The COVID Season: U.S. Collegiate Esports Programs’ Material Challenges and Opportunities During the 2020–21 Pandemic

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Abstract
During the COVID-19 pandemic, universities were among the first institutions to shift to an online model. As they did so, nascent collegiate esports program lost access to campus spaces and in-person connections, potentially destabilizing this rising industry. Conversely, universities also worked to provide students remote access to resources, and many components of esports already occur online. Therefore, collegiate esports may have adjusted to distancing measures, potentially strengthening their footholds on US campuses. This paper draws on in-depth interviews with collegiate esports players, student employees, program directors, and administrators to address different programs’ reactions to the pandemic, specifically the challenges and opportunities they faced. Overall, interviews reveal how COVID-19 shifted the understandings of and practices around gaming and esports, highlighted the intermittent relationship of online and offline spheres, and presented various possibilities and challenges for different stakeholders during the global pandemic.

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Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, mass media has highlighted video games’ potential role in helping us cope with distancing measures. Sources like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* offered “games that got us through the pandemic” lists (Salam, 2021; *Washington Post Staff*, 2021), while business-oriented outlets such as *Fortune* and *Forbes* trumpeted how stay-at-home orders increased game companies’ engagement, sales, and profits (Perez, 2020; Skwarczek, 2021; *Vanian*, 2021). These headlines, however, focused predominantly on online gaming, ignoring the industry’s many other forms of play. For example, esports tournaments, which often occur in-person, were forced to shift modalities under COVID-19 guidelines. Within these changing dynamics, this paper tries to understand how the stakeholders in the United States’ collegiate esports ecosystem adjusted to the unique demands of a pandemic environment, and the kind of foundation collegiate esports has for moving forward as we reopen.

Collegiate esports is a unique industry segment to address in this time period, because it is relatively new, it often involves offline components, and universities were among the first institutions to shift to an online model. Access to campus communities and resources changed dramatically and suddenly, potentially destabilizing nascent programs in ways that may not be true of more established segments like professional esports. On the other hand, as universities around the globe worked to provide students access to resources and technology remotely, it is possible that collegiate esports were able to adjust effectively. If this is the case, they may return to campus stronger and more stable.

This paper draws on in-depth interviews with U.S.-based collegiate esports players, program directors, student employees, and university administrators to address different programs’ reactions to the pandemic. Overall, student participants lamented the loss of in-person events, casual socialization at practices and university esports spaces, and even easy access to campus internet and technology. Administrators discussed the trials of budgets, layoffs, and loss of revenue. At the same time, almost all participants were optimistic about collegiate esports’ future, citing how easily esports adapted to social distancing and pointing out rising interest from non-gamers.

All in all, interviews reveal how COVID-19 shifted the understandings of and practices around gaming and collegiate esports, presenting various possibilities and challenges for different stakeholders during the global pandemic and highlighting the intermittent relationship of online and offline spheres of esports through the disruption of everyday routines. These findings complicate popular understandings of esports as a predominantly online or “pandemic-proof” activity, illustrating the ongoing importance of in-person gaming communities. More critically, they demonstrate how
equitable access to competitive gaming can rely on university resources, collaborations, and opportunities, necessitating further investment into these spaces.

**Literature Review**

**Collegiate Esports**

Esports—organized competitive video gaming—has existed in some form since at least the 1990s, rooted first in in-person tournaments, then expanding to include online competition (T. L. Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2016). Esports’ formal entry to college campuses, however, is relatively recent. The first varsity collegiate esports program was founded in 2014 at Robert Morris University in Illinois; by 2019, there were over 135 U.S. varsity programs (Bauer-Wolf, 2019; Morrison, 2019; Reames, 2018). Since then, colleges and universities have expanded esports into the realm of majors and courses of study; Massachusetts’s Becker College introduced the first full Bachelor’s of Science in Esports Management in 2018, but several other schools offer individual courses in this area, and many are in the process of creating majors (Zimmerman, 2018). Esports are undoubtedly becoming a significant institution on many U.S. campuses.

At the same time, collegiate esports programs’ growth and institutionalization have thus far been a free-for-all. Some programs are housed in athletics departments, while others are part of student life programs or even areas such as computer science (Bauer-Wolf, 2019). Preliminary research shows that each of these programs comes with different sets of expectations, funneling enthusiastic gamers’ committed, serious leisure (Kauweloa & Winter, 2019) through the lens of institutional creation (Pizzo, Jones, & Funk, 2019) to set and develop new norms. For instance, student life-based programs tend to be open to more students while varsity or major-specific programs—especially those with player scholarships—display more limited participation. Moreover, while many programs voluntarily join collegiate esports organizations such as the National Association of Collegiate Esports, others operate independently, and organizations like the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) currently do not regulate esports (Hayward, 2019; Walton, Lower-Hoppe, & Horger, 2020). Finally, tournaments are often organized by the companies that produce popular esports games, rather than universities or supervisory bodies. For instance, the Riot Scholastic Association of America oversees collegiate League of Legends, setting the base rules for tournaments, teams, and players (Riot Scholastic Association of America, 2021). Collegiate esports programs have an array of stakeholders with varied interests, leading to a lack of consistent oversight or organization.

The results from this are haphazard. U.S. collegiate esports programs are growing, and they often capitalize off both the rising professional esports industry (Webb, 2019) as well as powerful collegiate athletics institutions. Simultaneously, programs’ un-systematic organization means that many are still figuring out their costs, benefits, and resources. This embryonic status could put collegiate esports programs at risk in the face of COVID-19’s broader difficulties. Finally, esports have long spanned online and
offline spaces, with regular in-person tournaments and play. Collegiate esports’ shift to online modalities potentially undermines these traditions, presenting further challenges to program organization, player engagement, and more. This study thus asks: as the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly sent students home in early 2020, what happened to nascent U.S. collegiate esports programs?

**Pandemic Gaming**

This question is particularly pressing given how, as mentioned above, popular narratives about COVID-19 framed gaming—and, by extension, esports—as pandemic-proof. While in-depth research in this area is in progress, given the pandemic’s recent and ongoing nature, several reports illustrate how video game play, streaming, and viewership increased in 2020–21 (Haider, 2021; Perez, 2020; Stephen, 2020; Takahashi, 2021). Players often used these outlets to fill the gap when traditional sports were canceled (Ke & Wagner, 2020; Rosenblatt, 2021) or to cope with stress or socialize remotely (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2021; Pearce et al., 2021). Pearce and colleagues, for instance, interviewed parents who used video games—especially *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*—to manage their stress during the pandemic. They found that video games aided in stress recovery via psychological detachment, relaxation, mastery experiences, and control, giving players an environment to escape to and which they could manage. Games were also useful for social purposes; “Parents were using the game to find connections with other adults, whether they were existing friends, or finding new friends to play the game with” (Pearce et al., 2021). Thus, both news and research sources suggest that many people turned to online gaming and streaming to meet a variety of needs during the pandemic. Professional esports similarly gained popularity during this time (Haider, 2021), and preliminary sources suggest collegiate esports may have likewise benefited, especially as traditional college athletes become more involved in esports (Lee, 2021; Thompson, 2021).

By contrast, researchers and players have suggested the pandemic could exacerbate problematic play patterns (King, Delfabbro, Billieux, & Potenza, 2020; Sun et al., 2020) or online toxicity (Emmerich, Krekhov, & Krüger, 2020; Orlando, 2020; Perks, 2020). In an ongoing survey study, Emmerich et al. (2020) evaluated player perceptions of toxicity in eight popular games. Their pilot results suggest that about 1/3 of online gamers felt that toxic behavior had increased during the pandemic, especially in some popular titles like *League of Legends*; only 3–18% of players felt toxicity in their games had decreased (Emmerich et al., 2020). The authors attributed these perceived changes to players’ high levels of pandemic-related stress, which potentially increased the likelihood of toxic behavior as well as others’ sensitivity to negativity. Perks (2020) argued that, with many new users joining gaming, Twitch, or esports spaces, “the emotional demand of managing pro-social behavior online is draining for community managers, especially when many are socializing online for potentially the first time” (Perks, 2020, p. 178). Mechanics for managing online experiences were not always prepared for the influx of new community participants.
Pandemic gaming requires further exploration to unpack these tensions. For instance, while evidence suggests that esports players regularly communicate through multiple modalities, both online and offline, research has also shown that they prioritize at least some level of in-person communication (e.g. Freeman & Wohn, 2017, 2019; Lipovaya et al., 2018). Freeman and Wohn (2017) have even proposed that in-person communication may be particularly important to collegiate players, to help them build social networks on campus. Player studies thus highlight games’ material and physical aspects, alongside their digital ones.

Moreover, it is possible that the benefits and costs for programs are unequally distributed; the pandemic potentially exacerbated disparities between differently resourced programs or players. In gaming, online toxicity tends to drive out women or minority players at higher rates, as they face more severe harassment than normative, male gamers (Cote, 2020; Fox & Tang, 2017). Esports’ online shift may have reproduced these behaviors at a broader level. Additionally, N. Taylor and Stout (2020) discovered that amateur or casual gaming clubs tended to be more diverse in terms of membership than more formal varsity programs; as universities decide how to adjust their support and funding in the face of pandemic-induced budget cuts (Huber, 2020), supporting varsity programs over clubs could worsen this issue. COVID-19’s impact on collegiate esports, and on players more generally, is thus unclear.

Methods

This article emerges from a larger project on how collegiate esports teams develop and institutionalize. The overall study focuses on questions such as: “What are the institutional tensions at play in collegiate esports?” and “What role does the university play in the professional trajectory and skill development of esports players?” As the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States, where the research team is located, right as this project began, we also added: “How are different players, programs, and universities responding to the demands of COVID-19?” We address these themes via 21 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with U.S.-based collegiate esports players, program directors, and administrators, as well as with students who are involved in support initiatives such as student media outlets, campus facilities, or graphic design. A rotating pair of two researchers conducted each interview, which averaged 60–120 minutes. Interviews’ semi-structured format allowed both researchers and participants to introduce new topics and expand on or reorganize ideas as needed. Each interview was thus slightly different, but examples of questions included: “How is your program handling COVID?”, “How has your administrative role changed since COVID?” and “Have you seen a difference in public interest in esports since we began social distancing?”

Participants were recruited via snowball sampling; we started with members of one collegiate esports program in the Northwest U.S., then asked each interviewee to direct us to other sources. Given the ongoing pandemic, we could only utilize snowball sampling and conduct interviews online. While this hampered some possible
connections—for instance, participants were located in and primarily came from the United States—the research still reveals the possibilities of digital connectivity and esports’ embeddedness in it. Unsurprisingly for work on esports, our participants were chiefly young (mean 25.05, median 22, range 19–65), male (86%), straight (90%), and white (71%). This reflects the expected audience for many esports games (Ratan, Taylor, Hogan, Kennedy, & Williams, 2015) and collegiate leagues (Darvin, 2021). We anonymized participants by assigning them a designation from P1 to P21 but list their gender, age, and status (player, student worker, admin) to provide context in our analysis. We opted for these general categories—for example, combining program directors, student life administrators, and other university staff into one “admin” category—both to diminish participants’ identifiability, and because these individuals tended to share similar perspectives throughout our analysis. See Table 1 for overall participant information.

Completed interviews were transcribed and cleaned for clarity, then moved to the qualitative analysis program Dedoose. All members of the research team participated in the processes of interviewing, coding, and developing themes within an interpretively constructive framework (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017) using a grounded theory approach (i.e., generating themes from patterns in the data, rather than existing hypotheses; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). After the first few interviews were complete, a senior member of the research team open-coded the transcripts to create the initial codebook. Once that was established, individual team members signed up to code different transcripts (i.e., each transcript was coded by a single member). Open and multiple coding allowed us to engage first with all bits of the information and then develop broader categories from the field (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Throughout interviewing and coding, the research team came together weekly to discuss new findings and categories, to update the working codebook and ensure we applied new iterations to

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

| Gender      | Female: 3 (14.3%)<sup>a</sup> |
|-------------|---------------------------------|
|             | Male: 18 (85.7%)                |
| Age         | Range: 19–62                    |
|             | Average: 25                     |
|             | Median: 22                      |
| Location    | All located in the US           |
|             | Northeast: 2                    |
|             | Southeast: 2                    |
|             | West/Pacific: 14                |
|             | Midwest: 3                      |
| Role        | Student gamer/Athlete: 8 (38.1%)|
|             | Student worker: 7 (33.3%)       |
|             | Administrator: 6 (28.6%)        |

<sup>a</sup>Note. One participant identified as female/non-binary. They are classified as a female in this dataset for the purpose of deidentification.
previous transcripts. The research team also used an “undecided” code to mark sections of data about which they were uncertain. The team discussed these sections as a group to determine the appropriate coding and ensure consistency. Therefore, interrater reliability scores cannot be calculated, but they are also not needed due to the research’s qualitative nature; semi-structured interviews and grounded analysis lend themselves to in-depth explorations of specific phenomena, rather than generalizable claims.

Given the explanatory nature of our research and small number of participants, we first used a single “COVID-19” theme to code all information related. We then interpretively analyzed responses given about COVID-19 in relation to the themes developed through axial coding. An interpretive approach considers the relationship between themes, ideas, and contexts, but situates those interpretations within theoretical frameworks. Similarly, in what follows, we first present our results to give a clear sense of how the field responds to the challenges and possibilities brought about by the pandemic, with a focus on the main themes that emerged from our interviews in relation to COVID-19. After discussing the limitations of our research, we analyze our main themes and then situate those within theoretical frameworks.

Results

While we began with only a single COVID-19 code, our subsequent thematic analysis revealed several distinct yet interrelated challenges emergent from the pandemic. Specifically, participants highlighted issues with pandemic-related event cancellations, technology and space, budgets, and social connections. Many of these concerns were interrelated. For instance, the inability to use campus spaces frequently linked with budgetary questions, as esports facilities often made money for their programs, and social concerns, as students could no longer game together in these spaces. Worries were frequently shared across both students and administrators, although there were some differences in how these groups framed and responded to obstacles; administrators tended to advance practical, hands-on solutions while students discussed issues in broader, more theoretical ways. Simultaneously, however, both groups shared optimistic perspectives on collegiate esports’ future, citing how easily esports adapted to social distancing and pointing out rising interest from non-gamers. These optimistic perspectives were slightly more common among students than administrators, but all felt that collegiate esports had the potential to grow despite the pandemic. Subsequent sections explore the challenges and opportunities participants outlined in detail.

Challenge 1: Cancellations

The first thing that almost all participants mentioned, when asked how COVID-19 had affected their programs, was the broad sweep of cancellations that occurred in spring 2020. From tournaments to campus events, collegiate esports programs’ first reaction to the pandemic was to call off events. As P11 (male, age 22, student player) stated, “You know, it was kind of like a knee-jerk reaction from everyone, which I 100% understand
because they typically had players going into the school and playing together, which obviously can’t happen.” Because collegiate esports models were predominantly in-person, using campus spaces such as esports arenas, stakeholders canceled upcoming events rather than reorganize them. Program administrators similarly reflected on how they had canceled in-person play in response to universities’ shift to online education and the closing of campuses.

Cancellations affected more than just tournaments; both program administrators and affiliated students, such as graphic designers, social media coordinators, or journalists, found their plans disrupted as well. Administrators running student life-based esports programs, for example, argued that competition was only one goal for their programs. P18 (female, age 62, admin) summed up their program’s pillars as “competition, community, and career,” encouraging students to focus not only on the game but also on how esports could integrate with and improve their social lives, engagement on campus, and preparation for a post-grad world. This administrator had just kicked off an event series around these pillars at the start of 2020, stating, “We started doing a couple events around careers, had a few people in to talk to the students about kind of careers. And then, and then COVID hit, and we couldn’t do it.” P19 (male, age 29, admin), whose program prioritized live, in-person events that connected the university with local communities, had to cancel a planned tournament as well, following up with a limited online option instead. Student initiatives, such as social media, streaming, and shoutcasting, also briefly shut down as universities moved to a remote model. Cancellations not only hampered the initial growth of collegiate esports but also revealed how different stakeholders (such as administrators, student bodies, etc.) have diverging approaches to online esports in a global pandemic.

Following this first wave of what our participants described as “knee-jerk” cancellations, however, they felt that programs rapidly readjusted to the demands of remote education and social distancing, often following models from the professional esports scene. Professional League of Legends competitions moved online quickly, with collegiate competitors stating, “They still did the pro matches on the weekend. They’re just playing from home, which shows you don’t, you don’t need to be in person” (P4, male, age 21, student player). To that end, the cancellation of offline tournaments emerged as an opportunity for online tournaments, showing the adaptability of esports ecosystems. Students also felt that many programs had jumped the gun on cancellations, rather than recognizing that alternative options were available. P5 (age 20, student player), for instance, said, “They were like, oh, we got to cancel because, like, people don’t have access to their gaming lounges. You know, we weren’t really affected because most of us played from home before. But there are definitely schools that probably, you know, they only play in their arena or whatever.” Emerging out of the lack of communication between student bodies and administrators (as we discuss below), students began to rethink how esports could run in an online model, even organizing ad hoc tournaments of their own.
Challenge 2: Technology and Space

Both students and administrators lamented closing in-person campus play spaces, such as esports lounges or arenas. This was not only due to the loss of social connection that emerged from playing in the same physical space as others (addressed further below) but also because esports lounges provided access to high-quality technology or internet. Players, for instance, related how the pandemic’s online gaming boom complicated their at-home play. As P4 (male, age 21, student player) recalled, “They had this weird status message on League saying that, due to current events, internet traffic may be slow. Due to, like, internet speeds may be slower due to increased traffic. Which is their way of saying, a lot of people are at home because of Coronavirus, you might be laggy.” Students were relegated to playing on home internet, often shared with roommates, and then faced the additional challenge of overwhelmed game servers. Connecting with teammates while playing could also be a struggle if communications or the games lagged; “When you’re playing games at, like, such a high level, you need to have that communication with the guy right next to you. And when you’re using an app like Discord or something, that connection might not be the best” (P9, male, age 22, student worker). Players faced several technological limitations when their in-person tournaments and play moved online.

Student broadcasters encountered similar obstacles while streaming or shout-casting their collegiate esports team’s matches. The move from campus to online first meant that such organizations “basically essentially lost all our equipment” (P16, male, age 20, student worker), from computers to cameras to studio space. Second, broadcasters struggled with the same internet and bandwidth issues as players. For instance, one shoutcaster said, “Right now, it’s a little bit challenging since we’re sort of in our homes. […] Originally, they were gonna ask me to stream like one of the games or something, but I’m like, I don’t think that’s a good idea right now. I don’t have the highest bit rates” (P16, male, age 20, student worker). Although students did not expressly state this as such, their concerns reveal how a lack of access to campus technology could create haves and have-nots among students who previously were on an equal footing, especially among aspiring professionals in media industries.

This was a concern for administrators as well; many of them recognized that technology and finances were major hindrances to esports participation and that closing campus esports spaces would worsen these barriers. As one student life administrator, P18 (female, age 62, admin) phrased it, “One of the reasons we have the esports lounge is because not everybody can afford a good computer.” Further, having physical esports spaces could allow casual players to observe and become interested in participating. The same administrator continued, “I think the biggest barrier is being able to see yourself doing this and to try it in the first place. And that’s, that’s a barrier we got to figure out how to break.” This reflected other participants’ emphasis on the importance of in-person events for growing esports, building community, and connecting to the campus and surrounding environments. Closing esports spaces presented several
interrelated challenges, from barring underprivileged participants to shrinking the potential pool of players through the loss of “foot traffic” (P8, male, age 26, admin).

Students tended to discuss their technology concerns only briefly before moving on. On the other hand, administrators proceeded to highlight how their programs were responding to these challenges to improve access and move forward. For instance, multiple esports program directors or university staff members were reorganizing esports lounges and adding sanitization protocols in response to COVID-19. These changes ranged from spacing computers out, to adding plexiglass shields between stations, to having students bring their own headsets to avoid cross-contaminated microphones. One administrator, for example, said, “We explored the idea of plexiglass, but given that our room is actually fairly small, so we, like, we went away from that and did more of a spacing. So, we actually split our arena into two rooms now. So, we’ll be, we’ll have like six computers in one room, six or seven computers in another room, to be able to allow for spacing” (P8, male, age 26, admin). Administrators worked hard to take the specific needs of their program and their space into account to get esports labs back up and running as soon as possible, even getting special permission from campus safety officers to do so. While both students and administrators recognized technology barriers, administrators had more power to take actionable steps to solve the problem.

**Challenge 3: Budgets**

A similar division was visible in how participants discussed the budgetary challenges their programs faced due to COVID-19; universities’ pandemic budget restrictions (Huber, 2020) affected several programs. This led to overall fears regarding program sustainability. As P14 (male, age 24, admin), who worked for a collegiate esports tournament company, said, “there’s a lot of schools that are going to go under due to COVID.”

For administrators, budgetary conversations focused on the logistical difficulties of managing programs during a hiring freeze as well as, in line with the previous theme, figuring out how to make their esports spaces function within COVID-19 parameters. Newer programs primarily employed contract workers, from program directors to esports facilities staff. When contracts expired, these “non-essential” staff were not renewed, meaning a smaller number of permanent administrators, as well as student volunteers, had to take over more responsibilities. Overloaded program coordinators then focused on immediate issues, limiting their ability to do long-term planning. P8 (male, age 26, admin) said that esports directors were “primarily just making sure that we are staying afloat and we’re on track to meet our goals and expectations as not only a program, but also university as a whole.” Further, COVID-19 protocols made it more difficult for esports programs to bring in money. In esports lounges, non-varsity game players often pay to use the space. The move to remote education negated this source of income. And as administrators adjusted their labs to account for social distancing, they often removed computer stations or allowed fewer players at a time, meaning lounges’
earning potential remained lower even as students returned. Administrators were, again, primarily focused on how they could manage and respond to these challenges, working hard to keep their programs afloat.

However, anxieties about budgets and programs’ futures permeated out to involved students, who recognized the issues their programs faced but felt less informed about what was being done to address them. For instance, several students mentioned how non-essential workers, including program directors and building staff, were cut during the pandemic. While they understood the motivation behind these decisions, cuts made them anxious as they felt their programs were not yet fully integrated into the university. As P13 (male, age 21, student player) stated, “This is the formative year, it’s just like make or break. Like, if it doesn’t work out this year, then we’re probably not gonna get funding for next year.” Another student shared a similar concern, especially after their program director’s contract was not renewed. P10 (male, age 20, student worker) said, “I understand because it’s something they [the university] just created. And now they have to do job cuts. So why would they protect that, you know? They would just say, Oh, this is something we were without, so it’s fine.” Students felt that, because their programs were new, they were at higher risk of being cut if the university had to make tough decisions.

Finally, they were anxious as they felt underinformed regarding how administrators were responding to COVID-19 and protecting programs. P6 (male, age 22, student player), said, “it would be nice kind of to know kind of where the program’s going in the next year, but with COVID, and with it being such a new program, it’s really, really hard for, like, even the people at the head to know where it’s going, […] so I can’t really, I can’t really be upset by that.” Nevertheless, it was clear that students were upset at the uncertainty they faced, desiring more clarity regarding esports’ future. Both technological and budgetary concerns thus reveal a communication gap between administration and students, as the latter were unaware of the work supervisors were putting into keeping programs going.

**Challenge 4: Social Connections**

The one concern students brought up that was not often raised by administrators dealt with their social experiences as esports participants. This was particularly prominent among student players, almost all of whom felt COVID-19 had negatively affected their connections with teammates. Students found that the cancellation of in-person tournaments, and the move to remote education, threw off their plans for regular practice schedules and committed play. Although they could—and did—still connect online, players said things like: “Recently, practice hasn’t really been happening. Because there’s nothing to practice to compete for” (P5, male, age 20, student player), or “We were trying to get it where players were going to commit to a certain number of hours a week to practice. But it just never came through this year. I think it got derailed heavily by Coronavirus” (P4, male, age 21, student player). Their teams connected in more ad hoc, rather than organized, ways.
In addition, players found competing online lacked social connection. In person, they “could fist bump or, you know, like, pat [the next person] on the back” (P5, male, age 20, student player) when they had a successful game; that kind of celebration was more difficult via Discord. P2 (male, age 19, student player), who joined esports during the pandemic, said that his connection with his teammates improved after they had a chance to meet in person; “when we first started playing together, we had never met each other in real life. So, it was really quiet. Like, it was really awkwardly quiet. And I was the only person talking. But after meeting each other in real life and actually developing relationships with each other, we got a lot better, honestly.” Students were grateful that esports were still happening, but they often struggled with social distancing, a lack of motivation, and the loss of in-person connections. When esports lounges reopened, several students returned to playing there even though fewer people could be present at any given time. This suggests that solely online esports do not meet students’ social needs effectively, although they were useful stopgaps during remote education.

Opportunities

Almost all our participants thought U.S. collegiate esports’ future was bright, even if challenges outweighed opportunities. In particular, although they did not see online esports as quite the same as in-person, they felt that esports had done a better job moving online than other activities, which could help it gain traction both on college campuses and in the professional industry. This opportunity was, they felt, enhanced by the fact that traditional ball-and-stick sports were first canceled, and then heavily restricted, in ways that were not true of esports. As one program director (P19 male, age 29, admin) stated, “esports is a lot of stuff that’s already naturally online, and you kind of have to do in that way. And so that obviously doesn’t change at all.” Students and program directors thus argued that gaming, collegiate esports, and professional esports were all benefiting from increased interest.

P17 (female, age 20, student worker), for instance, contended that, after the first wave of cancellation, she had not “seen anything slow down with esports at all. Everything’s still going. I mean there are some things that have had hiccups, like actual tournaments having to be online instead of LAN. There’s been like those kinds of things, but that doesn’t necessarily stop it entirely.” Others were more circumspect, recognizing that online tournaments were not necessarily the same as in-person and that some opportunities had been lost. However, several agreed that online play was still drawing in bigger crowds because of COVID-19 restrictions on social interaction, stating, “a lot of games are piquing people’s interest right now because they’re just so bored” (P4, male, age 21, student player). This led to “more hype for esports” (P2, male, age 19, student player).

Participants also linked increased interest in esports to the cancellation of traditional ball-and-stick sports. Esports had to move online, but it returned to competitive play quickly. As P13 (male, age 21, student player) related, “We’re seeing this issue right
now with all the other sports, like people are contracting Coronavirus just from playing games with other people. I’m never going to have that issue. I’m not going to get that through the computer screen, and so I can rest easy still competing, still doing my craft without jeopardizing my own health.” Professional sports leagues also organized esports tournaments and streams to fill the gap. Students pointed to games like FIFA, where professional athletes were playing the video game versions of their sports while they could not play for real.

This led to increased coverage of esports by traditional sports press, which was unable to cover canceled ball-and-stick sports like baseball, basketball, and hockey. One program director, for example, related how their parents had stumbled on a League of Legends tournament on ESPN and called asking for an explanation as to how the game worked. P7 (male, age 32, admin) said,

“It’s been interesting to see just the growth of the esports industry in general right now, because people are fi ending for any sort of competitive content. You see ESPN, I mean, my mom called me and said, ‘Hey, me and your dad are watching this League of Legends,’ saying ‘can you tell me what it is?’ […] So, I sat on the phone with them for 45 minutes and explained, this is what League of Legends is.”

A student journalist, who worked on streaming and branding their collegiate esports teams, noted how professional esports were partnering with traditional sports industries; “there’s been new partnerships are starting, I think. I mean, Buffalo Wild Wings just announced that they’re gonna stream the LCS [League Championship Series] playoffs in their bars, which is like, that’s something I would never have expected but here we are, and […] that’s really huge for esports in general” (P16, male, age 20, student worker).

While many interviewees’ examples emerged from the professional esports space, rather than collegiate, they felt that this rising attention to esports would trickle down to their sphere as well, building a larger base of potential players and fans. A few also felt there had been “a noticeable uptick in interest” (P7, male, age 32, admin) in their collegiate team specifically, especially as universities continued to promote esports tournaments in lieu of other, canceled activities. In the most extreme example, one university funneled new students through the esports team’s Discord, to help them build social networks virtually while they could not do so in person. This was, to be fair, an unusual example; most students and program administrators felt that their collegiate esports communities had remained stable or even shrunk slightly during COVID-19. But a few ambitious administrators noticed a gap in available student activities and tried to fill it with esports.

Limitations

It is, of course, important to recognize the limitations of this study. Not only did we draw from a relatively small pool of participants, often with only one representative of
any given esports program, but interviews were also cross-sectional. They therefore cannot represent the changing approaches individuals and programs employed as the pandemic developed. Participants were also located in the United States; while this allows us to draw some conclusions about the large U.S. collegiate esports industry, it cannot speak to other parts of the world, such as Australia, where collegiate esports are also common (e.g., Australian Collegiate Esports, 2021; Queensland University of Technology, 2021) and where the national response to COVID-19 differed.

Further, because many of our participants share similar identity characteristics—young, male, white, etc.—we may not be able to evaluate which students benefited or suffered most from pandemic-influenced changes to esports. Research from N. Taylor and Stout (2020) indicates that casual esports and gaming clubs tend to be more diverse than formal varsity organizations, as they accept a broader range of skill sets and levels of commitment. A few participants indicated that, as collegiate esports moved online, it tended to coalesce around its most involved members. This was not prominent enough to be a full research theme, but it does suggest that more diverse players may have been lost during the pandemic. For instance, the loss of foot traffic mentioned by some program administrators may have shrunk the pool of potential esports athletes, as those who got involved during the pandemic were those who deliberately sought out esports. A few participants also indicated that some of their regular diversity and outreach efforts lapsed during the pandemic due to a lack of time and energy. One collegiate esports program, for example, usually held annual shared events with their university’s LGBT+ gaming group; during COVID-19, both groups turned inwards to focus on their core members, and this partnership was not translated to online events. More research is needed to see how the pandemic differentially affected players of various skill sets, levels of commitment, and identities.

Many of our participants also argued that collegiate esports programs tended to arise due to the work of a small, committed group of student advocates that pushed the university to start a program. The communication gap between students and administrators that occurred during the pandemic, as well as the executive decisions administrators made to keep their programs functioning, may have accelerated the university’s centralization of control over previously student-led programs. Future research should delve deeper into questions of power and control over collegiate esports initiatives.

Analysis and Discussion

Following initial coding, which generated our COVID-19 code, the research team engaged in broader thematic analysis, to generate the themes discussed above and to determine what interviewees’ individual concerns or optimism meant for U.S. collegiate esports as well as gaming more generally. Overall, our results highlighted the interconnected nature of online and offline spheres, as well as ongoing inequalities in gaming spaces that could be exacerbated due to the pandemic. At the same time, U.S. collegiate esports administrators remain committed to their programs, and the resources
available in the university system may still help even the playing field in esports provided different stakeholders effectively communicate their needs and what they can contribute.

Players’, student journalists’, and administrators’ strong focus on technology and access to campus spaces undermines the narrative that gaming is a naturally pandemic-proof industry. Although many gaming sectors can and did move online at the beginning of the pandemic—and online tournaments may even be easier for organizers, who do not have to provide furniture, power, and high-speed internet infrastructure—players related several logistical, technical, and infrastructural benefits to in-person esports in comparison to online ones. Students who lacked quality computers and internet connections, for instance, found their ability to compete in collegiate esports curtailed during the pandemic, even though opportunities for online play were still available. Lag or server issues hindered students’ ability to play effectively, and poor connections also made it difficult to coordinate with teammates. Resources and socioeconomic class remain relevant to esports, and having access to dedicated play spaces such as esports lounges is essential for preventing class-based disparities. We must remain attentive to what online play can and cannot offer, as well as who is able to take advantage of online gaming opportunities, especially at competitive levels. The players we spoke with for this study were also the ones who managed to overcome technical issues and continue playing at some level despite the loss of campus spaces and technology. Our dataset cannot speak to players that faced bigger challenges and were forced to drop out of esports programs when colleges and universities shifted to remote learning. The loss of institutional/infrastructural support provided by universities therefore likely has wider-ranging effects than those outlined here, impacting players, programs, and games in both the short and long term.

Further, as programs turned inwards to support their existing players during the pandemic, opportunities for collaboration and outreach diminished, which could threaten both diversity efforts and esports’ programs long-term sustainability. Informal gaming clubs tend to draw in more diverse players than formal esports organizations (N. Taylor & Stout, 2020); the pandemic-based loss of game nights, casual practices, or other ad hoc play sessions therefore risks shutting out non-traditional players and audiences. Decreased collaboration between gaming teams and other clubs could exacerbate this issue. Administrators and students should continue to recognize the benefits of cross-program promotion and events, even in online formats. Such initiatives can help keep programs vibrant. They will also let collegiate esports programs support different types of students and combat inequalities in esports spaces.

Finally, despite the fact that students continued to socialize online while gaming, they still missed elements of in-person play, such as the ability to congratulate teammates, the motivation to show up and practice regularly, and more. This reflects existing research findings, which suggest that, while esports competitors employ many communication modalities, they use online and in-person formats for different reasons (e.g., amateur players recruit heavily from existing offline social networks; Freeman & Wohn, 2019). Players also prioritize a level of face-to-face interaction; Freeman and
Wohn (2017), for example, found that over 80% of esports players made it a point to meet their teammates in person. They also suggested that college students might particularly value in-person relationships, although this finding needs further investigation. Overall, however, it is clear that achieving cohesion in the team-based games that comprise esports requires collaboration and communication between teammates, and that in-person elements help bolster these connections. Moreover, interview participants’ expressed need for further interaction reflects the high levels of social isolation that many have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic (Clair, Gordon, Kroon, & Reilly, 2021); online play has been a partial, but not complete, solution to this issue.

Considering the status of collegiate esports specifically, our findings show that administrators and student participants remained cognizant of the fact that esports were relatively new to college campuses and that the pandemic could destabilize them. For students, this led to concerns that their programs would be first to be cut if the university was facing budget or staff shortages. For administrators, however, this uncertainty led them to double their efforts, taking practical steps to keep their programs afloat even in the face of staff shortages, space restrictions, and higher requirements for cleaning and sanitizing esports equipment. From this, we tentatively conclude that universities which have taken the time to invest in collegiate esports programs are committed to staying the course. As they do so, however, they could benefit from better communication between staff and students; a lack of knowledge about how program directors and managers were keeping esports running increased students’ uncertainty and anxiety. It also likely failed to take full advantage of students’ energy and entrepreneurial status, as they often continued to organize practices, tournaments, and game streams (albeit in a more ad hoc fashion) despite a lack of access to campus spaces and equipment.

Participants were upfront about the challenges of COVID-19, but they also looked for silver linings, such as the increased attention esports received while traditional sports were unable to compete. Integrated into the overall internet infrastructure, esports were less affected by the pandemic. Although online esports were not the same as their in-person counterparts, participants appreciated that they were able to keep their programs going more easily than other student or sports organizations. Seeing how collegiate gamers and esports players adapted to online activities highlights once again the interrelation of online and offline modes of socialization and their contributions to social support (Freeman & Wohn, 2017; Lipovaya et al., 2018; Trepte, Reinecke, & Juechems, 2012).

**Conclusions**

In total, we found that despite, or perhaps because of, the COVID-19 pandemic, collegiate esports have the potential to strive and become meaningful through online digital technologies. At the same time, COVID-19 shows that access to necessary technologies and infrastructure is never equally distributed and that fairer gaming environments require the support of university resources such as esports lounges.
Similar to the emergence of esports in general, our results also reflected how collaborations between gamers on a community level is the main reason why collegiate esports managed to grow in popularity during the pandemic. However, the organization of remote esports and the disassociation of gaming clubs from competitive teams might have exacerbated the problems of diversity within collegiate esports. This is further reflected in the lack of communication between the parties we talked to, namely administrators, collegiate esports players, and involved media students.

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**Note**

1. This is likely in part because the students we were able to reach were those who had good enough technology/internet to continue participating in esports. We cannot evaluate how many students (or which students) may have dropped out of esports before we began recruiting. Those lost students likely would emphasize tech limitations more than the current sample.

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