

**Building Heroes:
Collegiate Esports, Character Formation, and Community Building**

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Senior Honors Thesis

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the nascent collegiate esports industry and the communities that have formed along with it. Specifically, the thesis aims to answer the questions of what the skills one can acquire through esports are, what is the nature of such communities, and how notions of masculine identity are formed through them. These questions were answered by acquiring qualitative data through participant observation and in-depth interviews of an esports team at the University of Colorado Boulder. There are three levels to the results. First, esports provide a cultural battleground in which the notions of what masculinity is and how it is performed is contested. Second, playing esports at the collegiate level can provide players with valuable skills such as communication, teamwork and leadership that are desirable for the future. Finally, that the communities formed through esports form a strong sense of belonging and simultaneously forge friendships, granting players a strong social network and support net.

Keywords: collegiate esports, masculinity, gaming, community, communication skills

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Thanks to many years of reinforced stereotypes, gaming has come to be known in the collective consciousness as a solitary activity, yet thanks to technological advances (namely, broadband) gaming has become an increasingly interconnected social activity (Shaw, 2010). With a wide array of genres and ways to play them, video games have become a massive form of entertainment whose industry now rivals the television industry, and the global music and film industries.

The success of the video game industry in the 21st century (as compared to other forms of entertainment) is represented by its multiplayer games that are considered some of the most competitive played games on a global scale (Newzoo, 2019). When people play these highly-competitive video games, they are often communicating with other people, particularly when they engage in the sort of teamwork-intensive games that have now evolved into a professional scene.

The growth of “esports” – the name given to the aforementioned competitive games that have spawned massive fan followings – has transformed gaming into more than just a mere hobby. The explosive growth of the esports industry has translated into the professionalization of gaming, and such effects have even begun to seep into the collegiate level. In some cases, colleges have even begun offering full-ride scholarships for students who participate in their esports teams (Koetsier, 2018).

Along with the industry boom of esports, colleges have now begun hopping along for the ride, and in some cases, they have created programs for collegiate esports. Some colleges now offer scholarships and visas to students who are interested in engaging in the competition while representing the college. In the case of colleges such as Clemson and UC Irvine, massive facilities have been developed as they hope to tap into the esports market. Collegiate esports

therefore represent an up-and-coming opportunity for college students to be part of a community; when schools invest in collegiate esports programs they are creating new avenues of interaction and community for people.

As more and more people show interest in esports and the industry continues to grow, researchers must turn their academic attention towards video games. Video games are now a cultural artifact with the power to create and shape individual experiences. In esports, teams are forming for specific video games and simultaneously so are new communities being formed.

The theoretical framework of this thesis is based on Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall's foundational work on Cultural Studies. William's essay "Culture is Ordinary" provides part of the framework, particularly his (1958) idea that "the making of a society is the finding of common meaning and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressure of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land." This thesis seeks to understand how specialized "societies" or, rather, communities are built through esports at the collegiate level. William's idea of debate and amendment is also a key factor in the conceptualization of this thesis, as the communities that are formed by esports generate new debates on accepted social values.

In addition, Stuart Hall's (1981) idea that popular culture is the arena of consent and resistance comprises the latter half of the theoretical framework under which this thesis operates. Within the communities that form around esports, notions of society and values are contested by its participants, forming a "cultural battleground" or "cultural arena" where the meanings of individuality are contested and created. This paper aims to examine how the collegiate esports community is one such cultural background, and the significance behind it being so.

While the aforementioned works inform the theoretical framework of this thesis, the study of gaming also plays a key role in its framework and approach. Namely, T.L. Taylor's (2015) seminal work "Raising the stakes: E-sports and the professionalization of computer gaming." which provides a holistic view of how esports transformed from a hobby into a professionalized experience. Taylor's historical accounts of the rise of esports as a male-dominated industry informed much of the knowledge of this thesis, and her ideas on masculinity in competitive gaming form a critical component of this thesis' approach to communities.

College is an extremely formative experience, and what people learn during their time in college is significant, particularly when we understand college as a place where behaviors, points of views and attitudes are learned by students (Hora et al., 2016). This thesis will examine the ways in which collegiate esports can help craft student communities, how participation in esports can affect personal growth, and the manner of skills students can attain through playing esports. More importantly, this thesis is concerned with how the new cultural arena created by collegiate esports can help mold individual experiences, reinforce or mitigate cultural values and grant students valuable life skills.

There are many benefits to participating in team-based esports, particularly at the collegiate level. A player can, for example, improve their communication skills, learn how to work as part of a team, and also help develop their identity – that is, how people view themselves and how they act according to who they believe themselves to be. This thesis will explore the ways in which each of these occurs when an individual engages in team-based esports. This will be achieved by a comprehensive analysis of a collegiate level team at the University of Colorado Boulder. By integrating myself into this team, I seek to answer how exactly these benefits have manifested in the rest of the team and how the players have changed after playing the game for a long amount of time – and what real-world consequences that has.

Chapter 2: Video Gaming, Whiteness, and Masculinity

Most researchers who conduct any sort of research into gaming, particularly competitive gaming, note that these communities are often overwhelmingly male-dominated (Taylor, 2015; Taylor, 2012). As such, it would be remiss to talk about esports without detailing its aspect of masculinity. Gaming as a whole is often stereotyped as being the space of white males (Shaw, 2010) and it is therefore perceived as such in the collective consciousness. And although new statistics indicate that we are now seeing a new trend in terms of the demographics of the communities around it – recently, for example, 83% of teenage girls played video games (Anderson & Jingjing, 2018) – the reality is that esports still remain a male-dominated sphere (Taylor, 2015). In the Overwatch League, there is a *single* female player that competes at that level while there are around two hundred players in total.

Scholars often say that traits that we associate with hegemonic masculinity are found within gaming communities, such as overt aggression (Braithwaite, 2016). Many levels of cultural artifacts work in conjunction to establish white geekness as the progenitor of gaming culture, erasing Asian influence by establishing a canon of highly selected texts (Condis, 2016). In this way, gaming communities are thus seen as being a chamber where the notions of what it means to be a man are reproduced, especially when we consider that gender identities are constructed through a stylized repetition of acts and performances of gender (Butler, 1988).

The masculinity that is often considered to be a part of gaming is multi-faceted and diverse. It contains notions of hegemonic masculinity such as aggressiveness, technological competency, misogyny, homophobia, heterosexuality and whiteness (DiSalvo, 2016). Such attributes are what gender theorists would consider as elements of the traditional, hegemonic masculinity that has pervaded society for years yet is now thought to be in the decline (Kimmel, 2005). But there are also slivers of geek masculinity present within gaming communities, attributes of which include competitiveness, mastery of the machine, risk-taking, and antisocial

behaviors (DiSalvo, 2016). In fact, the masculinity that is present within gaming can be better described as being diverse, a collection of many that intersect at this cultural artifact. As some gender theorists have described, masculinities argue that within even hegemonic masculinity there is a diversity of gender practices and consciousness (Connell, 2005). There is no singular “masculinity” and it can be expressed in many ways – while some masculine values do include aggression, there are also the values of protection of the weak and chivalry that are in direct opposition to aggression (Poteat, Kimmell & Wilchins, 2010). The communities that form around gaming and esports are often sites where such notions of masculinities are performed, but if we consider that the masculinities that exist within the gaming sphere to be diverse, then it is reasonable to expect a sort of friction or syncretism between them. As such, the esports communities that embody competitiveness but also aggression are an ideal cultural battleground to study when we seek to understand how exactly masculinity is performed within these spaces, and to what extent it is contested.

Although gaming is considered to be predominantly white, we cannot ignore the influence exerted by the South Korean sphere of play in esports (Taylor, 2015). Esports do not exist solely in the context of whiteness. Some researchers also see some esports such as League of Legends as bastions of community for marginalized Asian communities (Howard, 2018). The demographics of the team being studied in this thesis, for example, does also include non-white males.

These issues remain a key aspect of this thesis. If aggressiveness is an aspect of the community, esports and gaming could therefore be a space where that can be reinforced and reproduced. Certainly, there is much research on the levels of aggressiveness of video game players (Anderson et al., 2010). Still, it is important to consider the diversity of identities that form within these communities, and how these work together to create new meanings and effect

change. As T.L. Taylor (2015) writes, we must collect better accounts of the diversity of masculinities within gaming culture in order to better fully understand them.

This research will emphasize the ways in which such identities of masculinity come into place within the collegiate esports environment and how, using the idea of cultural battlegrounds, they are further re-negotiated and contested.

Chapter 3: Theoretical and Historical Framework

3.1 Esports

Video games have been competitive since their inception, with the old-school high scores being the first example of competitiveness in gaming. As the gaming industry evolved from the arcade to home entertainment, the idea behind what we now know as esports began. With the advent of the Internet, the interconnectivity of gaming exploded and esports found its strength (Taylor, 2015). Esports began far before the advent of computer gaming, back when arcades displayed high scores. As the gaming industry evolved from the arcade to home entertainment, esports began.

What was once a simple hobby has now transformed into a booming industry with aspects of professionalization. Such radical changes warrant study as new gaming subcultures rise along with the industry and eventually find themselves part of the mainstream (Taylor, 2015). More importantly, the professionalization of esports now mean that colleges are beginning to play a significant role in the esports industry, as hopeful players navigate the school system while harboring hopes of one day turning their passion into a career.

While there is no reigning body over esports such as the NCAA for football, organizations that provide a semblance of officiality such as Tespa exist (Howard, 2018). They grant college teams a skeleton under which they can participate in organized competition, with the possibility of getting prize money or sometimes even clout – for those who “make it big.” In some cases, success at the collegiate level has led into success in esports as a career (100Thieves, 2019). While there are many games that are considered to be esports – such as League of Legends, Counterstrike: Global Offensive or Defense of the Ancients 2 (DoTA 2) – this thesis will be concerned with only one: Overwatch.

3.2 Overwatch

Overwatch is a first-person shooter video game released by Blizzard Entertainment in 2016. It pits teams of six against each other in a series of objective-based rounds where teams must collaborate between themselves in order to gain the advantage over the opposing team. Within the game, there are three set roles one can perform: Tank, Damage, and Support. Tanks are bullet-sponges; they are meant to divert attention away from other team-members and take damage for them by protecting them. The Damage role is self-explanatory as they seek to deal damage to the enemy team in order to find an “Elimination” (Blizzard decided to make the game friendlier and not call it a “kill”) and taking out members of the opposing team. Finally, the Support role act as the healers of the team, restoring health and fixing damage in order to keep the team alive.

All three of these roles come together in order to form what has been dubbed a composition, referring to the way in which the chosen characters come together and synergize, helping a team achieve an objective. Furthermore, there are other unofficial roles that players familiar with the game eventually come to perform. There are the “shot-callers” who will make plays on the spot, often contending against the tension of the game and making decisions in the heat of the moment. “Scouts” are those players who will seek to relay information back to the team to properly inform them of the enemy’s team composition and how to respond to it accordingly. “Ult-trackers” are in a way the team’s mathematician, as they calculate the abilities of the enemy team and when to expect to see them in play. Each of these convey a sense of responsibility to the team, and grant players the ability to communicate and work together to achieve an objective: victory. In conjunction, the successful performance of all of these roles are what makes a good team, and the ability of players to perform these roles improves their results within the game.

There are many levels of play in Overwatch; from those who play it with friends for fun to those who play it for a living. In 2018, Blizzard Entertainment launched the relatively successful Overwatch League, an experiment into further commercializing esports to a wider audience. The League format includes what you would typically expect from traditional sports leagues such as standings, win differentials, playoffs and Grand Finals. Following the success of the inaugural season, a second season was launched with eight new expansion teams. The Overwatch League is meant to be the pinnacle of skill and teamwork, and its multi-tier system allows for a Division system that lets players improve and, perhaps one day, get to the very top.

Thanks to the system Blizzard Entertainment has put in place, it has paved the way for more amateur teams to form with the hopes of one day going pro. Tespa, mentioned earlier, runs a Collegiate Championship in which colleges across the United States compete against each other in Regional and National Championships, with the opportunity to win up to \$1700 dollars per person. Given the framework and officiality under which the Championships occur, the teams that participate in it are subject to a level of teamwork and cooperation that is expected from professionals.

At its core, the basis of Overwatch is cooperation, as each role must work in conjunction with the others in order for the team to perform adequately. As such, players of the game who are more experienced are theoretically better at skills such as communication and the roles mentioned above, and so playing the game continuously will improve said skills. As such, this thesis aims to research how skilled players of the game perceive their own skills, and what the dynamics of a team are by understanding how the team works from within.

3.3 Teamwork

In the 21st century, teamwork has slowly become one of the most desirable skills employers seek for newly graduated students (Girardi, 2016). Efficient communication skills as well as an ability to work well with other are considered critical in the modern job market (Hora et al., 2016). As such, there is an increasing level of expectation from employers that colleges *must* play a key role in assisting students in developing such skills (Archer & Davison, 2008). Though not the only solution, collegiate esports can help provide one such avenue to help students develop a better understanding of what teamwork is and how to accomplish it.

In Overwatch, teamwork is essential due to the compositions mentioned earlier. All six players *must* cooperate in order to make the composition work and, subsequently, achieve victory. Some compositions in the game have been so teamwork-intensive that even at the professional level teams have struggled to execute them properly. Thus, the game presents an opportunity for players to increase their teamwork as they work towards the common goal of improvement and victory. If players hope to win, they must learn, practice, and exert excellent teamwork to do so. In the collegiate sphere, the incentive of prizes and a possible future career pave the way for students to undertake this learning experience. Due to this, Overwatch can be considered to fall into the umbrella of “collaborative gaming” meaning video games that have a deep emphasis on teamwork and collaboration.

3.4 Collaborative Gaming

Gaming has often been studied due to its effects on people, particularly how games that feature “cooperative-based tasks” can promote positive educational outcomes (Kaye, 2016). Other research focuses on how games that immerse the players into a social environment, as is the case with Overwatch since it requires communication, can have the positive effect of increasing the accessibility of prosocial thoughts in players (Greitemeyer & Osswald, 2011).

As a rising form of entertainment, gaming has not been without its criticisms of increased aggression in players due to the level of immersion it can generate. And though sometimes that criticism comes from a moral panic, research has shown that violent video games can indeed have negative effects on interpersonal behavior (Anderson et al., 2010). Furthermore, violent video games are also associated with decreased cooperative behavior (Sheese & Graziano, 2005). Nevertheless, further research has shown that an effective to ameliorate these negative effects of video games is to play them cooperatively (Greitemeyer et al., 2012).

Thus, this research asks the question, does playing a game cooperatively, with a team, help improve communication and cooperation? Past research suggests that is the case (Greitemeyer et al., 2012). But this thesis aims to delve further into the question by ingraining itself into a team and seeing how the team works.

Cooperativeness is a skill that is useful beyond just gaming, as it has been shown to improve mental health, self-esteem, group productivity, and helps create more positive relationships (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). As we can see in sports, the effects of teamwork are such that it can provide a support net for players that amplify benefits in victory and help deal with defeat in the face of failure (Tauer & Harackiewicz, 2004). As such, it remains a critical aspect of collegiate esports that can provide a benefit to students beyond merely a pastime. Furthermore, in addition to the usefulness of cooperativeness, the qualities it grants all help form better citizens and individuals, in turn improving the quality of communities, be it just at the college level or at a larger social level. For this reason, it is important to fully understand the ways in which collegiate esports players are affected by what they are playing in terms of what skills they are getting and coming to a better understanding of whether or not that is a positive thing for their communities.

The ways in which teamwork and collaboration manifest in the game, and in a team setting, are plenty and will be discussed further when I delve into the results of the observation and interviews.

3.5 Intramurals

As Taylor (2015) states, the professionalization of esports has blurred the lines between gaming and what we considered traditional sports. As such, there are aspects of traditional sports that we must keep in mind when we analyze competitive video games. One such aspect is intramurals, the recreational performance of a sport – or in this case, esports – within an institution. The Overwatch Gold Team participated in an intramural setting, as we participated in not only a championship but also weekly scheduled scrimmages. This meant that the structure of our play can be likened to intramurals.

The organized aspect of intramurals can help provide a sense of community to players, both in traditional sports and esports. For example, studies have found that as college students participate in intramurals, their overall sense of community increases (Penland, 2017; Phipps et al., 2015). Furthermore, intramurals provide benefits to players beyond just community, such as stress reduction, enhanced personal and social diversity, leadership skills, self-esteem and moral growth (Rothwell & Theodore, 2006). Intramurals are also relevant because scholars have suggested that they provide a space in which values and beliefs are contested by players (Rothwell & Theodore, 2006). As such, they are similar to the ideas of cultural battlegrounds established earlier in this thesis. Within the spaces provided by intramurals a community forms, and within that community notions of masculinity and its performance are contested, reenacted, and established.

3.6 Community

Playing sports can give people a sense of community, as demonstrated by previous research (Penland, 2017). Given that there is a strong relationship between sports and esports (barring, of course, the athletic aspect often associated with traditional sports) the aspect of community is still very much relevant when it comes to esports (Taylor, 2015). Furthermore, some academics have suggested that engaging in esports grants players gaming capital, which in turn can be considered as social capital and economic capital as well (Molyneux et al., 2015). Therefore, esports have a strong proponent in creating communities and granting those who participate in them access to said communities. Lastly, a significant number of players believe that their online relationships are equal in value to their offline relationships (Yee, 2001).

As mentioned earlier, engaging in video games with a strong sense of prosocial communication further promotes prosocial communications. In addition, gaming communities can be alternate pathways that promote offline prosocial and pro civic behaviors (Peña & Hancock, 2006). This in turn suggests that individuals who partake in such communities can become better members of communities by improving their social skills in a gaming community. Such behaviors are beneficial to not just students but communities on a macro level as well.

Although we often speak of communities as forming *around* and *within* games, those same communities often bleed over into the “real” world. For example, research has shown that behaviors learned online can indeed spill over to other areas of life (Gil de Zuñiga & Coddington, 2013). The social capital one can earn through playing video games can indeed be translated into face-to-face social capital (Molyneux et al., 2015)

Playing video games can give people a sense of community as it grants social capital. So, while communities form around games and in games, those communities often bleed over into the real world as well. Communities are a good way of promoting prosocial and pro civic

behaviors which are largely beneficial not just the individuals which partake in the community, but also different macro levels – such as a campus community or society. In addition, research suggests that the more players play, the more likely they are to exchange more positive messages and reduce the number of negative messages, indicating a change in their behaviors (Peña & Hancock, 2006). The implications suggest that gaming can indeed exert change in individuals that will be felt in their communities as a positive effect. This idea will be explored through the qualitative data collected in this research.

Chapter 4: Methodology

The research questions behind this thesis are: What are the potential benefits, in terms of valuable skills attained, of playing esports for college students? What is the nature of the communities formed around collegiate esports? How do these communities reinforce or contest pre-established notions of masculine identity in the players?

In order to answer these questions, I employed a qualitative data approach, which included participant observation and in-depth interviews, of a team of Overwatch players at the University of Colorado Boulder. The Overwatch Gold Team is composed of nine players; three substitutes and six main roster players. Of these, one is a woman and the rest identify as male. The team members that were part of this research were Todd, Scott, Chris, Jack, Stephen, Anthony, Martin, and David (aliases provided). The female player was not participating in the team during this thesis' period of research, and as such she was not included in any study or discussion contained in this research. The methods by which this research was achieved was through participant observation and in-depth interviews. As other researchers have mentioned, game studies are often limited by a researcher's accessibility to true, impactful data depending on their level of skills, age, or even gender. Due to my familiarity with both the game, the industry, and the community, this provided the perfect opportunity for new, original research that provides an insider's insight into the way an esports team functions and the various social and cultural mechanics at play within it.

4.1 Participant Observation

When the idea behind this thesis was conceived, I was a casual Overwatch player. In order to fully experience a team, part of my time was dedicating to practicing my own mechanical skill to a sufficient point where I could try out for a team at the University. After being accepted into the team as a substitute player, I slowly gained enough familiarity with the

team to be promoted to a main Tank role. The team regularly met for practice at least once a week and participated in official Tespa matches every weekend, time during which I played along with them. By the time the main body of research for this thesis had started, the team and I had been playing together for around four months if not more.

The participant observation was based on Spradley's (1979) work. Observation is defined as "the systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989), while participant observation is when researchers engrain themselves into such setting to better acquire relevant qualitative data. For this thesis particularly, Spradley's words on maintaining a level of outsider-ness despite being completely immersed in the activity were thoughtfully considered during the research period. Since familiarity had already been established prior to the research period, this granted this thesis value as the players and I were playing in a familiar environment that is almost impossible to replicate in a research facility. Though it is impossible for me to know how much they modified their behaviors during the research period, the only change in their behavior that I personally noticed was that they had become more comfortable with me by nature of playing together for months, hours at a time.

I had multiple opportunities per week to observe the behavior of players, as the team often got together to play Overwatch at night. Most of the time, we played Competitive mode which raises the stakes by adding a reward system which emulates the competitiveness of esports playing. During this observation, I would make note of three things: what people said and how they said it, how people acted upon certain circumstances such as defeat/victory and in-game behaviors that were relevant to a feeling of community. I would also make note of my *own* feelings and consider if they were unique to me or if they were replicated by others. These four items in conjunction produced a comprehensive number of notes that will be discussed further in this thesis.

4.2 In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were semi-structured in accordance to Treadwell's (2017) guide, which allows for more casual conversation in which the participants feel more inclined to share their thoughts and feelings. The aim of this is to obtain an insight into how competitive gaming influences community, identities, and the acquisition of useful skills – and how the players themselves perceive these things. The main objective of the interviews was to round out the qualitative data acquired during the observation period. Meaning, in some cases players were asked to elaborate on specific instances that were noticed during participant observation.

For the interviews, three players were selected from the team, one from each in-game role (Tank, Support, DPS). The three players interviewed were Scott, Anthony, and Stephen. They were chosen according to how they had acted during the observation period, specifically if I had noticed that they were good at communicating certain concepts during the game or if they engaged in high levels of teamwork. Each of these players exhibited a mix of the different masculinities that are said to be found within gaming, and so they were selected.

The interviewees were contacted through the team's Discord server, and interviews were set up in an office building with comfortable chairs. The idea behind this was to provide a space where the interviewees felt comfortable to have a conversation with me. Since we talked often due to the nature of being teammates, there was no fear of players being uneasy during the interviews. A guideline (**Addendum 1**) of questions was utilized during the interviews, but mostly as a slight structure to guide the conversation smoothly. If the subject mentioned something of interest, i.e. a situation in which there was tension between teammates, I zoned in on that topic and asked them to further elaborate. All in all, some people had more to say but the conversations averaged around 30 minutes each. The relevant excerpts of these conversations will be analyzed and discussed in this paper, especially when they reveal potential implications and effects of gaming as it pertains to this thesis.

Chapter 5: Findings

5.1 Community and Values

The research conducted revealed particularly interesting behaviors displayed by members of this specific gaming community. There were a few instances in which Chris tried his hand at what would be considered staples of hegemonic masculinity (Taylor, 2015). In one instance, he made a joke using a racial slur to which the rest of the team promptly responded with groans, sighs, and even a “Hey, now.” Immediately, there was an attempt from him to shift away from that behavior as Chris skillfully transformed the joke into something else. Here we can see the idea of renegotiation – a behavior that is considered as normal from masculinity was rejected by the other members of the team and so it was established that such behaviors were not accepted in that community. In all the research period, only one homophobic slur was ever used, and the user immediately apologized after saying it. The community of the team was clearly not conformant to the stereotype usually thought of when gaming communities are discussed.

Another such instance of the traditional aspects of masculinity being embodied within the team has to do with aggression. Although most members never lost their temper and remained decidedly cool under pressure, some team members did display levels of aggression. Chris, for example, often raged at the game, airing his grievances for all to hear. In one occasion, he disconnected from the game and voice chat following a particularly defeating loss. The second time he disconnected, he issued an apology to the team, apologizing for his mood for all to hear. Another member of the team, Anthony, had the following to say regarding aggression:

I accidentally flamed Cole one time when we were playing. And I didn't even realize, so afterwards I was just like, "Sorry I flamed you so bad." [...] I flamed him pretty bad, and I was looking over the video and I hear another call being made, [so I realized my mistake].

In an outburst of anger, Anthony yelled at one of his teammates. But as he later described, once he self-reflects he noticed that it was wrong and directly apologized to his teammate as he recognized that everyone had made a mistake. This correction of aggression was a trend that I noticed throughout the observation. Although in some moments players would react with an outburst of anger, they almost always apologized later. Stephen, the team leader, had the following to say about aggressive players:

I think people come in aggressive. They come in with the mentality of "I need to do well, and I need to be the best." Most of the time, that changes. After a while, they become more of "Hey, I really like this group, and I think that as a group we need to do these things and I'll switch characters or do something else if this gives the group the best chance, rather than me. I'm gonna get less kills, but as a group we're going to do better."

This speaks to the level of transformation that occurs when people play in such a team environment. Chris is admittedly one of the newer players, so while he remains slightly aggressive it is quite possible that some semblance of change is already underway. This speaks to the powerful effect such a community has. While some communities may be reinforcing negative aspects of masculinity, this particular community became a battleground in which values are contested.

At the same time, players did in fact mention competitiveness as one of their main drives to play the game. There was an unspoken desire to win in the team, and everyone always tried their best to achieve that goal. When victory was not being achieved, many people got frustrated and stopped communicating. This was a feeling shared by many of the interviewees. This means that within this community competitiveness was held in high regard, which is in tune with the notions of competitive masculinity that were established prior. When asked why they got into esports to begin with, most players answered that their competitiveness was a deciding factor. Stephen, however, had this to say:

When we're trying hard and losing, people get [frustrated]. But when we're not trying at all and losing, it's more likely that people aren't gonna get [frustrated]. And ultimately that's what it is, I want people to have fun more than I want people to win.

Stephen's approach to the game was not entirely based on his competitiveness, but rather his stated desire for people to enjoy themselves and have fun. He also said that he saw the team as a safe space, which indicates that his notions of what the team was supposed to be and how people were supposed to act within it are different to what is traditionally understood to be the case. Of course, he too wanted to win and be the best he could be, but his interests were not solely in terms competitiveness or aggression, but rather on community and leisure. This exemplifies the level of diversity that can be found within the masculinities in gaming communities, and how they all intersect. Stephen's ideas, as the group leader, are reinforced more strongly in the community, and as such the other members of the team follow suit.

In fact, Stephen took steps to ensure that the community that he envisioned the team as being was preserved. Stephen recounted a situation in which a former teammate was being aggressive towards other players, being vocal about the mistakes they were making and

insulting them behind their back. Stephen expressed his embarrassment at the situation, and said the following:

It was embarrassing to have the tryouts come in and see that he was one of our players, because that's not the team I wanted to cultivate. He was getting incredibly angry. I tried to empathize for a second with the tryouts and be like, "okay, this has got to be uncomfortable for them, coming into this for the first time, looking for somewhere where they'll probably be safe and seeing that's what they're going to get."

Shortly after this situation, Stephen worked with the club administrators and directors to remove said player from the team. This former player exhibited the traditional aspects of masculinity previously established, and when those values did not match Stephen's own, he enacted change in the community and by extent modified the values of said community. Stephen's use of the word "cultivate" and "empathize" represent the type of masculinity he embodies, performs in the team, and subsequently provides the community with. Moreover, Stephen in multiple occasions referred to the team as a "safe space" which is not in line with the traditional values of homophobia, aggression, and misogyny of masculinity. This once again shows the diversity of ideologies of masculinity that are at play in a gaming community, and further exemplifies the idea that masculinity in gaming is far more complex than we often give it credit for.

5.2 Teamwork and Communication

There were many skills displayed during the research period. The first one was the level of leadership skills displayed by a couple of players. When Chris and David were getting overly aggressive, team members would step in and display leadership. In one instance, these two

players were taunting the enemy team by trash talking them, and Jack stepped in, put his foot down and asked them both to stop. In situations where the team was experiencing a crushing loss, Stephen would try his best to rally the team. Despite his voice sometimes being a bit insecure and hesitant, he rose up to the challenge when necessary. He also employed specific strategies to keep up the team morale.

After playing together for months, there was a clear level of improvement in the team's collaboration and execution of strategies. At one point, the team was playing for a playoff spot in the Tespa Championships against what some considered to be insurmountable odds. After pulling through and getting a win, Scott had this to say:

We beat them cause they just didn't feel coordinated. That was really satisfying. I didn't think we could do it, but then I saw them play and I was like, "well, if they have mechanic ability but we have good coordination, we could still be really good!"

Scott's feelings on how teamwork netted the team a victory was reflected on my own observation. The more we played together, the more I realized people were *playing together* as a team, communicating their strategies and announcing what they were about to do. Although some of the more aggressive players, like Chris, often disregarded the team mentality and sought to play by themselves, the team was comfortable with each other enough to be able to simply ask him to contribute, which he did. Scott shared the feeling of improvement on our teamwork as we went along, as he said:

Sometimes I just want to call everything and be like "we're gonna do this, now, here, with that, cause maybe that will work." But especially in the off-tank role you don't

quite see everything, you just see a little bit and so I'm just trying to help everyone put their pieces together to play the game better. I definitely didn't do that before.

The basis of teamwork is to know your place in the team and by extension know when you can facilitate others. As Scott showed, players learned this after being part of this community. The reward for learning this skill was victory in-game, but having learned this ability to "help everyone put their pieces together" will be beneficial in the long-run.

Some players such as Scott did not necessarily display the aggressive qualities that are associated with masculinity, but rather were more reserved. Todd, for example, did not usually speak unless he was making a call in-game or laying down a strategy. His demeanor was cooler and more collected, yet he was very keenly strategic. Still, both players were increasingly vocal and communicative. In fact, everyone on the team would call their actions, allowing the rest of the team to know the situation and react accordingly. In fact, it came to a point where people were talking *too much*, at which point Jack would say "clear comms" in an attempt to declutter the voice chat and make it clearer for everyone. Following this, everyone became accustomed to each other's callouts and synergized with other members to better execute strategies. As Anthony said: "Everyone in a way just talks. Some people say, 'Shield's going down.' And it's kind of all like mini shot-calling."

Moreover, being a part of teamwork had other positive effects related to the performance of masculinity. During his interview, Stephen stated that:

Sometimes they do become more aggressive, you can't really see it at first because they look like all the other players, but then they're stagnant while everyone else is progressing towards that team mentality. I think thinking as a team is the one [quality] they get after a while. But when they *don't* get that, then that's an issue.

Here, Stephen believes that the team mentality that players achieve is something that helps reduce aggression from other players. He mentions that those who don't acquire that mentality eventually become stagnant, and as such are not progressing towards the shared goal of victory at the same pace as the rest of the team. Furthermore, there is a clear acknowledgement that *not* having a teamwork mentality is an issue within the confines of the team community, meaning that such a value is a key point for those who wish to participate in the team.

Being part of a team and a community such as this had other positive effects on players. While I noticed that some players were slowly becoming more vocal, such as Todd, Stephen's words on the matter exemplified how the team was an avenue to growth in his personal experience. He said:

I think I've improved my ability to talk to people, improved my internet sociability. I very much am the kind of person who doesn't speak on the internet - I don't use microphone a lot. [The team] has helped me overcome that. I know back in high school I did talk to a staff member, in Gifted and Talented, and he said that there's an identity gap for me between who I am and who I am online, and for me I wasn't able to bridge that gap enough to speak. I couldn't tie my voice to that identity. But in some ways that has changed as I am being forced to be the voice of the group and be my own voice.

The sentiment that the team had been conducive to personal growth was shared by other people on the team, indicating the potential of collegiate esports in providing students with a community in which they can develop their interpersonal communication skills. Stephen found his voice in Overwatch, but more specifically he found it thanks to being part of a team.

5.3 Community and Belonging

The last aspect that remains to be discussed is how the team forms a sense of community for the players and gives them a sense of belonging. The most noticeable thing I came upon in my observation was how the team slowly evolved from a random assortment of players into a group of comrades. Slowly, as people got to know each other, people felt comfortable enough to start cracking jokes, to be more humorous in their approach to the game, and to just have fun while playing. Anthony said:

I've noticed that I try to build more connection first with whoever I'm friends with, and then I start trusting them more and more. I just talk to them, because if you play with someone enough times, you'll know their quirks as well. Just having that connection; we're winning a game, we're laughing around, we're having fun, it's like any other sports game if you think about it. You build a camaraderie with your team. There's support, not only in-game. I know if something happens in real life I can talk to these people.

There is an undeniable connection between the players of this team that can be seen not only in the level of play they perform, which requires a large level of synergy and teamwork, but also in how close they are as friends. Stephen for example, told me that he considers Jack to be a very close friend both in and out of game. Anthony and Chris were pretty close too, while Scott mentioned that being on the team had helped him establish a friendship with both Martin and David.

During the observation period, there was an instance in which Anthony – egged on by Chris – was recounting the tale of a romantic encounter he had experienced while on spring break. As he told the humorous story, the team members giggled and finally burst out with

laughter at the end of the story. All around there was an air of camaraderie and friendship in the group even though we were in the middle of a match. This speaks to the level of comfort the team had with each other, and by extent the strength of the community that had been built by the team. On the topic, Anthony said:

In this day and age, it's hard to be friends with people. And here in this town it's hard to find genuine people. But I feel like we all are pretty good friends, like we could all hang out here. We had fun when we had pictures! We all have fun together. You can still be online friends with a bunch of people.

At its core, playing on an Overwatch team at the collegiate level provided players with a strong support net with which they could confide in. In times of loss and defeat, team members would raise each other up and encourage each other. People like Jack and Anthony offered constructive feedback to those who asked for it. They were aware of other's shortcomings, as well as their own. But they still played together for that sense of cohesion the team offered. If anything, collegiate esports provide people with a strong sense of community and belonging – a fact that, according to Anthony's statement, is sorely necessary in some campuses. And while the same can be said of traditional sports, collegiate esports simply offer *another* avenue through which campuses can provide that for their students.

5.4 Discussion & Conclusion

The value of this research lies in the insight it grants into a community that is often closed off from researchers or hard to replicate in a research scenario. As researchers of gaming have noticed, some factors like gender, skill, or familiarity with the communities can make such research difficult or limit its effectiveness (Taylor, 2015). Therefore, this thesis can serve

as an insider's perspective into how a gaming community works, what skills it generates for those who participate in it, and what cultural values and ideas are contested within it.

When we talk about gaming, it is common for its demographic to be painted with a broad brush when the reality is very different. There are many singular experiences to be had within the cultural sphere of gaming, and the esports team that was examined here is proof of that. Of course, there exist thousands upon thousands of such communities, but the point to be taken away is that each is unique. This problematizes the research of gaming since they can all be so different, but only by beginning to dissect the diversity of cultures and values within gaming can we begin to understand the multi-layered complexities within it.

The question of how masculinity is performed, reenacted, and contested within gaming is one that will surely be part of gaming research for years to come. As the qualitative data of this research shows, the answer is not as clear-cut as some might be led to believe. While yes, there are instances of raucous displays of masculinity within the esports team, there was also a level of correction towards those attitudes and values. The traditional aspects of masculinity that Taylor describes as being prevalent in gaming communities certainly exists, but at least in this occasion was not as dominant as one might expect. Instead we must turn our attention to how the masculinity that is performed in this community *diverts* from that.

Stephen's attempts to shape the community into one that was accepting and resembling a safe space is a key example of the various performances of masculinity that are present within gaming communities. By exerting his own influence into the team, he successfully created a community with values that are different than those that are traditionally associated with hegemonic masculinity. While there is of course a key element of competitiveness in the team, there is also a factor of fun and belonging in terms of what the community was set up to achieve. This goes to show how although communities contain elements of traditional masculinity,

members within that community can still perform other forms of masculinity and by doing so recontest our notions of what masculinity looks like.

Some aspects of the masculinity performed in the team were in line with hegemonic masculinity. It should be noted that one of the main points of camaraderie and friendship did in fact come from the re-telling of a sexual experience by one member of the team. There is no denying that masculinity plays a role in gaming. But at the same time, we must also consider how the *aggressiveness* aspect that is considered a key element of masculinity – and in particular gaming masculinity – was in fact lessened in importance within the team. Team members explicitly rejected such aggression, to the point where the offenders apologized for their words and started to change and become even less aggressive. The fact that such a community can foster these contestations of undesirable values is particularly significant.

The community that was formed in the game gave way to many changes within the players, as they themselves noted. Some improved their communication skills, others found a group of people to befriend, while others became more self-reflective and attempted to reduce their aggressiveness. In fact, after being on a team, players reported themselves as being better teammates, more capable of listening to other people's inputs and ideas and working in conjunction with them to better achieve a common goal. Ultimately, these are skills that – like all the other benefits to be gained from such a community – will bleed over into these players' lives as they continue their development and growth. As such, collegiate esports remains an important avenue toward self-growth to be considered as research into this topic moves forward. Furthermore, this represents a key opportunity for campuses. As players such as Anthony mentioned, oftentimes there is a lack of sense of community within campuses and collegiate esports can aid in alleviating that feeling. Providing a framework under which players can continue their collegiate endeavors into esports is crucial, particularly when taking into consideration the fact that such a framework will be built regardless. College

administrations now have the opportunity to aid the growth of collegiate esports while simultaneously adding new ways in which their campuses not only provide students with a sense of belonging, but also with a set of hard skills that can be useful in their future careers.

The research conducted in this thesis allowed me to answer my research questions. Through it, I have identified that the potential values of esports communities go far beyond just the community aspect. Players can attain and improve leadership, communication, and teamwork skills in an environment outside the traditional classroom, as demonstrated by the self-perceived growth the players on the team reported. The research also established that the communities that form around collegiate esports have value beyond just the offline world, as they offer a sense of belonging to players as well as a support network that they can turn to when real life issues occur. The friendships that were formed (online) through means of the team eventually transcended into offline friendships that some players reported to be of significant value. Finally, this research has established that while there are certainly aspects of traditional masculinity represented within this gaming community, the site is a far more complex representation of masculinity than is generally thought. The team indeed embodied the term “cultural battleground” as players with different notions of masculinity contested the values that were performed within the groups and in turn recreated notions of masculinity. As such, the community took on a shape that goes beyond what we would consider as merely hegemonic masculinity. Instead, there was a wide array of different types of masculinities at play, each mingling with the other and contesting the meaning of masculinity.

5.5 Limitations

There are some limitations to the research undertaken in this thesis. For one, the manner in which the data was collected proved a significant limitation. Since the team does not have a physical space in which they can practice, the entirety of participant observation unfolded

online. Due to this, there were certain physical, non-verbal cues that I could not reasonably observe and note. Although we were always connected in voice chat, meaning I could hear some things such as desks being slammed in frustration, there were behaviors and reactions that were impossible to pick up on that could have been valuable to the development of this thesis. However, such things fall outside of the scope of this thesis and might better be researched in a study that looks at aggression levels in players while engaging in esports.

The fact that voice chat was used as the principal tool of data collection is also a limitation that should be considered. Players who were extremely frustrated could simply mute themselves, and in some occasions did in order to spare the rest of the team their diatribe. That said, only one particular player did so, and the rest felt comfortable enough to air their grievances on voice chat. At the same time, it is also impossible for me to know whether they muted themselves to avoid showing frustration or because something else came up. Thus, such instances were generally not included in this thesis so as to avoid making any assumptions about the player's intentions.

The final limitation of participant observation is that while I may have observed certain behaviors, there is the possibility that by the mere fact of observing the players they changed their actions. As the team was given notice and provided consent forms, they were entirely aware that I was taking notes of their actions, words and behaviors and so may have sought to alter them in a way so as to make themselves look more favorably. Of course, given that I have played with them for months *before* the research was conducted, I can attest to the fact that no behaviors were changed in an extreme manner. Still, it is important to keep such issues in mind when looking at this qualitative data.

The in-depth interviews also provide limitations to the research of this thesis. Since the players have been playing together for a long time, it is entirely possible that people have forgotten details that could have been relevant to this research. The limitations of human

memory are well known, and so it's possible that players' accounts were sugar-coated or altered in ways that are impossible for me to know. Regardless, the interviews provided important data on the players' *feelings* of belonging and community, as well as their perceived changes and skills acquired. For that reason, the employed methodology remains valuable to the purposes of this research.

Moreover, qualitative data by itself represents a limitation. The sample of this thesis is small, and the data collected here is not entirely representative of *all* communities in gaming. That said, it is important to amplify our knowledge of the diversity of communities within the subculture of video games, and as such the small sample of this thesis retains its value.

Future Research

For future research, it is critical to study how other games build communities and how masculine (and other) identities are performed there. Esports games are incredibly diverse, and so their different qualities may attract other types of identities to perform in those spaces. Therefore, while the research into Overwatch is valuable, we must take into consideration the level of diversity within esports if we wish to better paint a picture of gaming communities and their composition. On that same note, it is possible that other types of games grant players with skills in a different manner which once again highlights the importance of studying them.

While qualitative data has its strengths, adding in the value of quantitative data to our collective knowledge is also critical. Future research should also focus on more comprehensive samples of data so that the field of esports and communities can continue to be thoroughly studied and better understood.

Finally, as was mentioned earlier in the thesis, the demographics of gaming are changing. The staggering number of teenage girls who play esports may one day be represented in collegiate esports' demographics. In the Overwatch Gold Team, there are already some

female players, and the team was at one point led by a woman. For that reason, as gaming communities slowly transition into a mixed gender space it will be critical to study such an evolution and how gender identities and performances fare under that situation. Such a cultural background is not only academically significant, but in social terms is a micro-representation of other cultural changes we are experiencing. As such, it will be an important aspect of gaming communities to keep in mind when delving into future research.

Addendum 1

These questions are only meant to be a guide for the interview - they can help make the conversation flow depending on how the interviewee is doing. If any questions seem relevant during discussion, the interviewer will ask them regardless of whether or not they are included in this guide.

Structured Questions:

Tell me, how long have you been involved in esports?

When did you first start playing esports? What did you find attractive about it?

Since you've been playing esports for a while, can you tell me about how you think you've changed since you started playing?

Describe to me the role you play in the game. When you perform that role, how do you feel?

What is the most exciting victory you've had while playing for the team? (Follow-up) How did it feel?

What about the inverse, can you tell me about any defeating losses you recall? (Follow-up) What did you feel like?

It's been a while since you joined the team. Do you feel like you've learned something from playing in a team-based environment?

Would you say you have improved as a person? (Follow-up) In what way?

Do you feel like you belong in your team?

Has the team given you a sense of community? (Follow-up) Why do you think that is? (Follow-up) What about the game?

If they're a team leader:

What have you learned from managing a team?

What are the challenges of managing a team?

What types of personalities do you often see in your players? Do you see any change in them after a while of playing for the team?

How do you decide what player goes on what role? Do you think personality has anything to do with it?

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