GETTING IN THE GAME: A CASE STUDY OF DEVELOPING

AN ESPORTS PROGRAM AT A HISTORICALLY BLACK UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

A growing number of institutions on the collegiate level have implemented curriculum and gaming initiatives that coincide with the explosion of the esports industry. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) are one type of institution that has recognized the value of esports in academia and has launched various gaming programs to enrich their collegiate environment. Today an estimated 67 of the nation's 107 HBCUs offer facets of esports programs. The purpose of this case study was to explore the growth of esports at one HBCU by illustrating three essential areas associated with establishing an esports program. The paper identifies theses three primary areas of establishing an esports program as being organized gameplay, academic programs, and the establishment of an esports facility. Further this academic paper will discuss the process of how the university sanctioned esports team was established, the development of the proposed academic curriculum, and the creation of a new gaming lab on campus.

Keywords: Curriculum, Esports, historically black colleges and universities (HBCU), program development

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Introduction

Research suggests that racial and gender minority groups are underrepresented in the gaming industry in such areas as game development, content creation, and professional players (Hackney, 2018). With the lack of diversity, it is necessary to depict positive examples of esports initiatives that serve underrepresented environments. This paper presents a case of a collegiate esports program that was created at a historically Black college and university (HBCU). While the popularity of the gaming industry has soared globally in recent years, the formation of esports as an academic discipline has also increased. A growing number of colleges and universities have developed and launched curriculum initiatives aimed at supporting the explosion of the esports industry. Such emerging programs have included initiatives such as forming recreational gaming clubs, university-sanctioned esports teams, certificate programs, and academic degree programs (Pizzo, Jones, & Funk, 2019).

Given the boom in the market and newfound employment opportunities in the esports and gaming industries, the potential for growth appears to be substantial on an international level, as well. Playing video games is a leisure activity that is popular among college students and extends to people of all nationalities and demographics. Despite gameplay's pervasiveness among college students, research suggests that the proportion of industry professionals from racial and gender minority groups in esports and gaming is limited (Hackney, 2018; Taylor & Stout, 2020). For this reason, there is an increasing need to report accounts of the process of building esports and gaming programs in diverse populations, including institutions of higher education. The purpose of this paper is to explore the growth of esports at one HBCU by discussing three essential areas associated with developing an esports program. These three primary areas of establishing an esports program include organized gameplay, academic programs, and the building of an esports facility. This paper gives an account of how administrators implemented esports related initiatives to meet the demand from a grow popularity in the industry and student interest.

Approach

This paper uses a case study approach to detail the process of implementing an esports program at an HBCU. The research approach of a case study is appropriate since limited insight is provided through the literature on the development of esports gameplay and academic programs in the HBCU setting. The rationalization for using a single case study method includes the benefit of isolating the environment and exploring the context of the case in a descriptive manner. The information in this report was obtained through a review of the literature and through the firsthand account by the author. The author serves as a faculty advisor for an esports program at an HBCU. To ensure the privacy of the institution and members involved in establishing this esports program, the name of the university and members is not reported.

Literature defines the case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary problem within its real-life environment, typically when the boundaries between the research phenomenon and context is not clearly evident (Yin, 1984). The rationale behind selecting a case study design is due to the gap in research that indicates that there are not many studies of how esports are increasing in spaces related to persons of color and other underserved populations. Yin (1984) suggests that phenomena that require explanatory and descriptive solutions often lead to researchers implementing case studies as their preferred research strategy. The author of this paper was able to examine the inner workings of one HBCU esports environment and offer a firsthand account of the practices used to increase the profile of the program.

Procedures and Site

HBCUs comprise a sector of racial-minority-serving institutions that were primarily established prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and that have a mission of educating African Americans (Perry, 2017). Since 2020, many HBCUs have implemented esports and gaming initiatives to both accommodate the interests of African American students and offer innovative curriculum. This case profiles an esports program and depicts the process of growing esports across a HBCU campus for members of this specific environment. The first step of establishing the esports program was forming a planning committee of educators and student leaders. This

committee focused their attention of creating opportunities for players to compete in esports, to provide a space to play in a gaming lab, and to introduce new academic programming related to esports management. The forthcoming sections of this paper will address how the committee implemented the esports program.

The esports program described in this case is located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The university is classified as an R2 institution. In 2018, the institution announced a goal of raising $100 million in grants and contracts for research by 2024. In 2020, it surpassed this goal by $22 million in one fiscal year. The amount of money raised is a record sum earned by an HBCU in grants and contracts (JBHE, 2022). Since the establishment of the first HBCU esports program in 2019, several other HBCUs have introduced gaming initiatives.

In this case, the initial discussions regarding esports for the program began in 2020 among sports management faculty members at the institution. A committee was soon created to increase student involvement and implement programs for those who were currently involved in esports on campus. The committee was made up of faculty members in sports management and computer science, student leaders, and university administrators. A nonprofit organization with the mission of increasing the participation of students of color at HBCUs within the esports and video gaming industry, Cxmmunity, assisted the committee by serving as an adviser in growing various initiatives across campus (Cxmmunity, 2022). After establishing the feasibility to grow involvement in esports at the HBCU institution, the committee created a plan to increase its presence in three specific areas: implementing organized game play, developing academic programs, and establishing a facility space for gaming.

This case addresses three main issues related to establishing an esports program on the collegiate level. Based on the challenges experienced by the HBCU in this report, the areas of organized gameplay, academic programs, and building an esports facility emerged as being essential to the process of establishing an esports program. The following section will discuss how the institution structured and implemented organized gameplay for the gamers.

Initiative One: Organized Gameplay

The initial discovery of the esports committee was that many students were already playing video games. Further, some of these players were playing in esports competitions such as the HBCU Esports League. These findings served as a catalyst to leverage this preexisting involvement in gaming as a foundation from which to launch university-sanctioned game play.

A university esports team was formed and began official play in fall 2021. A student leader from the task force was assigned the role of team captain based on his involvement with the process and documented performance as a player. The captain oversaw the task of team member selection and recruiting. The first step of the selection process included the team captain selecting several gamers known to him who were currently competing. This provided the esports team with a core group of players that the team could build upon. The other roster spots were filled by open tryouts and through the results of a recruiting questionnaire. The initial primary criterion for team selection was that members of the esports team must be enrolled at the university. A total of 22 students were selected for the team during its first year of play.

The Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference (MEAC) began its inaugural season of esports play at this time. Although the esports team in our case was not housed in the athletic department, the majority of the university's athletic teams competed in the MEAC. The esports team competed in the games *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, *Rocket League*, *Call of Duty: Search and Destroy*, and *Splitgate* during the inaugural season of esports in the MEAC. During the following season, in 2022, the esports team competed in the games *Super Smash Bros., Ultimate Rocket League, Halo: Infinite*, and *Call of Duty: Cold War.* The esports team won the fall 2021 conference championships in *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, *Rocket League,* and *Call of Duty*. During the 2022 season the team won the conference championship in *Call of Duty*, *Super Smash Bros.*, and *Halo*.

As the negative perception of video games lessens in American society, esports and gaming remain a popular leisure activity for college-age students. Further, according to Lee et al. (2020), the wide and solid base of competitive esports players cultivates a richer environment across all levels of esports competitions. The expansion of varsity esports programs over the last few years has been vast (Bauer-Wolf, 2019). In addition to the collegiate level, high school–level leagues

are developing rapidly in the United States (Schwartz, 2018). High school clubs and teams are also increasing globally. To establish a program that is sustainable and one that replenishes gamers, the faculty advisers in our case increased partnerships with local high school and professional esports organizations.

On the heels of the success of the esports team, the committee turned its attention to establishing a club. The purpose of the club was to provide a space for university students to play games beyond the scope of the official team, where membership was limited. A preexisting gaming club was paired with faculty advisers. Like the esports team, club members competed in events and also played socially as a form of recreation. The esports club came under the supervision of the faculty advisers in January 2023.

The act of organizing competitive gameplay is essential to establishing an esports program on the collegiate level. Due to the popularity of gaming within the HBCU environment, the opportunity to implement university sanctioned gameplay is generally well accepted at these schools. The following section will express how the institution in this case established an academic component for their esports program.

Initiative Two: Academic Programs

The next phase of increasing the profile of esports and gaming at this historically Black college and university (HBCU) included developing an academic component. Seo and Jung (2016) suggested that esports has surpassed the stage of being merely a cult-like phenomenon and should be viewed as a contemporary consumer culture driven by the support of young adults. As esports and gaming have flourished and been established as mainstream products, educational institutions have increased the inclusion of esports programs for both collegiate and high school students in the United States. According to Tyson (2014), the first esports team to award scholarships to students was established at Robert Morris University. Recent literature indicates that an estimated 125 institutions host varsity esports programs in North America (Morrison, 2019). The considerable growth of esports as a university-sponsored initiative is noteworthy and supports the need to produce academic curriculum that develops practitioners for the industry.

Research suggests that the pairing of academic curriculum and learning experiences found in such initiatives as clubs and student organizations provides meaningful opportunities for students to develop professionalism (King et al., 2021; King & VanHecke, 2006). The HBCU program in our case developed both minor and major academic curricula. These programs were designed by educators based on a review of esports management curriculum requirements at several peer institutions. The minor curriculum consists of 18 credit hours related to the discipline of esports management. The major curriculum includes 39 academic credit hours as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Courses for Esports Management Major

Discipline	Course name	Number of credits
Esports	Intro to esports management	3
Esports	Esports governance	3
Esports	Esports event management	3
Esports	Esports internship	6
Sport management	Sports law	3
Sport management	Sports and the media	3
Management	Business and finance	3
Graphic art	Intro to game design	3
Graphic art	Digital media app	3
Marketing	Principles of marketing	3
Computer science	Game design & production	3
Communication	Social media & integrated marketing	3
		39 Total

Four new content-specific courses were developed during the academic implementation phase. These esports courses included introduction to esports management, esports governance, esports event management and planning, and esports internship. Introduction to esports management familiarizes students with the gaming industry and explores the effective management strategies applied in this field. The course navigates the professional settings of esports and presents students with the multifaceted areas of the discipline such as sports tournaments, marketing, communication, finance, coaching, and legal implications. In the esports event management and planning course, students examine best practices in esports management through case studies, exposure to industry professionals, practical experience, and interactive learning assignments. The esports governance course focuses on presenting the regulatory structures and governing bodies associated with the esports industry on local, state, national, and international levels.

Key course content includes the exercise of power, decision making, and creating policy in the industry. The tiers of esports including amateur, high school, collegiate, and professional game play are a focal point of the course. The fourth course, esports internship was proposed to include a capstone course to the curriculum. The esports internship course affords students the opportunity to gain six academic credits and is required for senior students before completing the degree program. In this course, students obtain practical experience by working in a job related to the esports and gaming industry.

The proposed minor esports management curriculum is meant to offer students a secondary academic discipline to specialize in addition to their major. The minor degree consists of 18 academic credit hours. Three courses (9 credits) are mandatory classes that students are required to complete. The mandatory classes include introduction to esports management, introduction to sport management and introduction to game design. In addition to these mandatory courses, students can select nine credits of elective courses as shown in Table 2.

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Table 2 Courses for Esports Management Minor

Discipline	Course name	Number of credits
Esports	Intro to esports management*	3
Sport Management	Intro to sport management *	3
Graphic art	Introduction to game design*	3
Computer Science	Computer & Video Game Development	3
Electrical Engineering	Digital Electronics	3
Esports	Esports internship	3
Sport management	Sports and the media	3
Management	Business and finance	3
Graphic art	Digital media app	3
Marketing	Principles of marketing	3
Computer science	Game design & production	3
Communication	Social media & integrated marketing	3
		36 Total

Note. Asterisks * denotes courses that are required for the minor degree.

Due to the rising popularity in academia, the HBCU institution in this case proposed both a major and minor degree program in esports management. The rationale behind offering two programs stems from the increased value of allow students multiple options of exploring the field academically. With its similarities to the field of sport management, the new academic programs in esports management will be housed in the sport management department at this HBCU institution. Next, this paper discusses the growing trend of establishing designed spaces and facilities aimed at participating in esports on the collegiate level.

Initiative Three: The Esports Facility

Johnson C. Smith University and Hampton University were among the early HBCU institutions to launch academic programs in esports and gaming. Both institutions included a mix of initiatives such as gaming labs, curriculum, university-sanctioned teams, and student clubs. Hampton University operated under funding provided by a technology grant from the U. S. Department of Homeland Security (Jones, 2019). An increased number of HBCUs have followed suit and included esports programs at their institutions. Institutions including Southern University, North Carolina Central University, Morris Brown College, Alcorn State University, Oakwood College, and Morgan State University are among the minority-serving institutions that have constructed or repurposed space for an esports lab. According to Cliburn (2021), 67 of the nation's 107 HBCUs offer facets of esports programs. Many of these programs have carved out space on their respective campuses aimed at providing new opportunities and offering innovative experiences to African American students through gaming. The academic initiatives are designed to prepare students of color for careers in a booming industry, increase the number of developers and publishers of color, and include a diverse population in all aspects of the industry.

In addition to grants, funding to build esports facilities has come largely through sponsorship and support from companies. In our case, Verizon, a leading telecommunications company, provided $1 million to be distributed among five HBCU institutions to create facilities on their campuses for esports. In addition to the commitment to build these facilities, the company awarded scholarships to women gamers majoring in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) fields. Of the $200,000 commitment to our institution, $100,000 was earmarked to revamp a space on campus for a gaming lab. The student union center was selected as the location to house the new esports space. The student union was selected because it was a central location on campus, had available space, and had a lot of foot traffic. The gaming lab space, which was named the Esports Mecca, included 10 individual gaming stations. Gaming stations include monitors and keyboards, PCs, headsets, and gaming chairs. Additional items for the lab included furniture, TVs, LED signage, and a trophy case.

Conclusion

The collegiate landscape for esports as a whole is rapidly growing as many American institutions of higher education add curricula, recreational clubs, and competitive esports teams. The addition of these programs in recent years is indicative of the emerging industry and popularity of video games across global markets. A diverse population of users regularly plays video games, especially the demographic of college-age students. This case illustrates how gaming and esports were introduced at a leading HBCU through its efforts to implement gameplay, establish major and minor curricula, and build a gaming lab.

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