intelligent characters intended to help first time players get used to the game before encountering human opponents. Nonetheless, we played multiple matches, hoping to encounter more human opponents, and discussed how fundamentals and strategy translated to in-game experience, as well as how to operate as a duo. While the lack of competitive human opponents certainly diminished the experience, in that I could not directly encounter a varsity-level *Fortnite* player in-game, I still found the implementation of game mechanics to be difficult and informative. Once more, double-entry journal notes, and observations were taken throughout and digitized afterwards.

Data Analysis

The data was collected from fieldwork through a hybrid of thematic and ethnographic analytic approaches. The first step in the process, in either approach, involves familiarizing one's self with the data collected during fieldwork. In line with

Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis (refer to Appendix D), this step was accomplished by transcribing the interview data and rereading observational field notes (p. 87). For comparison, Boellstorff et al.'s (2012) ethnographic analysis recommends 'becoming friends' with the data through a slow and immersive re-reading, re-experiencing, and re-examining of the data (p. 165). Regardless of the specific approach, this step is important because it serves two purposes: transcribing the data into digital form and reintroducing the researcher to data collected several months earlier, now under a focused analytical context, as opposed to the fast-paced environment of the field site.

During analysis, it is impossible to completely set aside the subjectivity of the researcher. We should avoid creating labels or codes that apply theory to the data. Instead, I found that labeling where theoretical concepts were present on the surface level of the data, allowed the participants to speak through the data, while still guiding my analysis towards answers to my research questions. Boellstorff et al. (2012) put it uniquely, saying that "[a]nswers to research questions lie within the data – and furthermore, new questions inhabit the data as well, questions that stood outside the universe of the thinkable when we originally designed the project" (p. 166). For this reason, I believe that a broad ethnographic research question is advantageous because the participants may guide the researcher to new questions and issues of importance through the data traces they leave behind.

Similarly, the second step of analysis involved a considerable amount of crossover between the two approaches. I chose to closely follow the ethnographic approach that organizes data by "tagging; that is labeling data with micro-units such as

‘gender,’ ‘conflict,’ (or) ‘alts,’(and) then moving to coding” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 165). Boellstorff et al. (2012) note that, while qualitative data analysis programs are available to assist with this, they recommend an approach that incorporates the researcher because automated processes miss out on the contextual elements of ethnographic data (pp. 165-166). This process was initially carried out by physically annotating the original fieldnotes in their dual-page entry journals. The interview transcripts were digitally annotated in Microsoft Word by attaching comments to each extract. In a separate journal, notes were taken for each occasion of field work (e.g. Hearthstone practice on January 23rd or a participant interview), detailing critical observations, questions that arose, future questions to ask, and how theoretical constructs may be present in the data that had just been labeled. An additional step was taken at this stage, ‘operationalizing’ the data, making it more accessible and efficient to work with by copying each extract into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. For each label, that had been applied to an extract in the fieldnotes and interviews, a column was added to the spreadsheet that could be marked by a ‘1’ or ‘0’, indicating whether or not the label had been applied to the corresponding extract (see Appendix E). The result is a digital copy of the entire data set, which can be filtered by any combination of labels, codes, or themes. Additionally, for convenience, extracts can be copied and pasted directly into the final report to provide evidence of findings.

For the remaining steps of the analysis I deferred to the ethnographic approach and ended up working in reverse. As steps three through five, Boellstorff et al. (2012) recommend coding the dataset based on higher constructs. Then thematizing the data by

coding for “patterns and critical moments where a phenomenon is echoing throughout”. And lastly, “[developing] higher-level themes by linking or juxtaposing coded units” (pp. 166-167). Before approaching these steps, I returned to the ethnographic research question to ensure the goals of the research were still in focus. At that time, I decided to operationalize two key terms: ‘demands’ and ‘involvement’, terms which I believe are crucial to answering my research questions. Having clear definitions of key terms is integral to this process, as they clearly identify what elements constitute the phenomenon to be coded and thematized, as I did in the fourth and fifth steps. These definitions are outlined in the following section.

The third step of either approach involves combining initial codes or labels, into 2nd order codes. In their recommendations for ethnographic analysis, while not clearly separating this step from the second, Boellstorff et al. (2012) provide a definitional difference between the form of ‘tags/labels’ and ‘codes’, noting that is mostly heuristic (p. 165). They define codes as “a systematic categorizing of data with higher-level constructs such as ‘player notions of work/play’” (p. 165). In my experience, the process of tagging resulted in a multitude of labels which needed to be reduced. The need to reduce labels aligned with Braun & Clarke’s description of the third step of thematic analysis: “[c]ollating codes into potential themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). Upon doing so, the resulting 2nd order codes consisted of low-level conceptual buckets describing the project’s findings, which are the first step to revealing the overarching high-level themes. If one visualizes a funnel (see Appendix F), the overarching high-level themes would be the large opening at the top. While not the lowest level of analysis, 2nd

order codes are the first iteration of categorizing the findings by some rationalized 'higher-level constructs'. Further analysis of the dataset, towards a micro scale, involves investigating the individual data extracts, which derive from the participants, and the labels applied to them (labels which show the first attempt at rationalizing the data).

Constitutive Elements of a Demand

The decision-making process for generating themes and codes from my dataset, as alluded to above, began by operationalizing key terms in my ethnographic research question. I believe the answers to my question largely hinged on how one defined the term 'demands'. As a result, I sought to triangulate (by analyzing from several perspectives) an operative definition by analyzing an array of dictionary definitions. I chose to use dictionary- rather than academic definitions because I believe that the dictionaries provide an understanding that is more in line with how my participants may regularly use the word 'demands'. Furthermore, as Boellstorff et al. recommend, a goal of ethnographic research should be not only to provide rich detail with academic rigour, but also to reach the broadest audience possible with as much clarity as possible (pp. 193-194). Thus, I chose to reference the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, which commonly tops my google search results, and the Oxford English Learner's Dictionary, which is geared towards learners of English as a non-native language. I believe these two sources provided definitions that closely aligned with my understanding of, and intentions in using, the term 'demands', at the time of writing my research question. Additionally, I referenced the Oxford Dictionary of English and Cambridge Academic Content

Dictionary, both of which provide definitions geared to academics by including additional context and information.

I began to triangulate my definition of demands by first collecting all possible definitions of the term from each source. I then underlined aspects of each definition that struck me as unique or important. Next, I highlighted terms that needed to be further defined and utilized each source once more to triangulate a definition of the additional terms. For example, the first definition of demand provided by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary is “an act of demanding or asking especially with authority” (“Demand,” Merriam-Webster.com, n.d.). For this definition I underlined ‘asking’ and ‘with authority’, as I found these aspects were critical to conveying its meaning. However, I believed that ‘authority’ could use further clarification. Authority can be defined as the “power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behaviour” (“authority,” Merriam-Webster.com, n.d.) or “the right to act in a specified way, delegated from one person or organization to another” (Stevenson, Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010a). From the first definition, I highlighted the importance of the phrases ‘power to influence’ and ‘thought, opinion, or behaviour’; and from the second, ‘delegated from one person or organization’. As a result of this process, I have one possible understanding of the word ‘demand’ that features an aspect of authority, which can be given to someone from a person or organization, and which provides them the power to influence thoughts, opinions, or behaviours. The process was repeated for a total of 19 definitions of demand. For each definition key aspects were underlined, but additional definitions were not always required.

Once a detailed set of definitions was created, I began to note the questions provoked by each, as well as the differences and similarities across the set. I then selected the definitions that seemed the most critical or thought provoking, which were eight in total. These eight definitions were categorized based on, what I found to be, four constitutive elements (meaning an observable demand consists of one or more of these elements): a condition, requests with authority, economics, and pressure.

Demands: A condition

After identifying the four elements and plotting the definitions on a Venn diagram,¹⁴ it quickly became clear that the first, a condition, was actually present regardless of the demand and was more of an ‘ontological’ element, meaning it describes a state of being. For this reason, I changed the diagram to position this element as a frame surrounding the others, as opposed to a circle of its own. Demand understood as a condition was defined as:

1. “A seeking or state of being sought after” (“Demand,” Merriam-Webster.com, n.d.)

To understand this definition an exploration of the term ‘state’ was necessary. Definitions included: “a mode or condition of being”, “a condition of mind or temperament”, “a condition of abnormal tension or excitement” (“State,” Merriam-Webster.com, n.d.), or “the particular condition that someone or something is in at a specified time” (Stevenson, *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2010e). Furthermore, the *Oxford Dictionary of English*

¹⁴ See Appendix G

(2010) included the common phrase “a state of affairs (or things)” (Stevenson, 2010e). Thus, regardless of the demand, an individual must be in some state of being, whether it is of the mind or body, or some abnormal tension or excitement. For this reason, I understood a condition as a foundational element of a demand; which will be present in, or even define, the following three elements.

Demands: Requests with Authority

The first constitutive element, in no particular order, is requests with authority.

This element can be understood through three definitions, of demand:

2. “an act of demanding or asking especially with authority” (“Demand,” Merriam-Webster.com, n.d.),
3. “an insistent or peremptory request, made as a right” (Stevenson, Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010b),¹⁵
4. and “something asked for forcefully, or something that you accept as necessary” (“Demand,” Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary, 2009).

As previously mentioned, authority is understood as the power to influence or command thoughts, opinions, or behaviours and is delegated to someone by another person or organization. Across each definition, two things are common, that a request is made and that there is some form of authority present. The term ‘peremptory’ means “having the expectation of immediate and complete obedience, or to be obeyed without explanation” (“Peremptory,” Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary, 2009). I believe that in order

¹⁵ See Appendix H for the definitions of all additional terms, such as ‘peremptory’.

for one to make a peremptory request, a sense of authority must be felt. And to ask for something forcefully, the use of power is implied; power which can be derived from a source of authority.¹⁶ On this point, I have chosen to introduce Foucauldian power dynamics, based on my findings, to introduce a critical cultural analysis. Identifying demands on a participant, which include a request with authority, may help describe how power dynamics are present in a student-athlete's involvement in varsity esports. Furthermore, understanding power dynamics helps contextualize the degree of agency student-athletes have to create, maintain, and disrupt institutions, which in turn helps reveal how their actions are shaped by said institutions.

Demands: Economic

As the second constitutive element, economic definitions of demand were present in each dictionary consulted. However, I chose to isolate two from Merriam-Webster's:

5. "The quantity of a commodity or service wanted at a specified price and time",
6. And "the requirement of work or the expenditure of a resource" ("Demand," Merriam-Webster.com, n.d.).

As will be explored in the discussion section, participants often framed their involvement in varsity related activities as representatives, advertisements or recruiters for both Saints

¹⁶ In my summation, the essence of Michel Foucault's theory of power can be understood in at least two key ways: 1) sovereign power which operates through corporeal discipline and punishment (physically targeting the body), and 2) biopower which disciplines invisibly and ubiquitously; surrounding, penetrating, permeating, and influencing one's entire being (Foucault, 1995).

Gaming and St. Clair College. In this context, a demand can be understood as the requirement of work or expenditure of a resource/commodity. I chose the above definitions because they included, what I understand as, the critical terms: commodity, resource, and expenditure. Crucially, both commodities and resources can be understood as comprising expenditures of human labour. More so, a commodity can be defined as being “subject to ready exchange or exploitation within a market” (“Commodity,” Merriam-Webster.com, n.d., emphasis added). Because varsity student-athletes identify themselves as advertisements, in the course of their involvement with the program, such involvement can be considered labour and the demands related to it exemplify this economic element. Furthermore, as will be discussed in the findings section, participants have compared the time they spent on varsity related activities to time spent working at part-time jobs. This sentiment parallels the economic sense of ‘demand’ as a resource spent and subjected to market forces. As a result, the varsity esports-related demands on student-athletes could be subjected to critical analysis through a Marxist political-economic lens.

None of the identified elements, including the economic, are mutually exclusive. As previously mentioned, each one overlaps and can be visualized in the form of a Venn diagram, with the element of a condition being represented as a frame or border surrounding it (see Appendix G). In this case, demands can be exclusively economic but are never present outside of a condition or state of being, e.g. an economy. Furthermore, an economic demand may include a request with authority or some other form of pressure. An economic demand may also contain a request with authority through the

requirement of an ‘expenditure’, which is “the use of energy, time, or other resources” (Stevenson, Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010c). A requirement is “a thing that is compulsory: a necessary condition” (Stevenson, Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010d). Thus, if an economic demand comes in the form of a required expenditure of resources it may align with any of the three definitions of demands classified as requests with authority. Such a demand may be something that you accept as necessary, which is being requested as of a right, or as the result of some form of authorization. An example of this could be contract-mandated practice time for student-athletes.

Demands: Pressure

Finally, demand can be defined within the context of a condition of increased pressure, simply as:

7. “pressing requirements” (Stevenson, Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010b),
8. Or, as a “thing that somebody/something makes you do, especially things that are difficult, make you tired, worried, etc.” (Hornby, Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 1995).

The second definition is, as a result of this triangulating process, the operative definition of demands that I will use for analyzing my findings. This definition contains two unique elements. First, it allows for the source of a demand to be either human or non-human actors. Thus, demands can be placed on student-athletes from other stakeholders, social pressures (perhaps inherent to institutions), or from the game/sport itself. Second, the definition allows for the participant to define a demand based on how it makes them feel,

e.g. frustrated, tired, worried. Additionally, it is sourced from the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (1995), which seems appropriate in that, as I mentioned already, the goal of an ethnography is to preserve the participant's perspective and make it accessible to the broadest audience possible. This definition is not burdened by complex words, it needs only one further clarification; that is what is referred to by a 'thing' that someone or something is making one do. To be clear a 'thing' stands-in for a verb. It could be a physical action, or a cognitive function that the participant is being made to confront. I believe that it is important to note that a demand may be confronted. From a conceptual perspective there should always be space for resistance. This being said, my operative definition of demand is: *a thing that somebody/something makes you confront, e.g. things that you find difficult, make you tired, worried etc.*

My operative definition of demand, as stated above, accommodates any combination of the constitutive elements. Pressure may be involved in a demand as somebody or something makes you confront an action. A request with authority can also be made in this manner, deriving power from some authoritative structure. Although authority is not necessary, thus allowing for pressure to remain its own element. Economic pressures fit the definition as well, through market forces. Although market forces are not necessary, as actors in any form of economy can act irrationally based on some condition of being. Lastly, requests with authority from within an economic structure, deriving their authority from said structure, may pressure someone to confront a demand, thus combining all four elements. Of course, regardless of any combination of

elements, there will always need to be some condition or state of being for a demand to be present.

With this definition of a demand and its constitutive elements, I am able to analyze my findings and understand what a student-athlete's involvement in varsity esports was like during the time I spent with Saints Gaming. Regardless of whether a participant was practicing, competing, or involving themselves in the community, when they identified or perceived a demand, it could be understood through some combination of these elements. Having identified said elements, I was able to combine the labels in my field notes into larger codes, then organize those codes based on which element(s) of a demand would likely affect them, e.g. the labels advertising, optics, and recruitment, were collapsed into one code – advertising – which was categorized as being largely affected by economic demands. Of course, no code or category of demand is completely pure, crossovers were expected, and instances of negation noted for their importance, in that they exposed a counter-logic.

CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

The conceptual foundations of my project lay largely in neo-institutionalism, a sociological field related to business, economics, and political science. Within the realm of neo-institutionalism, the concept which best frames my foray into varsity esports is 'institutional isomorphism', as put forth in Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell's (1983) "The Iron Cage Revisited". During a time when most organizational theorists were concerned with the diversity of organizations, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) asked why it is that organizations, leaving their early stages of growth, begin to display such

homogeneity in their structure and practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148)? Epistemologically, they note that the structure of an organizational field, “organizations that, in aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life”, cannot be determined by logic or reason but only through empirical investigation (p. 148). They believe one cannot understand the structure of an organizational field by simply observing it and applying *a priori* logics. Furthermore, I believe that either a strictly positivist or critical approach is insufficient. Empirical research is necessary, and it should be gathered by methods situated in the interactive paradigm, as described by Reid et al. (2017), where “knowledge is obtained by participating subjectively in a world of meanings created by individuals” (pp. 11-12). In this manner, one can understand the field and its structures through the perspectives of the actors by whom it is formed and for whom it is made significant. DiMaggio and Powell’s stance on empirical investigation aligns with the ethnographic approach in which researchers must gather observed evidence through fieldwork and experience.

In developing their theory of institutional isomorphism, DiMaggio and Powell identify three mechanisms of change: coercive, mimetic, and normative (p. 150). Most applicable to the organizational field of varsity esports, are normative pressures that stem, for example, from ‘professionalization’, as this is traditionally the intention of varsity athletics. In this context, professionalization refers to “the collective struggle of members of an occupation to define the conditions and methods of their work [...] and to establish a cognitive base and legitimation for their occupational autonomy” (p. 152). This understanding of professionalization highlights the importance of an actor’s agency, as

they struggle to define the methods and conditions of their work. In my estimation, such normative pressures may help us understand how the aspirations (and agency) of varsity esports student-athletes, coaches, administrators, and professors, are shaped by the broader institutional pursuits of legitimation and growth.

DiMaggio and Powell describe two aspects of professionalization which may suggest the presence of normative pressure in the field of varsity esports. The first being “the resting of formal education and of legitimation in a cognitive base produced by university specialists” (p. 152). This is perhaps the very *raison d’etre* of varsity esports programs and explains the introduction of St. Clair College’s ‘Esports Administration and Entrepreneurship’ academic program. The second is “the growth and elaboration of professional networks that span organizations and across which new models diffuse rapidly” (p. 152). Examples of these professional networks include leagues in which varsity teams compete, such as the Collegiate Starleague (CSL), or Tespa,, or traditional collegiate sports associations like the Canadian Collegiate Athletic Association (CCAA) and, in the American context, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), which governs collegiate athletics for major sports across the United States.

Regarding the combination of institutionalism with ethnographic research, DiMaggio and Powell underscore a consonance between their own conceptual approach and ethnographic literature (p. 157). Likewise, I believe that combining institutionalism with ethnographic research is a productive way of exploring organizational behavior via a timely exploration of the growing field of varsity esports. Furthermore, DiMaggio and Powell had emphasized the importance of understanding institutional isomorphism to aid

in current (1980's) efforts to encourage diversity (pp. 157-158); suggesting the political urgency of my work. Perhaps ahead of their time, they stated that "policy makers concerned with pluralism should consider the impact of their programs on the structure of organizational fields as a whole" (p. 158). In a contemporary field as strongly gendered as gaming, this indicates the continued importance of understanding how isomorphism unfolds through the lens of institutional work. Esports presents an opportunity to break from the gendered traditions of sports and isomorphism may stand in the way of progress by perpetuating gendered institutions. Thus, critical theoretical approaches and perspectives, such as feminist and minority perspectives, may be urgently needed, in order to enact change while institutions are still fluid.

The opportunity to bridge the gap between institutionalism and critical cultural studies is closest at the site of Suddaby's 'institutional work' (Suddaby, 2010). As I will discuss in the literature review, this particular branch of institutional research calls for a more nuanced understanding of an organization's meaning making systems and acknowledges/questions the role of an individual's agency in the creation, maintenance, and disruption of institutions. A focus on the individual and agency grounds institutional theory and isomorphism at the site of the varsity esports program, amongst administrators, staff, coaches and players. Here, notions of power and influence inherent to isomorphism invite a critical cultural analysis of developing institutions. Furthermore, this presents the opportunity to critically examine how institutions incorporate or potentially exacerbate injustices and inequalities within their structural development; institutions here understood as both organizations infused with value that provide rules

and typifications, and as more or less taken for granted social behaviours (Selznick, 1957; Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Greenwood et al., 2008), being ‘isomorphically’ adopted in new organizational fields.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To begin, it is important to discuss the definitions of some contested terms within the context of this research including, ‘esports’, and ‘student-athlete’. Additionally, one must recognize esports as a unique branch of games studies, with an accompanying canon. Despite their coexisting, culture and industry, esports is a definitionally different activity from mere gaming – “the act of playing video games, or games with a digital interface” (Bhaduri, 2016, p. 141). The term ‘esports’, is also commonly written as ‘e-sports’, or ‘electronic sports’. In his article “On the Scientific Relevance of esports”, Michael Wagner defines esports as “an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies” (Wagner, 2006, p. 438). More simply, it is defined by T.L. Taylor as: “formalized competitive computer gaming” (Taylor, 2018, p. 3). However, I would argue that removing the qualifier ‘computer’ and replacing it with ‘video’ would provide a more apt definition, as it implies that esports are played solely on personal computers. This is certainly not the case as many popular esports titles, such as Nintendo’s *Super Smash Bros.*, are exclusively played on consoles. Thus, my definition of ‘esports’ is formalized competitive video gaming. Additionally, I would be remiss not to acknowledge the debate over whether or not esports can be considered a ‘sport’, in the traditional sense. While this debate is very much alive (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010, as

cited in Taylor, 2015, p. 266), the name ‘esports’ is already popularly accepted (Jin, 2010; Taylor, 2015, 2018; Shaw, 2014; Wagner, 2006), with the qualifier ‘e’ included. I do not believe the debate affects my definition of the term. Furthermore, it did not affect the way I conducted research, although I do provide some context for the debate in the following sections and participants provided their own definitions based on how they perceived their activity.

For the purposes of this project, I intend to define a ‘student’ as a person who is enrolled to study at an educational institution, and an ‘athlete’ as a person who is physically adept in sports and competition. The hyphenated ‘student-athlete’, is certainly a contested one when applied to ‘gamers’ which I define as, “one who plays videogames.” Michael McTee undertook a summary of this definitional debate in his article “E-Sports: More than Just a Fad”. McTee notes that, of the definitions provided by various dictionaries, the term athlete includes a notion of participating in a competition or contest and being physically adept (McTee, 2014, p. 9). The more disputable element of the definition is whether a professional gamer possesses a level of physical skill above the capability of an average person. McTee refers to a study by Micklewright to bolster his argument, citing a press article from The University of Essex in which Micklewright concedes that gamers possess motor skills and reaction times on par with that of traditional athletes (University of Essex, 2010, as cited in McTee, 2014, p. 10). However, Micklewright himself would not agree that esports qualify as a sport, nor their participants as athletes due to a lack of physical exertion (University of Essex, 2010). Yet, in a contradictory manner, Micklewright does acknowledge that ‘sports’ are a social

concept and other games such as snooker and darts have been accepted as such for requiring high levels of skills similar to those in video games (University of Essex, 2010). Herein lies the crux of the debate amongst academics and the public alike; it is the question of whether or not esports necessitates athletes physically exert themselves enough and possess skills worthy of being classified as a sport. McTee, writing from a legal perspective, points to the United States Government's recognition of esports athletes for P-1A visas, which are "granted to aliens who perform as an athlete, individually or as part of a group or team, at an internationally recognized level of performance" (p. 10). This is the same visa afforded to world renowned athletes, such as David Beckham (p. 11), a British football player for the LA Galaxy between 2007 and 2012. It is worth noting that P-1A visas continue to be granted on a case-by-case basis (New, 2017), but in a legal sense, there is precedent to define gamers as athletes.

In the Canadian context, foreign athletes entering Canada to work/compete for a foreign team do not require a work permit. However, for a foreign athlete seeking to work/compete for a Canadian team, a work permit is required. In the case of varsity sports, where the athlete is considered a full-time international student, no permit is required (Government of Canada, 2019). Thus, while professional esports athletes in the United States may be defined as such, by virtue of the P1-A visa, this precedent/logic does not directly extend to Canadian varsity athletes, for whom no permit is technically required. However, considering that the activity being performed is the same, I argue that extending the definition to varsity players is acceptable. McTee asserts that "[u]ntil a decision is made, either in the public eye or in a legal sense, the best comparison that can

be used for determining how the law might react to different issues that arise [regarding esports] is to consider the players athletes and the game a sport” (McTee, 2014, p. 11). To date no such decision has been made in the U.S. or Canada, and due to the fact that varsity esports programs exist, I believe it is reasonable, within the limits of this research, to include esports gamers under the banner of athletes as per my definition. Once more, for the purpose of clarity, I define an athlete as a person who is physically adept in sports and competition.

While considering the scope of this literature review, I decided to exclude the vast body of work in game studies. I have defined esports as a different activity from gaming and believe it is deserving of its own sub-branch of games studies with its own canon. Additionally, while I acknowledge research into the South Korean scene, such as Dal Yong Jin’s *Korea’s Online Gaming Empire* (2010), I have excluded it as my project focuses on the development of the scene in Western culture, specifically on Canadian varsity esports. T.L. Taylor is a widely cited researcher and author in the field of esports. T.L. Taylor is currently the most highly cited author in the field of esports. Her ethnographic studies are trailblazing, providing a nuanced history of the culture and industry while asking critical questions relevant to contemporary developments. Taylor’s books make excellent use of data collected through participant observation, interviews, and archival work, to identify and illustrate critical topics of analysis in amateur and professional esports. I put forth *Raising the Stakes* (2015) and *Watch Me Play* (2018) as the canonical texts on which to base this project. In future analysis, games studies may be productively called upon to investigate findings pertaining to concepts such as:

embodiment, interfacing, gender dimensions, or systems design, as they concern institutional work or agency. However, it is also important to keep in mind that many of these concepts are connected through the site of the video game, but esports is also very much about the professionalization of play. Thus, in this project my focus is limited to the site of the student-athlete in relation to their surrounding institutions.

Canonical Works in Neo-institutionalism

Institutionalism is the dominant theory for understanding macro-organizational phenomena (Suddaby, 2010). This body of literature will form the theoretical framework from which to guide this investigation of the development of Canadian varsity esports. It is built on the foundational work of Max Weber, concerning the spread of bureaucracy through ‘organizational fields’ – “organizations that, in aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). In the canonical article: “The Iron Cage Revisited”, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) note that, since the time Weber wrote, bureaucratization of the state and corporation had been achieved but homogenization still occurred beyond the bureaucratic form, only less driven by forces of competition or the need for efficiency (p. 147). For example, DiMaggio explored the development of high-cultural organizations in nineteenth-century Boston, Massachusetts, which spurred the emerging dichotomy between high and popular culture in America (DiMaggio, 1982). The institutionalization of high-culture organizations (e.g. museums, opera houses, and theatres) shaped/homogenized the roles played by said institutions, the careers of artists, and the work they created or performed (pp. 33-34).

Their ideas helped bring forth a new wave of research, known as new or neo-institutionalism, positing a highly structured organizational field in which individual efforts to deal rationally with uncertainty and constraints aggregate in homogeneity among structural frameworks, culture, and output (p. 147). DiMaggio and Powell sought to determine why there is such homogeneity among organizational forms and practices as opposed to variation. They believed the answer to this question would provide us with a greater understanding of “...irrationality, the frustration of power, and the lack of innovation that are so commonplace in organizational life” (p. 157)¹⁷. This question is of interest to me and should be to ‘stakeholders’¹⁸ in developing industries, such as esports, as their organizations make early attempts at obtaining legitimacy, growth, and sustainability. DiMaggio and Powell note that “once disparate organizations in the same line of business are structured into an actual field (an organizational field)¹⁹ powerful forces emerge that lead them to become more similar to one another” (p. 148). This theory may be applicable to the developing esports industry, particularly as varsity

¹⁷ In his book *Weber, Irrationality, and Social Order* (1990), Alan Sica asked why “so much social theory – of personality, organizations, social change, even of deviance – lay such emphasis upon, even itself rely on, the notion of rationality in human action? And why has it therefore suppressed or judged irrelevant systematic tracking of ‘irrationality’ as a factor in social behaviour” (Sica, 1990, p. 1). He explores the work of Vilfredo Pareto, who centralized and advocated for an understanding of irrationality in social behaviour, and his contemporary Max Weber who, while fascinated with irrationality, bore the standard for rational models of social theory after Pareto’s passing in 1923 (pp. 1-2). Sica (1990) provides a definition of irrationality: “a spring of action or belief that is not readily susceptible of rational explanation, invariably from observer’s position, and not infrequently from that of the subject as well” (p. 5), which he would go on to argue was overly simplistic.

¹⁸ Stakeholder: refers to individuals, groups, or organizations that have a direct or indirect relationship with an organization, and that can be impacted by its policies, actions, and decisions (Bissonette, 2012).

¹⁹ Organizational Field: “organizations that, in aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1982, p. 148)

programs, leagues, and franchises begin to pop up around Canada and the United States, nurtured within existing post-secondary institutions. As per DiMaggio and Powell, pressures are likely mounting to consolidate, structure, and institutionalize the field. They use the concept of ‘institutional isomorphism’ to describe these forces of homogenization.

According to prominent institutional thinkers Nite, Ige, and Washington, the term ‘institution’ is to be understood in two ways: first, as an “organization infused with value that provides shared rules and typifications that identify categories of social actors and their appropriate activities or relationships” (Selznick, 1957; Barley & Tolbert, 1997, as cited in Nite, Ige, & Washington, 2019, p. 379). Second, an institution may be understood as “more or less taken-for-granted repetitive social behavior that is underpinned by normative systems and cognitive understandings that give meaning to social exchange and thus enable self-reproducing social order” (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008, as cited in Nite, Ige, & Washington, 2019, p.380). To explain ‘institutional isomorphism’, DiMaggio & Powell (1982) point to the scientific definition of isomorphism: “a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions” (p. 149). Furthermore, they contextualize isomorphism within institutional theory by delineating its two forms: *competitive*, emphasizing the influence of market forces, and *institutional isomorphism*, through the influence of organizational politics and ceremony (p. 150). Varsity esports will likely experience forces of competitive isomorphism, for example as programs compete to attract talented student-athletes or funding, they may invest in innovative

state-of-the-art equipment/facilities or well-renowned staff. However, for the purposes of this project institutional isomorphism takes the prominent role. I chose to focus on institutional isomorphism because I believe it is of significant interest in the context of Canada's varsity esports scene; which may be subjected to isomorphic pressure not only from the traditional professional sports industry, but also from the institution it is being constructed within – that is the post-secondary institution itself. The organizational fields of traditional professional and varsity sports are both well established and contain within them a plethora of institutions which varsity esports programs may adopt in order to grow and legitimize themselves. As previously stated, a goal of this study is to determine how developing institutions may affect an actor's agency, and vice versa. Thus, a desired result of this approach is to identify and rethink institutions from the former fields, which may negatively constrain an actor's agency, as they are adopted by the later.

The concept of human agency has been a point of some contention within institutionalism. Human agency, as defined by Scott, refers to an "individuals' ability to intentionally pursue interest and have an effect on the social world, altering the rules or the distribution of resources" (Scott, 2001, as cited in Battilana, 2006, p. 657). The point of contention, known as the 'paradox of embedded agency', has required institutional theorists to develop several conceptual approaches to how actors, shaped by institutions, can find the cognitive space to enact change upon said institutions, that is to be

‘institutional entrepreneurs’²⁰ (Battilana, 2006, p. 658)²¹. According to Weik (2012), there are three ways to incorporate agency into institutional theory;²² I believe the most prominent is, in their words, taking “neo-institutionalism’s own brand of agency theory [...] and enriching it with classic issues of agency theory like purposiveness, intention, or free will” (p. 565). Thus, institutional work is the most appropriate branch of neo-institutionalism through which to explore issues of agency, due to its focus on sense-making and action-oriented mode of inquiry (Battilana, 2006; Suddaby, 2010; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011; Weik, 2012; Nite, Ige, & Washington, 2019).

Tangential to the topic of agency, a line of early institutional research by key thinkers Meyer and Rowan explores the relation between institutional logics and myth; thus, bridging institutionalism and classic communications theory, such as Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* (1957). They posit organizational formal structures (essentially the

²⁰ An institutional entrepreneur refers to organized actors with sufficient resources to develop new institutions in order to fulfill the opportunity to realize interests that they highly value (DiMaggio, 1988, p. 14, as cited in Battilana, 2006, p. 657). Institutional entrepreneurship represents an approach to exploring the paradox of embedded agency and should not be confused with institutional work. One need not be an institutional entrepreneur to contribute to the creation, maintenance or disruption of institutions.

²¹ Battilana (2006) lists the following two approaches: paying attention to the environmental context in which institutional entrepreneurs are embedded (Greenwood and Hinings, 1996; Lawrence, 1999; Seo and Creed, 2002; Dorado, 2005), or taking into account the impact of organizational characteristics on the likelihood of the organization to engage in institutional entrepreneurship (Leblebici et al., 1991; Kraatz and Zajac, 1996; Rao et al., 2000; Garud et al., 2002; Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006) (p. 658).

²² “The challenge to incorporate agency into institutionalist theory can in principle be taken up in three different ways (Weik, 2011): First, by departing from the classic action theories of Weber, Schütz, Mead, Goffman and Garfinkel, to name just the most popular, and marrying them to the macro perspective that institutionalist theory has held traditionally. Second, by using theories that claim to have overcome the structure-agency dualism, most notably Giddens and Bourdieu, but also practice approaches inspired by the work of Schatzki (Schatzki, 1997, 2000, 2005; Schatzki et al., 2001) or Turner (1994, 2001). Third, by taking neo-institutionalism’s own brand of agency theory (Meyer et al., 1987; Meyer & Jepperson, 2000) and enriching it with classic issues of agency theory like purposiveness, intention, or free will, to name just a few.” (Weick, 2012, p. 565).

blueprint for activity within a firm, including: hierarchy, departments, programs, and the goals or policies which link them together) as building blocks – or myths – of industry, supposedly leading to success and legitimization. They also seek to explain the rise of formal structures endemic to modern society (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Meyer and Rowan describe the function of these myths through two properties. First, that “they are rationalized and impersonal prescriptions that identify various social purposes as technical ones and specify [...] the means to pursue these technical purposes” (p. 343). The second is that they are highly institutionalized, taking on a rule-like status in social thought or action (p. 341), and thus, beyond the understanding of any individual actor. Therefore, they must be taken for granted as legitimate. These myths can include professions, programs, and technologies (p. 344). For example, Meyer and Rowan cite Wilensky and Bell’s work on highly institutionalized professions which are controlled by social rules of licensing, certifying, and schooling, and tend to delegate activities based on what is socially expected or legally obligatory over what is efficient, such as medicine and academics (p. 344).

The usage of the term ‘myth’ recalls Roland Barthes’ work of 1957, *Mythologies*, in which he uses semiotic analysis to reveal the meaning of many societal myths (Barthes, 1957).²³ Essentially, Barthes explains 2nd and 3rd order connotations in myths

²³ Of the examples Barthes explores in *Mythologies*, I believe his analysis of the Tour de France (pp. 122-133) is the most relevant to sports, specifically through his explanation of how the Tour’s dynamics become mythicized. Barthes discusses the use of language to transform the event into an ‘epic’ – as in the historic storytelling tradition related to Homer and his epic poem the *Odyssey*. He describes the linguistic transformation of several aspects of the Tour, such as the names of famous riders, into myths which are widely understood and taken for granted by the public; e.g. “the slow concretion of the racer’s

found throughout post-war French society, which have a hegemonic effect on the professional and middle classes, who accept them as common sense and allow said myths to guide their actions. Barthes' approach to myth, emphasizing their hegemonic effect, may enhance our understanding of institutional logics as mythologies within the esports industry. This perspective may help illuminate how logics shape and constrain an actor's agency within institutions and contributes to organizational change. If practices, adopted as myths through isomorphism, contribute to the paradox of embedded agency, then perhaps Barthes-ian connotative analysis of said myths can reveal their functioning over actor's cognitive schemes. I believe an exploration of mythologies and the 'creativity of action' may be productive in understanding how institutions shape student-athlete's sense-making.

Returning now to neo-institutionalism, theorist Roy Suddaby has identified several flaws or deviations in and from the core of institutional scholarship over the last decade. Firstly, he argues that, since the time of DiMaggio and Powell's publication, "The Iron Cage Revisited" has often been misinterpreted to suggest that isomorphism

virtues in the audible substance of his name" (p. 122). I believe the mythification of the Tour is reflected in the broadcast of many traditional sports; e.g. basketball's 'air' Jordan, or 'magic' Johnson. While these examples are rather innocuous, Barthes description of the Tour mythicized as battle may be more problematic (p. 127). If extended to the broadcast of esports, in which the sport is often a digital representation of warfare, the mythification of language surrounding esports as a battle may unwittingly contribute to exacerbated gender dimensions, as warfare is often portrayed as a predominantly masculine territory. For institutional precedence look no further than the broadcast language of American football, in which phrases such as 'shotgun formation', 'throws a bomb', and 'has a cannon for an arm' are frequently used and widely understood. I would argue that even micro-institutions in the form of linguistic myths may contribute to supporting patriarchal hegemony within traditional sports, gaming, and, if adopted through isomorphism, esports.

will eventually drive all organizations to homogeneity and that it acts as an external force (Suddaby, 2010, p. 14). Secondly, Suddaby states that this mistaken theory has been abused over the years by scholars who were too eager to apply it in broad strokes to varying phenomena (p. 15). To correct the course of neo-institutionalism he proposes four areas of activity for productive future research, including institutional categories, language, work, and aesthetics. These areas are meant to refocus research on the central puzzle of institutionalism, which is “to understand why and how organizations adopt processes and structures for their meaning rather than productive value” – that is, to focus on meaning making (pp. 15-16). This puzzle has significant implications because in any form of a ‘firm’ – understood to exist solely for the purpose of generating profit – adopting processes and structures for their meaning rather than productive value is considered to be irrational behaviour. Thus, Suddaby’s assessments have led to an influx of new institutional research in each of his suggested areas.

Institutional work is the branch of neo-institutionalism that is of primary interest for this project, as it explores work conducted by members of an organization through their daily involvement. Institutional work, conducted by agents in an organization, occurs in three forms: creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011, p. 52). The aggregate of stakeholders’ institutional work (creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions) contributes towards the overall concept of institutional isomorphic pressure placed on their organization. The importance of this is to determine how members of an organization contribute to isomorphism

through conscious or subconscious decisions they make in their daily work, be it some form of policy making or changing decision or merely reinforcing a status quo.

Suddaby (2010) noted his surprise that institutional research had put little effort into understanding how institutions operate through the influence and agency of individuals. He identifies institutional logics, i.e. an organization's meaning systems, work culture, or social norms, as an example of an opportune entry point (pp. 16-17). Suddaby (2010) stated that, "if we take seriously the notion that institutions are powerful instruments of cognition, there must be some opportunity in conducting research on how institutional logics are understood and influence at the individual level of analysis" (p. 17). I intend to follow this line of thought in my research. I believe that the relation between institutional works and logics forms a useful framework through which to investigate the student-athlete's role in the emerging institutions of varsity esports. I wish to understand the feedback loop between institutional frameworks and the student-athlete – to know how institutions affect a student-athlete's agency, and vice versa, how student-athletes can affect institutions.

In an attempt to refocus institutional studies, Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca further elaborate on the 'work' branch of neo-institutionalism by focusing on processes of sense-making or identity-work conducted by individual actors. With the intent of bridging the gap between critical social theory and institutional studies, they highlight three long-standing issues which they suggest are highlighted, and can be enlivened, by introducing the concept of institutional work (Lawrence et al, 2011, p. 53). These issues are the role of individuals in institutional theory, the relationship between agency and

institutions, and the gap between institutional theory and the critical theory paradigm itself (Lawrence et al., 2011). An overarching goal of this project is to contribute original insights to each of these areas by understanding the role of student-athletes in the creation maintenance and disruption of their surrounding institutional frameworks. I also critically analyze the relationship between agency and institutions through the student-athlete's perspective. Furthermore, the chosen ethnographic approach is epistemologically in line with what Suddaby, DiMaggio and Powell have all recommended, which is to generate a qualitative understanding of the topic through the perspective of the relevant actors (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Suddaby, 2010).

In response to Lawrence et al.'s call to refocus institutional studies, sports management researchers at Temple University: Pizzo, Jones, and Funk, published "Navigating the Iron Cage" (2019); a project which, as a direct parallel to this work, explores the birth of American collegiate esports from an institutional work perspective. Pizzo et al. examine how program directors have generated acceptance for esports in the heavily institutionalized context of their universities. Furthermore, they ask how the strategies and results were influenced by the program location, be it in an athletic or student affairs department (Pizzo et al., 2019). They utilized an explanatory qualitative approach including semi-structured interviews. Among their findings are a number of institutional creation strategies and challenges including, gender equity concerns (p. 25). However, Pizzo et al. note that the research is limited by its focus on administrators and that an emphasis on other actors within academic institutions, including students, would "provide an even more nuanced insight on institutional creation strategies and inter-

department dynamics” (p. 34). This project, which is focused on providing nuanced, qualitative-insights from the perspective of the student-athlete, is designed to extend and expand upon the spirit of their work.

While Pizzo et al. explored esports from the administrative level, institutionalists Nite, Ige, and Washington conducted a study on the institutional work of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), a major governing body of traditional college sports in the United States. They argue that the NCAA has evolved into an institution, as a collection of processes and practices which generate the common sense notion that colleges should compete in sports (Nite et al., 2019, p. 381). They note that the dominance of the NCAA “gives rise to sport conferences, rules with regard to amateurship, revenue sharing among college conferences as well as [a notion of] who is eligible to play and organize college sport” (p. 381). By studying a trail of archived documents and historical accounts of the NCAA, Nite et al. (2019) were able to identify three aggregate theoretical dimensions (learning to control: boundaries, practices, and cognition) which explain how the organization maintained dominance and avoided institutional upheaval over the years (p. 383). They suggest that their findings are especially relevant to varsity esports (p. 391), in which governing bodies such as NACE are rising to control the field in much the same way as the NCAA. While NACE learns to control its own boundaries, practices, and cognition, it is possible, although notably not the case thus far, that isomorphic pressures lead to the adoption of unjust institutional logics such as the NCAA’s rules regarding amateurism, and revenue sharing. Nite et al. suggest we ask questions such as: how are others adversely impacted by the growth of the

NCAA, and “how do long-lasting, conflict-winning, dominant institutions shape entrepreneurial activities in the field” (p. 391)? Although these questions are a step in the right direction, they lack a critical edge which could be gained by critically examining the ideologies and hegemonic power that the NCAA’s institutions exercise on its stakeholders.

Lawrence and Suddaby’s conceptualization of institutional work provides the best theoretical framework in which to explore the research questions of this project because the student-athletes are at the very heart of these programs, without whom the program would not exist. I believe that, if social conflicts exist, it is the site of sense-making which best shines light on how exploitative institutional logics are adopted and perpetuated. Since St. Clair College is Canada’s first varsity esports program, an ethnographic study can uncover important issues that we ought to tackle early on within this budding organizational field. Identifying and addressing social justice issues present in institutions, such as gender bias or inequality, provides actors in the field with the opportunity to correct them, rather than blindly perpetuate them, thus contributing to institutional isomorphism through creative and disruptive work. This appears to be the critical step which is missing or generally lacking in most institutional research.

Canonical Works in Esports

Taylor’s (2015) *Raising the Stakes* provides a historical description of esports including accounts of the professionalization of players, the growth of the industry, analyses of computer games as sports, and of spectators and fandom. Although

admittedly not an ethnographic study, Taylor exemplifies the power of ethnographic methods, such as interviews and participant observation, in an exploration of esports. She notes her struggle to gain full participation while researching this book, due to the misogynistic nature of esports culture. The implication being, she uses her otherness as a unique outsider perspective, to identify issues that were not so obvious to insiders (Taylor, 2015, p. 29). Thus, Taylor manages to contribute a uniquely balanced account to the foundations of this field, breaking tradition from its games studies roots, and providing esports studies with a more critical, heterogenous-foundation (while also providing an outsider, female perspective). The benefactors of her research will be not only future scholars, but marginalized actors within the culture and industry itself.

In the conclusion of *Raising the Stakes* (2015), she notes four major themes to keep an eye on for the future of esports including, gamer identity, mainstreaming, global play, and professionalization (Taylor, 2015, p. 240). These themes are picked up by her subsequent work, *Watch Me Play* (2018) which made a case study of Twitch.tv. Taylor's theses also hold commonalities with DiMaggio and Powell's work on institutional isomorphism. The latter three are concerned with promoting growth and the legitimacy of the scene. Additionally, mainstreaming, globalization, and professionalization are all strong indicators of normative pressures within an organizational field, i.e. pressures that signal the stabilization of institutional forms, growth, and sustainability (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In light of their connection to institutional theory, it makes sense that these would be themes to keep an eye on for the future development of professional and varsity esports.

Issues of gamer's identity overlap with the themes of mainstreaming, global play, and professionalization. Here players find themselves no longer as leisurely gamers but situated within new identities as employees, athletes, student-athletes, or entrepreneurs, with new relations of production. Taylor (2015) notes that:

Ultimately [...] (a player's) ability to shift their gaming from casual activity to professional occupation is complex. It is never just an issue of individual skill but the ways an entire system of practices, institutions, values, and forms of identity work on, and through, that player (p. 132).

In her exploration of the livestreaming platform Twitch, Taylor (2018) identifies a number of troubling situations in which players/streamers found themselves in exploitative situations in the pursuit of professionalization. She explores early Multichannel Networks (MCNs): which were third party service providers that entered into contracts with a large number of YouTubers, offering audience development, content programming, collaboration, digital rights management, and monetization services in exchange for a percentage of ad revenue (Taylor, 2018, pp. 130-131). The rise and decline of MCNs offers an interesting case of normative isomorphic forces, and an example of exploitative industry practices, because they offer familiar paths to professionalization, success, and longevity, through recognizable organizational structures, such as those found in the entertainment and sports industries. Taylor highlights how these institutional structures were often ripe with pitfalls for creators including, social barriers, and manipulative contracts. Large MCNs such as Machinima took advantage of many, including underage creators, by enforcing 'in perpetuity clauses'

in contracts, which granted the MCN the rights to all of a creator's content for life. Contract issues persist in the realm of esports, where pro-team contracts include varying degrees of obligations including, live-streaming practice time, and maintaining a public profile as a media producer and commodity (p. 133). As recently as May 2019, a popular Twitch streamer entered a public legal dispute, with the pro-team FaZe Clan, over (among other things) an exploitative 80-20 contract stipulation (Grayson, 2019).

Aspiring professionals are often forced to interact with large organizations and platforms such as YouTube and Twitch because they provide access to the largest audiences for videogame live streaming; yet their relationship with the platform is precarious at best, and often with little to no bargaining power. In her exploration of Twitch, Taylor quotes a streamer's claims that Twitch controls the entirety of their monetary exchanges and, although reliant on streamers for content, treats them as independent contractors with which their own business interests are often at odds (pp. 124-125). This raises concerns because it is unsafe to assume that Twitch will put the interests of users ahead of those of the company or its shareholders (Twitch.tv is owned by Amazon). Yet, Taylor's political-economic analysis could gain a considerable critical edge through the application of Marxist theory of the exploitation of labour, especially when discussing streamer's reliance on Twitch for a significant portion of the means of production, advertisements, and payment (pp. 123-130). The potential for similar exploitation is present in the fledgling varsity scene and, should issues exist, an opportunity for critical researchers to contribute to our understanding through an exploration student-athlete's agency within varsity programs.

Building on research exploring the exploitation of athletes, a comparative case, within the world of traditional college athletics, is explored by legal theorists Baker III and Holden. They write about the NCAA's consideration of adopting esports as a rationale for reforming their controversial 'spirit of amateurism' policy (Baker III & Holden, 2018). Baker III and Holden cite the case of Donald De La Haye, a former University of Central Florida football player, who lost his division one scholarship after being declared ineligible by the NCAA. His popular YouTube channel, started before entering college, generated small sums of money and thus violated the NCAA's amateurism policy: restricting players from commercializing their likeness (p. 56). Baker III and Holden (2018) note the hypocrisy the NCAA faces, with adopting esports, due to the fact that collegiate esports players commonly have their own YouTube and Twitch channels. Additionally, former professional players are permitted to leave the professional ranks and pursue an education by accepting varsity esports scholarships (p. 57). Their article poses an important question for the future of esports and the NCAA which foregrounds issues of work, play, and labour. It also provides an excellent case study on the power of institutionalized myths, namely the 'spirit of amateurism', in shaping student-athletes' agency. If Canadian varsity programs mimic the NCAA, it could influence the way revenue generated during live-streamed practice time is handled; which may directly impact student-athletes' financial health. Luckily, as discussed in the findings, this has not been the case and, as of late April 2020, the NCAA board of governors has expressed support for relaxing their control over student-athletes' compensation and endorsements (Booker, 2020).

Finally, in *Watch Me Play* (2018), Taylor emphasizes three historical phases of esports development, in which organizations focused on marketing the game, sports, and media entertainment, respectively (p. 137). Having several historically failed attempts, at developing the North American and European markets, in contrast to the hugely successful South Korean example, provides an enticing opportunity to explore theory on institutional isomorphism. A critical examination can glean a rich understanding of successful practices for early-stage growth, by contrasting diverging strategies, institutional frameworks, and logics. Additionally, it fuels the debate around the ‘sportiness’ of esports. For example, early efforts to gain legitimacy by reflecting traditional sports, most notably through the Championship Gaming Series, failed to take hold under the public eye. In juxtaposition, successful contemporary organizations such as Major League Gaming (MLG) and the Electronic Sports League (ESL), provide excellent insights into more beneficial mimetic isomorphic processes, i.e. modeling new organizations after existing ones in the face of ambiguity or uncertainty (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 151). Meanwhile, the highly institutionalized South Korean industry with government organizations such as, the Korean Game Development and Promotion Institute and KeSPA, help illustrate the effects of coercive isomorphism: which result from formal or informal pressures exerted by other organizations (p. 150).

If, as Taylor suggests, the third phase of esports development takes a special focus on media entertainment, then it may be exemplified in the latest expansion into North America’s collegiate varsity programs, such as St. Clair College. This project enjoys the benefit of access to the optimal site of study from which to explore

institutional work and replicates Taylor's findings at the actor level. The timing is ideal because, as Suddaby (2010) notes, "institutions, totalizing structures, tend to only reveal their inner workings during times of disruption or stress", such as their early stages of development (p. 17). The St. Clair College program entered their third year of competing under fully-fledged varsity status at the time of this study. Thus, the inner workings of the institutions involved are were more accessible than ever and perhaps even open to change.

The E- 'Sports' Debate

As previously mentioned, esports entrepreneurs have tried, to varying degrees of success and over many years, to develop the industry in the image of traditional sports. Thus, it makes sense that the primary debate, amongst academics and the public, surrounds the worthiness of esports to be included in the realm of professional competitive 'sport'. This debate has dominated the early discussion on esports and there are few known articles that do not mention it in some capacity. Furthermore, it is not exclusive to cultural studies, as the question of 'sportiness' is naturally of interest to disciplines such as kinesiology, physical education, sports management, and law. For the purpose of this project the debate is of marginal concern, although it contributes to the operational definitions of 'esports' and 'student-athletes'. Beyond providing functional definitions, the debate largely distracts from the fact that the esports industry, continues to grow and solidify its organizational structures, which serve to both support and constrain stakeholders. Thus, the ethnographic goal of my research was to describe the

demands on student-athletes' during their involvement in varsity esports; and by extension the degree to which embedded players have agency in creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions in the midst of isomorphic pressures. Yet, it is still important to understand the major assumptions, theories, and concepts forming the debate; as the debate itself, can be seen as an indicator of supportive and constraining institutions in the organizational field.

Arguments Against Esports as 'Sport'

The argument against esports as 'sport' is most often encamped in the sports sciences (e.g. kinesiology and sports management); perhaps because academics in the field have more to gain by defending the intellectual boundaries of their discipline. Among the most frequently cited works in the debate – regardless of sides – are Bernard Suits' distinctions between sports and games (Suits, 1988, 2007), Taylor's ethnographic insights (Taylor, 2015), and Witkowski's conception of physicality (Witkowski, 2012). Generally, the fiercest debates revolve around the level of physicality required to differentiate between games and sports. 'Anti-sport' academics tend to rely on positivist means of defending their stance, citing studies that attempt to quantify the physicality required of gamers, down to heart rates and metabolic equivalents (Jenny, Manning, Keiper, & Olrich, 2017). Others attempt to defend their position through, the definition of- or rejection by, national and international sports organizations, such as the German Olympic Sport Confederation or International Olympic Committee (IOC) (Hallmann & Giel, 2018). The consequences of accepting esports as sport are largely cited as:

promoting unhealthy, sedentary-lifestyles in the face of growing child-hood obesity, by substituting the ‘real’ activity for the ‘virtual,’ and degrading the lofty idealizations of physical mastery within sport (Van Hilvoorde & Pot, 2016; Jenny et al., 2017; Hallmann & Giel, 2018).

While, academics in the sports sciences often concede the economic potential of esports, recognizing the growth of the industry and cultural phenomenon, as previously mentioned they argue that esports do not meet the physical requirement of a ‘sport’ (Jenny, Manning, Keiper, & Olrich, 2017; Hallmann & Giel, 2018). This argument stems from the work of Bernard Suits, a sports philosopher who delineates between game and sport by asserting that sports be: governed by rules, comprised of skill – which must be physical –, have a broad following, and “have achieved institutional stability where social institutions have rules which regulate it, stabilizing it as an important social practice” (as cited in Jenny et al., 2017, p. 5). Jenny et al. (2017) note that Suits’ definition is rather vague in terms of the nature of physicality and what elevates a game to the level of sport. To compensate, both Jenny et al. and Hallmann and Giel refer to metabolic studies in attempts to quantify the difference in energy expenditure between esports and traditional sports. Their conclusions both reject esports on the positivist grounds that there is no generalizable evidence to support esports as a physical activity (Jenny et al., 2017; Hallmann & Giel, 2018). However, Hallmann and Giel (2018) claim that esports is close, yet not equivalent, to sports based on the development of its industry and that it will likely be accepted in the sports business and as an Olympic sport when the necessary umbrella organizations are established (p. 17). Yet, the IOC citing “missing

organizational structures” as an obstacle to granting the acceptance of esports, which frankly has nothing to do with its ‘sportiness’, is plainly ignorant of long-standing international esports competitions such as the World Cyber Games, founded in 2000, and fashioned after the Olympics itself (Taylor, 2015, pp. 10-11).

While Hallmann and Giel’s reference to varying definitions by an array of committee’s seemingly weakens their argument, it shows the interdisciplinary nature of the definition of sport. If we accept Saussure’s notion that meaning is arbitrary, and dependant on communal acceptance (Saussure, 1974), then each academic discipline is welcome to its own definition and may choose to accept or reject esports. Once more this highlights the need for academics to move beyond the definitional argument and explore the social ramifications of the growing industry. Meanwhile, within the organizational field, it is the ‘sports’ debate and governing bodies which continue to have the greatest effect on the development of the industry; as organizations in the field seek legitimacy and growth by adopting the building blocks/myths necessary to appease the gatekeepers to the traditional sports industry.

From an institutional perspective this provides the most obvious case of institutional isomorphism in which isomorphic pressures may harm players. For example, the previously mentioned argument, by Baker III and Holden, regarding the NCAA’s entry into esports as a rationale for reforming the ‘spirit of amateurism’ policy (Baker III & Holden, 2018). Such work raises important questions for incumbent organizations and this project seeks to determine how Canadian varsity programs will tackle similar issues. For student-athletes this is a strong indicator of the amount of agency they are being

permitted in the development of new institutions. The fact that Canadian varsity institutions have not mimicked the NCAA, regarding players collecting revenue from practice streamed on Twitch, Mixer, or YouTube, provides a significant opportunity to benefit students' financial health.

It is worth noting that institutional isomorphism does not have to be negative for players. An example of traditional sports practices being adopted within esports was recently reported in *The New York Times*. After starting their season with a losing one and four record, the members of Origen, a Danish *League of Legends* team based in Copenhagen, were provided a new sporting director. The former captain of the national handball team, turned sporting director, overhauled their previously non-existent diets, sleep patterns, and exercise regime. One member was quoted as having “[gone] to sleep at 5 a.m. and [waking] up at 2 p.m. the next day, [to] eat McDonald’s two times”. The team now wakes up to a catered breakfast under the guidance of a nutritionist. Origen players attend fitness and yoga classes, commute strictly via bicycle, and meet for weekly ‘empty-the-backpack’ sessions with a psychologist. The results of these changes were impressive, Origen finished in second place in their league, and other esports franchises took note and followed suit (Keh, 2019). Such exercises have not yet been implemented at the Canadian varsity level – although it was indicated to me that an attempt to provide a training services was made by an unnamed private company based in Quebec. The article helps highlight many positive institutional practices that extend to esports through cognitively placing it within the realm of sport and athleticism. Again, this occurred

regardless of the result of the debate and shows the importance of investigating the developing Canadian varsity scene in the interest of all of the field's stakeholders.

Arguments in Favor of Esports as 'Sport'

When arguing in favor of esports, academics tend to utilize a surprising amount of both quantitative and qualitative arguments. As previously mentioned, research on esports, regardless of its conclusion, frequently cites the work of Bernard Suits (Suits, 1988, 2017). However, in response to his call for physical skill (Suits, 1988), those in favor of esports are more content to settle on the player's mastery of fine motor skills as a qualifying characteristic and move on to more pressing matters (Taylor, 2015; Van Hilvoorde & Pot, 2016; Pato & Remillard, 2018). They find the study of esports as sport to be important to society for several reasons, including to challenge the modern and hegemonic concept of sport (Taylor, 2015; Witkowski, 2012), determining its role in physical education and digital literacy (Van Hilvoorde & Pot, 2016), and to determine the consequences of the actions that take place during play (Pato & Remillard, 2018).

In contrast to the canonical works of Taylor (2015; 2018), who is primarily reliant on empirical qualitative data, Pato and Remillard (2018) attempt to build a hermeneutic understanding of virtual sports by explaining the rise of esports as an inevitability of human virtualization. According to them, "sport often operates in a real and present environment; however, it can also operate in a virtual environment [...] maintaining its playful elements while dissipating its elements rooted in reality" (p.138). Thus, esports is viewed as a new iteration of traditional sports in our human quest to virtualize and

control the world around us. Furthermore, esports need not be seen as a replacement or substitute for traditional sports, much like the motorcycle was to the bicycle, it is a new tool that merely operates on another area of virtualization (p. 138). Pato and Remillard (2018) employ a Heideggerian perspective of technology, as a way of revealing, and describe how it is transgressive against reality; in that it can be used as a tool to challenge what we believe is real and possible (p.139). They use this stance to analyze the technologies employed by traditional sports, such as a tennis racket, and compare them to the tools utilized in esports, such as the controller or virtual reality (pp. 139-140).

Pato and Remillard's work touches on further themes such as, the subjectivity and embodiment of players in virtual reality, which draws comparisons with Van Hilvoorde and Pot (2016), who explore physicality and embodiment through avatars (pp. 19-20). It seems common amongst the mentioned pro-esports scholars to employ more abstract and theoretical means of analyzing the phenomenon, which allows for a more critical take on the ways it affects our society. This also lends a certain grounded-ness to the work of T.L. Taylor, whose ethnographic methods provide witness to theory and place it firmly in the field. For example, Pato and Remillard's theoretical analysis of sports technology, as tools transgressing reality, is reflected in an interview conducted by Taylor, in which a player describes how the technological advancement of computer mice allowed for completely different play styles and increased performance (Taylor, 2015, p. 42).

Of course, once more, what is missing from this body of knowledge is an exploration of the consequences of considering esports as sport, and of the

professionalization of said sport. Furthermore, when the professionalization of the sport spreads to the varsity level, what new demands will be placed on the student-athlete in addition to: practice, competition, academics, training, and social life? T.L. Taylor discusses a number of consequential practices inherent to the professional esports industry, which may too become relevant for varsity programs. For example, she notes that professional esports players often double their practice time, since they are generally contractually obligated to stream their practice – leaving their strategy and tactics vulnerable to scouts (Taylor, 2018, pp. 83-84). It is my goal to make similar connections through an analysis of the data I seek to gain from interviews and participant observation at St. Clair College.

FINDINGS

The findings section will be structured by two essential themes: practice and competition. While a significant aspect of the student-athlete's experience in varsity esports, a third theme – community involvement – will be partly explored in the discussion session in order to keep this document more concise. The two highlighted themes are modes of interaction which categorize the majority of players' involvement in the Saints Gaming program. Within each section I will summarize 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 those of any other college student; with the addition of maintaining a 2.0 GPA, as per their NACE mandated contract. In order to achieve the ethnographic goal of this project, the findings section is written in such a way as to provide answers, rich in qualitative detail, to my research question: *How do student-athletes perceive the demands of their involvement in varsity esports?* Answers to my sub-questions will be explored afterwards in the discussion section, where my conceptual framework will be applied to select findings.

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,²⁴ and according to several players in Saints Gaming, varsity is too. During interviews, two players reported that the program is set to grow their esports facilities into the lobby outside the Nest,

²⁴ 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 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).

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 (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 CS:GO 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.²⁵ 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,²⁶ 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

²⁵ 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.

²⁶ 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 prizing (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).

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, 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.²⁷

Involvement in Practice

The majority of the time spent observing participants in the field was during practices. Each team carried out a weekly practice, which participants described as a mandatory requirement from the program. However, several players also noted that it is not strictly enforced. In interviews, three participants described practice as one of their responsibilities as a varsity student-athletes, referring to it as dedication and a time-commitment. Practice is a demand on the participant’s time and energy. In an interview, one participant described practice in terms of its difficulty to sustain, saying:

We had a lot of players suffering from very bad burn out, and it got to them, and they didn't want to play anymore. Every night at practice it would be, “can this night be over? Can this night be over? Can this night be over?” and, it’s like, “why are you playing something you don’t like anymore?” Because you’re forced to, once you sign that contract, you’re locked in, whether you want to or not. And, all of it, even I wanted to quit, I was so bored. And, but then, take a month off the

²⁷ 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).

game, after the semester ended, I came back to it and I felt revitalized, and I felt like, I want to get back into this, and it's been nice.

It should be noted that 'burnout' was not a phenomenon I ever observed, but it speaks to a participant's perception of practice as a demand they confronted and deemed to be tiring. Still, additional demands stemming from practice can be traced to three sources: the program, the game, and the players themselves.

Frequency

Based on the participant I was working with, and thus the specific team, I found the style of practice varied. On one hand, one could walk into the *Smash Bros.* or *Hearthstone* weekly practices, in The Nest, to find the teams gathered around monitors, scrimmaging, joking around, and carrying on a technical conversation regarding their gameplay. On the other hand, for the *Overwatch* and *CSGO* teams' practice could not be observed at all. These teams generally practiced from home, reportedly due to the difficulty of balancing all the players schedules. Players generally use their own peripherals, which are their gaming equipment aside from the computer or console, e.g. mouse and mousepad, keyboard, headphones, and for *Smash Bros.* (the only console-based game in the program) a GameCube or Nintendo Switch Pro Controller. While peripherals are provided by the program, the general consensus was that players prefer their own equipment because they are comfortable with it. By this reasoning players had argued for the right to play from home. Regardless, participants unanimously described

the practice culture as being very casual and fun but stressed its importance for maintaining and sharpening their skills.

While the *Smash Bros.* and *Hearthstone* teams practiced exclusively in person, and *CSGO* and *Overwatch* were never observed, somewhere in between laid the *Fortnite* and *League of Legends* teams. They were observed practicing in person; however, the entirety of the team was rarely physically present. *LoL* practiced in The Nest with five players, one of whom (the coach) played from home. Players took notes with pen and paper and discussed strategy or their individual play between rounds. Varsity *Fortnite* was played in duos and Saints Gaming had two teams. A participant would often practice in The Nest and noted that not all members needed to be present during the team's practice slot. They felt that so long as one team member could be seen in The Nest, the others could play remotely from their homes and communicate as normal through Discord. The ability to do this is certainly unique to esports, of course it is impossible for a traditional sports team to scrimmage from home. Although, not all esports teams benefit from their game's network capabilities, namely *Smash Bros.*, which was only ever observed being played face-to-face.

During interviews, the majority of participants reported practicing with their teams once a week and emphasized the importance of practicing on their own time. Although, several players stressed the need for more team practices. When asked how reasonable they felt their workload was, a member of the *Smash Bros.* team said that,

if it was spread out over multiple days it would help for essentially like, I don't know the way to word this but like, hammering stuff in. Like, if you, if you're

taught something at practice on Wednesday and, since Thursday (community-run) tournaments are optional, you just don't apply it until Monday, it's going to be gone.

They believed the team practiced only once a week because it was difficult to align player's schedules when they are in different (educational) programs. A participant from the *CSGO* team explained that,

The school doesn't say, "look you practice Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday". We kind of go (in Discord), "OK what day is everyone available?".

The *Smash Bros.* participant was concerned that the resulting weekly practices, did not "feel like much in the way of practice" and felt that with more time they could learn more from their teammates, understand how they play, and how they think. The player felt that the issue is a mix of both quantity and quality, but they would prefer to have more time played with their teammates.

An *Overwatch* player mirrored this sentiment when asked to describe their responsibilities as an esports student-athlete. Their response was, "Stay dedicated to the game, to the team you're on, to like the game specifically. Uh, generally like to practice every day. Review VoDs [Video on Demand], if there is any. Talk like, team bonding is especially key. Like, I think that's kind of underrated." This player reiterated the sentiment once more in the course of their interview and mentioned that there were not enough practices per week. They believed this was the reason their base scholarships were too small and compared their scholarship pay to what they could earn at their job.

The participant told me that they were not properly incentivized to practice more and explained that,

“Last semester I wouldn't want more ‘cus we only practiced once a week, but if we practice like, an example of, be like the traditional sports teams, I'm pretty sure they practice every day. So, ...everyone wants to, wants esports to be like, on par with sports in that sense. So, I thought we should be practicing more too, and then my teammates would just be like, “oh, I can't dedicate more hours” and like, “well then maybe you shouldn't be on the team”. Right? But that's out of my control, and that's why I think 500 should be raised, at least, at least a thousand, depending on how many times you practice and stuff.”

Another participant raised a similar concern, that certain players were not dedicated enough, while a third stood in opposition regarding the scholarship, saying it was reasonable even if they were asked to do more.

Content

In general, I found a typical varsity esports practice consisted of four activities: scrimmage, solo play, reviewing game footage, and discussing game mechanics or strategy. All practices included time spent on scrimmaging, which refers to the act of simulating competitive play. For example, two *Smash Bros.* players may scrimmage by playing one-on-one under the same conditions as a tournament (that is, the same rules, and maps). Generally, they play competitively, although on several occasion participants slowed down their play, or changed in-game characters and strategies. While most

players will ‘main’ one character, using only that character in competition, some will practice on their ‘alts’, an alternative character choice providing access to different abilities that may provide a better matchup against an opponent’s main. Often times, when practicing an alt participants would slow down the pace or request that their opponent play in a specific manner so that they can learn to counter it.

In certain instances, players would resort to solo play to practice on alts, or practice more specific strategies. For example, during participant observation of *Fortnite*, a participant described the importance of practicing fundamental skills. For this, players will practice either in a non-competitive, single player mode of the game, or in an entirely third-party game called *KovaaK 2.0: The Meta* – which members of the community designed specifically for practicing first-person shooter fundamentals.²⁸ In the third-party game, the participant would work on their muscle memory for controlling different gun recoil patterns. They explained that in *Fortnite*, the first shot is always perfectly accurate to where you were aiming, and the subsequent shots have what is called ‘bloom’, meaning there is increasing inaccuracy, or deviance from where you are aiming. Different weapons have different levels of inaccuracy at different ranges or different blooms. For example, a sniper rifle will have bullet drop and travel times which require leading off

²⁸ *KovaaK 2.0: The Meta*, is described on the Steam Store as follows: “Stop getting wrecked in your favorite FPS (first-person shooter)! KovaaK 2.0 takes aim-training to the next level, with upgraded UI (user-interface) and graphics, custom playlists, guided training, realistic weapon, target, and dodging physics, user-defined profiles, performance analysis, and over 3,000 practice scenarios” and “Hundreds of pros and streamers love KovaaK’s FPS Aim Trainer. Now, KovaaK 2.0 aims to make you a DPS god. Think of us as your gym and personal coach for FPS skills” (KovaaK 2.0, n.d., emphasis in original).

your opponent (aiming ahead of their avatar to compensate for the bullet's travel time, or above for gravity).²⁹

However, under certain circumstances in *Fortnite*, such as close-quarters combat (CQB), when an enemy is very close, it may become advantageous to shoot in full-auto, because in close range accuracy is not as important as ensuring a faster 'time-to-kill' (TTK). The participant explained that in this situation players prefer weapons designed for close range, like a shotgun which has a very low-TTK from close range. They will train in *KovaaK 2.0* to be as accurate as possible with shotguns by repeatedly shooting targets. Although, if a player has not picked up a shotgun in the match, say they only have an auto-rifle, and is engaged in CQB, they will need to fire in full-auto to compete with a shotgun user's low-TTK. To do this, the players train their muscle memory to compensate for each type of weapon's 'recoil pattern', the path the gun is designed take from your original point of aim if allowed to fire uninterrupted in full-auto. If they can compensate for this deviation, they can hit their target with more consecutive shots, killing their opponent faster, and competing regardless of the weapon equipped.

Across most first-person shooters, e.g. *CSGO* and *Rainbow Six*, the same practice mechanics apply; with somewhat of an exception being *Overwatch* which is a unique hero-based shooter.³⁰ Irrespective of the game, players generally sought out safe places,

²⁹ For this reason, competitive players will 'tap shot' auto-rifles when shooting from a distance, meaning they tap to shoot once, ensuring 1st shot accuracy, rather than holding down the trigger to shoot in full-auto, and then they tap again, effectively shooting in semi-auto. As a result, their weapon will not fire at its optimal rate, but it becomes more accurate from a distance.

³⁰ A hero is an in-game avatar, but not one that a player creates for themselves or in their image. A hero is a character designed by the game developers, generally with their own unique story, look, and set of

outside of competitive environments, to practice their fundamentals. In certain games, such places are built-in by the designers, in the form of edit or practice modes. For example, *Smash Bros.* participants were seen entering the games practice mode where the game allowed them to program a non-human opponent to repeatedly perform a specific attack or combo, so they could practice parrying it. In *Fortnite*, members of the community had created custom ‘edit courses’, designed to practice building mechanics, using the game’s edit mode. In other games, players had to play against the game’s logics (the idea that you are meant to compete) or, in the case of *KovaaK 2.0*, build their own practice space entirely.

Participants would also practice their fundamentals by reviewing their past gameplay footage and identify fundamental or strategic mistakes. This was done by watching VoDs, which include Twitch broadcast clips, YouTube videos, or, in the case of *Fortnite*, their ‘tapes’, which are in-game recordings of each match that allowed the player to view any player’s in-game perspective. Participants engaged in this form of practice leading up to or even between rounds of their weekly games, immediately after competitions, or on their own at home. They sought to identify their mistakes and what

skills. Popular examples include Mario in *Super Smash Bros.*, Tracer in *Overwatch*, and Ezreal in *League of Legends*. In the case of *Overwatch*, a hero-based shooter, players have a list of heroes to choose from, each belonging to a specific class, which relates to the player’s role in the game as a ‘support’, ‘damage’, or ‘tank’. In *Overwatch* each hero has their own abilities and weapons. For example, Tracer is a damage class hero who uses pulse pistols (short range automatic weapons) and has the ability to ‘blink’ (which teleports the player in the direction they are moving), and ‘recall’ (to travel back in time to a previous location and health). Each hero in *Overwatch* has a powerful ‘Ultimate’ ability that has a long reset time and thus must be coordinated with teammates and used strategically. Tracer’s Ultimate ability is ‘pulse bomb’, which is described as a powerful sticky explosive. While some weapons in *Overwatch* don’t have recoil patterns, they are all subject to bloom, thus the mechanics players practice are be hero-specific.

they could have done better strategically. For example, in *Fortnite* a participant explained how they may have conserved resources better and that their team may need a more strategic ‘drop point’, from which to begin the match.

Players generally discussed their play and strategies through a technical lingo; which in some instances spanned several sports while in others was game-specific. For example, terms such as ‘meta’, ‘nerf’, and ‘buff’ are common across each of the sports. Each term refers to the potency or competitive advantages of game elements such as, a hero/character, card, ability, weapon, etc. Players primarily discuss the state of ‘the meta’, which was defined by a *Hearthstone* participant as, a community sourced best practice or what most competitive players are using. The meta changes as the competitive community migrates to different best practices or ‘loadouts’ (combinations of competitive game elements) via small or sometimes large shifts in preferences in response to updates and hot patches. I found that all participants had very high, as I refer to it, ‘game IQ’, meaning their knowledge of the game’s design, fundamentals, and strategy. Participants from any sport could generally recall details of the game’s functions or design from memory, for example the *Smash Bros.* participant knows each attack’s ‘hit percent’, the damage it deals to an opponent, and the number of frames the animation takes to occur. During participant observation, the player taught me a basic attack combo for their main character and was able to break down the number of frames each step would take to progress. They determined that, while the game runs at 60 frames per second, a player needs to correctly time 4 controller inputs across approximately 15

frames; meaning to perform a basic combo, their responses were required at precise moment in a window of approximately a quarter of a second.³¹

This depth of knowledge contributes to a player's understanding of the meta and the way it evolves. When the damage a combo is designed to do, or the time the combo takes to unfold, is determined to be too powerful or fast, or not powerful or fast enough, its design is altered by the game developers. Players referred to this as 'balancing' which occurs when some element of the game code is changed in a monthly update or weekly hot patch. The game as a whole, needs to be kept in balance in order to ensure a fair competition, and to encourage players to try different things. When an element of the game is out of balance it will either join or leave the meta, in that it either gets used or ignored by the majority of competitive players. The result of an unbalanced element is that the game can get stale, if players only ever encounter the same scenarios, or it becomes unfair because some element is 'broken', by being far too powerful and providing an unfair advantage. Using statistics on in-game performance alongside community feedback, the game developers will keep the meta lively and fair, by balancing it in updates. When a game element is made stronger it is said to be 'buffed', if it was made weaker it was 'nerfed'. Participants closely followed updates and patch notes released by the developers. In certain cases, like when entirely new elements are added, a *Smash Bros.* participant explained how the community would 'lab' the game, to determine how new or updated elements provided a competitive edge. They explained

³¹ The breakdown of this combo is discussed further in footnote 42 on pp.100-101.

that players would experiment (like in a lab) with game elements before and after an update to objectively determine how their in-game performance had changed. For example, they would count an attack's damage before and after the update to determine if it had been buffed or nerfed, and by exactly how much. The culmination of this knowledge production is what the competitive community embraces *en masse*, i.e. the meta.

In some games the meta changed regularly and subtly, thus commanding a greater proportion of the team's conversations during practice, as they tried to determine what game elements to take advantage of. In others, such as *CSGO*, participants described changes to the meta as less frequent but more dramatic. For example, the *CSGO* participant described their meta as follows:

Sometimes you'll see a balance, or you'll see just like a broken one, like a broken gun come out. I think the most serious like, gun change is when they, they introduced a pistol called the R8. And, that was an \$850 pistol that could just one shot from anywhere on the map, and so it was broken. Actually, it got, it got banned from competitive like, tournaments or like, like your ESL (a professional league) and whatnot. When they had tournaments going on that week it came out, they strictly banned it because it was just too broken, and so Counter-Strike had to update it. But, meta changes like, gun-wise, I'd say you'd see like, maybe one or two different updates to guns a year. In Counter-Strike, I guess it's hard to say kind of meta, 'cause, back in like, 2015 the 'tec-9' was like, the best pistol but you wouldn't use the tec-9 over your common AK and M4. And same like, today you

could say the meta is: use like, a gun called the Kreig over the AK now, but it's like, the AK is still viable. So, um I'd say the guns get rebalanced once or twice a year.

In several cases, changes in the meta were the result of the game developer's business cycle. The *Smash Bros.* team would discuss the pros and cons of new characters added to the game as a part of Nintendo's annual Smash Pass, a paid subscription to downloadable content released over the course of a year. Each new character that Nintendo added could potentially shift the meta in a significant manner, and each element of the new character needed to be 'labeled'. The *Hearthstone* team was also observed practicing with and studying changes in the meta during a turbulent period directly related to Blizzard Entertainment's roll out downloadable content. Participants explained that Blizzard was releasing new cards each week, in what they called an adventure format, while also removing old cards (*Hearthstone* is a card game, thus the content in this case being decks of cards). The result was major changes to the meta on a weekly basis. Because of this, players were forced to re-educate themselves on the evolving meta each week, as old cards disappeared, and new ones were added. The *Hearthstone* participant explained this as a responsibility of being a varsity student-athlete, saying: "we have to report to practice on time, and put in the time to play on your own. Kind of just keep up with the meta, study what's going on. So, that way you're not completely lost by the time practice shows up or a game shows up." Players would do this by studying VoDs, from professional tournaments each week, finding out what decks the pros used and scrimmaging with those decks to learn their strengths and weaknesses.

Watching VoDs, not only of their own but of competitors and professionals, was common for several teams. These participants described it as something they do on their own time. Sometimes they would study a competitor's play before a tournament. For example, the *Smash Bros.* participant explained how they had studied an opponent's VoDs before they met in pool play at Frostbite, going into a key match they knew the opponent's main and alt, and how their main would match up against them. The participant went on to win the match.

Studying the game and their competition was a big part of practice and despite the frequent changes to the nature of their game, when asked how reasonable players found their workload to be, a participant on the *Hearthstone* team said:

“So, it's nothing, it's nothing crazy. Some games might demand a little bit more but, at least for *Hearthstone*, it's a lot of knowledge. So, as long as you're up to snuff, and most of us will watch videos and streams anyway, of like other players like, professional players, so we get their opinions on things and then you can combine a bunch of different opinions, so technically in a way you can call that studying the game. Whereas, we also use it for entertainment so, it's something we would be doing anyway. It just kind of gives us the knowledge, that's it. It's similar to also like, watching professional sports. So, if you watch hockey and you see a play, you might want to try that with your team, but you're going to be watching hockey anyways. Right? It's your favourite team so, you're just going to watch them no matter what.”

Several players repeated this sentiment, that watching streams and VoDs on their free time helped them study their games. When asked what the varsity program offered them in terms of opportunities or benefits, a participant on the *CSGO* team spoke about professionalization and being able to learn from high-level players, saying:

I think again, a lot of it comes from me playing sports and I've always looked up to, in sports especially playing football, the players that I've always liked, and I think the same goes for competitive esports. It's like, when you have a favorite player you try to, in a way, replicate how they play and that's a thing in Counter-Strike too. It's like, "oh you're gonna watch how this player plays" to help like, in a way you are replicating how they play in the game. [...] For example, I'm a huge Team Liquid fan, and I watch a lot of Team Liquid players, and I'm like, "Oh, I'm going to try to do what they're doing, see how they play," stuff like that.

Participants described how they expanded their involvement in varsity practice into their spare time, where they consumed game content for leisure. However, players also, framed their viewing habits as a learning opportunity and likened the activity to the aspirational content produced by traditional sports media.

Involvement in Competition

Organized competition can be considered the 'meat and potatoes' of varsity esports, so to speak, because it is the element which definitively separates the participants' involvement in 'esports' from everyday gaming. In this section, I will begin by describing student-athletes' involvement in competition via two traits that I have

observed to be unique unto varsity esports: open tournaments and network advantages. I will then describe the unique competitive experiences of *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* and *Hearthstone*, including some overlaps and anecdotes from other esports. Due to page-count constraints, competition for *Fortnite*, *Overwatch*, *Counter-Strike*, and *League of Legends* will not be described in detail. While each of these teams had unique traits and provided players with distinctly different experiences, I believe the breadth of experience can be summarized by the chosen games. By my observation, the other varsity esports lay somewhere along a spectrum between *Super Smash Bros.* and *Hearthstone*, dependent on the relative degree of grassroots community or corporate involvement. To one side, Nintendo has notably steered clear providing support to the competitive *Smash Bros.* community, instead allowing grassroots culture and organizations to flourish and largely define the competitive experience.³² Whereas, Blizzard Entertainment exemplifies the industry's most heavy-handed approach to esports, by controlling their IP and establishing their own leagues.

The first unique trait worth noting is that not all of the teams or players that participants play against are necessarily representing *varsity* programs. This was pointed out on several occasions by the *Smash Bros.* and *Fortnite* participants. In traditional

³² A participant on the *Smash Bros.* team was observed discussing Nintendo's approach, to the game's competitive community, once during practice. They debated the nature of the game, whether it ought to be considered a 'party game', meant to be played casually, or a 'fighting game', meant for competitive play. In essence the debate can be understood as players arguing whether they play the game by its design logics or are subverting them. If Nintendo designed *Smash Bros.* as a party game, and thus treats the player base accordingly, then the competitive players can be seen as a community that subverts the game's logics. However, the participant noted that Nintendo included a semi-sophisticated practice mode which suggests that the developers acknowledge a players' desire to play the game on more than a casual level.

collegiate athletics this would not be the case, e.g. only varsity teams can compete in the NCAA, not a student club. The majority of *Smash Bros.* tournaments are ‘opens’ meaning anyone from the public can sign up and compete. The only instance in which this was not the case for a *Smash Bros.* event was at the “Border City Battle”, which I will describe in more detail in the *Smash Bros.* section. The *Fortnite* team operated under a similar format, even so far as the CSL playoffs. A participant explained that, while the majority of the teams in the playoffs were representing a college, it was not the case for all of them. While having no contact with the participants’ opponents, I cannot be certain, but this may speak to Baker III and Holden’s (2018) classification of varsity esports teams, which includes privately formed recreational teams that likely operate without the formal sponsorship of their schools (p. 64). CSL allows this in certain levels of league play. For example, their website states that in their *LoL* tournament “There will be three divisions: Star for "competitive teams", Open for "semi-competitive/casual teams" and Gold for "casual teams" of rank *Gold* or lower players” (Collegiate Starleague, n.d.-b, emphasis added).³³ For both *Fortnite* and *LoL*, CSL noted that eligible teams “must belong to an accredited college or university with a physical address [... and] both players must be at the same university” (Collegiate Starleague, n.d.-a). These rules differ by league and sport, for example, to compete in a NACE tournament one must belong to a NACE member program.

³³ “Rank Gold or lower players” refers to the in-game rank distribution which starts with Iron I, II, III, and IV followed by Bronze I-IV, Silver I-IV, Gold I-IV, Platinum I-IV, Diamond I-IV, Master, Grandmaster, and Challenger. Professional esports athletes fall under the Challenger tier amongst the game’s highest talents.

The second trait unique to varsity esports, as compared to traditional varsity sports, is network capabilities, meaning the ability to host competitive play via the internet. This affected participants' involvement in varsity esports in two major ways: it eased their ability to compete with a wider array of varsity programs despite geographic barriers and provided players the ability to compete from their homes. For traditional sports, in order for two teams to compete they need to be physically present in the same space. Because of the digital nature of esports, occurring over servers, competition was carried out over the internet and neither team needed to travel. This isn't to say that teams don't travel, as previously mentioned certain Saints Gaming teams traveled for competition regularly, i.e. the *Smash Bros.* team which *only* competed in person.

The event of physically traveling for competition was observed for two specific occasions including tournament play, and late-stage playoffs. For example, the *Fortnite* and *CSGO* teams played their entire regular seasons without traveling. Games were played from The Nest or from home, and the Saints Gaming program broadcasted their matches on Twitch. Although, participants on both teams explained that if they made it far enough into the playoffs, they would travel to where the finals would be held as a live event – broadcasted by the league, with an arena and audience. For instance, participants told me that the top 8 in Tespa's *Overwatch* tournament flew to California and NACE's 2019 *CSGO* finals were meant to be held in Dallas, TX. However, these trips only occurred if players made it 'far enough' into the playoffs, which I believe generally referred to some level of the finals (quarter, semi, or grand-final).

More regularly, participants mentioned that travelling to large tournaments was common. The *CSGO* team drove to Montreal, Quebec for a tournament called “LAN ETS” and I joined the *Smash Bros.* team as they traveled to Waterloo, ON, for the University of Waterloo Arcadian, and to Detroit, MI for “Frostbite 2020”. The *Smash Bros.* participant explained that the program refunded travel expenses to the players, such as gas, mileage, entry-fees, and if they stayed overnight, accommodations. Four participants highlighted the importance of traveling for the varsity esports program and one expressed their frustration that the program did not approve more travel. Participants believed that traveling to tournaments was one of the opportunities or benefits granted to them through the program. Speaking to this point, a *Smash Bros.* player said:

It's very hard for me as a broke student to travel to outside tournaments. It's like, it's easy for me to catch the bus to Ezy Mode (a local gaming bar that hosted a weekly *Smash Bros.* tournament), pay the \$5 to participate at the tournament, but if someone comes into the Windsor Smash Discord and says “Hey we've got a tournament going on in Waterloo, do you want to come?” I'm like, “Well, how am I going to pay to get there, how am I going to pay the entry because it's a larger event.” I really-really want to, but I'm not going to be able to. But the team sends us to those events. That, in terms of opportunity is amazing because Smash in particular, it's very-very offline based so, whatever experience you can get off your local scene, that's what you're going to get.

Once more, two participants highlighted the benefit of traveling to tournaments when asked whether they had anything to add at the end of their interview.

Besides traveling to tournaments, network advantages also had a great effect on the players ability to play from home. As previously mentioned, there were many instances when player's involvement in the program took place from home and could not be observed. This is due to the same reason players can participate in leagues without having to travel and meet their opponents: they can simply log-on from their home computers and join the match online. Yet, two participants told me that on separate occasions players had argued with the program administration over playing conditions: once to play from home and a second time to limit mandatory live streaming hours. When asked to describe the program's organizational hierarchy and how they fit into it, one participant placed players at the bottom, even below the production team. When asked why that was, they responded:

Because like, at the end of the day, the players, I think right now, the players can say things, but I don't think. Like, they *can* request things or voice concerns, but I don't think a lot of it happens. I think personally, we had to fight a lot to play from home like, they wanted us there a lot but like, we had to explain to them there's just not enough room [...] for five people to sit on one side (of The Nest). And then, you have another team playing, taking up just as much room, on the other side and like, it just led to a lot of uncomfortable settings and then that's when, again like, people get mad. Like, you have to be here to play and then we get in trouble or [redacted] gets in trouble and then it leads to like, [...] then people look down at The Counter Strike team again. Cause like, "Oh, they just want to play

from home all the time, they don't really care” and stuff like that. When, we do care a lot (italics added for clarity).

The participant followed up their statement by explaining that they believed the reason the administration wanted players to be physically present was to live stream their matches, but they hadn't realized they could still accomplish that from home. Regarding streaming hours, another *CSGO* participant shared:

I remember, second year they wanted to do like, mandatory 10 hours I think, it's not, maybe not 10, I don't know the number exactly but it's like, you have to stream on the Saints gaming channel for a certain amount of hours. And, it's kind of like, “no because we can't stream our practices, 'cause we're coming up with strats (strategies), and then it's out to the public, and it's not a strat anymore”. You can stream our games, which they do but, then you want us to do more content than that, it's like, “well, we are already practicing, we're already playing our matches, I have a job, I have school, I don't have time, I'm not signing a contract that says I have to stream for five more hours on top of that”. And so, changes like that, I feel like, you have to talk to your players about.

These two instances speak very clearly to participants confronting the demands of the program and expressing a degree of agency which will be explored further in the discussion section.

Hearthstone

Walking into the student center of Sarnia, Ontario's, Lambton College, for the Border City Battle, the first things I noticed were the rows of couches and TVs, set up to play *Smash Bros.*, in front of Lambton's esports arena. Their arena was a glass enclosed space where players warmed up on rows of gaming rigs, with Lambton-themed blue lights glowing through tempered glass panels.³⁴ The college itself seemed older and smaller, however it was clear that money was being injected into certain aspects; for example, the grounds outside the building were being renovated and the program director told me that a new esports arena was being constructed. A *Fortnite* participant told me that their gaming rigs were of very high quality, with at least a CAD\$1000 graphics card alone. A trophy was displayed in the hallway and I was told this was the third installment of the event, Saints Gaming had won the first two. The teams, all donning their respective jerseys, were called to a lower lobby, which turned out to be the college bar, for 'opening ceremonies', in which the program coordinator and an administrator from Lambton College presented speeches regarding the growth of the two programs and then connected to a Skype call in which the president of the CSL addressed the players.

The teams ate lunch and then dispersed to begin their individual competitions. Each program had brought five teams to compete in the tournament including, *Smash Bros.*, *Hearthstone*, *Fortnite*, *League of Legends*, and *Rocket League*. The tournament was structured similar to a track and field meet. Each team played a best of 3, or a round

³⁴ See Appendix J

robin in the case of the *Smash Bros.* team, and the program with the most overall wins in the end took home the trophy. This weekend, it all came down to the *Hearthstone* team who played last on the schedule. Their games would break a 2-2 tie in the overall tournament. When the other teams recognized this, they quickly made their way to the upper lobby where the entirety of the two programs gathered around the couches in front of TVs live streaming the *Hearthstone* match with commentary.

Notably, the stream itself was on a delay, in order to avoid a form of cheating known as ‘stream sniping’. An esports live stream generally provides the perspective of a player(s) in the match, and in the case of *Hearthstone* (a digital card game), this allows spectators to see a player’s cards like a poker-match. If it weren’t for the delay, a team or player could access to the information provided to audiences via the live stream and use it to their advantage in-game. This form of cheating is known as ‘stream-sniping’ and it happens regularly to professional live-streamers (Taylor, 2018).

I will return to the significance of the stream delay towards the end of this section, but what is important is that, as with most esports, stream sniping is a significantly potent way of cheating, even more so in *Hearthstone*. Participants explained that *Hearthstone* is primarily based on information processing and strategy, as opposed to traditional sports which, while highly strategic, demand more physicality. As a participant put it:

...in traditional Sports you're usually face-to-face with your opponent in the same room or field area, and there's contact. So, you have to kind of be able to keep up with what they're pushing towards you. Whereas, in games you, as long as you can outthink your opponent, for the most part, you'll probably win.

Hearthstone was a random number generation (RNG)-based card game, meaning the cards in each player's deck are drawn based on randomly assigned numbers, which is like digitally simulated luck or chance. At first, this seemed to conflict with my definition of an athlete, which requires a degree of physical adeptness,³⁵ meaning there must be some advantage to being more physically adept in some aspect of the sport. When I asked the *Hearthstone* team for their opinion, the participant argued that for *Hearthstone*, like chess, tempo is the biggest factor and thus, micro movements are very important. In their interview, the participant explained that they believed esports were similar to traditional varsity sports:

Because it still requires something of the athlete. Soccer: you still have to put in X amount of hours a week training, required by the school or by your program, you'd still have to go to the gym, let's say for instance. Outside (of practice), so, you have to work on your own too, and you have to learn the game, learn plays, learn different aspects on the field - of what, where you need to be in certain points in the game - same thing applies to esports. Go to Counter-Strike, for instance: you have to learn how to manage your economy, you have to know where to be in certain rounds depending on what sort of execution you and your team want to run, you have to learn how to throw smokes so they land in certain locations to cut off vision from the enemy team. That all requires training so, even if they're training together as a team, they can run plays. But, outside of that, they

³⁵ See Table of Nomenclature for definition.

have to learn all of the different smokes, spray patterns of guns, movement, how to get to the place that they need to be as fast as possible. So, it all works like that, and similar to regular varsity sports, you're working as a team, you have to be able to communicate. *Counter-strike's* a lot about communication, most of the team-based games communication is key. If you can't relay proper information to the rest of your team: you'll probably lose.³⁶

Players provided varied reasons as to why they believed esports were more or less like traditional sports, two participants even denied that they were.³⁷ Their opinions should contribute to the debate on esports *as* sport and will be explored further in the discussion section. What is notable about the above quote is the player's emphasis on game IQ, knowing fundamentals, strategy, and communication, as a significant commonality between traditional and varsity e-sports.

Being competitive in varsity *Hearthstone* requires a high level of game IQ. It was often played with three players per team (although single player competitions were common), one controlled the computer while the others helped manage their strategy. The participant said the three work as one to process an array of strategic information. They explained that *Hearthstone* used to be played with only the game window on screen, while teams tracked all their strategic information mentally or with pencil and paper. However, in its current state, varsity *Hearthstone* players utilize several third-party

³⁶ This interview extract was followed up by a probing question, asking how the participant would relate their comment to *Hearthstone*. For the extended context see Appendix K.

³⁷ See discussion section pp. 108-109.

technologies leading up to and throughout a match, the first and most vital being Discord. The Saints Gaming team competed in Tespa's *Hearthstone* league. A participant told me that the strategy begins before the match when Tespa makes a Discord bot available to the two competing teams; for example, it could be Saints Gaming v. Lambton College. Both teams would put together 4 decks of cards, A-D, and input this information into the Discord bot up to 15 minutes before the game. The bot then showed the opposing teams what decks their opponents made, for the 15 minutes before the match. Each team studied the opponent's decks, selected one that they would like to ban their opponent from using, and provided that information to the bot. The bot then told the teams which of the 4 decks their opponent banned, meaning they would compete with the remaining three. This function made Discord more than just a communicative tool, it filled a gap in the game's design and became vital to this particular esport.

Tespa matches were played in a game mode called 'conquest'. The teams had to win a game with each of the 3 decks available to them. Thus, if deck C was banned by their opponent, and they won a round with deck A, they had to play with deck B or D for the next game. Once they won with deck B, they would have to play with deck D until they won with it or lost the match completely. For this reason, the participant explained that the strategy started before the match with the Discord bot. They had to strategize which 4 decks to make, which opponent's deck to ban, and then which decks to play each round. Since they would study the opponent's decks in Discord, they would track what cards the opponent could have left in each round, if they figured out what deck they were playing. They said the Discord bot provided codes that players could input to a website

that showed them what cards were in each deck. Community-made apps, such as those available on hsreplay.net, would overlay this information on the player's screen and track the progress of the game. These apps are the second third-party technology used in varsity *Hearthstone* matches. The participant said that they streamlined the game, making it more accessible, and that the skill gap was a lot higher when they only had paper and a pencil. They said the apps weren't consider cheating, that they could be used up to a certain level of competition, at which point a tournament organizer would require teams to play on pre-set screens.

Of course, the majority of the game's strategy occurred during the match. The participant told me that before a match they may study an opponent for patterns and try to bring decks that will counter the cards they think their opponent would bring. Knowing the meta helped them study because they could set aside the meta cards, which they knew any opponent would likely bring, and look for the standouts that indicated a team's preferences and style. They also looked for the cards an opponent would bring to counter their own style. In summary, they explained that individual players or teams tended to play in one of three ways: aggressive (known as aggro), mid-range, or control. They compared the styles to a game of rock-paper-scissors, where in a perfect world, aggro loses to mid-range, mid-range loses to control, and control loses to aggro. A team of three players would work together to access all three styles and be more flexible. However, their strategy would be influenced by the cards in their deck, which is partly dictated by the meta. When asked how a team balances their styles, the participant explained:

Having two different types of players, it doesn't so much help you meet in the middle it just gives you a wider variety or wider, what's the word I'm looking for, arsenal of decks. So, you could, if the meta is weird and decks like aggro decks and control decks are all viable at the same time, it gives you the opportunity to be able to run control decks and aggro decks in one line-up, and not have to, kind of, give in to what the meta says is good. You can play decks that are slightly below tier 1, let's say like, tier 2, tier 3 decks, but because you're so well-versed in piloting these styles of decks, you can play them as if they were a tier 1, tier 2 deck.

A big part of balancing the play styles comes down to their strategic tempo, as explained by the participant:

It matters on the deck too. So, you can build a deck around a tempo-based deck or a control-based deck. So, that's the main area you kind of balance that. And, then a lot of it is just playing together, practicing, getting used to what the "guy to my right thinks all the time" or what the "guy to my left thinks all the time." So, then you can, kind of, sync your ideas together and you'll all be on the same wavelength. Again, still you'll have different sequencing of plays but, for the most part you're all kind of focused on the same goal, in a way.

This sequencing of plays is reliant on a player's reflexes and timing. Each turn is on a timer and playing cards forces the players to wait for an animation to occur in game, knowing the timings of the animations and moving quickly through one's turn plays a

large role in maintaining the tempo of their strategy. When asked how the participant sees themselves in comparison to traditional varsity athletes, they explained that:

Again for *Hearthstone*, I think it's a little more lax compared to them. I'm sure they have to put in a lot more physical labour whereas, we put in more mental. That's not to say like, we still need to stay in a decent shape, cause if you do get lazy, and your reflexes might not be as up to snuff, so you do want to stay healthy. But, they, they have a higher physical whereas, we have a more mental tax on our respective games.

A consequence of the high game IQ required to compete at the varsity level in *Hearthstone* is that the game is rather difficult to follow for outsiders. Returning to Battle of the Border Cities, the match was tied 2-2 and the player's teammates had all gathered on the couches outside of the arena to watch the stream. I noticed a lot of the players did not seem to understand the mechanics of the game they were watching, and those who did were filling in the others. Yet this did not quell their excitement as the match entered its final round with the tournament on the line. The stream delay made for a strange viewing experience because the competing teams, seated behind the glass just around the corner from the TVs, would have known the results of the match well before their audience. This wasn't the only time I took notice of the delay. When the *CSGO* team competed in The Nest, they often reacted wildly to big plays, such as a teammate's victorious 1 on 4, and then laugh as the broadcast team, on the other side of the room, responded excitedly to the same play minutes later.

Regardless, when the *Hearthstone* team won their teammates cheered and applauded. The trophy was awarded to the program coordinator after some brief formalities, a speech and congratulations from the hosting coordinator. The players took pictures and passed the trophy around in the same way traditional athletes would, but what was remarkable was the lack of fanfare. Having grown up in a traditional sports-oriented family, I took note of the absence of cheering parents, the teams shaking hands, and proud mothers and fathers vying to take pictures with their victorious sons or daughters. On the point of sons and *daughters*, it should be noted that the demographics were overwhelmingly male. To my knowledge, only one female player (of two) from Saints Gaming was present.

Super Smash Bros. Ultimate

During my time in the field The *Smash Bros.* team was the most active team observed within Saints Gaming. Players in the ‘competitive smash community’ generally compete on an individual basis and although most tournaments had doubles competitions, the singles bracket was the highlight of every event. The Saints Gaming team had a minimum of one tournament a week, which is significant because while the other teams also competed on a weekly basis, they were generally competing in league play which involved a couple matches a night. *Smash Bros.* tournaments are bracket-style tournaments, which ranged between from 40 and 1,200 competitors, resulting in many more matches per week. Furthermore, the *Smash Bros.* team was observed competing in more than one tournament a week on several occasions, in one case competing in up to

four tournaments, with one being optional. The team's baseline expectation was that players attended the weekly tournament called Smash Class, hosted on campus. Smash Class was an open tournament where both students and the public could show up, register and compete.

Walking into the lobby exterior to The Nest, any given week on a Monday evening, one would find approximately forty students gathered around tables with 17 monitors and 16 Nintendo Switch consoles. One console was set up with an additional monitor (one for each competitor) inside The Nest, across from the program's Twitch livestream set. Smash Class livestreams consisted of the game feed, competitors on camera, colour commentary, and displayed the Saints Gaming program sponsors, including Subway. Players mulled about casually reporting to the tournament organizer's desk were students sat with a cash box, laptop, and TV displaying the tournament bracket. A *Smash Bros.* participant would approach their next competitor and ask for a match at an open console. The opponents would plug in their controllers, adjust settings such as controller sensitivity or button layouts, then input their gamertags, select characters, fist bump, and start playing. Nearly every *Super Smash Bros.* match I observed proceeded in this manner. On certain occasions, a participant on the *Smash Bros.* team chose to wear headphones to hear the game audio. They explained that when playing at high levels or against an opponent who mains certain characters, like Snake, having the game audio is advantageous because it allows them to figure out the timing of some of the character's attacks. They also explained that some players listen to music during a match to help control their tempo. According to the participant, a famous

professional player known as PPMD had released a *Super Smash Bros. Melee* practice guide that introduced this technique by using a metronome to get into a flow. They said that once players get on tempo they will try to pick up on their opponent's patterns and attack off beat to throw their opponent off.

According to the participant, the rules for a *Smash Bros.* match are crowd sourced over time, for each new version of the game. Smash Class followed the Ontario Smash community's standard, for stage selection and rules. Within the region the standard is rarely deviated from; for example, only the Ottawa community permitted a different stage, which the participant claimed nearly two thirds of the world might allow. The participant says that the weekly Smash Class tournament is considered to be both competition and practice, but not their main competition. The broader *Smash Bros.* community is very reliant on grassroots organization and is meshed together through a network of online forums and Discord servers. Players are ranked in leagues based on localities or regions. When tournaments were completed, organizers uploaded the results to websites such as braacket.com, smash.gg or smashladder.com, a.k.a. 'Anther's Ladder'. The participant told me that attending local tournaments, such as Smash Class or the weekly open at a local gaming bar called Ezy Mode, were a good way to boost their local ranking so they would be seeded higher at competitive tournaments out of town. As a former tournament organizer themselves, the participant had joined Saints Gaming and St. Clair College's Esports Administration and Entrepreneurship program to build a career in *Smash Bros.* esports and was very knowledgeable on the nuances of the Smash community.

On the weekend of The Border City Battle, the *Smash Bros.* team competed back to back at the University of Waterloo Arcadian (the Arcadian) as well. The contrast between the two tournaments was noticeable, and when compared to the much larger Frostbite tournament in Detroit, showed the scale on which the Smash community organizes.³⁸ The participant explained that Frostbite is a ‘supermajor,’ meaning it has a larger prize pool, better quality competition, and more prestige. When a participant won Smash Class, they reported earning CAD\$50; winning the Arcadian, earned them CAD\$400; and had they won, Frostbite would have provided a total prize pool of US\$12,800 (Major Tournaments, 2020), from which they would have taken home the majority share. The participant compared their earnings at the Arcadian to a paycheck from their former part-time job at Tim Hortons (which paid the provincial minimum wage of CAD\$14/hr, bi-weekly) and noted that they made about the equivalent. The participant said they wish they could hold a part-time job to help manage their student debt, having moved to Windsor to join the program, but they felt they wouldn’t have time or have a flexible enough schedule.

Smash Class and the Arcadian were both student-run tournaments, organized by the Saints Gaming program and UWaterloo Esports Club respectively. The Arcadian was nearly twice the attendance of Smash Class, with 103 players registered on the smash.gg bracket, and advertised over CAD\$1,000 in prizing. They had sponsorship material on site, including a point-of-sale display from Red Bull reading “The Power of Play”. The

³⁸ See Appendix J for visual comparisons.

tournament occupied a large atrium in the Student Life Centre where three large projection screens were set up,³⁹ to show the live stream, with a central stage and rows of seating. The participant told me that playing on stream was always a goal, they played better on stream and considered it to be one of the benefits of the Saints Gaming program, as they have more opportunities to play at broadcasted tournaments and get their name out there. Around the seating area was a ring of tables with computer monitors and Nintendo Switch consoles, as well as an equal number of old CRT television sets being used for separate tournament in an old version of the game called *Super Smash Bros. Melee*.⁴⁰

A participant on the *Smash Bros.* team explained that *Melee* was still popular because it was highly technical, requiring the 2nd highest ‘actions per minute’ in esports, behind *StarCraft*. As previously described in the methodology section, during participant observation the *Smash Bros.* participant and I broke down a basic combo for their main and found that players had to correctly time 4 controller inputs in a window of a quarter of a second. This required a series of judgements on the players behalf, which draws on their game IQ.⁴¹ Additionally, players needed to track their resources, as well as their

³⁹ See Appendix J, image 3.

⁴⁰ The participant explained that *Super Smash Bros. Melee* is played on old CRT TVs because if they tried to connect older consoles to new monitors there would be a lag of several frames, which is enough to throw the players off. *Super Smash Bros. Melee* is so popular amongst the smash community that members even started an open source mod of the game called ‘*Project Melee*’ that was once more popular than the official version available at the time, *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*. At the time of writing this, *Super Smash Bros. Melee* and *Project Melee* still have devout fans and dedicated tournaments.

⁴¹ The first step is to land next to your opponent with ‘up air’ (down on the directional joystick, up on the c-stick) just before hitting the ground. I found this difficult for two reasons, timing the input just before hitting the ground and landing next to the opponent who responds defensively by moving away (landing only 2/10 attempts). Furthermore, the second step requires a judgement call: A, If the opponent is

opponent's, and take note of the opponent's 'directional influence',⁴² as a defensive response to their attacks. As difficult as I found this to accomplish, I was told that *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* used a design feature known as buffering, meaning when the player pressed a combination of buttons to input a move, the game would store the second command until the first had been completed. However, the older version of the game, *Super Smash Bros. Melee*, did not have this feature, meaning all controller inputs needed to be precise, thus the game was more technical and had a higher skill floor.

During participant observation I learned what separates a casual player, such as myself, and a varsity athlete. The participant told me they think strategically about the game and identified my patterns quickly. While I thought my play style would be chaotic and unpredictable due to an absence of strategy, the participant was able to describe my habits immediately after the first round of play. The participant explained that the first trait separating a pro and casual player was the way they moved around the stage. A pro dodges in and out like a boxer, protecting themselves from attack while seeking an opportunity to strike. Pros also have the ability to instinctively improvise when their attacks do not land, which frees up their mind to focus on the opponent. Thus, while I had

at a low health percent (they are healthy) then one should 'down throw' (hold the down directional stick) which will result in an attack that keeps the opponent close enough for you to follow up with more attacks. B, If the opponent is at a high health percent (they are severely hurt), then one should use a 'back throw' (hold the directional stick opposite to the way your character is facing), which closes out the combo and should kill the opponent off the stage. C, Lastly, if the opponent is at a mid to high health percent, then one should use a 'forward throw' (hold forward on the directional stick) and follow up with a more deadly attack. These steps are reliant on where the player is on the stage, and don't begin to describe the added element of the opponent's responses to each step.

⁴² See Appendix L for an explanation of *Smash Bros.*' resource and directional influence game mechanics.

failed clumsily to take conscious note of each aspect of the above 2-step combo, the same information processing and controller inputs were committed to muscle memory for the participant, leaving their mind free to exploit my mistakes.

The lessons I learned during participant observation were later observed at Frostbite, as the participant battled through their first round in a bracket of nearly 1,650 competitors. The event took place on two floors of the Crowne Plaza Hotel in downtown Detroit, Michigan. Walking into the main competition room, it was immediately apparent that the tournament was of a much higher production level than anything I had previously observed. There was an approximately 60ft main stage, with two nearly 20ft projection screens, and rows of seating in front of them, mood lit from above with blue light panels. To either side of the main stage were 3 long tables with 8 Ben-Q monitors and Nintendo Switch consoles at each. Packed around the tables were competitors in esports jerseys, cosplay, and regular streetwear. Notably, one member of the community was present in a Furry outfit, representing a marginalized fandom/subculture. The demographics of the tournament were still vastly male-dominated, although with the presence of more women and visible minorities. Tournament organizers waded through the crowd calling out the next matchups and directing participants to stations, although the crowds and noise made them difficult to locate and hear.

At the back of the room were small vendors and a large demo booth for HitBox brand ‘smash box’ controllers. The *Smash Bros.* participant had explained at the Arcadian that these were a new style of controller, designed specifically for fighting games, that are flattened out like a keyboard and allowed for complete customization of the button

inputs. Additional vendors were found in a hallway outside the main competition room, in what was referred to as the vendor alley. Vendors supplied paraphernalia from a variety of videogame fandoms as well as local anime art, official event merchandise, and custom controller or console skins. On the same floor was a cafeteria style refreshment area, and competition overflow-room with 3 more tables of 8 stations. On the lobby level of the hotel were two more conference halls designated as a Bring Your Own Computer hall, and a side-event room for card game tournaments in *Pokémon*, *Yu-Gi-Oh*, and *Magic: The Gathering*.

The Saints Gaming *Smash Bros.* participant was seeded well into the top 500 players and, although nervous, had studied up on the opponents in their bracket and set a goal to make it out of round-one pool play, needing one upset. As they set up to play their first game, the tournament organizer handed them a slip of paper, like a golf card. It was a ‘Stage and Character Data Collection’ form (see Appendix J) which one player filled out with information pertaining to their matchup such as, their gamertags, characters, stage selection, stage bans, and the result of each game. The participant’s body language was seemingly focused and engaged, as they leaned in towards the screen during play. Between games, the players would lean back, briefly discuss interesting occurrences, such as a combo they weren’t expecting, and determine the next stage. When the participant eventually achieved their goal of making it past the first round of pool play, they were noticeably excited and after their opponent had left, literally jumping for joy.

I noticed that the crowd at all *Smash Bros.* events made for a great audience. The mainstage crowd would often erupt with excited cheers or the chanting of a crowd-

favorite's gamer-tag. In one case it was a local tournament organizer, who admirably 'mained' the same off-meta character for years, that drew the excitement of the crowd during a 10-minute wait on stage for phase 2 of the bracket to commence. During the break advertisements played over the live stream including, ads for Nintendo games, the Nintendo Fighters Pass, and remarkably, Saints Gaming and the St. Clair College Esports Administration and Entrepreneurship program.

Saints Gaming had sponsored the event and the program coordinator was working the front gate. The participant told me that while wearing their Saints Gaming jersey several players had approached them to ask about the program, which they said was not uncommon at tournaments. They said they felt that, in certain situations, wearing their jersey made them a target for other players to beat, "but in a limited way". Besides their jerseys, players represented Saints Gaming by adding the abbreviation SCC (for St. Clair College) before their gamertags. When asked what they give back to the program, three participants described themselves as advertisements. One participant said:

I personally feel like I'm doing a good job of both advertising the program, through being a part of the team with the jersey and prefix, but also making it seem legitimate as well, with, excuse me, good placing at the tournaments they send me to.

While another explained:

In my opinion, downline for, or bottom line for colleges and universities is enrolment. That's where they get money, that's how they stay up. So, if kids in high school, cause video games are popular, if kids in high school see that St.

Clair College has some of the best esports teams around, they're not going to go to Lambton, and they're not going to go to Brock, Toronto schools, stuff like that.

They're going to come down to St Clair, even if they're not from St. Clair.

Thus, the participants were aware of the economic elements at play within their program and can be described as having worked for the program in the sense that they advertised it through their play.

DISCUSSION

Having briefly summarized my participants' involvement in varsity esports, I will now discuss the research sub-questions laid out at the beginning of the project.⁴³ The following sections will explore the theoretical implications of my research, by addressing my sub-questions in turn. First, I will discuss how esports student-athletes display evidence of action based on isomorphically adopted institutions. These actions were described in the findings, in the form of three themes: practice, competition and community involvement. Then, I will discuss how esports student-athletes have agency in the development of the organization. During interviews, participants described two separate occasions, in the development of Saints Gaming, during which they debated with program administration (the coordinators and coaches) over institutions affecting practice and competition. In each case, the demands, requested by the program, were confronted by participants, exemplify student-athletes' agency within the program. However, rather

⁴³ As a reminder, the sub-research questions are: *in what ways, if at all, do student-athletes display evidence of action explicable by 'institutions' and adopted under isomorphic pressures, and in what ways, if at all, do student-athletes have agency in the development of the organization?*

than conclusive solutions to my research sub-questions, what these cases represent are an invitation for further research and an acknowledgment that the methodological and theoretical approach of this research has been productive.

Isomorphism

To put it broadly, the three main demands of a student-athlete's involvement in varsity esports were practice, competition, and community involvement. The argument I am putting forth is that actions displayed by participants, pertaining to these three activities are institutions adopted as the result of isomorphic pressure. Esports represents an organizational field, which as per DiMaggio and Powell, consists of "organizations that, in aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). Within this organizational field I have chosen to investigate a new entrant, varsity esports programs, the goal being to discover whether varsity esports student-athletes created, maintained, or disrupted isomorphically adopted institutions. Among the many demands detailed in the findings section, I found that student-athletes take part in institutions adopted from the areas of professional esports and traditional sports. Examples of practice institutions adopted from pro sports and esports include, studying 'game-tapes' in the form of VoDs, practicing fundamentals, maintaining peak performance levels, scheduling and maintaining practice hours, and following news or updates within their sports community. When competing, players wore uniforms, practiced traditional sportsmanship, played by the meta (playing to win), and committed to a sense of school pride. Lastly, within their community players subscribed to notions

of hierarchy based on rank or expertise, but also carried themselves as representatives of their school.

To explain how these institutions were adopted on account of isomorphic pressures, one should first recall the definitions of an institution discussed by Nite et al. (2019) in the literature review. An institution can be understood in two ways, the first being the ‘institution’ as an organization infused with value that provides shared rules and typifications (Selznick, 1957; Barley & Tolbert, 1997, as cited in Nite et al., 2019). It is by these terms that one should understand Saints Gaming as an institution. According to Suddaby (2010), this form of institution is a powerful instrument of cognition (p. 17), and the central puzzle of institutionalism is “to understand why and how organizations (e.g. Saints Gaming) adopt processes and structures for their meaning rather than productive value” (pp. 15-16). By “processes and structures”, Suddaby refers to the second definitional understanding of an institution: “more or less taken-for-granted repetitive social behavior that is underpinned by normative systems and cognitive understandings that give meaning to social exchange and thus enable self-reproducing social order” (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008, as cited in Nite et al., 2019, p. 380).

As the recent work of Pizzo et al. (2019) has taught us, at the administrative level, varsity esports program directors have used functional and cognitive strategies to integrate esports programs into college institutions. Their strategies include “using the structure, resources, imagery, and branding of (traditional) athletic departments, as well as aligning esports with the existing values associated with sport, to address the

challenges surrounding the integration of esports (into existing institutions)” (p. 186).

Pizzo et al. described the adoption of institutions which have no productive value, in that they do not produce any form of commodity but are adopted because their meaning has utility in the form of legitimizing the organization. In other words, the isomorphic adoption of institutions by program directors seeking to legitimize varsity esports through cognitive strategies, thus situating their program within the familiar cognitive realm of traditional sports.

As instruments of cognition these institutions – varsity esports programs – submit to the traditional values of sport and collegiate athletics. However, do student-athletes, who’s cognition is shaped by the institution they are a part of, feel and act the same? My findings are inconclusive. When asked how they would describe varsity esports to somebody who knows nothing about what they do, and how they see themselves in comparison to traditional varsity student-athletes, participant responses were mixed and often self-conflicting. All but one participant described varsity esports by comparing it directly to traditional sports, but each participant stressed the differences between the two including, the videogames, network capabilities, open-entry tournaments, leagues, and mental versus physical aspects. Three participants mentioned their scholarships in a comparison to traditional varsity sports. When asked at the beginning of their interviews whether they were scholarship athletes, only one participant questioned being an ‘athlete’. Lastly, one participant expressed that they felt esports are simply not sports, saying:

As a sport, no. It is not a sport. We are not athletes. I think, in my opinion, we're just like, good at what we, essentially, it's just a competition. [...] I feel like athletes work like, their whole life to get to where they are. You know? With like, working out and what not, and like, I could play a game for like, 2 years and be the best. Just 'cause I'm naturally good or what not, or I put the time in, and it's not like, physical workouts or anything. So, I don't know, I don't see gamers as athletes.

When comparing themselves to traditional varsity athletes, responses were split and far more mixed, only three participants made entirely positive comparisons. Other participants seemed conflicted, describing negative public perceptions towards gamers or videogames, a lack of physical activity or contact, and a lack of strictness among esports. Thus, I found that while participants looked to traditional sports as a comparison for their own experience in varsity sports, they did not situate themselves within the cognitive realm of traditional sports as Pizzo et al. found directors do. Yet, they seek to legitimize their pursuits in that light and adopted the institutions of traditional sports in practice, competition, and community involvement.

I believe that esports student-athletes' perception of their activity is important because scholars, such as T.L. Taylor, have argued that esports is at a pivotal moment in its development, when stakeholders must take to heart ethical calls for equitable access to both esports, and sports in general, as a fundamental human right (Taylor, 2018, p. 194). For example, Taylor (2018) comments on how "Esports industry professionals frequently remark on how digital game competition does not tap into physical differences. In this

regard, they are hitting on the possibility of a truly radical disruption of traditional sports' long-standing problematic: the biology-as-destiny argument" (p. 195). Yet, stakeholders at the administrative level of varsity esports have chosen to house programs within athletics departments and adopt their values, despite it not being the 'natural' home for esports, but rather the best 'strategic' fit (Pizzo et al., 2019, p. 191). Taylor deplores such practices saying that "it is stunning that an industry so willing to push the frontier with new ideas about what might count as sport would rely on outdated models of gender" (2018, pp. 198-199). Thus, I believe future research should explore whether stakeholders adopt all the values of traditional sports blindly, purposively, or in some other manner? My immediate answer is no, they do not adopt all institutions blindly, as I found that varsity esports had made at least one significant advancement by allowing participants to generate income from their play. However, three participants expressed that student-athletes need a better understanding of how administration works and would like a greater say in how the organization develops. One participant expressed that they believed cultural and sexual diversity should be a focus of future research, responding:

In the future there might be one (question), and that's do you see a more, sorry, do you think there could be more cultural and sexual diversity in esports? Because we don't see a lot of females on the varsity teams, or a lot of people of ethnic diversity.

Notably, all participants were asked if they had ever felt discriminated against during their time in the program and only one participant felt that they had been wrongfully dismissed from their starting position. Another participant who self-identified as trans-

female emphasized that they felt surprisingly accepted and supported in Saints Gaming, saying:

I honestly expected to have some problems, there hasn't been one. Um, it's been amazing, and that was something that I wasn't entirely expecting. Like, I expected there to be at least one or two people, if not on the team in the [redacted] community in general, that would have a problem with who I am. But it's like, they're respectful about it, and they don't care, and they don't bring attention to my identity at all, which honestly just makes me feel so welcomed and it's. Yah it's, it's been amazing, I haven't faced any, any discrimination at all.

Academics such as Pizzo et al. (2019) list gender equity issues among their concerns for future research and argue that “athletic departments need a clear understanding of Title IX implications from both a compliance and policy perspective” (p. 190)⁴⁴. Additionally, they recommended that future researchers explore the perspectives of other stakeholders within the field, such as the student-athletes’, which this research has achieved. This was important because if the varsity esports program had adopted inequitable institutions, the students-athletes would most-likely have been affected.

⁴⁴ Title IX is a piece of American federal legislation passed in 1972 that ensures that “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance” (Title IX, n.d.). There is no direct Canadian equivalent, however the Charter of Rights and Freedoms ensures equality under the law (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, n.d.) and the Canadian Human Rights Act prohibits discrimination based on sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression (Canadian Human Rights Act, n.d.).

Agency

My second sub-question was intended to explore student-athletes' agency – their ability to affect institutions within the varsity program. Should inequitable institutions have a negative effect on them, it is important that student-athletes are able to resist, voice their concerns, and facilitate changes. In my findings, participants described two situations in which they were able to express agency over the development of the program. However, participants argued that they should be more involved in the decision-making process when changes are made that affect them.

As outlined in the findings section, a participant noted an argument, between the program administration and players, concerning the inclusion of a contractual requirement that players stream for ten hours a week on the program's Twitch channel. Another participant described an instance where players fought with administration over permission to compete from their home set-ups. The participant felt that program administration wanted players physically present because they wanted to stream their games but noted that this could still be accomplished when the team plays from home. In both cases, it seemed the players won their arguments. Participants were known to have played from home during both practice and competition throughout my time in the field. Additionally, separate participants indicated that their contractual responsibility to live-stream was loosely enforced, saying that:

I don't personally stream however, I definitely hit that three-hour threshold, if participating in [events] that are streamed on the Saints Gaming channel counts

for that. If it doesn't, then that's definitely not part of the contract that they're strictly upholding. Or at least it's, a better wording would be strictly holding us to. I believe these two instances exemplify, as previously defined, a demand made with authority over student-athletes. This is significant because it shows how power works within the varsity program and can give us an idea of how participants found space to express agency. In both cases the program administration made a request of players, that they provide their physical presence for the purpose of livestreaming. Their demand relied on the authority granted to the program through their contractual agreement with players. Importantly, as was discussed when defining demands, the players were able to confront this demand and negotiate changes. The fact that the institution was altered exemplifies institutional work via the players' disruption and creation of a new institution. According to research by institutionalists Nite et al., these two cases may also exemplify institutional work being conducted by the program (Nite et al., 2019). Although, they studied the NCAA's rise to power, they recommended that, during the early stages of development, institutions address conflicts from within and remain flexible regarding their practices (Nite et al., 2019, pp. 390-391).

While I do not believe the program administration made these demands with mal intent, I found that exploring the power dynamics involved in their implementation aided my understanding of the program's rationale; through the intersections of power, isomorphic pressures, and institutional work. I believe the demands were requested as institutions adopted to legitimize the program by aligning it with several related fields including, professional esports, traditional sports, and videogame live streaming. Saints

Gaming is an official varsity program closely aligned with the athletics department, which supports a traditional path to professionalization for its athletes, be it through professional leagues or as amateur athletes pay for an education by earning athletics scholarships (Baker III & Holden, 2018).

The synergy between varsity esports and athletics departments is more complex than simply a source of legitimization. As DiMaggio and Powell (1983) noted, the process of professionalization, a collective struggle entwined with agency, spawns normative isomorphic pressure; one aspect of which is “the resting of formal education and of legitimation in a cognitive base produced by university specialists” (p. 152). As Pizzo et al. suggested, athletics departments offer an easily accessible cognitive base from which to adopt institutions. From a Foucauldian perspective, this exemplifies the normative function of power that grants legitimacy and prestige to an institution by demonstrating discipline. For example, in *Discipline & Punish* (1995), Foucault described how, through the power of normalization, the Christian schools, École Militaire, and early hospitals of France generated homogenized and disciplined individuals. For, according to Foucault, normative power was established in ‘normative-schools’ such as, teacher’s training schools, the national medical profession, hospitals operating by the norms of general health, and the standardized industrial process. The normative power of these institutions supplemented indicators of status and privilege by “indicating membership of a homogenous social body but also (played) a part in classification, hierarchization and the distribution of rank” (Foucault, 1995, p. 184). Thus, by demanding, through contractual obligation, that athletes be physically present

for livestreaming practice and competition, the program can demonstrate its normative power.

Live streaming homogenizes practice regimes and hierarchizes competition (which makes the rank or skill of an athlete apparent) by publicizing the discipline of the program's athletes and highlighting their strengths. Participants believed publicity from livestreams would grow their reputation, which may assist them along a path to professionalization.⁴⁵ This may be true of all broadcasted college sports because scouts look for disciplined athletes as well as standout talents. Furthermore, the amount of time esports athletes are expected to spend in the public view, via livestream, may produce positive behavioural effects via panoptic power. Making the players more consistently visible online may influence their behaviour on-stream and refine a professional public demeanor that is conducive to videogame livestreaming and professional esports. When working with videogame live streamers, Taylor (2018) noted that streaming is a performative activity, deeply tied to a range of emotions experienced between the player and audience, and that streaming is embodied work (p. 86). Taylor's description of livestreaming as a performative activity suggests a unique presentation of self which is likely shaped and informed through panoptic power, that is being made visible. Among

⁴⁵ The path to professionalization within esports is yet to be concretely defined. Participants recognized that many professional esports players 'go pro' before the age of 18, when students generally begin college. Thus, the esports scene as a whole, with its latest forays into varsity programs and high school programs, has yet to settle into the traditional linear path to professionalization of traditional sports, where players progress through the educational system and go pro after college. Participants described their belief that going pro in esports could happen in correlation to success in competition or increasing social reputation/following.

the reasons participants provided, as to why they do not stream, were privacy, and feeling the need to entertain. Additionally, during interviews, a participant noted that “a lot of people say things that can get people in trouble”. The participant described an incident when a player made explicit comments during competition which were captured on stream and resulted in their dismissal from the program. From a Foucauldian perspective, this speaks to the semi-panoptic power of livestreaming, where players feel that their actions and behaviour are constantly being watched while participating in program-related activities. As a consequence, these practices train players to adopt professional institutions under isomorphic pressure. Thus, herein may lie a productive case study for dramaturgical analysis a la Erving Goffman.

Note that in this case panoptic power is limited, participants are certainly not imprisoned in a panopticon,⁴⁶ they are not under ubiquitous 24/7 surveillance. Whereas, the prisoner in the panopticon cannot know when exactly they are being watched, and thus must constantly assume that is the case, an esports player or streamer generally knows when they are on stream. Yet, this does not change the effect of being watched. According to Foucault, the major effect of the panopticon is to induce a state of consciousness and visibility (recall that a state suggests a condition, which is a fundamental element of a demand) that assures the automatic functioning of power – a constitutive element of a demand, which in this case is the institution of livestreaming

⁴⁶ The panopticon is a prison layout, designed by Jeremy Bentham, in which cells, backlit with windows, are arranged around a central guard tower with venetian blinds. The guards within the tower can see outwards to backlit shadows of the prisoners at all times, but the prisoners cannot see into the tower. Thus, the prisoners must assume at all times that there is a guard in the tower (Foucault, 1995).

(Foucault, 1995, p. 201). Furthermore, Foucault (1995) states that a principle element, according to Bentham, is that power should be visible and unverifiable. Panopticism gains its power from making the individual seen. Livestreaming makes players seen and may reflect broader trends of a larger culture of digital visibility and identity production on social media; micro-influencing, self-branding etc. However, I would not argue that videogame live streamers are subjected to panoptic power. Streamers know when they are on stream and can verify that viewers are there, via the chat or their platform's user interface. However, varsity esports players may not be able to verify that viewers are present because they do not have access to chat or a user-interface, they see only the game on their monitor. Further research may swiftly confirm or deny this, but regardless the players must assume that they are being watched and thus, perform.

As per Goffman, a performance refers to “all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” (Goffman, 1959, p. 22). Thus, regardless of who one is, be it a prisoner or esports player, in the continuous presence of observers, whether they know it or not, they perform to some desired influence on the observer. Furthermore, Goffman (1959) defines a ‘front’, as “the part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. Front, then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance” (p. 22). Prisoners and esports athletes alike put on a front when observed, either wittingly or unwittingly, be it of docility, discipline or professionalism.

Professional etiquette, according to Goffman (1959), is a performance meant to preserve the common front of a profession and that performers concerned with ‘maintaining a line’⁴⁷ will select teammates who can be trusted to perform properly (pp. 90-91). It is for this reason, through normative pressure and panoptic power, that varsity programs may have an interest in making the discipline of their athletes visible. Along the path to professionalization, an individual must prove that they can ‘maintain the line’ of their desired profession and a successful program needs to display its ability to produce talented athletes who can do that as well.

Panoptic and normative powers are useful to a professional end; however, they do manipulate an individual’s behaviour in ways they may not be aware of. Through interviews with live streamers, Taylor describes the commodification of emotion that happens as a result of streaming, noting that “while (a streamer’s) work is performative and they spend huge chunks of time ‘on’, it is also tied up with conventions of authenticity, connection, and immediacy that can evoke powerful emotions as well as experiences with their viewers” (Taylor, 2018, p. 85). As a result, Taylor (2018) states that streamers have spoken candidly about depression, personal or family troubles, and burnout (p. 85). Goffman (1959) explains how these issues may arise when a performer maintains a front they do not believe in, resulting in alienation and a wariness of others (p. 236). While this is certainly a concern for streamers, as Taylor describes it, esports

⁴⁷ By maintaining a line, Goffman refers to a performer, or team of performers, objective to sustain a particular definition of the situation or their claim to what reality is (Goffman, 1959, p. 85).

athletes, and perhaps any aspiring professional, may experience similar issues along their path to professionalization, if their identity does not match the front they are made to maintain as a result of normative pressures.

Several players noted that it is their responsibility to represent Saints Gaming and the college in a positive light and felt that they essentially served as advertisements for the program or recruiters for the school. This is a desirable attitude from the perspective of the program and is an institution common to traditional sports and varsity athletics. However, from the player's perspective there may be a number of concerns with being subjected to increased publicity. For example, Taylor (2018) conveyed a number of concerns from both live streamers and esports players in regard to streaming. Players felt that broadcasting practice time converted it into entertainment more than they would have liked, meaning they felt obliged to engage their audience and perform as a 'personality', which created the necessity for more 'real' practice time afterwards (p. 99). Streamers described stream sniping as a negative outcome of practicing on stream, noting that they had been able to take advantage of other streamers because they had gained significant knowledge of their strategies (p. 84). The same argument was used by a participant, in response to the program's streaming demands, saying "we can't stream our practices, 'cause we're coming up with strats (strategies), and then it's out to the public, and it's not a strat anymore".

The fact that players experienced a limited capacity to advocate for change is unsurprising, as Taylor (2015) explained that:

Unlike in traditional sports where there is a known path to professionalization (albeit a highly competitive one) with eventual clear payoffs and legitimacy – all supported by a range of organizations and auxiliary professionals – the indeterminacy of esports as a space for professional identity works against building, through institutions like unions, long term systems of representation and advocacy (p. 179).

They raised an important concern for professional esports which is clearly applicable to varsity esports as well. Granted, the organizational field is in its infancy, making it unlikely for a bargaining unit to reflect the collective interests of esports student-athletes. Participants unanimously described Saints Gaming’s organizational hierarchy such that players were at the bottom.⁴⁸ Two participants described the administration as being unknown to or very distanced from the players. They also called for more communication between administration and players, in regard to changes within the program, and felt that players should have more input. For now, it seems clear that student-athletes have agency within their institutions and can contribute to institutional work. However, further research, on the function of power and isomorphic pressure, may reveal a clearer path to advocacy for student-athletes.

CONCLUSIONS

⁴⁸ One participant described the organizational hierarchy saying: “I’m kind of the bottom of the web as a player. Above that would be the coach, and assistant coach. [...] and then above that it’s [redacted] as the head of the, head of the esports.” Another participant said “So, there’s the head person, then there’s manager, well I guess, the manager and coaches, and I would say the production team, and then the players. So, I guess, so, I kind of fit under that player category so, bottom.”

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.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Consent to Participate in Research



CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Study: An Ethnography of Varsity eSports in Canada

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Ben Scholl and supervised by Dr. Vincent Manzerolle, from the Faculty of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences at the University of Windsor, the results of which will contribute to a final thesis project.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel to contact either:

Ben Scholl at [REDACTED], or
Dr. Vincent Manzerolle at [REDACTED].

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to understand how varsity eSports programs are beginning to take shape in Canada and what the student-athletes' involvement looks and feels like. St Clair College is home to the first Canadian varsity eSports program and provides an ideal case study in which to do this. In particular, we hope to understand how student athletes perceive the demands of their involvement in varsity eSports, what is working well and what needs improvement. An additional purpose is to understand how the organizations of varsity eSports mirror and differ from other organizations, such as traditional varsity sports, professional sports, and the gaming industry.

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to welcome the presence of the researcher as an observer and active participant in St. Clair College eSports related activities over the remainder of the fall and part of the winter semester (2020/02/23). In addition to this you will be asked to participate in several one-on-one interviews. These two research methods (participant observation and interviews) have been selected in order to help the researcher produce an authentic and detailed understanding of varsity eSports involvement from your perspective, that is the point of view of the student-athlete.

Participant Observation:

This is the first step in the research process. It simply involves the researcher being present and participating in your daily team activities, such as practice sessions, streaming*, competitions, campus events, meetings etc. To clarify, participation in the context of competition will not entail actively competing, merely having access to the participating team members. By observation it is meant that the researcher will take notes, converse with participants, and ask questions to understand the activity taking place. Each day the researcher will ask for your ongoing consent to be observed. You may feel free to decline for that day if you so choose.

*Participant observation while streaming (on Twitch.tv) is digitally recorded and publicly available, as is the nature of the activity. In this unique case the degree of confidentiality the researcher can promise you

is compromised. What you say and do on stream is public and can be easily connected to you. It is important in general, but even more so in relation to your participation in this research, to take this into consideration.

One-on-One Interviews:

Semi-structured interviews provide the researcher with an opportunity to ask you questions in a private setting. These questions will be related to the varsity program and observations made during participation. These interviews will be a minimum of 30 minutes in length and scheduled around your availability and take place either on St. Clair College's campus, or at a mutually agreed upon location. The use of an audio recorder will be involved in order to assist the researcher in creating an accurate transcript of the conversation. Should you wish to participate, a follow-up interview will be scheduled so you can review the transcript from the first and offer any clarifications or objections to your original comments.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

With unfamiliar situations such as participant observation and interviews it is always possible for participants to feel uncomfortable, nervous, or embarrassed. Additionally, topics to be discussed during interviews will likely be personal in nature and call for participants to share their private thoughts and critical perspectives. If at any point the participant feels uncomfortable with answering a question or continuing the conversation, they may feel free to decline to do so. Although these risks may not present themselves during the study there is an ongoing concern that they may present afterwards if the output is published.

Risk to bystanders, who choose not to be observed, will be eliminated by systematically excluding them from the process of recording observations via codes. Observations referring to individuals will be generated by referencing one or more unique code names, which will only be assigned to consenting participants, leaving un-coded bystanders without a point of reference within the system of fieldnote generation.

Risk to the college/program's reputation may be present due to the open acknowledgement of their participation in the research and the direct feedback that the final outputs present to them.

Social risks may result from participants' comments. These could include being avoided or shunned, loss of social status, and loss of privacy.

Economic risks may be present during participant observation on Twitch, because a participant see a decline in monetization (e.g. viewers, ads, or donations). Additionally, any comments made on public livestreams may be tied back to participants and result in repercussions. This may be seen as a viable reason to withdraw from the study.

With the collection of field notes, such as observations, audio recordings, and interview notes, there is a risk of confidential information being breached, lost, or stolen. Participant's identities will be coded with the use of master sheet which will be locked away except when in use by the researcher and never in the presence of participants. Field notes will be locked in a safe when not in use and all digital notes and recordings will be password encrypted. Lastly, the recording device will also be locked in a safe when not in use. However, if a participant's identity is compromised it is possible that they may experience ramifications from their teammates, coaches, or college due to the content of their interviews.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

There may be no clear benefits to all participants. However, while participating in this research you may gain an increased understanding of the organizational system around you and through self-reflection may come to better understand your role in contributing to its change.

Since St. Clair College's varsity eSports program is Canada's first ever, it presents an opportunity to break ground in this region for eSports studies. By participating in this research participants are helping to provide a greater understanding of the institution while it is being developed. Additionally, critical research at the level of the student-athlete has never been conducted in any form related to eSports. By participating in this study,

you lend your perspective to the very first research of this kind and contribute to the foundations of knowledge produced at this level.

COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION

There will be no compensation for participation in this study. If a participant chooses to participate in an interview but requests a location other than St. Clair College's campus they will not be compensated for travel or parking.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Due to the public nature of your work as an eSports student-athlete I cannot guarantee you that any information you provide will be confidential. While your name, gamer tag or gender will never be included in the final outputs of this project it is still possible to identify participants due to the public accessibility of your program, its small size, and specificity of your game teams (i.e. which teammates play which games). Additionally, Saint Clair College will be identified as the location of the eSports program, this is because it is significant to the research and due to the fact that yours is (at the time of writing) the first and only program of its kind in Canada.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You may withdraw from the study at any time until the completion of data collection, which the researcher will inform you of via email. The expected date of completion will be 2020/02/23. During the study you may decline to be observed on any day which you choose not to. During interviews you are free to decline any questions.

Should you wish to withdraw, you need only email the researcher (Ben Scholl). Once the email has been received a confirmation will be sent and all your data will be destroyed. In the case of participant observation onTwitch.tv, the recorded streams will remain in the possession of the SaintsGaming account owner.

The study will come to an end either mid-way through the winter semester (2020/02/23) or at such a time as the researcher determines that sufficient data has been collected. Either way you will be informed of the researcher's departure from the team via email at least a week in advance. Over the course of the winter semester the researcher will conduct an analysis of the field notes generated in this study and write the final report. Once the research has been finished you will be notified via email with a link to the research summary. Subsequent updates may come if the research is further published or otherwise disseminated.

FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE PARTICIPANTS

Once the final report has been completed a summary will be available online and participants will be contacted via email with the official link.

Web address: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/research-result-summaries/>

Date when results are available: Estimated to be available by April 2020

SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA

The data generated in this study may be used in subsequent studies, publications, and presentations.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact: Research Ethics Coordinator, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3P4; Telephone: 519-253-3000, ext. 3948; e-mail: ethics@uwindsor.ca

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

I understand the information provided for the study: An Ethnography of Varsity eSports in Canada, as described herein.

I consent to participation in the following procedures:

- Face-to-face participant observation
- Participant observation during public streaming on Twitch.tv
- One-on-one interviews
- Secondary follow-up interviews

My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.

Signature of Investigator

Date

CONSENT TO CONTACT FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

I give the investigator permission to contact me in the future for further research.

Circle One: NO YES

(If Yes) He may do so at:

Email Address

Phone Number

Appendix B: Interview Script

Interview Script: Ethnography of Varsity eSports in Canada

Participant: _____

Date: _____

Audio File Name: _____

INTRODUCTION

- The Interview should last around 30 minutes to 1 hour.
- If you agree, I am going to record our conversation and transcribe it later in order to have an accurate record of what we have said. If you want to review the transcript we can do a follow up interview and book a time that works for both of us at the end of this one. Once we are happy with the transcript I will use it in my analysis and final paper.
- As was mentioned in the consent form, I can't promise that anything you say will be kept anonymous. This is because the sample size of St. Clair's varsity program is so small, and your names are all already public. However, I will not use your name in my final report and any of your quotes I choose to include will be double checked by my supervisory committee to ensure they are effective, not misrepresented, or not very easily tied back to you.
- Additionally, I want to ask that throughout the interview you try not to identify any team members specifically in your answers.
- Remember, you can choose not to answer any of the questions I ask you or ask me any questions you may have.
- If this is all okay with you, and if you have no questions right now, I will turn on the recorder, start asking some questions and taking notes.

Do you agree to have the audio from following interview recorded?

[Circle One]

NO

YES

WARM-UP

I want to start by asking you some really basic questions about yourself and to get to know your eSports story a bit.

- What age are you?
- How would you describe your gender?
- How would you describe your ethnicity/race?
- Where are you from?
- Are you a scholarship athlete?
- What does your gamer tag mean? Or why did you choose it?
- How did you get into playing video games?

What is it about gaming that attracts you?

- Why did you start playing competitively?

Was there a certain game, a friend, or other thing that got you into it? Do you stream?

- How long have you been on St. Clair's Varsity team?
- Can you tell me about how you got here, that you are playing varsity eSports at St. Clair?

How did you learn about the program, were you recruited?

MAIN BODY

(For Reminder Only, Don't Read Aloud)

Research Question: How do student-athletes perceive the demands of their involvement in varsity eSports?

Sub-questions: - in what ways, if at all, do student-athletes display evidence of action explicable by institutional logics and adopted through 'isomorphic pressure'

- in what ways, if at all, do student-athletes have agency in the development of the organization?

- How would you describe varsity eSports to someone who knows nothing about what you do?

How aware are you of other governing bodies in sports such as: traditional, international, varsity, or eSports (e.g. the NFL, IOC, NCAA or NACE, and ESL, respectively)?

If so, can you describe the roles of those which you know?

How do you think they are reflected in your varsity eSports experience?

Similar to the previous question, how aware are you of goings on in the gaming industry and of grassroots eSports culture (e.g. Blizzard Entertainment or Electronic Arts, and local tournaments and LAN parties, respectively)?

If applicable, can you tell me what you know about it?

How do you think this is reflected in your varsity eSports experience?

Can you describe your responsibilities as an eSports student-athlete?

Are there activities you must participate in? Are there activities you feel obliged to participate in?

What does the College administration require of you?

Has the program required anything of you? e.g. Have you signed contracts, what did this entail?

How has the program affected your day-to-day life?

Can you describe your weekly eSports schedule?

How reasonable is the workload placed on you as a varsity eSports student-athlete?

How do you see yourself in comparison to the traditional varsity athletes?

What is your mindset or what emotions emerge when you participate in program related activities?

What does the varsity program offer you in terms of opportunities or benefits?

What do you give the program in return?

Can you describe the program's organizational hierarchy and how you fit into it?

Can you describe what the culture is like on the varsity team?

Can you describe how people act around one another? What are the team dynamics?

Have you ever felt discriminated against or put down during your involvement with varsity eSports?

Can you describe the team's processes, in terms of how internal matters are attended to?

When you need something addressed what do you do? How does it work?

WRAP-UP

Did I miss anything you think is important?

Are there any questions you think I should be asking in the future?

Do you have anything to add?

Do you have any questions for me?

CLOSING

Thank you so much for spending time with me answering all the questions you could.

Do you have any more questions about the recording, transcripts, or confidentiality?

Do you want to schedule a follow-up interview to go over the transcripts from this interview?

Follow-up Interview:

[Circle One]

NO

YES

Date: _____

Appendix C: Double-Entry Journal

Double-Entry Journal Format

Study: An Ethnography of Varsity eSports in Canada

Location: _____

Date (YYYY/MM/DD): _____ / _____ / _____ Time: _____ AM PM

ACTIVITY:

(All of the above will appear on the left page of the journal before the preceding section)

CODE	OBSERVATION/DESCRIPTIVE NOTES	EXPANDED NOTES
	LEFT PAGE OF JOURNAL	RIGHT PAGE OF JOURNAL

Appendix D: Phases of Thematic Analysis

Table 1 Phases of thematic analysis

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Table 1. "The phases of thematic analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87)

Appendix E: Labeling Spreadsheet

The screenshot shows an Excel spreadsheet with the following structure:

- Columns:** H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, U, V, W, X, Y.
 - Columns H-I: Critical Observation, Future Q
 - Column J: Player XP
 - Column K: Player Health
 - Column L: Player Comms
 - Column M: Gender
 - Column N: Demographic
 - Column O: Labour
 - Column P: Agency
 - Column Q: Program
 - Column R: College
 - Column S: Larger 1
 - Column T: Grassroots
 - Column U: Tech
 - Column V: Practice
 - Column W: Comp
 - Column X: Team
 - Column Y: Broadcast
- Rows:** 1 to 15.
 - Row 1: Critical Observation
 - Row 2: Future Q
 - Row 3: Player XP
 - Row 4: Player Health
 - Row 5: Player Comms
 - Row 6: Gender
 - Row 7: Demographic
 - Row 8: Labour
 - Row 9: Agency
 - Row 10: Program
 - Row 11: College
 - Row 12: Larger 1
 - Row 13: Grassroots
 - Row 14: Tech
 - Row 15: Practice

The data table contains binary values (0s and 1s) indicating label application. For example, in row 12, column Q (Program), the value is 1, indicating that the 'Program' label applies to that observation.

Image 1. Excel spreadsheet showing labels in columns and rows relating to data extracts. Binary 1s and 0s populate the field to indicate when a label applies to an extract, e.g. Q-12 was labeled as having a program-related institution.

Appendix F: Thematic Funnel

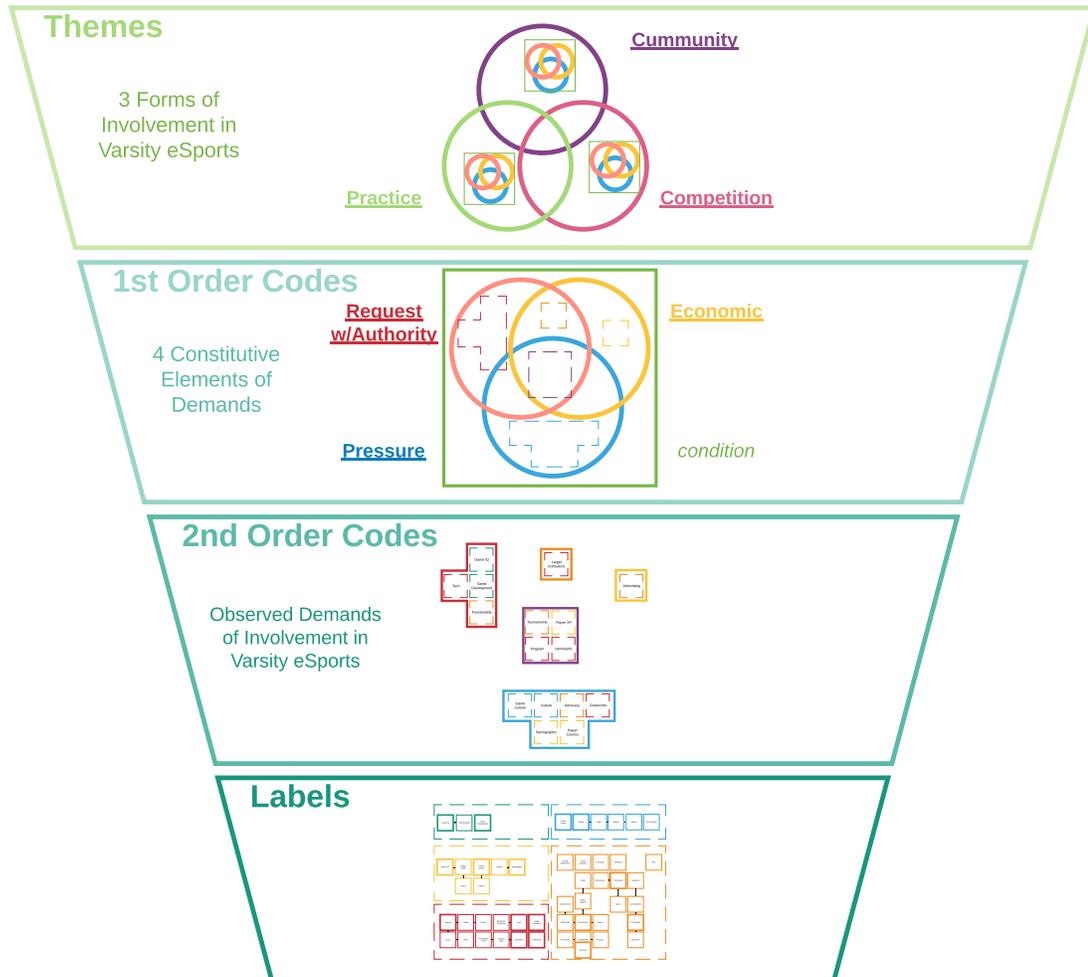


Figure 1. depicts a conceptual 'funnel' showing the levels of analysis performed on the dataset from macro-level thematization to micro-level labeling.

Appendix G: Constitutive Elements of a Demand

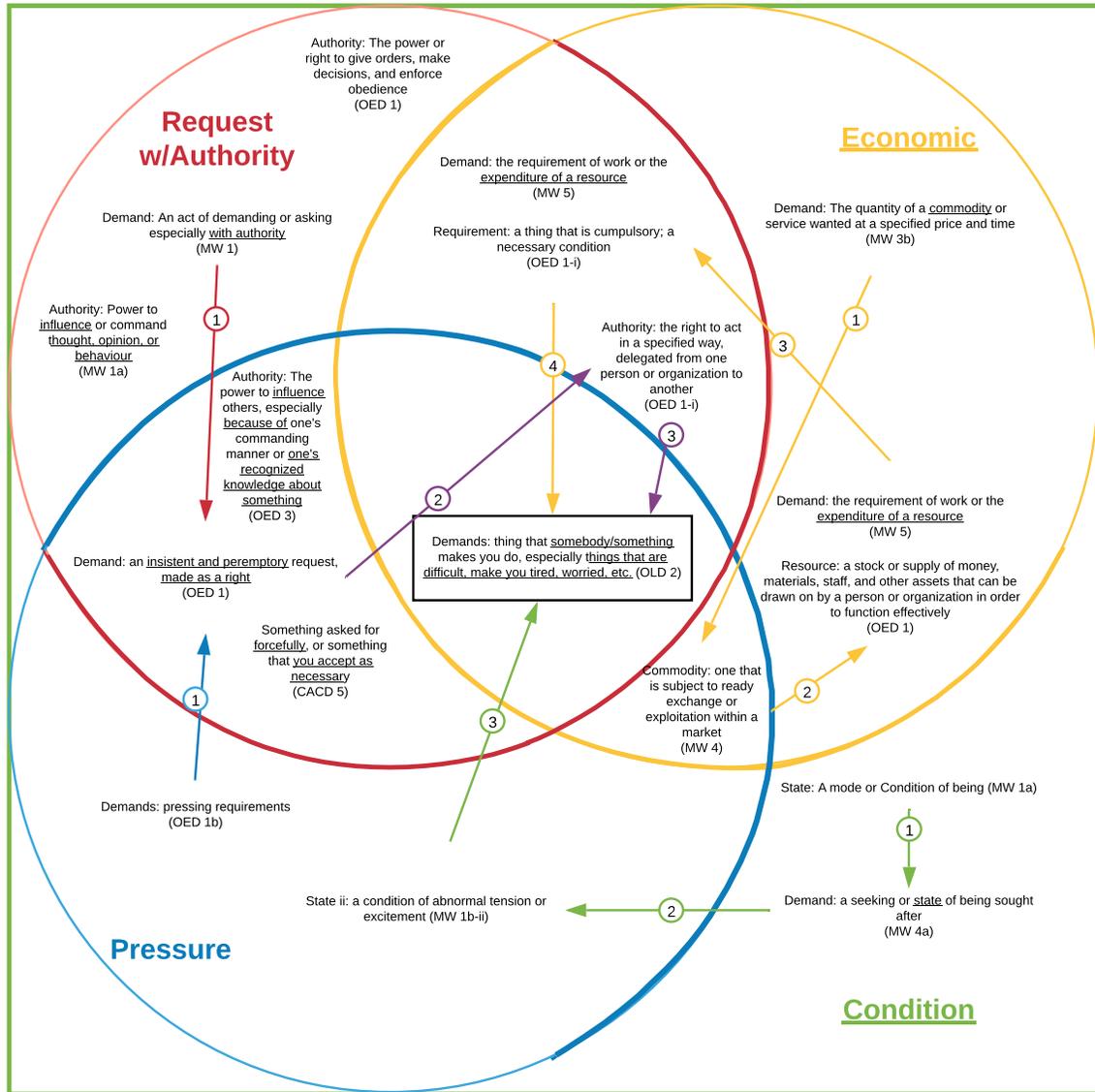


Figure 2. The Venn diagram used to categorize the definitions of demand, and additional terms, into the constitutive elements of a demand: requests with authority, economics, pressures, and a condition. The operative definition of demand is indicated by a border in the centre. The 'Pressure' circle is off to the left because the diagram originally consisted of four rings; however, the 'condition' ring was turned into the frame surrounding the diagram to indicate its foundational presence in all elements. The numbered arrows delineate my thought process in arriving at the operative definition from each element.

Appendix H: Definitions of a Demand

Source	Definitions of Demand		
	Additional Terms	Source	Definition
Merriam-Webster Dictionary	1a. An act of demanding or <u>asking</u> especially with authority .		
	Authority:	Merriam-Webster Dictionary	1a. <u>Power to influence</u> or command <u>thought, opinion, or behaviour</u> .
		Oxford English Dictionary	1ii. The right to act in a specified way, <u>delegated from one person or organization</u> to another.
	3b. Economics: The quantity of a commodity or <u>service</u> wanted at a <u>specified price and time</u> .		
	Commodity:	Merriam-Webster Dictionary	4. <u>One</u> that is subject to ready exchange or exploitation within a market.
	4a. A seeking or state of being sought after.		
	State:	Merriam-Webster Dictionary	1a. A mode or <u>condition</u> of being.
			1b-ii. A <u>condition</u> of abnormal tension or excitement.
	5. The requirement of work or the expenditure of a resource .		
	Requirement:	Oxford English Dictionary	1i. a thing that is compulsory; a necessary condition.
	Expenditure:	Oxford English Dictionary	1ii. The use of energy, time, or other resource.
	Resource:	Oxford English Dictionary	1. A stock or supply of money, materials, <u>staff</u> , and other assets that can be drawn on by a person or organization in order to function effectively.
Oxford Learner's Dictionary	2. (demands) thing that <u>somebody/something</u> makes you do, especially things that are difficult, make you tired, worried, etc.		
Oxford English Dictionary	1. An <u>insistent</u> and peremptory request, <u>made as of right</u> .		
	Peremptory:	Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary	1. Having the expectation of immediate and complete obedience, or to be obeyed without explanation.
Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary	5. Something <u>asked for forcefully</u> , or something <u>you accept as necessary</u> .		

Table 2. 7 definitions of demand, by their dictionary source, and the definitions of additional terms used to understand them.

Appendix I: Expanded Fieldnotes on Discord

Additional Observations on the importance of Discord

Throughout my time in the field I observed that participants used Discord for the majority of their program-related communication, that is in and out of game. When participating in competition and practice, player used the app for voice communications, because the app was said to provide better service than in-game options. The Discord app can be used on a phone or desktop. During practice and competition, all participants were observed with their phones beside them, they checked the in the midst of matches and during breaks in between rounds. They also opened the app on their desktops to communicate with their team during play via voice chat. Besides *Smash Bros.*, the teams wore their own noise-cancelling headsets with microphones, which the program also provided as peripherals. When streaming the broadcast team would often assist players in setting up their Discord voice chat and game audio to optimize recording. Several participants mentioned that their individual teams were primarily organized through Discord and they used the app to communicate their schedules for practices. When asked to describe their team's processes, in terms of how internal matters are attended to and how they would approach having something addressed, four participants answered that they would handle anything in their Discord group chats.

The app was not only essential to the organization and communications of the teams, it was also relied upon by the leagues. During observation of the CSL *Fortnite* playoffs, the importance of the app was made apparent. In order for the 49 individual teams, 98 players in total, to join the game lobby a unique code was sent to the team

coordinators by a CSL representative through Discord. However, when the game was scheduled to begin, 101 players were waiting in the queue. The participant told me that there should only be 99, the competitors and the CSL rep who was meant to host the match and then leave. The participant told me that someone had leaked the code and continued to do so over the course of the evening, as the CSL rep attempted to restart the lobby and send out multiple new codes. Unfortunately, there was no way for the tournament organizers to see which players did not belong in the lobby because they did not have the ability to do so in-game. Over the hour and a half delay, players began to openly express their frustrations with the league through the Discord group chat. They eventually played their two matches for the evening, but after the holiday break the results were scrapped. CSL had chosen to reboot the playoffs after they partnered with *Fortnite's* developer, EPIC Games, to provide dedicated in-game servers and support, so they no longer had to rely on sharing game codes through Discord.

Appendix J: Images from the Field



Image 2. Lambton College, Sarnia ON, esports arena at the Battle of the Border Cities. Saints Gaming players packing up their peripherals after a match.



Image 3. University of Waterloo, Waterloo ON, atrium of the student life centre at the University of Waterloo Arcadian. Attendees play Super *Smash Bros. Melee* on CRT TVs.



Image 4. The main stage at Frostbite 2020, Detroit MI. Early crowd starts to gather for *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* phase 1 singles pool play.



Image 5. The *Smash Bros.* area for XMAS LAN at St. Clair College's Student Life Centre, Windsor ON. Attendees play 'friendlies' in between rounds during a break in the tournament. The broadcast team is set up on the main stage.

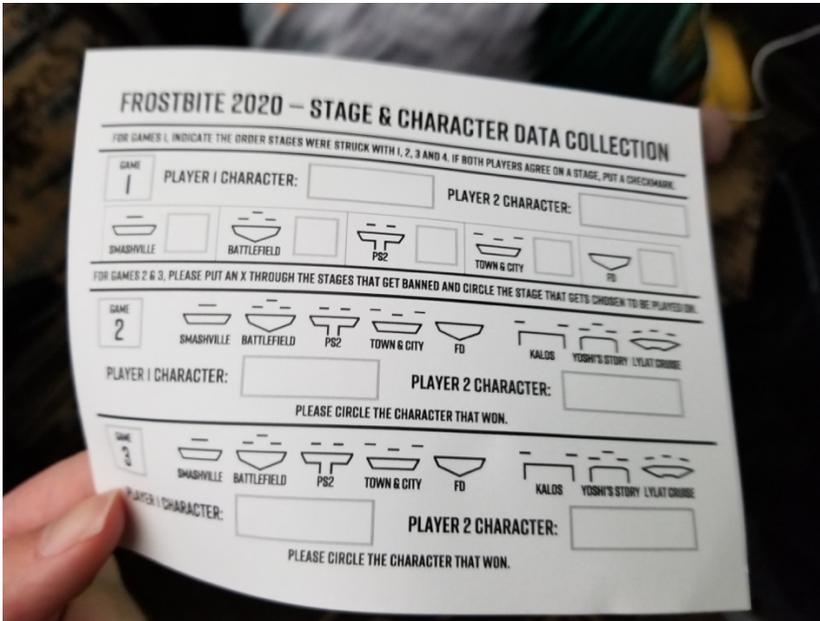


Image 6. Frostbite 2020 – Stage & Character Data Collection card handed out to players before each match by a tournament organizer. Players would fill out the card in between rounds and return it to the tournament organizer’s desk afterwards.



Image 7. The Nest – Interior – at St. Clair College, Windsor ON. Players compete in *Fortnite* CSL Playoffs while their coach spectates, and the broadcast team live streams with commentary on the opposite side of the room.

Appendix K: Extended Interview Transcript - *Hearthstone*

Q: How would you describe Varsity Esports to someone who knows nothing about what you do?

A: Similar to regular Varsity Sports except adapted into games now. Whereas, there's a competitive scene, still requires equal amounts of training, sometimes more, sometimes less, depending on what you're doing. But you still have to work at it, instead of working more physical aspects, you're working more mental aspects. In my opinion, there is still some physical requirements to some of the eSports, but not as much as like, soccer, football, that sort of thing.

Q: Why do you think that it's similar to traditional varsity sports?

A: Because it still requires something of the athlete. Soccer: you still have to put in X amount of hours a week training, required by the school or by your program, you'd still have to go to the gym, let's say for instance, outside so, you have to work on your own too, and you have to learn the game, learn plays, learn different aspects on the field - of what, where you need to be in certain points in the game - same thing applies to Esports. Go to Counter-Strike, for instance: you have to learn how to manage your economy, you have to know where to be in certain rounds depending on what sort of execution you and your team want to run, you have to learn how to throw smokes so they land in certain locations to cut off vision from the enemy team. That all requires training so, even if they're training together as a team, they can run plays. But, outside of that, they have to learn all of the different smokes, spray patterns of guns, movement, how to get to the place that they need to be as fast as possible. So, it all works like that, and similar to

regular Varsity Sports, you're working as a team, you have to be able to communicate. Counter-Strike's a lot about communication, most of the team-based games communication is key. If you can't relay proper information to the rest of your team: you'll probably lose.

Q: How would you relate that to Hearthstone?

A: Hearthstone, uh, so, information is important for Hearthstone. 'Cause you could be thinking of a certain play, and how you want to execute it but, maybe one sequence in that play like, the second step, you're doing it sub optimally, but the guy next to you, he knows that that second step should be like this, and maybe he thinks, has a different opinion or different values towards the game. So, I could be a more Tempo-oriented player, where I want to play like, a one-drop on 1, two-drop on 2, three-drop on 3, and just continuously value my, out-value my opponent by continuously playing good minions throughout the game. Whereas, my teammate could be a more Control-based player. So, he wants to save all like, removal let's say like, a board-wipe, to destroy all my opponent's minions, he'll want to save that instead of playing it right away. So, if I wanted to clear - say I have a board-wipe that deals 4 damage to all minions - he's got to four fours, if I'm more of a tempo-oriented player, I might be inclined to wipe the board right there. Whereas, a control player would wait a little bit longer, let the opponent overextend, and then get the value out of that. So, you kind of want to Value the amount of resources. A lot of it, in Hearthstone, a lot of the thing is like, two-for-ones, one-for-ones. So, if you play one spell and it removes, let's say, five creatures: that's a five-for-one, and that's insane value. You're spending x amount of Mana for one resource to

remove multiple resources, that's kind of how you want to evaluate the game and it's, it's how you and your team, kinda communicate those ideals towards the game. 'Cause we have had some semesters where we aren't communicating very well, and it hasn't worked out the best for us. Whereas, when, those semesters where, as a team we weren't doing well, individually a few of us did well in other tournaments outside of the team-based one.

Q: So, how do you manage that, that balance of control vs. Tempo players?

A: Um, it matters on the deck too. So, you can build a deck around a tempo-based deck or a control-based deck. So, that's the main area you kind of balance that. And, then a lot of it is just playing together, practicing, getting used to what the "guy to my right thinks all the time" or what the "guy to my left thinks all the time." So, then you can, kind of, sync your ideas together and you'll all be on the same wavelength, again still you'll have different sequencing of plays but, for the most part you're all kind of focused on the same goal, in a way.

Q: Okay, so, if you've got two players like, at opposite poles though, do you think it makes you better to, sort of, come to the middle? In a way.

A: Ah, kind of. Uh, it's really weird with decks, you think of it as a triangle of rock-paper-scissors. You have a 'aggro', 'mid-range', 'control'. So, in a perfect world: aggro loses to mid-range, mid-range loses to control, control loses to aggro. That's the perfect

world ideal of the rock-paper-scissors. Obviously, there's variances simply due to the randomness of cards.

But, if you're an Aggro player, you're more inclined to play out everything you have in your hand, empty your hand right away, get as many minions on the board as possible. You don't often trade, so you don't often to use your minions to destroy theirs. You pretty much just want their health to say zero, that's your ultimate goal. How you get there doesn't matter, that's what you want. Mid-range: you're trying to fight with an aggro early to keep your board state, and usually around like 3 or 4, you start playing high stated Minions that can trade optimally into the aggro decks. And, then usually you're going to win on like 7 to 10, so to say. So, you are fast, but you're trying to, you're playing a more value game. Tempo-value-ey game it's like a mixture. And whereas, control: you probably passed the first seven turns, something like that, and then you just want to board-wipe after board-wipe until you've denied your opponent all their resources, and then you slam a big creature down that gets insane value like, 'discover a free spell' or 'put free dragons in your hand' that's, that's just right now, in terms of cards that are available now. Very overpowered effects for a large amount of Mana is what you want for control. So, having two different types of players, it doesn't so much help you meet in the middle it just gives you a wider variety or wider, what's the word I'm looking for, arsenal of decks.

So, you could, if the Meta is weird, and decks like aggro decks and control decks are all viable at the same time, it gives you the opportunity to be able to run control decks and aggro decks in one line-up, and not have to, kind of, give in to what the meta says is

good. You can play Decks that are slightly below tier one, let's say like, tier 2, tier 3 decks, but because you're so well-versed in piloting these styles of decks, you can play them as if they were a tier 1 tier 2 deck.

Appendix L: Expanded Participatory Observation Fieldnotes

Game mechanics from participant observation of *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*:

By resources, the participant refers to the number of times a character can perform a vertical jump animation. To simplify the mechanic, all characters can jump twice, e.g. once off the stage and once more in mid-air. They also have a one-time vertical attack move, which provides a vertical boost and can be used like a jump. These resources reset when the character touches the stage again. A typical *Smash Bros.* stage floats in the center of the TV or computer screen. Around it is open air, and then a kill zone which is located at the physical boundaries of the screen. If a player guide's their avatar beyond the limit of the screen, or if an opponent attacks and launches them beyond the boundary of the screen, the kill zone will eliminate the player in a matter of seconds. Competitive players often play in the space between the stage and the kill zone where it is easier to launch their opponent into the kill zone. However, this is risky because they are floating in 'mid-air' and need enough resources to make their way back to the stage. If a player runs out of resources off stage, they will fall to their demise in the kill-zone below them. If a player notices their opponent has run low on resources, they will attack them in mid-air to ensure they can't regain their resources, by touching the stage, and attempt to launch them into the kill-zone.

Directional Influence is another key game mechanic in *Super Smash Bros.* which players were observed discussing frequently in practice. Through participant observation I gained a greater understanding of the mechanic and its strategic implications.

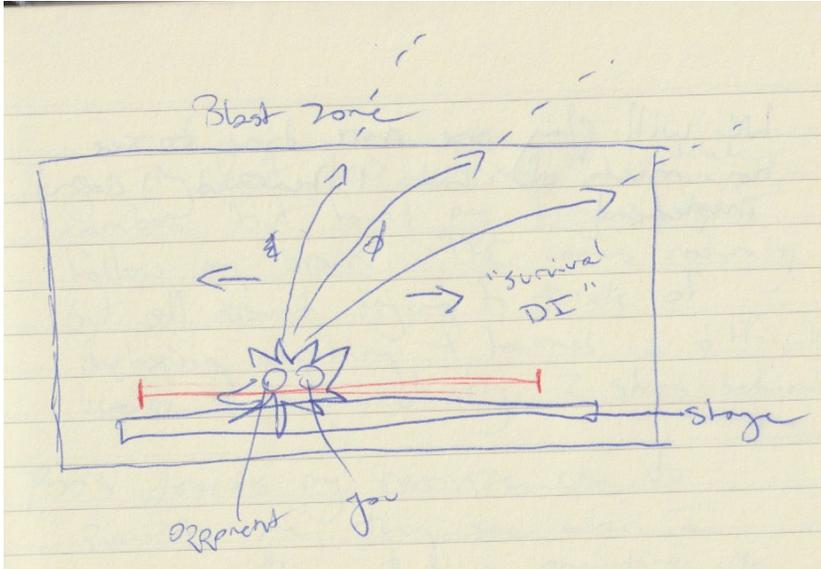


Image 8. Sketch, drawn during participant observation, portraying the three directional influence (DI) paths a player could choose from

Super Smash Bros. Ultimate operates on a two-tier damage system where the base knockback (aka. damage) of an attack is static and tied to each unique attack. The variable damage or 'knockback growth' is tied to a player's health percent. A high health percent indicates a player has taken a lot of damage, thus when attacked, knockback growth will be exponentially higher in addition to base knockback. Every time a player is successfully attacked, they will be 'knocked back' from the point of attack at a velocity relative to the two-tiered total knockback. In image 8, the arched arrow marked "survival DI" depicts that by holding the directional stick to the right, the player's avatar would be launched from the point of attack on an arc that would direct them away from the blast zone. The central arched arrow indicates the path the avatar would be launched on if the player releases the directional stick, providing no DI. The most vertical arrow depicts the path the avatar would be launched on if the player holds the directional stick to the left,

influencing their avatar's flight up into the blast zone, making them most likely to be eliminated in the blast zone. The red ruler is meant to indicate that the attack could occur from any location along the stage, thus changing the appropriate choice of DI.

Furthermore, the attack could occur off the stage from either above or below and launch the character on any path within 360°, and the arch of the three paths will be more or less straight depending on the total knockback dealt by the attack.

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