

Preparing Students for Careers in the Esport Industry: Engaging with Role-Play as a Pedagogical Experiential Learning Tool

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Role-play is an active learning tool that increases the involvement, motivation, and responsibility of students through their immersion in the very industry for which they are learning and preparing and has been used in a wide range of settings, including education, business, and entertainment, to facilitate education, problem-solving, and personal growth. As such, role-play was implemented in an *Introduction to Esport* course to help students better understand and experience the real-life planning, obligations, and execution of the many roles and responsibilities necessary to host and stream an esport competition. In this manuscript, we offer an overview of student experiences and provide lessons learned to help enhance future role-playing and experiential learning opportunities in the esport space. Results from this project demonstrated that role-play can be an effective pedagogical tool, affording students with opportunities to enhance their knowledge and familiarity with the esport industry, learn and practice industry-specific skills, and experience a real-time event competition requiring them to apply what they learned in the classroom.

Keywords: engaged learning, role play, esports

Introduction

Spurred by increased access to and advancements in technology, the growth of online gaming and electronic sport (esport) competitions continues to elevate its value and niche in the sport world. Global esport viewership is currently estimated at 532 million and projected to grow to more than 640 million by 2025, with subsequent revenues estimated at \$1.38 billion (Newzoo, 2022). Though its

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position in the sport industry is often debated, esports shares many characteristics often attributed to more traditional sports, including players, spectators, competition, and entertainment. Likewise, esports competitions, matches, and tournaments are similarly structured and developed with rules of competition, participant regulations, and broadcasting and media rights (Hamari & Sjoblom, 2017; Jenny et al., 2017; Karadakis, 2022).

Not surprisingly then, as esports continues to garner mainstream acceptance and growth, increased interest is being drawn from collegiate athletic programs (Scott et al., 2021). There has also been increased attention from the academy to research and examine knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes that students need for careers in esports, as well as to develop curriculum that supports educational endeavors to this end (Funk et al., 2018; Jenny et al., 2021). Much like traditional sport management and comparable academic disciplines, scholars note esports as a practice-based subject that should utilize experiential learning opportunities to advance and apply what is taught in the classroom (Karadakis & Painchaud, 2022; Scott et al., 2021). Because of this, internships are often deemed a critical learning tool for career development (Oodio & Kerwin, 2016). Yet due to its nascency in the academic discipline(s) of sport, esports may not offer such opportunities. Therefore, we sought to examine the appropriateness of role-play pedagogy as a supplementary means by which students can gain applicable and practical experience in the esports industry.

Role-play is a practical pedagogical method in which instructors provide students the chance to prepare for industry employment (Westrup & Planander, 2012), often balancing theory and practice in an academic course setting (Sogunro, 2004). Studies have found that as an active learning tool, role-playing increases student learning, engagement, and interest of the topic, knowledge of industry-specific situations, and transferable skill development (Rao & Stupans, 2012). To our knowledge, scant research exists on the implementation of this pedagogical approach in the educational spaces of esports. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine how the educational practices of role-play pedagogy influenced the learning outcomes, career preparation, and experiences of students in an *Introduction to Esport* class.

Esport and The Academy

Esport, also commonly referred to as cybersport, virtual sport, and competitive gaming, is in essence comprised of various organized video game competitions (Jenny et al., 2017). Such vagueness perpetuates continued discussions and debates as to the definition of esports and its categorization (or not) as a true sport (Cranmer et al., 2021). Regardless, it seems to be a common understanding that esports centers around, at its core, a video game (Witkowski, 2012) that involves

“competitive, organized or technologically enabled activities encompassing varying degrees of physicality, virtuality, and technological immersion” (Cranmer et al., 2021, p. 2). Moreover, numerous features of traditional sport, such as teams, professional players, uniforms, coaches, managers, agents, leagues, competitions, marquee events, endorsement deals, player transfer fees, color commentators (i.e., shoutcasters), highlight reels, and intercollegiate athletic scholarships can be found in esports (Jenny et al., 2017; Jenny et al., 2018; Li, 2017). Even the sinister side of sports has permeated the gaming landscape with the presence of match fixing, doping, labor disputes, and sexist and homophobic discourse (Bopp et al., 2022; Li, 2017; Segal, 2014). As such, the esports industry presents various career paths, in both traditional working roles and positions unique to esports, for which students and employees must be armed with general sport and gaming-specific knowledge, skills, and abilities (Hedlund et al., 2021).

It’s been a relatively recent call for sport and entertainment managers and practitioners to “devote increased attention to esports and embrace its commercial, educational, and research potential” (Funk et al., 2018, p. 12). Accordingly, educational curriculums should consider this growing ecosystem and subsequent career opportunities to help students diversify skillsets, and learn transferable skills preferred by employers (Scott et al., 2021). Karadakis and Painchaud (2022) interviewed esports professionals and found several educational sectors pertinent to a student entering the esports job force including business acumen and strategizing, human relations skills, relationship and technology management, effective communication, creative problem solving and analysis, international cultural competence, and leadership ability. Such work (re)confirms students’ need for the knowledge, adaptability, and problem-solving skills that can best be learned and experienced through the various and unanticipated situations only found within the competitive and innovative spaces of esports. However, such campus spaces are not readily available and equipped (Trotto, n.d.) to provide the experiential learning opportunities that many sport and entertainment students must accrue to be competitive job applicants upon graduation, despite many institutions of higher education and their constituents having witnessed an increased interest, demand, and support of esports offerings both nationally and abroad.

The National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE; 2023) lauds more than 240 U.S. member schools with more than 5,000 student-athletes and \$16 million in scholarships and aid. This continued growth of esports, in both physical and digital spaces, hearkens to an increased need for industry-specific trained and educated individuals, subsequently recognizing and advancing esports as a fertile athletic space for institutions and their members (e.g., faculty and students) to attain educational and scholarly goals related to recruitment, retention, and engagement (Karadakis

& Painchaud, 2022; Murray et al., 2021). Considering the breadth of and varied esports event and entertainment industry areas, research suggests curriculum and educational practices that take on an applied, experiential, and hands-on learning approach (Karadakis & Painchaud, 2022; Scott et al., 2021). Role-playing is one such pedagogical approach (Westrup & Planander, 2012).

Role-play is an active learning tool that increases the involvement, motivation, and responsibility of students through their immersion in the very industry for which they are preparing and has been used in a wide range of settings, including education, business, and entertainment, to facilitate education, problem-solving, and personal growth (Westrup & Planander, 2012). Studies have found that role-play helps students develop practical skills by “acting out” a group scenario, as well as enhances students’ learning and interest in a subject (Rao & Stupans, 2012), while developing skills for future employment. Lizzio and Wilson (2004) suggest “one approach to meeting the challenge of preparing capable professionals is to involve students in processes that enable them to develop their abilities to adaptively and robustly learn from experience” (p. 471). Role-play accomplishes this by providing students with opportunities and activities to “act out a set of defined role behaviors or position with a view to acquiring desired experiences” (Sogunro, 2004, p. 356) within different roles using different types of behaviors, goals, and arguments (Yardley-Matwiejzok, 1997). In this understanding of the pedagogical tool, students are considered participants, and instructors are facilitators of learning, highlighting that role-playing is learning by doing in a safe environment (i.e., a community of sharing through an esports arena, class discussions, and reflections). Therefore, role-play was implemented in an *Introduction to Esport* course to help students better understand and experience the real-life planning, obligations, and execution of the many roles and responsibilities necessary to host and stream an esports competition.

Methods

To learn from student experiences with role-play pedagogy and the influence of this educational practice on their learning, we conducted a basic qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), manifested through a descriptive case study approach (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The case study methodology was deemed most appropriate because the data was collected from multiple sources (i.e., students), within a bounded system or defined context (i.e., esports competition at an esports arena), and centered around an intentional topic (i.e., role-play pedagogical practice; Creswell, 2007; Hoerber, 2023). Given the investigative interests in student experiences with role-play pedagogical practices in an esports context, the descriptive case study afforded the researchers opportunities to examine an

intervention or “contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context [were] not clearly evident” (Yin, 1981, p. 98).

The Assignment

The *Introduction to Esport* class took place at a private, non-profit university located in the Northeast United States with approximately 3,000 on-campus students. The university sponsors a varsity esport program that participates in the National Esports Collegiate Conference (NECC), is a member of NACE, and hosts competitions at its on-campus esport arena. Utilizing Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning process, the course was designed so that students would conceptualize, plan, and stream two competitive esport matches. In accordance with Nilsson and Waldemarson’s (1988) design criteria for role-playing, the curriculum took place over three stages: 1) preparation, 2) performance, and 3) reflection and feedback. The preparation stage lasted approximately three weeks, during which students familiarized themselves with course content, toured the esport arena, and met with two intercollegiate esport coaches, a professional league esport coach, and an esport arena and event production manager. Students also took this time to discuss and select one of five industry roles to assume: 1) gamer, 2) coach, 3) referee or moderator, 4) event operations, and 5) production and shoutcasting. During these three weeks, students were gathering information on each of the various roles and learning gameplay basics, both within and out of the classroom setting. The following five weeks composed the performance stage, during which students hosted and competed in two gaming competitions: Valorant and Overwatch. To provide students with a more holistic and well-rounded learning experience, students switched roles between gaming competitions to learn from and experience various responsibilities and expectations associated with the other esport positions. Lastly, students kept a journal in which they reflected on their engaged learning experiences and offered feedback.

Data Collection

At the beginning of the semester, students were made aware that their writing and feedback would likely be used for research presentations and publications. The researchers collected qualitative data via student reflection papers. Reflection is a beneficial learning tool through which learners (i.e., students) are provided the opportunity to review, revisit, and evaluate their practical experiences to reinforce and add depth to what they learned (Chang, 2019). To this end, the course instructor prompted students to expand on: 1) what they (might have) learned, 2) what they did and did not like in each of their roles, 3) how their roles and responsibilities varied and to what benefit, 4) how engaging with the livestreaming events

facilitated career preparation, and 5) to offer suggestions for improvement. Each student submitted three reflection papers, accounting for a total of 93 pages to review and analyze. The first reflection paper was due at the conclusion of the preparation phase, the next was submitted after the first esports event, and the third reflection paper was turned in after the second gaming competition.

Participants

A total of 21 students, of which 20 identified as male and one as female, participated in the assignment. There were five varsity players in the class, one team manager, and one shoutcaster. It is important to note, these students were asked to assume roles with which they did not have prior experience to provide them with the best learning opportunity. Varsity players were chosen to coach and shoutcast. This design helped inform and minimize the learning curve for the games, as well as afforded the class with both peer-to-peer and teacher-to-student learning opportunities (Alkin & Christie, 2002).

Data Analysis

Data analysis first commenced in the classroom where the instructor led a class-wide member review (Hoeber, 2023) with all participants, during which students were provided an overview of the data and offered opportunities to discuss, refute, and clarify their experiences. Through this process, the researcher-instructor was able to begin conceptualizing meaningful “themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2021), which were then (re)visited during the coding process with the second researcher. This proved to be a mutually beneficial process as it added to the scientific rigor and trustworthiness of the researcher-instructor and provided opportunities for students to learn from the experiences of their peers, as well as have meaningful conversations regarding their interpretation and understanding of each other’s experiences (Chang, 2019).

Given the exploratory nature of the research questions and the firsthand experiential foundation of the data, we undertook the dynamic process of a codebook thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Braun et al., 2016). While a coding framework and/or documentation is vital to a codebook thematic analysis, inter-rater reliability and coding agreement are not as critical (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This allowed us to vacillate between the steps of (re)reading the reflection papers, becoming familiar with and coding the data, discussing and developing themes, and refining and naming said themes. Such practices further add to the transparency of coding procedures and results, as well as to researcher trustworthiness (Saldaña, 2013). Thus, four superficial themes were initially developed through the researcher-instructors’ familiarization with the data during the classroom member-check and reflection. The second researcher,

absent throughout the entirety of the semester, independently coded the raw data (i.e., participant reflection papers) after the conclusion of the course. He concluded there to be two overarching themes and seven subthemes. Using the resultant codes and (sub)themes, the researchers met to discuss their discrepant findings and acquiesced to two themes with five subthemes.

Findings

In reflecting on their experiences throughout the project and after the event, students revealed that role-play enhanced their learning and benefited their career preparation and skill development in two primary ways: 1) knowledge of the esports industry (i.e., gaming and production) and 2) career skills development (i.e., teamwork, communication, and leadership skills). In cases where direct units of analysis (i.e., quotes) are utilized to confirm and expound on themes, participant pseudonyms are used.

Esport Industry Knowledge

The first set of subthemes center on learning industry-specific elements of hosting a livestreamed esports event competition. The gaming and production sides of the events might be common in some academic disciplines but given the relatively new and unique elements of esports, were critical to the career preparation of students interested in this online, digital space.

Gaming

Though many students were aware of the basics of gaming, and even the particulars of several games, holding different roles in the live streaming of an event reinforced and introduced them to multiple distinctions between gaming titles, and the contrasting styles of play, cultures, and stigmas of each. The unintended consequences of the “PC/console divide” (Peterson, 2018; Roland, 2016) were readily present at the onset of the course role-playing project. Several students seemingly took it personal that they were having to play on a platform with which they were unaccustomed. William shared that he had “never played on a PC before, so as a player, [he] was definitely a little worried about [his] ability to perform,” but wanted to “be better than everyone else for personal reasons.” Brian likewise felt inspired by learning a new game, having “found it very fun to test myself and try something new.” Conversely, Nathan “did not enjoy the feeling that I was not competent at the game I was playing,” while for Dylan it was “the initial stress of being overloaded by all the new information and being expected to perform well.” However, even though there may have been stress with learning a new game and/or gaming platform, there were other aspects of

gaming that the students enjoyed. “I don’t particularly enjoy Valorant as a game,” quipped Mark, “but I do enjoy the comradery of the team environment.”

Production

Students were seemingly less familiar with the behind-the-scenes responsibilities of hosting an esports competition. Though perhaps the most critical component of a livestreamed esports event, members of the production team expressed mixed emotions. Matthew admitted, “My initial reaction to the job was excitement, but nervousness, because we had no idea what we needed to do or how to operate any of the tools in the production room.” Because he had never produced before, Ernie was also “worried for a while” and found the experience “daunting.” However, he believes he improved his performance over time and now has a newfound appreciation for all the work that goes into putting on such events. Over time, he came to enjoy the role and learned “how to transition between gameplay, time breaks, and pan to the castors more effectively.” Several other students who assumed a producer role also spoke about the industry-specific job skills they learned. Thomas “learned how to use OBS studio and run it to Twitch while changing cameras, such as caster cams ... and also learned how to edit and set scenes” to put team and caster names in the frames. William discussed how to put graphics on the screen and even enhanced basic typing skills by learning “how to place my fingers correctly on the keyboard.”

It could be argued that the lessons learned during the events can also be garnered through a weekend computer skills course or other experiential learning opportunities. However, the benefit of role-playing afforded students the opportunity to learn while the pressure was real, but the stakes were not. Moreover, this intentioned setup did not limit learning experiences to only one role; rather, they led to transferable skill development beyond specific role for which students were assigned. For instance, Ernie and Matthew both spent time as producers and in addition to learning the production side, referenced the value of “team-work” and the “team effort” needed to successfully produce a livestream match. Likewise, Jasper received valuable insight into “what goes on behind the scenes with esports, the broadcasting team, as well as the casting crew and refs.”

Career Skills Development

The educational focus on learning, practicing, and applying industry-specific skills in real time is often a core component of sport management curriculum (Odio & Kerwin, 2016). We know that role-play pedagogy provides a space in which students can achieve this, but our findings reveal how such practices can additionally lead to transferable skill development (Rao & Stupans, 2012).

Despite the efforts and choices of the student participants being done under the auspices of the course instructor, the authentic demands of a real-time, livestreamed esports competition translate to a skill set valuable to a diverse set of potential career fields.

Teamwork Skills

Regardless of the role they occupied throughout the course of the project, students discussed the importance of teamwork. From Ken, “The biggest thing that I learned was how all aspects of an esports organization run together as one big team.” Ken works for the institution’s athletics department and additionally benefitted from experiencing the “different ways that a [sport] organization can be run.” But it wasn’t only the operation that was enhanced by learning to work as a team; the students’ playing performances improved as they more seamlessly worked together. Danny concisely explained, “The more you work as a team, the stronger you will be. By the end, as a team, we had better chemistry, and all improved.” As a leader, Jasper discussed how “watching them improve was very gratifying and brought us together,” and provided him an opportunity to “take pride in our team.” Further insight into such growth and development was offered by Manny, who “learned a bit about playing with teammates” of different gaming abilities and elected “to play around their strengths rather than focusing on patching up their weaknesses.” Likewise, Stan acknowledged learning how to better function within a team, “I definitely got to really feel just how hard it is to work in that team environment and keeping up constant communication and playing off of your teammates, it was extremely difficult ... but a very important skill.” Added Matthew,

Being able to connect and interact with a different group of individuals who I may not have necessarily been associated with is another factor in this class that will help us in the real world. We will need to work in teams with future companies we are in; these teams and groups will be extremely diverse forcing us to make connections with others.

Communication Skills

As evidenced in the previous sections, by experience and learning from within a team environment, students also improved their communication. The development of communication skills occurred across various levels of role-play, ranging from individual engagement, team cohesion, and organizational management. The experience allowed Reggie, a self-proclaimed “shy person,” a chance “to talk to new people that I wouldn’t have normally talked to ... this has allowed me to go outside of my comfort zone.” Likewise, the responsibilities Matthew had as a member of the production room encouraged him to “form connections to students I previously didn’t know” and work together to “further my understanding of the

tools in the room.” However, bringing together students with diverse experiences and personalities can sometimes lead to communication problems. But with guided reflection from the instructor, this can be turned into a positive learning experience. William acknowledges he is a “smartass” and might have upset his teammates by making a mistake and simply laughing it off. Upon reflection after the incident, he “thought about how in a real workplace this would never fly,” and that he needs to be more cognizant of how he interacts with teammates. Nathan also learned that his personality might be difficult, and he might have benefited by improving his “communications with my esports team in different ways.” By role-playing, Kevin “learned how to communicate effectively in *real time* and strategize based on everyone’s ability and skillset.” Noah “learned that having a communicative team with balanced roles is extremely important” and, therefore, “did not enjoy the lack of communication.” However, once again, this frustration turned into a learning opportunity as he proclaimed that “next time I will try to be more proactive as a leader.”

Leadership Skills

One of the roles assumed by students was that of coach (i.e., leader). This afforded students with a variety of experiential learning opportunities in which to apply and practice an array of leadership skills. One such skill was goal setting. From his time being a coach, Manny learned the need to “set an attainable goal” for his team. Similarly, Edward said it was “best to communicate with your team beforehand.” He also learned how to communicate as an authority figure and that it is “a good thing to always be positive and give suggestions.” George learned how to effectively give feedback, reassuring his players and offering support. Landry valued this aspect of the experience, commenting that he relied on data analysis, to which his team “was very receptive,” and after receiving the feedback, began “to improve instantly!” However, Reggie learned that coaching is more than just being positive. “Coaching is not as easy as it seems because it requires the coach to understand the game, when to and not to intervene is important, and knowing what players need to work on in-game,” as well as recognizing when players need “to regroup and compose” themselves.

Discussion and Implications

Using a case study methodology, we sought to learn more about the potential benefits of instilling the educational practices of role-play pedagogy in an *Introduction to Esport* class. Students shared that they had a better understanding of the course materials and the real-world applicability of course content, gained valuable practical experience, and developed transferrable skills specific to the esport industry and other relevant spaces. Through their role-

playing experiences, students enhanced career preparedness by developing into, or at least creating a foundation to become, job-seeking individuals who can problem-solve, effectively communicate, understand the unique dynamics of the esports industry, and possess encouraging and supportive human relations skills necessary to work in esports environments (Karadakis & Painchaud, 2022). In addition to improving their content knowledge, students reported that role-playing enhanced their applied understanding of what it is like to work in an esports organization, the importance of communication and teamwork, as well as critical thinking under pressure and solving problems in real-time as they arose in the arena during competition.

Specific to this course, student experiences were further enhanced by meetings with industry experts, access to and controls of a contemporary and fully operational esports arena, and hands-on experiences in the various esports event and organizational roles. By assuming the requisite working roles to host and stream an esports event, students gained a more holistic understanding of the potential jobs and careers available to job seekers in this esports industry. However, unlike the portentous sport and entertainment venues regularly found on U.S. campuses, esports arenas are not as prevalent (Trotto, n.d.) and subsequently reduce opportunities for hands-on experiential learning. We are cognizant that the human and physical resources afforded the students in this class is unapparelled, and thus share several lessons learned.

The following are offered considerations for faculty wanting to capitalize on role-playing practices in the classroom, regardless of resources. Having 21 students and finding meaningful roles for each of them can be difficult. For instance, students who occupied the roles of moderators and/or referees found limited engagement opportunities once students understood the game mechanics. Moreover, the time it took to learn the game(s), as well as the platforms on which they were played, varied among the students and affected team in-game performance. While this may not have been factored into the student's grade, several students were more competitive than others and the lack of gameplay progression and success irked them. Whether it be connectivity, audio, or other technological errors, such issues sometimes derailed class and did not allow for the participants to capitalize on their time in the arena. We recommend a technology specialist be on hand during class sessions to help minimize such time delays. Lastly, when role-playing, students must commit to attending class and the responsibilities of their role. Due to student illness and other extenuating circumstances, there was, at times, a need for players to switch roles or step in during some of the class sessions. However, with proper planning and equipment, students might be able to remotely contribute to and participate in the gaming sessions.

Limitations and Future Research

A benefit of conducting a single-case study is typically the diverse and inordinate amount of data collected and used to gain an in-depth understanding of a single phenomenon (Heale & Twycross, 2018). Despite gathering compelling data, it may have been limited due to IRB approval not being granted until semester's end, thereby restricting data collection to the timeline of the course and the guidelines of the reflection paper assignments. While a descriptive case study methodology helps mitigate this potential limitation, we acknowledge we were prevented from revisiting participants with follow-up analysis. Future research would be wise to plan and provide opportunities for further analysis on participants' experiences beyond a single-class member check. Wanting to better understand the potential educational benefits of role-play pedagogies, participation in our study was limited to the students enrolled in the esports class. Thus, the homogeneity of our participants prevented an understanding on how role-play and engaged learning might be experienced by diverse students, as well as perceptions of how such practical experiences might contribute to their confidence and preparation for entering the esports industry. Lastly, the use of an esports arena is not a readily available resource on college campuses (Trotto, n.d.) and limits the generalizability of this work. Future research should consider and explore more common means by which to offer students role-play opportunities in the digital space.

Conclusion

Results from this project demonstrate that role-play can be an effective pedagogical tool, affording students with opportunities to enhance their knowledge and familiarity with the esports industry, learn and practice industry-specific skills, and experience a real-time event competition requiring them to apply what they learned in the classroom. Current trends in the esports industry suggest that the need for a skilled workforce will continue to rise, and academic institutions would do well to offer training and curriculum that can help placate the escalating demand. Similar to traditional sport industries, educational endeavors and career preparation will be best served by providing internships and other similar experiential learning opportunities for students (Odio & Kerwin, 2016). As an educational space in which role-play opportunities may be more accessible, this project adds validity to the proposal that the esports curriculum is one best delivered via practice-based and experiential learning (Scott et al., 2021).

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