

Chapter 13

Tensions of Growth in Collegiate Esports: Legitimacy, Affinity Spaces, and UNM Esports

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ABSTRACT

Looking at collegiate esports, the space is filled with a diverse array of programs growing at different rates and all finding legitimacy and recognition in different ways. However, many programs are faced with a specific tension between the flexibility of a grassroots club and the rigidity of university organization. This chapter will look at one particular program at the University of New Mexico and how it has been navigating its own identity as an affinity space and how its growth into something more may have unintended consequences that should be considered for any similar program. Specifically, the chapter will focus on what it means to be an affinity space, how UNM esports fits into that category, and what gets lost when attempting to integrate with different institutional-level structures.

INTRODUCTION

Esports has quickly amassed cultural relevance (Steinkuehler, 2020), but it is not always clear how a particular institution or group of people can best move forward in articulating their potential shared interest and organize their efforts. Whether we are considering how to capitalize on latent interest within our local community, to identify a new varsity sport, or to create some other institutional alignment under say student services, there seem to be many approaches to growing esports at the collegiate level (Pizzo, Jones, & Funk, 2019). A great deal of the collegiate organization around esports happens within

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the context of varsity athletics (Funk, et al., 2018; Keiper et al., 2017)). Within broad efforts to consider the establishment of esports as a varsity sport, we have one path to both participation and legitimacy for such groups. But there is a lot of variation in how and why the activities of esports are being commingled with higher education (Reitman, et al., 2020, Summerly, 2020) and this gives the individual enthusiasts who are looking to organize local activity around esports a lot to think about. Possibly the largest theme is the tension that exists between the typical nature of game communities as fluid and permeable affinity spaces and the hierarchical, formal organizational structures maintained within universities.

Many of the spaces that are set up around esports do not begin life as varsity sports, or culturally resemble the sport cultures, even though this is the most common way to institutionalize esports within a university, whether or not this happens specifically within the athletics department (Pizzo, Jones, & Funk, 2019). Gaming cultures are the result of grassroots movements, small communities that have sprung up based on shared interests in relation to the monolithic game publishers. From the outside these spaces seem far from the trappings of scholarships and branding we normally associate with collegiate athletics. The circumstances and eventual histories of these small idiosyncratic organizations may in the end play a large role in how esports becomes institutionalized within higher education, and if esports plays a role even remotely approaching that of prior collegiate sports, significantly altering the institutional realities of colleges and Universities themselves.

Much of the literature describes the growth of esports within colleges as a process of institutionalization, where formal structures already in place at universities and within athletics especially (e.g., coaches, staff, facilities, scholarships, branding, national governance) are put in place to support esports organizations. There are plenty of discussions about whether athletics will have esports, who else might, whether NCAA or similar governance is a good idea, and similar issues of organizational governance. But all these discussions are in terms of how esports will try to fit into these existing molds. Will a male dominated sport sound like a Title IX nightmare to athletics departments? Will the NCAA's statute of amateurism accommodate the prize money and other monetization realities in esports already? Will team players need to maintain the same GPA as their old sport counterparts?

What seems to be missing, is much discussion of how this fundamentally informal and distributed cultural form will fare under institutionalization, or how appropriate such a model is for games that are constantly changing at the whims of their players and publishers. So, in this paper, we would like to consider what it can look like to be leading these efforts from within, within a position of leadership for a broader local esports group trying to make it bigger within a university.

Architects (Gee, 2017) of esports spaces are looking for ways to build participation, legitimize their activities, and find places of permanence for these game-playing and affiliated activities within the structures and ways of life in higher education. Although varsity athletics is available as a model to emulate, it is not the only model available, and is not even a single model. Esports clubs may decide to adopt a team structure, coaches, facilities, and management for instance, and yet decide not to participate in a mother organization such as the NCAA oversees typical collegiate sports. Which trappings of sports, collegiate athletics, or even broader organizational and philosophical structures of the university any specific club may decide to take on or leave behind is currently up for grabs, and models derived from athletics have been adopted in other university centers to house esports clubs.

There are significant differences between the existing cultures and histories of development in esports and old sports (Summerly, 2018), and between the gaming cultures that birthed esports (Gee, 2003; Consalvo, 2012). Varsity athletics might not be the best fit for a variety of reasons or might simply not be a contextually available option depending on local circumstances and the situation of the enthusiasts

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