Viability and Implementation of Esports in Schools: A Basic Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Video games entered popular culture in the 1980s and have continually grown in acceptance to the point of creating organizations for players to compete with one another known as esports. Colleges have begun offering esports teams for their students to compete in akin to traditional sports. Studies of esports and their effects on students are slowly increasing, but there is a knowledge gap between these activities and their viability as a scholastic program. The problem is that secondary schools are hesitant to adopt an esports opportunity due to previous stigmas about video games, a lack of data establishing its developmental benefits, and a lack of resources on how to properly implement it for coaches and students. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore scholastic esports stakeholder perceptions of the viability of scholastic esports programs and the implementation process for creating such a program. This study was guided by online collaborative learning theory and gamification of learning theory. A sample of 26 Chicagoland IHSEA scholastic esports stakeholders was asked for their reflections through an online questionnaire and optional semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using Dedoose (2021) software through Creswell and Poth's (2016) data analysis spiral. Results indicated positive perceptions toward scholastic esports programs and the potential social, skill-building, and inclusively competitive benefits they provide. Participants shared suggestions and strategies for effective esports program implementation, due to a lack of statewide regulation or guidance. The findings suggest more secondary schools should offer esports programs, and for competitive scholastic associations to begin developing regulations for all schools to compete as they currently do with traditional sports programs.

Keywords: esports, implementation, qualitative, scholastic, stakeholders, viability, video games

Dedication

To my parents, for your love and encouragement.

To my siblings, for your positivity and playfulness.

To my friends, for your authenticity and acceptance.

And to my wife, for your inspiration and unending support.

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I would like to thank and acknowledge the team of professionals and scholars who guided me through the most difficult, frustrating, and rewarding experience of my life. Without their assistance, this study would never see the light of day. I am profoundly grateful to have had their influence throughout this process.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

Table

List of Figures

Figure

Chapter 1: Introduction

Esports, the official moniker for competitive video gaming, is a growing phenomenon, as an entertainment industry and an extracurricular opportunity for students worldwide (Good, 2017). The earliest source of the term "esports" was a 1999 press release from the Online Gamers Association (Wagner, 2006). Since then, esports has been slowly increasing in popularity and adoption (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Colleges are beginning to adopt scholarship programs for proficient gamers and coaches to represent schools in a non-athletic, yet competitive environment (Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019). The rise in streaming services such as Twitch.tv and YouTube Gaming has solidified esports as a normalized activity with millions of viewers every day (Pei, 2019). Some question esports as a legitimate activity, especially for students, in terms of the general view of video gaming (Boers et al., 2019). Overall, esports are gaining popularity in youth culture and as an industry. If educators plan to provide esports as a scholastic opportunity, then continuous analysis of the phenomenon would prove useful.

Esports' history is detailed in the background and statement of the problem, as well as its developing relationship with educational institutions. The purpose of this study includes a rationale for the research. Potential benefits from this study are included in the significance of the study. The research questions and theoretical framework proposed provide the guidelines for research. Terms and phrases used within this research are provided and defined. Descriptions, boundaries, and potential restrictions of this study are detailed in the assumptions, scope and delimitations, and limitations.

Background of the Problem

Video gaming has been around since the early 1970s, while the first signs of major competitive esports gaming appeared in the mid-1990s (Nyitray, 2019; Petryk et al., 2020). Since

then, the popularity of video gaming as a pastime has grown the activity into a massive entertainment industry, with millions of active viewers of hundreds of different games every day (Taylor, 2020). Over 95% of teens ages 12–17 play video games regularly, whether on a computer, website, portable system, or console (Lenhart et al., 2008). Schools have slowly begun implementing competitive video gaming into extracurricular options for students, and the first college esports team was created in 2014 (DiFrancisco-Donoghue & Balentine, 2018). Many of these colleges offer scholarships for members of collegiate esports teams, which provide opportunities for students who may have been previously excluded from athletic or academic scholarships. Critics of video games oppose esports involvement in schools, mainly due to previously held stigmas about video gaming (Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019). These stigmas include concerns about mental health, hygiene, and exposure to violence, to name a few. These stigmas, along with other misconceptions surrounding video games as a beneficial activity, have caused the issue this study was conducted to investigate.

Statement of the Problem

The problem is that secondary schools are hesitant to adopt an esports opportunity due to previous stigmas about video games, a lack of data establishing its developmental benefits, and a lack of resources on how to properly implement it for coaches and students. Witkowski and Kow (2019) found some schools are embracing esports and collaborating with game/tournament creators, while other schools are formally rejecting the activity, forcing students to organize independently. With the rise in internet and social media culture among youth born after 2000, the popularity of video games and esports has begun leaking into the classroom. Some traditional educators dismiss this entirely, which can alienate them from what students are interested in. Research around esports is still in its infancy but is beginning to gain momentum (Reitman et al.,

2020). Esports has been making its way into the Olympics at the rate it is growing, though there are concerns about its ties to violent games (Ives, 2018). Overall, esports is on the rise as a normalized activity, career, and industry; schools should start developing opportunities to address this phenomenon to educate and guide interested students. To do so, there needs to be compelling evidence that an esports program can benefit students, and there are regulated protocols or established strategies to support implementation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore scholastic esports stakeholder perceptions of the viability of scholastic esports programs and the implementation process for creating such a program. Esports is a growing trend as a pastime and career opportunity (Pei, 2019). Schools have begun adopting and developing programs to allow for competitive gaming to be an opportunity for students. It is starting to show signs of inclusion in scholastic sports programs, as researchers and educators are starting to see the benefits of providing a competitive outlet for students who may not be physically athletic (Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019). The adoption has been slow to start, as preexisting stigmas surrounding video games have caused educators and school administrators to be hesitant with the stigmas being poor hygiene, encouraging addictive activities, and promoting violence. For interested schools, most educators have trouble knowing where to look to adopt this opportunity properly (Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019). Nationwide regulations do not exist for esports, and there is a sparse amount of professional guidance for educators interested in sponsoring a team (Chao, 2017). Gathering reflections from scholastic esports program stakeholders may be useful in determining if esports is a viable activity for schools to offer and effective strategies for implementation.

Significance of the Study

This study may advance the knowledge base by contributing to the growing number of studies aimed at this scholastic phenomenon. Community members, educators, and district administrators may benefit from the results of this study in determining the viability of adding or supporting such a program in a school. Regulations are still being developed for this activity; having more educational and scholarly professionals informed about this process could help determine and enforce said regulations. Many students participate in extracurricular esports that would not have participated in an academic or athletic extracurricular opportunity. When students participate in extracurriculars, they are less likely to cut class, more likely to have a higher grade-point average, and more likely to graduate (Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019). Esports also promote the development of 21st-century skills that are highly sought after in technology industries, such as teamwork, strategic planning under pressure, and effective communication (Komatsu et al., 2021). Further studies should be conducted to determine more finite results of adding an esports program in schools and how students could benefit from the experience; this study could provide a foundation for more research in the future.

Research Questions

To gauge the current state of esports, and how it is or can be used in schools, questions can be posed to educators who already implement these kinds of programs. Qualitative questions can provide a holistic view into the skills students gain from an esports opportunity. Responses from educators and school leaders involved in the program, and community members could provide a multi-faceted view into the viability of esports as a school-sponsored activity.

Research Question 1: How are esports currently offered in Chicagoland schools?

Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of Chicagoland scholastic esports program stakeholders (teachers, teaching assistants, coaches, building or district administrators, and community members) on scholastic esports as a viable scholastic activity?

Research Question 3: What strategies should potential scholastic esports stakeholders employ and avoid in scholastic esports implementation?

Theoretical Framework

A combination of gamification in education theory and online collaborative learning theory provided the theoretical framework for this research. Gamification in education theory is defined by using game thinking, aesthetics, and game-based mechanics to promote learning, engage people, motivate action, and solve problems (Kapp, 2013). Online collaborative learning occurs when groups of people learn together by connecting digitally in a network, which became a worldwide phenomenon due to the 2020 pandemic (Kalmar et al., 2022). Both theories are present at any level of esports activity in a school system; educators and coaches use online competitive video gaming to encourage students to collaborate toward winning a game while developing strategies for problem-solving and tactical decision-making (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017).

Congruence of gamification in education and online collaborative learning theory in schools may not always be the case, which can cause outside observers to question the legitimacy of esports as a scholastic opportunity. Educators can view esports programs through this combined theoretical framework to determine the viability of the proposed research questions. This framework can help current and future program sponsors to develop a program to provide students with a beneficial experience.

Definitions of Terms

Pertinent terminology used in this study is defined. Definitions are used to assist in understanding common terms and phrases that may appear through the proposed research process.

Chicagoland is defined as the metropolitan area surrounding Chicago, Illinois, USA (Britannica, 2023). This area stretches as far north as Kenosha, Wisconsin, to the south around Lake Michigan into northern Indiana and southwest Michigan.

Esports is defined as competitive video gaming (Petryk et al., 2020). The levels of organization and regulation vary. This study focused on esports activities offered by schools.

Gamification is defined as "an interactive online design that plays on the competitive interests of people and often uses rewards to drive action" (Anderson & Rainie, 2012, p. 3). This definition was expanded upon, adding "using game-based mechanics, aesthetics, and game thinking to engage people, motivate action, promote learning, and solve problems" (Kapp, 2013, p.10).

Nationwide Regulations of Esports are defined as the rules and policies that esports organizers, sponsors, teams, and players must follow to officially play (Hollist, 2015). These are in the process of being developed like the regulations of other nationwide sports leagues like the NBA, NFL, and MLB.

Online is defined as the state of being digitally connected to the internet with a device (van den Eijnden et al., 2008). In the context of esports, it means connecting one team to another either through a hardline or a Wi-Fi network. This allows each team to play against each other without having to be physically in the same room.

Scholastic Sports Program is defined as an organization made up of scholastic professionals to provide students with a regulated sports experience *(*Nayef & Rasheed, 2021). A

scholastic esports program may use similar implantation processes, though they are not required to be regulated like a traditional scholastic esports program.

Stakeholder is defined as an individual involved in, or in charge of a program or system. Educational stakeholders include community members, teachers, students, and administrators (Owo & Udoka, 2021). In this study, esports stakeholders refer to the teachers, teaching assistants, coaches, building or district administrators, and community members involved in their school's esports program.

Video Games are defined as electronic amusement activities to be played across a wide variety of electronic and digital platforms (Belanger, 2022). In this context, esports are played with specific team-based video games, usually on a personal computer.

Assumptions

Assumptions in research can be defined as previously held unquestioned beliefs or principles of faith that may affect or influence the research process (van Manen, 1990). This study's assumptions were described and explain how they could not be avoided. The first assumption used for this study is each scholastic esports program researched utilizes online, team-based gameplay based on the prior definition of esports. A second assumption is each participant answers the questionnaire and potential semi-structured interview honestly and without motive. In basic qualitative studies, the perceptions of participants should represent experiences and worldviews (Kahlke, 2014). The final assumption is that each subject will choose to participate willingly. These assumptions were necessary as each participant was provided information on the benefits and risks of the study before agreeing.

Scope and Delimitations

In research, the scope is defined as the parameters under which the study operated (Goes & Simon, 2017). The scope of this study was scholastic esports stakeholders in the Chicagoland area of Illinois. These participants may include teachers, teaching assistants, coaches, building or district administrators, and community members involved in a scholastic esports program. Initial data were collected through a digital qualitative questionnaire, with the potential of an optional semi-structured virtual interview for participants to expand upon answers. Basic or generic qualitative research was used, allowing participants to express perspectives on the topic (Merriam, 2009).

Delimitations can be defined as the characteristics of the research that arise from limitations and the scope of the study as well as predetermined decisions made during the development of the study (Goes & Simon, 2017). The main delimitation of this study will apply to addressing only Chicagoland scholastic esports programs, as other scholastic esports programs across the United States or the rest of the world will not be included in the research. Results may not be transferable to other contexts of scholastic esports programs.

Limitations

Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018) define limitations in research as "potential weaknesses that are usually out of the researcher's control and are closely associated with the chosen research design, statistical model constraints, funding constraints, or other factors" (p. 156). Limitations of this study involved participant responses that were perspective-based and therefore subjective. Participants were encouraged to respond to questions in an open and honest format to preserve credibility. Member checking with post-interviews was utilized to further ensure credibility (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Transferability of this study may not be possible due to the subjective nature of the potential answers as well as the small sample size (Creswell &

Poth, 2016). Reflexivity and an audit trail will provide grounds for confirmability, in which research results have been shaped by participants (Nowell et. al., 2017).

Potential participants were already engaged in providing esports as a scholastic activity. Also, participants may have displayed a potential bias for embellishing the student benefits of such a program. Implementing a scholastic esports program should require established research into esports and how it may benefit students as a school-sponsored activity before implementation.

Chapter Summary

The details of the study have been introduced, along with a history of the topic and why this study is necessary for understanding the current state of esports and its potential to be a scholastic activity. With this phenomenon becoming accepted in scholastic environments since 2014, more research should be done to fully understand the implications and implementations. Future research based on this study may promote a deeper understanding of esports and its relationship to educational institutions.

Multiple research questions were created to guide the study. These questions were developed with a qualitative nature to determine honest perceptions of esports as a scholastic activity. The research focused on stakeholder perceptions of scholastic esports and was done to collect reflections on implementing such a program in a school.

Assumptions made before conducting research have been identified. These assumptions relate to the nature of a qualitative study, as well as the inherent biases of participants towards the topic. The scope and delimitations detailed the locale of the target population as well as the subjective nature of a basic qualitative study. Limitations for this study include details dealing with the credibility, transferability, and confirmability of the research. After introducing the

study, a review of current literature will follow to provide more context on the topic of scholastic esports.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Esports, or competitive video gaming, is still a new venture in the early 2020s. Most secondary schools have yet to adopt an esports program due to preexisting stigmas or a lack of information on the educational viability of such a program (Shum et al., 2021). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore scholastic esports stakeholder perceptions of the viability of scholastic esports programs and the implementation process for creating such a program. Research about esports includes its science, advantages, and how it could be used in schools. There is also competing evidence of the possible dangers of extensive video game playtime which has prevented schools from adopting these programs (Trotter et al., 2022). Existing research on esports has only begun to explore the intricacies of this phenomenon, and more should be conducted to gain a better understanding of how it affects society (Reitman et al., 2020). Research on scholastic-based esports programs is scarce as the popularity of the general esports industry developed in the 2010s (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Esports has started expanding into educational settings, with colleges starting to offer varsity esports teams and a growing number offering esports scholarships (Ogland et al., 2021).

Many esports participants are aged 18–34, with a substantial portion being college-aged (Stewart & Price, 2022). Over 200 colleges have spent over 15 million dollars annually on these programs (Kauweloa & Winter, 2019). Esports viewership has also begun to rival traditional sports, with approximately 644 million annual audience members of esports events (Jang & Byon, 2021). Over half of these viewers are college-aged or younger, establishing a cultural phenomenon for youth entertainment (Trotter et al., 2022). Some believe primary and secondary schools should begin to prepare students for this collegiate opportunity, though there are no regulated processes for doing so (Chao, 2017).

The literature analyzing the current state of esports and its relationship to schools is sparse before 2016, so there is still much to be discovered. There is data on the potential skills built by participating in an esports program and the sense of community created among teams. However, there is an established cultural stigma towards video games, which has prevented older generations from realizing these potential benefits. There is also data showing the real dangers of prolonged video gaming; physical, mental, and emotional (Boers et al., 2019). Traditional sports programs are hesitant to recognize esports, creating social divides (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2017). Schools worldwide are addressing the esports phenomenon in diverse ways, but many wonder which way is the best for students specifically. There is also a glaring lack of nationwide regulation of esports, leaving some to question the legitimacy of the activity (Chao, 2017). Schools are starting to adopt these esports programs, though it remains to be seen if they are beneficial for students, and what the correct strategy is for implementing them.

Literature Search Strategy

The resources used to support this study were acquired through databases provided by the American College of Education Library, ProQuest, and JSTOR, including Academic Search Complete, Education Source, and ERIC. Further peer-reviewed resources were obtained from journal websites. The search engines used were ACE OneSearch and Google Scholar. Keywords used to distill content from these searches included *esports*, *esports scholarships*, *esports in schools*, *esports implementation*, *esports stigmas*, and *esports demographics*. The majority of supporting articles and studies were dated from 2017–2022, with some older resources to provide historical context.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework foundation used in this study consists of a combination of gamification in education theory and an online collaborative learning theory. Both theories are present at any level of esports activity in schools. Educators and coaches use video games to encourage players to collaborate toward winning a game while developing strategies for problem-solving and tactical decision-making (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017).

Kapp (2013) defined *gamification* in education theory as using game-based mechanics, aesthetics, and game thinking to engage people, motivate action, promote learning, and solve problems. Anderson et al. (2012) expanded upon this definition, adding that gamification is a way to describe an interactive online design that plays on the competitive interests of people and often uses rewards to drive action. Gamification in education theory has increased in recent years, with a "serious gaming" movement appearing among scholars and educators (Anderson et al., 2012). Educators and scholars suggest students are naturally drawn to games, regardless of their content (Wimmer et al., 2021).

With the youth culture of 2024 not knowing a world without the iPhone, mobile apps, and digital gaming, educators have been forced to develop new strategies for gaining students' attention and delivering content. By incorporating video gaming into their curriculum, educators can provide a fun, authentic learning experience for their students. Moseikina et al. (2022) stated that gamification in learning has supported the development of 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, social intelligence, emotional literacy, cross-culturalism, and the ability to study/self-study. Esports are entirely made up of competitive video games, the most popular being objective-based team games. Coaches of scholastic esports can also provide the same educational leadership and social guidance as traditional sports coaches.

Online collaborative learning theory is not entirely new, people have been learning informally in groups for thousands of years (Roberts, 2004). The introduction of the Internet and connecting digitally from any location, at any time, has increased the amount of collaboration to a level that was previously impossible. Online collaborative learning has also increased drastically with the onset of remote learning due to the 2020 pandemic (Kalmar et al., 2022). This massive pedagogical shift forced many students and educators to become familiar with online collaborative learning, as it was an effective strategy to overcome the challenges of learning remotely (Cobb, 2021).

Online collaborative learning can transform bystanders into participants to a level of connection that would not be possible in a traditional classroom setting (Wang & Wang, 2022). This initiative is taken even further through collaborative video gaming, where students can become immersed to the point of emotional attachment (Garcia & Jung, 2021). Esports would not be possible without online collaborative learning, as teams would not be able to connect, analyze, or respond to each other to achieve their goals. This process includes planning, delegating, and communicating instructions to outplay an opponent. To compete against each other, teams need to be digitally networked together to display player avatars, score, and establish or enforce game rules. Each team collaboratively learns about their opponents in real-time as they play against each other online, requiring them to make split-second decisions that could determine the outcome.

Most esports events and competitions are team-based and are connected digitally through a network (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). There are examples of esports gaming without teams and some esports competitions that are not all connected online. For this study, one assumption made

any reference to esports to mean competitive digital gaming, requiring the learning and collaboration of teams connected online.

By applying the axioms of gamification in education theory and the axioms of online collaborative learning theory, the theoretical framework of this study begins to take form. With a video gaming platform, esports can be considered a facet of gamification in education, if it meets the requirements. Esports games are team-based by nature and require a collaboration of team members connected online to achieve the common goal of winning the game. Educators can utilize this combined theoretical framework to determine if esports is a viable activity for their students.

Research Literature Review

Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) wrote about what esports is and why it draws people in; escapism, acquiring knowledge about the games being played, novelty, and esports athlete aggressiveness positively predict esports spectating frequency. With these competitions happening worldwide, with bigger audiences than what American sports draw, esports has been establishing itself as a regular pastime (Good, 2017). Professional players are seen as rock stars and can connect with their fan base through streaming services such as Twitch.tv (Ingram, 2019). Streaming services like Twitch and YouTube Gaming have broadened the audience of esports, and have allowed for collaborations with music artists, movie stars, and professional traditional sports players to play together with esports streamers. Many believe there is something to be gained from the activity, potentially in the school system (Raupp, 2020). Different approaches to scholastic esports have been made and can provide interesting insight for future adopters. The lack of regulation for these events allows schools to have the autonomy to decide if and how they would implement an esports program (Cho et al., 2019). This study looked qualitatively at the

state of esports in schools and determined proper implementation methods to ensure viability as a scholastic program.

The History of Esports

The first commercial video game was titled *Computer Space* and released in 1971, with the massive multiplayer hit *Pong* released a year later (Nyitray, 2019). These were originally locally based games, requiring players to be directly connected to the hardware that ran the game. The first major example of competitive online gaming was through a computer game called Quake in 1996, but the term *esports* was only officially added to the most extensive English dictionary, "Dictionary.com," in 2015 (Petryk et al., 2020). This delayed recognition of the esports industry shows how naive we are to its impact, and how much research is yet to be done to fully understand it, especially in a school setting. Esports is seen by the public as a counterculture pastime, with hesitancies to consider esports as a sport in general (Kane & Spradley, 2017).

The popularity of esports and spectating them has risen tremendously along with online live streaming services such as Twitch, allowing more spectators than traditional television programming (Taylor, 2020). According to ESPN, 27 million viewers tuned into the 2014 League of Legends Championship, versus the 15.5 million viewers of the 2014 NBA Finals (Dorsey, 2014). Unique to esports, its consumers are both active and passive, as gaming systems allow participants to shift to being spectators and back with little friction (Tang et al., 2022). Esports consumption is a rich and rewarding experience, as content and social interaction for and through games is possible in multiple forms of media and entertainment which compound upon each other (Huston et al., 2022). The narratives and social connections built through esports are vast, as there are multiple avenues for consumption and participation in one game alone. There

are hundreds of popular esports games, leading to a nuanced and constantly evolving digital landscape that provides an exciting consumption experience (Huston et al., 2022). Differences from traditional sports allow more diverse audiences to experience, participate, and enjoy esports. This consumption experience paired with the rapidly evolving world of technology has pushed esports to the forefront of digital entertainment and culture.

Major sporting leagues have seen this trend shift and have begun developing their esports leagues (Pizzo et al., 2018). The Philadelphia 76ers purchased two esports teams, while the Golden State Warriors, Washington Capitals, and Los Angeles football club bought controlling interest in a major esports team, Team Liquid. The NBA and Take-Two Interactive announced the formation of the NBA 2K eLeague, the first official esports league operated by a U.S. sports league (Pizzo et al., 2018). Pizzo et al. also found traditional sports marketing and deployment can work for esports, and esports spectators are similarly drawn to events to see big-name professional esports players.

Esports as an industry has provided millions of dollars in profit, job development, and payouts to champions (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021). Investments in esports from venture capitalists and private equity firms exceeded 4.5 billion dollars in 2018 alone (Murray et al., 2021). Esports events have also evolved industrial and digital labor, as organizing leagues and tournaments requires collaboration between producers, organizers, players, sponsors, broadcasters, and game developers (Newman et al., 2022). This unique ecosystem has created new labor processes, transformed existing ones, yielded new career opportunities, and provided tremendous profits to be made by a range of participants (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021).

Robert Morris University became the first college to recognize and offer esports as a varsity sport for their students in 2014. This number grew to 22 colleges as of 2018

(DiFrancisco-Donoghue & Balentine, 2018) and now over 200 colleges are committing to some level of esports student programming in 2022 (Stewart & Price, 2022). This number may continue to rise as esports' popularity grows, so research into this scholastic relationship should also expand. Primary and secondary schools would be wise to prepare their students for these collegiate opportunities (Stewart & Price, 2022). Some of these schools have done so but in different fashions. This study was conducted to determine which of these offerings is the best for students, and how schools should implement them.

Gaming the School System

Rothwell and Shaffer (2019) stated the environment of esports in school culture is present and growing. This foundational study provided the springboard for more research into scholastic esports. Some see esports like cell phones in schools. Administrators can blanketly ban them, while others accept and integrate the devices into their curriculum to provide a new learning experience (Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019). As the social and cultural landscape of students evolves, educators would be wise to evolve along with them (Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019).

Shum et al. (2021) penned a similar study which found many parents and educators alike believe that esports intensify children's addiction to video games, causing hesitation in adopting esports programs for schools. Shum et al. concluded, "We need to understand that being esports players is one of the dreams of this generation and recognize that esports do have numerous advantages that should not be discounted" (p. 63). An increasing number of gamers look to esports as a career opportunity rather than a recreational activity (Akkaya et al., 2021). If educators ignore the cultural shifts of their students, they may create divides in understanding between the two groups. Alternatively, they can embrace and utilize esports to enhance a curricular or behavioral lesson. Incorporating gamification and online collaboration could prove

to be the next big thing in education, or at least the research seems to lead that way. This study looked to expand upon this line of questioning and add a deeper understanding of the implementation of these programs in schools.

Colleges have seen esports growing as a trend and are starting to adopt gaming scholarships akin to traditional sports scholarships. Institutions of higher education see digital athletes developing desirable soft skills such as teamwork, problem-solving under pressure, and effective communication (Favorito, 2018). Esports can be an inclusive opportunity for college students, especially those who are not physically inclined to compete in traditional sports. Most colleges that recognize this opportunity have been developing practices to promote student recruitment, retention, and engagement; and to provide a space for diverse students to develop bonds with their fellow participants (Murray et al., 2021).

Colleges like the University of Kentucky are investing in large physical spaces to house these teams and tournaments with hundreds of spectators (Stewart & Price, 2022). Illinois State University is developing a $6,000,000.00 renovation for an esports arena and gaming center, offering access to more than 70 gaming computers (Urban, 2021). Stephens College offers more than 30 video game scholarships and was the first women's college to sponsor an esports program (Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019). These monetary and facility-based investments are creating a cascading effect, as colleges compete to provide appealing choices for prospective students.

The popularity of collegiate esports has grown to the point where the Big Ten Network of colleges has partnered with the world's largest esports organization, ESL, to develop and implement an esports season and championship tournament (Fitch, 2019). Alternatively, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has opted out of adopting esports under its regulatory model; though studies show that esports tournaments and leagues would not benefit

from the NCAA's rules (Baker & Holden, 2018). This lack of nationwide regulation is also the cause of some hesitation to adopt these programs, though many believe that the regulations of traditional sports may alienate the player base for esports. Chao (2017) called for a nationwide, independent governing authority for this industry, as none currently exists. Monitoring this scholastic phenomenon should prove to be interesting as it continues to grow (Chao, 2017).

High schools have also begun their journey into the esports realm, with some schools following in the footsteps of these college programs by establishing their esports leagues. Cho et al. (2019) evaluated the inaugural year of a Californian high school esports league to determine logistical concerns as well as any connections between esports and learning. From the 25 schools they studied, they determined that esports could provide a quality extracurricular experience that encourages learning and socio-emotional development. This activity allowed for the participation of students who would not have participated in school extracurriculars without esports. They also discovered that these students felt like they were part of a community and an exciting one at that. Cho et al. (2019) also noted that much more research needs to be done involving the relationship between high schools and esports.

With this meteoric rise and global popularity, esports may continue to develop into a societal norm (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). The excitement of the venture, as well as the adherence to the latest technological advances, has allowed esports to explode into an industry that schools should no longer ignore (Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019). Educators should recognize this trend and use it to their advantage by encouraging the different skills and developmental strengths that an esports program could provide (Shut et al., 2021).

Pros for the Player

Looking beyond college, video games create a major impact on the 21st-century socio-economic landscape. The video game industry brought in over 90 billion dollars to the United States economy and provided over 425,000 jobs in 2019 (Tripp et al., 2020). An esports industry can stimulate economies in many countries to solve unemployment issues (Kim et al., 2020). Esports participants can utilize their time in their programs to develop career trajectories and create networking connections throughout the industry. Spectators can become participants, and participants can become coaches or commentators. Professional esports organizations are hiring team coaches and managers to support their players and develop strategies for tournaments (Ingram, 2019). These careers or trajectories are possible as esports provide opportunities for anyone to play or contribute. Aside from the economic impact of esports, there are also impacts on the behavior and skill development of the players (Komatsu et al., 2021).

Skills that esports athletes develop can be used in numerous careers. The FAA is recruiting gamers for air traffic controllers; because many video game skills and techniques like scanning a map, spatial awareness, and strategic planning, translate well to the job (Sellers, 2021). Esports programs can allow participants to learn telecommunications technology, social structure, management, and other basic skills necessary for working adults (Komatsu et al., 2021). Companies and recruiters are leveraging the draw and skills gained through gaming to grow their applicant base.

Kleinman et al. (2021) suggested that esports games such as League of Legends can develop self-regulated learning skills through trial and error by simply playing the game. Players are rewarded with in-game currency, items, and cosmetics for accomplishing self-directed tutorials and in-game challenges. This intrinsic motivation assists students in wanting to get

better at the game, both for their enjoyment and to increase the chances of their team winning. Playing video games can assist learning by developing cognitive processes such as visual imagery, problem-solving, and visual processing (Schenk et al., 2017). They claim these cognitive functions, which can be improved by video gaming, are important factors within learning processes. With these results, educators can utilize gaming to enhance their curricula.

By leveraging this form of media, which students from diverse backgrounds engage with often, educators can encourage the development of traditionally disillusioned and disengaged curricula (von Gillern & Stufft, 2021). Lee et al. (2020) developed the first high school ELA curriculum incorporating esports. This type of curriculum emphasizes school and parents' engagement in students' interest-driven learning toward the opportunities for academic and career education. Lee et al. also found that due to the collaborative nature of esports, this integrated strategy also develops socio-emotional learning in students. This evidence of gamification in learning and online collaborative learning has proven to be effective for students. Akkaya et al. (2021) found that various projects and training programs directed at young learners to understand esports can be beneficial if taught congruently with the risks that come with extended video gaming. Incorporating these strategies allows educators to teach with or ahead of the technological curve. Staying culturally and technologically relevant should assist educators in drawing students towards their content in entertaining ways (von Gillern & Stufft, 2021).

While technically a sedentary activity due to prolonged periods of sitting at a computer desk, esports also elicit similar physiological responses as traditional sports. On average, esports participants engaged in regular intervals of playtime induce the same heart rate level as vigorous aerobic activity (Andre et al., 2020). Andre et al. noted that this type of activity requires further investigation as there is proportionally more cardiovascular activity than muscular exercise,

which can have adverse long-term effects. Polman et al. (2018) found that school esports programs have the potential to bring about positive health, behavior, and psychological development if implemented appropriately.

Falkenthal and Byrne (2021) noted that esports provide opportunities for developing leadership and media communication skills. Participants can use their experiences to become coaches or even shift to the production side of tournaments and programs. Esports would not rise to the industry it is today without media communications and its careers, also allowing participants to experience and develop their skills in that market (Taylor & Stout, 2020). The necessity for broadcasting these events has provided jobs for camera operators, sound and lighting engineers, and social media content managers.

Connections between esports and economic growth are palpable, with plenty of occupational opportunities for those involved (Tripp et al., 2020). Educators who prepare their students for careers in the 21st century should cultivate the skills gained from an esports experience (Schenk et al., 2017). These advantages may be apparent to most, though educators approach esports in separate ways, or not at all.

Worldwide Phenomenon

Esports are not limited to Western cultures, as most of the popularity overseas has been observed to outshine major American events. Pei (2019) reported that there were 2 million more unique viewers of the 2018 League of Legends Championships in South Korea than the 2018 NFL Super Bowl. As popular as esports may be, schools around the world are approaching scholastic esports in different ways (Witkowski & Kow, 2019).

In South Korea, one of the original countries that hosts and supports competitions and tournaments, esports is a cultural landmark. Games are televised, professional players are

celebrities, and the government fully supports esports as a career and pastime (Yoo & Jin, 2012). The Korean Ministry of Education has yet to adopt educational gaming into its accepted pedagogy. This distinct gap has separated the notion of video gaming as an educational tool from the industry itself (DeArmond et al., 2022). These opinions have been stagnant in recent years and are dependent on the South Korean gaming industry addressing the gap. Until that happens, the separation of esports from educational settings would continue.

In Pakistan, major esports games like PUBG have been banned because of increased suicides among Pakistani youth due to video games (Jamal, 2020). This move has caused a major cultural rift as Pakistan is one of the youngest and most populated countries in the world (Kundi, 2018), which is still influenced by the worldwide establishment of esports and online gaming. Hussain et al. (2021) found that esports are still being played in Pakistan regardless of the ban, as it provides players a way to escape from their traditional and limiting cultural norms. If the government bans an activity, public schools should follow suit to be compliant with the values of that culture.

Witkowski and Kow (2019) investigated the differences in scholastic esports approaches from a Hong Kong and Australian perspective. In Hong Kong, video gaming is seen in the public eye as an addiction, schools do not officially support esports for students but allow them to organize and compete without affiliation with the school itself. The general view of secondary school and university students in Hong Kong is positive towards esports, as it builds social networks and develops skills; but there are significantly inadequate resources to participate (Chung et al., 2022). In Australia, Riot Games—the creators of League of Legends—officially sponsors schools' teams and their tournaments as well. On one hand, commercially driven corporations are infiltrating schools and interacting with children to hook them into a product,

while the lack of adult supervision in other countries' programs raises concerns about the seriousness of the activity (Witkowski & Kow, 2019).

Overall, there are tensions to be aware of in implementing esports in schools, and there seems to be a balance that has not yet been achieved (Raupp, 2020). Worldwide research on the impact of esports programs in education is still scarce but has been increasing in number in recent years (Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019). Jenny et al. (2021) published the first known comprehensive worldwide inventory and overview of these programs; noting that their list does not cover the effectiveness of these programs and warned of the possible existence of predatory programs focused on institutional income over student learning. There is much more to be discovered and said about this worldwide phenomenon, especially its relationship with educational institutions.

Corporate Involvement

The rise of the esports industry also brings the rise of corporate investing and involvement. Witkowski and Kow (2019) raised this question about Riot Games' involvement in Australian schools' esports leagues, and how they might influence students. Abreu Freitas et al. (2021) realized that esports sponsorship is an extremely lucrative avenue for corporate sponsors, as players and spectators are already used to online digital advertising and building brand image through a culturally relevant medium. These sponsorships can be beneficial for participants, as they may open employment opportunities, but there are many questionable byproducts of these ventures.

Game publishers have the most control and gain the most revenue from esports (Arin, 2020). Publishers usually control most of the leagues in which their games are being played, as they can change the rules of their own game and how they want it to be played at any time. They

are also gaining revenue from selling these titles so teams can play them, as well as gaining free publicity from all the events and players who are streaming worldwide (Arin, 2020). Additionally, game publishers are also engaging in a highly controversial practice of offering gambling-based loot boxes in their games to acquire different cosmetics and other items within the games. Montiel et al. (2022) discovered that purchasing loot boxes in esports games is a frequent practice for minors and can support gambling-like habits. Developers of these loot boxes are capitalizing on the dopamine-releasing and instant-gratification psychology that hooks minors into developing loot box-purchasing habits (Azin, 2020). Alcohol companies have also begun marketing and sponsoring esports events where many athletes and consumers are children and young people (Chambers, 2020). These tactics raise questions about the appropriateness of esports in schools, as educators would prefer to avoid influencing their students with these mature concepts (Montiel et. al., 2022; Chambers, 2020).

Newman et al. (2022) determined that if esports sponsors wanted to be successful, they would have to push forward a narrative like sponsoring professional sports leagues. Data show that esports streamer credibility influences audience attitudes toward brands endorsed by the streamer (Xu et al., 2022). Esports leagues do not follow the same economics as traditional sports leagues, as teams and tournaments can be held in many different venues, with different owners and individual relationships with their players. The protections and systematic structure that allow for careers in professional sports are not entirely present in the current esports realm. This difference may be misleading to students interested in pursuing a career in esports in the same way they might pursue a career with traditional school-sponsored sports like football, baseball, or basketball.

Chao (2017) expanded upon this anomaly, noting that esports is in a "wild west" phase as an industry. The structure and rapid rise of the popularity of esports do not allow for the same oversight and regulation seen in the traditional sports industry. This lack of regulation is due to the numerous different game developers, intellectual properties, tournament hosts, and corporate league sponsors. Traditional sports business structures tend to skew toward favoring the most dominant stakeholder's interests at the expense of consumer welfare (Chao, 2017). This favoring, paired with the lack of an independent governing body over all esports has prevented many, including school leaders, from accepting esports as a secure career path.

Schools need to be aware of these potential quagmires of corporate involvement in the esports world (Witkowski & Kow, 2019). Educators should be wary of allowing these narratives and influences to seep into their esports clubs or teams (Chambers, 2020). They should also be aware of the prevalent stigmas and drawbacks that esports may incur.

An Uphill Battle

Video games have carried their own set of stigmas that have made parents and professionals wary of their value, even as an entertainment vehicle (Etchells, 2021). Etchells found that research into video games has been riddled with controversy and contention. Data exists on the negative drawbacks that extended video gaming can present, both cognitively and emotionally, which has been a major point of esports opposition (Boers et al., 2019).

Video games and their relation to violence, both virtual and physical, have been a hot topic in media since their popularization with home consoles. Whitton and Maclure (2017) analyzed multiple articles and determined regardless of links existing between video gaming and violence, the media still casually pushed a narrative that would make legitimizing video games

difficult. This media panic has created a difficult path for educators to establish esports as an accepted school activity.

Markey et al. (2020) dove into other numerous myths around video games, finding that growing empirical research suggests video games do not contribute to poor social skills, desensitize and influence real-world violence, cause obesity, or incite severe acts of aggression. The authors further relate these unfounded panics to similar parental and educational responses to heavy metal music, comic books, and Harry Potter. Without proper guidance, these sources of media can be harmful to children; but if trained professionals are mediating this kind of content, students can engage with it appropriately.

Shum et al. (2022) noted multiple drawbacks to esports when deciding if they should be a co-curricular activity in schools. The authors listed high time costs, overuse injuries, problematic psychological functioning, and exposure to mature content as the main reasons why esports can be harmful to students. Along with these issues, Shum et al. also found positive influences that esports can provide students; enhancement of cognitive skills, exploration of roles, enhancement of communication skills, and an increase in friendships. If educators want to implement a successful esports program, they should mitigate these potential issues and encourage these benefits (Shum et al., 2022).

Video game developers have become aware of these stigmas and have actively designed their games to encourage positive mental health narratives. Schlote and Major (2021) found that recent commercial games have been developed with a prosocial attitude, to enlighten and normalize mental health issues and to lower the stigmas surrounding video games. The authors note video games still face major limitations in providing comprehensive mental health

education and would require teaching and learning from people who know of the misconceptions that arise from video games.

Attitudes from school leadership outside of the esports realm are slow to accept the validity of esports as a school organization. Many collegiate athletic programs still view esports participants as non-athletes, which causes a divide within schools' organizations (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2017). Esports, even in name, are separated from traditional sports in many ways. There is a lack of nationwide regulation in esports; teams and players can be individually sponsored by non-school-related companies, and the physicality is completely different between traditional sports and esports.

Buzzelli and Draper (2021) noted that "support from school administration to start a program requires some level of educating various constituents about the value of an esports program" (p. 118). They also stated a challenge that schools face is in the ownership of an esports program, whether to recognize it as a sport, while nationally recognized institutions like the NCAA do not. This recognition of esports as a scholastic activity has not been realized, causing participants strain in figuring out their identity.

Esports participants from these schools feel the need to overcome stigmas, such as viewing esports participants as the overweight, basement-dwelling social outcast stereotype (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2017). Giakoni-Ramírez et al. (2021) discovered that professional esports athletes are not typically obese, though the public stigmas still exist. Participants feel a clear sense of athlete identity and social capital within their esports groups (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2017). Alternatively, research has shown the perceived social benefits from inclusion in these collegiate programs aligned more with participants' self-identity, rather than athlete identity

(Buzzelli & Draper, 2021). The divides from traditional sports programs have left esports athletes in the lurch, though this systematic attitude is slowly changing for the better.

As mentioned, there are examples of gambling throughout esports games, in terms of buying cosmetics and loot boxes. Marchica et al. (2021) learned that esports betting, like sports or horse betting, is also popular and appealing to adolescents. The public views esports gamblers as less dangerous than casino gamblers (Peter et al., 2019). With the lack of widely accepted regulations, these practices can slip through the cracks and influence our younger population toward these problem behaviors.

Other behavioral issues like stress can arise from excessive esports playing. Palanichamy et al. (2020) suggested that excessive esports play "causes social, emotional, addiction, and psychological problems such as depression and aggression" (p. 197). In 2018, the World Health Order classified *gaming disorder* as "impaired control over gaming, increasing priority given to gaming over other activities to the extent which gaming takes precedence over other interests and daily activities, and continuation or escalation of gaming despite the occurrence of negative consequences" (WHO, 2020, para. 2). Reporting of these changes did not include the multitude of doctors who disagree with this definition. Journalists ended up stigmatizing gamers as a whole because of it (Parrott et al., 2020). Mestre-Bach et al. (2022) determined that there are misconceptions about this disorder, and more evidence-based research needs to be done to reach a more concise scientific consensus. This established disorder has given opposers to esports plenty of foundation for their arguments, but they do not consider the possibility of qualified leaders of these programs to address and educate participants about these dangers.

Along with behavioral stigmas, video gaming can perpetuate social stigmas. Stoever (2021) warned colleges that esports, like traditional professional sports, is muddled with issues

of gender, sexual harassment, and cyber abuse. Wattanapisit et al. (2020) suggested that the public health sector should follow the development of esports and implement support programs for athletes and spectators. Programs do not exist or are not expansive enough to address these issues yet.

Streaming of esports events has seen some controversy, as streaming platforms have been found to exhibit exploitative practices within their economic structure, leaving players feeling powerless (McCutcheon & Hitchens, 2020). Esports players also do not have labor unions, employment benefits, or other protections that traditional sports players do; 'player associations' have been created, but some have crossed the boundary into antitrust law (Zetino, 2021). Leagues running esports tournaments have been found to treat competitors as independent contractors and have refused to bargain with them as a group (Holden & Baker, 2019). The legal status of professional players remains unsettled, whether as employees or contractors, causing further struggles in legitimizing it as a career (Martin, 2020). Esports players have realized the industry is riddled with other issues such as a lack of transparency, lack of doping regulations, lack of appeal processes, and a lack of representation for players (Ingram, 2019).

Educators who plan to implement an esports program should be aware of these stigmas and drawbacks to video gaming (Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019). If they can educate their community about the possible dangers, they can also proactively design their program to combat these issues (Schlote & Major, 2021). Like shoulder pads and helmets in football, program leaders can adopt policies to protect their participants and encourage an enjoyable experience for all (Buzzelli & Draper, 2021).

An Equal Playing Field

Another stigma that esports in schools can address is the gender gap among student participants. Like traditional sports, gender stereotype threats exist and continue to cause a gender imbalance in esports (Hao et al., 2020). Alternative to traditional sports, esports can allow for mixed-gendered teams without raising concerns for equality. Even with this opportunity, females have utilized in-game gender-swapping to avoid these stereotypes.

Esports and the STEM world have always been dominated by male students, though that is slowly regulating a more even playing field (Kim, 2017). Studies are starting to show that girls involved with video gaming are more likely to follow a career in the STEM field (Hosein, 2019; Wimmer et. al., 2021). Wimmer et al. also discovered friendships between boys and girls were facilitated and encouraged through esports when they otherwise would not have developed without an esports experience. This attitude should transcend to the collegiate level, as inclusion and gender diversity are greater in clubs, rather than in varsity programs (Taylor & Stout, 2020). Jang and Byon (2021) determined males are drawn towards esports due to hedonic motivation and social influence, while females enjoy building habits and effort expectancy, which is the ease at which esports can be learned and played. Educators can use this knowledge to recruit and help encourage diversity in their esports programs.

Esports allows opportunities for students who may not be drawn to, or able to compete in, traditional sports. Students with disabilities can compete in ways they would be unable to in traditional sports. Smith and Inazu (2021) explored online gaming and how it provided opportunities for normalizing, anonymizing, augmenting, accommodating, and connecting those who would be unable to normally due to their disabilities. Martynenko et al. (2021) found esports opportunities have also been proven to have “a positive effect on students with

disabilities, developing their skills of social adaptation" (p. 1). Esports can provide a solution to the many problems people with disabilities face: (a) normal employment, (b) socialization, and (c) communication. Exciting advancements in controller technology have created opportunities for students with disabilities through adaptive gaming. Hassan et al. (2022) investigated controller technology, and how these advancements can lead to para-esports league creations like para-sports. Hassan et. al. also found acceptance and accessibility are reasons behind esports' rise. Educators focused on inclusion could utilize this to decide on esports implementation in their schools.

Cho et al. (2019) suggested esports draws a certain kind of student, specifically, those who are more academically engaged overall to tackle the high learning curve and come through the door with a high-end home computer and internet access. An example like this brings up another element of equity, as students who have access to esports-capable computers and the internet at home tend to gravitate towards participating in esports at school. This circumstance was compounded by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing most students to engage and collaborate virtually online for school and work.

COVID Impact

Circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic allowed scholastic members to reevaluate their standing on esports, as it provided their students an opportunity to continue participating virtually. The Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association explored esports as an educational opportunity and was met with an enthusiastic response (Elfman, 2021). Martins et al. (2022) analyzed comparable results in their study, where traditional school sports opportunities were either limited or put on hold entirely due to the then-implemented safety protocols, while immediate remote alternatives like esports took their place. With the ability to connect and

socialize digitally, students were able to have some semblance of normality through virtual esports participation during the pandemic.

Kim et al. (2020) noted how the traditional sports industry shifted towards esports during this time, as it was more lucrative and rewarding to broadcast and support virtual esports over traditional sports broadcasts. Pu et al. (2021) concluded with related results, as traditional sports broadcasting began leveraging video games and gamification to increase audience engagement. Esports have been infiltrating the traditional sports world. It might be a matter of time before esports rivals or even outcompetes them. These recent shifts in the industry should continue to allow esports to grow, to the point where schools should no longer ignore them.

The 2020 pandemic forced most students to learn online, and schools were forced through a phase of digitizing. Educators found by incorporating online collaborative learning groups into their curricula, their students were able to facilitate a sense of belonging and community (Cobb, 2021). Kalmar et al. (2022) stated online collaborative learning due to the pandemic was successful but should still be developed to hone social interactions further. Groups and teams formed before quarantining were strengthened, while weak social connections were further weakened. Incorporating gamification into the mix could enhance these experiences further, but more research is required to establish gamification as an effective educational tool.

Chapter Summary

From diving into current research, it is becoming clear there is a potential viability of adding esports into schools, but there are many pitfalls to be aware of (Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019). The organizations in charge of tournaments should maintain a healthy relationship with students, and the schools need to acknowledge and encourage their traditional athletes to welcome and accept esports athletes as one of their own (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2017). Proactive

education about the benefits, stigmas, and drawbacks of video gaming should also be utilized to inform school communities. Establishing a healthy gaming culture would simplify becoming a professional in the esports industry (Akkaya et al., 2021).

Creators of education gaming platforms such as Minecraft are aware of the benefits of gamification of learning and online collaborative learning theories and are providing resources for educators to begin implementing these kinds of programs in their schools (Ogland et al., 2021). Developers of major esports games like League of Legends are spending time and resources to ensure that esports has a place to stay in mainstream culture (Witkowski & Kow, 2019). Third-party corporations and advertisers realize the global impact this activity has potential for and are investing heavily in it (Newman et al., 2022). Companies and organizations like the FAA are accepting and encouraging the skill benefits that esports can develop for potential employees (Sellers, 2021). From these points, an educator should feel confident in implementing their esports program, if they are aware of current pedagogical strategies and what stigmas they should avoid (Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019).

The qualitative aspect of this study should provide useful information to contribute to the knowledge base. Esports, and research into it, is still a novel phenomenon to dissect and discuss (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017). Esports within schools is an even rarer phenomenon, gaining traction in implementation (Jenny et al., 2021). If educators wish to incorporate any activity into their school's culture, they should utilize researched-backed reasoning and strategies for doing so (Murray et al., 2021). Implementing esports programs in schools could prove fruitful or wrought with the common stigmas and drawbacks that video gaming suffers from (Shum et al., 2021).

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Esports is a growing collegiate venture, with millions of dollars being invested into esports programs and scholarships for students (Kauweloa & Winter, 2019). The problem is that secondary schools are hesitant to adopt an esports opportunity due to previous stigmas about video games, a lack of data establishing its developmental benefits, and a lack of resources on how to properly implement it for coaches and students. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore scholastic esports stakeholder perceptions of the viability of scholastic esports programs and the implementation process for creating such a program. The following research questions guide the study.

Research Question 1: How are esports currently offered in Chicagoland schools?

Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of Chicagoland scholastic esports program stakeholders (teachers, teaching assistants, coaches, building or district administrators, and community members) on scholastic esports as a viable scholastic activity?

Research Question 3: What strategies should potential scholastic esports stakeholders employ and avoid in scholastic esports implementation?

Research Methodology, Design, and Rationale

To achieve the purpose of this study, basic qualitative data were collected from the stakeholders involved in scholastic esports programs from the Chicagoland area. This included reflections from the teachers, teaching assistants, coaches, building or district administrators, and community members involved in a scholastic esports program. A phenomenological approach would find thematic reactions towards esports as a school-sponsored activity, but to uncover the practices and processes of esports in schools, a basic qualitative study should be conducted (Worthington, 2013). To gather data for these research questions, online questionnaires and

interviews were utilized to provide solid context for how esports is implemented in schools and if that implementation is a beneficially viable activity for students. Questions directed at the esports sponsor/coaches and school administrators should assist new adopters in establishing their esports programs. By using these instruments, researchers can obtain qualitative data effectively (Zohrabi, 2013). They also reiterate that every researcher should enhance the validity and reliability of the data by using methods such as the ones they provided. With these suggestions, the design of the questionnaires, interviews, and observations were well-defined.

Methodology

The utilization of basic qualitative study methods focusing on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those who have experienced scholastic esports would offer the greatest potential to make a difference in the lives of others (Merriam, 2009). A basic qualitative study – or generic qualitative study – can be defined as research that is not guided by an established set of philosophic assumptions as seen in phenomenology, grounded theory, or ethnography (Kahlke, 2014). Studying these experiences is not from a unique group about a specific phenomenon, so phenomenological research would not fit.

Design

With a basic qualitative study design, the research can identify and analyze information that may not be easily quantified, such as people's subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or experiences of things or events (Percy et al., 2015). This design approach was appropriate for the research questions because the purpose of the study was to determine stakeholder perceptions of the viability of esports as a scholastic opportunity and the implementation process for creating such a program. These questions required the reflections of stakeholders involved in scholastic esports programs to provide their opinions of the activity. The anticipated benefit of this design

was to provide the stakeholders of these esports programs a platform to share their experiences as well as strategies to employ or avoid when implementing an esports program in a school. Perspectives from these stakeholders may potentially grow the awareness around these programs, and solve the problem of a lack of secondary schools following in the collegiate footsteps of recognizing and supporting this new student activity.

Role of the Researcher

Secondary schools in the Chicagoland area, where I attended as a student and currently teach, were the site of the study. As a scholastic esports program leader myself, I took on the role of the observer as a participant (Merriam, 2009). The research questions stated for this study were questions that I first desired answers to assist the implementation of my program. In this role, questionnaires and interviews would gather and assimilate as much related information as possible, to publish and support those who find themselves in similar standing as I did in developing a scholastic esports program.

I also took on the role of collaborative partner, as the participants desired the answers to the research questions as well, establishing the participants and myself as equal partners in the research process (Merriam, 2009). It was assumed that secondary schools that have begun adopting esports programs are looking to prepare their students for the collegiate opportunities available and are therefore also looking to improve their implementation efforts moving forward. Any potential participants had no prior relationship with me, whether personal or professional. To further reduce bias, bracketing was employed to set aside any experiences or beliefs I held to truly observe the reflections of the participants (Gearing, 2004).

Research Procedures

Any leading stakeholders involved in a Chicagoland secondary scholastic esports program were the target population for the basic qualitative study. Data collection instruments were an online questionnaire with digital storage of answers, paired with an optional semi-structured interview for further elaboration on responses to the research questions. The data collection instruments aligned with the research questions for determining the opinions and perceptions of esports as a scholastic activity, as well as gathering potential strategies for enhancing future implementation endeavors.

Population and Sample Selection

Qualitative data was collected with digital tools over the Internet. The target population for this study involved stakeholders from over 60 different Chicagoland scholastic esports programs. This included teachers, teaching assistants, coaches, building or district administrators, and community members if they were involved with a scholastic esports program. The total population of participants was at least 60, as many schools can support more than one esports stakeholder within their program. All participants were above the age of 18 to cover ethical considerations when studying minors.

A sample size of 26 participants across multiple secondary schools in the Chicagoland area provided enough unique perspectives. Utilizing nonprobability sampling methods like purposive snowball sampling was the most effective format for determining applicable participants (Naderifar et al., 2017). No research commenced until approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) from the American College of Education (ACE). Primary participants were gleaned from a list of participating schools registered with the Illinois High School Esports Association (IHSEA), and the site permission request (see Appendix A) was sent to the IHSEA executive director. Once permission was granted (see Appendix B) and IRB

approval was received, a private link with information regarding the study (see Appendix C), its purpose, methods of data collection, and the informed consent (see Appendix D) form was sent to potential participants, who were also tasked with passing along this information to anyone who might fit the criteria for qualification. Utilizing snowball sampling in this fashion may have helped increase the sample size of participants, as those willing to join should have some knowledge of other potential participants who may be interested as well. This was due to the necessity of communicating with other schools for esports matches or tournaments. Potential participants were provided an informed consent form (see Appendix D), detailing the purpose of the study and the instructions to proceed with the study. Willing participants were requested to respond via email.

Data Instruments

A Google Form questionnaire was used to gauge qualitative responses toward scholastic esports. Generic qualitative inquiry was the main form of data collection, as it investigated the reports of esports stakeholders on their attitudes and beliefs toward the scholastic activity (Percy et al., 2015). Combining the reflections of community members as well as perspectives from their esports sponsors and school administrators would contribute to developing a model of how esports can be an educationally viable activity for students. After administering the questionnaire, an optional semi-structured interview was scheduled with the scholastic esports stakeholders to go over their answers in more detail and to provide participants with further opportunities to describe their reflections on the scholastic activity.

Google Form Questionnaire

The Google Form Questionnaire and its questions (see Appendix E) were used to determine the participants' scholastic esports program opportunity and how it was offered.

Potential options might range from a class, after-school club, or a sports team with a seasonal schedule. For reflections on the viability of a scholastic esports program, open-ended questions were used to gauge observations of student behavior, socialization, collaboration, communication, as well as emotional states. Qualitative comment opportunities that followed were left open-ended to not lead participants. Finally, the last set of qualitative comments was offered for participants to describe strategies that were effective in the implementation of the program and ineffective strategies.

Optional Online Semi-Structured Interview

After administering the Google Form questionnaire, an optional online interview was presented to all participants to provide further context to their questionnaire responses. The questions provided (see Appendix F) were pre-structured based on pre-knowledge of scholastic esports, with opportunities for "tell me more" responses (Percy et al., 2015). The questions followed Patton's (2015) six types of qualitative questioning techniques. The participants met virtually and were offered a platform to further detail their perceptions of esports as a scholastic activity. The interview utilized audio recording to enhance transcription for analysis.

Field Testing

To ensure validity, three subject matter experts (SME) were contacted to review and approve the interview and questionnaire questions (see Appendix G). All SMEs had doctorate degrees and were involved with gamified education or high school esports regulation. Each SME was contacted through email to determine their opinion on the validity of the data instrumentation for this study. The first responder (SME1) previously earned their EdD in Curriculum and Instruction from ACE and added some quality follow-up questions for both the demographic and content sections. SME2 previously published a study about esports in schools

and helped hone in on the scope of some of the content questions to avoid vagueness. SME3 also published works on scholastic esports and helped narrow down more specific word usage for the research questions. Changes have been made to each of the SMEs' suggestions to confirm the quality of the data collection instruments.

Data Collection

Data collection for the questionnaire was done through Google Forms' digital collection process. Results were then automatically stored in a Google Sheets document to be analyzed later. The storage of forms and results will be in a password-protected Google Drive folder for three years. For the optional follow-up interview, data collection was recorded through Google Meet. The Google Meet connection was password protected and the audio recording was stored in a password-protected Google Drive folder. Participants were notified when the audio recording started and stopped. Identifiers were limited to ensure the participants' privacy. Participants were notified of this process before the interview to ensure full transparency. Through member checking, transcriptions were returned to each participant individually through email for their approval of the data they provided (Carlson, 2010). The accuracy of the transcription from the interviews was rigorous due to the nature of digital and video recording (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Data from both instruments were stored in a password-protected Google Drive folder for analysis. Data will be erased after three years from the start of collection.

Data Preparation

Transcriptions of audio recordings were made of the collected data for analysis. These transcriptions were returned to their respective participants for member checking before analysis. After transcriptions were member-checked, the data were converted for coding and thematic

analysis. Dedoose (2021) was utilized for digital analysis, along with a combination of theoretical analysis and triangulation (Percy et al., 2015).

Data Analysis

Data analysis began following Creswell and Poth's (2016) data analysis spiral. After preparing the data, transcripts were read and annotated with emerging ideas. Participants' reflections on esports viability as a scholastic activity and strategies for implementation were analyzed. Triangulation was implemented to synthesize the qualitative data from the two sources of collection (Patton, 1999). After both sets of data were transcribed and converted into a common format, the notation of similar words or phrases was marked. If they arose, discrepancies between the data sets were marked for notation to ensure unbiased reporting. Thematic analysis was used, specifically theoretical analysis, to determine which pre-existing themes the perspectives of a scholastic esports opportunity would fall under (Percy et al., 2015).

Further analysis was done using Dedoose's (2021) software to gain an understanding with a programmed perspective. Forman and Damschroder's (2007) qualitative content analysis was used to categorize the results to determine trends in the responses. Following the final step of Creswell and Poth's (2016) data analysis spiral, the results were organized for presentation.

Reliability and Validity

Looking objectively at this topic, schools that already incorporate an esports opportunity likely have some predisposition to thinking that esports is a viable activity for their student population. It was important to remind participants to answer as objectively and honestly as possible to not skew results. To secure as much validity as possible, all questions were designed for open-ended, freeform responses. This format ensured that the responses were not being led by the researcher and allowed participants to articulate their reflections in their own manner.

To ensure credibility, techniques such as member checking with post-interviews, triangulation, and subjective positionality were utilized (Rose & Johnson, 2020). By comparing and contrasting responses from the questionnaires and interviews, triangulation was implemented to distill results to reflect the perceptions of scholastic esports accurately. Avoiding oversimplification contributed to credibility, as qualitative results are dependent on context and are case-dependent.

To address dependability, the data collection process was thoroughly detailed in the study, allowing this research to be replicated in the future (Shenton, 2004). Established and academically accepted research methodologies and designs were utilized, while avoiding questionable research practices, also contributed to dependability. Adhering to proper research practices such as transparency of data reporting and acquiring approved site research (see Appendix A) or consent also contributed to dependability.

To ensure transferability, all questions were general enough that any stakeholder from any school could answer them. Also, written data were detailed enough to allow future researchers to decide how to utilize the results regarding other contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2016). To establish confirmability, a combination of reflexivity and an audit trail was utilized to uphold the trustworthiness of the research. When using reflexivity and an audit trail, research findings were shaped by the participants, rather than the researcher themself (Nowell et. al., 2017).

These criteria and standards were developed before completing the research, to proactively manage threats to reliability and validity (Morse et al., 2002). Extra steps have been taken to reduce internal threats to validity through bracketing (Gearing, 2004). Ensuring that research questions and instruments remain impartial to potential responses is paramount in maintaining credibility and validity.

Ethical Procedures

To ensure that the rights of the human subjects being researched are preserved, guidelines provided by the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP, 2018), and the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1978) have been followed. All research sites were approved with permission from site administrators before data collection (see Appendix B). Participants were willing, consenting adults, provided with an informational email detailing their participation as well as the link to the digital questionnaire. Instruments included an informed consent form approved by the IRB, and a model of continuous consent was followed (Klykken, 2021). Transcripts of the optional interview were returned to participants individually. Also, all interview participants had further consented to an audio recording before the interview. To avoid ethical issues dealing with research in the workplace, any participant who had a personal or professional relationship between parties was excluded from the study. Data are stored in a password-locked digital folder. All digital data will be deleted from the password-protected folder three years after collection. Physical data will be shredded three years after collection.

Chapter Summary

The methodology and protocols stated here propose the steps taken to ensure that the research was conducted ethically and with the utmost respect to participants as well as readers. For this basic qualitative study, it was essential to develop a research strategy that could identify participants' perceptions of esports as a scholastic opportunity without compromising their integrity or the integrity of the research. The role of the researcher and an explanation of basic qualitative research has been stated.

Population selection methods, data instruments, and data storage strategies have been established. Data analysis protocol has been laid out, along with potential avenues for coding and examining the data through traditional and digital methods. Considerations for credibility, reliability, and ethical protocols were also stated. Chapter 3 contains the structure for the methodology of the qualitative research in this study. The research method was a basic qualitative study that focused on the perceptions of scholastic esports stakeholders. Chapter 4 contains the detailed results of the study.

Chapter 4: Research Findings and Data Analysis Results

Video games have been an established pastime for over 40 years, this has led to the creation of competitive professional video game teams, matches, and tournaments under the umbrella term esports (Good, 2017). Esports entered the scholastic world by giving students teams to compete in a similar sense to traditional sports. Colleges are encouraging participation in their esports teams by offering scholarships and related degrees (Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019). Institutions like the FAA are recruiting professionals from esports due to desirable skills developed from playing on an esports team (Sellers, 2021). With this, there is little data on the viability of scholastic esports, and how these programs should be implemented in schools.

The problem is that secondary schools are hesitant to adopt an esports opportunity due to previous stigmas about video games, a lack of data establishing its developmental benefits, and a lack of resources to implement it for coaches and students properly. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore scholastic esports stakeholder perceptions of the viability of scholastic esports programs and the implementation process for creating such a program. Using the results of this study will further develop the knowledge base on scholastic esports and may help develop regulated processes for this novel extracurricular activity.

This study operated on several key assumptions. The first assumption was that each esports program that was studied used online, team-based gameplay based on the definition of esports. It also assumed each participant provided their responses with honesty and without motive and that each participant offered their responses willingly. Additionally, the limitations of this study were clearly outlined and defined. The first limitation of this study was that each participant would respond about their perceptions and experiences of scholastic esports and were therefore subjective. A second limitation of this study was that transferability may not apply due

to the subjective nature of the potential responses and the limited subject size and location. Understanding that each participant was already involved in a scholastic esports program and may embellish the responses to reflect more positive student benefits of such a program was the final limitation. The main bias of this study was the participants' predisposition to the viability of scholastic esports. However, steps have been taken to remove this bias to ensure the credibility and sanctity of the research. Detailed explanations were provided regarding the data collection process, along with the preparation and analysis of said data. The results were listed and analyzed with a focus on reliability and validity.

Data Collection

Data collection primarily utilized a Google Form questionnaire that gauged participants' perceptions of esports as a scholastic activity (see Appendix E). Participants accessed the Google Form through the direct link to the form, or the QR code on a recruitment flyer. The first page of the survey includes the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved introduction letter and informed consent letter. Participants were required to read and sign the letter before being able to see or respond to the research questions.

Participants were recruited from the Illinois High School Esports Association (IHSEA) which includes stakeholders involved with scholastic esports programs. The IHSEA board president posted the recruitment flyer and direct link to the Google Form to the IHSEA newsletter in June 2023. The recruitment flyer addressed Chicagoland esports stakeholders and requested their participation to further the knowledge base of scholastic esports. Initial recruitment efforts began in June of 2023 but had to be postponed to October 2023 due to a low turnout of participants in June. This is most likely attributed to the fact that most if not all scholastic esports stakeholders are teachers and are hard to reach during summer months. A

second flyer and direct link were reposted by the IHSEA board president in October of 2023 to gain further participants to meet the proposed sample size of 20. Eleven participants responded within the first week of reposting the recruitment flyer and link in October, and 12 more responded the week after. As of November 1, 2023, 26 participants responded, meeting the proposed sample size.

At the end of the Google Form questionnaire, participants were prompted with the option to schedule a follow-up semi-structured interview. Seventeen of the 26 participants opted into the follow-up interview. Each willing interview participant was emailed to schedule the follow-up interview and to present them with the interview questions (see Appendix F). Only five of the 17 participants emailed to schedule a follow-up interview. One participant missed the original interview time and asked to reschedule for a day later. All data collection was completed on November 6, 2023. The data were then prepared for analysis.

Data Preparation

Once all data collection was completed, the data were organized into Google Sheets for ease of access. Each question was given its own sheet for responses to analyze further and determine common codes and themes. Interviews were conducted through Google Meet, recorded into Audacity, and live transcribed into Google Docs. After completing each interview, the audio recordings were played back to finalize each transcription. Final transcriptions were emailed to each participant to ensure validity through member-checking. Once validity was verified through member checking, the audio recordings were deleted. The audio transcriptions from the five follow-up interviews were also added to the Google Sheets document to combine all data sources into one location for analysis. The insertion of [esports] was included in responses to help the reader with context if it was missing. The data did not need additional

cleaning or modification to preserve the authenticity of the responses. Participant names have been replaced with numbers to preserve confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The process for data analysis followed Creswell and Poth's data analysis spiral (2016). First, the data were organized, and then emerging ideas were identified into codes which were synthesized further into overarching themes. Once the data from the Google Form questionnaire was analyzed, the process began for analyzing data from the semi-structured follow-up interviews. Five participants provided further depth to their responses by answering six more questions (see Appendix F). The first two questions asked participants to elaborate on their positions relative to, and the demographics of, their school's esports program. They were then asked three questions about their program, their feelings toward it, and any advice for future adopters. Participants were finally asked for any closing statements they wanted to add.

Once organized into Google Sheets, the participant responses were analyzed in multiple runs. After an initial analog analysis run was completed, the data were analyzed through Dedoose (2021) software for further understanding and perspective. Once the data analysis spiral was completed, analysis results were organized and visualized through appendices, figures, and tables.

Results

Participants' responses have been laid out in deeper detail according to the major themes to display the experiences and knowledge of the participants' responses. The backgrounds of the participants have been explained to offer further insight into current scholastic esports stakeholders, as well as reflections on scholastic esports in general. The information gathered has

been used to answer the driving research questions of the study.

Emerging Codes and Themes

From the first run of data analysis, multiple codes and common wordings emerged from participant responses. Codes such as school and esports were excluded from this list as they appeared in almost every response. The code students was included as the most common code to show emphasis on how most stakeholders focused on how their programs relate to their students. The most emergent codes were displayed (see Appendix H) with the number of occurrences found in the responses as well as a participant example of each code.

Three major themes were discovered from the data taken from both the Google Form questionnaire and the follow-up interview concerning scholastic esports programs (see Table 1). The first major theme was the benefits scholastic esports programs provide students, namely social inclusion, future opportunities, and skill development. The second major theme identified was the lack of statewide and nationwide regulation and organization of scholastic esports. Lack of regulation and organization leads to various ways schools can offer and compete in these programs. The third major theme that arose was the difficulties involved with starting a program. Further details and examples of major themes were listed (see Appendix I). Participant #8 (personal communication, October 24, 2023) summed up the reflections and major themes of scholastic esports stakeholders with this statement:

> I think it's fabulous for SEL (Social Emotional Learning), school investment, and soft skill development. I find the barriers frustrating - lack of school resources, outdated IT policies, and inconsistent "national" level leagues. I worry about startup profiteers like PlayVS in the esports space taking advantage of districts with money to burn.

Table 1

Major Themes and Examples

Major Theme	Example
Student Benefits	[The] district superintendent and I had discussed how [esports] could offer and benefit some of our students.
Lack of Regulation	There are so many different games with constantly shifting rosters and schedules. Putting the organizational responsibilities all onto 1–2 individual school sponsors is a bit egregious.
Startup Issues	Avoid getting involved in too many platforms that offer esports competitions. Find your state league and start there.

Background Information

The first set of questions for participants gauged their general demographics and the background of their school's esports programs. This information can help readers understand how scholastic esports programs may vary from school to school. With esports being a new extracurricular activity, statewide regulation has yet to be established which results in a variety of formats for students and stakeholders to participate in.

Many schools offer structured competition teams following the schedules and regulations of the IHSEA or the High School Esports League. Others provide informal club settings, with participation flexibility and online communication due to the absence of physical spaces to meet in. Eligibility requirements also vary, with competitive teams often mirroring traditional sports

guidelines to maintain academic standards, where clubs adopt more lenient criteria to encourage broader participation.

Participants from the optional interview provided further insight into the demographics of their esports programs (see Appendix J). Three of the five participants reiterated how diverse and inclusive their programs are and how their programs create a space that welcomes students with various backgrounds and abilities. One participant specifically stated one of their programs includes several students with disabilities or on the spectrum and how esports is more inclusive than traditional sports for those students.

The study also explored participants' roles within their schools and esports programs, showing a mix of educators, support staff, and administrators involved (see Figures 1 and 2). The majority indicated a recent involvement in these programs, with many attributing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to the initiation or expansion of esports programs. Reasons for involvement varied, some driven by a personal passion for gaming and others responding to student interest or exposure to esports' potential benefits. Challenges arise in game selection due to concerns over negative associations surrounding first-person shooters, despite their popularity among students, thus impacting recruitment efforts.

Figure 1

Participants' Role in Their School

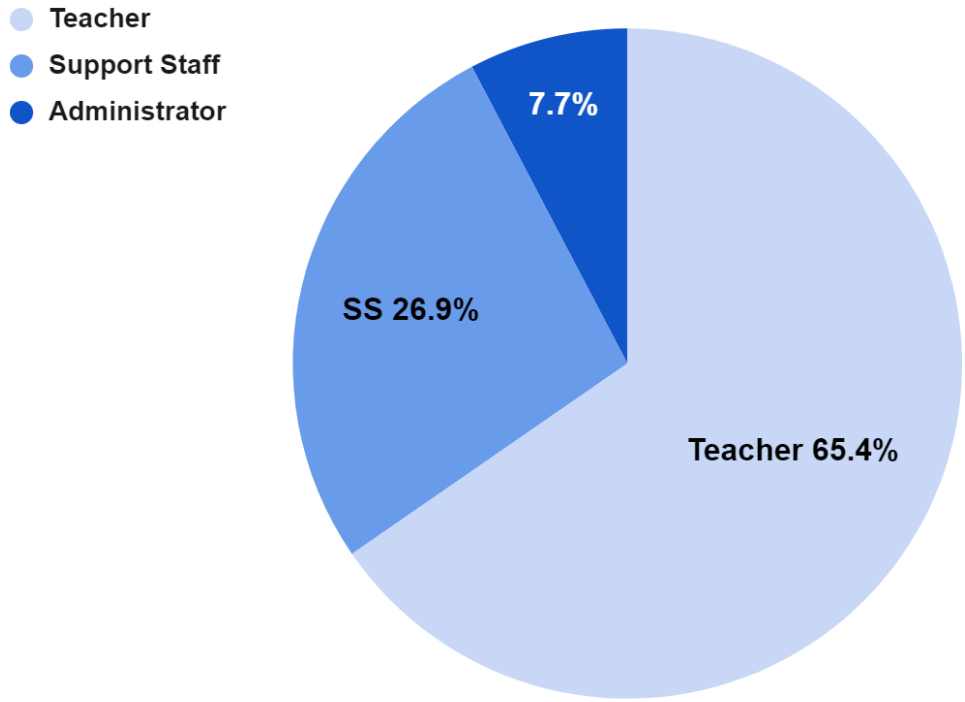
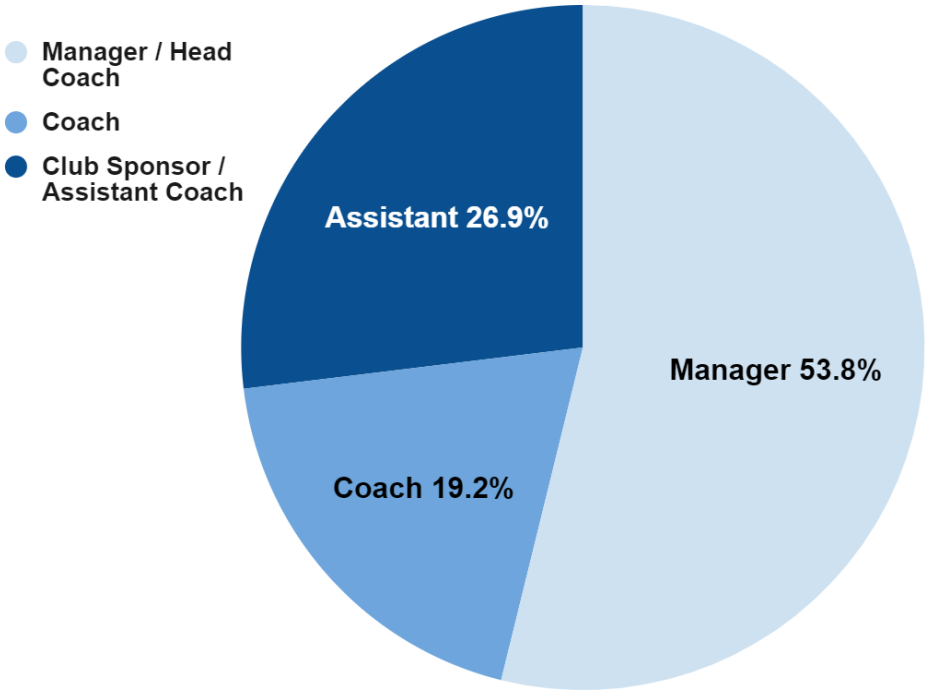


Figure 2

Participants' Role in their Esports Program



Student Benefits

When asked about perceptions of their esports program, most participants noted the opportunity for engagement that their program provides students who might not normally participate in any school activities. These reflections were also tied to accessibility and inclusion for students who may not feel included in traditional sports. Eight participant responses also touched on the collegiate opportunities their program provides through the encouragement of college scholarships in esports participation. Six of the participants reflected on the skills that were built into their program including teamwork and communication. Six other participants reflected on the socialization involved in esports and how it brings students together who would not normally socialize.

Many of the teacher participants stated they could see their students not only in an academic light but also in a competitive and extracurricular light that built deeper connections and relationships. All five participants who were interviewed responded initially with positivity and love toward their programs. One participant went further to say that their program was their baby, and it has been nice to watch it grow into the organization it is today. When asked about scholastic esports in general, participants most often reflected on the benefits and opportunities a program like this can provide (see Table 2). Twenty-two of the 26 participants resonated with positive remarks about scholastic esports in general and the opportunities for student growth, their future education, or potential careers.

Table 2

Perceptions of Scholastic Esports in General

Participant #	What are your perceptions of esports as a scholastic opportunity in general?
2	There is academic opportunity and skill-based opportunity that target esports players. For example, colleges are interested in our players, and we specifically have an IT company that sponsored us and is interested in capturing employment from our players.
3	I think that legitimizing esports as a scholastic opportunity is a way to encourage student participation in team-building activities for students [who] might not have done so otherwise.
4	Outside of the competitive scene, there are many opportunities for students to look for careers in esports. These include broadcasting, production, coaching, tournament management, etc.
9	I think it's a great way for kids to learn teamwork skills while showing respectful language toward opponents despite being frustrated at losses or proud of victory.

Lack of Regulation

Seven participants mentioned the lack of state and nationwide regulation or how scholastic esports is currently in its “wild west” phase. Six participants also mentioned how scholastic esports should be a nationally recognized and supported program and lamented the

slow adoption and acceptance rate. Participants were asked how they measure the success of their programs. Thirteen participants stated they judge the success of their programs by the student engagement or amount of student participation. Seven participants look for student enjoyment and the amount of fun the students have. Five participants spoke on the importance of growth for these programs as a measure of success. Four participants mentioned attending the state tournaments would be a good indicator of success, but they do not judge their programs by that metric.

Three of the five interview participants noted how their number of student members fluctuates year to year, and how recruitment efforts need to be a recurring process. One participant noted how in previous years they had full teams to compete in League of Legends, but this year they barely have enough players to make one complete team. Another participant noted that their esports team is in a combined district that allows members from multiple high schools to fill rosters, which might not be possible if not for the combined district. One participant recommended the use of a signed waiver to assist in the buy-in and understanding of their esports program so that admin and parents are involved and informed of the process.

Three interview participants also yearned for more support and acceptance of their programs. Two of these responses specifically hope for increased support from their school administration. Participant 1 stated:

> I see that we have monthly coaches' meetings for all traditional athletics, but we don't get an invitation to stuff like that; we still are not considered on the same playing field as the other traditional sports which is unfortunate.

After gauging perceptions of esports programs and the metrics of a successful esports program, participants were asked to provide strategies that were effective in the implementation of an esports program, and things to avoid in implementation.

Startup Issues

Participants provided many detailed suggestions for new scholastic esports adopters, touching on proactive strategies as well as logistical techniques to build an effective program. Responses varied with numerous suggestions, but commonalities arose from the submissions (see Table 3). The most common recurring suggestion was utilizing student interest, involvement, and ownership to develop a program organically. Interview participants also emphasized the importance of starting small with a well-advertised structure.

The second most common suggestion was getting administrative buy-in and developing a support system within the school for the program. Most of the optional interview participants reiterated this suggestion, encouraging potential adopters to maintain good relations with the school's administration and IT departments which are necessary for a scholastic esports program to thrive. Marketing and advertising the program were the next most common suggestions, with multiple participants emphasizing the amount of advertising required to gain enough participants. The final common suggestion was overcoming the negative stigmas tied to video games and efforts to legitimize esports as a scholastic program.

Participants were also asked to provide advice on what to avoid in implementing an esports program. The most common suggestion was to start small and build slowly. Ten participants spoke on the dangers of growing too big too fast. The second most common suggestion touched on avoiding third-party esports companies that provide turnkey solutions. Two of those submissions explicitly stated the company PlayVS and how companies like them

may be predatory to schools. The final suggestion was to avoid limiting options for students and to listen to student interest. Alternatively, there was a submission that recommended *not* letting student interest guide the program entirely.

Table 3

Strategies for Effective Implementation of Scholastic Esports

Participant #	What strategies are effective in implementing a scholastic esports program?
2	Getting administrative and school board support is key. Funding usually becomes an issue for most schools. If you get your tech-ed teacher involved or students even they can help provide labor or construction. Thus, having your own space legitimizes the esports program and in turn, draws in membership. Another strategy is building the program but then allowing students to take ownership. As the head coach I play more of an administrative role where I assign the leaders and they end up coaching their own teams. They know the games better than most adults. This creates an awesome dynamic that is unique to esports.
6	Marketing the program. Marketing the program. Marketing the program. The more you can sell the idea to colleagues, admin, and the school board the better. It is really important to make the program visible -- similar to athletics. The more buy-in you get from various stakeholders, the more success you will have [in] building a program and getting it funded appropriately.

Participant #	What strategies are effective in implementing a scholastic esports program?
14	First, you need to destigmatize what it means to be an esports athlete. Kids need to be excited to be on the team, so give them a reason to be proud of it. If possible, also find somewhere in the school to play. If everyone is online at home, it is hard to form a connection outside of a Discord call. When people are at school and see your presence then it becomes more real for everyone involved.
22	Marketing, advertisement, multiple student leaders with roles, an active player base

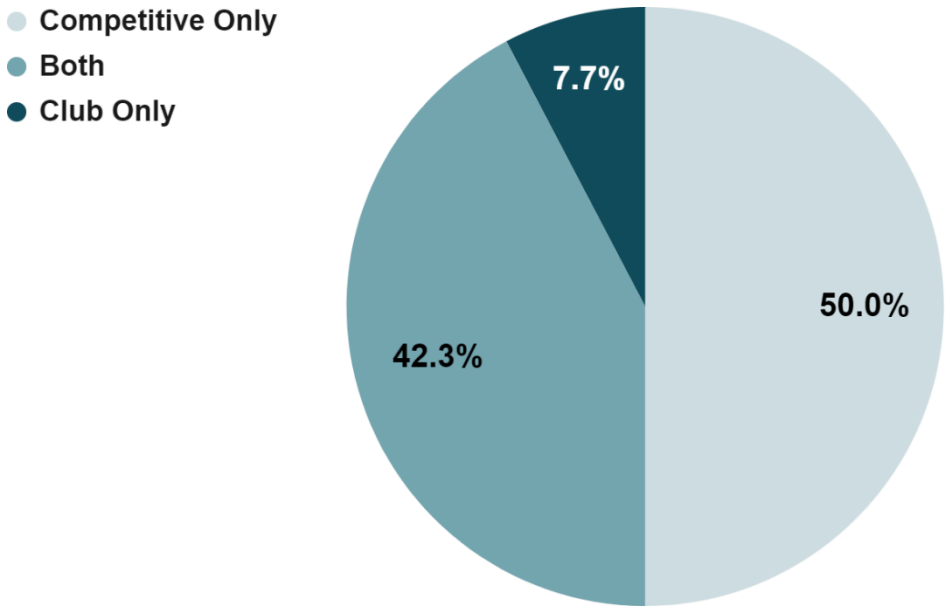
Participants were finally asked to share any closing thoughts. Seventeen of the participants declined to share any further. Of the remaining nine participants who did leave final thoughts, five of them encouraged more schools to join in with their programs. Three of the final responses warned of the current issues of scholastic esports, noting low stipends, lack of regulation, and a lack of digital access to some platforms. One participant mentioned how their joining the scholastic esports program as a stakeholder helped increase female student participation. Participants of the optional interview provided further knowledge for potential esports program adopters (see Appendix K). From the collection and analysis of this qualitative data on the viability and implementation of esports in schools, results can be drawn from the major themes to answer the research questions of the study.

Research Questions

The first research question looked at how scholastic esports are currently offered in the Chicagoland area. Responses provided insight into each of their esports programs and how they offer them to students (see Figure 3). All participants' programs were offered as extracurricular activities for students to sign up and participate in. Twenty-four of the participants' programs offer competitive teams for students to join and play together or against other schools. Ten participant programs also offer a casual club-like experience on top of their competitive teams, with two participants only providing a club experience. One of the 26 participants offers their program online only as they do not have a physical space for their students.

Figure 3

How Participants Offer Scholastic Esports



The second research question asked what the current perceptions of scholastic esports stakeholders were on esports as a scholastic opportunity. Participants overwhelmingly stated positive perceptions of their esports program as a scholastic opportunity for students. On the first content-related question, 21 participants immediately shared the opportunities a scholastic

esports program provides students, skill development, socialization, and future educational and career opportunities. Two participants shared how their administration recognizes and supports the esports program as an addition to their traditional sports offerings. Two other participants saw the potential for a crossover between esports and academic subjects. One participant noted how this opportunity is not fully realized and overlooked in the school industry.

The third research question looked for insight and strategies to employ or avoid in scholastic esports program implementation. From the results, most participants recommended starting small and growing the program organically through student interest. Alternatively, one response suggested not letting student interest drive too much of the program. The second main strategy for effective implementation relies on constant advertisement of the program and marketing it to students and school administration alike. The third main suggestion was to build an infrastructure within the program that would lead to success. This includes having signed waivers, open and continuous communication with admin and parents, and offering events within the school community to build understanding and generate more buy-in for the programs. Within these infrastructure suggestions, there were also warnings about utilizing third-party companies to develop these programs.

Reliability and Validity

All participants come from a school that already offers esports, establishing a predisposition that esports can be a viable scholastic activity. To ensure as much validity as possible, all questions and response formats were designed to be open-ended and allow each participant to respond freely. Participants articulated their responses in their manner and in their own time.

Credibility and Triangulation

To increase credibility, triangulation, subject positionality, and member-checking for each follow-up interview participant were utilized (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Triangulation was implemented by comparing the responses from the questionnaire and the interviews as well as comparing responses from the different positions of the stakeholders in comparison to their esports programs. Participants were also asked to share their responses in detail to avoid oversimplification.

Dependability and Consistency

In terms of dependability, the data collection process has been laid out, allowing the possibility of replicating the research in the future (Shenton, 2004). Using already established and academically accepted methodologies and designs while avoiding questionable research practices contributes to dependability as well. Data reporting was transparent and the methods for acquiring site permission and consent adhered to proper research practices and was consistent with what was proposed in the research methodology.

Transferability

All questions were designed in a way that any stakeholder from any school would be able to answer them, thus ensuring transferability. Written data were collected with high regard for detail to allow other researchers to use the results in different contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2016). A combination of an audit trail and reflexivity was used to establish confirmability (Nowell et. al., 2017). This upheld the trustworthiness of the study and ensured the participants shaped the research findings and not the research instruments.

Trustworthiness

To proactively manage these threats to reliability and validity, these criteria and standards were developed before data collection (Morse et al., 2002). Extra steps were taken to reduce an internal threat to validity, as the participants may have biases towards scholastic esports. To maintain credibility and validity, the research questions and instruments were designed to remain impartial to potential responses.

Chapter Summary

Data collection from current scholastic esports stakeholders was completed utilizing proper qualitative research practices to expand the knowledge base surrounding scholastic esports, its viability as a scholastic opportunity, and insight into the implementation process. The data collection process was explained in detail, stating the research approval process, the consent process for participants, the data collection instruments, and the steps taken to remove threats to validity. Data analysis was also explained in detail, identifying Creswell and Poth's (2016) data analysis spiral as the main analysis strategy. The techniques for data analysis were also stated, including the use of Dedoose's (2021) software to analyze the data further. The results of the data analysis process were shared, identifying three major themes that arose from participant responses. From synthesizing the data gleaned from the responses, the three guiding research questions were answered.

The first research question asked how scholastic esports is currently offered in the Chicagoland area. All participant programs provide students with an extracurricular esports opportunity managed through the IHSEA. Half of the programs offer an informal club version of the activity to encourage wider participation. There is a lack of statewide and national guidance on how to structure these programs.

The second research question included participant perceptions of scholastic esports. Many responses detail the benefits a scholastic esports program may provide students, namely inclusion for diverse students, socialization among non-regular groups of students, skill development, and educational or career opportunities. There were many responses centered on the lack of regulation for these programs. While each program was involved with the IHSEA, the level and format of involvement were not uniform across the different esports programs. There is also much to be desired in how schools and administrations understand or support scholastic esports.

The final research question asked participants to provide guidance in developing a scholastic esports program. Many responses explained the struggles of starting up an esports program, including the need to partner with the school administration or the IT department of a school, the need for constant advertisement and marketing of the programs for recruitment, and the lack of guidance on what to do and what to avoid for new program adopters. Participants provided suggestions on proactive strategies and things to avoid in implementation such as starting small, utilizing student interest, and being careful when looking to third-party solutions.

The data collected and shared provide important insight into the state of scholastic esports programs and should help researchers, educators, and school administrators determine their viability in a school setting. The data were organized and summarized to assist future stakeholders in the development of their scholastic esports program. Conclusions of the findings, limitations, and potential uses for this research will follow to finalize this research study.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore scholastic esports stakeholder perceptions of the viability of scholastic esports programs and the implementation process for creating such a program. With the novelty of scholastic esports, many secondary schools do not yet offer the activity due to a lack of regulation for these programs, stigmas tied to video gaming, and a lack of research on the subject (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017).

The study was conducted to determine how scholastic esports are currently offered in Chicagoland. Each participant offers esports as an extracurricular activity, either as a casual social club or as a competitive team (see Figure 3). Regarding the viability of scholastic esports programs, each participant held the opportunity in high regard for the benefits it can provide students. Participants provided suggestions for potential scholastic esports adopters. Responses were varied but reflected a need to market the program for increased buy-in and to start small but build it organically.

Interpretations and conclusions have been drawn from the results of the study. Limitations of this study exist and were addressed to provide the reader with context for understanding. Recommendations have been made for future scholastic esports adopters and potential researchers who want to continue expanding the knowledge base around the topic. There are implications for leadership, specifically with school or district-level administration, in developing an esports program and how to support stakeholders in ensuring its success. The conclusions of this study may guide future research on scholastic esports.

Findings, Interpretations, and Conclusions

The findings of this study corroborated many points discovered in the literature review. The main factor that resonated in both the literature review and the results of the study was the

novelty of scholastic esports. This leads to many problems secondary schools face in determining the viability of scholastic esports, including a lack of regulation, limited supporting research data, acceptance with traditional sports communities, and countering stigmas around video games. A second commonality found between the study's results and the literature review focused on the potential benefits an esports program can provide for a school's community.

Centralized nationwide and statewide regulation does not yet exist for scholastic esports, which has created a wild west scenario for schools (Chao, 2017). This addresses the first research question in determining how esports is provided in Chicagoland schools. Many participants appreciated their non-profit esports league organization, IHSEA, but also noted no guidance from state-affiliated scholastic activity associations on the proper development and execution of such a program. Alternatively, the lack of regulation has allowed schools autonomy in how they choose to take part in esports (Cho et al., 2019).

With the novelty of scholastic esports, research is sparse but growing (Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019). Multiple participants resonated with this challenge, and several noted their programs began due to student interest rather than being informed about the activity from trusted educational resources. Many schools are still hesitant to adopt esports due to the limited information available on the viability of such a program (Shum et al., 2021).

Esports have yet to be officially accepted alongside traditional sports, with major organizations like the NCAA opting out of supporting esports programs (Baker & Holden, 2018). Participants noted how these feelings persist at the secondary level, where their competitive esports teams and programs are left out of meetings with traditional sports leaders and community communications about competitive activities in their districts. This has created a rift in attitudes and acceptance even within their student populations. Buzzelli and Draper (2021)

found a challenge many schools face is in how they "own" or offer their esports programs when organizations like the NCAA do not yet acknowledge esports in competitive sports.

Another major issue in developing a scholastic esports program involves overcoming traditional stigmas surrounding video games. Whitton and Maclure (2017) noted mainstream media pushed a narrative linking video games to real-world violence without much connection to research data. This has caused a similar unfounded parental panic akin to the popularization of heavy metal music or Harry Potter (Markey et al., 2020). Participant 15 felt this to an extreme degree, where most if not all scholastic esports events include shooter games like Valorant, Overwatch, or Fortnite, their community voted against using any shooter games in the esports program due to the fears of the games inciting violence. This game ban has students feeling left out, as shooter games tend to be the most popular and most celebrated within the esports community. Many participants identified negative stigmas they have had to face and how they used community outreach or marketing to show the benefits their programs could provide. These results answer the research question on strategies and suggestions for implementing a scholastic esports program. Shum et al. (2021) found many parents and community members believe that esports intensify student video game addictions but noted the advantages of these scholastic programs should not be discounted.

All participants' responses included positive remarks about their esports programs and the benefits they provide students. Most participants mentioned the social benefits of their teams and clubs, specifically how esports drew students from different social cliques to play and work together as a team. Recent commercial games are being designed with a prosocial attitude, encouraging teamwork and respect for all players from any culture (Schlote & Major, 2021). Participant 14 said this kind of heterogeneous community is hard to build in a traditional

classroom, but with the common interest in video games, students who would never socialize normally are now working together organically. These reflections also lead to the many benefits esports can provide for inclusion.

Esports attract many students who may not be involved with traditional scholastic athletics or activities. Martynenko et al. (2021) discovered esports is proven to help students with disabilities in developing their skills of social adaptation. Participants noted how their programs provide an inclusive space for students with disabilities or special needs to participate and compete at the same level as their peers. Smith and Inazu (2021) found esports provide connection, normalization, and accommodations for students who normally would be unable to do so due to their disabilities. Participant 24 reflected on the accessibility of their esports program and how a wheelchair-bound student enjoys playing FIFA (a soccer video game). The student takes pride in their membership in the esports team since they would be unable to compete in a traditional soccer program. These reflections answer the research question exploring the perceptions of scholastic esports stakeholders on the viability of these programs. The benefits scholastic esports programs provide are not limited to social or inclusion, but also to real-world skill building to set students up for professional success.

Komatsu et al. (2021) found scholastic esports programs can help students develop 21st-century skills in ways traditional academics may not. Esports utilizes a combination of online collaborative learning theory and gamification of learning theory by pitting student competitors in high-stress scenarios that require critical thinking, strategizing, and effective communication for success. These experiences help students develop these skills under pressure and build confidence in problem-solving with a team (Schenk et al., 2017). Participants stated how their esports programs give students leadership and outreach opportunities through student

coaching, team captains, community recruitment, and team management. Students of the participants also have opportunities to work in marketing and digital communication by running the esports team's social channels and documenting their season highlights. Falkenthal and Byrne (2021) stated the leadership and media communication skills developed through scholastic esports can translate into professional opportunities, which supports what many of the participants presented in their reflections.

Participants noted the collegiate and professional opportunities their secondary esports programs have provided to their players. Five participants said many students from their programs had earned college scholarships due to their involvement and performance on their scholastic esports teams. Seven participants reflected on how their esports teams have helped prepare students for college through skill building and exploration of possible degrees in communications and business. One participant noted a local IT company sponsors their school's esports team and is interested in capturing employment from their graduated players. Institutions like the FAA are recruiting scholastic esports players due to the applicable skills developed in their programs, including spatial awareness, rapid map scanning, and strategic planning (Sellers, 2021). Most participants reflected on how their programs introduce and enhance these skills for their students, and how other schools may miss this inclusive development by not offering an esports program.

All participants provided suggestions for the effective implementation of scholastic esports. Participants recommended establishing partnerships with the school's administration and IT departments to ensure a successful program. Marketing for an esports team and the benefits it could provide students is essential for community buy-in (Buzzelli & Draper, 2021). Due to the lack of regulations, schools around the world are approaching esports in many ways which has

led to confusion and frustration in developing programs (Witkowski & Kow, 2019). Many participants resonated with this and suggested starting with one game or organization and building slowly. Warnings were made about third-party companies offering turn-key solutions. Participants also suggested using student interest and leadership to help guide the program, but not to drive it entirely.

The results of this study match the themes discovered in the literature review, how unregulated scholastic esports is, and the developmental and inclusive benefits these programs may provide. Online collaborative learning theory and gamification of learning theory are present within each participant's esports program and help establish legitimacy for implementation. This theoretical framework should allow school professionals to see esports for its developmental potential, but also to address and avoid negative aspects and stigmas of extended video game playing. From these results, potential adopters can feel confident that an esports program would be a positive addition to a school's activity offerings if it is developed for student growth and supported by the school's community.

Limitations

The limitations of this study have been addressed and may provide more insight for future research. The main limitation of this study is the subjectivity of participant responses from their perspectives. Participants have already established scholastic esports programs at their school and are responsible for them, which may have led to a positive bias in how they reflected on their programs. This study was limited to the metropolitan area of Chicagoland. Results may vary in different areas due to the lack of regulation for scholastic esports and different cultural approaches to the activity.

Transferability was handled through generalized questions so any stakeholder from any school could answer them, but this may not be possible due to the subjective nature of the study and the limited sample size (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Credibility was addressed through the questionnaire design by allowing participants to respond openly and honestly. Member checking, subject positionality, and data triangulation further ensured the study's credibility (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Dependability was established through a thoroughly detailed process for collecting, analyzing, and sharing the data gathered to allow for future research to be replicated (Shenton, 2004). Confirmability was addressed through an audit trail and reflexivity to retain the trustworthiness of the findings (Nowell et. al., 2017).

Recommendations

Recommendations can be made from these findings, both in Chicagoland esports and the greater scholastic esports world. School stakeholders that have yet to adopt an esports program can gain insight into developing and supporting their own. Administrators and district leaders should realize the potential benefits of properly established scholastic esports programs. State and nationwide policymakers should see the gaps in regulation and guidance for these programs and be called to fill them. Scholastic esports should be regulated, supported, and continually developed like its traditional scholastic sports counterparts. Further research can be completed to develop and establish regulations or support for scholastic esports.

Research from a statewide or nationwide perspective may be useful for a broader understanding of the current state of scholastic esports. These programs are offered in a myriad of ways across the country and the world. Discovering and sharing the axioms of successful programs, leagues, and tournaments would greatly benefit the establishment of regulations for

esports in schools. Deeper research into the logistics of effective scholastic esports implementation should provide school communities with guidance for their programs.

Research into the connections of college scholarships, job opportunities, and industry relations to scholastic esports players may yield interesting results as well. Many colleges and businesses are realizing the benefits of scholastic esports and are already capturing employment through sponsoring these programs. Tracking data of a scholastic esports player through their secondary, collegiate, and professional careers should provide deeper insight into how these programs prepare students for the professional world.

Another research opportunity could be found within the relations of schools and third-party esports organizations they may connect with. Game developers, marketing firms, and technology corporations interact with scholastic esports due to the lucrative nature of the industry (Abreu Freitas et al., 2021). These interactions are also unregulated and have led to questionable outcomes, including the promotion of gambling and alcohol to minors (Chambers, 2020). Further research into these relations should be conducted to establish guard rails in protecting student esports participants. There is still a well of untapped potential in researching scholastic esports due to the field's novelty.

Implications for Leadership

The results of this study can be used to enlighten and empower separate groups of people involved with scholastic esports. Students can organize, compete, and collaborate in a culturally popular activity that is not tied to athletic ability. Additional opportunities to develop camaraderie with other groups they would not normally socialize with ensue. Students can have leadership opportunities through team coaching or management. They can also develop career paths through collegiate and professional esports involvement.

Parents and community members can be informed about the benefits of scholastic esports and its separation from the traditional, stigma-riddled view of video games. A deeper understanding of this activity from an outside perspective can aid in normalization and support for the students involved. Community members can become involved and assist in the development of a scholastic esports program by volunteering their time to coach or professional connections for career development.

School stakeholders can use this research to support the inauguration of a scholastic esports program and develop it with confidence. Teachers and coaches can utilize the suggestions and advice from this study to start a program and build it responsibly. The esports programs developed from the knowledge gathered here can be established as a permanent addition to a school's extracurricular activities.

School and district leadership have a chance to provide their students with an activity that will support diverse and equitable inclusion while also building real-world skills to translate into professions. Scholastic esports can develop students' social, leadership, and marketing skills through the implementation and development of a program. District leaders can use these initiatives to build meaningful experiences for their students, especially through supporting school stakeholders in charge of executing an effective program.

Scholastic policymakers can guide and regulate this novel extracurricular activity to properly support and develop school teams and their players. Protections can be developed to ensure students involved with esports can participate safely, like the implementation of football helmets and pads for traditional sports. Researchers can assist policymakers and leadership by expanding the knowledge base around scholastic esports.

Conclusion

Esports will continue to grow based on its cultural, educational, and economic impact (Good, 2017). Colleges are investing millions annually to support students in these programs (Kauweloa & Winter, 2019). Secondary schools hesitate to adopt esports programs due to a lack of regulation and guidance (Chao, 2017). Chicagoland scholastic esports programs vary in format, games offered, schedules, and eligibility requirements. Current Chicagoland scholastic esports stakeholders see the potential benefits their programs can provide but are frustrated with the inconsistent organization for running them. Suggestions were provided for the effective implementation of scholastic esports.

Overall, scholastic esports are still struggling for acceptance and normalization in their infancy (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2017). The stakeholders involved with running these programs feel the benefits outweigh the uncertainty and frustration linked with organizing and supporting them. Educating communities and school leadership is key for buy-in and growth for scholastic esports. State and nationwide policymakers would be wise to address this growing phenomenon to ensure that esports programs are developed properly, and stakeholders are supported with research-backed guidance. Organizations like the IHSEA are helpful, but participants believe the state should accept and support esports like traditional sports.

Esports can be a developmentally beneficial opportunity for diverse students to compete in inclusive ways (Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019). Schools, their communities, and their leadership teams should be aware of these potential benefits to help develop and support their esports programs. Educational policymakers need to create regulations to continue to support this growing phenomenon. Further research into scholastic esports and its potential should provide the foundation for the future progress of the activity.

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Appendix A

Research Site Permission Letter

April 18, 2023
[redacted]

IHSEA Executive Director:

Dear [redacted]

My name is Anthony Pollina and I am a doctoral candidate at the American College of Education (ACE) writing to request permission to survey and possibly interview members of the IHSEA involved with esports programs. This information will be used for my dissertation research related to the viability and implementation of esports in schools. The purpose of this basic qualitative study is to explore scholastic esports stakeholder perceptions of the viability of scholastic esports programs and the implementation process for creating such a program.

My goal is to obtain 20 participants to provide their perceptions of scholastic esports programs. I will be utilizing Google Forms to survey participants for their responses and to also collect effective strategies for implementation. I will then offer an optional follow-up virtual interview for participants to expand further on their answers to the questionnaire. The interview will be audio recorded. Transcription of the interview will be sent to the participants to ensure the accuracy of the data collected and will be analyzed through member checking.

Important Contacts for this study include:

Principal Investigator: Anthony Pollina
E-mail: [redacted]
Phone: [redacted]

Dissertation Chair: [redacted]
E-mail: [redacted]

Thank you for your attention to this issue and prompt response. I appreciate your time and consideration of my request.

Regards,

Anthony Pollina, M.S.Ed

Appendix B

Research Site Response

AM [redacted]

To: Anthony Pollina

Fri 4/21/2023 1:37 PM

Dear Mr.Pollina,

Thank you for your email and for considering the IHSEA for your dissertation research on the viability and implementation of esports in schools. We appreciate your interest in our organization and the role we play in promoting and supporting scholastic esports programs.

We are happy to grant you permission to survey and possibly interview members of the IHSEA involved with scholastic esports programs. Your study aligns with our mission to advance the positive impact of esports in education, and we are eager to contribute to the body of knowledge on this topic.

We look forward to learning more about your findings and insights into the viability of scholastic esports programs and the implementation process. Please keep us updated on the progress of your research, and do not hesitate to reach out if you need any further assistance.

Wishing you the best of luck with your study and your doctoral journey.

Sincerely,

[redacted]

Appendix C

Letter of Recruitment

Dear Chicagoland Esports Stakeholders:

My name is Anthony Pollina and I am pursuing my doctoral degree in education at the American College of Education (ACE). I am a current middle school STEM teacher and esports coach for Deer Path Middle School in Lake Forest. I am writing to inform you of an opportunity to partake in a study on the viability and implementation of esports in schools. The goal of the basic qualitative study is to share results with school leaders so that they may guide stakeholders on best practices for effectively implementing esports programs in schools.

Data will be collected through a digital questionnaire and a possible virtual interview. This will require one 15–20-minute questionnaire session, which will be conducted virtually. The optional virtual interview will be audio recorded. After the interview has been transcribed, a copy of the transcription will be sent to each participant to ensure the accuracy of data analyzed through the process of member checking. Participation is completely voluntary, and participants may withdraw at any time. Potential participants must meet the following requirements:

1. Be involved in a scholastic esports program (coach, sponsor, parent, administrator, etc)
2. Have no prior personal or professional relationship with the researcher

Personal information will be kept confidential, and no names will be shared in the published results. All information will be kept secure in a password-protected folder to ensure confidentiality. If you would like to participate in the study, or if you have any questions about the procedures, please reach out to me via email at [redacted]. Thank you for your time and consideration of your participation.

Sincerely,

Anthony Pollina, M.S.Ed

Appendix D

Informed Consent

Prospective Research Participant:
Read this consent form carefully and ask as many questions as you like before you decide whether you want to participate in this research study. You are free to ask questions at any time before, during, or after you participate in this research.

Project Information

Project Title: The Viability and Implementation of Esports in Schools
Researcher: Anthony Pollina
Organization: American College of Education
Email: [redacted]

Date of IRB Approval:
Please note that this research study has been approved by the American College of Education Institutional Review Board. The IRB approved this study on April 28th, 2023. A copy of the approval letter will be provided upon request.

Researcher's Dissertation Chair: Dr. Matt Smalley
Organization and Position: Adjunct Professor for American College of Education
Email: [redacted]

Introduction I am Anthony Pollina and I am a doctoral candidate student at the American College of Education. I am doing research under the guidance and supervision of my Chair, Dr. Matt Smalley. I will give you some information about the project and invite you to be part of this research. Before you decide, you can talk to anyone you feel comfortable with about the research. If you have questions, ask me to stop as we go through the information, and I will explain. If you have questions later, feel free to ask me then.

Purpose of the Research
The purpose of this basic qualitative study is to explore scholastic esports stakeholder perceptions of the viability of scholastic esports programs and the implementation process for creating such a program. You are being asked to participate in a research study that will assist with gauging perceptions of scholastic esports. Conducting this qualitative study will expand the knowledge base on scholastic esports and provide actionable information for schools interested in the endeavor.

Research Design and Procedures
The study will use a qualitative methodology and a basic qualitative research design. Site permission letters will be disseminated to specific participants within Chicagoland schools. The study will comprise 20 participants who will participate in a digital questionnaire and optional follow-up virtual interview.

Participant selection
You are being invited to take part in this research because of your experience as a scholastic esports stakeholder who can contribute much to the current understanding of scholastic esports and its implementation, which meets the criteria for this study. Participant selection criteria: scholastic esports stakeholders in the Chicagoland area.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate. If you choose not to participate, there will be no punitive repercussions.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw
Participation is voluntary. At any time you wish to end your participation in the research study, you may do so by sending me an email explaining you are opting out of the study. There will be no repercussions for leaving the study.

Procedures
We are inviting you to participate in this research study. If you agree, you will be asked to fill in a digital questionnaire, and optionally partake in a virtual interview. The type of questions asked will range from a demographical perspective to direct inquiries about the topic of scholastic esports.

Duration
The questionnaire portion of the research study will require approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. If you chose to be interviewed, the time allotted for the virtual interview will be within 2 weeks of submission of the questionnaire at a time convenient for the participant. Before an interview, you will be asked to provide permission to have the interview recorded for the sake of having accurate transcripts for data.

Risks
The researcher will ask you to share personal and confidential information, and you may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics. You do not have to answer any questions or take part in the discussion if you don't wish to do so. You do not have to give any reason for not responding to any question.

Benefits
While there will be no direct financial benefit to you, your participation is likely to help us find out more about scholastic esports. The potential benefits of this study will aid the scholastic community in esports program implementation.

Confidentiality
I will not share information about you or anything you say to anyone outside of the researcher. During the defense of the doctoral dissertation, data collected will be presented to the dissertation committee. The data collected will be kept in an encrypted computer file. Any information about you will be coded and will not have a direct correlation, which directly

identifies you as the participant. Only I will know what your number is, and I will secure your information in a password-protected folder.

Sharing the Results
At the end of the research study, the results will be available for each participant. It is anticipated to publish the results so other interested people may learn from the research.

Questions About the Study
If you have any questions, you can ask them now or later. If you wish to ask questions later, you may contact me at [redacted]. This research plan has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the American College of Education. This is a committee whose role is to make sure research participants are protected from harm. If you wish to ask questions about this group, email IRB@ace.edu.

Certificate of Consent
I have read the information about this study, or it has been read to me. I acknowledge why I have been asked to be a participant in the research study. I have been provided the opportunity to ask questions about the study, and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I certify I am at least 18 years of age. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Print or Type Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____

I confirm that the participant was allowed to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily. A copy of this Consent Form has been provided to the participant.

Print or type name of lead researcher: _____

Signature of lead researcher: _____

Date: _____

PLEASE KEEP THIS INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR YOUR RECORDS.

Appendix E

Questionnaire Questions

Demographic Questions

1. What is your position in relation to the school?
2. What is your position in relation to the school's esports program?
3. What prompted you to become involved in a scholastic esports program?
4. How long have you been involved in your school's esports program?

Content-Related Questions

1. How does your school currently offer esports to students?
2. What are your perceptions of your esports program as a scholastic opportunity?
3. What are your perceptions of esports as a scholastic opportunity in general?
4. How do you measure the success of your school's esports program?
5. What types of eligibility requirements do you have in place for students in your school's esports program?
6. What strategies are effective in implementing a scholastic esports program?
7. What should scholastic esports program adopters avoid in implementation?
8. Is there anything else you would like to add?
9. Would you be interested in participating in an optional virtual interview to further explain your answers?

Appendix F

Semi-structured Interview Questions

Demographic Questions

1. What about your position in relation to the school or its esports program would you like to elaborate further on?
2. Is there anything else you would like to add about the demographics of your esports program?

Content-Related Questions

1. Is there anything you would like to expand upon in terms of your school's esports program?
2. What are your feelings towards your school's esports program?
3. Is there any knowledge you wish to impart to new esports program adopters?
4. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix G

Subject Matter Expert Validity Request

Hello there!

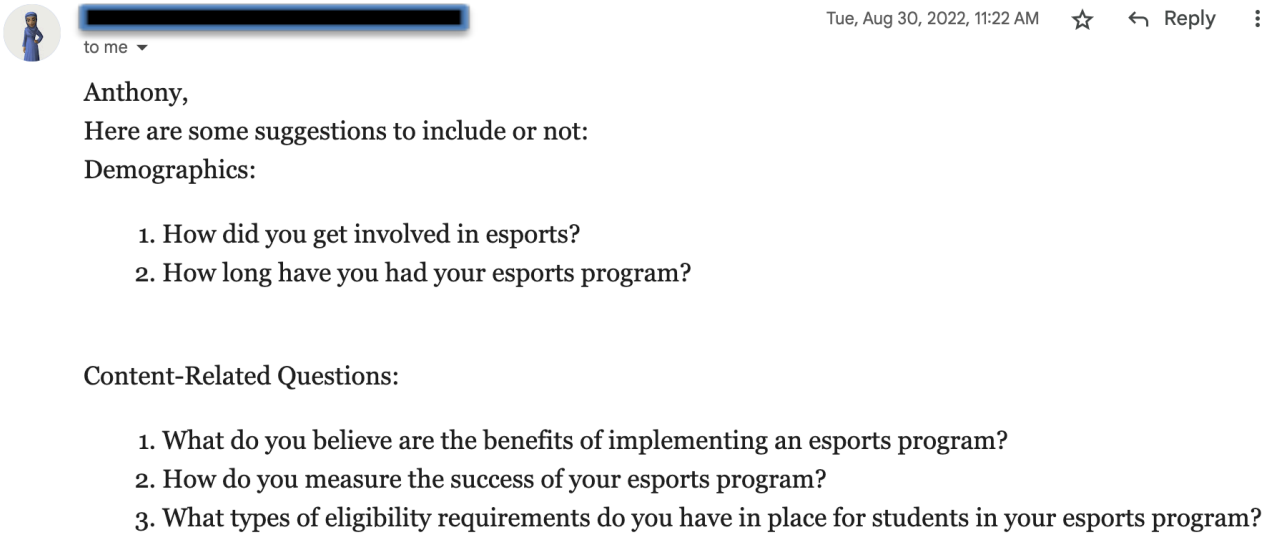
My name is Anthony Pollina and I am currently pursuing my Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction with a focus on STEM leadership. My proposed research will be conducted on the viability and implementation of scholastic esports. Using a basic qualitative approach, I will be distributing questionnaires and conducting semistructured virtual interviews. I consider each of you to be subject matter experts regarding curriculum and instruction, as well as scholastic esports implementation. If you would be willing to review my interview questions and provide me with feedback, I would be greatly honored. The goal of the questionnaires and interviews is to establish an understanding of perceptions of scholastic esports and to gather effective strategies to employ and avoid in implementation. Any feedback regarding clarity, bias, or validity would be appreciated.

If you choose to provide feedback, I request that a response be sent by [DATE]. Attached are the interview questions for your reference and review. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Anthony Pollina

SME 1


[redacted] Tue, Aug 30, 2022, 11:22 AM ☆ Reply ⋮

to me

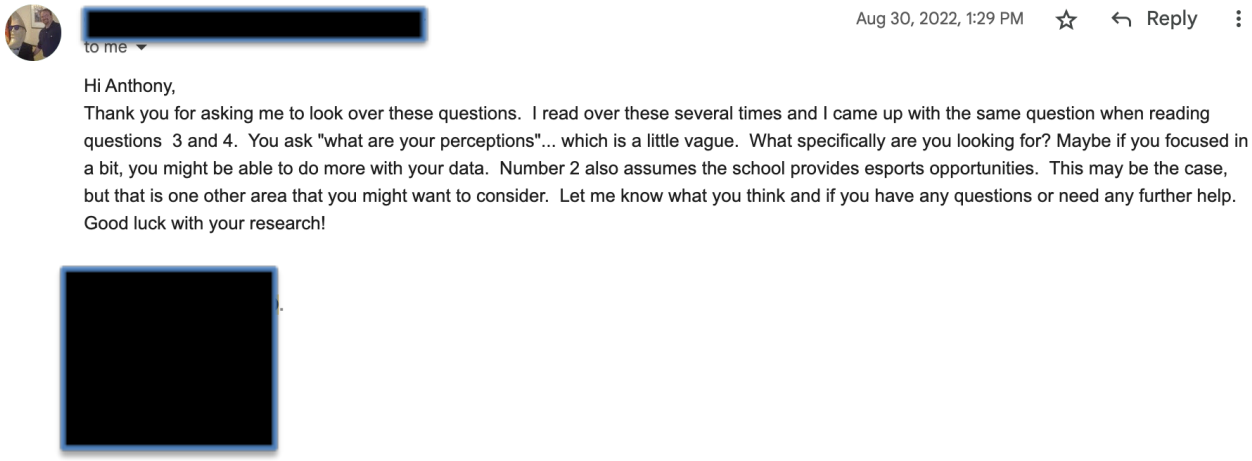
Anthony,
Here are some suggestions to include or not:
Demographics:

1. How did you get involved in esports?
2. How long have you had your esports program?

Content-Related Questions:

1. What do you believe are the benefits of implementing an esports program?
2. How do you measure the success of your esports program?
3. What types of eligibility requirements do you have in place for students in your esports program?

SME2


[redacted]
Aug 30, 2022, 1:29 PM Reply
to me

Hi Anthony,
Thank you for asking me to look over these questions. I read over these several times and I came up with the same question when reading questions 3 and 4. You ask "what are your perceptions"... which is a little vague. What specifically are you looking for? Maybe if you focused in a bit, you might be able to do more with your data. Number 2 also assumes the school provides esports opportunities. This may be the case, but that is one other area that you might want to consider. Let me know what you think and if you have any questions or need any further help. Good luck with your research!

[redacted]

SME 3

Hi! I just have a couple of things.

- I'm probably being overly critical here, but I think you might either use "scholastic esports" consistently or define the difference between "esports" and "scholastic esports." I think at times "esports" to many people is just the competitive piece, and using both in your questions might lead the interviewee to believe that there is a difference.

Excited for you! Good luck!

[redacted]

Appendix H

Emerging Codes From Data Analysis

Code	Occurrences	Example from Participant
Students	109	It's a great extracurricular activity that allows students to compete and socialize with others who share the same interests
Games	41	There are many platforms to choose from and trying to play in too many or participate in a large number of games can negatively impact a club just starting
Team	39	Students are able to design develop and coach their own teams as well as broadcasts and get into multimedia
Play	37	Esports at the school level is especially valuable to teach students how to play on a team as often times with the games they play, they are playing for themselves and not really communicating and strategizing and working together with a team
Compete	29	I thought it was a great way for kids to compete without risking injury
Program	27	From a very early age, I always wished that my high school had [an esports] program that competed against other high schools. I wanted to provide the same for my students.
Participate	25	We also participate competitively in 17 different game titles, throughout the year
Involved	22	[Esports] engages students who are participating in other activities AND also engages many students who were not previously involved in school activities
Build	21	Start slowly and build over time
IHSA/IHSEA	19	We follow the same IHSA guidelines that traditional athletics follow
Community	19	to increase participation/community for our students coming out of covid
Clubs	19	I feel like it is opening the door to more opportunities and ways to establish new skills that are not offered by other clubs or sports in our district

Code	Occurrences	Example from Participant
Opportunity	18	There is academic opportunity and skill-based opportunity that target esports players
Success	16	I'm very grateful to have been able to bring E-Sports to our school, it's been a great success both for my students and gen ed students alike
Activity	16	It allows students that would not normally be involved in school sponsored activities to be involved in a team setting
Eligibility	14	Academic and behavioral eligibility requirements that are in place for all other athletic programs are in place for esports as well
Growth	13	We have seen continual growth in the last 3 years
Support	10	Support from Admins makes things easier
Skills	10	I think it can train valuable team-building skills and help students better understand speaking and listening skills
Academic	9	[Esports] helps students grow socially, emotionally, and provides a reward for academic success
PlayVS	4	Avoid joining for profit providers like PlayVS

Appendix I

Emerging Themes from Data Analysis

Major Theme	Participant Response Example	#
Student Benefits	There are numerous positives provided by esports. It enables students to develop teamwork, communication skills, leadership, and critical thinking. After running our program for 3 years it's truly amazing to see how kids work together in this environment. While outside perception of video gaming may be negative at times, once someone sees what is really happening it really can change minds.	6
	Esports is a great way to involve students that may not be involved in other activities. Esports at the school level is especially valuable to teach students how to play on a team as often times with the games they play, they are playing for themselves and not really communicating and strategizing and working together with a team.	17
	I think it's incredible and has been very accessible (I work in special education, and my wheelchair-bound student has had a lot of fun playing in his FIFA matches for IHSA–he obviously isn't really able to participate in any other sport, and he takes great pride in membership with the E-Sports team). I'm very grateful to have been able to bring E-Sports to our school, it's been a great success both for my students and gen ed students alike. It teaches cooperation, communication, and commitment–all very, very valuable life skills.	24
Lack of Regulation	That [esports] is beneficial but in the wild west with everyone doing radically different things	5
	I believe in 2023 it should be mandatory for students to have access to these opportunities.	18
	I think it's a great thing and should become a standard.	20

Major Theme	Participant Response Example	#
Lack of Regulation (Cont.)	We need almost like – eventually it's going to be the IHSA in Illinois specifically is going to have to very specifically adopt things but right now they just kind of its wild west everybody's doing everything differently and there's no structure but if the IHSA adopt stuff then I don't see how schools can't start funding it, it would be crazy not to. So, like we're trying to put together a northern sectional, as that stuff happens then I think IHSA will step in the right direction. I think we need more – we need to move out of the wild west and make it more formal.	25
Startup Issues	Don't be afraid to start small and work your way into a larger program. Building infrastructure and processes that scale are very important. This can become overwhelming very quickly if you're not careful.	1
	I would love to see improvement/gains in stipend. Esports can be time-consuming and year-round. Assistant coaches need to be provided otherwise we will burn the coaches out.	5
	Pay attention to numbers and budget. It can get very pricy very fast so make sure you are paying attention, or you will not have money for little things you might end up needing in the future.	10

Appendix J

Follow-Up Interview Responses on Scholastic Esports Program Demographics

Participant #	Is there anything you would like to add about the demographics of your program?
13	It's worthwhile to note that the vast majority of students in our esports program are students who are also a part of different extracurriculars such as band, football, basketball, lacrosse, mock trial, and all these other different things. I mean we have students on our esports teams that are made up of populations all over the school
15	My Esports program involves a lot of students who don't do anything else. I have a wide range of demographics; I have African American students, I have female students, I have white students, I have Hispanic students, all different groups. I have a lot of people who don't do anything else and I also have starters on the football team so, heck, my Pokémon Unite captain is the offensive lineman for the football team. It's all over the place which is super cool because we're getting people talking and working together who would normally never meet. So we have a star lineman on the football team who would never meet with a really nerdy freshman and now they're talking and working together on the same esports team
20	It's a really good question, it's an interesting question I thought about it. I've never explicitly done anything about it, well no I have I guess. We're a relatively diverse school, we're like 35% Asian which is a huge word obviously - we have Indian, Pakistani, Japanese, and then I forget what percentage, but we have a decently high percentage of Latino/Latina, and obviously white. Even our white population we have a huge Russian and Ukrainian population. I started recently an addendum to esports club called Women in Esports. We meet every other Friday and it is really interesting, it's very new, it's driven by one of my girls who's just a fantastic young lady and we talk about the difficulties of being a woman in esports. It is a demographic I would love to get more of

Appendix K

Follow-Up Interview Responses for New Esports Program Adopters

Participant #	Is there any knowledge you wish to impart to new esports program adopters?
1	Start small so that way you can scale up. Start having conversations with your IT department yesterday, it's the biggest barrier within all of this is that there's going to be somebody who keeps saying no. Finding ways to get around that no in order to make this possible for students. I feel like there are going to be people who build barriers just to build barriers and it's really sad
13	Advertisement, advertisement, advertisement. You are not going to get anywhere with a new esports program if you are not making it excessively clear and accessible for your students. The reason that we have found so much success over the past 3 years is because I personally have been absolutely insufferable with the amount of posters that I put up for our program. Not only that, they are posters saying Esports but also giving students an idea of what's being offered, when, and how to get involved. And also have a lot of pride in our coaching staff who are good communicators about what is happening at any given time, and good communication with parents and with students. So I really really can't emphasize enough the idea of accessibility and advertisement
15	For me I would say you got to get your admins to understand what you're doing because they don't. They just don't. Admins tend to be older and they have not played video games, they don't. Most of them don't understand what their kids are doing when they're playing video games. You have to talk to your admins, bring them in and when you get the kids coming in and playing, you gotta bring the administration and show them what you're doing and let them see these special ed kids who have severe social anxiety are sitting there and talking normally with kids off the baseball team. Then they'll start to actually try to understand what you're doing but until they actually see some interactions. Some won't even try to understand...