THE COLLEGE ESPORTS EXPERIENCE: GAMING, IDENTITY, AND DEVELOPMENT

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI’I AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION SCIENCES

May 2022

By

Nyle Sky Kauweloa

Dissertation Committee:

Jenifer Sunrise Winter, Chairperson

Wayne Buente

Elizabeth Davidson

Richard D. Taylor

Julienne Maeda, University Representative

Keywords: Esports, College, Gaming
Abstract

An emerging esports scene has developed on college campuses across North America. The proposition universities are extending to students who qualify and become collegiate esports players includes expert training, access to dedicated competitive facilities, and university scholarships. Given the institutional investment in facilities and player support for esports programs, in an industry that still lacks a formalized process of professionalization, the purpose of this dissertation is to examine how players navigate the various demands, responsibilities, and tensions that constitute the role of a collegiate esports player.

Employing Stebbins’ serious leisure perspective and Baxter Magolda's theory of self-authorship, the longitudinal study conducted at the University of California, Irvine’s Esports Program included on-site observations, repeated in-depth interviews with players, program staff, and student volunteers, along with an analysis of archival materials related to the program's development.

The major findings of the study point to how a historical turn was implicated in the participants’ accounts. Instead of a sole focus on the future, players reflected on their pasts and the possibility of their time at UCI Esports as a means of redemption for unmet promises. Because UCI, as an educational institution, was seen as providing the “whole package,” players were excited by the prospects of pursuing a competitive collegiate career at a reputable school, while also fully engaged in a varsity program that could help prepare them with a structured path into upper echelons of professional play.

However, the analysis also revealed nuanced motivations for why players selected to play for a collegiate program. For a select group of veteran payers, a desire to meet parental expectations stood out as an important reason for participating in UCI Esports. Once on the team,
the players revealed that commitment and effort at skilled development led to having to decide between one's passion for esports versus a focus on academics. Via the analytic framing of the “Crossroads,” an institutional battle between UCI Esports and its players emerged. Participants found themselves contesting the very institution that was supposed to support them. The expanded programmatic offerings that UCI Esports provided created tensions for players who wanted to use their time in the varsity program as a means of discovery and experimentation with elite competitive play. Players learned that institutional growth at UCI Esports conflicted with their cultivating competitive identities. Consequently, a sense of disillusionment overcame many players who faced disappointments in the program, with some seeing UCI Esports as not living up to the social, competitive, and institutional experience imagined. Thus, this work reveals novel and nuanced topics central to the discussion of balance and negotiation as part of the collegiate esports experience.
# Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1  
1.1 College Esports: A Pre-history to “Modern” Programmatic Gaming ......................................................... 6

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW ......................................................................................................... 16  
2.1 Work versus Play ..................................................................................................................................... 16  
2.2 The Serious Leisure Framework .............................................................................................................. 18  
2.3 Psychosocial Theories of the Development of the Self ............................................................................ 28  
2.4 Ethical and Moral Identity Development ................................................................................................ 32  
2.5 Self-Authorship as Identity Development ............................................................................................... 37  
2.6 Research Questions ............................................................................................................................... 47

CHAPTER 3: METHODS ............................................................................................................................... 49  
3.1 Field Site .................................................................................................................................................. 49  
3.2 Research Relationships .......................................................................................................................... 52  
3.3 Participant Selection ............................................................................................................................... 54  
3.4 Data Collection ....................................................................................................................................... 57  
3.5 Interview Instrument ............................................................................................................................. 61  
3.6 Data Analysis ........................................................................................................................................ 63

CHAPTER 4: COMPETITIVE GAMING AS A PRECURSOR TO UCI ESPORTS ........................................ 66  
4.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................................................ 66  
4.2 Play, Parents, and the Home as a Precursor to UCI Esports ..................................................................... 67  
4.2.1 Competitive Play Starts at Home ......................................................................................................... 71  
4.2.2 Hitting Challenger with Mom’s Help ..................................................................................................... 73  
4.3 Parental Buy-in by “making almost as much” as Dad .............................................................................. 78  
4.3.1 How Prize Money Helped to Alter Parents’ Perspectives ..................................................................... 83  
4.4 Summary ................................................................................................................................................ 87

CHAPTER 5: REVERSING THE “PIPELINE”: PROFESSIONALS IN COLLEGE ESPORTS ..................... 89  
5.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................................................ 89  
5.2 The Star Players ...................................................................................................................................... 90  
5.3 UCI Esports as the “Whole Package” .................................................................................................... 101  
5.3.1 The Perfect Student .......................................................................................................................... 104  
5.3.2 The UCI Esports “Gaming House” ................................................................................................... 109  
5.4 Summary ............................................................................................................................................ 117
# CHAPTER 6: CONTROL OVER PRACTICE SCHEDULES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>The Importance of UCI Esports Interns</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>Wanting to have Weekends Back</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>The Need to be a “Student-Athlete”</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4.1</td>
<td>Proving Priority Registration</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>Collegiate Player Resistance as Identity Work</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5.1</td>
<td>The Collegiate Player Body as Leverage</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5.2</td>
<td>Circumventing the Program to Get Better</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# CHAPTER 7: “GIVING BACK” WITH COLLEGE ESPORTS RESEARCH

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Disrupting the Collegiate Pipeline to Pro</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2.1</td>
<td>The Indecision to Go Pro</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>Reciprocity in College Esports Research</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3.1</td>
<td>Leaving the Varsity Esports Team</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3.1.1</td>
<td>Leaving then Coming Back?</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# CHAPTER 8: DISILLUSIONMENT AND SOLIDARITY AT UCI ESPORTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>The Esports Arena as a Disciplined Space</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>Here today, Gone Tomorrow</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3.1</td>
<td>Not Being Listened To</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>Unremunerated Collegiate Labor &amp; Scholarships</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>Seeking Solidarity</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>Agency, History, Identity, and Disillusionment</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>278</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCI Esports at its Height</td>
<td>278</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Centrality of the Esports Arena in Research</td>
<td>279</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside the Academic School Year</td>
<td>280</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where were the Women Players?</td>
<td>281</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving Forward</td>
<td>282</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix A: Summary of Games Noted in This Work and Paths to Professional Status ........ 289
Appendix B: Interview Guide ......................................................................................... 292
Appendix C: Consent Form (Sample) .............................................................................. 295
References ....................................................................................................................... 297
List of Figures

Figure 1. UCI Esports Arena ......................................................................................... 51
Figure 2. UCI Esports Arena Layout ............................................................................. 59
List of Tables

Table 1. Research Participants........................................................................................................... 56
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the American sports broadcasting network ESPN visited the campus of the University of California, Irvine (UCI) to document the trials of the varsity esports team as it pursued national and international recognition for its collegiate esports program (ESPN Esports, 2019). The varsity program was just starting a journey that would become an experiment in higher education of institutionalizing a culture of competitive video gameplay that had previously existed for generations on college campuses (Brand, 1972; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Lowood, 2009). At the start of the ESPN documentary, viewers were introduced to a team of collegiate esports players, many of whom claimed some of the most elite ranks (nationally) in their games as former professional players. The “player profiles” that ESPN created portrayed the team members clad in UCI Esports jerseys, custom-designed and with decals from name-brand sponsors (including Oakley and Rockstar). Each of the players—fresh from their 2018 collegiate championship win—was highlighted in a brief introduction. The players described themselves, their in-game roles, and the strengths they brought to the team and the UCI Esports program.

While the ESPN college esports documentary was intended to provide a snapshot of a larger movement of colleges and universities seeking to establish esports programs across North America, the selection of UCI Esports was intentional. The anticipation, hype, and attention that UCI Esports garnered was a continuation of the traditions initiated by founding programs to further the sportification, institutionalization, and rationalization (Ingham, 2004) of competitive video gameplay on college campuses. Thus, the viewing public was given an insider’s glimpse into a varsity program unlike any other. Through the high-profile ESPN feature, viewers learned that players from this elite, research-intensive university were treated to a host of services, from
shared team housing, access to gaming technologies, and one-on-one meetings with the team’s psychologist and exercise physiologist. By giving ESPN insider access to UCI Esports meetings, matches, and tournaments, the program was able to showcase the institutional treatment of its players as “student-athletes” (Jenny et al., 2017; Kane & Spradley, 2017; Keiper et al., 2017).

Ultimately, the four-part ESPN documentary traced a path of programmatic success that was unique to the UCI Esports program’s Southern California roots by showcasing the intricate relationships among UCI as an educational institution, the premiere California video games industry, and a top-tier college varsity esports program. Throughout the documentary, the varsity players were seen working with Riot Games (one of the largest video game publishers in North America) on a range of projects. Some projects highlighted the excitement of being part of the gaming company’s media promotional activities, such as photoshoots conducted on campus, while other projects enabled the players to train at Riot’s professional studios to prepare for their collegiate championships. While UCI Esports is not the first esports program to have benefited from high-profile commercial “endemic” and “nonendemic” partnerships, the nature, depth, and involvement that UCI Esports cultivated with prominent video games, esports, and media companies stood out as exceptional (Deppe, 2016). Therefore, audiences saw a UCI Esports program, along with students, that interacted, worked, and consulted with some of the most visible and influential video game publishers in the esports industry.

What motivated the ESPN documentary crew and executives to select the UCI Esports program as a focus for their feature overlapped with what had earlier motivated me to choose UCI Esports as my research field site in 2017, when I made my first on-site visit to the program. UCI Esports emerged on my radar in the fall of 2016, after I had made other research visits to Robert Morris University (RMU) and the University of British Columbia (UBC). My trips to
RMU and UBC helped me to understand the wider context of how different educational institutions, both in the United States and Canada, approached the emerging scene of collegiate esports. However, while RMU was the first program to create a varsity team, kickstarting a movement of smaller universities in the United States (e.g., the University of Pikeville, Maryville University, and Columbia College) to create their collegiate programs, the question I grappled with was whether collegiate esports would find support in a broader set of higher education institutions, both private and public—rather than being relegated to a specific niche of schools.

When UCI Esports announced its collegiate varsity program, the proposed institutional investment and expectations for the UCI Esports program felt different than what had been proposed by other schools. For example, the support publicly articulated by UCI’s vice-chancellor of Student Affairs for their debut varsity program was unprecedented for the time. The vice-chancellor spoke directly to a demographic of students (“gamers”) who have often been left out of larger considerations about their interests as part of campus life, but also to a growing contingent of researchers and faculty who also felt excited about what appeared to be a renewed interest in video games research by the university when he said:

We hope to attract the best gamers from around the world, and our academic programs in computer gaming science, digital arts, computer science, engineering, anthropology, law, medicine, neuroscience and behavior create a strong foundation for research and inquiry related to gaming. (“UCI to Launch,” 2016)

In deciding on a site for my research, I was drawn to UCI Esports because, as the vice-chancellor had illustrated, the program asserted an interdisciplinary mission. A core set of “pillars”—that of supporting “competitions, academics, entertainment, and community” (UCI
News, 2016) undergirded the program. Accordingly, I began my research confident that I would have access to some of the most competitive collegiate teams in the United States. For instance, the inaugural League of Legends team that the director and his staff had pieced together was drawn from the top slots of the leaderboard in North America, where UCI Esports harbored ambitions, as the director of the program had once said to me, to be the “Duke basketball of college esports.”

Alternatively, I felt confident that I would be accepted in my role as a researcher due to my own experience as a gamer and researcher of collegiate esports. This was a program that thought about itself not only as a competitive powerhouse but as being on the leading edge of collegiate programmatic development. As an example of the program’s forward-thinking orientation, a multi-stakeholder task force was created early in its development. This group included over a dozen UCI faculty, staff, interns, students, and community leaders tasked to address issues of diversity and inclusion in college esports (Amazan-Hall et al., 2018). Even as I casually walked around the UCI Esports gaming facilities, I was heartened to see poster boards of recently conducted research about esports—a pilot study on the effects physical exercise had on the UCI Esports players (Peck et al., n.d.), and a study on the use of the esports “Arena” as training facility (Clemenson et al., 2018)—situated near the entrance of the esports facility. Nearly every time I returned to the UCI campus for my research, I was surprised at just how much work the program staff was taking on, the plans they had, and the projects already executed. Few other college esports programs were creating initiatives beyond the singular focus of competition, while UCI took an expansive view of how collegiate esports varsity programs

---

1 A summary of games highlighted in this work and discussion of the path to professional status is included in Appendix A.
could be developed, and further embedded, within the institutional structures of a top research university.

In this work, I examine the nexus of how play (Huizinga, 1955), sports (Ingham, 2004), and institutionalized esports (Abanazir, 2018) come together to shape the experiences of students who were varsity players on the UCI Esports teams. Collegiate esports represents one of the more recent nodes among what Rambusch, Jakobsson, & Pargman (2007) framed as the “circuits of interactivity” (p. 158) that constitute the cultural, economic, and technological dimensions of esports as a structured leisure, amateur, and professional activity. Further and perhaps more importantly, collegiate esports provides a new window on how the evolution and understanding of esports continue to be culturally, politically, economically, and technologically contextually situated (Abanazir, 2018; Jin, 2020; Lin & Zhao, 2020; Voorhees & Orlando, 2018).

Research examining the interactivity between education and esports, both as a high school and collegiate activity (Anderson et al., 2018; Cho et al., 2019; Lee & Steinkuehler, 2019; Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019), has posited the relationship as one of the opportunities that marry the profession of esports with the structures of programmatic and curricular education—especially for students who have traditionally been dissuaded from furthering their interest in competitive video games. The advent of collegiate esports programs has excited a broad cross-section of students but also faculty and administrators who see esports as a new digital culture that can enable enticing new learning opportunities.

When applied to the context of UCI Esports, however, what was unprecedented and unique about the program and its organizational ambitions led me to redirect my attention back to the players. The personal reflections, repeated questions, and prevailing research (Anderson et al., 2018; Cho et al., 2019; Lee & Steinkuehler, 2019; Richard et al., 2018; Rothwell & Shaffer,
about the possibilities that could be harnessed through a more granular look at the lived experiences of belonging to UCI Esports sensitized me to the burdens, pressures, and demands that were shouldered, and balanced, by the students because of their participation in the varsity program. The questions I pose in this study focus on understanding how players articulated a serious commitment to gaming and, consequently, how that orientation influenced their development as students and players:

1) How do collegiate esports scholarship players articulate commitment, effort, and dedication to their pursuits with esports?

2) How do collegiate esports scholarship players understand their experiences as gamers in relation to their academic and personal development in college?

Negotiating between competing demands, often between one’s commitment to academics versus competitive gaming, required students to draw upon a matrix of subject positions, interpersonal relationships, and institutional knowledge. Subjectively, new and exciting opportunities in collegiate esports meant that students had to examine the risk, uncertainty, and precarity of a future in the profession (Brock, 2017; Lin & Zhao, 2020). Interpersonally, the horizon of new prospects within collegiate esports drew on the discursive and relational work that securing support from friends, family, and parents entailed. Institutionally, varsity programs, where students faced a barrage of challenges, tensions, and demands, now function as important sites that shape experiences, reflections, and meaning with video games—which young adults now find crucial to exploring or experimenting with hybrid techno-sporting-gaming identities.

1.1 College Esports: A Pre-history to “Modern” Programmatic Gaming

Currently, a lacuna exists within the domain of esports research that speaks to informal, grassroots, and student-led origins of college esports. The “origins story” for college esports
traces back to the first documented video game tournament at Stanford University in 1972 (Brand, 1972). I deploy the use of the word “prehistory” with the same intent that Saarikoski, Suominen, and Reunanen (2017) used in their research to examine the “roots” of competitive video game history, especially one where the records of the past are tenuous, scattered, or continue to be unearthed. While researching the origins of college esports, the term “prehistory” is especially useful (Borowy, 2013; Jin, 2020, Partin, 2021) because so much of what has constituted “college esports” as an activity did not necessarily have an official name or title but was characterized by a casual affiliation of friends, classmates, and peers who, while sharing a love for competitive video gameplay as part of an on-campus club or dormitory experience, did not immediately see the significance of their activities as an institutionalized activity (Kow & Young, 2013).

And yet, whatever canonical past attributed to the origins of on-campus gaming is, in fact, linked to the very origins of computing history (Lowood, 2009). Before discussing this point, however, elaborating on the geopolitical context around the 1972 Stanford University video game tournament is important to understand why the university was the locus of video game development and competition. The decade roughly preceding, and the decades following, the tournament had a been defining period for the establishment of a vast military-academic-industrial complex. Towards the end of the 1950s, the United States military’s fears were heightened by the USSR’s launch of Sputnik, the first artificial satellite in space. The military and intelligence response by the United States to Soviet ambitions to militarize space was not only the establishment of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), but also the creation of the Advanced Research Project Agency (APRA, then DARPA) (Elton & Carey, 2013).
I return to the *Rolling Stone* article that Stewart Brand (1972) wrote about the 1972 tournament to demonstrate the schism over the expectations with the landmark video game tournament at Stanford University and the subsequent lack of attention, discourse, and research given to the culture of competitive gaming on college campuses. Having the first documented video game tournament at Stanford University was not accidental, but grew out of the ARPA project, where a matrix of science, technology, and engineering research labs at some of the most prestigious universities across the United States, starting with the University of California, Los Angeles and then Stanford University, was selected to be equipped with PDP mainframe computers, and the attendant networking capacities that become the formation of the ARPANET (Leiner, 2009).

While the public’s attention was largely focused on the latest computing technologies at the time (the PDP-1 microcomputer), scholars have looked back and focused on the importance of the video game SpaceWars! as foundational to the origins of the video game industry (Brand, 1972; Monnens & Goldberg, 2015). As (graduate) students prepared for the events, Brand (1972) spoke of an “irrepressible midnight phenomenon” of students who would wait after the other researchers were done with their projects at the on-campus artificial intelligence labs to take over the computers for their gameplay. Perhaps just as relevant today, there was a distinction made between what the graduate students did with the video game SpaceWars!, which Brand recalled being regarded as “low-rent” research, versus what scientists accomplished with research on robotics and computer language processing seen as “high-rent” research.

The 50-year leap in time that this review makes between Brand’s (1972) coverage of the Stanford University tournament and the current state of post-secondary educational institutional support for esports programs highlights the significant absence of historical research on the role
grassroots, student-led, and community-oriented groups have had in shaping the landscape, and preparing the groundwork, for more recognizable “start dates” of a modern college esports scene. Collegiate esports histories exist but are scattered on online forums (Kauweloa, 2021), hidden on hard drives, or bound to oral histories of video games past. Although what exists today differs significantly from what was described in 1972, there are a shared set of features that remain relevant within the backdrop of collegiate esports today. Brand’s (1972) observations, for instance, about the various obstacles students faced in creating an environment where competitive play as part of a collegiate experience was dependent upon the relationships among students, administrative and institutional support was prescient—and is the broader subject of this dissertation.

What changes manifested have been the organization and evolution of collegiate esports on college campuses centered around the creation of co-curricular student-organized gaming clubs, associations of gaming clubs, and university-recognized collegiate esports programs. What started as an experiment in 2014 at a small, private university (Robert Morris University, or RMU) in Chicago, Illinois to create the first varsity esports program has expanded to hundreds of college campuses across North America, each offering various levels of institutional support and advancing their own iterations of esports (Johnson, 2020).

University of Washington (Washington Gaming Association) and the University of British Columbia (UBC Esports Association), for instance, began as independent, student-organized gaming clubs on their respective campuses, but have grown to gain greater institutional support. Alternatively, Robert Morris University (RMU Illinois Esports), the University of California at Irvine (UCI Esports), and the University of Utah (Utah Esports) are officially recognized collegiate esports programs, offering scholarships to students to be varsity
gamers who represent their schools, as one would see with student-athletes representing their university in traditional sporting competitions.

Looking to emulate the success of schools that have created their programs, such as UCI, colleges have become optimistic that esports can serve as an important vector of overlapping goals between a university’s mission and student interests (McGrath, 2019) by appealing to (and retaining) a new cohort of students who have traditionally sat outside the purview of universities in exchange for providing access to an exciting and highly sought-after industry.

In 2014, RMU became the first school to offer varsity esports scholarships in the United States (Robert Morris Athletics, 2014). Situating the esports program under the athletics program at RMU has allowed parallels to be drawn between competitive collegiate esports and traditional college athletics. Kurt Melcher, former athletics director at RMU and founder of the esports program, argues that schools would be remiss to acknowledge the talent of traditional sports athletes without also appreciating the similar talent gamers bring to the realm of competition as a new type of college athlete (Seok & Baek, 2017). RMU has done much to outline what a collegiate esports program should look like, from the construction of their esports arena located on campus for gamers to practice in, the esports jerseys students are required to wear during tournaments, to the hiring of gaming coaches and analysts who provide needed feedback and support to help scholarship players improve their skills.

In 2016 and 2017, several public research universities started their collegiate esports programs. The University of Utah became the first school from a major athletic conference (Power Five) to offer official student scholarships starting in the fall of 2017. That year, Utah’s esports varsity program distributed 33 scholarships to collegiate esports players. Mirroring some of RMU’s broader objectives in its long-term goals for building its esports program, the director
of Utah’s esports program saw collegiate esports as becoming a mainstream college experience for students in the future (Falk, 2017).

College gaming was already pervasive in Utah, which has a vibrant on-campus gaming scene, with 600 members belonging to the Crimson Gaming Club. According to the director of Utah’s esports program, the active gaming community on campus helped to pave the way to start an official scholarship program (Burns, 2017). One notable difference, however, in comparing Utah’s esports program to RMU’s program is that Utah’s program is not formally a part of its athletics department. Rather, it is aligned with its Entertainment Arts and Engineering program. This was an interesting development in the world of collegiate esports due to the less regulated nature of this domain of collegiate competitive gaming. Novel approaches for generating student interest, funding, and administrative-level support for collegiate esports meant that programs could emerge within departments that lie outside of the athletics domain.

UCI launched its esports program in the fall of 2016, being the first public research university to invest in a collegiate esports program (Szoldra, 2016). Outlining an agenda like other collegiate esports programs wanting to provide funding for student gamers through official scholarships, UCI is regarded as an ideal school for students who have an interest in video games overall. Similar to Utah, UCI also boasts a vibrant gaming culture on campus, one present before the advent of the scholarship program. UCI was voted one of the top schools for gamers due to having one of the largest computer science programs in the country, and this plays a role for many students in their college selection (Russell, 2017). The Association of Gamers is the largest student club on the UCI campus, and according to UCI’s Esports Director, it is also the largest collegiate gaming club in the United States. A UCI poll of students revealed that 82% of the
student body supported starting an esports program, with 72% of undergraduates at UCI identifying themselves as a “gamer” (Lingle, 2016).

What distinguished the UCI Esports program from other programs was its relationship with other departments and services on campus, its long-term goals of assimilating itself further into UCI, and the forward-thinking mission of imagining a program that expanded beyond competition. Although the program is financially independent of the school, it is administered by Student Affairs at UCI, and often collaborates with Student Affairs at various on-campus gaming events (Smith, 2017). Regarding its goals in gaming, UCI is working towards recognition as a major academic center of gaming research. While UCI’s collegiate esports program is intended as an avenue for student gamers to find funding for college, the program also supports a growing number of scholars interested in using UCI’s Esports Arena as a site for academic research. During the summer of 2017, the program hosted its first esports symposium, inviting various speakers and scholars related to gaming and esports, as well as students involved with collegiate esports (UCI Esports, 2016). This special focus on research is also related to the mission of UCI’s esports program. The “pillars” underlying UCI’s program include competition, academics and research, entertainment, and community (UCI Esports, 2016).

Although the esports program has a competitive focus, the program is also critically involved with issues related to inclusion and diversity in gaming. In 2017, the UCI Esports program started a task force to decide whether the program is meeting diversity and inclusion goals. This includes having gamers abide by conduct rules when they are playing at UCI’s Esports Arena, finding ways to support a diversity of applicants who wish to work for the program, and being open and welcoming to diverse groups and communities seeking to qualify for UCI’s competitive esports teams (UCI Esports, 2017).
UCI’s esports program also seeks to make connections to the wider community of gamers in the area. At the heart of that connection between the program and the wider community is the program’s Arena. Created to provide a space for UCI students and its competitive esports team, the UCI Esports Arena is also open for public use with an hourly fee. Another way UCI’s program seeks to include the wider community of gamers is to solicit feedback about changes. For instance, UCI decided to add Blizzard Entertainment’s *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016) title to its competitive program, but before making the addition, it sought to understand how the game was being accepted by the wider esports community (Sumali, 2017), and whether there is a healthy competitive scene around the game. However, in accepting the game title, UCI Esports also took into consideration whether Overwatch fits into its mission of greater inclusivity, noting that Blizzard Entertainment created a diverse cast of heroes within the game.

In this introductory chapter, I have provided the context of collegiate esports, why the UCI Esports program was selected as the field site for the dissertation, what makes it unique as a collegiate program, and how the context shaped the research, both in its focus on the competitive ambitions of the teams, but also as a program that sought to develop its players holistically.

Chapter 2 highlights relevant literature and explores the theoretical framework of the dissertation, where both a serious leisure perspective and the theory of self-authorship (using the “Crossroads” metaphor) are used to illuminate how both analytical perspectives end up supporting each other to develop a picture of how players negotiated the tensions, responsibilities, and demands of collegiate esports.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodological considerations taken to engage with the research as an ethnographic study that included observations, interviews, field notes, document analysis, and repeated in-person site visits.
Chapters 4 through 8 present the major themes identified in my analysis. In Chapter 4, the theme of *agency* grew out of my application of a serious leisure perspective. Participants in the research built on years of interpersonal work, family relationships, and emotional labor that ultimately helped to allay parental fears that their child’s dedication to esports had a promising future. Rather than detail only the obstacles that beset the journey towards skilled development as competitive players, I highlight moments during their years in high school when players were given more trust, confidence, and ultimately agency by their families to further articulate commitment to competitive play.

In Chapter 5, the themes of *historical turn* and *redemption* are elaborated. While the excitement, promise, and anticipation of collegiate esports often framed how players imagined their tenure as players, participants also understood their involvement in the program as a time to revisit, reflect, and make up for a past that they felt was misdirected. This chapter examines the decision, especially by the “star players,” to redirect their energies towards an attempt to go professional. Thus, the transition to UCI Esports provided collegiate players a unique opportunity to correct for the past by belonging to a program that was regarded as the “whole package”—thus allowing the players to have the best of both competitive and academic worlds.

Chapter 6 explores the themes of *contested identities* explaining factors that were crucial to players’ motivation to stay in the program. As UCI Esports expanded to become a program that not only catered to the hyper-competitive, results-oriented, and rationalist goals of traditional sports, it also sought to holistically develop its players. Consequently, a clash of expectations about the ultimate mission and purpose of the program created disagreements and placed participants at the “Crossroads” of personal development as they questioned their involvement in the program. While the imposition of a discourse that framed the players as “student-athletes”
was tacitly accepted, players believed that the varsity program was not doing enough to support a mission that pushed competitive excellence, and therefore, control over how to utilize the program to help build a competitive esports identity.

In Chapters 7 and 8, the themes of *disillusionment* and *solidarity* are excavated. In these chapters, I relate players’ uncertainties about their continuation in the program. As the varsity players approached their final years at university, the pressure to commit to a competitive path in esports versus re-orienting their time and energies back towards careers that they had prepared for while in university became more pressing. The decision to leave the UCI Esports program was spurred by feelings of disillusionment around the relationships among team members, communications between the leadership and players, and feelings of being underappreciated by the program. However, even in moments of uncertainty, the definitive act of leaving the program was complicated by the desire of wanting to stay in the program to help out teammates and seek ways of creating solidarity among one’s teammates.

In Chapter 9, the research concludes with a return to the aim of the study, revisiting themes and insights outlined in the research, and examining how the Crossroads repeatedly framed how the players made meaning of their times at UCI Esports, and the inevitable decision needed to be made. The chapter outlines the combination of opportunities in collegiate esports, as well as takes into consideration the overall precarity of esports.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter outlines the key literature and theoretical framework guiding the direction of this dissertation. The framework includes an introduction to the topic of work versus play concerning committed video gameplay, a discussion of the serious leisure perspective (Stebbins, 1982; 2017), and a review of the theory of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2008; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). This section also examines the literature on adult and adolescent identity development through several formative theories from psychosocial, moral, and ethical perspectives. I review key components of each theory as it relates to the goal of this section of the dissertation, with selected critiques of authors. Finally, an explanation for integrating the self-authorship perspective into the larger guiding framework of serious leisure is provided. For both the serious leisure and self-authorship perspectives, a discussion on the strengths of each perspective is given within the context of this study’s guiding research questions about collegiate esports players.

2.1 Work versus Play

The existing literature related to digital work and play largely examines how the division between the two domains has become obscured, as the blurring between work and play continues to present challenges in understanding a committed orientation towards activities involving digital gaming technologies. Earlier work on the blurring between work and play in video games has examined the dedication that hobbyists invest in creating content for games they enjoy. For instance, the efforts by gaming “modding” communities can result in their work becoming increasingly appropriated into models for revenue generation in game development (Sotamaa, 2007). While this posits larger questions about the increasingly precarious and flexible nature of the digital economy (Bell, 1973; Fuchs, 2014), it also shows that the time invested as work and
play towards games can be exploited by outside interests because the committed leisure of modifying video games can look much like the work of professionally paid gaming development (Postigo, 2003).

Similarly, with virtual worlds and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), issues of work and play have also manifested as relevant questions to explore within the context of traditional notions of labor exploitation in-game. Instead of representing utopian spaces of uninhibited digital interactions, some MMORPG gaming worlds replicate traditional power structures (as in “gold farming”) through the commodification of leisure and play (Schulzke, 2014).

While some of the aforementioned studies provide the needed context to understanding work and play in games research, it is also apparent that the merging of the two topics may necessitate looking beyond just in-game activities to get a fuller understanding of what is taking place. For instance, Taylor, Bergstrom, Jenson, and de Castell (2015) offer insightful perspectives about the community of EVE Online gamers, addressing the very same concerns about labor exploration and the replications of power structures in situating EVE Online gaming as literal work. They add to the discourse around work versus play in games by arguing that the work of EVE Online play continued even when gamers signed off of the gaming client. Many EVE Online players persisted in doing the work (organizing) of community gaming practices in face-to-face interactions, as well as working to find ways to diffuse the knowledge of how to play EVE Online offline away from the game client.

Finally, Brock’s (2017) research on work and play is useful for this review, given that its motivation is to find within the work versus play literature an understanding of where to place the advent of collegiate esports with the broader gaming literature. Brock’s (2017) arguments are
firmly rooted within a normative perspective about the sanctity of play (Caillois, 2001). It is the rampant and hyper-focused nature of competitions in professional esports, and its obsession with winning at any cost, that ultimately corrupts the virtue of play. Brock (2017) maintains this line of ethical concern about competitive gaming in esports, drawing from broader ethical concerns in earlier research (Sotamaa, 2007) on modding communities. These works highlight the dangers that commercial interests pose in exploiting digital content creation and find further support with games-related research reflecting the same concerns about the threat of real-life economic and market dynamics and power structures being replicated within the games themselves (Schulzke, 2014; Taylor, Bergstrom, Jenson, & de Castell, 2015).

This research acknowledges the work done within the dynamics of the “work versus play” literature in video games by its examination of how competitive play can be usurped by rationalist, instrumentalist, and standardized practices from entities who may see the opportunity to exploit how games can bleed into work. However, while the work versus play literature focuses on the blurring effect that games can have in transforming itself into work, this research seeks to understand the longitudinal processes and effects—before, during, and after blurring occurs—that keep the domains of non-game work and play separated. In doing so, it becomes crucial to locate both a broader discussion of work and play, but also one that returns to a frame that also holds onto the tension of having to keep play separated from work—until one has to choose between the two.

2.2 The Serious Leisure Framework

Stebbins’ (2004) research on leisure and work revolves around the overlapping commonalities between both fields of study. Some domains of work afford individuals the ability to engage in self-enriching and fulfilling activities, in the same way, that some leisure activities
also afford benefits of self-development and enjoyment. Engaging in specific forms of work, such as consulting, skilled trade, and custom work can generate values associated with fulfilling work, such as “success, achievement, freedom of action, individual personality, and activity” (Stebbins, 2004, p. 2). It becomes important to understand how certain types of work-like activities can inspire meaning and purpose in peoples’ lives, just as how a dedication towards leisure activities can also lend feelings of accomplishment and fulfillment.

It is through Stebbins’ (1978, 1979, 1992) early ethnographic work on comedians, athletes, singers, and amateur scientists that a definition of serious leisure emerged:

Serious leisure can be defined as the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of its special skills and knowledge.

(Stebbins, 1992, p. 3)

Stebbins outlines a set of defining characteristics and benefits linked to serious leisure pursuits: perseverance, career, effort, knowledge/skill acquisition, durable benefits (self-actualization, self-enrichment, feelings of accomplishment), a community ethos, and a sense of identity (Stebbins, 2007).

When individuals pursue some type of leisure activity with a serious commitment to an activity, research shows the variety of ways people persevere and overcome obstacles in their dedication to a serious leisure pursuit, which can encompass embarrassment, exhaustion, annoyance, anxiety, and injury (Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2002; Major, 2001; Yarnal & Dowler, 2002/2003). For instance, Lamont, Kennelly, and Moyle (2015) give insight into the perseverance strategies of triathlon runners who avoid locations that could be canceled due to harsh weather conditions. In contemplating future events, runners had to make the difficult
decision of scaling back their participation in triathlons. In another study, Gibson, Willming, and Holdnak (2002) explored the unrelenting pride participants had for the University of Florida’s Gator football team by revealing the justifications fans made in defining their loyalty during times when their team accumulated a series of wins, but most importantly, how they defined themselves during times when the team was losing games.

Looking at how perseverance is exercised or negotiated through competitive environments is relevant for this review because it highlights not only the boundaries of and dedication to participation in one’s preferred leisure activities but also how far leisure participants are willing to push those boundaries. This is important in two ways. First, understanding how individuals find ways to control their leisure pursuits to support a balance between competing life demands can help situate that leisure activity within a larger social world for that individual. Second, finding out why people are willing to transgress boundaries or neglect a healthy balance between their leisure pursuits and outside responsibilities can highlight reasons for an extreme commitment to serious leisure and its meaning to the individual.

Stebbins (1982) articulates the importance of commitment in serious leisure pursuits. Commitments are contextual and negotiated whether professionals or amateurs are the focus of analysis. For instance, professionals can have “continuance commitments” (Becker, 1960; Kantor, 1969; Stebbins, 1970b) imposed upon them through legal contracts or commitments can manifest through social evolution, such as one’s level of seniority. As defined, commitments imposed upon a person through legal or social contracts differ from more ordinary understandings of commitment as something that is usually demonstrated by personal choice. For amateurs, the quality and nature of one’s dedication are regarded as “value commitment,” where amateurs are given the space to make a judgment about the activity over time. In either
case, the notion of commitment figures prominently as a crucial part of psychological and human development to show how individuals grow and how identity is constructed (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1980; Marcia, 1980; Perry, 1981).

Individuals pursuing a serious leisure activity can find themselves generating a career in their chosen activity. Within the relevant literature (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1961; Hall, 1948; Hughes, 1937), the organizing principle around the concept of one’s career can have slightly different meanings, but there is consensus about a few underlying principles. For Stebbins (1970a), the concept of a “subjective career” refers to the continuity in time of one’s participation in activities, marked by a series of contingencies and meaningful events, with growth happening along stages. Five career stages characterize the construction of a career: beginning, development, establishment, maintenance, and decline.

Heuser’s (2005) study on Australian women’s involvement in lawn bowling presents an interesting exploration of the stage development of one’s career through the historical context of a game that has a 160-year history in Australia. While the participants registered going through the various stages of career development, what is especially insightful about the study is the recognition that development for the Australian participants emerged in a manner that did not confirm previous research on how traditional careers develop (Hastings, Kurth, & Meyer, 1989). Rather than articulating a career path that unfolds in a linear progression with a beginning, middle, and end, participants in Heuser’s (2005) study outlined a more indirect path of development, especially during the middle period when players alternated among being social players, serious players, and retirement.

While all five of Stebbins’ stages offer important ways of understanding the unfolding processes of career development, it is important to understand how serious leisure participants
negotiate growth beyond the beginning stage. For instance, the women Australian competitors started to talk about getting “hooked” on the game, making commitments to competitions, and then finding ways to take part in the wider community of bowlers, even if there was not a strictly competitive dynamic. While this review does not focus on the serious leisure participation of older adults, understanding the various stages of development, as demonstrated by the women in the lawn bowling community, could be relevant for future research on careers when examined as not a strictly linear process.

The benefits that come with pursuing a serious leisure activity, which includes self-actualization, self-enrichment, self-expression, regeneration, accomplishment, self-image, social interactions, and belongingness, are a fundamental part of taking leisure seriously. The dabbler, dilettante, or player will generally lack access to the durable benefits afforded to more serious leisure participants. This is not to say that casual leisure and play do not grant players any benefits in the act of play, but Stebbins (1992) does argue that play is conceptualized as being separate from one’s daily experiences, lacking a connection to real life, and being disconnected from material gain (Huizinga, 1955). A non-serious pursuit of play does not provide the needed structure for realizing lasting benefits.

The realization of benefits is marked by a sense of urgency, seriousness, and commitment to a serious leisure activity that can grow over time. This makes looking at amateur athletes and competitors appealing for this research. Overall, participation in sports offers tremendous satisfaction for players (Kelly & Freysinger, 2000); participation in sports often highlights “flow” as one of the major benefits (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975); and youth participation in sports has positive impacts on moral reasoning and social identity (Kleiber, 1999; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997).
For Siegenthaler and Gonzalez (1997), the benefits of leisure can begin with children who are involved with youth sports. Youth sports involvement that seeks to complement the developmental needs of younger players by allowing them some form of personal choice and agency in how they approach their activities could lead to a lasting and positive view of serious leisure activities as they mature. This frames the experiences of serious leisure for younger players more positively and highlights the importance of working hard to meet personal goals, with commitment and effort not always strongly associated with the desire to only win games (Dubois, 1986; Marten, 1993).

Benefits associated with serious leisure are not confined to direct participation in an activity. The benefits associated with being seriously committed to sports are also apparent outside the context of direct competition. In a study on the stress and coping strategies of collegiate athletes (Kimball & Freysinger, 2003), the participants in the study note that successfully navigating college life as student-athletes has made them recognize their talents and potential to do bigger things. One student-athlete became more confident in her skills to pursue her ambitions to become a doctor because of how well she was able to manage her time. This is a crucial point because finding how indirect participation may lead to attaining benefits that are not necessarily directly attributed to the core activity itself offers a broader picture of how individuals pursue a commitment to serious leisure.

Dilley and Scratons’ (2010) study of women climbers is particularly useful in highlighting the benefits of participation and does not draw only upon the positives related to climbing. This study shows that serious leisure participation for the women climbers was about larger goals related to self-care, resisting social expectations about women’s roles, being social, and showing solidarity with other climbers. While the main activity of climbing was certainly
enjoyable, and the physicality of climbing allowed them to address issues outside of the realm of the sport, participation in serious climbing fundamentally allowed the women participants in the study to simply be social with others in a way that affirmed their interests in a more “masculine-oriented sports”—while attending to and acknowledging their identities as women climbers.

While Stebbins speaks about the primacy of the “core activity” in serious leisure pursuits, and the importance of understanding that the direct appeal of any serious leisure pursuit resides in a narrow set of actions (e.g., for the avid down-hill skier, the main appeal of this leisure activity is simply the act of gliding down a hill) (Stebbins, 2004), Dilley and Scratons’ (2010) study demonstrates that exclusively concentrating on the core activity fails to capture what participants of this serious leisure activity find important. Similarly, as Kimball and Freysinger (2003) note in their interviews with college athletes, simply being part of an athletics program, and the responsibilities that come along with being a student-athlete, offer meaningful opportunities to grow and develop in ways that are not necessarily mapped back to taking part in the physical sport.

In the realm of competitive video gaming, parallels can be drawn with orienting oneself towards a more serious pursuit of video games. Taylor’s (2003) ethnographic work around the community of avid EverQuest gamers reveals several ways in which people who are extremely dedicated to this game will often articulate a style of play that lies outside the expected norms of conventional gaming. For example, power gamers are inclined to be ruthlessly efficient in executing strategies and finding the best way to increase one’s level or rank. In failure, power gamers take the time to review, assess, and learn from mistakes. This leads power gamers to constantly set new goals, aspire to conquer the game in unexpected ways, and accept that
achieving rank requires significant effort and work. Finally, the work associated with being a power gamer eventually leads to greater technical abilities and skill development.

Within the theoretical framework of serious leisure (Stebbins, 2004), certain dimensions of the power gamer (Taylor, 2003) appear to align with several characteristics associated with serious leisure. First, the serious leisure framework stresses that individuals committed to leisure will often persevere through setbacks and obstacles to attain some type of goal or achievement. For power gamers, losing becomes a significant interruption, but one of the features distinguishing a power gamer from a casual gamer is the ability to reflect and learn after a loss. Similarly, those who are committed to a serious leisure activity will find themselves engaged in a career marked by memorable moments, significant turning points, and development. For power gamers, similar paths of development came from “dynamic goal setting” (Taylor, 2003, p. 302), referring to the constant striving to be better in different ways through either leveling up, collecting certain coveted in-game items, or being accepted into elite gaming teams or guilds. Finally, serious leisure careers are uniquely identified through significant effort invested in an activity and the accumulation of expertise and technical skill developed over time. Taylor (2006) notes that power gamers in her study showed dedication towards effort and hard work and did not mind suffering through the “grind” of repetitive actions to achieve a goal.

While Taylor’s (2003, 2006) work on amateur power gamers reveals helpful insights about the type of in-game dedication and effort indicative of this type of committed amateur play, she also makes larger connections between the power gamer and professional gamer. This is important because part of the critical lens of the serious leisure perspective is to understand where the commonalities lie between activities regarded as work and activities regarded as leisure. For Stebbins (2004), the dividing line between work—such as skilled trade, custom
work, and consulting—and leisure can often blur given that both domains of activities can impart enduring and lasting benefits related to personal success, a sense of agency, freedom, and achievement. This is also why using a serious leisure perspective for this study is useful, as it gives this research a vocabulary to work through some of the nuances of amateur and professional esports.

Seo’s (2016) study on the professional identity development and transformation of esports players provides tremendous insight into the evolution of this emerging field of professional competitive video gaming. Findings reveal both a unique set of practices and expectations from the domain of professional esports, but also practices that reveal themselves to be familiar to earlier research on committed gaming (Taylor 2003, 2006). Although Seo’s (2016) research approaches the topic of esports from a marketing perspective, his qualitative findings suggest that the culture of competitive esports promotes values, such as competition, fairness, and self-improvement—values about committed gaming that amateur power gamers also expressed as being important (Taylor, 2003, 2006). For instance, one esports gamer respondent articulated that being part of a competitive esports scene means constantly getting better and improving one’s level and technical expertise, and the means of doing that is via competition. The effort and perseverance characteristic of being a professional is marked by a conscious effort to watch other gamers on their streams, follow online esports gaming communities, and take gaming seriously during practice.

Competitive esports players also explained that involvement in a competitive gaming scene allowed them to realize some of the social benefits of serious leisure pursuit, such as the realization of a career, and the development of a professional identity (Seo, 2016). Careers in a professional esports context can be framed as a progression of the “hero’s journey” (Campbell,
1968). In such a journey, the hero traverses several stages that remove the protagonist from the comforts of his or her surrounding environment, to a stage where he or she is tested, and finally, where the individual becomes an expert in his or her domain of activity. This progression into building proficiency in one’s domain becomes a catalyst, for one participant in Seo’s (2016) study, to note that reaching this final stage of the journey allowed her to integrate her identity deeper within the culture of esports. No longer confined to being named as simply a gamer, she argues, her identity in esports has expanded into administrative and governance work within esports as a whole.

Taylor’s (2003, 2006) research on power gamers and Seo’s (2016) research on the social world of esports provides important context for the justification of the present research. It outlines the starting and ending boundaries of the present research, with the committed effort of amateur power gamers at one end, and the serious dedication of professional esports athletes on the other. The gap that this research intends to fill is understanding not only if similar benefits exist for collegiate esports players, but also how students are negotiating and balancing competing demands, responsibilities, and tensions in similar contexts.

As demonstrated, an orientation towards a serious leisure pursuit of gaming exists in both amateur and professional pursuits of competitive esports, with unique benefits ascribed to a serious leisure orientation existing for both types of players. This research seeks to understand not only if those benefits existed for collegiate esports players, but also under what conditions unique to a college environment, one filled with competing demands, responsibilities, and tensions will those benefits unfold.

In her book *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*, Taylor (2012) notes that the journey towards the professionalization of esports can
sometimes be a fraught process of confusion and uncertainty for players who are often quite young and inexperienced. The professionalization process for committed gamers can begin with players entering:

lower-level ad hoc competitions interspersed with continued schoolwork. While a prize check is one early signal that a person is starting to transition into professionalism, it is often being signed to an established team that marks a pivotal career turn. (Taylor, 2012, p. 107)

While this certainly appears to capture a particular process in professionalization, the reference to school is only briefly mentioned. In fact, with the increasing interest in and growth of collegiate esports programs in the United States, schools (colleges and universities) may begin to serve as significant points of socialization and professionalization, with implications for the broader competitive esports scene overall. As that competitive culture in esports takes root, I return to the questions central to this dissertation, that of understanding how college esports players balance the demands, on the one hand, that come with taking part in an activity that commands so much of one’s leisure time versus, on the other, a commitment to one’s academics and schoolwork. To investigate that tension, in the next section, I explore the usefulness of applying a socio-cognitive-developmental theory of development within the context of esports—especially when players are placed in a position (that of the “Crossroads”) where their serious commitment to games requires individuals to make a definitive choice between the two demands.

2.3 Psychosocial Theories of the Development of the Self

Formative psychosocial research often explores development across a range of issues and questions, including trust between child and adult and childhood autonomy, issues about intimacy, relationships, and the increasing realization of mortality and death. Within that
evolutionary journey, at some point, the emergence of a unique identity linked to adolescence and early adulthood begins to take shape, causing the need to address specific questions about one’s purpose in life, or grappling with one’s identity.

Being one of the first to propose a theoretical explanation of identity development from adolescence into adulthood, Erikson (1959/1980, 1963, 1968) argued that the ultimate motivation for the individual is to reach ego-identity through a series of reoccurring crisis points that require resolution. Representing a period during adolescence when exploration of identity takes on immense importance, Erikson identifies development beginning with the construction of trust within the formative years of a child’s life, as the child begins to understand the relationship between himself or herself and the caregiving interactions from the parent. The onset of the first crisis appears for the child when care is not consistently given, and with the maturing of the child, a sense of autonomy and a willingness to explore asserts itself. Progressively, as the child moves through a series of stages that tests their sense of exploration, a growing confidence in satisfying one’s curiosity manifests, and the conviction that identity is fundamentally linked to being a productive and industrious person is slowly realized.

However, what is insightful about this theoretical perspective is when individuals begin to operate within what Erikson (1980) refers to as the “Identity Versus Identity Diffusion” and “Intimacy Versus Isolation” stages. Conceptualized as a transition point between adolescence and adulthood, both stages offer a distinct look at when adult identity begins to form, as one’s sense of personal autonomy requires resolution through exploring answers to questions such as “What do I want to be?” about one’s future, newly formed relationships, and one’s role in society. At this stage of early adult identity development, answers to these questions are often provided by experimentation with different types of identities, and the constant source of
guidance, solace, and the company of one’s social network as the individual transitions into this identity phase (Muuss, Velder, & Porton, 1996). What is important to highlight is the need to differentiate oneself from one’s family and parental influence, opening the space to engage in identity experimentation and role development.

Experimentation is an important part of identity development, but a crucial component to generating meaningful experiences during experimentation is also taking commitments seriously, as that can be one way of triggering growth through an identity crisis (Erikson, 1968). For Marcia (1966, 1980), “commitments” and “crises” are at the heart of his empirical extension of Erikson’s (1968) work. Marcia (1980) identifies growth or stagnation as a combination of the existence and non-existence of commitments and crises within the individual.

Similar to Erikson’s (1968) theoretical articulation of development, Marcia’s (1980) theory of identity possesses a point of tension as individuals start to stake out commitments to certain paths in life and, as a result, begin to experience interpersonal and social pressures to conform. Marcia’s (1980) empirical grounding of Erikson’s (1968) work is also useful in demonstrating what struggles young adults go through as they transition into “commitment/crisis” status. Specifically, commitment is understood as someone who shows ownership over decisions made, values embraced, and goals set (Bilsker, Schiedel, & Marcia, 1988). Similarly, Erikson (1968) also addressed issues of commitment through the discourse around “fidelity,” but this was highlighted in the latter stages of development. Overall, Marcia’s (1980) own theoretical perspective of adolescence and young adulthood frame identity development, transformation, and change as being marked by confidence in one’s actions and decisions. The individual has not only started to question the usefulness of external sources of knowledge and advice but he or she will also find themself to be a legitimate source of
knowledge. As a result, self-confidence and a real sense of oneself start to appear for the individual (Marcia, 1994).

Addressing specific questions about one’s identity and what is important in life is a crucial step in understanding individual identity. Similarly, locating where the independent self emerges within the different theoretical perspectives along the continuum of adolescence and adulthood provides a timeline to focus upon for this review. However, serious reservations about the inherent biases of Erikson’s (1968) theory against women have been identified in the literature (Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1996). What stands out as problematic with Erikson’s (1968) theoretical perspective when it comes to constructing a more nuanced and complex profile of identity is the investment in a linear understanding of identity formation, and it has become increasingly problematic to use early theories of identity development because research into culturally and ethnically diverse populations has complicated some of the assumptions behind the linear modeling of identity development (Renn, 2004). As a result, there are calls within the field of adolescent and young adult identity development to find more nuanced and inclusive theories that look beyond the traditional reliance on White male perspectives, and theories that take a more holistic look at integrating different aspects of identity beyond a focus on cognitive growth (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010).

Chickering and Reisser (1993) offer early theoretical insight within the psychosocial paradigm, with Chickering (1969) providing research about college students between 1959 and 1965 and putting forth the position that reconciling identity issues is the principal concern for all college students. Chickering and Reisser (1993) provide a counter-perspective to some of the linear theories of development by offering the idea of dimensions (or “vectors”) of growth, which share some similarities with Erikson’s (1968) and Marcia’s (1980) conceptualizations of
identity construction. However, a significant difference lies in Chickering and Reissers’ (1993) more flexible views about the nature of stages in identity development. Unlike the linearity of growth that characterizes classical perspectives of identity construction, Chickering and Reisser (1993) argue that in traversing between modes or stages, vectors have a non-linear nature which can be “expressed more appropriately by a spiral or steps than by a straight line” (p. xv).

The conceptual acknowledgment that the nature of change does not sit neatly into compartments and is not necessarily always forward-moving is an important concession to make in gaining a more complex understanding of how students mature. Young adults and college students may find themselves negotiating distinct stages in life concurrently, and possibly returning to previously settled periods of development to reflect and reexamine issues.

2.4 Ethical and Moral Identity Development

What moral and ethical theories of identity development share with psychosocial theories is situating the individual in an uncomplicated moral and ethical universe of decision-making responsibilities and consequences. Ethical and moral theoretical frameworks begin with a distinct shift in conceptualizing the structures of identity growth, moving away from the specific questions that individuals seek to answer about their own identity, and towards the use of cognitive structures to reconcile dissonance and conflict. This leads to the emergence of an identity that has been shaped by considered and nuanced moral reasoning.

Moral development takes place with the realization that the individual occupies a world with increasing social responsibilities to others and begins with a straightforward worldview that actions should be evaluated by whether one can avoid punishments (Kohlberg, 1976). For the individuals occupying the early stages of moral consideration, choices are straightforward, uncomplicated, and often given. Moral complexity starts to materialize along six stages as
interests and desires start to acknowledge the existence of others beyond oneself. According to Kohlberg (1976), the individual sees social exchange with others as needing to be governed by a sense of equity towards peers and a capacity to generate consensus. Prioritizing interpersonal relationships becomes a social imperative, as the individual starts to suppress personal desires, wants, and concerns if asserting oneself comes brings relationships with significant others into conflict. The final stage of moral development for Kohlberg is for the individual to achieve a state of separation (‘prior-to-society’) that allows the individual to make decisions based upon one’s principles.

On the other hand, basic ethical cognitive structures can start with simple dichotomous groupings, such as actions being considered strictly right and wrong, or good and bad, with authority figures being granted loyalty in their knowledge and certainty (Perry, 1981). As Perry states about the nature of early identity development in relation to knowledge acquisition, “Knowledge and goodness are perceived as quantitative accretions of discrete rightness to be collected by hard work and obedience…” (p. 80). Consequently, ethical growth occurs as individuals start to traverse across preliminary stages of development and begin to engage in the process of reconciling moments of cognitive dissonance. Complex knowledge of the world can be triggered by the realization that traditional pillars and sources of knowledge, such as parents and teachers, can conflict with other sources of knowledge, and that authority figures sometimes simply do not have all the answers (Perry, 1981). This cognitive state of “duality” soon becomes replaced by a more nuanced ethical state of “multiplicity,” which is a period when various opinions, worldviews, and perspectives are generally accepted as valid, as the contingent nature of knowledge is slowly recognized.
What is important to recognize with both ethical and moral theoretical perspectives is the balancing act between the self and others. From Perry’s (1981) perspective, complex knowing is not only the possible rejection of traditional authority figures as sources of knowledge; it is the relinquishment of traditional sources of knowledge with the hope that the space created will allow for more diverse views and persons to be recognized. Alternatively, the moral framework articulated by Kohlberg (1976) is not only about personal development, but it is also about a greater understanding of one’s social role in society and seeking a balance between one’s own needs with the needs of family and friends. In both cases, the questions being negotiated are not as important as how one can utilize processes to reconcile one’s perspective of what is right or wrong about the world while considering others around him or her. This marks the beginning of identity development.

While Kohlberg (1976) and Perry (1981) offered different theories of moral and ethical identity development, they do so with the knowledge that their theories were not representative of women at the colleges and universities they selected to study. The moral articulation of identity development that takes into consideration women’s voices is important to acknowledge, given that so much of the domain of identity development has often favored looking at how individuals grow from men’s perspective (Gilligan, 1982).

Gilligan’s (1982) research recognizes the importance that a woman’s perspective brings to the academic discourse on identity development. Although not the only early perspective (Josselson, 1991) to use women as the basis of theoretical identity development, Gilligan provides a distinctive approach to balancing individual identity as it emerges within the web of social responsibilities from a perspective that prioritizes relationships, connections, and care. Viewing identity development as something that manifests through issues related to care orients
research towards considering values that have been traditionally considered more “feminine”, but Gilligan argues that her theory transcends traditional boundaries related to gender (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Specifically, where Gilligan (1982) diverges with earlier theoretical positions about early stages of development is in locating early development with the need to survive, sometimes in situations of social isolation or a state of psychological pain or hurt. Similar to Kohlberg (1976) and Perry (1981), Gilligan’s (1982) early developmental markers position the individual as being self-centered and residing within his or her disconnected moral world.

However, one can see where development becomes meaningful for Gilligan (1982), as her paradigm represents a new lens compared to traditional models by positing that a woman’s perspective about growth is about reorienting prejudices that have traditionally favored the men-dominated ideals of social separation (that of the individual away from family and peers) over more female-oriented values of inclusion and relationships (bringing relationships closer to women). As Gilligan (1982) states about her realization of how women understood personal growth and identity and how relationships shape this dynamic:

Reframing these questions to make these relational realities explicit—how to live in relationship with others, what to do in the face of conflict—I found that I heard women’s and men’s voices differently. Women’s voices suddenly made new sense and women’s approaches to conflict were often deeply instructive because of the constant eye to maintaining relational order and connection. It was concern about relationship [sic] that made women’s voices sound “different” within a world that was preoccupied with separation and obsessed with creating and maintaining boundaries between people—like the New Englanders in Robert Frost’s poem who say that “good fences make good
neighbors.” When I began writing, however, concerns about relationships were seen for the most part as “women’s problems”. (p. xiv)

What is instructive about this quote is seeing what was once considered “women’s problems,” that of connections, care, and consideration, of identity development has turned out to be a feature that has given a more complex and holistic picture of human identity. So far, in examining the literature on identity development, a significant shift in focus and perspective appears to have taken place away from traditional models of identity development. Initially finding grounding in Erikson’s theory (1959/1980), linear models have been criticized for failing to fully represent the nuance of development through its strict application of linear perspectives, and the lack of representation of ethnically diverse populations. While Kohlberg (1976) and Perry (1981) offered different theories of moral and ethical identity development, they did so knowing that their theories were not fully representative of diverse populations or representative of women at the colleges and universities they selected to study (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010).

Recognizing the shortcomings of these theories, it is also helpful to highlight their more holistic qualities and why they are important to this review. For instance, Kohlberg (1976), expresses the belief that the content of moral consideration is not necessarily of prime importance in identity development. Instead, value is placed upon the processes and structures in thought about morality. In Chickering (1969) and Perry (1981), the recognition that development does not unfold linearly and straightforwardly lends valuable perspectives about how to think about identity construction that can be cyclical. Finally, although not considered “traditional” in the literature, Gilligan (1982) provides tremendous value in rounding out the picture of understanding identity development from the perspective that sees care as moral guidance, where
one’s relationship with oneself becomes equally important in capturing a holistic perspective about the construction of identity.

2.5 Self-Authorship as Identity Development

Thus far, this review has outlined ways in which traditional, deterministic, and classical viewpoints about identity development have become more nuanced and complex, taking a more holistic perspective on how young adults and students grow and mature. The self-authorship perspective complements the main theoretical perspective of this research and provides an appropriate lens to examine competitive collegiate esports players through the field of student development. Looking at the development of competitive college esports players through the interactions of cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions via the manifestation of their internal voice creates a more complicated, but also a more realistic, picture of the lives of students who are also competitive gamers in college.

A holistic view of identity development incorporates a series of assumptions about knowledge, learning, and how individuals seek to reconcile differing values and wider perspectives into a coherent whole. Principal among these assumptions is a constructivist-developmental perspective that individuals construct contextual meaning out of experiences, and the significant role this plays in knowledge creation. The constructivist point of view asserts that individuals are deeply implicated in the creation of their reality, perceptions, and values through experiences with the outside world (Willis & Jost, 2007).

In addition, a holistic perspective of development seeks to understand how individuals negotiate tension, conflict, and dissonance by focusing on meaning-making capacities. For Kegan (1982), the very essence associated with meaning-making is central to one’s being as a human:
Thus it is not that a person makes meaning, as much as that the activity of being a person is the activity of meaning-making. There is thus no feeling, no experience, no thought, no perception, independent of a meaning-making context in which it becomes a feeling, an experience, a thought, a perception, because we are the meaning-making context. (p. 11)

This quote signals that the essential nature of all humans to be reflective, feeling, and thinking beings fortifies our meaning-making abilities. The very process of meaning-making happens between the margins of human experience and the willful reflection upon those very experiences (Boes, Baxter Magolda, & Buckley, 2010). Meaning-making is deeply connected to the full range of human experience and plays a significant role in process of development (Baxter Magolda, 2009a). This has implications for researchers when selecting methods and analyses that are more interpretive and qualitative. Because meaning-making is central to cognitive processes related to how individuals make sense of the world around them, it can only be approached through investigations of how people structure their justifications to commitments, articulate their worldviews, and provide a rationale for various choices made (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012).

Overall, the traditional concept of development has referred to a specific set of dynamics of change. First, that development unfolds across time and in a manner characterized as increasing in complexity along a linear trajectory (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). Second, development from one period of complexity to another keeps elements of a previous structure, while also incorporating and creating new and more complex structures. Third, as development progresses, individuals foster the ability to remove themselves as “subjects” of their evolution and obtain a perspective of “object” that situates change in a manner to be reflected upon (Kegan, 1994). Although holistic perspectives have accepted this pattern of development,
where significant reservations have been made, it has been related to the assumptions about the strict linearity of progress and change (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012).

Kegan’s (1982, 1994) theoretical links among meaning-making, development, and self-authorship become clear when looking at how central the processes of integration are to growth. At one level, questions related to how knowledge is gained (“How do I know?”) become important to the individual. On another level, questions about identity (“Who am I?”) and how one sees himself or herself become central to constructing identity. Lastly, questions related to one’s relationship with others (“How do I relate to others?”) and the type of connections someone cultivates inform development. A more complex and holistic theoretical perspective, such as self-authorship, looks at each dimension, not in isolation, but as an integrated whole (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012).

For this review, finding the initial and precursory stages of development before and including a self-authoring phase becomes helpful in understanding the identity development of college students. Kegan (1994) asserts that between “one-half to two-thirds of the adult population appears not to have fully reached the fourth order of consciousness” (p. 188). Within the theoretical hierarchy of Kegan’s (1994) research, the fourth order of consciousness is the “self-authoring mind,” which is characterized as a state where individuals have established internal validation of values and rules.

Baxter Magolda (2001) also refers to an awareness by students that they lack this ability of self-authorship as they prepared to graduate from college. This manifested as a lack of confidence and method in asserting one’s voice and direction in shaping one’s future. So, while the goal of self-authorship is acknowledged in the literature, reaching the stage of self-authorship is quite rare. However, even if participants in this research did not attain a fully self-authoring
perspective, it is still helpful to understand the myriad ways in which young adults and students explored their meaningful experiences through the grounding of that reflection.

Baxter Magolda’s research (1992, 2001, 2008, 2009a) is based on a longitudinal study of epistemological, interpersonal, and intrapersonal integration and identity development in college students. In total, she interviewed 101 students (50 men and 51 women), all in their late teens and early twenties. Her extensive research on self-authorship emphasizes that identity development is a sequence that begins with a set of externally defined definitions and progresses towards a maturing of one’s meaning-making capacity that is more internally defined.

Baxter Magolda (2001) outlines a four-stage path towards self-authorship, with students starting with a reliance and dependency on parents, teachers, and mentors for guidance. Referred to as “Following External Formulas,” individuals at this stage will view and judge the world around them in terms of being “right” or “wrong”, with ambiguity needing external intervention due to the lack of personal confidence about addressing issues that lack a clear solution. It is the unique focus on college in Baxter Magolda’s (2001) research, however, that lends valuable insight into the type of dependency seen in her participants. For instance, having little input in the type of major a student selects for study, being beholden to the opinions and judgments of one’s college peers, and being prevented from guiding one’s path in college towards a certain career are some of the consequences associated with being defined by and dependent on others (Baxter Magolda, 2009b).

In the literature, ethnic identity can play a significant role in how individuals work out and resolve issues. While Baxter Magolda (1992) gives empirical findings for dependency, those findings draw from predominantly samples of White men at Miami University of Ohio (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). Torres and Hernandez’s (2007) study of 29 Latino college
students over four years provides needed context about how ethnically non-majority students negotiate identity development. In the early stage of “Following External Formulas,” or being externally defined (Baxter Magolda, 2001), Torres and Hernandez’s (2007) findings suggest that Latino students do not necessarily extend the same degree of trust and dependency to authority figures outside of their family. Latino students are far more likely to seek guidance from parents, family, and peers as external sources of guidance, unlike students at Miami University, who sought out a wider range of external sources of authority.

While the present study does not place ethnicity as central to development, this research seeks to understand the different ways in which students from diverse backgrounds and identities negotiate development within a college setting. Torres (2003), Torres and Baxter Magolda (2004), and Torres and Hernandez (2007) offer the first major look at self-authorship mediated through issues of ethnicity and race, but with larger implications for future research that touches upon similar themes. For this review, examining why Latino students were at first uncritical and accepting of the stereotypes associated with Mexicans, and then later used these negative views as motivation to further find pride and grounding in their ethnic background, can provide insight into parallels with other types of students who find themselves marginalized as a group in colleges. Being externally defined presents its challenges towards development, but understanding how various factors, such as race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, can present additional barriers to acceptance becomes crucial in understanding how other student populations negotiate identity development.

Following a path that has often been defined by external advice, guidance, and instruction, individuals move into a more nuanced, and complex, position about what individuals believe is the right way to make life-changing choices—what Baxter Magolda (2001) refers to as
the “Crossroads.” Students occupying the Crossroads start to recognize that following the advice and guidance of others may not necessarily be in their best interests. At this point, the Crossroads represents a transitional period, consisting of both externally derived meaning-making and validation, along with a growing tension as an individual starts to construct more assertive ways to express his or her internal voice (Lahey, Felix, Goodman, Kegan, & Souvaine, 2011). In another significant study on self-authorship, the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education (WNS) looked at the development of 315 college students through a series of interviews taking place in 2006, 2007, and 2010 (Pascarella & Blaich, 2013). The WNS study largely confirms some of the earlier research by Baxter Magolda (2001) with a slightly more diverse set of participants, which included 34 African-Americans, 29 Hispanics, and 27 Asian/Pacific Islanders.

For the WNS participants, entering the Crossroads necessarily meant recognizing the incremental steps being taken as their viewpoints and perspectives started to emerge as a counter-voice to the tendency to seek outside advice. While this was true for several participants in the study, students within the Crossroads stage felt unable to break free from external influence (Baxter Magolda, King, Taylor, & Wakefield, 2012). For instance, one participant in the WNS study found herself exploring more of her justifications for why she took certain political positions when prompted by her professor in college to articulate her views in class. The active meaning-making she engaged in at college allowed her to sort out her viewpoints from those she had traditionally accepted as wisdom from others. However, her interviews also showed that her brother became a constant source of validation for her and the opinions she held, where seeking advice from her brother before she followed through with a major decision was often a necessary step in her decision making (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012).
While entering the Crossroads is a necessary step towards self-authorship, the first cause and steps leading to the Crossroads can be a disruptive process. Parks (2011) uses the word “shipwreck” in his writings to encapsulate the devastation and disappointment experienced when coming to terms with the reality that external definitions can often fail. For student of minority or marginalized backgrounds, negative experiences can trigger individuals to move into the Crossroads sooner than other individuals. In Torres and Hernandez’s (2007) study, the realization that racist viewpoints about Mexicans in America still exist became the catalyst for a young woman to work through some of the dissonance and negative views encountered. Resolving the dissonance led her to further strengthen ties to her ethnic identity in the end.

In two other qualitative studies, Pizzolato (2003, 2004) examined over 50 high-risk (those considered likely to leave or drop out prematurely) college students, who were mostly non-White females, on the topic of identity development in college. Findings from the study show that students from this particular college population of high-risk students started to internally grapple with several identity development issues, such as the Crossroads and self-authorship, far earlier than noted in previous research on non-high-risk dropouts. The unique, complicated, and troubling environments of Pizzolato’s participants extend the context and understanding of the motivating factors for this population of students in justifying their ambitions and goals. Unlike what was found in Baxter Magolda’s (1992, 2001, 2008, 2009a) longitudinal research on self-authorship, one of the participants in Pizzolato’s (2004) study expressed that he was searching for ways of internally justifying his voice and motivations for attending college, knowing that pursuing a path towards greater learning could conflict with his community’s perceptions about higher education.
Pizzolato’s (2003, 2004) studies offer valuable insight for this review by showing how aspirations to attend college can trigger the self to negotiate with a more advanced meaning-making orientation in identity development. Importantly, this opens up interesting questions about identity for certain student populations, and the particular backgrounds students bring to the processes of meaning-making. Also, while college itself can be an avenue for development (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016), it may be fruitful to examine how students start to move into a self-authoring perspective with the help of universities and colleges, as academic institutions can lend legitimization to identity acceptance outside of mainstream society.

In the identity development literature, Kegan (1982) explains the necessity of a balance between challenge and support taking place through “holding environments” (p. 116). The holding environments function in two ways: as places that currently support where people are at in their developmental stage, and as places that provide the structure and support to evolve beyond where they are now. With marginalized identities slowly receiving public acceptance, it will be crucial to acknowledge both the characteristics that students bring to development and how they understand themselves. Particularly, understanding the role colleges play in lending legitimization and support for students in articulating and making public formerly invisible parts of themselves becomes crucial in gaining a complete picture of student development.

The final stage in Baxter Magolda’s (2001) path towards self-authorship is “Becoming the Author of One’s Life.” This is a stage in life where there exists an internal ability to define one’s values, beliefs, relationships, and identity. Someone who is self-authoring has allowed one’s internal voice to move to the foreground to mediate external pressures and influence. There is a greater awareness that one’s system of beliefs is inherently contingent upon and open to being renegotiated; but whatever change happens, an internal consultation and agency over
change reside with oneself. While Kegan’s (1994) theoretical work on the evolution of human
development and self-authorship (i.e., the “fourth order of consciousness”) has provided an
intellectual framework for looking at identity development from a holistic perspective, it is the
extensive empirical research by Baxter Magolda (1992, 2001, 2008, 2009a) that has grounded
many concepts from Kegan’s writings in the literature of identity development.

For Baxter Magolda’s participants (2008, 2009a), the early shift towards self-authorship
was characterized by an understanding of which events one has control over, and which were
completely beyond being influenced. Being able to understand and accept limitations as being a
natural order of things represents a pivotal moment of empowerment because it allowed the
young adults in Baxter Magolda’s (2008, 2009a) study to focus upon areas where agency over
one’s life can be exercised. Being able to step back and examine situations is a fundamental part
of having a self-authored perspective. Moving from a point of view that is considered “subject”
to a point of view that is considered “object” aids in allowing the individual to fully have power
over understanding what is happening around him or her (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). To experience
the world as a subject is to have a first-person perspective, to be embedded in the action and
social consequence of events. To be an object in the world is to stand apart from the subject and
transition to the observer, to reflect, think about, and finally take responsibility for one’s
decisions. For the student who can transition easily from one perspective to another, from a point
of embeddedness in one’s social world to an objective viewer of events, marks a necessary step
toward becoming self-authoring.

Similarly, constructing a lasting internal framework signals a point of maturity within
self-authorship. This marks a point of development when participants start to speak of having a
guiding philosophy in life. It is here when students in some of the studies in self-authorship also
start to integrate and piece together values, beliefs, relationships, and identities into a coherent whole that endures across time. In studies of lesbian college students and their experience with identity, Abes (2009) and Abes and Jones (2004) report about the journey of development for their participants, especially as they transitioned out of the Crossroads, dissatisfied with various attempts by others to place labels on their experiences in a heavily heteronormative environment. One college participant, however, articulated a good example of building an internal foundation by finding ways to integrate sexual, religious, class, and racial identities in such a way that even if her other identities presented challenges to her sexual identity as a lesbian, she could reconcile each of them to eventually have it become her foundation in self-authorship and identity development.

Abes and Jones’ study (2004) of lesbian and queer college students enlightens the conversation around identity development for today’s college students because it puts into focus the seemingly conflicting and complex realities that marginalized students may need to deal with as they openly express and represent themselves in more authentic ways. For some students in college, their authentic selves are visible, open, and proud. For other students, it is a matter of context as to whether someone is open and expressive or closeted and hidden. Understanding under what conditions marginalized students find it appropriate to position their identities as public and open, or whether to maintain hidden their authentic selves becomes helpful and informative overall when addressing concerns about identity development in college.

Finally, Baxter Magolda’s (2008, 2009a) research reveals that some of her participants spoke of the need to be committed. Often, commitments were largely abstract, something that was reflected upon but never actually executed. The key difference for individuals is that reflection about what one should do becomes embodied in the person. No longer should someone
reflect upon what is the right thing to do, but that the evolution of oneself into a self-authoring perspective will eventually transform knowledge into established wisdom.

The review of the theory of self-authorship, as well as studies providing empirical insight about the development of diverse student communities, shows that this study can be appropriately situated to address similar concerns about students who have taken on the identity of being collegiate esports players at their universities. Consequently, questions about whether competitive collegiate esports players are externally defined, occupy the middle ground in Baxter Magolda’s Crossroads, or have developed secure internal voices in articulating the type of future they see fit for themselves, become relevant to ask in light of the growing trend of institutional support for collegiate esports players.

2.6 Research Questions

The review of the literature situates the research towards exploring issues of young adult development through an examination of the serious leisure perspective within the context of college life and development. Tracing the evolution of commitment and dedication concerning collegiate esports, and looking at the growth and development of identity through a gradual emergence of an internal voice, the following research questions guide this study:

RQ1: How do collegiate esports scholarship players articulate commitment, effort, and dedication to their pursuits with esports?

Linking back to the serious leisure perspective, this question seeks to understand where the parameters that defined a dedicated and committed orientation towards video games began, and how that orientation was developed as a college esports player.
RQ2: How do collegiate esports scholarship players understand their experiences as gamers in relation to their academic and personal development in college?

Drawing from the theory of self-authorship, this question explores how players balanced the responsibilities and demands of being on a college esports team and a UCI student. Accordingly, those demands were apparent before, during, and leaving the program.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Qualitative methods were selected for this study due to the emergent gaming culture collegiate esports presents, as well as the need to understand how participants constructed meaning through lived experiences as collegiate esports players. In addressing the research questions presented in Chapter 2, participant observation at the UCI Esports arena was one of the principal methods of data collection. Additionally, interviews with esports players were conducted guided by a theoretical framework that includes Stebbins’ serious leisure perspective (1992, 2007) and Baxter Magolda’s theory of self-authorship (2008, 2012). These interviews explored how students created meaning from their participation on the teams, how they justified actions taken as players and students, and how they balanced between competing demands as members of the UCI Esports program. Finally, data were collected through document analysis, such as the institutional UCI Esports website, brochures, and pamphlets collected from the UCI Esports Arena to provide further qualitative data and insight.

3.1 Field Site

The primary location for research was on the campus of the University of California, Irvine (UCI) and the UCI Esports Arena. UCI belongs to a select few college esports programs in the United States that garnered a national championship win in the game *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009), as well as consistently placing in top positions for their other varsity game, *Overwatch*. The UCI Esports Arena officially opened in the summer of 2016, providing a gaming space of 3,500 square feet for students, families of students, faculty, alumni, and community members to attend and participate. At the time of the research, 80 custom-built iBuyPower gaming computers were present throughout the arena.
Even before setting foot on the UCI campus, I was aware from my preliminary fact-findings how different the program sat in relationship to other varsity programs. I first visited UCI in the summer of 2017, touring the campus and the UCI Esports Arena. Part of the motivation for the visit was to attain permission to conduct my dissertation work at UCI.

Reasons for selecting UCI as a site of research, in addition to its ambitions of wanting to be a championship program, was that it also aspired to be a hub of academic, gaming industry career, and entertainment-oriented activities around esports (Dhami, 2018; Lee, 2019). To promote those efforts, the UCI Esports program held its first esports symposium, hosting academic experts on the various topics by academics, faculty, analysts, and UCI students to discuss the emerging area of collegiate esports. Then, in 2018, UCI Esports launched the UCI Esports Conference, promoted as “the first academic event of its kind to focus on esports research and practice” (“UCI Esports Conference (ESC 2018),” 2017).

Consequently, The UCI Esports program was ideal for my research in two ways. First, its policy for being a space that was intentional (linking back to the program’s “pillars”) about its support for video game and esports research aided in my decision to invest time, effort, and resources into a location that was willing to grant me access to their program (staff, interns, and director), players (from their varsity and junior varsity teams), and location. More importantly, the UCI Esports program’s ongoing relationship with UCI Student Affairs on campus presented a dynamic between a program and student services that were uncommon among varsity esports programs in the United States. Because an important component of my dissertation research examined issues of student development (Baxter Magolda, 2008; 2012), the connection between the esports program and UCI Student Affairs made for an ideal research site.
The physical location of the UCI Esports Arena is situated right next to the Student Affairs building, as well as being centrally located on campus. The UCI Esports Arena is depicted in Figure 1. Gaming computers, gaming chairs, and computer peripherals (mice, headsets, keyboards) were provided by computer hardware companies from the gaming industry, such as Logitech, Asus, and Vertagear. I referenced online pictures and graphics of the Arena before my arrival to gain some sense of familiarity with the physical dimensions of the arena, but it was after my arrival that I was able to see how expansive the business interests and relationships of UCI’s Esports program were within the gaming industry.

Figure 1. UCI Esports Arena

An emerging culture of competitive gaming and esports on college campuses increasingly involves accepting the presence of corporate gaming sponsors on college grounds,
each with their own private interests of generating community, brand loyalty, and consumer engagement at the collegiate level. As I discuss later in this dissertation, although my research questions are not directly related to the allegiances between esports organizations, technology companies, and higher education at the organizational level, the juxtaposition of private and corporate interests, and the temptations they present to students on a public campus, speaks to the further relevance of why UCI Esports was a strong choice for this research.

3.2 Research Relationships

Starting in 2017, I initiated contact through email and social media with players, students, UCI Esports Arena staff (coordinator and player support), and UCI Esports interns. Generating rapport with the UCI Esports staff had been an important part not only of my preparing to conduct dissertation research but also throughout my data collection and analysis. From the staff’s perspective, given that I introduced myself as a Ph.D. student researcher, I was granted some form of insider status based upon the pillars that UCI Esports states in their mission (academics & research, community, entertainment, and careers) (UCI Esports, 2020).

With the UCI Esports players and teams, it was difficult to anticipate how I was going to be received. Although I entered the site largely privileging my identity as a researcher in front of the UCI esports players, I also highlighted certain parts of myself, which included myself being a “gamer” (Shaw, 2012), student, researcher, or peer, depending upon whom I was with, what intentions I had, or what games I was playing or spectating. For instance, during the early phases of my research, as I spent time familiarizing myself with the arena, my “gamer” identity was something I utilized to acclimate myself to various students who were playing video games in the “community section” of the arena.
How I foreground my identity inside the arena shifted throughout the research. While my background as a gamer was helpful at the start of the research, after becoming a more constant presence inside the Arena and developing relationships with the players, staff, interns, and students, I switched between positionalities that I brought into the space. My assumption going into the study was that my “playing research” position, a term Aarseth (2003) used in the title of his paper on why researchers should “excel” at the games they study (p. 7), was going to be of prime importance. However, complications with how I wanted to incorporate my own games background into the research quickly emerged. First, I had to make intentional choices about my time in preparing for the research and wondered whether playing matches with the League of Legends team would help situate myself into the research context of my dissertation. Rather than engage the varsity players in their games (League of Legends and Overwatch), which can take upwards of 30 to 45 minutes for each match and many months of constant training to master, I explored other game genres that both the participants in the research and I shared. That meant looking at console-based titles, such as the popular Super Smash Bros. (Nintendo, 2018) game—which several of the varsity players did play—as a means of establishing rapport with players.

However, as I discuss in Chapter 8, some players found the blurring of their varsity spaces for esports and the conduct of the research all in one location to be unwanted. Thus, there was less willingness by some participants in the research to both talk and play inside the Arena. Initially, given that my interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 90 minutes, the players felt uneasy being away from their computers for that amount of time. Being cognizant of their schedules, I wanted to make sure that I was being attentive to their daily routines, and so I was happy to accommodate players by doing some of my ethnographic interviews right at their varsity competition desks. However, as the research progressed, the nature of the discussion and
interviews required more privacy. Thus, rather than assuming that the Arena could serve as a site for interviews, as the players became more settled, comfortable, and willing to explore more sensitive topics, the location of the research became important to the players. Thus, in many cases, we began to meet elsewhere on campus.

3.3 Participant Selection

Participants for the research were introduced with the help of gatekeepers. Two gatekeepers at UCI Esports were contacted, and ongoing conversations with them yielded details about what their roles would entail in the research. Gatekeepers informed various players at the field site about the option to be part of the research project. Initially, the defining criteria for being included in the study were that 1) the participant was 18-years old or older, 2) the participant was a student at UCI, and 3) the participant was a UCI Esports scholarship player. However, as the study progressed, I added participants to my interviews who were not scholarship players, but included staff, interns, and students who were part of UCI Esports.

While the focus of the research was on the scholarship players, the scope of the research included individuals that sat outside of the original criteria I created. Once I arrived on campus, the mix of students, interns, staff, coaches, and leadership was crucial to the success of the program, as well as providing important information and context about the research. It was only after I had arrived on campus, and with subsequent visits, that I fully understood how large of an operation UCI Esports was, as well as how porous, fluid, and in flux the organization operated in terms of bringing in (and letting go) new hires.

There were two scholarship-based teams at UCI Esports: The first is a League of Legends team, consisting of five members (players), and the second scholarship-based team is with Overwatch, consisting of six members (players). Before the study began, a total of 11 varsity-
based scholarship players were identified as being eligible for inclusion in the study. However, once the research started, 12 varsity scholarship players were included, as the program added players throughout my research visits. While the goal was to gain access to all members of both teams, more League of Legends players were included in the study (7) than the Overwatch team (4), largely due to the availability of players.

In total, 12 scholarship players and five members of UCI Esports were participants in this study. Table 1 provides a list of the participants (pseudonyms), their roles in the program, and the games they were linked to.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Game</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Noah</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Student: Business Economics</td>
<td>Overwatch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandon</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Student: Public Health Science</td>
<td>Overwatch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Student: Computer Engineering</td>
<td>League of Legends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Student: Computer Science</td>
<td>League of Legends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Student: Computer Science</td>
<td>Overwatch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Student: Business Economics</td>
<td>League of Legends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barron</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Student: Undeclared</td>
<td>League of Legends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victor</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Student: Philosophy</td>
<td>League of Legends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zack</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Student: Undeclared</td>
<td>Overwatch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logan</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Student: Undeclared</td>
<td>League of Legends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elijah</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Student: Computer Science</td>
<td>League of Legends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nelson</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Student: Computer Science</td>
<td>Overwatch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Director: UCI Esports</td>
<td>All Games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Arena Coordinator: UCI Esports</td>
<td>All Games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sage</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Intern: UCI Esports</td>
<td>All Games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Intern: UCI Esports</td>
<td>All Games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Exercise Physiologist: UCI Esports</td>
<td>All Games</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Research Participants

Given UCI’s unprecedented efforts to create higher education policy that fosters a more diverse and inclusive stance toward esports participation (Amazan-Hall et al., 2018), I had anticipated that there would be women players on the varsity teams. However, there were none. Research on gender participation in college esports shows that despite the growth of varsity programs across the United States and Canada, little change has occurred when it comes to the recruitment of women onto esports teams (AnyKey, 2016)—a topic I will elaborate in Chapter 5.

With the intent to interview a range of players with different experiences (Creswell, 2007), the order in choosing participants for the study was guided by first selecting participants...
who were in the program as scholarship players the longest. As I explain in later chapters, however, the opposite occurred. Access to players was ultimately dictated by their attendance in the Esports Arena and their availability for interviews. Thus, participation among the varsity players in the research included students who were new to the program intermixed with students who had been involved with the program over a longer period. Regardless of the ordering, the research selection of participants still covered a range of experiences (discussed further below) and backgrounds, gender excluded, by varsity players on both teams (Table 1).

3.4 Data Collection

My time spent at UCI for data collection was predominately located at the UCI Esports Arena. I originally intended to make two research visits to the UCI Esports Arena, each one semester apart and lasting two weeks per visit. Instead, I made three research visits to the campus. The timeline of my visits occurred in May and October 2018, and October 2019. Each of those visits was approximately two weeks in which I embedded myself in the Arena for the research.

I arrived at the Arena around 10 a.m. and stayed on campus until 8 p.m., where my presence at the site for seven or eight hours each day allowed me to attain a fuller understanding of how players (and UCI Esports leadership) utilized the Arena throughout the day. Overall, I was at the Arena from Monday to Friday, conducting the majority of my interviews and observations. I used the weekends to gather my notes, organize my writings, and prepare for the following week of visits.

While a significant part of my research was located around the Arena (a topic that I discuss in Chapter 8), I was also able to participate in other activities on campus that provided me with a wider scope of how the program operated. On my second trip in October of 2018, I
took part in the first esports academic conference held by UCI Esports. The following year, I was invited to take part in a pre-conference summit with various directors, faculty, researchers, and video game industry representatives from around the world.

As my work proceeded, I also conducted several follow-up interviews with participants online. These continued until March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly altered all of our lives.

Participant Observations. In ethnographic research, the question arises as to how the researcher approaches his or her role as both a participant as well as an observer (Murchison, 2010). My initial stance while at the field site took on a more observational role, with a constant recording of events via notetaking, memo-writing, and personal journal writing of events through rich descriptions. Privileging the observational role at the start of my research allowed me to experience the dynamics of what is happening at the UCI Esports Arena, observe relationships between UCI’s scholarship players and staff, record interactions between the players themselves, and prepare for events not yet anticipated. The observational role I assumed at the start of the research prefaced the interviews, as far as observations allowed me to view collegiate esports culture in action. This helped me to approach interviews better informed about the questions I asked, and constant observations throughout my research provided opportunities to validate if what was being said during the interviews with players aligned with what was being observed through conversations among teammates and behaviors within the space of the arena.

As a researcher, I favored the observational role as a matter of personal preference at the start of the dissertation. Given that in ethnographic research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument in data collection, being aware of my preferences, idiosyncrasies, and prejudices is important in thinking about qualitative design for research (Maxwell, 2013). However, the
observational component of my research quickly changed once I began my ethnographic interviews. As discussed in later chapters (specifically 7 and 8), the co-constructive, developmental, and meaning-making nature of the research implicated me in how the players understood their time at UCI Esports.

The layout of the UCI Esports Arena offers different spaces for players to hang out together. Shaped in an “L” floor plan, the space within the arena allows players to have dedicated locations to play on personal computers, consoles, and virtual reality stations. How the Arena is designed shaped how observations took place. Most of the personal gaming computers were placed on the right side of the area. Scholarship players conduct their practices and tournament matches against the blue wall, to the right of the Arena (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2. UCI Esports Arena Layout](image)

While observations initiated the research, participation is a fundamental part of doing ethnographic work. Participating in interactions with the players and the site itself unfolded as I began to game with the students. The purpose of participation in ethnographic research is often
to acquire access and bear witness to practices and events that are often invisible to outsiders. My participation in gaming with students served as a means of introducing myself to the environment outside the context of my being a researcher. While I am quite comfortable playing several esports titles, the only game that I do not play is League of Legends, which is currently one of the games that the UCI esports players are competitive in. Balancing my outsider-insider dynamic through the visible performance of playing games took into account that I needed to be cognizant of my purpose in playing games.

*Interviews.* Once the gatekeepers located willing participants for the study, I held meetings with the players individually to fully detail what the study entailed. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews and structured based on the serious leisure and self-authorship frameworks outlined in Chapter 2 (see Appendix B for the Institutional Review Board (IRB) exempt approved interview guide). Participants completed a consent form (see Appendix C) before being interviewed, which outlined their rights as research subjects. Interviews lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes each and were audio-recorded.

Interviews were also used as a means of following up with players between and after on-site visits through the use of social media (Facebook) and chat apps (Discord). After my final visit to UCI Esports in 2019, I continued interviews with several of the varsity players, as they transitioned from students to graduates of UCI. My final interviews with the players, staff, and interns were completed in early 2020. Throughout the study, I shared transcripts with participants, which served as a credibility check and allowed for further analysis as well as participant elaborations and meetings.

*Archival.* Key policy and research documents were collected, both while I was at UCI Esports, and throughout the research (Amazan-Hall et al., 2018) as new documents emerged.
UCI Esports’ *Inclusivity Plan* (UCI Esports, 2017) was a key document shared with me by staff, and further documentation about the UCI Esports program was gathered through official channels of online communication via the UCI Esports website (http://esports.uci.edu/). The website is often updated with information about the program, up-to-date news, information about the arena, teams, recruitment, events, reporting, and FAQs. Additionally, information was gathered through UCI’s informal channels of communication, via the social media (Twitter) accounts of team players, interns, and the UCI staff.

When possible, online materials were saved offline as a record and for use in my analysis. In total, just over 200 pieces of documentation related to both UCI’s website, news articles about collegiate esports, and relevant social media posts from UCI Esports were collected.

3.5 Interview Instrument

All interviews with UCI Esports players involved three parts of open-ended questioning, beginning with background questions, then moving on to the topics of serious leisure (Stebbins, 2007) and self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2008). The interview guide is presented in Appendix B.

The first set of questions outlined in the interview instrument was motivated by Stebbins (2007) and intended to gather background summaries of relevant information about each player’s “gaming history,” then their general thoughts about the UCI Esports program, and questions related to their family’s involvement in their college life (Q1-Q6). The second set of questions pertained to RQ1 (“How do collegiate esports scholarship players articulate commitment, effort, and dedication to their pursuits with esports?”) Starting with Q7, the interview sought to tap into the durable benefits of Stebbins’ (2007) serious leisure perspective, in relation to positive notions
of self-image, self-actualization, self-expression, feelings of accomplishment, and a sense of belonging to a community. Q8 related to issues about identity and how strongly participants come to merge and accept their serious leisure activities in college esports as being a core part of who they are. Q9 explored the social world of serious leisure participants, trying to understand how their commitment creates webs of social relationships that further embed one’s leisure identity into a larger social world. Finally, Q10 sought to explore the journey that participants have taken to reveal the types of effort and perseverance required to reach the point where they are happy with their achievements. Overall, Q10 intended to highlight the larger career path of the collegiate esports players (Stebbins, 2007).

To address RQ2 (“How do collegiate esports scholarship players understand their experiences as gamers in relation to their academic and personal development in college?”), the third set of questions, motivated by Baxter Magolda’s theory of self-authorship (2008), explored meaningful experiences of students while in college, identifying academic experiences mentioned as being important in their growth as students. This phase of interviews sought to understand how students engaged in meaning-making strategies in coordinating their epistemological/cognitive (“How do I know?”), intrapersonal (“Who am I?”), and interpersonal (“How do I relate to others?”) capacities towards self-authorship. During the third phase of interviews, further questioning was used to elaborate on significant experiences, such as “Tell me more about how you felt about that situation,” “Why did you react that way?” and “What was the best or worst thing about that situation?”

The major goal with interviews focused on assessing self-authorship is understanding how student participants traversed the path from an internal meaning-making model of development, moved into the Crossroads (where participants are both internally and externally
led, and finally attained a predominately internally defined identity (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Question Q11 provided the starting context for looking at self-authorship and student development, specifically dealing with prior expectations about college, and if those expectations have been met. Q12-Q15 began a deeper exploration into the larger role college has played in their lives by asking participants to reflect upon the more meaningful experiences they have had in college. This series of questions represented the primary effort in revealing how students engaged in meaning-making processes as students and how they started to experience tensions, conflicts, and internal dissonance at the Crossroads of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). Finally, Q16-Q20 asked participants to reflect upon some of the answers given, and how the previous academic year had been formative for them in understanding who they are, how they relate to others, and what insights they are taking with them as they go into the next year of college life. This series of questions was helpful for students when trying to synthesize answers provided in coming to a greater understanding of their development (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007).

3.6 Data Analysis

I began the analysis phase by transcribing all interviews, reading (and rereading) transcripts, reviewing observational notes and memos, reflecting upon a personal journal, as well as listening to recorded tapes. Analysis of recorded data and transcriptions was an ongoing process throughout the visit to UCI. Data analysis of interviews started with an initial reading and open coding of transcripts. The initial step in the coding process examined relevant and interesting statements and comments made by participants during interviews. Reflecting on the type of conditions, the consequences, and how participants respond to these circumstances was part of the first run-through in coding interviews. During the open-coding phase, I engaged in
descriptive coding as part of data management work, recording students’ ages, years in school, area of study, location of the interview, and time spent in the esports program.

The next step was to code along with larger topics that were present in the transcripts. For instance, a reference to perseverance or effort can be coded initially as “evidence of personal effort” or “example of perseverance in gaming” as it pertains to the topic of commitment to leisure (Stebbins, 2007). This was important when coding for topics related to student development and self-authorship, as coding for insightful content related to self-authorship required identifying notable student characteristics and experiences that were specifically singled out as being important to each of the players.

The last step in the analysis applied an analytic coding scheme to the qualitative data. This phase of coding explicitly required a concentrated effort of reflection and interpretation in analysis. For analytic coding, the focus moves beyond highlighting descriptive and categorical coding as evidence, and begins the process of asking questions related to “Why am I interested in that?” or “Why do I find that interesting?” These types of questions begin the analytic coding processes (Maxwell, 2013).

Because the self-authorship perspective seeks to discover the process through which students use meaning-making to understand their experiences (Berger, 2010), an analytic coding scheme was used as a “connecting” strategy for analysis (Maxwell, 2013). The purpose is to cut across categories coded in the interviews to find overlapping commonalities with concepts related to cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development, going beyond descriptive and categorizing strategies, and specifically locating arguments of structure, arguments, and meaning-making in addition to content.
The coding of interviews, along with the review of documents, notes, personal journal, social media accounts, and event pamphlets from UCI’s Esports program, provided different sources of evidence to further validate what is being collected during interviews. Finally, the role I played by doing participant-observation research was used to initially contextualize the questions I planned before the interviews. In addition, I continued to use observations of culture, behaviors, and conversations as a means to draw up further interviews with specific members of the team, when observations made at the Arena or with the players needed further exploration.
CHAPTER 4: COMPETITIVE GAMING AS A PRECURSOR TO UCI ESPORTS

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the context, events, and circumstances that helped to shape how players became members of the UCI Esports program. An important part of that analysis was interrogating the relationships between the players and their families (especially parents). Because of how unique the UCI Esports program was within the broader landscape of varsity esports programs, the backstories of the varsity players were placed within a shifting landscape of organized high school and (community) college esports (Reitman et al., 2018), keeping in frame that the research conducted for this dissertation took place during a period when institutional support and community efforts in esports were blurred.

In this chapter, I explore how the UCI Esports players drew on a unique set of recursive relationships within their families, where the emotional and relational work of having a father or mother who was supportive of esports became one of several areas of privilege that set the cohort of participants at UCI Esports apart. I provide an account of the power dynamics between parents and child, one where the interchange of trust, control, and confidence was increasingly sought after by participants in the research, and one where parents were willing to grant freedoms so long as the players were living up to certain academic standards.

Accordingly, the advantages (and agency) that players were afforded spanned from having parents who—rather than holding strictly adversarial perspectives about video games—were largely open-minded about their children’s interests, having access to traditional domestic arrangements within the home to support one’s efforts at competitive play, to having the opportunity to present evidence to parents that esports is a form of “productive” activity (Pearce, 2006; Sotamaa & Svelch, 2021).
4.2 Play, Parents, and the Home as a Precursor to UCI Esports

The growth of organized high school esports in the United States has been foregrounded as evidence of its increasing importance as a sanctioned sport (Reitman, Cho, & Steinkuehler, 2018), but the popular public attention garnered by the scale of high school esports misdirected attention away from the personal journeys that many of the UCI Esports varsity players had traversed as part of their encounters with competitive gaming. Even with its upward trend, members of official high school esports associations still lack a critical mass of schools, leaving kids to navigate their esports communities by themselves. For several of the UCI Esports players in this study, the growth that has taken place over the past couple of years with the creation of high school-based and for-profit esports organizations sat outside of their experience of competitive play.

Reitman, Cho, and Steinkuehler (2018) have described the current phase of high school esports as being constructed of both top-down and bottom-up organizations. Top-down structures include, for example, the North American Scholastic Esports Federation (NASEF), a non-profit organization that believes esports can serve as a path that ensures “ALL students possess the knowledge and skills needed to be society’s game changers” (“North American Scholastic Esports Federation,” 2019). For-profit organizations, alternatively, have started to partner with high schools in the United States to develop esports programs. Notable among the actors in the development of high school esports for profit is PlayVs, an organization that offers “turnkey” solutions to get a high school ready for esports competitions in the United States (Porter, 2021). The goal for many of these services is to create relationships with state-regulated governing institutions and high school districts to make esports a more accessible activity for young people.
The routes taken by the UCI Esports varsity players I interacted with, however, were less direct, structured, and organized than what the most ardent and passionate supporters of esports might imagine. Rather, the players pointed to a more ad-hoc, personal, and independent experience leading up to their role on the UCI Esports varsity team, often with an open-ended sense of what it meant to get into the competitive scene and a realistic understanding of the effort required to accomplish that goal. The prevailing description of high school esports as an “ecosystem,” one where there are designated coaches, teachers, classroom-based instructions (Reitman, Cho, & Steinkuehler, 2018), and perhaps a relationship with a local college, was alien to many of the players.

Instead, as with most teenagers, high school was a fraught period in the lives of the players; stress lingered over whether they were getting good grades in school, satisfying their parents’ expectations as students, or making friends with their classmates. While these forms of anxieties beset the average American teenager (Newman et al., 2000), the central role that video games occupied in the lives of the UCI Esports players added an extra layer of complexity during their teenage years when many of the UCI Esports varsity players started to take gaming far more seriously (Elkington, 2014; Stebbins, 2017).

While not at the center of my inquiry at the start of my exchanges, the topic of grades and gaming, and the “balance” between the two, eventually motivated much of the research for this dissertation. The two topics were deeply intertwined—to talk about video games was almost always broached the subject of academics. I noticed how the subject of grades would make some of the students feel slightly embarrassed. Because of how predominant time spent playing video games was linked to struggles with academics when the question was posed to “tell me how you balanced your time in high school with your interest in video games,” I would sometimes get
playful smiles before being given answers—as if questions about academics and gaming were familiar themes from previous conversations students had with parents, teachers, or other adults. I sensed that for several of the players, the interwoven topics of games and grades were nothing new and that I was treading on familiar territory.

There was no single successful way the UCI esports players approached the twin pressures of academics and gaming when they were in high school. Instead of asking about whether they were happy with their grades, to which the players would sometimes give answers in apologetic tones, I found the strategies that the players used to maintain their interests in gaming while handling school to help understand what they found important, what they privileged, and what they thought they could accomplish in their roles at UCI Esports.

While the varsity players spent an extraordinary amount of time playing video games during high school, tapping into concerns from parents that esports could be a distraction for students or a waste of time (Bowman, 2015; Ferguson et al., 2015), perhaps most surprising, however, was the support that varsity players were able to find from their families starting from a young age. Reflecting on their teenage past, the players spoke of a simpler time. Perhaps the great challenge that they could recall was the pressure to get “good grades.” Generally, that was not a problem for the students. Some of this cohort of players did well in high school and were the first in their families to go to college.

Nathan, for instance, who played on the varsity Overwatch team, conveyed a sense of urgency and expectation about his future when talking about his education. As a first-generation Latino college student, he was one of several members of the UCI Esports team who excelled as a high school student. Nathan attributed his success in school to wanting to make his parents proud given the sacrifices they made as immigrants to the United States. Nathan’s story, like
many of his teammates, was one of a respectful, loving, but complex relationship with family, where he was given tremendous freedom by his parents with choices he made, even at a young age. However, this freedom also entailed a greater sense of responsibility.

Reasons players like Nathan felt entrusted by their families to make important decisions stemmed from addressing their parents’ fears. With concerns about how video games presented challenges for parents, teachers, and administrators who saw an excessive focus, dedication, and passion for video games as leading to a host of problematic behaviors (Bowman, 2015), the players had an easier time pacifying their parents’ concerns by getting good grades. Rather, as I progressed through the research, I started to question whether having strong grades was always an absolute good. Speaking to just how focused many of the players at UCI Esports were, in multiple interviews, I sensed from the players that they saw their academic work as something that needed to be met, done, and checked off. Players were highly confident about their schoolwork. This was the case with Alex, a substitute player on the League of Legends team. When his parents questioned him about his gaming, he responded, “I have all As. What are you going to do?”

The confidence that Alex expressed about his grades with the comment about what his parents could “do” about his interests, commitment, and focus on games, so long as he was satisfying his parents’ concerns about his academics, was indicative of the level of agency players were able to command during their formative years of competitive play. Consequently, players, like Alex explained the relationship many the players had with their parents in high school and at UCI, one where as long as the players were satisfying their parents’ wishes to be the best students they could be, parents entrusted to their children control over how they wanted to articulate and spend their leisure time
4.2.1 Competitive Play Starts at Home

With gaming removed from the institutional contexts of high schools for many of the players, the home (and bedroom) as geographical space, as well as a social and family place (Lincoln, 2020; Livingstone, 2007), became a focal point of where participants navigated and developed as themselves as competitors. Similar to what Alex had described, Nathan found himself relatively alone with his video game interests as a teenager. Choosing how to balance time between school and gaming, for instance, Nathan’s “main strategy” as he pointed out, “was [to] do as much work as I could at school, so I would have more time to play at home.” As with other varsity players, Nathan was granted the time and space to enjoy video games. Video games imposed order in his life, serving as a constant reminder that he needed to complete his schoolwork before heading back home to game. As pressures around school mounted, Nathan began to think about how he could find more time throughout his day to accommodate his gaming.

Even with the leeway given by their parents, the necessity of having to find extra time to fit in more time for games made Nathan rethink how he was balancing his priorities. When school obligations were pushed to the margins of what he could accomplish, Nathan started to rearrange, and move closer together, time for work and play, as the two started to encroach upon each other. To accomplish this, he explained how he used his time to play one of his favorite games, Team Fortress 2 (TF2) (Valve Corporation, 2007):

There’s a specific game mode in Team Fortress 2, where there are very long downtimes, where it’s a one-life thing and you had to wait until the next round. And the games would last for a really long time, like probably 15 to 20 minutes, I don’t know. And so, when it was during these downtimes when I lost, or when I was waiting for the next round to
start, I would do homework in between. So, I would literally have my computer in front of me, and set my homework to the left of me, on a tv tray, like a portable tv tray, and have the work there and work on it as fast as I could, obviously keeping some quality, right. And then, once the game came around, then I would go back to the game and focus on that.

This example neatly encapsulates how students seemed to be in constant dialogues with themselves about how far they could push boundaries around their commitment to school and their love for playing video games. On the one hand, the ever-constant presence of gaming technologies in the lives of the students created conditions that accelerated their development as skilled gamers. Unlike other leisure activities that have been used as objects of study in leisure research, such as dancing (Brown, 2007), surfing (Cheng & Tsaur, 2012), rock climbing (Dilley & Scraton, 2010), and running (Major, 2001), the technological immediateness of being able to play video games is apparent in ways for gamers that were not for other leisure-related activities (even more so if they are done outdoors). With greater allowance to pursue his interests, Nathan found creative ways of fitting in both his growing involvement with the TFT community and his academics, where his attention for choosing between homework and play was increasingly pushed to the margins. Thus, a common method that Nathan ended up deploying successfully was to do parts of his homework in between the down times when he was required to wait for the game to find him an opponent.

What used to be an orderly way of organizing homework before play evolved to where schoolwork was also situated in between play. In this situation, rather than his parents becoming upset about how he was juxtaposing games and academics, the rationalization made by Nathan to situate both worlds of gaming and schoolwork right next to each other, at worst, looked curious
to his parents. For instance, Nathan described that when his father first saw his son with his “homework on the left side” of his desk and his “games in front” of him, he recalled his father commenting, “whatever works.” The practice of edging his interests in games and responsibilities closer together with school, as Nathan just described, perfectly summed up the type of strategies that varsity players were already making, and would later draw upon, with games before they arrived at the UCI Esports program.

4.2.2 Hitting Challenger with Mom’s Help

When Victor outlined his progress into the highest rank of competitive League of Legends, he also spoke about the journey of going through “solo queue” matches at first, then finding a talented group of players to train with, allowing him to reach the rank of Challenger. Challenger is the highest rank in League of Legends and is a considerable advancement within the game League of Legends, with this elite player base representing a tiny fraction of the total population (constituting millions of players) from around the world. Victor highlighted how his teammates motivated him to dedicate more hours to improving, something he would not have done were he just to play against random strangers. As he explained:

I would go home. I think school ends at 2:15 or something. It was 2:13, the time school would end. I would go home and play League until 2 am. Like, I would play so much. It’s unreal how much League I played.

Hearing that Victor dedicated 12 hours to playing League of Legends, while impressed by the discipline needed to competitively play for that long, I also noticed that was not out of the norm. Other team members emphasized similar levels of dedication to their respective games. Nathan, from the Overwatch team, pointed to his devotion to gaming by explaining that, with “over four thousand hours” played, “[n]obody on our team has beaten me so far in hours.” Whether that was
just free time after school or an official schedule of practice with teams, the players repeatedly highlighted just how much time they played—something, at face value, that spoke to the “significant personal effort based on specially acquired knowledge, training, or skill, and, indeed, sometimes all three” that defines the transition to taking an activity seriously (Stebbins, 1992, pp. 6–7).

The use of the term “unreal,” however, stuck with me. It was a glimpse into the qualitative realities of Victor’s climb as a player. Because the varsity players described their focus on gaming in numerical measures (DiFrancisco-Donoghue et al., 2019) by how long they played (being, hours, weeks, or years)—with little context of where, when, and how that commitment to skilled development was situated—I felt that quantitative descriptions were one-dimensional, concealing more than revealing, the underlying dynamics that went into articulating competitive play. Kari, Siutila, and Karhulahti (2019) argued this point with their research on the training regimes of esports players, warning that survey-based answers about the length of time players dedicated to “esports” came with assumptions that are contingent, incomplete, and open to interpretation. The players in their study may have been prone to collapse a variety of esports-related activities together, such as team gatherings, coaching sessions, game analysis, and media work into the large category of esports. This is not to say that participants in the study had falsely mischaracterized their time invested by including activities that sat outside of the domain of directly playing a video game, but Kari, Siutila, and Karhulaht (2019) tapped into a critique by Witkowski (2012b) about how esports needs to be broadly understood as constituting a host of activities that lie beyond the centralizing tendencies of seeing only the player and the technology.

Even if players spoke of their evolution in terms of personal progress, perseverance, effort, and determination (Stebbins, 1982), the agency to develop one’s skilled expertise
eventually called upon the support of friends, family, and parents. Almost everyone in the program had to contend with the unwanted pressures from parents who were worried about their commitments to video games, especially when they learned of how much time and effort their children were investing into esports. And yet, certain players also garnered parental support for their interests, leading to qualitatively different accounts of how skilled development occurred. In fact, there were distinct advantages to how Victor was able to articulate his progression as a League of Legends player because of his mother’s help.

That support started off with encouragement with gaming throughout his years in high school. Being exceptionally good at games, Victor created a social life in school built around his accomplishments as a competitive player. Somewhat still in disbelief, Victor noted that he ended up meeting his girlfriend in high school after her finding out that “he’s Challenger.” While he felt uncomfortable with some of the attention he received, such as when it became public in school that he was a Challenger player, the local fame ended up shaping his early identity, as he recalled, when students from the school would come up to him asking, “Hey, are you [Victor]?”

Getting to the rank of Challenger was not an easy task. While personal dedication and hours of practice invested into the game were crucial to his success, Victor, however, credits having a supportive mother who had attended to his needs over the several months as he climbed rank. He explained:

Also living at home. It’s a lot easier to do that because things are there. You don’t have to leave your room. Like, you go out to get food that my mom made. So, it was really easy to play all day.

Given that so much of where the players’ leisure activities with video games took place at home, and in particular, one’s bedroom (Wong, 2020), understanding skill development involved seeing
it as more than a personal act of perseverance (Rojek, 2010). For instance, I was attuned to Victor’s comment about being able to “go out to get food that my mom made” as being the kind of insightful descriptions that I found wanting with questions about “how many hours played?” Consequently, for those intense gaming sessions that allowed Victor to “play all day” without having to “leave” his room, I was able to explore how his progress depended on the within-home labor and domesticity that often goes unnoticed, or underappreciated when players reflected on their skill development as gamers.

Because of the intensity of his training, Victor needed to be around his game as much as possible, a particular all-or-nothing mindset that he harbored with esports. At the elite levels of competitions, professional esports organizations have catered to this mentality by creating the “team house” or the “gaming house,” which is a set of living arrangements where players are looked after by dedicated management, staff, and help. Gaming houses have evolved over the years, varying in size of the facilities and amenities that are provided, but their primary function has remained the same: to provide a space where esports players have little to worry about in their lives besides completely focusing on playing their games (Freeman & Wohn, 2019).

While Victor did not set out to recreate the conditions of a professional gaming house, the domestic arrangements of his home, such as having his mother look after his meals, as well as providing him with other domestic services that he could depend on, sounded like how professional esports players would be attended to in a traditional gaming house. The more Victor devoted himself to reaching an elite level of competitive play, the more he found himself drawing on his family for support in ways that his teammates could not relate to. It was clear that framing commitment as just time spent playing was not sufficient for understanding the structural differences that aided players’ capacity to improve their skills.
Often, devotion to playing video games can create tensions within a family. Robert, a varsity player for the League of Legends team, recalled the cat-and-mouse chase between him and his parents, as his mother tried to curtail what she saw as his excessive interest in video games by hiding the Internet router in their home. Among the flashpoints he recalled were how contentious nights were when his mother demanded that computers or gaming consoles be immediately turned off. Parents often do not understand how suddenly leaving or quitting in the middle of a game can be met with in-game penalties (such as a time-out for future games). Interestingly, the very mechanisms that gaming publishers have created to disincentivize toxic behaviors such as suddenly dropping out of a game (or “rage quitting”) can also penalize kids for listening to their parents.

Victor sidestepped the kinds of fraught interactions that his teammates went through with their parents by being given the physical, mental, and social space to seriously participate in his gaming without having to be concerned about interruptions. This is important to note because, for individuals who eagerly dedicate time towards a leisure activity that they love, attention can be diverted away from other obligations at work, responsibilities at home, or time spent with loved ones, causing tensions within personal relationships (Gillespie, Leffler, & Lerner, 2002; Lamont, Kennelly, & Wilson, 2012). The luxury of burrowing away, uninterrupted, for hours with one’s favorite video game, however, was different than how some of Victor’s teammates grew up with video games. With such inequalities among the teammates at UCI Esports, having access to one’s bedroom, personal private space, or parental support served as an example of the structural disparities that can hide behind the numbers (i.e., hours played), for instance, when trying to understand the nature of dedication, perseverance, and effort in skilled play (Stebbins, 1992).
While Victor’s circumstances remained a unique example of a supportive family relationship, it appeared to be a template that others around him wanted to replicate. During their years in high school, the players recalled being given the flexibility to foster the type of serious leisure environments that was largely under their control, where the only real constraint that needed navigating was the players’ academic performance. Most of those I engaged with had been able to satisfy that requirement. After graduating from high school, however, things started to change. The lax, more leisure-based, and grassroots environments that they had grown up with, and become accustomed to, required more effort to maintain.

In the next section, I examine how the players’ interactions with their parents led them to take their competitive gaming more seriously, rather than tempering their ambitions for video games. Not being able to assume that they could rely on the freedoms they had enjoyed before, garnering support for their continued passion for competitive play required further efforts to convince parents about the promise of a future in esports. Consequently, while the interpersonal work required to keep one’s parents supportive of their commitments to games continued to be a reality for the players, the unexpected potential for tournament earnings and prize monies challenged entrenched views about esports, allowing the players to push deeper into pursuing their careers within the professional industry.

4.3 Parental Buy-in by “making almost as much” as Dad

Rather than going straight to UCI after high school, several of the players spent time at local community colleges. Mirroring real-world decisions for why many students have chosen to attend community college, reasons for attending a two-year educational institution included the affordable costs, the convenience and proximity to one’s home, and the educational experience of smaller classes (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Moreover, the realities of being an adult, taking on
more responsibilities, and considering the consequences of their educational choices spurred the
players to make important life choices. For some, this marked a time that deepened their
educational pursuits, seeing community college as an opportunity to recommit to school. After
graduating from high school, Victor placed his interest to pursue professional esports on hold.
Even if college was not an immediate priority, the realization that he was not prepared to fully
commit to the life of a professional player in esports spurred him to “try community college,”
where, as he explained, “I loved college right away.”

Peter, a League of Legends player at UCI Esports, held similar views to Victor about the
importance of community college. Attending Irvine Valley College, one of several two-year
colleges in the area that fed into UCI, Peter explained that this was a conscious decision to
foreground his education, arguing that he just “wanted to do school.” There was a stronger sense
of their educational direction evinced by some of the varsity players who attended a community
college. During Victor’s first college course in philosophy, for instance, he reflected on how he
started to “learn about everything—life.” I was particularly sympathetic to Victor’s time at his
two-year college. After taking my own introductory philosophy course in community college, I
remembered how the frenzied energies of college life sparked my intellectual interests. Similarly,
I could see in some of the players, such as Victor, respect and acknowledgment for how
important time spent at community college was for their intellectual and academic growth.

Moreover, being in community college gave students like Robert their first taste of what
“college esports” could entail. He insisted on taking college classes while also building a career
with an aspiring LCS team. While attending community college gave Robert the flexibility to
further his commitments to esports, attempts at simultaneously building a professional career as a
college student presented an arduous schedule to maintain. A two-hour commute between
Robert’s home and college meant having a routine that limited the amount of time he was able to socialize with his classmates or interact with his teachers after school. Needing to be back with the LCS team for practices right after his classes denied him any semblance of college life that he had anticipated and wanted.

Robert’s progression with League of Legends was frequently interlaced with references to his mother and father, and the broader context of wanting to be a financially supportive member of his family. Because Robert was never able to keep separate his leisure pursuits with video games from the broader context of wanting to financially help his family, gaming, and its economic consequences, were always woven together (Brock, 2017; Taylor, 2012). Hence, some of the moral quandaries around activities that have been forbidden by Riot Games, such as “boosting” (playing on other accounts to increase their level or rank) were not necessarily a problem. Robert first used his expertise as a League of Legends player to earn money by boosting League of Legends accounts. As he explained, boosting accounts allowed him to make a “few thousand dollars” by getting people into the upper ranks of League of Legends. While Robert was aware of the ethical, as well as legal, violations that were in play with boosting accounts, he also had a practical take on his activities, telling me he “[d]id what [he] could with what [he] had.” The comment neatly summarized the context that framed his relationship to esports, seeing it as a means of financial support for his family who immigrated to the United States from their home in Europe.

Robert recalled how happy his mother was after learning that her son was earning money, regardless of whether it was related to esports or not. It was after high school, however, that professional esports finally garnered Robert a stable income, which he used to help his family. He did not like seeing his parents, who were engineers in their home country, struggle to pay
bills. That he was able to contribute to the success of his family became a tremendous source of pride. Eventually, he ended up being the family’s principal source of income. Because of the “boosting” activities, Robert recalled a comment from his mother that the money he had made was “almost as much as [his] dad makes.”

Where, at the start of this chapter, players such as Alex, Nathan, and Victor recalled a culture of competitive play in high school that was informal, ad hoc, and at times, a shambolic gathering with friends and schoolmates, things suddenly changed. As Robert described, this occurred with the commodification of the activity, rendering his childhood passion for video games into calculated decisions to profit from his competitive talents. Even if Robert knew that Riot Games was not happy with the practice of boosting League of Legends accounts, he saw what he did as an economic choice: doing “what [he] could with what [he] had.

Hearing Robert describe the choices he needed to make, I was struck by the straightforward practicality with which he approached games. On the one hand, there appeared to be a “loss of innocence” in the way that he had professionalized his interests. Due to the transition of having to move to a new country at a very young age, Robert did not have the same experiences as his teammates of having a group of like-minded friends who he grew up with and could share in the experiences of esports. Rather, social isolation forced him into developing himself through consistent solo queue play, without a consistent set of teammates to practice with. On the other hand, Robert was able to thrive in a gaming environment that was shorn of everything except the most competitive and skill-based focus of the game, allowing him to quickly monetize his expertise.

I wanted to remain open in my opinions about Robert’s circumstances that led him towards competitive play (i.e., utilizing it not only for his pleasure but also profiting from his
talents), and I also felt sorry for him. I understood that he was placed in a position where something that he enjoyed doing as a teenager, perhaps even helping him to cope with the hardships of moving to a new country, was rendered into a commercial activity. Drawing on a debate between Taylor (2012) and Brock (2017) about the dynamics and consequences of when competitive video gameplay becomes rationalized, I sympathized with Brock’s (2017) warning that the “principle of play” (Caillois, 2001) is put at risk of being rendered corrupt when individuals “become dependent on its extrinsic rewards as a means of subsistence and personal identity” (p. 12). I would not say that Robert was necessarily dependent upon his monetary success, especially to the degree where it became problematic, but his achievements in turning competitive play into monetized work had certainly formed an important part of his identity inside his family to the point where his affiliation with competitive video games fundamentally shifted.

While Brock’s (2017) concern over the “contamination of play” is important to highlight, I was ultimately sympathetic to Taylor’s (2018) point that she was “accountable to situating player practices within participants’ descriptions of the pleasure, creativity, social connection, aspirations, and authentic experience that so often accompanies the work of play” (p. 261). Robert did not see himself as having the option of not commodifying his leisure time. The move from high school, when gaming was a still leisure activity untouched by the concerns of monetary gain, to one where it became an option for remuneration happened quickly. For players whose obligations of everyday life inevitably seeped into the “sanctity” of play, the choice of being able to keep at bay the temptation to monetize one’s skills felt like an economic privilege that only a few on the team could enjoy.
Thus, I continued to be held “accountable”, as Taylor (2018) argued, to decisions made by the players. With Robert, the distinct pleasures that he associated with helping his family worked out for him. Although an unusual case among his teammate, Robert successfully integrated the dynamics of moving what was leisure into work in a way that was not necessarily about framing his decisions as “corrupting” one’s relationship to leisure, games, and entertainment. Rather, he was praised by his mother for being someone who could contribute to the family’s financial circumstances. While his parents did not completely understand what their son did in esports, Robert had earned their support. He was happy with how things turned out for his family. The use of his expertise as a League of Legends player fit into a larger narrative of his family lifting itself out of the relative financial hardships he had grown up with. Soon after, Robert’s father and mother found jobs that made use of their engineering backgrounds, which allowed them to move out of their one-bedroom apartment and eventually purchase their first home.

It was because of this unique, as well as fortunate, situation that Robert continued to earn trust from his parents to chase after his dreams of turning into a professional player. However, instead of committing fully to opportunities in esports, he always considered ways to make sure he was balancing his aspirations of becoming a professional player with ensuring he was making his parents happy.

4.3.1 How Prize Money Helped to Alter Parents’ Perspectives

The path that Robert took to successfully convince his parents about the viability of esports by starting a professional career remained an outlier among those interviewed. Although not representative of most of the players, I have chosen to highlight Robert’s experiences to show how important, helpful, and consequential it was to have parental support. Alternatively,
what I observed throughout my interviews was that the work of persuading parents about the prospects of a future in esports was a never-ending tussle of proving that, with each successive step forward with esports, there was evidence of the path’s sustainability to ensure continued parental support.

While many of the players retained control over their competitive journeys, the transition into early adulthood (and college) did not necessarily mean they were free from the concerns of their families. For Noah, who played on the Overwatch varsity team, while the transition to community college allowed him time to think about his future, he was still burdened with questions about his pursuits. For instance, his mother provided nearly daily reminders of his failings: “You are not going to go to the school you wanted to go to,” if he kept focusing on esports. Exacerbating tensions within his family, Noah and his sister competed for their parents’ attention and praise, and this was largely lavished on his sister. Envious that his sister was able to study abroad on a scholarship for Italian opera, Noah wanted to show his family that esports could be equally useful to him. As he spoke about his sister’s full-ride scholarship for her studies in Italy, I also sensed that he wished his efforts in collegiate esports would eventually bring in that level of financial support.

For many of the players, however, Noah’s path was far more familiar. While perhaps not receiving a full-ride scholarship to the university, Noah was already demonstrating his accomplishments as a college player—even if not “varsity.” Noah recalled that his parents’ views about esports started to change after his team at his community college won their first esports tournament. He recalled the moment when, suddenly, his mother praised him for his progress. After winning his first tournament, he described the excitement of rushing to tell his parents:
I went downstairs, and I was like, “mom, I just won a thousand dollars” and she was like, “what?” It just went from there. We won the money, she was like, “good job, you got to do this again next year.” I got contacted by [Max]. Then from there, they’ve been really supportive, compared to how it was before.

Repeatedly, players pointed to moments, when their parents had a change of heart about esports after proving that they were earning income or winning prize money. The thousand dollars that Noah won was not like the substantial sums that usually make headlines, or as Elijah described, that would make one’s parents go, “Oh, wow!” However, it was commensurate with his needs, leading his mother to tell him that his win was sufficient to provide “two semesters worth of money” to pay for his community college costs. Noah was thrilled that his mother could see his tournament wins as useful and practical about his family’s financial circumstances.

Stories of dramatic million-dollars windfalls for esports players have become more commonplace, with parents becoming aware of, and tempted by, the prospects of supporting their children’s interests in esports because of these events. I became aware of this in 2019 when I was invited by a university to give a talk about the professional esports industry to university representatives, administrators, and students. After the talk, I was approached by a parent, asking if she should pull her son out of school so that he could spend more time playing the game *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017). Even though the comment appeared to be made in jest, the question came only a couple of weeks after an American teenage Fortnite player (Kyle Giersdorf, or “Bugha”) won USD 3 million for his first-place finish at the age of 16 (Taylor & Chokshi, 2019). Because of that win, I had several discussions with parents who were curious to learn more about the prospects (and realities) of seriously chasing after esports.
However, families were not moved to reconsider deeply entrenched views about esports only by the possibility of sensational earnings; the first step that served to instigate change, quite often, was the one-off tournament win. The way parents reacted to the win, in fact, often shocked the players due to the sudden shift in attitudes of their families. Years of deeply contentious fights over the topic of esports appeared to have just vanished, or if not completely, the wins had alleviated tensions. The suggestion that Noah “do this again next year” was the kind of opening he needed to give him the confidence to continue.

Consequently, expectations by parents to be more accepting of their children’s interests in video games were simple, realistic, and practical. When Noah’s mother petitioned that her son to repeat his win the following year, for instance, she did not necessarily see his competitive activities as a proper, long-term job but viewed the winnings from his competitive leisure activities as temporary. And yet, it was work. The tournament win was one of several successive evidential steps that reassured parents that time spent with esports had productive (economic) value. In return, parents were willing to further extend their trust, confidence, and control over to their children.

In the next chapter, I build on the dynamics found between the players and families to show how a particular group of “star players” breached boundaries that had normally kept their competitive pursuits as an amateur, not too serious, and “safe” activity. An analysis of the cohort of veteran players, and their brief journey as aspiring League Championship Series (LCS) players, was important to the research because it represented the first stand taken to assert wishes to try to go professional. I draw attention to moments where decisive action was either taken, or considered, to understand how players attempted to define paths in an industry that lacks real guidance or mentorship.
4.4 Summary

With the growth of organized high schools esports as part of a national trend in North America (PlayVs, NASEF, or HESL) continues to draw public attention, in this chapter, I explored how before becoming UCI Esports varsity players, expressions of commitment were principally grounded in the recursive, trusting, and cooperative relationships the players had between parent and child that allowed the research participants to feel a sense of agency in how were given control with their formative year with esports.

Addressing my first research question (“How do collegiate esports scholarship players articulate commitment, effort, and dedication to their pursuits with esports?”), players initially framed their expression with commitment in quantitative terms, such as the number of hours played, as one example, to justify their dedication. With greater effort and perseverance, however, there came a point where reference to the amount of time played lacked a holistic understanding of how skilled play was expressed, with other advantages, as discussed, of a stable home environment, access to one’s bedroom, or sufficient privacy to develop an identity (Lincoln, 2020; Livingstone, 2007) around video games helped how players were able to express seriousness that was not simply just about how much time someone spent playing.

With how players articulated commitment, effort, and dedication, consequently, players drew on broader considerations of how they were able to effectively exercise seriousness. Key to that articulation was the agency earned by players from the mutually reinforcing relationships between parent and child. Through strong academic records that the players were able to produce, parental fears were addressed, and consequently, further leeway, trust, and freedom were given back to the players for their interests in competitive gaming. This was most evident in how Victor, in his journey to attaining one of the highest ranks in the game League of
Legends, referred to the luxury of leaning on his mother’s domestic labor to prepare his meals during this specific period when he had nested away in his room with very little to worry about besides his goal to “climb rank.”

The transitions from high school and into community college offered a unique lens to understand how that recursive relationship of trust evolved from grades to potential monetary earnings. Building on those relationships, parents continued to shift away from their resistance to esports, seeing it, as in the case with Robert, as a means of offering financial support to one’s family. In the absence of evidence that esports could become a mainstream career, underlying concerns were that the players were squandering their potential, time, and efforts.

However, the line between esports being unacceptable and acceptable was far thinner than I had expected. Parents were willing to rethink their positions about esports, especially as it started to look like (paid) work. Accordingly, the ability of players to operate with a sense that what they were doing with esports was viewed with support from parents drew on significant advantages in how the expression of skilled play, seriousness, and development was exercised.
CHAPTER 5: REVERSING THE “PIPELINE”: PROFESSIONALS IN COLLEGE ESPORTS

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I examine a unique group of “star players” from the League of Legends team at UCI Esports and trace their trajectories to-and-from the collegiate and professional scenes. While several of the varsity players on the League of Legends and Overwatch teams took more traditional routes into college, the star players (Robert, Barron, and Logan) represented what a non-conventional path back to college looked like after years spent pursuing the goal of a professional career. Given that the support for college esports has often centered around the hope that it could serve as a “pipeline” for aspiring students (Pizzo, Jones, & Funk, 2019; Reitman, Cho, & Steinkuehler, 2018)—starting from high school into college—the presence of veteran players who returned to a post-secondary education setting after pursuing their professional careers disrupted the direction of what is currently imagined in discussions about “paths” to college esports.

Examining how the UCI Esports varsity players expressed commitment and effort as varsity esports players, in this chapter, I highlight how the star players discussed the historical turn made by this cohort of veteran players, justifying why they were at UCI Esports, and the sense of redemption they ascribed to their belonging to the UCI Esports program. The advent of collegiate esports was more than just an opportunity to enjoy a unique and exciting facet of college life at UCI; for the star players, this provided an opportunity to pause, reflect, and make amends for what they perceived as poorly made decisions, or unrealized hopes, from their past.

Drawing on the analytic metaphor of the “Crossroads” (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012) to further explicate the struggles between “emerging internal voices and external influence” (p. 14),
I provided the star players space to highlight the difficulties experienced with chasing their dreams of a professional esports career. With the focus on the star players in this chapter, I further explore the experiences of trauma, regret, and emotional pain that the cohort brought with them from their professional scene into the collegiate esports.

5.2 The Star Players

I arrived at the UCI Esports Arena on the 14th of May 2018 to begin my fieldwork. While it was not my first time at the UCI esports facility, I recall the initial jitters upon returning to the campus to start my research. Walking around the university grounds on my first day, I noticed just how deliberate UCI was in showcasing the accomplishments of the members of their community. The university found interesting ways to highlight several up-and-coming faculty members and researchers at UCI. For instance, I noticed that several of the busses belonging to the on-campus transit system were decorated with graphics that highlighted star researchers and well-known figures from UCI. As took I took a break for lunch at the local In-&-Out Burger right across the street from the campus, I noticed a bus with an advertisement about Dr. Melinda Nicewonger, dubbed the “Ice Oracle” on one of the side bus panels. Dr. Nicewonger studies ancient cores of ice in the artic to understand the present realities of climate change. While it was just my first day on campus, I recalled thinking just how interesting and “cool” UCI was as a school.

At the UCI Esports Arena, there was a similar emphasis on highlighting, showcasing, and celebrating the top talent on the varsity teams. “Star players” was a term that Max, at the time the acting director of UCI Esports, used to refer to the group of players (Barron, Logan, and Robert) who were recruited into the program in 2016. Outwardly, nothing indicated that this group of star players was exceptionally different. They looked like any other student on campus. Had Max not
noted this difference, I may not have known what was unique about each of these players until much later in my research, when information about their past became more apparent. However, for the star players, being at UCI Esports was something exceptional, special, and unique, which was why they were drawn to return to college for a second chance at their education.

Being considered a “star player,” from what I observed, ranging from actually playing for a well-known professional team, even if just on their “development team,” to being on an esports team that was looking to make it to the League Championship Series (LCS), Riot’s top North America championship tournament. However, the way that I saw this group of individuals as “star players” was often through the visibility that they provided the varsity program. Their inaugural year at UCI Esports was not only filled with acclimating into a new environment as college students, but one in which they were also the public faces of the program, with their images splashed across major media publications, ranging from CNN, The Los Angeles Times, Forbes Magazine, and full-length documentaries from ESPN (ESPN Esports, 2019).

As I did investigative work in preparation for my visits to the campus, many of the photos that I saw of the star players came from major news sources. Since they had forged a professional LCS history, I began my interaction with the team almost as a fan. Throughout a few months before my arrival on campus, I had a trail of saved web pages and bookmarks of each of the player’s profile pages, pictures from various interviews, and other relevant details I could collect sorted for quick retrieval.

However, what I had learned about the players through my preliminary research online versus what I observed, learned, and discussed with the players once I had started my research, were two different realities. A dynamic that I had not anticipated in my research was the significant costs to careers and personal relationships that this group of star players went through
before arriving at UCI. An important critique of the neoliberalist condition of modern esports (Brock, 2017; Johnson & Woodcock, 2021; Lin & Zhao, 2020) is the hyper-rationalized reality that this form of work is part of a global network that “intensifies social competition, celebrates invidious comparison, and leads to precarious working relations” (Brock, 2017, p. 7). Being with these players nearly every day allowed me to see the consequences of decisions made as part of that logic.

Although it was tempting to create strict temporal divisions between the time before their joining UCI Esports and the time after becoming a UCI Esports varsity player, involvement in professional esports brought a history of emotional pain that shaped the star players’ decisions about why they decided to return to college. While the UCI players saw the star players as mentors with unique experiences playing in a semi-to-professional scene, throughout my research, I also saw them as victims of circumstance. This was particularly true of Barron, who spent a tumultuous, but brief, stint with the professional esports organization Team Liquid (once before attending UCI, and the next, leaving UCI to play for the organization), which would end up defining much of how he thought about the industry. I further discuss his absence from school to play professionally in Chapter 7.

I began my research anticipating a more forward-looking orientation by the players about their futures and expectations, but the “star players” frequently referenced their past, taking a historical turn to frame the reasons they chose to join UCI Esports. As I discussed in Chapter 4, because of the confidence, trust, and confidence parents had in their children’s academic accomplishments, players were afforded agency in articulating the type of competitive experiences they wanted with esports. However, the historical turn that the star players took in the research served as a corrective to that narrative. While agency was certainly granted, there
came a point when players had stepped past the threshold of parental tolerance, often when players gestured towards going professional. Thus, the historical turn was meant to revisit, and correct, unmet expectations of themselves and their parents.

When Logan looked at his past, he saw the UCI Esports program as one way to alleviate feelings of disappointment for not making it to the LCS. Two years before arriving at UCI, Logan pursued the dream of being picked up by a Challenger team, a goal he set after finishing high school. With each aspiring LCS team, Logan was on the precipice of making it to the professional stage, but he ultimately failed to start a professional career. He described the moment that he knew this process needed to stop:

So, the night I got the pro offer was right after my third attempt to go pro with a Challenger team. This was the third time that I had made the final four teams that would have a chance to qualify into the LCS. It was also [my] third time losing and my third time I was on a team that disbanded the same night we lost. So that night I decided, “Alright, I’m done. I quit now.” I went to a friend’s house and got wrecked. I had a night, “I’m going to fucking not give a shit.”

The same sense of resignation was shared by Barron, who was the only player to have played for Team Liquid’s “academy” team, one of the more well-known professional esports organizations in North America. Being part of Team Liquid required significant personal sacrifices, the most notable being that Barron stopped his university education in 2015 (at Robert Morris University) to concentrate on his efforts with the professional esports organization.

Barron was exceptionally proud of the success of the academy team he was on (with a “95% win rate” against other top teams, he would remind me often), drawing attention from elite players in the league who, as Barron pointed out, would ask, “who the fuck are these guys?”
Even with the success of his academy team, however, Barron started to resent what he saw as calculated business decisions that undermined the progress he was making. With one particular instance, Team Liquid had shuffled players between the main roster team and the academy team right before a crucial tournament. The move disrupted the dynamics of Barron’s team by bringing a new set of players into the group. The aftermath of that decision made Barron reconsider whether he wanted to continue going pro. As he explained:

After that happened, I was like, “fuck it, I’m going to go to university,” and that’s when I heard. No, I heard UCI started an esports program and they were looking for a player, so I was like, “should I go to a different team or should I go [to] university.” I was like the world is already fucking up. If this works, because TL is considerably one of the best orgs in NA, but they have that reputation. The fact they were that kind of org, for me, maybe another org is going to be the same or worse. So, I was like, “I will just go to UCI.”

Robert, by some accounts, was regarded as one of the best support players in North America early in competitive League of Legends. Having moved around from various teams, he finally found a group of players he believed had a chance to make it into the LCS. However, Robert was unhappy with how little he was getting paid, something that made him question the viability of chasing down a career in esports. This prompted his departure. Lacking the motivation to continue on the team, he explained:

We were getting paid $500 a month by the org, which was really bad. And everything back then was undeveloped. Riot was giving 5.5K per split and there were two splits per year. The rest you would have to make up at the playoffs and Worlds. So, you could barely get by making 15 or 20K per year. It’s not worth it.
While it was clear that each of the star players brought with them a legacy and past from professional esports that none of their other younger teammates shared, the star players were also disenchanted with that very experience of chasing their dream jobs as professional players. The examples that the star players provided represented the culmination of frustrations with the professional scene that led the cohort of star players to seek change.

I was particularly attentive to the examples that Barron and Logan had given, each reminding me of the “disposable futures” Lin and Zhao (2020, p. 595) had written about, which examined the constant threat that professional players face with being replaced with a fresh cache of younger, even more driven, set of prospective applicants. Because of the threat of being replaced, the players were imbued with a sense of fatalism about the prospects of their careers, to the point that the professional players did not “think about the future” (p. 593).

At UCI Esports, I found myself with a set of veteran players who were able to sympathize with the precarity of being a professional player. To unpack that history, my initial concerns were that queries into the players’ lives could summon uncomfortable memories of the past. However, part of the consequence of one’s historical turn that I had gleaned in the analysis was players feeling secure to reflect on one’s past. Where in the previous chapter, I touched upon the agency earned by the players early in their competitive careers that allowed them to accelerate their interests in esports. With the historical turn, however, players slowed down a tempo that had become incessant, repetitive, and partly uncontrollable.

During the research, when players looked uncomfortable about the thought of recalling their past, I reminded the participants that they were under no obligation to answer my questions. However, Barron appeared to have a palpable disgust when he recalled memories with Team Liquid because of how much he had risked for the organization, only to have them recklessly
treat his team with no regard for their future. And yet, it was that very same professional experience that UCI Esports found appealing when selecting the star players as recruits in their inaugural cohort of scholarship students (UCI News, 2016). The star players were lauded by their varsity teammates—one of the reasons why they were attractive prospects in the first place—as Robert pointed out, “they were interested. I was a top player at the time.”

I sensed from Barron that he had been most affected by this past mistreatment. Barron grew up idolizing South Korean professional gamers and expressed pride in the rapid development of South Korea’s esports and gaming industry (Jin, 2010). To some degree, being regarded as a star player by UCI Esports was not the first time that Barron found minor celebrity status with video games. At a local “PC Bang” (Chee, 2006) where Barron spent time sharpening his competitive gaming skills when he was a teenager, groups of middle school students gathered around his computer to spectate his games. To get him to stay at this local gaming center, Barron described how the owner of the PC Bang would provide him “free hours, free drinks, free food, bought me cash items” as a reward for his patronage. Going through this experience shaped how Barron viewed the role video games could play in his career, with the local fame he acquired around his neighborhood giving him a “first glimpse” into what a life with esports could look like.

Team Liquid was the only professional team that I heard being mentioned around the Arena that had ties to the program. The professional esports organization has a storied past, with its origins as a European establishment that now supports multiple teams across a spectrum of mainstream esports titles. In 2020, Forbes Magazine ranked Team Liquid as the third most “valuable” esports company globally, with a valuation of $310 million according to a recent accounting (Settimi, 2020). What Barron encountered with Team Liquid, however, was a
company that failed to meet even some of the most basic responsibilities expected from one of the more storied and successful esports organizations operating in North America.

Each of the star players registered grievances about how different professional organizations treated them. Their concerns often centered around short-term, profit-driven decisions meant to ensure tournament success (Brock, 2017; Lin & Zhao, 2020). Barron was especially bothered by Team Liquid’s refusal to provide his team with free meals during the weekends. Even if Team Liquid was paying him an acceptable salary (though less than his other teammates), the lack of food registered as a major red flag of concern for him, portending something troubling about the organization, and possibly the industry overall. However, Barron was willing to stay with the team, irrespective of what he could see were questionable practices because, as he stated, “I know the team has the potential to go to LCS, so I will just deal with it.”

The reality of having to “deal with it” as the star players traversed paths within the professional League of Legends scene was a common refrain I heard, in one form or another, at the start of my research. Part of the consequence of having to “deal with it” came from the fact that most of the star players were making their decisions to turn professional counter to and in isolation from their families’ wishes. These decisions were not necessarily well thought out either and were made to capitalize on opportunities that had suddenly sprung up, adding to the uncertainty of their situations. Because of the rash decisions made, the players repeatedly overlooked, and accepted, a string of disappointments, setbacks, and frustrations that define the professional esports scene as an ongoing cycle of precarious work in esports (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021).

Consequently, I spent the first half of my research visit being a witness to stories of the past, prompting me to rethink how I wanted to structure my research questions, observations, and
inquiry. While I had prepared questions that explored the players’ histories, I had anticipated exchanges that were more forward-looking. Instead, the star players spoke of trauma, depression, and disownment. The change called on me to reorient how I wanted to apply my theoretical framework. The demands of using self-authorship (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012) as a theoretical lens depends upon the teasing out capacities to make sense (meaning) out of events, but part of the difficulty in executing this was the requirement to push past the stories of the players. I came into my interviews with questions that were aligned with the commitments of a constructivist and a subject-object perspective (Lahey et al., 2011) that called for “active listening” by being investigative, probing, and searching (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, p. 504). However, players such as Barron were adamant that they wanted their participation in my research to serve as a platform for their histories to be heard.

For instance, when I initiated an exploratory question about why Barron selected UCI, he prefaced our conversation by asking, “Is this an interview for your research? Before I could answer that question, Barron curled up into the gaming chair that sat behind the team’s varsity desk, with knees tucked deep into his chest, as if he was preparing himself to be on that seat for a while. I said, “Yes, for my research,” even though I had already explained who I was and that I was studying the lives of the players on the varsity teams at UCI.

After listening to me explain myself, it did not take long before Barron nodded his head a little, stopped the game he was playing, and then agreed to the interview, saying: “Ok, I want to let this out. I never had the chance to let this out.” While being someone whom the players could trust to listen to their stories became a crucial part of the rapport-building process throughout the first week of my stay (Davies, 1999), I had never felt it more than I had when engaging with Barron. I felt both thankful that he was willing to share intimate knowledge of what had
happened to him as a professional player but also fearful that I could easily lose that trust were he to “read” me the wrong way.

Regrets about decisions made between their professional gaming and education lingered heavily among the star players, leading to skepticism about the professional esports industry. While I promised to give myself time to unravel the individual stories, I was already observing evidence of “Crossroads” (Baxter Magolda, 2008) perspectives in the different players’ accounts of being at UCI Esports. The Crossroads (as elaborated in Chapter 2) is the internal breakdown of an externally defined subject position that is usually dependent on outside authority figures (parents, family, teachers, elders) for validation, direction, and guidance for answers.

While I discuss the utility of the Crossroads in subsequent chapters when showing the tension between one’s voice, I “slowed down” the use of the metaphor as an analytical lens with the star players at the start of the analysis because the Crossroads stresses action, choice, transition, and change. Consequently, I reoriented my research in that manner to be sympathetic to the tempo of how the player wanted to interact with the study. This is not to say that I stopped engaging with the varsity players in critical reflection as participants in the research, but as Taylor (2018) advised in his fieldwork on Halo esports players, I tried to temper the use of my research as simply a “matter of processing participants” so that one can start analyzing their data (p. 16).

Players wanted to share their stories of trauma, taking time to explain the pain and hurt of going through a lifestyle that had ruinous consequences on their family relationships. With the ethnographic interviews I conducted, the players wanted to convey the sheer helplessness they had felt, what Parks (2011) termed as being “shipwrecked” (p. 48). To be shipwrecked entails the “inability to immediately sense the promise of anything beyond the breakup of what has been
secure and trustworthy” (Parks, 2011, p. 43). Rather than starting my analysis of tensions, contradictions, or regrets that was partial to the professional players, which meant looking for layers in their meaning-making processes (Baxter Magolda, 2001), I had the star players’ narrative descriptions of the past stand as evidence—that of the regret, grief, and uncertainty—for rarely discussed topics in college esports.

It was only after I had spent time with the star players, engaging with their stories, that I understood just how destructive their aspirations of going professional had been to their relationships. Besides the unique qualities of having professional LCS experience, the other defining feature of belonging to the “star players” was the experiences of abandonment, whether that was from professional teams, organizations, or even one’s own family. The contentious dynamics that Logan had with his family, for instance, grew out of his professional ambitions in esports after he graduated from high school. This led to threats by his mother to “disown” him. While Logan explained that he held “no regrets” over his decision to play professionally, framing his choices as the time when he wanted to “challenge” himself, he recalled the intense “self-doubt” that he went through because of his decision.

Consequently, the star players grew up feeling disconnected from the types of authority figures (i.e., parents, community leaders, teachers, or religious elders) that younger people usually look to for guidance. Finding it hard to identify allies among older adults, Logan recalled that once his friends’ parents knew that he had left home to become a professional player, the parents of his friend had banned him from associating with their children. The players had felt their abandonment by people whom they should have been able to rely on in a “total and primary” (Parks, 2011, p. 40) way.
5.3 UCI Esports as the “Whole Package”

Given the historical context, and consequences, of the players’ past, the question of “why did the players select UCI?” kept coming back to me. In Chapter 4, I outlined the formative years for the players, as they traversed a competitive landscape shaped partly by their interactions with friends and peers in high school, and partly by the informal networks of competitive play that they found online. During that time, none of the participants in the research planned to attend UCI or play for UCI Esports.

In 2016, collegiate esports as an institutionalized practice was two years old, with nearly a dozen collegiate programs in the United States to choose from. The consensus from many of the varsity players, both new to the program and existing players from previous years, was that UCI offered something unique that other schools did not. In describing their reasons for selecting UCI, newer members of the program, such as Victor, summed up what many of his teammates were thinking:

I think UCI is a whole package. That’s the good thing. It’s a really, really good school, and it’s really good at gaming. That’s what really did it for me. I would, if Robert Morris was a top 5 university, go there and get a full ride, you know. UCI is higher rated [and] that offered me things.

The idea of the “whole package” was what UCI Esports intended to offer its incoming varsity players. Implicit in Victor’s comments are the tremendous strides that UCI has made in becoming the school of “first choice” among the UC schools for many freshmen college applicants in the state of California (Hardesty, 2019). This is a school that is aware of its standings (admissions, research funding, and graduates) in comparison to other UC schools. As I made my way into the Student Center building during my second week on campus, for example,
I was greeted with a large digital board that displayed a series of nationally recognized accomplishments by the university—“#1 University” that is “doing the most for the American dream” as claimed by *The New York Times*; the UCI Medical Center being “among the nation’s best hospitals” according to *US News & World Report*; or hosting former President of the United States Barack Obama for “UCI’s 50th Commencement Celebration” in 2014. I had originally intended to take time to read more about UCI, its history, and its development as a public research university, but I noticed myself learning a lot about the school from my daily walks throughout the campus as I ran into strategically placed advertisements.

At the UCI Esports Arena, I was treated to displays (posters, shirts, standing cardboard displays) of the program being the whole package, as the program did not shy from highlighting its ties to the professional video games industry. Although the UCI Esports arena is located on a college campus, the juxtaposition of the academic, professional, amateur, industry and student inside the Arena was apparent.

I was reminded daily of the unique relationships UCI Esports had with the industry, especially inside the Arena. As I walked through the doors early in the mornings and looked to find a location to hang my backpack, the only area where there were hooks to hang items appeared below an array of team-signed and custom-made jerseys from professional esports organizations, such as Cloud9, the Los Angeles Valiant, and CLG. These were displayed right behind where each of the varsity players sat.

While Victor’s comments about UCI being the “whole package” focused on how UCI Esports was able to offer students an insider’s perspective of the video games and esports industry, players also understood it as having a unique, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be within a team setting as part of the collegiate experience. Zack, one of the newer members of the
Overwatch varsity team, was excited that UCI Esports had invested in an array of support and developmental services for the players, such as a team psychologist, exercise physiologist, player support, and a host of other initiatives (Amazan-Hall et al., 2018).

The fact that Zack was attending UCI, playing on their varsity Overwatch team, and earning scholarship funding for his education was a scenario he could have never imagined a few years before he arrived at the school. In 2014, Zack was in his home country of Yemen, seeking to come to the United States for greater opportunities for his education. He arrived in the United States as a 14-year-old, moving around different high schools as his family slowly settled into finding a permanent residence in a new country.

Because Zack was not able to maintain a steady enough presence in one school long enough to form relationships with classmates, his goal in attending UCI was to create the kind of friendships he wanted to have during high school. When asked what living with his teammates would be like, he already knew what he wanted, explaining, “[y]ou know you hear players eat, sleep, do everything together. I want something similar. I want to have that. We are in college. So, I’m trying to spend as much time together. During playing, getting food, whatever it is.”

Students expressed how special UCI was because of the combination of its educational reputation coupled with the significant investments being made into collegiate esports. Because of the academic reputation of UCI and its esports program, however, players did not necessarily believe that a hard choice needed to be immediately made between the two domains—UCI offered both.

However, I observed how it was also extremely rare to be able to pursue both activities at the same time or to not have to choose between gaming and academics. When Victor described UCI as the “whole package,” he was describing UCI as an educational institution, but I also
understood the comment as hope that the school could transform its esports members into the perfect hybrid specimens of student and player. The reality, however, was not every student at UCI Esports was able to capitalize fully on the experience that the program wanted to provide, and those who did were unique. To have been able to enjoy the benefits of UCI, both as a student and player, one would have to already have been the embodiment of the “whole package.”

5.3.1 The Perfect Student

According to Max, if there was one student who was able to excel in his role as a student and player, it was Jonathan. Even before meeting Jonathan, I was already informed by Max that he was the “unicorn” of the program. I initially found the term surprising, not fully understanding the scope of what that meant. Almost like a proud father, Max explained who Jonathan was, and why he was important. By using the term “unicorn,” Max made it clear that Jonathan was a different type of player and student:

[W]hen you look at elite players that are able to play as much as he is and are as highly ranked as he is, combined with a GPA, not just a good student, but…I don’t know, borderline 4.0. You don’t hear either one of those. He’s top 100 in League of Legends right now, and he’s top of his class probably with [his] GPA.

Although the metaphor of the “unicorn” was used to describe Jonathan, I also believed the term masked much of what made, or created the conditions to make, Jonathan such a successful student and player. As the quote above demonstrates, if UCI was the whole package, one that offered the complete academic and gaming college experience, then Jonathan was as close to the complete student who was able to take advantage of those opportunities within the program. Because he was a 4.0 student and top League of Legends player, what his teammates envied most about Jonathan was being able to keep at bay the inevitability of confronting the
Crossroads—of having to select between what they knew was the “right” path of getting an education versus taking the alternative route of becoming a professional player.

To some degree, Jonathan was the embodiment of the program. It was hard to filter out where Jonathan struggled as a student or a player. At times, he felt too perfect. His interests in science and technology started at home, with parents who were educated engineers. Eventually, he would graduate from a high school noted for educating some of the top STEM students in the State of California. Consequently, his academic shift into UCI, as he admitted, “was not as bad” as other students because his “high school was harder than most other high school students would have it.” His parents were extremely proud of him and his accomplishments.

However, to have maintained the status of a “unicorn” on the team, Jonathan was deeply critical of himself and whatever mistakes he made, especially as a collegiate player. While this was generally true of his teammates, this was almost a fault for Jonathan. He recalled a time he cried on a collegiate competitive stage after a loss. Heidi consoled Jonathan during that moment, asking him why he placed so much pressure on himself when he knows this is a team game. Jonathan recognized that he is “too harsh on himself,” often obsessing over the few mistakes he made in a game, at times to the point where he had trouble sleeping. During our interview, I asked him what was the point of it all? He responded “winning,” and to “feel proud of how I performed.” The sense of wanting to make sure he was never a burden on the team wore on him in multiple ways. He was already apologetic, for instance, for being the only vegetarian on the team, and for the inconveniences that he had created. Sometimes his food preferences worried him when everyone would want to go out for Korean barbeque. He was appreciative that Max and his teammates were considerate of his personal food choices.

A large part of Jonathan’s success in crafting an image of being a “unicorn,” however,
was his habit of sheltering himself away from issues that affected other players and concentrating on his improvement. His teammates were often curious about how he was so successful with his schoolwork while being an extremely talented player. One of his team members asked, “what is his secret?” Surprisingly, there was no secret, no clever timesaving hacks or daily management apps that he used. Rather, his advice appeared to be commonsense, and in fact, reflected some of the balancing strategies that many of the varsity players practiced when the players were younger, such as having “a clear plan” of what is needed to “get done” and making sure “to finish school first” before playing games.

But Jonathan was someone who uniquely benefited from his background, upbringing, and education, and that played into his success. His parents worried less about his future and academics and, consequently, provided him with a range of freedoms. The reality was that for most of his teammates, successfully managing one’s educational goals versus interest in esports was more of a struggle. Because this research interrogated the tensions between the desire to author one’s future versus the pressures of having to live up to social expectations (Baxter Magolda, 2007; 2012; Pizzolato, 2005), the experiences that Jonathan went through at UCI Esports differed from what I had first observed with the other players. For the star players, UCI being the “whole package” was complicated by social, economic, and cultural factors specific to Barron, Robert, and Logan. That history influenced how the star players ended up interfacing with the school, program, and teammates.

The star players did not have as smooth of a transition into UCI or UCI Esports. Instead, the path back to school for this cohort of players was marked by inconsistencies, abrupt changes, and unrealized hopes. While UCI Esports was repeatedly cast as an opportunity to experience something new, unique, and special as part of a collegiate experience, UCI Esports also
represented a chance to revisit a past of unmet promises and expectations. Here, I return to the discussion about how the cohort of star players summoned their histories to explain the reasons for their being at UCI. Moving from the trauma that was associated with the professional scene, the group highlighted how a university education was always part of their plans, but how an earlier failure to attain the proper grades kept them from continuing forward.

While Barron’s previous attempts to get into a reputable college failed, he was celebratory about how things turned out, perhaps even secretly happy that he was able to avenge the disappointment of being initially rejected by UCI. While many of the students had framed UCI, and the UCI Esports program, as constituting the “whole package,” the star players also presented the school as redemption. Linking back to the historical turn, the star players understood that it was because of UCI Esports that they were able to have a second chance at their education.

For instance, Barron explained, “this was a perfect thing for me. I go to a UC school, which I applied here originally. Then I got declined, but I’m here.” Robert was also happy about the circumstances that allowed him to become a student at UCI, but he also never imagined that he “would not get into one.” Robert explained that only “until [he] heard about the program” did he muster the courage to apply for the school. While excited to have been accepted, he seemed happier knowing how much it had pleased his parents that he was attending a UC school. Consequently, the sense of being able to revisit, correct, and live up to a past that had escaped him during his years within the professional scene was a reminder of just how meaningful the varsity program was to the group.

Because of how important UCI was to the players, players were willing to make changes to their educational plans to stay in school. As I discuss in the next section, much was sacrificed
by the players to have the opportunity to attend a “UC school” on an esports scholarship. Even for Robert, who among his veteran teammates was probably the most prepared to resume his education, the transition to UCI required unwanted concessions. Perhaps the biggest disappointment was learning that none of the community college credits that he acquired during his time as a professional player were transferable to UCI.

And yet, where those limitations existed, to some degree, they did not matter. Players were committed to their decision to attend UCI. In fact, what many of the players had in common was just how much they were willing to accommodate for them to remain eligible for their majors. Thinking of workarounds, Robert attempted to apply for UCI’s renowned computer science major with no credits. Given that he would be transferring in as a junior, he was told that he was “too much of a risk” for the program. As a result, he switched his studies a couple of times, eventually committing to a business/economics major. Thus, while UCI is an educational institution that others viewed as the “whole package,” players with non-traditional routes to a university education were suddenly required to make career-changing decisions based on what was the best way to stay at UCI.

UCI Esports represented a new start and a chance at addressing a past that was placed on hold. After years spent attempting to find a spot on a team that had the potential to play in the LCS, the star players had grown tired of the repeated tries at making it “on stage” as professional players. Although UCI was framed as the whole package, insofar as it represented both the chance to attain an education with academic rigor and a competitive outlet for esports, star players reflected upon UCI Esports as redemption.

Next, I highlight the transition of the star players into UCI through the experience of the UCI gaming house. With the framing of UCI Esports as redemption, a chance to revisit and
correct perceived mistakes of the past, allowing individuals to pursue their education, as well as keeping themselves active in the League of Legends scene, decisions made by the UCI Esports leadership worried team members about the program’s capacity to offer an environment different from what was seen in the professional scene. In particular, the nearly unassailable regard that the players held for the program was slowly questioned when, as a particularly worrisome example, the onboarding of the inaugural team led to a last-minute rush over the summer of 2016 to get the star players’ living arrangements in order, which instead led to strained relationships among the incoming cohort of players.

5.3.2 The UCI Esports “Gaming House”

In this section, I discuss how important it was for the players, who were all living together during their inaugural year as a team on off-campus housing, in what was occasionally referred to as the “gaming house,” to maintain the idea of UCI Esports as being redemptive or the whole package. With each of the star players having been absent from school for a few years, the move from professional player to UCI student happened quickly. Being part of the band of star players, Barron, Robert, and Logan thought that the transition into the program would be a relatively straightforward process. However, even before their official arrival on campus, the trio was already making accommodations in their university living arrangements. For instance, players had assumed they would be living on campus, excited by the prospects of experiencing college life at UCI, but due to the late admissions process that the star players went through, on-campus housing was impossible to locate.

Normally, the UCI Esports varsity players are given time to be onboarded into the esports program over the summer before the fall quarter begins. Over the years, the onboarding process has become far more involved. During my research visits, the orientation process for players
included becoming familiar with the communications tools to use with the team and staff, understanding the rules governing the use of the Arena, and acclimating to a schedule that required professional development sessions with the program’s “performance specialist.” Robert remembered the rush to get his team onto campus during the program’s inaugural year, at a time when the process of onboarding players was not as burdensome. However, the inaugural team was disappointed that they were located in an apartment about 45 minutes to an hour away from campus. When I asked Robert about the experience of living in an apartment with teammates, he commented, “that was not a good idea.”

The onboarding process, however, stood as an example of how the varsity players needed time, months or even years, to reflect on how they felt about events that had transpired. At the time of the housing situation, Robert did not want to create trouble for himself, his teammates, or the program. Being critical of the program was an action that Robert was “not comfortable” with, fearing that he would create an atmosphere of “misunderstandings.” He recalled that the last time he asserted himself with an esports organization it led to an early departure from his professional team. After a poor performance, he recalled, the coach decided to remove Robert from the roster. It was one of the few regrets he had that he told his team he was thinking of “going back to school” after the year was completed. From that incident, he learned that being transparent with a professional organization was a risk. Although he did not have intentions of leaving the organization, it did not matter. He was immediately benched and then removed once he voiced his opinion to the team.

Less than two years later, Robert again found himself in a situation where he was trying to find openings with the desire to speak his mind to UCI. Indirectly, Robert found ways of expressing his dissatisfaction with how UCI Esports handled the onboarding of his team into the
school, which complicated the framing of UCI being the “whole package.” For instance, he disagreed with my repeated use of the term “gaming house” to describe the living arrangements with his teammates, instead likening it to a “gaming apartment.”

He was right. A proper gaming house would have professional players under the close supervision of coaches and team managers. They would provide structure for the players’ schedules and assure that daily activities ran smoothly inside the house. When Logan explained the situation, by comparison, he argued that UCI Esports “had no admin oversight,” which is why the experiment to have all the players live together, as he determined, “ultimately failed.”

At first, I was surprised to learn that UCI Esports players were being organized into a housing arrangement usually reserved for professional teams. Over the past several years, the concept (and execution) of gaming houses had come under scrutiny from the professional esports community for failing to provide enough separation for a healthy work-life balance. For example, in 2014, professional League of Legends esports coach Nicolai ‘Hazel’ Larsen, posted to Reddit on the topic of gaming houses, outlining what he saw as significant flaws with the system. His post drew in close to 1,000 comments, discussing the various benefits but also drawbacks of gaming houses. While the professional esports scene embraced the practice around that time, Nicolai noted that conditions in gaming houses were antithetical to the promotion of a “professional culture” and bred “animosity” among players. He explained:

In a gaming house, you will without a doubt find at minimum six young men, for many of whom living in a gaming house is the first place that they have lived away from their parents at home. Having what is essentially a teenager [and] throwing him into a situation where he is not only broadcasted to millions of people around the world, but has to find his place in a social setting with five other guys who [are] trying just as hard to find their
social space, will without a shred of doubt lead to a lot of pressure. How people react to this will vary, but there have already been several instances where lack of performance has led to friction inside the gaming house. (Larsen, 2014)

Themes mentioned by Nicolai Larsen about the lack of a work-life balance, the relative immaturity of roommates, and the personal tensions between players spilling over into the workplace were also relevant to UCI Esports. While the star players may have shared a competitive past to reach the LCS, that did not mean they held similar views about how to be responsible college roommates.

Part of why players believed that the gaming house had failed was the divisions it had created among team members. As I walked around the Arena with Max during one of our meetings, as one example, he explained why I may have noticed only certain players present in the Arena at specific times, stating that some players “don’t want to work out with each other. Some don’t want to be in the same room with each other because they are still upset with each other.” While Max was describing the strife between players on the team, I also sensed regret in how he viewed the events. He appeared sorry for what had happened, possibly aware, in hindsight, of just how damaging it was to the League of Legends team living together in one location at the beginning of their inaugural year. After all, the players were not just teammates but were also seeking certain coveted positions on the teams, rendering each of them as competitors before they became teammates.

Robert offered an account about the circumstances of having to live with teammates as being the earliest, and perhaps the starkest, example of having to “deal with it” in a collegiate esports setting. Reasons for why many of the players adopted the perspective of having little power over their circumstances were situated within the familiar patterns of their leaving home
to pursue professional careers. Because of the unique combination that UCI offered between academics and esports, the rationale was one of tolerating, accepting, or overlooking mistakes made.

These living arrangements ended up testing the limits of the players. Each of the members of the inaugural League of Legends team brought with them different “lifestyles” and “habits” into the mix. What started as a simple issue of not washing one’s dishes or throwing away food, for instance, grew into a much larger and serious concern that ended up dividing the roommates into different groups, with Robert describing the situation as:

People were very messy, unclean, didn’t clean up after themselves, made messes, forgot to clean those messes up. And then out of the blue we just got fleas. Cause we had a cat, and I think the cat got fleas from the patio, so then we all got fleas, our whole house got infested. It was a nightmare. But this year is a lot better, none of that. We all moved out, whoever wanted to move out and live with other people did so.

The concerns over the lack of personal cleanliness were quietly overlooked for months by roommates, even though Robert made it clear that he was a self-identified “germaphobe.” Understanding that he would have to tolerate some level of inconvenience with a group of players he had never met before, he was excited by this aspect of the typical American college experience. But rooming and lodging with teammates so young that they have never lived outside of their home, nor traveled abroad, was a scenario that the star players thought they had left in the past.

Robert’s views about how UCI Esports had handled the gaming house captured some of the underlying tensions among his teammates. With Robert, it took some time and separation from the events of the gaming house to understand, process, and construct meaning from what
had transpired. This was a topic that he had not openly discussed before with many people.

Coupled with criticisms he had about the players’ housing, Robert tended to follow up with comments about how thankful he was to the varsity program for providing him with the opportunity to attend UCI, repeatedly acknowledging his appreciation to Max and the staff.

When talking about the gaming house, Robert often hedged his criticisms. While critical of the program, he faulted his teammates. For instance, Robert explained that the problem of there being a lack of cleanliness stemmed from the fact that they “were all gamers.” The more base, unsavory, or irresponsible elements of their personalities could be summed up with the term “gamer” (Bergstrom et al., 2016; Shaw, 2012), and that was how Robert saw where the team was at fault. They were young, inexperienced, and prone to exercising bad habits. Although Robert had summoned the gamer label as a means of explaining the behavior of the team, I sensed he was suggesting that, after a certain point, the varsity players as gamers could not be counted on to be responsible for their actions. When asked about what the school could have done to address the situation inside the gaming house, he replied, “maybe maid services?”

Robert laughed at his comment, but he was being serious. He understood that more could have been done to alleviate the tensions in the gaming house by offering the players domestic cleaning services. It was, perhaps, the type of service that he would have expected from a professional organization. At a minimum, the star players believed that being a “scholarship player” entailed belonging to a program that would allow them to focus on their competitive development as collegiate players—the type of basic accommodations that Victor enjoyed within the comfort of his own home. By locating some of the responsibility back onto the program, Robert raised an important point about how important it was for UCI Esports to play the role of mediator. While several of the players had reservations about what responsibilities UCI Esports
could reasonably handle, Robert believed the program had a fundamental responsibility of ensuring that players had a clean, safe, and supportive environment for the team to practice and train.

The comment about UCI Esports providing “maid services” indicated how the discourse over UCI as being the “whole package” fell short of being as close as possible to “total institution” (Goffman, 1961). In college athletics, a level of Goffmanian control exists over the day-to-day routines of when and where student-athletes sleep, eat, and exercise on campus (Fitz et al., 1999): that does not fully exist in collegiate esports. In the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I sports, for instance, athletes can spend upwards of 40 hours per week dedicated to their primary sporting activities (Wolverton, 2008), constituting a form of control by the university. A wealth of research about the topic (Adler & Adler, 1991; Nixon, 1992; Southall & Weiler, 2014) shows how the institutional exercise of control has also stepped outside the bounds of the players’ core sporting activities, with administrators checking on players’ social media, reviewing their personal finances, and even selecting their majors and courses (Hopkins et al., 2013; Sanderson & Browning, 2013).

From what I observed, however, building a varsity esports program that exacted that level of control was far from realistic. As I discuss in Chapter 6, it was not the success at controlling teams that signaled the program’s intentions of wanting to be “total” in its institutional control, but rather the failures of achieving that goal that reminded me of the program’s intent. The difficulties of getting the inaugural League of Legends team to live together cooperatively (as just one example) showed the limitations of how much control UCI Esports could exert over the players. The varsity program’s institutional sway was imperfect, contingent, and still a work-in-
progress (Anderson, 2009). In other words, what Max was creating with UCI Esports was still largely aspirational.

The novelty of the program, consequently, afforded UCI Esports some cover from criticism. Even though UCI Esports had its debut opening in 2016, the sense that varsity esports was still new territory for Max and his staff was apparent two years later (a comment frequently brought up by the staff about the program was that they were “building it as they fly”). Because UCI Esports was seen as redemptive by the star players, however, the urgency to be critical was less pressing. The varsity program, after all, was the principal reason the star players were at UCI. When mistakes were made by the program, as Robert explained with a slight sense of resignation, he would have to just “deal with it.”

However, I also wondered when players would eventually tire of giving the program second chances. At UCI, the last-minute onboarding of players onto campus ended up tarnishing the image of the varsity program as constituting a meaningful part of the “whole package” experience. The pressure of “having to deal with it” sat counter to the exuberance and excitement of UCI as the total experience. While the star players were excited by the prospects of transitioning their time and energies into the relatively new, and still untested, environment that was collegiate esports, the example of the gaming house suggested that the modus operandi of collegiate varsity programs and professional esports organizations are, perhaps, not that dissimilar. The move to rush the first cohort of players onto the UCI campus at the last minute reminded me of Barron’s comments about the short-term thinking that had pervaded his time with Team Liquid, when the organization made sudden and rash roster changes to his team that ended up jeopardizing their chances of coherently working together.
The tension between what players believed should have been done, which was to report
the incidents in the apartment to UCI Esports and its management, conflicted with the
experiences of players’ professional past, which suggested that being transparent and upfront
with team management could be detrimental to one’s future. For Robert, speaking out about the
team’s living conditions to UCI Esports was to risk identifying individuals with whom he was
just forming relationships, and possibly jeopardizing his chances with an esports organization,
once again. Thus, Robert’s instincts were to be protective of his new teammates, who were, to
some degree, all in the same situation, with a shared past of questionable relationships with
professional teams. He expressed that his biggest concern was that he did not want to “point
people out.”

In the next chapter, I continue to explore the notion of UCI Esports as the “whole
package,” examining where the metaphor of the program as being the complete experience was
applicable, on the one hand, and where expectations about the program failed to live up to its
promise, on the other. For Robert, the uncertainty over whether his time invested into the varsity
esports program was always subordinate to his being grateful to the leadership for allowing him
to be at UCI, intent on completing his education. Consequently, his views of the “gaming house”
encapsulated a broader ambivalence and uncertainty, even if hopeful about belonging to the
program—a view shared by many of the other participants in the study.

5.4 Summary

In this chapter, I examined how prior engagement with professional esports influenced
the decision by a group of “star players” to attend a desired school. By joining the UCI Esports
varsity program, this unique cohort of players was able to take a “historical turn” away from a
cycle of chasing after professional aspirations in esports. By themselves, the star players
represented a collection of students who were selected to join the inaugural UCI Esports program because of their unique backgrounds in the professional League of Legends scene.

Anticipating that players would be more forward-looking about their careers in competitive gaming, I came across players whose personal histories before their joining UCI Esports dealt with the uncertainty, trauma, and cynicism associated with the cut-throat world of professional esports (Brock, 2017; Lin & Zhao, 2020). This chapter focused on the past due to the experiences of a group of veteran players who formed UCI’s inaugural League of Legends varsity esports team—the fraught and complicated experiences of the professional scene highlighted how their trauma catalyzed their viewing the UCI Esports program as redemption for a second chance to start anew.

As the research progressed, players oriented the interviews with me to serve as a means of documenting and recording the turbulent narratives that had shaped their journeys before they arrived at UCI Esports. Thus, while my aims were focused on engaging the players in co-constructive and meaning-making deliberations, a part of the interview process that is central to the methodological focus of a self-authorship perspective (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007), I needed to balance the role of engaging the players in my ethnographic research, but also to provide them with the room to utilize the research in a way that was meaningful to them.

The themes of the historical turn and redemption provide nuanced insight into my initial research question (“How do collegiate esports scholarship players articulate commitment, effort, and dedication to their pursuits with esports?”), I address this question by investigating how the agency that the players were given early in their competitive careers accelerated their movement into high-tier competitive environments. In chapter five, however, I found that the star players had reversed, or slowed down, that trajectory.
For the star players who took a historical turn with their collegiate esports careers, as well as seeing the UCI Esports as the “whole package,” the UCI Esports program was spared criticism for missteps early in its development because it was seen as redemption. This was apparent in Robert’s account with the “gaming house.” Having been accepted into a UC school, ultimately, Robert wanted to avoid risking his status as a student in a school that he, and his parents, viewed as prestigious. Accordingly, the expression of one’s commitment to esports was not only about a single-minded focus on perseverance, effort, and knowledge at playing the game (Stebbins, 1992), but how seriousness in esports was applied to life-changing shifts from the professional scene back to college.

In particular, the historical turn exhibited by the star players was largely focused on the unmet or failed parental expectations that the player perceived as needed redressing, and the opportunity to complete one’s education became an important rationale or motivation for their using their skilled expertise to revisit the question of regret.
CHAPTER 6: CONTROL OVER PRACTICE SCHEDULES

6.1 Introduction

During the spring quarter of 2018, UCI Esports was going through a transitional period that included expanding the scope and mission of its program (Amazan-Hall et al., 2018; Lee & Steinkuehler, 2019). While competition remained a core focus for UCI Esports, the program leadership also readied themselves to tackle the broader issues of diversity, inclusion, training, and careers as part of a mission to align itself with UCI’s commitments to excellence and leadership. As the ambitions of UCI Esports began to expand, however, the program struggled with accomplishing one of the more fundamental jobs of a varsity program—finding a shared schedule of practice times among its teams to organize schedules and uphold one of its principal goals of supporting competition (UCI Esports, 2021).

In this chapter, I explore how the difficulties of finding a set of organized times and schedules for the League of Legends team became a catalyst for UCI Esports to introspect about its identity as a collegiate institution. UCI Esports continued to seek validation for operating as close as possible to a college athletic program on the UCI campus. The UCI Esports program, however, stumbled upon the uncomfortable reality that robust control over their competitive agenda was dependent upon a controversial redefinition of the institutional status of collegiate varsity players.

Specifically, I examined how players, first, navigated between the contested identities that were imposed upon players—tacitly accepted, and yet rejected— and then resisted what they believed to be betrayals of the spirit of what collegiate esports at UCI represented, that of unfettered competition. Resistance and pushback, however, were more than players lamenting that the program had begun to concern itself with a much broader set of institutional goals, but
saw the programmatic changes as a direct challenge to the players’ self-identity. The tensions that are explored in this chapter expose the first major divisions between the authority and leadership at UCI Esports, on the one hand, and the students and players, on the other.

6.2 The Importance of UCI Esports Interns

The varsity esports program I encountered on my first visit to the campus was led by a group of women employees and student interns (see Table 1) who were doing important work on the topics of diversity and inclusion as related to the institutional ambitions of UCI Esports. While my research focused on varsity students within the program, the work that the UCI Esports interns did was a crucial part of the success of the UCI Esports, not only because of their day-to-day effort in the operations of the organization but also because the interns were the foundation of new and creative ideas unseen in collegiate esports.

Situated between the community section and the entrance of the esports arena, the interns at UCI Esports were frequently at their desks tending to their teams’ busy schedules and daily demands which meant constant vigilance over a host of time-management tools. The Discord application (an incredibly popular chat app used among gamers) operated as one of the primary communications technologies for the players, staff, and teams to interact with each other as everyone tried to keep on top of constant questions and concerns. Computer screens were regularly opened to calendars—yellow, red, blue, magenta, an array of colors tiled the entire month of May through October 2018 on one of the staffer’s calendars. Sage, an intern at UCI Esports, explained how 2018 was especially busy, as the program was preparing to host a landmark event for the program in the fall of the next academic year of 2018–2019.

Heidi became involved as an intern with UCI Esports after meeting Max at an on-campus leadership conference. She was intrigued by what she heard of the newly created esports
program, and recalled that when she met with Max after the conference, one of her first questions about UCI Esports was, “what are you doing about women in gaming?” After graduating from UCI, Heidi was hired to be the program’s player support. Max was eager to create this position in 2018 because of the lessons learned from prior missteps (e.g., the onboarding and housing of the League of Legends team) in 2016. Even before meeting Heidi in 2018, I was already familiar with some of her accomplishments at UCI Esports through preliminary research of the program, and the ground-breaking work done by the interns. One of the more successful projects that Heidi oversaw, for instance, was the UCI Esports Girl’s Summer Camp, a project important to Heidi because of her interest in seeing more young women having the opportunity to participate in the larger gaming industry.

The Girl’s Camp was able to take advantage of UCI’s prime location and connections to the esports and video games scene of Southern California. This was a one-week-long event for girls in high school, exposing them to a range of networking opportunities and workshops at the Arena. Industry representatives, from publishers such as Blizzard Entertainment, and professional esports team, such as Dignitas, were weekly guests. It could be easy to overlook the role that students, staff, and interns played in helping to shape the development of an inclusive collegiate esports environment on the UCI campus, but some of the ideas being put forth by the interns, such as the girls’ camp, were the most progressive, forward-thinking, and inclusive I have seen in collegiate esports programming.

Initially, what inspired Heidi to take part in the program was the possibility of helping at-risk youth through video games, an issue closely aligned with Heidi’s interest in college, given that she had majored in criminology. Through her involvement with the girls’ camps, Heidi began to realize just how important women’s participation in esports was to the community.
Being involved with UCI Esports was a learning experience, where a significant part of that learning process took place through the upscaling and planning events to put together the week-long girls’ camp. The tremendous organizational effort was required to run esports-related events, where the coordination of schedules, confirmation of multiple speakers, and logistical efforts of creating workshops became more of a frequent responsibility for Heidi. Consequently, the interns were exposed to a range of interesting problems around the development of esports, both inside and outside of the college landscape.

There was a significant amount of work for Heidi and Sage to accomplish with the program and being placed into a position of responsibility of having to interface with some of the largest video game companies in the United States, and that was unfamiliar territory for the interns. Sage explained, “[t]his was my first time actually reaching out to well-known people in esports.” The first major video game company she emailed was Blizzard, whom she contacted to ask if they could send a representative from the company for UCI’s Summer Girls’ Camp. She recalled fretting over the single paragraph in her email—writing, erasing, then rewriting it multiple times. Ultimately, this ended up taking three hours to complete. Listening to Sage talk about the responsibilities she had, I was struck by the sheer range of tasks she was given. While some were day-to-day; others would fundamentally change the wider collegiate esports landscape. Eventually, the success of the Summer Girls’ Camp and the confidence that this brought Sage spurred her to ask Max to hire her for an official position.

The interactions I had with Sage and Heidi gave me a better understanding of just how important they were to the growth of UCI Esports, and consequently, in what direction the program was heading. When Victor talked about UCI encompassing the “whole package,” it was only after time spent with the interns that I fully appreciated the effort required to craft a
program that wanted to offer its players a holistic experience. That expansion started around 2017 when a collection of stakeholders involving UCI faculty, students, and alumni created the “Diversity and Inclusion in Esports Task Force” (Amazan-Hall et al., 2018). Unprecedented at the time, the task force outlined a set of strategies to support diversity and inclusivity through the creation, among many other projects, of a “code of conduct,” “bystander training,” and outreach initiatives, such as “new player nights.”

I remember how impressive it was to have the task force include a collection of stakeholders, some of whom I was aware of by their name because of their prominence in games research (Constance Steinkuehler and Bonnie Ruberg), others whom I knew from their work in inclusivity in esports (Morgan Romine of AnyKey), and individuals I became acquainted directly through my research at UCI (e.g., Angela, as arena coordinator). However, what I learned about the task force largely came from the time I spent with the interns because much of the execution of these projects depended upon their efforts.

As UCI Esports evolved to encompass multiple goals, institutional growth started to impinge upon the control the varsity players felt they had over their careers. In the following section, I discuss how the growing ambitions of the program manifested as a threat to how players imagined themselves as competitors. The analysis revealed that perceptions of UCI Esports were that, while players saw UCI as the “whole package”—a place where players foresaw the potential of having a fulfilling educational and collegiate esports experience, the spring quarter of 2018 presented the program with a significant challenge. The team found it impossible to hold League of Legends practices during the school week because of conflicting student schedules. Accordingly, Heidi was charged with the monumental task of reconciling an
increasingly packed schedule among the teams, where the program itself had become a substantial obstacle to the competitive development of the players.

6.3 Wanting to have Weekends Back

During the spring of 2018, UCI Esports struggled with finding schedules that were satisfactory for the League of Legends players. Unfortunately, the best that the staff could do was create team practices, according to Max, “one or two evenings a week” for the entire quarter. That was a best-case scenario for the team. Those “one or two evenings” of practices, instead, were part of a larger shift towards pushing varsity practices to the weekends.

Ideally, the League of Legends team would want to have a schedule that included weekday evening practices. The same was true for the Overwatch team, with an occasional match on the weekend being acceptable. However, when I arrived on campus, the League of Legends varsity players were particularly unhappy with their spring 2018 schedules. Due to unfavorable course times for the spring quarter, none of the team members were able to make practice during the school week. While many other players were upset about the spring schedules, Victor summed up the collective frustrations when he explained that the League of Legends team just wanted to have their “weekends back.”

A key reason why Victor decided to attend UCI was the proximity that the school had to his hometown, San Diego. Because the UCI campus is close to San Diego, he imagined making trips home on the weekends, allowing him to spend time with his parents and sisters. Going home to visit his mother and father was a particularly important ritual for Victor, as it allowed him to get his mind off esports and to connect with family and friends. Victor explained:

Sometimes it’s fun to just hang out, play board games with friends, or just chill. And like, it’s hard to do that with practice on weekends. I used to play, before I moved here, back
in San Diego, me and my friend group would play board games really often, like a couple of times a week. Everyone would come over and play Catan or Code Names or something. It was super fun. They would come to my house, and we would play for hours. I kind of missed that. They were planning on coming every once in a while, during the weekend, but it’s pretty hard to do that.

Having to be prepared for practices and scrims on the weekends represented a burden for the players, but especially for Victor. During my first encounter with him, I remember entering through the Arena’s side door, and immediately hearing his laughs echoing throughout the small space. Victor was sitting with Jonathan and Elijah, two of his teammates. They were trying to help him sort through the fall 2019 schedule, not an easy task because Jonathan and Elijah majored in computer science while Victor was in philosophy.

To make up for the untimely schedules in the spring, Victor’s parents ended up making visits between San Diego to the UCI campus. As discussed in Chapter 4, Victor’s relationship with his parents had been a constant source of support throughout his career in gaming, starting in high school and now extending into college. With the spring 2018 schedule being unworkable, Victor’s parents were able to find a way to make sure his needs were being met, in much of the same way that he depended on his mother’s help (by preparing meals) when he was in high school. Once again, he was able to fully concentrate on his games without having to leave what he was doing.

I was able to meet Victor’s parents at the Arena on my second visit to the UCI campus in the fall of the 2019 quarter. They were the first set of players’ parents that I had met. On that day, I remember seeing Victor at his computer and his parents standing behind him, with his mother flanked to his right and his father to his left. Having parents at the Arena was an unusual
sight to see, but a welcome one. That it was Victor’s parents, and not another player’s, was not a
surprise, given the sustained support that he has had throughout his teenage and young adult
years. I was hesitant to interrupt the scene: Victor’s mother and father were completely fixated
on what their son was playing. Their attention darted back and forth between looking at the high-
end gaming rig screen and then looking down at Victor.

I walked up when I noticed a lull in the game and introduced myself to Victor’s parents
and asked if I could steal away a moment of Victor’s time for an interview for my research. At
first, they appeared shocked, perhaps even confused, that someone would want their son to
participate in their research. His father patted Victor on the shoulder as he got up and we both
left. Just as his mother had supported Victor during his climb into the ranks of Challenger during
high school, when he burrowed himself into his room for weeks while she prepared his meals so
that he would only need to concentrate on his game, his family was there for him once again.

Although Victor was fortunate to have his parents present, the loss of his weekends was
still a significant setback. There was a strong sense that with the new schedule, UCI Esports was
impinging upon time belonging to the students. The sense I got from Victor was that to be
prepared for practices on a Saturday or Sunday rendered gaming a chore (or an obligation), given
that his weekends were normally regarded as leisure (Postigo, 2003; Schulzke, 2014).

Players were frustrated because it seemed as if weekends belonged to the program.
Pushing matches to the weekend only prolonged the time that they believed they needed to play,
as players continued to game throughout the school week, regardless. Even if they were not
scheduled for scrims or practices, the League of Legends team ended up practicing even more
under this revised schedule.
The conflicting schedules complicated the spring quarter of 2018 for the League of Legends team, but the lack of control over the players’ academic calendars was indicative of a larger problem within the UCI Esports, which ultimately presented the program with a significant challenge on how it could institutionally define itself (Goffman, 1961; Kauweloa, 2021, Summerly, 2020). Even with a workforce of UCI staffers, interns, and student volunteers, there were limits to what could be accomplished. When asked how UCI Esports intended to revolve misaligned schedules, the consensus was that the program would attain the status of Priority Registration. Implicit in that suggestion that UCI Esports could acquire the status of Priority Registration for players was the belief that there were no clear differences between the demands and pressure faced by their League of Legends team versus that of conventional college athletics teams, and that the university needed to consider recognizing their roster of varsity players as “student-athletes.”

6.4 The Need to be a “Student-Athlete”

The reasons for League of Legends players being burdened with untimely schedules, according to several of the players, stemmed from the teams not having the special status of Priority Registration. For the UCI Esports program, this became of primary importance. Priority Registration is a designation at UCI, also common to other post-secondary educational institutions, which allows students to register for classes earlier within the registration period based upon the certain classifications, such as being in the military, disabled, or a student-athlete (Bahr, Gross, Slay, & Christensen, 2015).

However, at the heart of attaining the special status of Priority Registration was the intention of redefining both what is meant to belong to the varsity program as a player, as well as the broader mission of the program. To accomplish that goal, the program’s leadership needed to
extract even more control over the players’ weekly schedules, and for that to happen, the players needed to be recognized as “student-athletes.”

Heidi was tasked with trying to solve this problem. Because of her close working relationship with the varsity teams in her role as the program’s player support, she was adamant that if anyone just looked at the players’ “practice schedules” and understood their commitments to their games, it would be obvious that they deserve the status of student-athletes. Attempts to get UCI to institutionally recognize the varsity esports players as student-athletes, however, repeatedly failed. However, UCI Esports decided to back off from further efforts to claim the status after the UCI academic senate challenged Max for having, in Heidi’s words, the “audacity” to suggest that esports players were deserving of the special status equal to the other athletes on campus.

Throughout my research at UCI Esports, the term “student-athlete” was often used in discussions where I was involved with university administrators. With the advent of scholarship-based esports programs, the term appeared also appeared to be a fit for coaches and educators to define an emerging space of competitive gamers on college campuses (Baker & Holden, 2018; Funk, Pizzo, & Baker, 2018; Schaeperkoetter et al., 2017). When the NCAA looked at officially regulating college esports in 2017, for instance, those in the esports community understood that universities would have to “embrace the concept of the student-athlete” in college esports (Blum, 2017). Used to describe someone as a student with competing demands in academics and varsity college athletics, the term “student-athlete” presents itself as a neutral term for thousands of students who play traditional sports on college campuses across the United States (Hatteberg, 2018; McCormick & McCormick, 2006).
The term “student-athlete” was one of several descriptors used to speak about, differentiate, or categorize the esports varsity players from other students on campus. With other terms such as “unicorn” and “star players” being deployed around the Arena, I saw how labels were seen as unproblematic because they were often used as terms of endearment. Being descriptive categories, however, the labels that emerged through conversations by staff, administration, and the program leadership as part of the ongoing conversations in college esports were part of the identity work that the program layered onto the students—of which the use of “student-athlete” became the most consequential.

At times, I was surprised at how quickly the term “student-athlete” became naturalized into institutional discourse, and often without reflection. As one example, in a meeting that I had with an athletics director (and his team) from a Division I (NCAA) university, the term “student-athlete” was half-jokingly referenced by a staff member in front of about a dozen of his colleagues over how they should refer to a certain college esports player at their school. Suggesting in slight disbelief if the group should now call esports players “student-athletes,” the athletics assistant made it clear how difficult it was to summon the right syntax needed to refer to the players. There was also consensus that nobody at the table wanted to refer to the students as “gamer” (Bergstrom et al., 2016; Shaw, 2012) for reasons they saw incongruent with the mission of the athletics department.

Within minutes of bringing up the term student-athletes, the group of athletic administrators pointed out the similarities between esports players and traditional athletes, suggesting that even though esports is not a “physical sport,” it does not differ significantly from traditional sports. After a brief discussion, the group defaulted to using the term student-athlete as a preferred label to talk about the esports players, with the word continuing to be deployed
throughout the meeting. Without knowing it, I thought, the group appeared to deploy the term “student-athlete” in the same way that Szablewicz (2011) examined how the term “esports” is put to work through its “civilizing” effects (in her research, those effects are further grounded in the idea that esports is a modern form of “patriotic leisure”) and the conciliatory links to “skill-building, individual competition and self-control” (p. 17).

The difficulty I observed with the term “student-athlete” was how it was virtually absent from the discussions and observations I had with the UCI esports varsity players. There was one exception. Barron used the term to differentiate between college and professional esports. The context of that exchange was to show how college esports did not have the same regulatory framework as professional esports when it came to poaching players from one team to another. As Barron understood it, poaching did not exist in college esports because “it’s just a student-athlete. It’s not a professional team.” In the single instance where the term “student-athlete” was used by one of the varsity players, it was being framed as less than, diminutive to, or undeserving of its place in comparison to a professional sports player.

From UCI’s perspective, the use of the term “student-athlete” was an institutional attempt at figuring out how to conceptualize and understand what a “college esports player” is or does by deploying familiar definitions. To refer to the players in conventional athletic terms drew on multiple motivations, one that initially needed to decipher the confusion of college esports for individuals unfamiliar with its growing presence. Key in the repeated use of the term was the “civilizing” or legitimizing effects that were desired by stakeholders who, while unsure of its impact, were preparing to assimilate an emerging digital sports culture into the structures of a modern, large-scale public university. In one form or another, the example is illustrative of what
I had experienced on several occasions with university officials. For example, I noted how quickly the word can come into use within administrative vernacular.

Attempts to redefine the discourse around college esports required some level of buy-in and acceptance from the students themselves—even if it was not explicit. Scott (2011), in his research on the transformative power that institutions hold in shaping identities, is instructive here, arguing that individuals who immerse themselves into organizations to undergo personal change often end up “subjecting themselves to institutional discourses that define their old and new identities, as well as the system of rules with which they willingly comply” (p. 238). While the varsity players rarely used the term “student-athlete” in how they identified themselves on the team, they also never really pushed back against the framing. Instead, the term, while not personally deployed in the self-description of the players, may have also been tacitly accepted as one of many ongoing identities considered as part of how the players identified themselves.

My thoughts about the nuances associated with the player’s identity in collegiate esports were shaped by my previous research at Robert Morris University (Chicago) and the University of British Columbia (Canada) when I visited both locations in 2016 (Kauweloa & Winter, 2021). On the other hand, students often held conflicting views of their participation in esports programs. At Robert Morris University, for instance, the players I spent time with were thrilled to share their experiences of being part of the initial cohort of players to belong to the first varsity esports program in the United States. On the other hand, the research I conducted at the University of British Columbia found students who were far more nuanced about their publicness with video games. Rather than explicitly being “proud of what they do” (Stebbins, 2004, p. 77), the players at UBC chose to carefully exercise when, and with whom, they were explicit about their participation in esports. The fear according to one student who was near
finishing his undergraduate degree in business was he did not want to diminish his chances of landing a job by being viewed by his peers as being too “obsessed, geeky, or whatever” (Kauweloa & Winter, 2019, p. 44).

In the research, I refer to the complex negotiations about when and how the UCI Esports varsity players articulated self-perceptions as contested identities. That is, the identities of the collegiate esports players were almost always under pressure to be defined, often in conventional athletic terms, such as the “student-athlete.” The participants in my research, however, remained uncommitted to an emerging, often institutional discourse, about who or what they are, with the exception that they saw themselves as “competitors.”

What was apparent is that I found myself more aware of my participation in shaping the very discourse around the players and within the program. For the varsity players, the introduction of new terms (“star players,” superstar player,” and “unicorn”), often approving, celebratory, or complimentary, to describe who the players are, or what the players do, was extremely unusual, given the tumultuous history that players faced in the past for their passion for video games. Generally, I resisted using the term “student-athlete” when I was around the UCI Esports Arena, knowing the term’s controversial history in college athletics. Walter Byer, the director of the NCAA in 1964, created the term “student-athlete” to stave off potential financial liabilities for universities over the surge of university-related football injuries by explicitly classifying football players as “student-athletes.”

To avoid workers’ compensation claims, various maneuvers were made to entrench the paradigm of the “student-athlete” as the prevailing model of the new on-campus sports player by changes to how scholarships were regarded as “a full cost-of-attendance allowance (or help to further the education of athletes)” (Comeaux, 2019, p. 9), and not payments based upon
performance or participation. After addressing the legal arguments over the definition of what constituted a “student-athlete,” the NCAA worked to guide public perceptions over the changes in the prevailing language, as McCormick and McCormick (2006) argue, through a “long, fervent public relations campaign to persuade the public that these athletes are students, not employees” (p. 85).

When I was around the varsity team, I self-consciously maneuvered around the term “student-athlete” by using labels such as “gamer,” “player,” and “competitor.” Unlike the confidence shown by the athletics director who immediately employed the term “student-athlete” in their meeting with me, I almost always felt uncomfortable with the word, even before commencing with my research at UCI. Staurowsky and Sack (2005) have argued that there is a moral case for researchers to reconsider the use of the term in their scholarship. They state that for educators, and others who write on the topic of sports, the “history of the term student-athlete presents a dilemma” in higher education, where “if known and not challenged or knowable but not discussed” the continued use of the term “student-athlete” is tantamount to being “complicit in fraud” (Staurowsky & Sack, 2005, p. 111).

While I remained reluctant to use the term on my visits with the players, I also struggled to maintain that position. It was not that I believed that the varsity esports players were not “athletes,” nor that esports did not constitute real sports (Bowman & Cranmer, 2019). The institutional legacy, history, and incongruity of the term were so apparent to my sensibilities that every time I heard the word used within or around the context of college esports, it felt disingenuous. However, after learning that the varsity League of Legends team was refused Priority Registration because the UCI Esports teams were not seen as equivalents of student-athletes in conventional college sports terms, I wondered if my refusal to affirm the discourse of
college esports players as “student-athletes” was counterproductive. As I discuss in Chapter 7, one of my goals with this research was to make sure that it served the players in a way that improved their conditions.

After time spent with Heidi and seeing her efforts to improve the lives of the players, I questioned the uncertainty over my using the term “student-athlete.” Were my writings, panel appearances, or discussions with players and administrators on campus being framed in a way that was helpful towards the lived experiences of the players? Why did it matter, I asked myself, if the varsity esports players were called “student-athletes?” The rationale was not necessary to take part in a “civilizing” process for esports. Rather, because my research situated me into the lived experiences of being collegiate competitors on the UCI campus, I witnessed the demands placed on the players; consequently, if it meant making their busy lives easier to manage, and especially if helped to convince the relevant authorities at UCI that the players were deserving of a special registration status, I wanted to contribute to in helpful ways. Ultimately, I wanted my research to be used for the benefit of the program and the players (Harrison et al., 2001)

While the UCI Esports players were still negotiating through their own identities with joining a top-tier collegiate esports team, and potentially parlaying a collegiate career into something professional in the future, by imposing a language and discourse that situated the players as “student-athletes,” the UCI Esports program was already enacting identity work, not only on the students but also on the program itself. To talk about college esports players as “student-athletes” was to summon an imaginary (Strauss, 2006) of what could be possible (the values, goals, and direction) with the future of college esports. However, that imaginary was not sweeping or radical in its outlook but instead looked to replicate established “Big-Time” college athletics, which would include industry-defining expert coaching and performance training, a
robust network of support staff, and enthusiastic institutional backing from administrators and presidents (Clotfelter, 2019).

In the next section of the chapter, I explain how the proposed language being used, that of the “student-athlete,” was part of a larger strategy to structure, extract, and then use as much of the players’ times during the school week to expand the program’s mission and goals. I examined the issue of Priority Registration as a lens to learn about the intentions of the program to redefine itself and its attempts to control students’ time. To make the case that UCI Esports players deserved the unique status of Priority Registration, efforts were made to draw closer comparisons between the varsity League of Legends players and the traditional student-athletes on the UCI campus.

However, aspirations to enlarge the scope of UCI Esports during its inaugural years (Amazan-Hall et al., 2018), conflicted with how students imagined their competitive evolution within the program. The contested identities that the players faced through the deployment of discourses progressed into attempts by the program to assume greater and more comprehensive control over the players’ free time. What emerged throughout the research, then, were significant disagreements among players and the leadership about the nature of their participation in a program they saw as failing to support its first “pillar” of competition.

6.4.1 Proving Priority Registration

If UCI Esports intended to craft a program comprehensive in its institutional aims by promoting competition, research, academics, community, entertainment, and careers in esports (Lee & Steinkuehler, 2019), many of the UCI Esports varsity players had a straightforward, and far more narrowly focused, perspective about what they wanted to achieve—belonging to a close-knit team that was consistently producing wins for the college. However, to deliver on that
promise of belonging to an organization that could aid with providing a premier collegiate experience, as Zack, from the varsity Overwatch team, explained it, to “eat, sleep, do everything together” with his teammates, meant that UCI Esports needed to exact greater control over its operations (Goffman, 1961).

With each visit to the UCI campus (fall 2018, winter 2018, and fall 2019), I saw how difficult it was for UCI Esports to organize its varsity schedules. I initially contemplated charting the weekly obligations of the players for my reference, wanting to see how complicated the class schedules were for the players, as well as what other responsibilities they had during their week. My concerns over mapping out the duties of each of the players revolved around how time-consuming that could be, taking me away from “the action” of what was happening in the Arena, along with the privacy worries of having to ask for the details of the players’ academic calendars.

While the players appeared to be fine with sharing their calendars with me, I was never sure whether my position as a researcher ended up creating tensions to comply, and I did not want to pressure students into handing over information they were unsure about. Even when students agreed to send me information about their calendars, I never got over the discomfort of getting records of their schedules. For instance, the few times that I attempted to gather information about the players’ schedules, while I wanted to have only course details (times and dates), the players ended up giving me screenshots of their entire week’s calendar, without taking the time to redact information that was not relevant to my research. In two instances, the students included other important personal information (such as medical information about doctor’s visits) in their screenshots that were not part of my study.

One day, as I discussed my dilemma about the collection of the players’ schedules with the program’s strategic planner, he mentioned Heidi had created a similar calendar as part of her
work as player support. Among her various responsibilities, Heidi was tasked by UCI Esports with re-organizing the calendars and schedules for the League of Legends team, as she explained, to “demonstrate how unreasonable the students’ schedules were.”

I discussed Heidi’s efforts with her, about what she had created, and asked permission for its use in my research. The more I learned about Heidi’s position as player support, the more I saw how much work she did that overlapped with what I wanted to accomplish with the players but could not take the time to accomplish. That I learned of these calendars surreptitiously through conversations with another person unrelated to my inquiries revealed the disconnects between what I believed was valuable, noteworthy, or insightful evidence of the program’s motivations versus what others believed to be important about the program. Heidi appeared surprised that I wanted to use the calendar, telling me it “took a lot of work.” The files had been sitting on her hard drive, unopened, since she had created them for presentation to the academic senate, thinking that she may never need them again. Thankfully, they were not deleted.

As so often has happened in collegiate esports, the careful recording and history of gaming events on college campuses history, especially in the early development of college esports, has been overlooked by students who rarely saw the importance of documenting examples of on-campus video game histories. I assured Heidi, however, that what she had was something that I found important. She gave her approval and said she was “happy it’s helping other people” and being “milked for all it’s worth.”

To create the experimental calendars, Heidi gathered schedules for the fall, winter, and spring of the 2018–2019 academic year. She used colors (red, aqua, green, orange, gray, blue, and purple) to represent the different courses that the players took for the spring 2018 quarter, which included physics, economics, computer science, philosophy, political science,
anthropology, sociology, history, and education. On the first calendar (spring 2018) that Heidi created, she organized all the League of Legend players’ courses into a single Monday-to-Friday schedule to get a complete picture of how scattered and disparate the players’ classes were, and where there were gaps of free time among the players’ schedules. Small blocks of free time, for instance, showed on Monday (9 a.m. to 10 a.m.) and Wednesday (9 a.m. to 11 a.m.), with other small pockets of openings mostly intermittent and sparse, a pattern that I could confirm during my visits. Those pockets of free time between classes allowed students to come into the Arena during the school day to play, but the decision to use the Arena between morning classes was ultimately up to the players.

As I observed during my research visits, certain students made frequent use of the Arena, and Jonathan was someone who took advantage of his free time between classes for practice. Even before my arrival to do research, Jonathan noted that his repeated visits to the esports Arena started to worry Max. He was so concerned about how often Jonathan was visiting the Arena that he eventually asked if he was “doing ok in school?”

As busy as Max was as the director of the program, I was impressed by how much he involved himself with the teams, even if busy attending to the business of being a director, still aware of the minutiae of the team’s latest wins, strategies, and statistics. Knowing Jonathan as the “unicorn,” I was not surprised by Max’s concern. I would have also been worried about how much time I had seen Jonathan practicing had I not known that he possessed the uncanny ability to maintain a 4.0 academic record while being a top-ranked League of Legends player. Max was aware of his varsity program, down to the very players, such as Jonathan.

However, even being self-disciplined as Jonathan about appointing himself time to come into the Arena, Nathan, from the Overwatch team, explained that players “don’t want to play the
game alone” without friends or teammates. Having the players come to the Arena to practice independently of each other, in other words, was not how the UCI Esports program imagined how their varsity players would integrate into the team. An important reason for why many of the varsity players selected to join UCI Esports, after all, were the opportunities for team-bonding experiences. Victor was clear that he “love[d] being on a team,” because it gave him the chance of “[m]eeting new players and becoming really close to [his] teammates.”

After creating the first calendar, Heidi created a second “ideal” calendar. She built the next version with the assumption that the players were deemed eligible to have Priority Registration. The ideal calendar she had created neatly swept away the scattering of courses that were present throughout the middle of the day, opening up a huge blank space in the center of the calendar. With the players’ wishes in mind, Heidi thought broadly about how getting Priority Registration could provide the type of bonding experience that was expected by players. She explained what the goal for the ideal schedule meant:

I actually simulated it as if this would have been their schedule. So, I looked at where they were in their courses, what classes they actually need to take next. So, I was able to find these two students who can actually take the same class at the same time, and that’s really great to have shared classes. So, I was able to put that schedule together and say, “here is this beautiful, perfect, imaginary schedule they could have had if I had control.” Priority registration and to help them know what classes to take. I tried to plan out the really good things, “oh, we have all this time to eat and do training.” But, also now, a lot of them now share the same classes, and they can all work on their academics together. Just trying to further the point to the administrators.
Because many of the players shared similar STEM-based majors, Heidi found slots for players to be in the same courses during the spring semester; locating blocks of time where the players could have lunch together was also another chance for Heidi to structure times for players to connect. What was originally a project aimed at communicating just how difficult it was to organize a set of disparate varsity schedules became an opportunity to reimagine what could be accomplished (“the really good things”) were UCI Esports given the designation of Priority Registration.

The differences between the calendars that Heidi created were notable. The “idealized” calendar was a significant improvement over the actual schedules of the players. Heidi believed that what she was doing was exactly what players hoped for when they anticipated UCI as being the “whole package.” With finding scrim times with the second calendar, for instance, Heidi explained she was “hoping to get 5 o’clock” as free as possible across the quarter. “Openings in the evenings are beautiful,” she continued, telling me that she wanted “to get as many of those that [she] could.” According to Heidi, the fundamental problem of the schedules was partly addressed by moving and sorting blocks of time around, a solution and mode of operations that the interns were quite familiar with already when having to do the very same thing when doing event planning for the various workshops, conferences, training, and camps that they had been involved with.

The method for transforming the schedules of the players was largely about addressing the issue of misaligned schedules with quantitative solutions, where the modern-day concern over the scarcity of time is seen as a problem that could be solved (Wajcman, 2019). However, it was a problem in which the solution was to command greater control and say over the players’ activities, which meant ensuring not only that a certain set of hours within the day were “free,”
but that those hours were conveniently situated at the right time of day (mornings for classes and evenings for practices). For instance, while starting practices and scrims at 5 o’clock in the evenings could be difficult for some players to attend due to students still taking classes, the goal, as Heidi explained, was to “open that up as much as [she] could” given that these were the “prime times” when UCI could find other schools, or other teams, to practice against.

The crux of UCI’s problems with scheduling boiled down to the lack of control over the specified hours of what various students and staff had referred to as “prime times.” According to Brandon, the meaning of “prime time” was closely tied to an “optimal time,” or an ideal time, for teams to practice “based on life schedules.” A varsity program, at the very minimum, needs to have the ability to schedule players around these crucial hours, often in the evenings or nights, but the problem was that classes were repeatedly encroaching on this crucial time for the players.

When I was first alerted to the term “prime time” in college esports, I was surprised to see a word that drew from an older association between technology and its attendant sensitivity to temporality and media production being used as part of the vernacular. However, it made sense. The term has a long history with traditional broadcast and programming that involved airing popular television shows during evening hours of “8:00 to 11:00 p.m. (EST, MST, PST; 7—10:00 CST)” (Segal, 2010, p. 2) in the United States. When the television was once the center of family entertainment, broadcasters learned that the greatest exposure to viewing audiences happened within a certain range of hours during the evening—a (prime) time normally bracketed for leisure activities within the home (often for men) that began after the traditional “workday” and ended before bedtime.

Not much has changed when it comes to the media habits of the present generation of technology users who still prefer evenings as the primary part of their day to engage with digital
Temporal considerations are at the heart of what is meant by “prime time” in collegiate esports when the best times to have college teams play each other, generally, sat around the same traditional prime time broadcasting hours 8:00 to 11:00 p.m. Depending on where different university varsity teams are geographically located within North America, the “prime times” for colleges that participate in esports can meaningfully differ. The consensus, however, is getting evenings free for scrims and practices, right after class (or perhaps an hour from one’s last class) have been completed, was ideal for the UCI Esports team.

Ambitions to reorganize the players’ times, however, were not just focused on blocking off the prime times of the evening hours after classes to schedule practices and matches. In creating the second calendar, while Heidi had to be cognizant of the intricacies associated with prime times for practices, she also wanted to assure that the players were fulfilling the broader programmatic goals that UCI Esports wanted to accomplish as they reimagined the program as encompassing a larger set of player development goals (Amazan-Hall et al., 2018). Heidi explained, “I was equally concerned with our bi-weekly [school’s psychologist] meetings, for example. They are the reason why I make student schedules in the first place.” Each week, the varsity players were required to meet with the team’s exercise physiologist and psychologist.

Learning of how serious UCI Esports was taking its holistic approach to college esports, I remember being impressed by the wider associations the program made to existing infrastructure and personnel on the UCI campus to support its efforts. For instance, UCI’s licensed psychologist was brought into the program to help players work through team building, emotional maturity, and conflict resolution. In an environment as competitive as UCI Esports, with players motivated to take part at the highest levels of competitive play, it is not uncommon to have conflicts within teams. The goal of the team’s official psychologist was to build up
enough trust and rapport with the players so that he could have meaningful and transparent conversations with the teammates throughout their time as students.

Alternatively, meetings with Henry were geared towards helping the players through gaming-specific strength and conditioning exercises that concentrated on the long-term impacts on their health. Henry placed the players on a regime that outlined proper eating habits, as well as tracked the sleeping patterns of the players. When it came to actual play, the ergonomic setups of their training areas in the UCI Esports Arena were optimized for the players, but so were the sets up at home. Once a week, the team members would make the trek from the esports Arena to the on-campus gym and recreational center, where they would meet with the trainer to go over personalized workout regimens, which can include strength training, flexibility exercises, and weightlifting. The goal of the exercise sessions, as Henry explained to me, was to improve the players’ “overall health” through “long-term” education about their eating, sleep, and workout habits so that they become “healthy human beings.”

To have a schedule that met these demands (both scrims and UCI Esports programmatic initiatives) (Amazan-Hall et al., 2018), a significant portion of the middle of the day was cleared of obligations. Thus, the results of the ideal calendar concentrated almost all the players’ classes in the mornings, with time left in the middle of the day for various UCI Esports program-required activities with the professional development team, and the evenings reserved for the team’s scrims, practices, and games. To some degree, this was the program’s own “prime time,” a part of the day that UCI Esports could fit everyone into a unified slot to accomplish its growing mission of player development.

The only way for Heidi to execute the wholesale rearrangement of schedules that she had spent weeks creating, however, was for the university to grant the varsity players Priority
Registration. Heidi thought that demonstrating how difficult the actual schedules were for the UCI Esports players (she had done this for the fall, winter, and spring of the 2018–2019 academic year) would be sufficient to convince the university authorities that the players were deserving of the recognition of student-athletes. Instead, what she found was pushback against the proposed changes from the university.

Even with Heidi’s advocacy work, UCI Esports was still unsure of its Priority Registration status by the time I had finished my last final visit. Describing the process of getting Priority Registration as “political,” Heidi pointed out that UCI Esports had not received an update on this status from the faculty senate (as of 2021), and because of the impact of COVID-19, “everything is on hold now.” The continued uncertainty over their status served as a challenge to the institutional identity of UCI Esports. With hopes to look like a traditional athletics outfit, UCI Esports was not able to assign the status of “student-athlete” to its players, a designation that traditional college athletics programs should have the power to command (Bahr, Gross, Slay, & Christensen, 2015).

6.5 Collegiate Player Resistance as Identity Work

The analysis has examined the influence that the UCI Esports program has exerted on shaping the experiences of the varsity players—most notably the contested identities associated with the discursive practices utilized by administrators, coaches, and leadership—with little discussion about attempts by the participants in the research to resist how they were being talked about, referred to, or institutionally defined.

As discussed in chapter 5, the redemptive status (also that of the “whole package”) that the players attributed to UCI Esports appealed to their wanting to be in a program that provided the students the ability to be at an institution of higher learning that had a reputable academic
reputation, as well as allowing them to be part of an exceptionally talented esports team. UCI Esports, consequently, served as a geographic, and physical, crossroads for the players. Consequently, the redemptive status of the varsity program had allowed the players to keep at bay the decision between their passion for esports and their academic expectations, creating a sense that they were going into UCI with the intention of creating a balance between their responsibilities.

However, in the following section, I explain how players began to counter pressures to conform to changes they believed were inconsequential to their skilled development, seeking instead to disrupt the “balance” they had anticipated making as collegiate esports players. The resistance that the players mounted tested the contested identities that had lingered undefined for years inside UCI Esports. The changes observed at UCI Esports, illustrated by Heidi’s work on creating the new varsity calendars, spurred several of the players to actively push back against UCI Esports by asserting their competitive identities against what they viewed as plans to expand the scope of what a “traditional” varsity college esports program entailed.

Focusing on how players rebelled against the program is an important part of my analysis given that the confrontation presented the first real example of the clashes of perspectives among students and the leadership. This consequently affected how the players understood the limits to which they could cultivate elite competitive identities as players. No longer idle in their observations about the changes around them—as I discuss at the start of the chapter, they neither openly rebelled against, nor denied, the public discourse about themselves as student-athletes—players became more assertive about who they were. Specifically, I highlighted how individuals were treated differently with regards to their resistance against the programmatic changes, and
the consequences that had on whether that served as a moment for reflection about their ambitions with competitive play

6.5.1 The Collegiate Player Body as Leverage

As UCI Esports constructed a case against the perceived wrongs of having their esports teams rejected for Priority Registration status. Barron disputed the need to take part in the broader plans of the program to foster a more holistic orientation (careers, inclusion, diversity, research, and health) around college esports (Amazan-Hall et al., 2018). Barron’s overriding mission at UCI Esports, as he explained, was to “win collegiate.” I say mission because the unrealized reality of not winning a national championship—first when he was at RMU in 2014—still bothered him. He was obsessed with trying to win: whether that was with a single game of League of Legends or a national championship, he held unbridled regard for competition. After becoming a student at UCI, he was excited by the possibility of there being a realistic chance at winning a coveted collegiate championship title in League of Legends. Playing a leadership role on the varsity team, Barron was unambiguous that “winning collegiate” was his only “goal.”

The objective of “winning collegiate” was not just a team goal for Barron. His obsession with winning was more personal. Because of Barron’s elite pedigree as a competitive player, he often looked down on the collegiate scene. When asked about the talent within the collegiate space, Barron regarded it as comprised of “not real teams” or organized by a “bunch of students” who “nobody takes seriously. A single-minded focus on winning, consequently, ended up creating conflict between Barron and the program.

As UCI Esports expanded to redefine its mission and identity as a varsity program. I was encouraged by novel ways of thinking about what esports at the college level could entail beyond a focus on competition. I assumed this was what players wanted or thought about when
imagining what the “whole package” entailed. Bringing in specialists from the fields of sports and performance psychology and exercise physiology was revolutionary in college esports. No program, from what I recalled at the time, was moving in a direction that I observed with UCI Esports.

What I did not fully appreciate in its consequence, however, was just how threatening the changes to the program were to some players. Where disagreements had their deepest impact was Barron’s insistence that the varsity player development sessions, as outlined in Heidi’s calendar, were a “waste of time.” With little hesitation and a slight shrug, Barron explained to me that his going to the sessions would be them just talking “to a wall,” so he “just didn’t go.” Thus, UCI Esports benched Barron for refusing to follow through with his professional development appointments, a move (benching) that was pointed to by other players as being devastating to their confidence. And yet, when Barron spoke of the incident, I wondered if he had felt similar impacts due to his benching. Instead, he appeared unfazed by the punishment, saying he “was ok with it.”

Through my observations, Barron insisted on near-absolute control over how he oriented himself with his competitive gaming. Because of the unique LCS experiences he brought to the team, Barron was almost always in conflict with the broader goals of the program. For example, as UCI Esports exercised greater control over how the players managed their physical and mental health, those demands ended up creating significant tensions between the management and teams, instigating certain players to reassert more narrowly focused identities that foregrounded the primacy of their being elite, LCS-trained competitors.

Possibly no greater were those disagreements than between Barron and the proposed changes to his training regime. Barron’s resistance to the professional development sessions
hardened when UCI’s exercise physiologist wanted him to take seriously proper steps on how he should manage his sleeping and eating habits. The idea that someone else would know better about Barron’s optimal levels of performance was completely absurd to him, to which he explained:

  Barron: I can focus just as well if I don’t sleep, if I don’t eat. In the LCS, I didn’t eat. I straight up don’t eat that day.

  Sky: The whole day?

  Barron: After the matches. Before the match, I don’t eat anything because it just bothers me. I don’t need to eat to focus. I don’t need to sleep to focus. They don’t understand me. That I don’t eat. In general, people do need that. They need to have good sleep to focus on the exact timing. But I don’t need that. I can fix it very easily. So, it was a waste of time for me to go because I know what’s good for me myself. And it’s going to waste their time because they are literally talking to a wall. That’s why I didn’t show up.

Because Barron was accustomed to pushing his corporal self to the physical extremes, the encroachment on the use of his body was seen as a threat to his identity as an elite player. Originally, those extremes led to his developing poor sleeping habits, which started during high school, then followed him throughout his college and professional career. When I asked Barron how much sleep he received, he would get anywhere from a full 8 hours of rest per night, which appeared to bother him because he thought 8 hours of sleep was excessive, to 3 hours a night. Sleep was just one of those activities that he wished could be ignored, explaining to me that “personally, I hate sleeping.” When Barron was younger, he could go for a week with only “3 to 4 hours a day” with sleep because, as he stated, sleep tended to be a “waste of time.” I asked him if he could “still do that now?” He laughed, and said, “probably.”
Knowing that UCI Esports wanted to establish itself as a tier-1 collegiate program, I saw how valuable it was to have someone, like Barron, with such sheer determination and will for winning to be at UCI Esports. And yet, how Barron articulated a path to collegiate esports success was something he would determine. Barron strategically withdrew his time, efforts, and presence from UCI Esports practices when he wanted to pressure his teammates to work or train harder. In general, when Barron was committed to the team, players knew he could be depended on. In fact, Barron tended to take over operations whenever he was involved. There was no middle ground with Barron. To “win collegiate,” for instance, Barron required control and obedience from his teammates, and to a large extent, the program. That level of control began with expectations he had for his team, which was to follow what he said. As far as he was concerned, the burden of leading the varsity team was his responsibility alone, where, as he explained, “[h]ow should I say this? Basically, I know how to win the game. So, I need them to play my game. Do you know what I mean?”

I knew what he meant. Besides my interactions with Barron vis-à-vis the ethnographic observations I made inside the Arena, among teammates, and the interviews I conducted with him, my first glimpse at just how dominant of a figure Barron was on his team stemmed from the various practices that I witnessed, watching some the matches that the League of Legends team had against other universities. When Barron first joined UCI Esports, he assumed the role of “midlaner” for UCI Esports. This is an all-important in-game role that is typically given the most visibility, praise, and respect due to the impact the role has on the outcomes of winning games. In 2018, however, Barron was moved out of the midlane position, and reassigned to a supportive role, called “Jungle.” Jonathan, a younger and less experienced player, became the team’s new leader in the midlane position.
Even in his new role as support, Barron continued to be a domineering figure. The few times I was able to watch their matches, he would end the games with more “damage output” than Jonathan, a dynamic within League of Legends that is technically not intended to happen between the more dominant midlane player versus a jungle position. Barron noted this as a “red flag” for the team. He faulted his teammates for not playing more aggressively, a style that he preferred. I wondered, however, to what degree was Barron responsible for creating these power differentials. Even when Barron was required to step back to allow his teammates the opportunities to play roles with greater impact within the game, he was still able to impose a style of play that highlighted his sheer dominance.

Outside the game, the imposition of Barron’s will was similarly felt. When I learned that Barron had unilaterally canceled meetings with the professional development staff, I was slightly surprised. Having lived and taught in South Korea for nearly a decade, I know just how reverential South Koreans can be with people in authority, whether that is a boss, professor, or business professional. Knowing how unusual it is in South Korean culture to be dismissive of individuals who are seen as educators or industry professionals, I could tell just how resistant Barron was to being forced to attend the sessions. The struggle over control with Barron was not just about time, however, but also over his presence, body, and corporeal self. When Barron felt pressured to conform, he found ways to avoid being subject to control, especially if it took away time from gaming.

Foucault’s (1977) insights about control over the physical body are relevant here for understanding the tensions that had manifested between UCI Esports and Barron, where the body represents contested territory over which “power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs (p.
By not participating in UCI Esports’ professional development sessions, Barron refused to “carry out tasks” and to “perform ceremonies” that the program wanted, ultimately challenging the reimagining of the UCI Esports as encompassing a broader set of missions.

The question for the varsity players skeptical of the program’s ambitions was not whether the demand for disciplined bodies existed in sports (Andrew, 1993), but whether the UCI Esports program was deserving, or even competent, of having the ability to exact that degree of control over players. With efforts to reconstitute new schedules and to acquire Priority Registration having failed, the program continued to press for demands on players, but Barron resisted the changes as a means of re-affirming his identity as an elite competitor. When it came to talking to the team’s psychologist, for instance, Barron was cynical about the purpose, stating that “If I go to a psychologist and ask about things, I know the questions they ask or body language they are showing is all based upon textbooks. I already know those cues. When I talk to them, it’s bullshit.” Barron considered himself good at reading people and quickly judged if it was worth it to spend time with them.

Barron was also never going to allow a collegiate program to dictate how he was going to train his body. Part of the reason why he refused to consent was also that he was never sure if he would be at UCI. The prospects of leaving always felt real for Barron. After all, he had one of the more circuitous routes between college and the professional seen among his teammates, having transitioned from RMU to Team Liquid, to UCI, then to Team Liquid, and finally returning to UCI. I asked Barron if he was still interested in returning to become a professional. He assured me he wasn’t. However, the prospect of his returning to the professional scene was also something that could suddenly appear if Team Liquid reached out to him again by tempting him to leave college once more. Barron knew that. Thus, I sensed that Barron wanted to be
prepared, as much as he could, if he decided to make that transition once again, and he was not
going to let someone outside of the professional esports scene jeopardize his chances—even
UCI.

Barron also did not fully withdraw himself from all the activities that he was asked to go
for the program. He was keenly aware of how important his presence was to the success of UCI
Esports by “carrying out tasks” at a time when the program was eager to acquire national
championship wins. Even if Barron’s views about his taking a more holistic approach to gaming
did not change, UCI Esports still needed him present, his corporeal self, as part of the program’s
activities. Max believed that if Barron just agreed to play along, even just a bit, the program
could, as argued by Bourdieu (1988) on the hegemonic demands of sports, acquire “from the
body a form of consent that the mind could refuse” (p. 161).

Eventually, UCI Esports leadership understood that players may not believe in the
program’s broader mission of player development, but Max was resigned to that fact so long as
players were willing to show up for the program when they were needed, that was one way to
move forward. By having Barron physically present, at the least, UCI Esports could project
control, showcase compliance, and stage consent. The idea of feigning consent to play along was
not new at UCI Esports. With Barron, for instance, he was already providing a performance for
the school’s licensed psychologist by showing up. With greater attention from the media, the
players were bombarded with requests for interviews, from the university, local news, and
national outlets for interviews. Consequently, Barron had tired of the media responsibilities that
came with belonging to a top-tier college program. Because he could not reject the requests, the
only way he could push back against the exchange, as Barron explained, was by “playing with
them.”
In fact, many of the varsity players feigned consent for a variety of activities that were meant to lend legitimacy to the program, which could include afternoon photoshoots with gaming publishers or the ongoing cycle of media interviews, for instance. However, those events were fun for the players and did not require a tremendous amount of energy to participate in. Due to the influx of media requests that took place during their inaugural years as members of UCI Esports, however, players were increasingly called upon to be present for a variety of events. Barron ended up rebelling in his own way. While still showing up, he explained how he toyed with his interlocutors by giving “answers that they want to hear.” Even if not ideal, the program could work with this dynamic. Eventually, the nature of requests became too burdensome to comply with. No longer just media interviews, photoshoots, or “content days,” the demands became too much for Barron to follow, fundamentally pushing him to alter a core part of his identity as a competitive player. That made him stop everything.

Whereas the “star players” understood UCI Esports to be redemption from a troubled past with professional esports, I was unsure if Barron fully viewed the program in its redemptive form to the degree that his teammates did. He positioned himself within UCI Esports as not only belonging to an elite group of players with LCS experience but also someone who could be helpful with the inaugural college esports program. Although Barron rarely highlighted his collegiate past, preferring to focus on his attempts at going professional, I knew his qualifications in esports included rather unique insights into the very origins of varsity collegiate esports. During a visit to RMU in 2015, when I was doing fieldwork on the Chicago campus, Barron was part of the groundbreaking inaugural RMU varsity program of 2014 that began the trend for universities across the United States to start their own initiatives. He was excited about the
prospects of having an “impact” on the program and appreciated that UCI Esports wanted “to hear” from him.

Not everyone, however, on either of the teams at UCI Esports, was able, nor were they encouraged, to look at their time in the program as simply developing one’s competitive talent, as was allowed with Barron. Barron was given the license to indulge this part of his interests, which rendered collegiate esports in the starkest of sportification terms, namely an expression of dominance, a celebration of efficiency, an unquestioning belief in meritocracy, and a devotion to competition. (Bourdieu, 1978; Hargreaves, 1985; Ingham, 2004; Paul, 2018). With whatever initiative, project, or program that Barron saw himself participating in, he oriented competition and meritocracy central to what he did with games. Because of that intense focus on competition, Barron needed to dictate the terms with how the program would interact with him to accomplish his goals. Consequently, he was given leeway to skirt certain rules, that he believed to be detrimental to his development and identity as an elite competitor.

Observing how Barron maneuvered within UCI Esports via a single-minded focus on winning made me wonder why Max allowed him to behave that way. Part of the freedom that UCI Esports granted Barron stemmed from his past as a professional player. His professional past was still a fundamental part of his identity, even if he had discussed how important it was for him to be in the collegiate space. While he was part of the program, he also felt unhinged from the team. He came to the Arena “when he wanted” was the response I would get when asking if anyone had seen him. Consequently, when observing how Barron pushed back against the program, the resistance appeared visceral. It was not that he was just rebelling against the program because he felt the need to—Barron had been brought to UCI Esports, initially, because of his expertise, experience, and status within the top-tier circles of League of Legends.
competitive play. Barron and other star players appreciated the regard that Max, and UCI Esports, had held for them.

Barron, in particular, appreciated being given a privileged position at UCI Esports. He had wanted his experiences as a professional player to be acknowledged, and made useful, but I observed that placing Barron in a position where his expertise was rarely questioned also disadvantaged him as someone who, in addition to being part of the star players, was a student. He viewed himself being at UCI Esports as a teacher, possibly a mentor—not just to the students but to the program. Barron desired that role and lamented that the relationship between him and the program, however, had changed in 2018. While the star players referenced the redemptive nature of UCI Esports, Barron became fond of an UCI Esports program, as he put it, “that needed me.”

As I progressed in the research, I could clearly see what Barron meant about his being “needed” by the program, which did create a very different set of relations between Barron and UCI Esports that allowed him far more latitude in how he operated in the program. This also gave him the impression that there were few consequences for his actions. Allowing Barron to operate with an unencumbered view of esports as a strictly competitive development also ended up sending mixed signals to other players about what was permissible when challenging the contested identities that were being imposed upon them within the evolving mission at UCI Esports.

If Barron, who cultivated an identity that was almost untouchable, operated within the program with significant latitude and was unafraid of the possible consequences, I observed how other players, such as Noah (from the Overwatch team), were required to take a more indirect route when asserting their identities.
6.5.2 Circumventing the Program to Get Better

Noah shared with Barron the conviction that time dedicated to perfecting play was best spent by singularly focusing on playing, but Noah also cared deeply about wanting to make the program a success. If Barron was unafraid of the consequences set by UCI Esports, confident in his talents as a player, and eager to be an asset to the program because of his previous professional experiences, Noah came to UCI Esports intent on exploring whether a path to professional was a viable option for his future.

Before arriving on the UCI campus, Noah, along with his teammate Brandon, gained minor notoriety within the emerging collegiate Overwatch scene in 2016 when their community college team beat nationally ranked esports clubs from UCLA and UCSD in the Tespa Collegiate Series West Regions bracket. Because of the milestones that Noah and Brandon reached with their community college esports team, they were eager to capitalize on their wins. Excited after his community college esports victory, for instance, Brandon drafted a public response to the collegiate esports community about his team’s wishes to be recruited by a college esports program. The goal, as Brandon articulated in their statement, was to advertise that “[a]ll players are actively ready and looking to transfer.” He ended the notice by asking potential recruiters to contact him about “scholarships” or “team offers” (“[Brandon’s] comment,” 2016).

Soon after, Brandon and Noah were recruited by UCI Esports to form the program’s first varsity Overwatch team. Noah was ecstatic about his community college wins, which ended up forging their identities as skilled and competent competitors in a game that was highly anticipated to gain traction in the collegiate space. Before arriving at the UCI campus, I had expected that my research would start with stories of UCI as a championship program. Instead,
my arrival on campus was right before a significant loss against the University of California, Berkeley for the *Fiesta Bowl Overwatch Collegiate National Championships*.

The bowl was an in-person event held at Arizona State University in 2018. Before heading into the semi-finals and finals for the Fiesta Bowl (which also included the University of Toronto and the University of California, San Diego), the UCI Overwatch varsity team maintained an undefeated record of 16 wins, but they ultimately lost to UC Berkeley 0-3, making the loss for the UCI players even more of a devastating defeat. Depending on whom I asked, the defeat was either completely unexpected, on one hand, or an inevitable outcome from the lack of preparation, on the other. The loss brought to the fore issues over how much time, personal effort, and investment into the game was being delivered by the players and the program.

In the ensuing postmortem over the tournament, the subject of practice blocks, scrim times, and time management ended up surfacing major disagreements among the varsity Overwatch players.

Noah, in particular, was devastated by the loss. Everything that seemed to have initially brought joy to Noah’s being at UCI Esports was colored by the loss of the Overwatch collegiate championship against UC Berkeley. With only a year into the program, Noah questioned whether he was improving as a player. This concerned Noah for several reasons, but perhaps most worrying was that he believed that his Overwatch varsity team was not “practicing all the time.” Noah saw the lack of investment and time dedicated to Overwatch as a significant problem, not only because he saw a decline in his competitive expertise, but Noah, as he explained to me during one of our discussions at the Arena, wanted to make Max proud. Noah never fully explained his relationship with Max, beyond the apparent association between player
and director, but Noah was extremely grateful to the UCI Esports director for giving him the chance to join UCI as a scholarship player.

Like Barron, Noah possessed a strong sense of his own identity in the program and wanted to use his time at UCI Esports to improve his competitive skills, as well as the team’s performance. Unlike Barron, however, Noah’s identity as a competitive player was closely tied up with the program. Noah was not shy about why he chose to come to UCI, stating that he “came to UCI because of the [varsity] program.” Expectations were that he would continue to improve in a team-based environment at the university. Coming from a reputable amateur scene in Overwatch, Noah had already established a name for himself and was pleased with how quickly he was progressing as a competitive player.

However, Noah was also disappointed that his collegiate experiences at UCI had not lived up to expectations. Before joining UCI Esports, Noah explained that he “was on a pretty good tier-2 team” that had a “different dynamic and schedule” to the more relaxed agenda of the varsity program. He missed the prevailing work ethic that he had among his friends in community college where no matter what, as he stated, “your main focus is the game, and you’re always trying to get better to make it to the next level.” Being able to perfect oneself through sheer determination and unfettered play was what Noah fondly remembered about gaming before things become more structured.

Although Noah did not specifically reference conflicts with the broader set of plans that UCI Esports anticipated enacting, there was a sense that Noah believed the program was not doing enough to support the competitive aspirations of the team. Noah was at UCI Esports on a mission to find out if competitive gaming and esports were a realistic option for his future, but the discovery process was not turning out as he had planned. During our interviews, he
reminisced as though wanting to return to his years in community college, when his connection to video games appeared simpler, explaining to me that “everything feels worse than it did when it was just me and 5 other guys. We didn’t have a coach; we didn’t have anything. We were just having fun.”

By referencing the term “fun,” Noah longed for a past that was more amateur, when he, and his friends, had more control over their destinies as competitors. He missed the slightly more informal process of forming teams with a bunch of friends who got together based on a shared love and drive for wanting to be the best. He wanted an esports experience in which a grassroots seriousness was at the center of the collegiate experience. So much of what had come to define competitive gaming for several of the varsity players, before arriving at UCI, was the sheer pleasure of competition that was on their own terms.

I saw how the divergent views between Brandon and Noah about why the Overwatch team lost the Fiesta Bowl Overwatch Collegiate National Championships strained the relationship between the two friends, but I also saw how the pressures between both players reflected broader structural changes at UCI, especially as it was being defined by players as part of a “whole package.” As illustrated, Heidi’s reimagining of the players’ schedules seen through the creation of the calendar—simply seen as a re-arranging of time as blocks—was also viewed as a threat to one’s identity as a competitive player. And yet, the program’s structural changes (as Max once asked me “what is college esports really about?”) were also issues players started to disagree with among themselves.

For example, disagreements between the players over the most effective use of how the team should allocate time for practice blocks would end up defining arguments between players. For instance, Brandon believed that the team “didn’t make good use” of their time, “didn’t take it
seriously” and ultimately “didn’t play smart.” By “smart,” Brandon argued that instead of spending “eight hours” only playing the game, more could be done by “spending four of them[hours] practicing, two VOD review, and two for theory-crafting.” To some extent, Brandon was turning his back on some of the grassroots leisure-based modes of competitive practice that players, such as Nathan, Victor, and Noah fondly remembered. For Brandon, the emphasis was on using expert practices, established rules, and proven techniques as a means of turning a pastime, or an unstructured passion for play, into a process of “sportification” (Ingham, 2004).

Not everyone on the varsity teams, however, was able to summon the same level of attentiveness to Brandon’s vision for the team. Instead, the management that was most relevant for players, such as Noah, was related to the sheer amount of time dedicated to team practices (“scrims”), and that alone.

Noah’s frustrations were not about playing “smart” but simply practicing more. The team maintained a “2-2-4” practice “block” during the quarter that I was present on campus, with each block consisting of 2-hours of practice. Initially, I had misunderstood and thought the “2-2-4” referred to the number of blocks so that “2” meant two blocks or 4 hours of practice. Nathan, a teammate of Noah’s, corrected me about the “2-2-4” schedule, clarifying that it was 2 hours of practice on Monday, 2 hours of practice on Wednesday, and 4 hours of practice on Friday. In total, this amounted to roughly 8 to 10 hours of practice scrims a week.

As I previously discussed in Chapter 5, at times, players highlighted their identities as “gamers” when unhappy with, or trying to deflect away from, esports. The emphasis by Noah on the few hours played by the team was another example of players wanting to return to a past that was just about gaming. For instance, after Noah told me about the varsity Overwatch schedule, I was puzzled by how little that felt for practices. Noah agreed. When I further examined the topic
about the “2-2-4” blocks for the spring quarter, Noah thought the program could easily double the number of hours per week for scrims so that the Overwatch team could practice at least 2 hours per day or 16 or more hours per week.

Although Noah was less explicit about framing his grievances as directed against UCI Esports, it was clear that he contested the lack of time being dedicated to practices. For the varsity players, time was an immensely important resource. It was formally organized and almost always referenced on digital calendars, from the early morning to late at night, a facet of the players’ lives that I had a hard time fully comprehending given that their daily plans were so busy. I became aware of just how busy the players were during my initial research request for interviews when I was sometimes met with paused responses, glances at phones, and a question about the length of the interview.

When I scheduled my first meeting with Noah on the 14th of May 2020, he was sitting at one of the varsity gaming stations. I asked him what he was doing. He was watching an Overwatch VOD of a previous practice. I wanted to schedule a meeting for our interview. He toggled his calendar to see what his schedule looked like for an interview. I noticed large chunks of time were already allotted for with other activities. I also saw where there were free spaces. If needed, I was free to do the interview the following day at the Arena. He did not appear interested in coming back to the Arena for an interview, however. He closed his calendar, and said, “We can do it now, if you want.”

Even if I was able to schedule interviews ahead of time, my presence as a researcher disrupted the daily flow of events for the players. That was made apparent with my first impression of Noah, who appeared to have suddenly made time for me by dropping part of his practice regimen. In other words, time with me meant less time spent preparing for games.
Almost every one of the varsity team members had digital calendars and used them to plan out their days. When I talked with Brandon about how he scheduled his daily activities, he articulated that everything he did revolved around a “block,” or a unit of time that almost every varsity player would later refer to with their schedules. For Brandon, there were blocks for everything, as he described it:

You have a scrim block, a scrimmage block. I was thinking about my routine in blocks. I thought, ok, I will spend this block in an hour or two studying organic chemistry. I’m going to spend this block on an assignment in public health class. And so forth. And even make sure I have blocks of food, making sure I’m eating, because if I’m only scheduling school and stuff all day, then I’m not really balancing my life in terms of nutrition and whatnot. And making sure I have time to socialize as well, which fits itself already between, you don’t really need to have a block for socializing. You’re just kind of like, “Hey I’ll come to the Arena and play games and talk to people.” That’s kind of the way I approach it.

Learning that everything important to Brandon was allotted its rightful place in time, I wondered what block of time I had disrupted with my research. I was informed by the UCI staff that my ethnographic interviews might logistically be difficult to arrange weeks or months in advance of my arrival. I anticipated having to uneasily locate myself among an already busy set of schedules full of blocks. Conceptualizing time in blocks, however, allowed Brandon to imagine the management of his everyday activities similar to, as he put it, “a game of SIMs.” where “[y]ou have all your needs, you have your hunger, you have your socializing, you have exercise” with the goal of “trying to balance all of it.” The management of time blocks, while a fundamental part of modern-day life, was a core feature of collegiate esports life.
The reference to the video game SIMs appeared to be an accurate way to describe Brandon’s philosophy, especially given the game’s focus on resource management of in-game characters’ moods, desires, and demands (Frasca, 2001). Brandon had a more holistic view of his time in collegiate esports, making it easier for him to align his goals with the program. He had blocks for nearly everything, sleeping, eating, studying, socializing, and reading. Brandon displayed a sense of control over his daily routines by structuring almost everything he did as time-managed blocks. Blocks of time are quantifiable, clearly demarcated, and most often defined by purpose (Nagy et al., 2020; Zerubavel, 1985).

For someone who was only 20-years old at the time of my research, Brandon appeared far more mature than I imagined myself at that age. His hyper-awareness and attention to his availability, as scheduled time, struck me as being an incredibly adult concern for someone so young. Brandon took on multiple responsibilities within the broader gaming community at UCI. He was also an anomaly within the program, which to some degree, was refreshing to see.

He believed there were two components to competitive gaming on college campuses: one being “collegiate esports” and the other being the “collegiate environment.” The collegiate environment, he explained, was “going to events or being a scholarship player for UCI” or meeting “a lot of people who I networked with, and I talked to them, and getting to know their stories, getting to know mine.” To have the time and lifestyle that allowed him to socialize and network with dozens of student leaders across multiple gaming communities, mostly different California colleges, required a strict regime that, as he mentioned, required “trying to balance all of it.”

However, Noah, at the time of my research visit, was trying to not “balance all of it.” Rather, while much of what I had heard from other players who were seeking a balance between
their academics and gaming, Noah was intentionally seeking disruption. While he had other interests, he purposefully put them aside. Esports was nearly everything to him at UCI, but due to the loss to UC Berkeley, Noah wanted to assert greater direction over the team. The only problem was he also understood that “people aren’t as focused on the game. People are more focused on school, which is understandable. This is college, so you aren’t paying a ton of money to not focus on school.”

Noah became increasingly aware of just how constrained he was in instigating change, especially after their loss when he wanted his teammates to invest more of their time into practice. The reality was that there were just fundamental differences between him and his teammates when it came to forging greater promises of commitments to games. Even if Noah appeared to understand that his teammates had different priorities, it did not stop him from wishing for change. Noah was using his participation at UCI Esports as a means of finding out the viability of going professional, but he needed others on the team to make those same investments for it to work.

The proper use of the team’s time highlighted, as Breeze (2015) argued about with the professionalization of amateur sport, the inherent frictions between “modes of ordering” (Law, 1993). In her research, she argued that “seriousness, rather than a normative description of some forms of leisure, is generative of, and generated in, practice” (p. 28). For Brandon, the loss at the Fiesta Bowl made him realize that the team needed to prioritize a practice regime that was “smart” and “maximize[d]” the best use of time. Brandon foreclosed on the grassroots belief (supported by Noah) that more practice was necessarily better practice. Rather, Brandon believed in a system whose interests, when “put to work,” aligned itself with the modernized strategies of sporting efficiency, measured standards, and replicable progress, and where, as Ingham (2004)
argued about the modernization of sports, “[l]ess legitimacy is granted to action anchored in tradition, emotion, and absolute values” (p. 20).

To a certain extent, Brandon was winning the argument. As I sat with Noah on a Thursday afternoon in the Arena, he pointed out that none of his teammates were in the esports Arena practicing. This was true, at least for that day. My initial scribblings when seeing Noah sitting at his computer was him being “alone.” After a few days, I wondered if he was being shunned or ignored by his teammates. As with Barron, once again I was drawn to how the presence of bodies, playing or participating, stood as a measure of commitment or success. Although I was not entirely sure why Noah was often alone in the arena, those observations made me feel sorry for him.

Although Noah understood that everyone had different priorities at UCI Esports, that did not prevent him from being reflective about the loss, saying that “if things ended differently, everything would be different right now. There would probably be a bunch more people here.” Like the League of Legends team, I thought that maybe the Overwatch varsity players had issues with scheduling and classes, which created discrepancies among the members that prevented players from visiting the Arena during the daytime.

Noah had a hard time comprehending why his teammates would not invest more of their time by being in the Arena for the betterment of the team. I understood the constraints that he believed he was under, but the notion that other players at UCI Esports were not as motivated to win, or “do well,” also did not feel like the full story. Noah repeatedly harkened back to a grassroots ethos (Stebbins, 1992) that what mattered most was that the team continued to play, improve, and communicate together, seeking to summon the drive and spirit that some of the other varsity players spoke about during their times in high school.
However, Noah’s teammates on the Overwatch team saw things differently. While understanding of why Noah was frustrated, Nathan was also clear about the boundaries he set around the time allotted to the varsity team. I asked Nathan the same question I had asked the other Overwatch players about how they balanced their responsibilities between academics and play, and why I rarely saw them at the Arena. Nathan explained that “there was no reason” for him to keep playing Overwatch at the time because “there was no more season.”

The idea of taking a break almost seemed like a rebellious act, something I could not see Noah doing. Taking breaks, however, were an important part of Nathan’s regimen. It allowed him to deactivate, destress, and have fun. It was during his extended breaks with the team that allowed him to return to playing video games as well. When I first met Nathan, he was just learning to play an anime-style fighting game. I ended up talking about my history with fighting games. Part of me found it endearing to hear Nathan, who was so exceptionally talented in Overwatch, talk about how confusing he found the topic of frame data in Fighting Games, but it allowed me to see Nathan as more than a one-dimensional player when it came to his interests in video games. Nathan challenged some of the assumptions about what was required to be a UCI Esports player, which, principal among them, was to be completely focused on the varsity game that they were contracted to play.

Because of the loss to UC Berkeley, the increased formalization of collegiate esports sat uneasy with Noah, complicating views that I had heard from players that they were happy with the standardization of the collegiate space. Even the presence of scholarships became a troublesome reality. Noah questioned the motivations for why players were participating in the varsity program to begin with, explaining that “if there was no scholarship, there would just be a bunch of people who want to work hard and who want to just win.” This was shocking to hear
because he was casting doubt on the very pillars of why varsity programs were successful projects in the first place, and scholarships certainly were a big part of that success. Noah wanted to create a collegiate environment where “everyone was just there because they wanted to do well.”

With only a year on the varsity Overwatch team, Noah pushed back at the boundaries of UCI Esports. Frustrations mounted for Noah, who did not see himself gaining traction by trying to inspire his teammates to scale their commitment to a level that he thought appropriate for a program that had one of the best college Overwatch teams in the nation. The loss served to motivate Noah to act in a way he had not done before. I draw on Pizzolato’s (2005) concept of the “provocative moment” to illuminate the act of pushing back with the creation of the Open Division team. The provocative moment is important to this analysis because it provides an analytical lens to events in peoples’ lives that lead “to commitment to, rather than only recognition of the need to turn inward in a search for self-definition” (p. 625). Throughout the remainder of the dissertation, I return to this idea of the provocative moment to explain how the varsity players think through important events that end up shaping the players’ experiences and their development in collegiate esports.

For Noah, the UC Berkeley loss represented, if not that singular moment of provocation, the start of a string of events that began with the loss and ended with a significant rift in the relationships between him and Max. At the start, tensions culminated when Noah created an “Open Division” team in Overwatch that ended up excluding Brandon, his teammate, from joining. The route via the Open Division tournaments is one of several steps in Overwatch League’s “Path-to-Pro” system that gives players a chance to become professional. Recognizing the limits of what he could do to force the other players on the Overwatch team to take seriously
their time to get better, Noah created the alternative team with a few friends he had from the amateur scene, along with some of the UCI players. Noah was excited about the possibility of going far with the Open Division team he had created, stating that if things had gone right, the following steps would have been to move into “Contenders Trials” and “if we win Contenders Trials, then we are Contenders, then we are in the money.”

While I had initially not known about the Open Division team, once Noah told me about his efforts, I had a strong hint as to why he created the team. The formation of the team was the start of his decision to take a stand and assert himself and the priority he was giving to his competitive aspirations. Rather than speaking about balance, a key goal that undergirded the direction of many of the players as they progressed through their years at UCI Esports, Noah was openly creating conditions of imbalance with the Open Division team as a means of challenging the contested identities that were being foisted upon his teammates.

It was not enough to have the players being referred to as “student-athletes” for him to have derived the type of experiences that had motivated him to be part of the program. Instead, Noah wanted opportunities to play more games, be with friends, and relive some of the grassroots experiences that he recalled having in community college. Creating another team with friends allowed him to accomplish that.

At first, Noah did not see creating an alternative team as controversial. The process to start the Open Division team was something he was already familiar with—getting a few friends together, setting up a practice schedule, and just playing Overwatch until the team reaches its potential is a pattern of play that Noah wanted to return to. He cleared the creation of the team with the UCI Esports leadership, making sure he was still allotting enough time with his varsity squad to fulfill his duties with the program. With the formation of the Open Division team, Noah
was able to recreate the serious leisure lifestyle that he had before arriving at UCI—one that harkened back to his amateur roots when players were unanimous about their goals (as he stated earlier, where “everyone was just there because they wanted to do well”) and situated themselves within a competitive structure where there was a clearer path towards going professional.

To create the Open Division team, however, as Noah explained, he had to “sidestep” the program. As I learned while talking with some of the varsity players, the idea of maneuvering around the program was not necessarily controversial, so long as the players were clear about their intentions with the leadership. There exist numerous opportunities for players to experiment, play, or flirt with the boundaries between varsity and aspiring professional play, even while at UCI Esports. However, Noah was unprepared for the blowback that ensued because he decided to create an alternative team. Max was unhappy, in particular, with what he perceived as attempts by Noah to pressure Brandon to “up his game” or face exclusion from the Open Division team.

According to Max, the Open Division team created instability and rifts among the members, even though Noah stated that he was in communication with the director throughout the Open Division tournaments and received the “go ahead” to create the team. Max placed blame on each of the players, but Noah was devastated for being identified as someone who had caused trouble, commenting that he felt as though he was “thrown under the bus.” Even though these events had transpired about a year before my research had started, Noah was still bothered by the situation. He had a hard time fathoming why he was being blamed for trying his best. He repeatedly signaled how much harder he had worked in comparison to his teammates, suggesting that while he may have not been the “hardest” working player on the team, he was certainly close, with nearly “200 games” recorded on his Blizzard account. Ultimately, Noah kept
returning to questions over “why.” He explained, “for me to be blamed, when I feel like I’m working really hard and I really wanted it. I didn’t understand.”

To understand how UCI Esports positioned itself early in its development as a competitive outlet for college esports, or as Max detailed in an interview with the New York Post wanting to be the “Duke basketball of online gaming” (Blaustein, 2016), it is easy to understand why Noah was confused about the consequences of his creating the Open Division team. This is a program that, while cognizant of its evolving mission to offer players a wider set of opportunities within esports, makes no qualms, as Max would tell me, about how it seeks to “recruit the best gamers in the world.” At its core, UCI Esports saw itself as a competitive program. However, I could also understand where confusion could manifest. At times, I found myself unsure as to where the leading edge of the program lay. Depending on whom I was talking to, having lunch with, running into at the Arena, or being introduced to, conversations about the future of the program could veer between the work that UCI Esports was doing to expand into a mix of broad and holistic experiences for players, on the one hand, or to its championship teams and wins, on the other.

On my second research visit in October 2018, as an example, the topic of UCI’s four “pillars” (competition, academics & research, community, and entertainment) had come up in our conversations, which was a point that I had planned to discuss with Max because the values-as-pillars for a collegiate program had intrigued me, having never seen another university institute something similar. As I started to ask my questions about UCI’s four pillars, Max quickly interjected with, “oh, we now have five pillars! We are adding careers.” While I thought the addition of the extra pillar made sense, the change (addition) to their pillars was unexpected. A few days before, I had reviewed the pillars on the program’s website, making sure that I was
aware of what each meant because that was going to be the heart of my questions to Max. However, with the extra pillar, I wondered how things had changed. Thus, some of the documents I had reviewed were suddenly slightly out-of-date, and instead of leading with questions that I wanted to explore, Max spent time updating me on the new policy changes.

While the exchange with Max was brief, it was indicative of a larger pattern of sudden, but significant, changes at UCI Esports that caught players, and me, by surprise. Noah believed that he would have had the support of UCI Esports—and perhaps more importantly, Max—when he created the Open Division team. Being reprimanded by Max for operating the Open Division team, however, was a shock. Having Brandon tell Max that “it’s his fault” was a shock. And, having Max take Brandon’s side, according to Noah, was a shock. I, too, was unsure as to why he was being singled out. Ultimately, Noah was benched for his actions.

Noah was devastated by his benching, ultimately finding himself unmotivated and “keeping to [his] business” and “not getting into any more trouble.” As a consequence of Noah retreating away from investing more into his team, he was still angered by the benching. Whereas I had initially seen Barron and Noah as individuals who represented different types of players, one coming from the cohort of “star players” with the attending professional reputations that they brought to the program, and the other a student recruited to the program with semi-ambitious competitive aspirations, I saw how each of their predicaments were representative of an array of players at UCI Esports in their ambitions, each seeking to challenge the contested identities that were often being foisted upon them.

Moreover, both Barron and Noah were never fully able to step back, reflect, and take account of what was happening during these events when they were actively trying to push back against the program. By attempting to challenge the contested identities faced, Barron and Noah
did not necessarily develop a better understanding of who they were. Rather, the consequences of their pushback either went unexamined, which was the case for Barron who did not take seriously the impact of his actions at UCI Esports, or its consequences on him; or dealt such a devastating blow to one’s confidence, which happened to Noah, that the event rendered him unable to process the events due to the shock he experienced. Players were far too subject to their own encounters of what was taking place at UCI Esports, the expectations they had for themselves, and the diminishing timeline they had as students to act on their goals. Baxter Magolda (2012) in her own work self-authorship draws on Kegan’s (1994) theorizing on subject-object thinking to explain how “complex meaning-making structures arises from elements that were formerly subject becoming object or moving what was unseen and unexamined to a place where it can be seen and examined” (p. 12).

In chapter 7, I further develop this line of inquiry between being subject versus being object to one’s own experiences. To create the space to investigate the meaning-making capacities of the players, I reflect on how my research served as an example of a temporary space that the players used to think through the tensions, demands, and conflicts and to locate, alternatively, where they possessed control and agency over their careers as collegiate players.

What became apparent in the research was that varsity players needed time away from the game, team, or program to process the stream of events, tournaments, and championships that happened throughout the academic year for them to interpret, create meaning, and judge for themselves what had transpired. Via the research process, in fact, the ethnographic interviews operated as one of those opportunities for the players to take a needed pause.

6.6 Summary
At the time of my research, UCI Esports set out to accomplish a series of changes that expanded its mandate to support esports beyond what has often been a singular focus on competition (Amazan-Hall et al., 2018). However, as UCI Esports learned, the mission to diversify, or multiply, the program’s higher educational goals required a further entrenching into defining itself as a traditional college athletics establishment. This was due to difficulties the program encountered when organizing the spring 2018 League of Legends team and found itself unable to streamline schedules for its players.

In this chapter, the research question that I explored (“How do collegiate esports scholarship players understand their experiences as gamers in relation to their academic and personal development in college?”) was focused on the institutional discourse imposed upon the players by stakeholders, such as directors, coaches, educators, and administrators through the theme of contested identities. Due to various factors, which included a series of conflicting schedules, the lack of institutional support for Priority Registration, and programmatic expansion of pillars, the varsity players saw a disconnect between how they were being framed in everyday discourse, as well as via organizational language, as being “student-athletes” versus what actual powers the varsity players had in benefiting from the very status that the players were being told they possessed.

As UCI Esports increasingly asserted its organizational identity, program goals, and institutional expectations (Goffman, 1961), players felt their identities as competitors were being challenged by programmatic changes that were encroaching upon practices that the player identified as being core to their identities as competitive players. Because changes were viewed as being antithetical to competitive ambitions and threats to their self-perceptions, several varsity
players resisted programmatic structures previously espoused by players as redemption and the “whole package.”

Through the acts of resistance to the UCI Esports program, the players realized the institutional limitations that they needed to confront. Accordingly, threats to one’s identity were immediate and a constant source of anxiety. Demands made on players such as Barron were not just about having to “balance” one’s responsibilities between work and play (Kristiansen, 2017): players, for instance, were pushed into expertly organizing, following, and attending to various controls over their bodies. Thus, demands, beyond just that between academics and competition, were required of players to be physically healthy, and participatory became a core experience of the players, and yet, the programmatic focus on the body (and mind) drew doubts about its effectiveness in creating better players

Because players were subject to their experiences, unable to effectively remove themselves, or step outside, of their expectations, desires, and college esports ambitions, the ability to critically reflect upon, or hold “object” (Baxter Magolda, 2012), their lived experiences were challenged. In particular, some of the most impassioned and dedicated players found it difficult to generate a broader understanding of events, actions, and changes taking place within the program, and the effects such changes had on the players. In those cases, participants in the research were either unmoved or devested by the evolution of UCI Esports. In Barron’s case, he was largely unaffected by the consequences, and in Noah’s case, he was paralyzed by hurt and disappointment about the lack of support. Both players thus withdrew from wanting to invest more into their collegiate activities.
CHAPTER 7: “GIVING BACK” WITH COLLEGE ESPORTS RESEARCH

7.1 Introduction

The excitement of the 2018 national championship win by the League of Legends team was noticeable across the program, with the teams, staff, and interns finally finding the validation that they had been seeking as being the top program in the nation. However, with greater visibility of UCI Esports, concerns mounted around the prospects that certain varsity players could either seek to leave or be scouted. Lessons learned from the experiences of Barron, and his absence from the program to play for Team Liquid powerfully shaped how Max viewed the relationship between his program, video game publishers such as Riot Games, and a collection of professional teams looking to colleges for upcoming talent.

Going professional was a topic that, if not directly discussed, was always part of the proverbial background noise in the research when discussing the players’ futures. With their first national championship collegiate esports (cLoL) win in the summer of 2018, players from the League of Legends team were thrilled to return to campus and excited by their national recognition as a top collegiate program. Within this dynamic, I sought to understand how my presence and work as a researcher could be of help to the players. Time spent observing, note-taking, sitting with staff, and interacting with players presented me with the chance to apply my research as a means of helping participants in my study understand the complexities and tensions inherent with being part of a varsity esports team (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007; 2012).

In this chapter, I build on the analysis of the previous section by exploring how players, such as Elijah of the League of Legends team, reflected, reconciled, and constructed meaning from the ethnographic interviews by being able to step away from their activities on the esports
team to access events that crystalized the importance of having to decide between one’s future as a competitive player versus a renewed effort to one’s schooling.

Where the players in the previous chapters were unable to extract themselves from their concerns with protecting their competitive identities, in this chapter, I focus on my engagement with players trying to understand how my research was realistically “giving back” in its reciprocity to those who should benefit from the research (Lather, 1986). Thus, in the analysis, I trace through the complex, and nuanced, commitments that players hold about their continued participation in collegiate esports. Taking inspiration from Taylor’s (2016) fieldwork with competitive esports players, I used my study as a means of an intervention by offering the players time, space, and the analysis of life-defining moments, such as whether a player should decide to go professional or stay in school.

7.2 Disrupting the Collegiate Pipeline to Pro

When I returned to the UCI campus after the summer of 2018, I noticed the large UCI Esports sign above the Arena included markings celebrating the national championship victory (UCI News, 2018). After an eventful spring in 2018, I expected to see a UCI Esports program that was more subdued for the fall. That the League of Legends team came away with a victory in Riot’s premier collegiate League of Legends tournament was unexpected, but exciting, news. On my return visit, I walked into an esports Arena that was busier than my first visit in May. Only five months had passed, but the Arena looked different. Perhaps the most notable change was the unfamiliar faces of new students busily attending to unpacked boxes filled with shirts, posters, and cardboard cutouts for an upcoming event. The doors of the Arena were left open, as students and staff spilled into and out of the facility. There was something quite different about
how the Arena was configured. Next door, a small stage was being prepared, with booths from
gaming vendors setting up in anticipation of the opening event.

UCI Esports, in conjunction with a South Korean gaming company (InvenGlobal), was
preparing for an “esports festival” that included a range of game-related contests and activities
scheduled on the weekend of my arrival. Unlike my first visit, I was slightly confused by the
assortment of advertisements surrounding the Arena. Instead of being only esports-focused, the
events included a “Destiny Child” anime cosplay contest, where contestants vied for a $5,000
prize, and a Hyper Universe video game “show match” that offered $3,000 in prize monies. The
diversity of games on show reminded me of how vast the video games industry is, and how the
various intersecting parts of “geek culture” are still an incredibly important part of the discourse
around gaming culture on college campuses. Perhaps most exciting, however, for the UCI
Esports players was the planned exhibition match that UCI Esports organized between its
collegiate varsity team and the Los Angeles Valiant, a professional Overwatch team. It was the
first time I had ever seen a professional team on campus.

I had planned to wait longer than five months before returning to UCI Esports, but I
hastened my return to campus for a second field visit for three reasons. First, I was invited to
present my ongoing research at UCI’s inaugural esports research conference, billed as “the first
academic event of its kind to focus on esports research and practice” (“Welcome to the UCI
Esports Conference 2018,” 2021). Second, given the unparalleled national championship win by
the program’s League of Legends team, I realized that it was important to continue my research
as soon as possible. While I wanted to wait until the following year to make a second visit, I also
had not appreciated just how much could change for the varsity players from quarter to quarter
within the same year. Finally, the esports research conference was also planned around a series
of other special collegiate esports events, including a visiting team from a South Korean college playing an exhibition game with UCI’s team. I wanted to be present for what I believed would be a unique college esports event.

The celebrations for the cLoL national championship win over the summer included an event that was attended by friends and family of the UCI players and a congressional recognition certificate sent by California representative Mimi Walters. There was an atmosphere of excitement that still buzzed around the Arena. Eager to inform some of the players that I was back on campus, I ran into Jonathan, who was wearing a yellow College League of Legends shirt. As soon as I saw Jonathan, I noticed something different about his attire.

This was the first time I had seen any of the UCI Esports varsity players wearing something affiliated with college esports. Even with the constraints around Priority Registration that continued to plague the program, the players on the League of Legends team looked refreshed and excited about the upcoming academic year. Jonathan appeared pleased with how events with the tournament unfolded over the summer. He was happy with his performance because of how self-assured he felt playing in a more professional setting at Riot’s esports arena, being particularly surprised that his “stage presence didn’t really affect” him nor did he “play any different.” In fact, he believed he “played better” during the tournament. He was well-prepared, wanting to make up for the unfortunate circumstances that prevented the varsity League of Legends team from competing in cLoL’s national championships the previous year—a year, as I previously discussed, when Barron decided to leave the UCI Esports team to go professional.

In one form or another, the decision about whether to go professional was a question that was contemplated by nearly all the varsity players at UCI Esports, but on my return visit in
October, players were more transparent and forward about their opinions on the topic. On the Overwatch and League of Legends teams, players differed about whether going professional was the right choice. The UCI Esports program had its first experience with having one of its college players go professional when Barron left UCI Esports in 2017 to play for Team Liquid. The consequences of his absence were significant for the varsity program, with Max telling me, “That was a bad experience for us.” Barron’s sudden absence was disruptive for UCI Esports because the program suddenly found itself without a key player for the start of the collegiate League of Legends season that year.

Because of what had transpired between Barron and Team Liquid, by the second year of the program’s debut, Max was trying to build in preventive measures to keep his players from rushing to go professional. It was a careful balance for UCI Esports to maintain. The program still promoted links to the industry as a unique component of joining UCI Esports. Anyone walking into the esports Arena saw how UCI Esports intentionally positioned itself as a touchpoint to the professional space. I was reminded of this fact almost every day, from when I walked into the UCI Esports Arena to begin my research—having to hang my backpack on hooks that were strategically placed below an array of team-signed jerseys of professional esports organizations, such as Cloud9, the Los Angeles Valiant, and CLG; to consistently getting beat by some of the world’s best “Smash” players, such as “Faceroll,” who were either students at UCI or top-tier players who congregated at the Arena for competition. By geography alone, UCI Esports was a magnet for talent in the Southern California area.

However, the relationship between UCI Esports and the broader esports industry was constantly under negotiation. I was witness to this dynamic during a pre-UCI Esports conference summit meeting I was invited to attend in October 2019, along with various stakeholders in
esports, to discuss the future of collegiate esports. With university representatives from Ireland, Germany, Texas, Ohio, and Hawaii (myself), attendees were encouraged to network, discuss, and find solutions to problems unique to our communities, all within the earshot of industry participants from Riot Games and Twitch.

I remember feeling awkward about attending the event, knowing that for the first time I was at UCI not to do research with the players. However, I was made to feel at home at the summit, being able to reconnect with friends that I had made at Twitch, along with reconnecting with the former esports director of Robert Morris University. UCI had struck a “Hawaiian”-oriented theme for the meeting by serving attendees teriyaki chicken and rice. More importantly, the nearly six-hour session that Max had set up at UCI’s Innovation Lab allowed me to witness a rare event: a publisher, Riot Games, was physically present in the same room to listen to a host of challenges discussed by a variety of university representatives.

While the meeting was friendly and open, there were clear lines drawn by Max, who represented the most seasoned esports director in the room, on the one hand, versus Riot Games, that represented the intellectual property rights holder of, perhaps, the most popular esports titles among varsity esports players, on the other. About halfway into the meeting, Max addressed the room, arguing that one of the more pressing problems in collegiate esports is the lack of a “common set of values” and an “expected minimum bar” that “everyone is going to meet.” Although it was clear that Max was referring to how universities needed to articulate a more defined set of shared values, I also sensed that some of Max’s frustrations were also targeted toward Riot Games. The universities present wanted to have a publisher that was willing to take a step back, and, as Max stated, have universities be more in the “driver’s seat” when it comes to shaping how collegiate esports operates.
This was a side of Max I had not seen before—protective, watchful, and in solidarity with other schools. The Max that I had met years before was extremely confident about the program he was leading. As I discussed in Chapter 6, UCI Esports repeatedly differentiated itself from other universities by innovating on programmatic offerings unseen in collegiate esports. On the one hand, UCI Esports imagined itself as the premier collegiate esports program, offering its students an unprecedented menu of services and experiences. On the other, the set of pillars that defined the mission of the program took it in multiple vectors of growth that appeared to diminish, according to some of its most impassioned players, its focus on competition. Spending time with Max at different points in my research, I observed how he was repeatedly trying to navigate that balance.

For Max, the drive to have video game publishers become more sympathetic to the unique challenges that UCI Esports faced stemmed from Barron’s brief absence into the professional scene in 2017. Even though Max was supportive of Barron’s decision to pursue his dream of making it as a professional player, he was upset with Team Liquid for what he described as “poaching” of his players. Considering just how much it disrupted Barron’s education, as well as the varsity team’s ambitions to contend for a national championship title in 2017, I understood how Max felt about the whole event. However, Barron was uncomfortable with characterizing what happened to him as poaching, seeing his transition onto Team Liquid as something that “happens often” in professional sports. Technically, Barron was correct. There was nothing rule-breaking about Team Liquid giving Barron the chance to try out given that the governance over recruitment of college students by professional teams, before 2018, was largely non-existent within LCS’s competitive ruleset.
One of the problems that the UCI Esports varsity program faced was that several players were vulnerable to leaving UCI Esports, and by extension, their education, to go professional, especially if the right opportunities were presented. Because of how poorly Barron was treated by Team Liquid, Max acted to assure that professional teams could never repeat what Team Liquid did to one of his students.

Consequently, Max succeeded in getting Riot Games to implement the “[Barron] rule,” as it was known internally in the program at UCI, into their official ruleset. Section 5.4 of the LCS Academy League 2020 Official Rules (2020) (under “Restrictions Regarding College Players”) states that “no Team may acquire any Player that is a member of a varsity College League of Legends team to the extent that such individual has accepted a scholarship from their college or university to play League of Legends” (p. 12). Anticipating that offers from professional teams could be difficult to resist, the LCS clarified that the ban follows students even if a player “quits the college or university team, is terminated by the college or university team or leaves the college or university” (p.12). The rule, however, left the final decision about a student’s prospects to transfer into the professional league, ultimately, to the college or university by allowing schools to waive the rule if they see fit.

Where UCI Esports had failed to convince university officials to enact a policy that sought to recognize the varsity esports players as “student-athletes,” Max succeeded at instigating policy changes with a major gaming publisher. The “[Barron] rule” stood as a rare piece of authority by publishers of a game that advocated for stricter control over how professional teams interacted with college students. In an environment that has generally lacked coordinated governance over student well-being in esports, the collaboration between UCI Esports and Riot allowed the program to have greater control over its players. As previously
discussed, exercising control had been an issue for the program during its opening years, from their rough start with properly onboarding their 2016 inaugural League of Legends team into UCI, to finding it nearly impossible to consolidate the players’ course schedules ahead of the academic quarter. With the [Barron] rule established as LCS policy, Max felt more in the driver’s seat, and was able to protect players from what he believed were predatory tendencies from some of the top professional teams.

7.2.1 The Indecision to Go Pro

Barron’s time with Team Liquid was an event that gained wide coverage within the League of Legends community. The younger UCI Esports varsity players on the League of Legends team, however, expressed shock at just how quickly he was dismissed from the professional team. Based upon how poor Barron’s experiences were with Team Liquid, I expected there to be greater reluctance about the profession—but the idea of going professional was never really a settled question. Instead, the viability of a professional career was constantly assessed and reassessed. This was especially true for Elijah.

Unlike the rest of his League of Legends teammates, Elijah was on the quieter side. That was a slight surprise because up to that point, most of the players I had spent time with were quite outgoing, sociable, and boisterous, typical of most of the college students I saw on campus. I first spoke with Elijah on my return trip to UCI Esports in October 2018. When I first saw Elijah among his teammates, he sat at the far end of the varsity tables, near a wall that cocooned the players into their competition area, making him almost invisible to anyone walking by. Even if he was quiet and reserved, the time spent with Elijah was intense. He was upfront with his thoughts about esports, making it known that he was not happy being a student at UCI or in his major. Before one of his games, we discussed those disappointments. I lead with the question as
to why he felt he was “wasting time” and what was “bothersome” for him about his continued investments into League of Legends. He replied:

I think mainly the fact that people my age are really starting to find out their career paths. And like, basically they are on the right path towards whatever jobs. They want to be an engineer. They are almost there. Whereas for me, I’m just, you know, kind of wasting my time playing League because I’m not too sure where it will lead up to after college.

Elijah was constantly surveilling the accomplishments of others, drawing comparisons between himself and his peers, and questioning the purpose of his time and efforts with gaming. From the very moment I met Elijah, he looked exhausted, both emotionally and physically. Like Jonathan, one could tell how Elijah was feeling just by looking at him. They both wore their emotions openly. Initially, I had not taken notice of the physical appearances of the players, until I met Elijah. Then, it became something I registered in my notes, with comments such as “worn,” “taxed,” and, “tired.” I wondered whether the physical manifestations of the players’ upkeep, dress, and presentation were appropriate for me to document. After all, they were college kids, with extremely busy schedules, regardless of them being varsity esports players. And yet, there was something exhausted looking about Elijah, which I had not noticed with his teammates.

As I listened to Elijah, I could not help but want to help him sort through his difficulties. I initially struggled with the temptation of offering advice as he described his struggles with his plans, which frequently stemmed from the comparisons he made between himself and Jonathan. Even if Elijah held mixed opinions about the merits or importance of collegiate esports, one of the players he most wanted to model himself after was Jonathan, admiring the success, confidence, and direction that he had as a collegiate player. Several of the players admired Jonathan for these reasons. He was often a topic of conversation among his teammates, and when
his name came up, it was to appreciate his tenacity and work ethic. Barron, in particular, praised Jonathan for his lack of “ego,” something he believed was part of the problem he had creating friendships with teammates. Because Barron perceived Jonathan as someone straightforward with his intentions to improve, he ended up forming a mentor-mentee relationship with Jonathan. One of Barron’s goals at UCI Esports was to become more of a “teacher” to some of the players.

When Jonathan’s ‘name came up, Elijah regretted just how much time he wasted— for not doing better, not living up to his parents’ expectations, and not, essentially, being like Jonathan. The extreme self-doubt about himself became more apparent as we discussed his future. Admiration for Jonathan turned into questions about how far he fell short in living up to some of the expectations he had for himself, When I asked what he learned from those comparisons to Jonathan, Elijah was blunt with his answer, stating:

So, I feel like when I compare myself to him, I feel like shit. I feel like I’m good at League, but then he’s better than me, and not only is he better than me, he’s better than me at school. So, I feel like actual shit.

So much of what is discussed by stakeholders, from students, administrators, to parents, in collegiate esports has centered around having players achieve a balance between being academically successful, on the one hand, while being a competitive varsity player, on the other. When the topic of balance was broached, however, there is no real consensus about what balance meant for each of the players. Unlike what players had described about balance during their years in high school, where schoolwork was generally given primacy before games, there were multiple ways in which the players operationalized balance in college, and it was always evolving, negotiated, and contingent (Aquilina, 2013). Elijah, however, was one of the only individuals to explicitly mention that he wanted to be good at both, striving for academic success
and recognition from his peers within his major, but also having the same level of acceptance by his UCI Esports teammates.

Although there was tremendous admiration for Jonathan, his teammates seldom discussed how much pressure he imposed upon himself. Jonathan was intensely self-critical, often looking at how he could improve himself first before looking to his team. He admitted that he was especially “harsh” on himself after poor performances. After certain losses, he cycled through a series of questions asking himself, “what if I played better here or there”, or “if I made less mistakes, then we still could have won the game?” As noted earlier, after one of the team’s losses, Jonathan publicly broke down crying. He obsessed over how he could be better as a player, but always to make sure it was in the service of the team. Even though Jonathan’s self-critical approach to winning was never really discussed by his teammates, I sensed that the players knew exactly the sort of pressures that Jonathan felt. In fact, this was probably what they admired about him: regardless of the costs and pressures, Jonathan’s ability to forge through intense personal expectations in the face of loss and emerge even stronger, in the end, was admirable.

In a still-emerging digital games space, however, there was a clear sense at UCI Esports that the players were looking for guidance to help them through important decisions about their professional work futures after they graduated, including the possibility of becoming a professional esports player. I noticed how my discussions with a few of the players were more than my “probing” for answers and seeking to understand insights into the demands of the players as college students. The interviews also provided players space to examine assumptions, uncertainties, and expectations they held about their future.
Elijah was cognizant of the achievement of his peers, both within UCI Esports but also around his wider network. At times, he would register the major milestones of his friends during our discussions, noting how so many of them are moving on with their own jobs, marriages, and careers. Sounding somewhat exhausted in one of our final sessions together, he explained, “I still haven’t learned” much about the game, reflecting on the time he believed he wasted playing League of Legends for “several years” by going “through the same mistakes.” Towards the end of my research at UCI Esports, interactions with Elijah became more unbounded. Interviews became longer, with no clear ending, continuing even after I had formally signaled their end by thanking the players for their time. More importantly, the momentum of interactions with Elijah shifted as he redirected the flow of the interviews by taking the initiative of “asking questions back” (Roberts, 1981, p. 35).

For instance, on the second research trip back to the campus in the fall of 2018, Elijah concluded one of our discussions by asking me “if it ever gets better?” By the term “better,” Elijah wondered whether he could overcome the insecurity he felt about his future. I was not sure if I could be any help in giving him advice. Given my self-doubt around my work and identity as a Ph.D. student, and the attending anxieties that are associated with being academically productive early in one’s academic journey, I sympathized with Elijah’s anxieties about doing enough to stay relevant.

In the interviews I conducted with the varsity players, I prepared a set of index cards with certain keywords (such as “angry,” “success,” “sad,” and “torn”) (Lahey et al., 1988) meant to delineate the meaning-making space and “edges” of the interpretive frame for action and change participants occupied. Normally, players would end up concentrating on one or two of the terms that were relevant to their hardships. The selection of a few terms to concentrate on
allowed the interview to take a deeper dive into context-specific examples of where participants engaged in self-reflection activities and where they accepted responsibilities for situations that have been difficult to resolve (Berger, 2010). Accordingly, Baxter Magolda (2007) argued that qualitative interviews can help participants to understand how they “constructed their sense of self” by aiding to “identify questions that locate the boundaries of the interviewee’s assumptions about knowledge, self, and relationships” (p. 496). The qualitative interview, in other words, is seen as an intervention that promotes self-reflection, introspection, and the learning of unexamined assumptions (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012).

The self that Elijah had constructed, however, was a deeply conflicted one. Unlike his teammates, who focused on a few of the terms, nearly every one of the words on the index card presented to Elijah was connected to the uncertainties that he harbored about his time at UCI Esports. Although Elijah was thrilled, just as everyone else, to be part of the UCI’s storied League of Legends team, he had not anticipated being part of the UCI Esports varsity team when he first joined the school. An unexpected absence by one of the League of Legends players left open a spot on the roster, and he took a chance by applying for the open slot. Just like Jonathan, Elijah found himself suddenly propelled from being an everyday student on campus, with an interest in computer science, hanging out with his friends, and socializing with other gamers, to someone who was playing alongside former professional players on one of best collegiate esports teams in the nation.

Being thrust into the spotlight, Elijah found himself pulled in opposite directions about his future. I saw how those tensions played out in our interviews. He regarded his membership on the varsity esports team as being a major milestone for his competitive career, explaining to me that “not a lot of people are able to play League of Legends and get a scholarship. I feel like
that itself is a big accomplishment.” While he qualified his win (he was on the team that brought home UCI’s first cLoL title) by noting that it is “not a World Championship,” he was also aware that “not many people can say they won the National Championship for Collegiate League of Legends. For that itself, I feel pretty proud.” Elijah proved to be more than qualified for his position on the team. Not only was Elijah able to qualify for one of the more prestigious collegiate esports programs in the nation, but he also demonstrated exceptional skill as a teammate during the 2018 College League of Legends Championship when he won the program’s first MVP award (Gayoso, 2018).

Even when there was substantial evidence of Elijah’s contributions to the varsity program, he questioned its significance. Elijah did not speak openly about the MVP award, for instance. Rather, the MVP award was brought to my attention through discussions with his teammates, which was when I learned that Elijah had won the recognition. Part of the reluctance to speak openly about his collegiate esports accomplishments stemmed from his belief that “it’s not a big deal.” However, to him and many others, it was a big deal. Moments before, he had talked about how “proud” he was of winning a national title.

With Elijah, each step forward in college varsity esports was eventually contextualized in its importance, with frequent comparisons between what he had achieved as a college esports player and the professional scene. Again, after Elijah had acknowledged his excitement over the cLoL national championship win, he followed up with the comment, “I don’t think it’s the greatest success.” When asked if he could clarify this comment, he noted:

I feel like there’s so many more things a League player can accomplish. Compared to the Worlds, winning Worlds compared to winning collegiate are two different things. I feel
like winning collegiate is not even 1% of making Worlds. I feel like winning Worlds is 100 times more successful. 100 times more.

Regularly, I was left wondering how Elijah felt about collegiate esports or professional esports. Comments made by Elijah, at times, would flatly contradict or counter what he had just said. When I asked what he would do if a professional team offered him a contract, Elijah responded without hesitation, “[d]ude, I would just sign that right now.” I followed up with the question, “you wouldn’t think about it?” He looked at me, somewhat in disbelief that I would even ask the question, laughed, and, said, “I would be, ‘peace out, [Max]’.” I smiled, knowing that Elijah would certainly love the opportunity to play for his favorite professional League of Legends team (Cloud9). Even the brief hypothetical question about his favorite professional team had brought a smile to his face.

However, in a follow-up interview in 2019, Elijah expressed a different perspective about going professional. Instead of being charmed by the prospects, he was more upfront with what he found objectionable about the profession, stating:

To be a pro player, you honestly have to have the strongest mentality out there. You have to be able to withstand people shitting on you every single day. People hate posting you on social media, and people in-game calling you out, saying you’re shit at the game and that you should quit. I just feel the League of Legends community is something that I am not proud to be a part of. I genuinely think the League community is one of the most toxic communities out there.

Elijah’s views about collegiate and professional esports illustrate the constant back-and-forth changes that I had observed throughout my time at UCI Esports. The indecision that had plagued Elijah was nothing new to him, but the sudden responsibility he assumed as part of the varsity
League of Legends team had created a sense of urgency about his time in school. Unlike the focus on narratives (feelings of abandonment by those around the players) that I had learned with the “star players” early in my research, I was becoming increasingly sensitized to the tensions, interpretations, and contradictions that Elijah had struggled with concerning his commitment to esports. This is not to say that Elijah’s history with games was inconsequential or not impactful to him as a college student. It was clear that Elijah still lived with the specter of his mother’s disapproving views about esports, which played a significant role in his lack of confidence about deciding about his future in esports, and I wanted to help.

7.3 Reciprocity in College Esports Research

On my third trip back to the campus in the fall of 2019, the struggles that Elijah was going through between esports, and his academics were so apparent that I wanted to help. Generally, Elijah described himself as someone who wanted to please others. Having that orientation in life, however, left Elijah without a sense of his own goals. He described not knowing what he wanted to do after high school, explaining to me, “I just went with the flow. I just did my homework, applied to school, and just did what everyone did.” The feeling of being lost, without a sense of purpose, was a significant burden on Elijah.

Part of the goal of my study at UCI Esports was to orient my research in the ethnographic tradition of making sure my research “gives back”—something that I discuss using Baxter Magolda’s (2009a) idea of being the “good partner” during the research process. Taylor’s (2016) work within the competitive Halo scene represents some of the first explorations on the topic of giving back in esports studies, where he explored the nuances that he had to address around the practice of reciprocity, with knowing the “how, when, and what” to give back to his research participants (p. 5).
Reciprocity in ethnography traces back a complicated history to the 1970s and 1980s, according to Weems (2006), inherent in the field of Anthropology and its development of the researcher-researched dynamic that became a legacy of practices that uniquely favored the researcher or those with more power over the researched. Accordingly, the aim of expanding the application of reciprocity was to create a more level field among participants and to allow for research to serve as a liberating experience by providing for self-reflection and an increased awareness of one’s conditions (Lather, 1986).

In his research, however, Taylor (2016) was concerned over whether his study was well-suited for acts of reciprocity, fearing he had “little to give back” in his “capacity as a university researcher.” As Taylor (2016) explained, while the practice of reciprocity is often more discussed among ethnographic scholars situated in a variety of settings and environments, rarely has the topic been broached when it deals with video games or esports research.

As a researcher, I was also unsure of how my writing could improve the lives of the varsity players, especially in the immediate term. Seeing the difficulties that Elijah had struggled with, I initially tried to understand how I could be an industry or career resource, wanting to frame my interactions with participants, as Taylor (2016) had done with the professional Halo players in his research, in strictly “promotional” terms.

My attempts at giving back were also to offer the players contacts to individuals with whom I had worked with as part of the collegiate esports scene, seeing the input that I was able to provide also in “promotional” terms. For instance, when I had asked some of the varsity players if they were familiar with well-known individuals who worked to support collegiate programs and initiatives from various organizations, such as Twitch or Nvidia, most of the players were unaware, or unprepared to utilize that information in a meaningful manner. During
the final phases of my interviews with Elijah, he did not necessarily want connections to the video games industry. After all, he was part of a program that interacted with a variety of video game entities, from Activision-Blizzard, which had its campus only 10 minutes away from UCI to Riot Games, a company that worked closely with UCI Esports in developing its program.

Although I was able to offer a nexus for collegiate contacts for some of the varsity players, I was not sure whether this constituted the type of reciprocity or “giving back” that was meaningful to the players who took part in my research (Weems, 2006). Through several attempts, I tried to orient my interactions with the players so that they did see personal value in participating in my research. I was a curiosity for many of the players, which ended up spurring many of them to make time for me throughout my research stays. Coming from Hawaii, I also represented something new and exciting within the Arena. With Logan, who transitioned from being a varsity player to the team’s analyst on my return trip, I ended up prefacing a lot of our interviews with stories about Hawaii, my native background, and even the politics of Hawaii’s sovereignty movement.

Because reciprocity in practice has been described in a variety of ways, understood as the “exchange of favors and commitments” (Glaser, 1982, p. 50), the “involvement of research participants in the construction and validation of knowledge” (Lather, 1986, p. 265), or to “empower the researched” (MacGibbon & Morton, 2001, p. 323), I also observed how reciprocity meant different things to different players. Due to the dedication invested into their competitive gaming, the varsity players had little time to explore topics that sat outside of their immediate academic interests or majors.

In that sense, reciprocity meant acknowledging the players as individuals who had broader interests beyond video games—in other words, not just esports. That involved
countering some of the expectations that the players had when they prepared to sit with me for their interviews. Rather than asking them questions that only focused on the immediate research interest of my dissertation, if it felt natural and unforced, I followed the students through topics that were not necessarily part of my research plan. With several of the players, I noticed myself tapping into different parts of my identity, interests, and past when trying to build rapport. Ways in which I attempted to make connections to the players stemmed from my growing up in San Diego, my travels around the Middle East, my native Hawaiian ancestry, and even my time spent living in the Philippines. In addition to my more visible identity as a student and researcher, I came to understand, as Reinharz (1997) noticed in her ethnographic research of the nearly twenty different research selves that she had documented that either had emerged or were intentionally foregrounded and how there is no single identity that one performs when taking part in ethnographic inquiry.

Acknowledging interests outside of esports was appreciated by the students. Occasionally, I meandered away from the subject of esports during my discussion with the players, which would cause some confusion, given that so many of the varsity players were accustomed to discussing esports-related topics with visiting guests, media, and researchers. This was how the players normally engaged with the public’s interest in their lives. For instance, when I learned about the different courses that Barron took due to being undeclared as a major, I wanted to learn more about what academic interests Barron had. Although I was aware that my research questions would address the topic of what kind of courses and classes the players were taking, I intended that inquiry to be far more focused with Barron. As I followed Barron through his experience of being an undeclared major, he discussed how much he had enjoyed learning
about different academic subjects. For instance, in the following exchange, I asked Barron what it was like to study subjects he was unfamiliar with:

Sky: “What classes did you take when you came here?”

Barron: “Art class. Electives. Intro to gangs.”

Sky: “Intro to games?”

Barron: “No, Intro to gangs.”

Sky: “So, you took those kinds of courses?”

Barron: “Yes. Those kinds of classes, electives, art classes.”

Sky: “Were they interesting to you?”

Barron: “It was. The art classes were interesting.”

Sky: “So, it was more like linguistics? Art? Or anthropology?”

Barron: “It was more reading and essay kind of classes. Really going deep into the discipline, like the individual. It was a really trippy class. It was like, for the individual to exist, you have to have another individual. Without the group, you have to be in a group to be an individual. Something like that. It was really trippy. I was like ‘woah’.”

Sky: “Sort of blown away? So, these are classes you’ve never…”

Barron: I never took it. All the high school classes were like, one plus one is two. That kind of class.”

Because of the excitement of using esports as a “veritable trojan horse” for academic development (Reitman et al., 2020), educators have focused on finding common ground between STEM-based literacies and the culture of competitive gaming. However, I first noticed pushback against the benefits of having students in STEM subjects at UCI Esports during a conversation with Max. Rather than celebrate the possibility of a promising recruit into the program, he was
worried about the fact that he was a transfer who intended to go into engineering, and therefore concerned about the demands that would be placed on that player. Max exclaimed, “I’ll be honest, when I hear someone is coming in doing a philosophy major, I get excited!” From a director’s perspective, having someone from the Humanities is just easier to manage, as those players will have “more time and energy, and less stress.”

The conversation with Barron about his STEM education suggested that the relationship between a STEM-focused education and esports was not as straightforward as imagined (Anderson et al, 2018). As I noticed with Barron, an intense personal or institutional focus on STEM can limit what students are allowed to imagine for themselves. While STEM learning is an important part of the educational investments in 21st-century, work-related skillsets (Bourn, 2018), I observed how some of the varsity esports players also pushed back against pursuing a STEM-focused education. Later in the chapter, I detail how Elijah explicitly counters the popular, narrative linking between a STEM-focused education and esports.

It was rare when Barron allowed himself to think differently about the future but discussing the different academic subjects that he was taking was a moment when he opened up. Growing up in South Korea, Barron benefited from an educational system that is world-renowned for its investment and emphasis on science and technology, producing students with some of the highest marks for STEM learning and education (Davis et al., 2020). Because Barron decided to remain undeclared as a major at UCI (he wanted an academic course load that would make it easier “to win collegiate”), allowing him to take courses that were not strictly STEM-based, new ideas, perspectives, and thinking had become available to him.

During my discussions with Barron, I recalled a change in demeanor as he excitedly talked about the social dynamics between the “individual” versus the “group,” topics that are
common in subjects within the Humanities but, perhaps, were not a significant part of his education in South Korea. In that discussion, Barron had completely left out any reference to esports, which was a surprise, given just how focused our interactions had been around esports. I withheld the temptation of swinging the conversation back around to my research.

If reciprocity in ethnographic inquiry is meant to improve the lives of the people who voluntarily take part in research, then engaging the collegiate varsity players as individuals with varied interests was one way that I saw how my research could approach that goal. Hearing Barron regard his experiences with STEM classes as strictly technical highlighted that Barron was concerned with more than being the best collegiate player at UCI Esports. Existing literature about STEM-focused curricula within secondary and post-secondary education (Cannady et al., 2014; Weinstein, 2016; Zouda, 2016) has posed critical questions about the ever-growing urgency for national education agendas to locate policy decisions as supporting skills related to technical competency, scientific knowledge, and digital communications (Bourn, 2018). However, Zhao (2019) has argued in a critique of STEM-heavy curricula that national policies that excessively focus on rationalist, skills-based educational goals “deny individuals the opportunity to discover their real potential” (p. 66), limits the range of personal discovery of talents, and that ultimately, becomes a question of causing harm.

Barron’s comment about his STEM-focused education being essentially comprised of “one plus one is two” courses stuck with me. It was a rare moment of reflection from a player about his education, and perhaps what he would like to do differently. Often, because of UCI’s strong academic reputation, little consideration was given to the type of education the players were receiving, or the sacrifices they made by having to give up or change majors to join UCI Esports. The fact that they were at UCI was all that mattered. Though Barron did not elaborate
further on just how much he enjoyed taking courses outside of a STEM curriculum, the way Barron spoke about the “trippy” parts of what he was learning, topics related to community, social cohesion, and identity, was evidence that Barron found intellectually stimulating subjects that were not specifically science or technology based.

Being cognizant of how I was “giving back,” I did not want my motivations for reciprocity to be only about getting “more and better data” (Lather, 1991, p. 57)–and yet, I also could not ignore how reciprocity led to richer accounts of the research. By having Barron explore his concerns about a STEM education, for instance, opened up a line of inquiry around the intersection of education and collegiate players that I had not anticipated. In particular, by understanding how a STEM-focused education presented limitations for the players, I expanded the scope of questions, wondering whether the UCI Esports program also had reservations about the interlinking between STEM and esports.

With each new piece of information gleaned during my research, or conversations I had been privy to with the players or program leadership, I thought about how I could use that information to help the players think through some of these issues. For instance, in the middle of my research visits in 2018, several of the players talked about wanting to get internships. I assumed acquiring an internship would have been relatively easier for the players given the close connections and relationships that UCI Esports had developed with several technology-related companies, but the reality was that the varsity players at UCI Esports struggled to land internships that were relevant to the kind of careers that they wanted after graduating.

Nearly every player I talked to had voiced their concerns about the lack of internships. While the players knew about internships that were available outside of UCI Esports, the players were also puzzled by opportunities that the program could provide but did not. With the few
companies that did make connections to the varsity program, Robert thought that the players should have stood out to internship recruiters due to being on the “competitive side” of the program, and therefore the “most talented” among the group. Listening to the players lament the lack of internships, once again, I thought about how my research could materially make things better, and quickly.

7.3.1 Leaving the Varsity Esports Team

Understanding how important it was to acknowledge the players as individuals with differing interests beyond esports, I was repeatedly challenged to orient my research with that perspective in mind. In particular, Elijah kept drawing our discussions back to the topic of esports and the uncertainties he had over a possible future professional career. While conversations about going professional with players became longer in their duration, going into greater detail and greater thoughtfulness given to the subject, interactions with Elijah stood out because of the increasing frustrations he exhibited about not having done more to prepare himself to succeed.

At times, I wondered whether Elijah understood how upset Max was with what happened to Barron when he left to play for Team Liquid in 2017, or the consequences of what changed inside the program because of how Barron was treated. When I questioned Elijah about the prospects of going professional, I appreciated how straightforward he imagined leaving UCI Esports to play professionally would be. Elijah expressed almost no hesitation about leaving everything that he had created at UCI—or the education he would be giving up for the opportunity to play for his favorite League of Legends team, Cloud9. However, with the creation of the “[Barron] rule,” the path to going professional was not as simple as saying “peace out” to Max.
The extent to which Barron was mistreated was significant. Understandably, Max’s anger over the events was partially directed at how disruptive his sudden absence was to the varsity program. Before leaving, Barron had consulted with Max about the opportunity to return to Team Liquid to play during the spring quarter. Although Max was unhappy to see Barron leave, he also understood that this was Barron’s dream. Anyone who knew Barron knew just how driven he was to showcase himself with the goal of making it back to the professional scene.

With Barron gone at the start of the academic quarter in 2017, the program scrambled to find someone who could fill his spot, so they put a talented, but untested, Jonathan into a team with an all-star cast of teammates with LCS experience. It was only after Barron transferred to Team Liquid at the start of 2017, however, that Max understood the full extent of how bad things were for Barron. Max elaborated that:

It wasn’t just that he was poached, but they treated him really badly. He played for one weekend with Team Liquid, and they replaced him with “Doublelift.” So, they bring in a high school kid, offer him tiny peanuts, and pull him out of school, winter quarter so he essentially loses out all the classes for winter quarter and wasn’t here for spring. You give him a tiny signing bonus since they put him on the team for one weekend. And then they bring this guy they had to pay out of the nose for. Why the heck did you bring in a kid for one weekend and pull him out of class? And then they tried to kick him off the team and make him leave the house.

Barron’s attempts at going professional, once again, had gone horribly wrong. I could not help but share the same sense of frustration that I observed from Max when he explained to me, “I told Riot, ‘You can’t allow pro teams [to] poach college kids in the middle of the season’.” Barron appreciated the support that Max had shown once news spread that Team Liquid was
going to remove him from their roster. Thinking back at the numerous missed opportunities to go professional, Barron referred to himself as being “unlucky” when it came to crucial moments in esports that could have launched his career, which included having teammates miss important tournaments because they accidentally slept in or having his team’s roster suddenly replaced by the esports organization that owned the team.

This time was different, however. This was not a case of being “unlucky” but that of maltreatment by the organization. Having been told that he would be the “superstar” by the CEO of the professional organization and promised that they would “fully commit” to him once he signed a contract—only to be removed from Team Liquid’s roster less than a week after having dropped out of school was more than bad luck. Perhaps knowing that he was going “into a trap” by returning to Team Liquid, Barron spoke with Max, who was adamantly against Barron returning to play for the organization, to gain assurances that if things did not turn out well, he could return to the university to play for the team.

Barron’s leaving the UCI Esports program to play for Team Liquid in 2017 was known by all of his teammates. Talking with Elijah about what had happened to Barron, he understood the precarity that is associated with the industry and the risks that were involved by pursuing this line of career, but at the same time, he was also willing to take those chances. The tensions that Elijah struggled with over which path to take when it concerned prioritizing academics or a career in esports, as discussed earlier, defined the interactions that I had with Elijah over the course of my research.

Over time, the indecisiveness from my two interviews with Elijah troubled me. As I spent more time with him, I became concerned with his own uncertainties. Part of my worry stemmed from my wanting to be helpful to the players. Although I wanted to provide insights that could
help him make a decision, Elijah nearly always provided two competing, contradictory, and conflicting answers during our interviews about his engagement with collegiate esports. For instance, when asked whether he was proud of his identity as a varsity player (“I don’t spout it out” versus “It is important”), his time invested (or wasted) into developing himself as an elite player (“I just feel fucking exhausted. I just feel like I lost my drive. I feel I am ready to move on to something else” versus “So, if I don’t go pro, I will regret it for the rest of my life”), or his accomplishments at UCI Esports (“Winning collegiate is like whatever” versus” “Honestly, not a lot of people are able to accomplish the things I have done”)—nothing was ever settled in Elijah’s mind about his relationship with UCI Esports.

During my closing interviews, I had prepared the series of questions that I had repeated with students on the second and third rounds of interviews, following up with open-ended questions that were meant to locate and examine the players’ “leading edge” (or boundaries) (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, p. 496) and perspectives on their participation with collegiate esports. Elijah appeared less enthusiastic about answering questions. Unlike the summer of 2018, when UCI Esports acquired their first national championship in varsity League of Legends, on my third trip back, the team had just suffered an unexpected loss to the University of Western Ontario in Canada, denying UCI Esports a second national championship (cLoL).

During the final meetings, I talked about the loss. He was disappointed that his team had not taken the Canadian team more seriously. Possibly due to the loss, Elijah was far more pessimistic about his chances of turning professional, describing the process, at one point in our conversation, as a “shot in the dark.” Elijah went through a list of reasons why he described the attempt to go professional in this way, starting first with the difficulties of finding the “perfect team” during the trial phase (Scouting Grounds) of finding a professional League of Legends
team to join. At the time of my research, Elijah played the “toplane” role on the UCI Esports team, a position within the professional scene that was occupied by a collection of talented toplaners. For him to make the transition from college to a professional organization would require him to get “lucky,” which, according to Elijah, meant having one of the professional players on a top-tier team in the LCS move back to South Korea or being relegated to an academy team just to have a shot at getting recruited.

Elijah also questioned the viability of trying to pursue a STEM degree while attempting to prepare to go professional. Barron had already spoken about the intricacies of having to navigate a STEM-focused education, but Elijah was more explicit about the difficulties of being a STEM major while taking part in competitive esports, pointing out that you would have to be a “God to be a pro player in college because you’re balancing two full-time jobs.” Although he loved what he was studying (Elijah was a computer science major), he began to openly discuss how being a computer science major presented a major hurdle to his goals in esports –“if you’re a STEM major, and you’re trying to pursue a pro career, it’s really difficult.”

Overall, Elijah wanted to rid himself of the feelings of guilt for the love of video games he had since childhood. Up until that point, I had attempted to trace a careful path of making sure that I was playing a supportive role in how I asked questions “to elicit data on student characteristics, meaningful experiences, and participants’ interpretations of those experiences” (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, p. 501). Accordingly, the interviewer plays a key role in helping to tease out from the participants’ interpretative frameworks the work of a meaning-making process that draws on “participants’ attention to the complexity of their work and life decisions” (Baxter Magolda, 2009b, p. 3).
Players, however, had a comprehensive understanding of their own unique difficulties, especially when it concerned the twin struggles over participation in esports and their academics. The issues that I covered with the players were not new. For Elijah, anxieties related to video games and esports had been an ongoing issue for over a decade. Elijah outlined the beginnings of his problems with video games to his time in middle school, a period when he described himself as being “addicted” to video games. He recalled major arguments that his family would have over his gaming. Unlike many of the other varsity players, Elijah still carried with him into college the oppressive views that his parents had about gaming. To some degree, he blamed himself for the years of troubles, saying it was “his fault” for causing stress for his family. Eventually, the tensions become too much for his mother to handle. As Elijah pointed out, she eventually “stopped caring.”

Although I had not intended the question to be controversial, during Elijah’s interview, I asked him, “Why the guilt?” As soon as I asked him the question, I realized how I had delivered the question with an abrupt change in tone, length, and curtness. I almost shocked myself when I asked the question. I feared that Elijah could have easily read my frustrations through the question. Compared with how I conducted interviews over the previous year with Elijah, as well as the other players, it was not the type of question that sought to develop his own perspective, to locate where he saw his own responsibility for change, nor to develop confidence in the interpretation of his past (Barber & King, 2014; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007). Rather, I had wondered why he persisted in feeling guilty about something that he had felt so strongly about.

I recall Elijah being slightly surprised, perhaps not by the question, but by the way I had interrupted him while he was speaking. Elijah also looked offended, as if I had not listened to his
grievances throughout his interviews. To some degree, I suppose I was indirectly doubting why he continued to feel guilty. In what appeared to be the last attempt at getting his point across, he took a noticeable inhale of breath, then addressed my question:

I think it’s cause there’s a lot of things, for sure. I think, again, the first appearance of guilt was when my parents didn’t approve of me playing video games. So, just growing up, I have been trying to hide away my passion for video games because it wasn’t something I should have been proud of, according to my parents. So, yea, I didn’t have the best support growing up, so I always doubted myself. I think the more that I play League, the more flaws I see in it. There are just some things about League that I really don’t like. Honestly, I’m the type of person who used to play a bunch of different games. I have jumped from game to game. Playing League for 9 years is kind of hard. Your passion and love and enjoyment really goes down.

Elijah did not propose a counterargument or suggest a brighter alternative as he would normally do. There was no caveat or exceptions. Speaking about what he had disliked about the competitive scene in esports, he delivered an uninterrupted, even cathartic, account of his displeasure. As he explained how he always had to “hide” his “passion for video games,” I remembered Elijah telling me during our first interview session that his mother did not know that he was on a varsity esports team. Even as he was able to secure scholarship funding for his tuition as a varsity player, Elijah still did not want to let his mother know that he was on a competitive college esports team.

As I wrapped up the interview, I thanked Elijah for the time. Then, he told me that “[t]his is probably going to be the last time we talk.” I asked him why, thinking that I may have said or done something wrong. I immediately thought that I may have provoked Elijah too much by
appearing to question or doubt his reason for his feelings of guilt. He explained, “I’m not going to join the team for sure, and no one knows it.” He slowly got up from where he was sitting and half-turned back to me, not exactly leaving the table, but also clearly intending to signal that he did not intend to stay at the table any longer. He wanted me to keep the information confidential until he left, which I agreed to do. He made it clear that he wanted to tell the team at that moment.

The way he got up from the table was hastened. The urgency was clear, as if he was trying to prevent himself from being dissuaded, perhaps by a further conversation with me, from his plans to quit the team. With only being about 10 feet from the back entrance into the esports Arena, perhaps he felt that even with that short distance, anything could happen. Before he left, I asked him if he thought telling his teammates the news would be difficult. He affirmed that it would be, especially to Jonathan, with whom his relationship stretched back to “Day one of UCI Esports.”

Elijah’s decision to tell me about leaving UCI Esports raised questions about the good of my research, and in what way was I giving back to the varsity players. Unlike some of the relationships that the varsity players had with long-time friends, family, or significant others, the time I spent with the players engaging with my research, even if longitudinal, was shorter than the connections they had with friends and family in their personal lives. After Elijah revealed his intentions to leave the team, I wondered what, if any, the impact the time I had spent with him had contributed to his decision. The meeting with Elijah was the last in-person session that I had planned with him.

A few weeks later, while conducting a follow-up interview with Logan, he confirmed that Elijah had left. For some reason, I did not want to come out and ask what had happened to Elijah,
but I did end up asking. Since the last conversation I had with Elijah about his quitting, I had neither spoken to nor known about his circumstances. Perhaps reading into my audible concerns, Logan reassured me that Elijah was fine. In fact, Logan wanted to thank me, on “his behalf,” for what had transpired.

Logan explained that he noticed a “weight being lifted from his shoulders,” that he believed he was making “the right decision…in being free from it all,” and this was the “right decision for himself, as an individual.” I was happy to hear that Elijah felt secure in his decision to leave. Given that one of Elijah’s more pressing concerns throughout his life had been the indecision, lack of confidence, and anxiety around his engagement with video games, the decision to leave UCI Esports felt meaningful.

Through a constructivist approach, the collaboration between the researcher and participants is essential in helping to shape the construction of meaning for participants in a study. Baxter Magolda (2009a) referred to the role of the friend, family member, or loved one, who, over time, helps to guide perspectives, discusses important issues, and serves to help create meaning, as being a “good partner.” Because of the troubled relationships that the varsity players had with family members, however, the pool of individuals whom the players could depend upon to cultivate an objective perspective of themselves was quite small. Consequently, I took my role as a researcher as someone who could be a good partner—a role that called for “affirming” participants’ stories, while helping players to see “the complexity of their work and life decisions” and “develop their personal authority” (Magola Baxter, 2009a, p. 251).

I was unsure, however, whether I had fulfilled the role of being a good partner in the research in this instance and about the motivations for Elijah’s disengagement with the program. Proponents of the socio-cognitive approach to development (Barber & King, 2014; Baxter
Magolda & King, 2012; Kegan 1982; 1994) would argue that students like Elijah should not fully give up on their goals but need to work on resolving existing tensions. With the right mix of challenge and support, Elijah should have found a way to reconcile the uncertainties of his past, assert some sense of direction, and articulate the beginnings of a “voice” to move forward. While Elijah was still clearly beset with the insecurities and conflicted over the right path to take, I ascribed failure on my part, as a researcher, for not helping him to revisit these issues with a renewed sense of self and direction. From a constructivist perspective, being a helpful guide through the research entails attending to factors (engaging with participants on topics that may be personal, disclosing information about oneself, and if presented, cultivating friendships with participants) meant to alleviate hierarchical inequalities that are inherent in research settings (Roberts, 1981).

Being a good partner, however, was an unclear position to navigate, especially when helping someone who is deeply conflicted about his or her future. Hearing myself repeatedly confirming Elijah’s perspectives, as he transitioned back-and-forth from seeing the good and the bad in everything that he did with esports, I wondered if Elijah questioned my sincerity. When Elijah was adamant about how disillusioned he was with League of Legends, I affirmed his viewpoints, understanding his fears about the prospects of having a “shitty career,” the possibility of developing “medical injuries,” the need to “withstand people shitting on you every single day,” or being told, “you should quit.” Alternatively, I also sympathized with how much time, effort, and personal sacrifice he had invested into that very same culture of gaming that he found problematic. He had given so much of himself to the game, building up friendships with the broader competitive League of Legends community for nearly a decade. Because of his
expectations, as Elijah detailed in our discussions over the course of the research, his not turning professional would be an outcome that he would “regret” for the remainder of his life.

7.3.1.1 Leaving then Coming Back?

With my final in-person interview with Elijah, I had forgotten to clarify exactly what he planned to do after leaving the program. Even with reservations about what he had seen with professional League of Legends, I still assumed that Elijah left the program to concentrate on turning professional. Looking over my field notes, I had noted that Elijah was “leaving to try out his professional chances,” but I could not confirm the jottings I had made through the final interview with Elijah. I had questioned whether I correctly remembered what had transpired, given that few details were given by Elijah on his departure from UCI Esports. In looking back, I felt certain that Elijah actually did leave UCI Esports to try his “luck” at going professional.

In a follow-up interview in the summer of 2019, however, Elijah cleared up a lot of my confusion, telling me that he stopped participating with the varsity League of Legends team, but that his decision was not because he wanted to go professional. Rather, during the winter quarter of 2018, he decided to stop his activities with UCI Esports to concentrate on school, stating:

Actually, for the past two years, I was playing for UCIE and we would practice a lot and we would play every single season. Even over summer. It was a lot of time consumed. So, I never really had a chance to solely focus on academics. I always felt balancing league and school was hard. In the fall, when I was not on the team, it felt a lot easier.

The act idea of withdrawing from one’s varsity activities seemed counter to everything that I have experienced with varsity esports (the “dream” of “getting paid” to play video games in college), especially for a program with the sort of competitive ambitions that UCI Esports held. However, Elijah was happy with his choice of withdrawing from the team, repeatedly telling me
that life-work balance demands were just “easier” to navigate, going from playing nearly 40 hours a week down to two hours per week of League of Legends. Suddenly, Elijah had far more free time to socialize with friends outside of the context of just UCI Esports.

Elijah did not explicitly talk about the time he and I spent together as being a catalyst for his thinking differently about his commitment to collegiate esports in the same way other players, such as Noah, Barron, and Logan spoke about their participation in my ethnographic research in a beneficial way. With the latter group of players, they had drawn some type of benefit from taking part in the research. In Noah’s case, for instance, the topic of his being blamed by the program for taking too aggressive of an approach to competition weighed heavily on his mind. Being able to revisit the topic through the repeated interviews, as he described it, was “like therapy.” After discussions that appeared to be emotionally intense, I spent time debriefing the players about the interview itself, and in those moments, I would hear how the research exchange had been helpful (Ezzy, 2010). With Barron, even before the research began, he was already convinced that what I was doing would be helpful, prefacing his interview at the start of my research by saying, “I never had the chance to let this out. I’m excited.”

Much had transpired between interviews with Elijah. While he had taken a break, he also returned to the team after the quarter pause. I was surprised to hear that Elijah returned to play for the League of Legends team at UCI Esports in the fall of 2019, explaining that he wanted to come back, but this time for reasons that differed from when he was on the team before. Because it was the last year for some of the senior players (Robert and Peter, among others) on the team, Elijah wanted to join them in their final collegiate season. Moreover, Victor had also asked Elijah if he would return. Due to the strong bonds created between friends, Elijah was happy to
return. He also knew that the team would not go far without him, commenting that “[t]hey are not going to win without me. For sure.”

I sensed more confidence in the choice he made to return to the program. He also did not appear to return just for his competitive interests; he wanted to support the friends he made. Aware that quitting the program had consequences for those who stayed behind, Elijah seemed to reorient his perspective about collegiate esports away from the intense focus on whether he needed to use UCI Esports as a means of capitalizing on an uncertain future career in professional esports.

The idea of stepping back, taking a break, or pausing is not unusual. In fact, longitudinal research on socio-cognitive development shows that the meaning-making journey rarely unfolds linearly or continuously (Abes, 2012; King & Kitchener, 1994; Mentkowski & Associates, 2000; Perry, 1970; Rest, Narvaez et al., 1999; Torres & Hernandez, 2007). Instead, “growth” can be categorized as more “undulating, cyclical, or wavelike than linear, more like a swiveling helix than a fixed, straight line” (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012, p. 16). Although Baxter Magolda and King (2012) address the shortcomings that a strictly linear model that self-authorship postulates, Taylor’s (2016) understanding of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive growth as consisting of a “circuitous pacing” resonated more faithfully with what I had observed with Elijah. Rather than being linear, incremental, or continuous, Taylor (2016) draws on thinking about development as the “circumference of one’s awareness” that is both “wider and deeper” in its considerations (i.e., family and friends) (p. 38) that lies beyond a progressive or continuous climb around individual development.

Because Elijah was constantly aware of the individuals who would be affected whenever he thought about esports, framing meaning-making as being “wider and deeper,” rather than
straight and continuous, became increasingly more relevant to my research. This is important to note because part of me regretted that I was not able to share with Elijah this perspective, having engaged with Taylor’s (2016) writing later in my analysis. The guilt that Elijah held about having to take into consideration his parents’ thoughts, feelings, and perspectives weighed on him. Elijah was trying to widen the circle of individuals who he wanted to be part of his journey, especially his family and parents.

Seeing Elijah’s reluctance, indecision, and apprehension not as signs of underdevelopment, or stagnation, but acknowledging what Elijah was doing was a particular way of *knowing* that did not cater to the “normative ideals of separation” but was sensitive to a “connected process” of “attend[ing] to relationships between an object and its context” (Taylor, 2016, p. 36). Most of the players I talked to, while having grown up in the United States, were shaped by their ethnic Asian (Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese) cultural upbringings. Team members I collaborated with at the Arena did not come from a White background but represented a broad spectrum of East Asian, Mexican, Persian, and Middle Eastern ethnic perspectives. A glaring critique of classical theories of student development is that its founding research was consistently based on a highly skewed sampling of a predominantly White male cohort of college students (King & Kitchener, 1994; Baxter Magolda, 1992). Thus, Western-orientated biases, such as privileging the individual and being separate from others and confident in one’s own decisions, were clearly at play when it came to how student development thinking was shaped in its formative years. Consequently, the need for me to tread cautiously when applying the framing toward students with diverse or marginalized backgrounds was important.

Consequently, there was nothing “wrong” with Elijah withdrawing from the program. By stepping back, then returning, Elijah had reset the boundaries of his participation and reframed
his priorities vis-à-vis UCI Esports. As one example of a reset, Elijah extended his graduation for another year to build his résumé to enter the job market. He told me he “didn’t want to graduate without any opportunities.” As noted above, internships were a key concern of players. This was particularly the case for the seniors. Overall, finding an internship, either with a gaming company or with technology companies, had not been as easy as some of the players had anticipated. Thus, landing a coveted internship was a goal for Elijah and a promise that he had made to his parents.

Upon reflection, I also understood that reciprocity in research, as Harrison et al. (2001) described, is a process of “give” and “take.” The assumption that my research was going to give “voice” to students was challenged by the steps that Elijah took to take charge of his circumstances. Elijah exercised his own agency by redefining the boundaries of his participation, which meant attending to friendships made among the players. In most cases, the social relationships that the players had developed were nearly all because of their connections to the program. Bonds players formed through teamwork were often talked about as an important part of the process for teams to become integral units for competition. However, it was also clear that the bonds that the players created because of playing together as a team made the decision to leave the program more complicated. Elijah felt the need to return because he also understood that his friends were also preparing to test whether they could start the process of looking for a professional team to join. In that regard, coming back to UCI Esports was an attempt to honor and support those relationships that he had created on his varsity team.

7.4 Summary

In this chapter, I discussed how the possibility of going professional by the varsity players became an ongoing part of a discussion that progressed with each research visit. With a
national championship win in 2018, UCI Esports had proven itself worthy of calling itself a top-tier collegiate program. Players felt confident about how they performed and had a renewed sense of self and direction. There was an excitement on campus when I returned after that summer 2018 win, and most notable was the sense that players felt extremely confident over the prospect of their being able to garner visibility in the elite ranks of the League of Legends community.

In addressing the research question for the dissertation (“How do collegiate esports scholarship players understand their experiences as gamers in relation to their academic and personal development in college?”), I oriented my ethnographic inquiry to how I could “give back” as a means of both shedding light on the meaning-making processes of the participants, as well as a means of improving the lived conditions of their being students (Harrison et al., 2001).

After the 2018 cLoL win, players were excited by the prospects of their new status as national collegiate champions. However, uncertainty, anxiety, and insecurity about the future continued to permeate the lives of the players in the program—especially for students who, either in the junior or senior years, saw the futility of trying to “balance” academic success and professional aspirations within an increasingly narrow window of time (Aquilina, 2013; Kristiansen, 2017). Thus, I oriented my interactions with the players in a way that helped frame the difficulties that the players were going through by drawing attention to where they had agency, control, and responsibility for their futures by my playing the “good partner” role and actively guiding them to examine their circumstances, and in Elijah’s case, taking decisive action on what path to take (Baxter Magolda & King, 2009).

As covered in chapter 6, the ability for the players to extract themselves, even just briefly, from the everyday “grind” of progressing as skilled technicians, surveilling and comparing
themselves against others, or contemplating one’s future in competitive gaming was a privilege that not many of the players were able to do. Thus, I draw on the co-constructivist nature of my theoretical commitments in the research with Elijah, a member of the League of Legends team, as he struggled with tremendous indecision as a collegiate player. Unlike the pushback against the program that was instigated by some of the more impassioned members of the team, Elijah was paralyzed with confusion about his next steps as a student or player. While fraught with indecisiveness, the state of not knowing what to do next did allow Elijah to reflect on the choices made, and the path he wanted to create moving forward.

The decision to leave, then return, to UCI Esports reflected the ability of Elijah to be nimble, responsive, and aware of his choices. After my final interview, Elijah decided to leave UCI Esports, a topic that I further explore in the final chapter of this dissertation. While I had wanted my research to “give back,” I was unsure in what ways it would have an impact on the varsity players. By leaving, however, Elijah reasserted his internal voice, and agency, to return to the program the following semester. The return to UCI Esports, specifically, was to help his teammates and friends who still wanted to pursue their competitive careers and was not just about his aspiring ambitions as a professional player. In his return, he spoke about the confidence, freedom, and clarity (that of just there being less pressure) in his life and being able to reengage with the program on his terms.
CHAPTER 8: DISILLUSIONMENT AND SOLIDARITY AT UCI ESPORTS

8.1 Introduction

Although Chapter 8 concludes the dissertation research, the analytic insights brought to the fore in this chapter arrive full circle back to the start of the research, with the intent of understanding the responsibilities subsumed with belonging to UCI Esports, and how players interpret and understand their development as students and players within the confines of a varsity program. With the final chapter, I focus on a phenomenon that was not initially planned for in the research—players whom I met, spent time with, or briefly heard about suddenly leaving the UCI Esports program.

Where concerns about dedicating time to college esports, like traditional sports, have traditionally focused on the divided attention demanded between one’s academics versus sports competition (Aquilina, 2013; Kristiansen, 2017), the decision to leave UCI Esports revealed a deeper dissatisfaction centered on feelings of being isolated, secluded, or disregarded by the program. What had initially sparked excitement with the inaugural years of UCI Esports was called into question. Towards the latter half of the research, players were asking themselves whether investing time, often of invaluable measure during their senior years, into the program was a worthwhile effort.

Within the context of my role as a researcher who created connections and friendships with students in the study, I became increasingly aware of how key relationships I made with individuals inside the program allowed me to broach the controversial topic of quitting or leaving the program, given the sensitivity of the issues and personal grievances that players expressed around the subject. The sense of disillusionment experienced ranged from the realization that one’s aspirations to turn professional are unlikely, to feelings about how one’s voice—whether
that was to be listened to, recognized, or heeded—ended up constituting a significant part of the labor of being heard, or simply not having their perspectives taken seriously as part of the development of the teams or the program.

8.2 The Esports Arena as a Disciplined Space

During his first year in the varsity program, Logan, who started out as a scholarship player, but later took on other roles, such as team analyst within the program, considered leaving UCI Esports. Some of the reasons for leaving were a series of decisions made by the UCI Esports leadership that made Logan question his motivations for continuing. While some of the complexities and nuances of leaving the program were explored in the previous chapter—I discussed how Elijah, who played on the League of Legends team, returned to the program after considering that his absence would be a detriment to teammates who still held onto ambitions as professional players, in this chapter, I take a deeper interrogative dive into the topic of leaving.

Before I begin the analysis of this chapter, I draw attention to the friendship that I established with Logan over the course of the research. Overall, I spent a greater amount of time with Logan throughout the research than I did with other participants. An uncanny resemblance to one of my high school friends made it easy for me to form a close relationship that lasted beyond the research. The more time I spent with him, the more I found out what we had in common. He was an avid water sports enthusiast (water polo and surfing), along with an interest in martial arts. Logan was the only player on the team with whom I formed a friendship that continues today, leading to ethnographic exchanges that differed from some of my interactions with other players.

Due to my connection with Logan, his experiences as a member of the varsity program influenced my thoughts about my research, the collection of data, and the analysis at different
parts of my study. Not only did Logan play an important role in my understanding of the topic of quitting or leaving the program, but my relationship with Logan continued to inform my thinking even after my leaving UCI Esports as a research site. Throughout the research, I thought about how my relationship with Logan would shape the dissertation’s findings. In foregrounding my relationship with Logan, I highlight what Davies (1999) has argued that “a very close relationship [with research participants] neither guarantees nor precludes good ethnography” (p. 82). While I understood that the research relationship that I had with Logan could be tremendously helpful, that proximity needed to be repeatedly put into context for it to glean meaningful insights, and to guard against assuming that closeness to the research participants, without a reflexive treatment, necessarily meant better data. My friendship with Logan as a source of analysis meant that I had to be critical and reflective at different junctures of the research. I needed to understand how my thinking was shaped by the experiences that Logan brought to the study and how that required greater care, acknowledgment, and recognition in my dissertation.

During my time on campus, a phenomenon that I did not anticipate going into the research was players who had quit the team and the varsity esports program. Becoming part of UCI Esports challenged, as well as widened, perspectives about the opportunities that could be capitalized on while participating in the program. In some cases, the journey for many of the players was also a process of disillusionment with one’s personal investment of time into the program. When I initially met Logan, I noted my impressions of him during our initial interview. When making notes of players with whom I had met for the first time, I often concentrated on the visual cues, where my scribblings focused on the general demeanor of the players, what
players were wearing, and, whether the players were wearing collegiate esports apparel, or anything that indicated some type of support for UCI Esports.

The jottings I put down in my cellphone about my first interactions with Logan read “white-ish sweater/hoodie with hat” were not meant to indicate serious reflection. At the time, I was just taking note of what I had seen inside UCI Esports, not thinking that something as mundane as what someone was wearing could be an important clue. In his inaugural year in the varsity program, Logan was so committed to the team that he ended up shutting out various distractions in his life. Outside of the program, this entailed pushing away various social activities, gatherings, and relationships with friends that he deeply enjoyed. Inside, he delved into focusing on his game. Returning to the notion of paying attention to outside appearances, I noticed that a particular habit that Logan brought with him to UCI from his semi-professional experiences was that he would throw on his sweater that had a hood, and then tighten the hood around his face with the accompanying drawstrings in order completely close off his focus to what was directly in front of him. As I discuss, behaviors like this would end up causing strife between him and the program.

The image of Logan wearing a hoodie, closed off to the world outside of what is immediately in front of him nicely encapsulated the larger issues that he had at the time with UCI Esports. Logan was not trying to be anti-social, nor to give off the impression of being unfriendly, but by wearing his sweater in this manner, Logan created tensions inside the Arena. UCI Esports staff and players started to question the appropriateness of having one of their players giving off an unfriendly impression.

How the players were expected to conduct themselves inside the Arena was an issue that Logan had difficulty acclimating himself to, but it represented where players had to relearn a
culture of esports, as I discussed in Chapter 4, once believed to be under their expert domain. For instance, within a few months of his being on the varsity team in 2016, Logan was asked to “smile more” around the Arena. The notion that Logan was being asked to be more friendly around the Arena came as a surprise because I had always seen Logan as cheerful, excited, and eager. He admitted that when was focused on winning games, his body would tense, his demeanor would stiffen, and his mannerisms could come off as unwelcoming. It was the first time he was asked to be more “personable” or “approachable” when in the Arena. While he tried, Logan found himself slipping and forgetting how he was supposed to act in front of his teammates, or inside the Arena (Rojek, 2010).

As much as the UCI Esports Arena was the primary location for the varsity team to conduct their practices or tournament matches, it was also a public space on the campus for students to use. Having players reorient themselves into a competitive space, such as a collegiate esports arena, was part of a broader strategy of making the UCI Esports a more inclusive location on campus, where students, staff, and players were creating an environment conducive to those goals. Forward-thinking initiatives and policies created by AnyKey (2016) have insisted on “[p]ro-active inclusion” (p. 2) policies to create environments that do not intimidate newcomers to games. In working with UCI Esports to develop policies around inclusion and diversity, AnyKey has frequently pointed to the creation of inclusive and “welcoming spaces” (p. 16) on college campuses by being intentional with bringing new people into programs, reiterating how kindness should be a front-door policy, and creating an overall atmosphere of support.

Consequently, the UCI Esports leadership wanted the varsity players to be seen as approachable to students and patrons who were in the Arena. However, conflicts with how the Arena was viewed by the players, on the one hand, and the general student population, on the
other, repeatedly touched upon the sensitivities of how the Arena was imagined by its community as both a public and private space. For Logan, having to be cognizant of the Arena’s publicness, along with the prospects that he was being watched during his impassioned responses to wins, or losses, became moments when he had concerns. Rojek’s (2010) work on the necessity of having to expend “emotional labor” is insightful here. He argued “[t]o be regarded by others as competent, relevant and credible” (p. 4) in the modern world, individuals need to be aware that their actions are under constant surveillance not only during work but also in one’s leisure hours. For Logan, the pressure to tone down his behavior inside the Arena, thus, became a realization that being a collegiate esports player had an ongoing performative component to its operations that he needed to be aware of at almost all times.

With the business model that UCI Esports wanted to replicate, it was not surprising that UCI Esports wanted the players to behave in a certain way. Originally, UCI Esports anticipated having its Arena function similarly to a South Korean “PC Bang,” or PC café. The PC Bang played a pivotal role in providing young South Koreans, often males, an affordable leisure space outside the home to play video games when South Korea was going through the thralls of an Asian Financial Crisis, spurring what became the catalyst for what is regarded, today, as the birth of modern esports (Jin, 2010, 2020). The fact that the UCI Esports Arena was also a crucial part of the program’s business model was not lost on me. At $4 per hour, students were charged to use the facilities. I remember being slightly shocked at the fees, recalling how affordable South Korean PC Bangs were at about 1,000 Won (the Korean currency) for one hour of use of the computers (or roughly $1 per hour). But prices that affordable were a reality over a decade ago. Regardless, the Arena was heavily used by students, coming in throughout the middle of the day,
and buying dozens of hours of playtime. The PC Bang model appeared to have been working for the program.

However, the UCI Esports Arena was more than a technical space, filled with the latest top-end personal gaming computers and consoles, but operating as a social location for students. Players such as Brandon visited the Arena to talk with friends, hang out with teammates, or spectate games without really competing or practicing. My observations of Brandon in the Arena, often in his social role, may not have been a faithful representation of his other reasons for being at the Arena, like competing with his teammates. I highlight the repeated social uses of the UCI Esports, as Chee (2006) showed in her ethnographic research of South Korean PC Bang culture, to highlight how technological spaces can take on multiple meanings for communities, beyond being the rationalizing effects of competition.

It is within the shifting social and technological arrangements at the UCI Esports Arena that many of the players were trying to understand where they fit in. Even after two years at UCI Esports, for instance, Logan was still trying to navigate in the Arena, around his teammates, and with leadership in a manner that he felt comfortable with. Accepting that the UCI Esports Arena, while the primary domain of the team, was also a public space open to students, as well as the broader public, was a reality that players were constantly trying to negotiate into their understandings.

To the uninitiated, the UCI Esports Arena was a minefield of unintentional offenses. I learned of this when I had planned to first introduce myself to Robert by walking up behind his computer monitor, where the back of it faced outwards towards the center of the Arena. Seeking to find the right time to make my introduction, I peeked around his monitor, while he had been playing, partly blocking his vision as he played. I had felt terrible about having to insert myself
between him and his game. He had darted his eyes to his left, keeping his head completely still, looking annoyed but still focused on his game. Later, I learned that I was not the only person who would end up interrupting the players in this manner. I apologized, given that it was not the norm for me to be so assertive, but I was eager to get his attention, knowing how quickly other players had often left the Arena right after practices.

In describing the blurred context of the UCI Esports Arena, Robert talked about how visitors to the Arena would try to speak to the players during their games by going around their monitors (the very same thing I had done) or by standing behind them in the varsity esports section. Although Robert was trying to be subtle with his point, his comments that “people have to be respectful and kind of know that you’re there and you’re working” could have been easily directed at me. When those boundaries, Robert continued, are crossed, “that’s when it becomes an issue.” Thus, what was once familiar territory for the star players, such as having ownership and control over a given workspace, could no longer be assumed to be their domain.

As much as I wanted to imagine sections between the different areas of the Arena, as one example, the reality is that the dynamics of the space (and the program) were fluid, in flux, and not neatly defined. Rules, policies, or guidelines that appeared to be fixed were also flexible. To some degree, this was what got Logan in trouble—not understanding when he could, and could not, react with the type of unbridled excitement, enthusiasm, and fervor that often motivated the more impassioned players on the team.

With the occasional exuberant outburst, intense first pumping, or slamming hands on the gaming tables, Logan was expressive with his emotions. That enthusiasm, however, ended up backfiring. Teammates voiced their concerns that Logan teetered on being menacing. He was described by some of his teammates as “on the edge,” “ready to snap,” or “hot tempered.” Most
shocking to hear was that one of the players had feared that he could turn violent, or unintentionally “punch” someone. Although I never observed, felt, or imagined Logan as being someone whose actions could be interpreted as threatening, I could recognize how some of the exciting energy that Logan exhibited during times of excitement, or frustration, could easily be interpreted as intimidating. Regardless, the leadership wanted him to control the excitement that was interpreted as threatening by others around him.

Logan could not believe that his teammates construed his behavior as threatening. Having been recruited to UCI Esports because of his experiences with the professional scene, he saw himself as an asset to the program, a person that others could learn from, and a mentor to the younger players. However, after less than a year at UCI Esports, he was being confronted by his teammates about concerning behavior inside the Arena, which resulted in his being benched from “out of nowhere.” The sense of being blindsided by individuals whom he trusted was hard for Logan to accept. He felt angry, confused, and betrayed, and ultimately wanted to leave UCI Esports.

The thought of leaving was a complicated topic to consider, with players who were either reluctant to talk about the subject, particularly when inside the Arena or had redirected around the topic as something that they were no longer considering. When I say that I was interested in exploring the subject of quitting, I was not interested in understanding why players left the program if it included, for instance, having to move away from school for personal reasons, being expelled from school for cheating, or having to take a break from school for financial reasons, to name just a few. Rather, with the grievances player registered, I wanted to understand the tensions inherent in mulling over that decision, how the process of leaving started, and how long it took to execute leaving the program. In that process, I drew on the work of Bergstrom
(2017) who examined why players quit playing video games. As part of her key claims, she argues for the importance of getting the perspectives of players who have chosen, or were required, to stop playing games as part of a broader ontological argument that has largely gone unexamined within games studies.

8.3 Here today, Gone Tomorrow

Although my research centered on players who were active, participating, and contributing members of the UCI Esports program, once my inquiry started, I noticed players who were either reluctant to participate with the program, rarely at the Arena, or had become absent from the team. The first person whom I noticed had a diminishing presence was Brandon. I saw him twice, perhaps, at the UCI Esports Arena at the start of my research, but then he had suddenly stopped showing up around the premises. Other varsity members, several of whom I did not have a chance to meet, had also left the program.

Absences became frequent enough for me to start making notes of players who had stopped showing up or were no longer visible as part of the team. Players leaving indicated a profound disappointment with their experiences as collegiate players. Hearing from individuals who were clear about their decision brought a different perspective to the research—one in which I started off with the view of UCI Esports encompassing, as Victor described, as being the “whole package,” a school that offered the best of both worlds by being a “really good school” and “really good at gaming.”

This was the case with Nelson, a former Overwatch varsity player. I had observed Nelson a few times at the varsity section of the Arena before he had ultimately left the program. I had not imagined that I would have to account for players, with whom I had mentally noted as part of the pool of potential applicants, leaving UCI Esports. Because of how busy I ended up
scheduling myself for my research stays, I made a mental reminder to follow up with plans to do my first interview with Nelson, but I had forgotten. Consequently, while I had not conducted any in-person interviews with him, I was able to watch a few of his games, the interactions he had with his team, and the social connections he made with the UCI Esports staff.

Nelson was on the quieter side, not as visible compared to his teammates. I was always unsure if he wanted to talk. I got the feeling that he was either not interested in the research or generally unwilling to interact with me. When I sensed players disinterested in the research, I would leave the person alone, and perhaps, once more, ask at another time if they would be interested in taking part in the study. Unfortunately, I was never able to do that with Nelson. He had left UCI Esports when I wanted to return to the topic.

About a year after he decided to leave, I re-established contact with Nelson via Facebook. It was the first online interview that I had with any of the players. Nelson appeared far more receptive to talking after he left, perhaps, I thought, because he was no longer with UCI Esports in an official role. Because he was speaking to me in an online context, moreover, the research was no longer linked to the campus, Arena, or locations where he possibly could have felt uncomfortable talking about his experiences. I could understand Nelson’s reluctance to speak openly with me unless he was in the right setting.

My rationale for locating ethnographic observations and research at the Arena, in addition to its being the primary location of where players congregated as a team, was that, at times, players asked if they could hold their interviews while in the competition desks, wanting to take part in my research but also wanting to be at their computers in the varsity section of the Arena. One time that I allowed that mode of exchange, however, I quickly observed how other players were within earshot of the interviews. During an interview with Noah, for instance,
teammates overheard answers they did not like, and one of the players openly challenged the interview by making comments that were intended to correct his statements. After that encounter Noah no longer wanted to hold our discussions inside the Arena and I agreed to move our meetings outside.

Nelson was someone who would refer to me as “sir” during our interviews. I insisted that he did not have to call me “sir.” He moved to the United States at a very young age from South Korea. I assumed that there would be similarities between him and Baron, but these were two very different people. Video Games were a significant part of his life while living in a single-parent household. Joining UCI Esports was a major milestone for him, even if he was secretive about his participation and had not told his family he was on the scholarship team. Once again, I saw what I had seen in my previous research done at RMU and UBC—players were unsure of how to be public about their role in collegiate esports.

With joining UCI Esports, Nelson was excited by the possibility of learning from more experienced individuals on the team. Nelson explained that he “was taught at a very young age that literally everyone older than me should be respected.” When talking about “older,” Nelson was not necessarily only talking about age, but their interactions with the team, and the level of professionalism they carried with them. After only a few months at UCI Esports, disappointment from what he saw as a lack of maturity from peers set in. Nelson sought out players whom he could respect, but that became increasingly difficult. The constant bickering between players became a stressful part of belonging to the team. He did not understand why players at UCI were less disciplined than teams he had previously belonged to outside of the program. Part of the problem was that “in college, people are still too young.” Nelson wanted relationships with
players with more experience, foresight, and maturity, telling me that he “always look[s] up to people who are older.”

The circumstances of Nelson’s leaving UCI Esports differed from others. Whereas some players left to seek out the possibilities of a professional career (Barron, Victor) or to take a break from the demands of being a collegiate player (Elijah), Nelson was stressed because of the communicative demands of being on an Overwatch team. Normally, the unique working contexts, communication practices, and protocols of competitive esports teams have been highlighted as part of the benefits of elite play (Freeman & Wohn, 2018; Lipovava et al., 2018). However, Nelson saw the demands of constant communication on his varsity Overwatch team, as well as his lacking “voice hierarchy,” as he put it, leading to feeling exhausted with the program. While the varsity players repeatedly indicated the work of collegiate esports as being the never-ending balances made between their competitive commitments to the program versus their academic schoolwork, the labor of team-based communications was also situated by Nelson as significant work in college esports.

With the emerging intersections of worker subjectivities, knowledge production, and digital technologies, Lazzarato (1996) first conceptualized digital forms of “labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity” as immaterial labor. Accordingly, immaterial labor represents “changes taking place in workers’ labor processes” with increasing control over “horizontal and vertical communication” (p. 77). In conversations with collegiate coaches, amateur team managers, and the CEO of a major professional South Korean esports organization, I had often heard comments that suggested a “silent team is a dead team.” However, before joining UCI Esports, Nelson explained that he was not required to “say much” when playing with his teammates. The sudden pressure to be communicative as part of the
collegiate esports experience was something he did not understand. As part of his previous experiences with competitive gaming, for instance, Nelson was involved with “multiple tournaments, and multiple seasons of Team Fortress 2, playing with actual teams and friends,” but without his having to say, “a single word.” When I asked him how playing under those conditions went, he explained that everything worked out “perfectly fine.”

During one of the Overwatch team’s practices on my return visit to the campus, for instance, I heard the clashing of voices throughout the Arena. Players “shot called” positions, location, and developments within their games. Screams of “left, left, left!” by one of the players indicated positions, followed up by repeated screams of “dive!” to commence a particular attack, then calls of “76 bottom right” to point to a particular enemy’s locations ended the sequence of calls. Some of the shot callers would constantly repeat themselves, while others would utter single commands and pass off communications to others. From an outsider’s perspective, one could be easily forgiven for thinking that what was being heard sounded like a jumbled mess. Besides parts of the game that were inactive, there was a constant flow of information from player to player, information that was either immediately actionable or referential to the latter parts of the game. Ultimately, it was up to the individual, in that regard, to be cognizant of what is, and is not, relevant information to listen to.

The confidence of the UCI Overwatch team’s shot caller was apparent. Once an enemy was identified, players responded to the call, and executed one of their team strategies. When Nelson was asked to take up the position of “target caller,” he accepted the position, even though he was reluctant to take on a more active role with communications on the team. Lazzarato’s (1996) analysis of (digital) labor continues to be insightful here, pointing out that the emerging “antagonism” between traditional management and a new breed of technology worker demands
that he or she “has to express oneself” or “has to speak, communicate, cooperate, and so forth” in order to be part of a new economy (p. 79).

However, communications alone were not sufficient to make a great team member. Although Nelson’s new position was to call out names targeted, attempts at fulfilling his new responsibilities, in his view, had failed. From what I could hear during some of the team’s practices, Nelson's feedback as target caller was clear, precise, and timed for its greatest impact, but he also tended to be quieter, less dramatic, and far calmer than his teammates throughout the game, lacking the excitement that others displayed. Nelson was aware of these differences, but he also refused to change, stating that “becoming the 3rd loud person on the team would not help at all.”

Nelson was correct that being louder, brasher, and aggressively vocal was not the best way to have a more integrated and cooperative team environment, but the role still required some form of emotional display that could help players filter the informational urgency of his calls. Wiktowski’s (2012) use of a socio-material approach to studying expert play in esports examined some of the communicative practices of high-performance teams, finding that effective communications among teammates were not just about giving accurate spatial-temporal details of one’s position, but, as one of the participants in her study noted, it is also the strategic use of “emotion in your voice” (p. 90). The one time that the players were able to shout, scream, and display a range of emotions inside the UCI Esports Arena appeared to be during game time. There was an emotional component to the job that was performative, but that was not something Nelson could muster the energy to do.

Kuhn et al. (2017) make the argument that modern-day work in organizational settings is constituted, principally, by the exchange of information, where the “working and organizing —
and, thus, ‘doing’ capitalism—is communication’ (p. 28). The difficulties that Nelson went through in trying to develop his own voice on his Overwatch team spoke to the reality that communication is work. At one point, Nelson felt so shut out from the flow of information on his team that resorted to writing a “2-page essay” about what he saw wrong. The coach did respond that he would “try to work on it,” but then, Nelson noted that nothing was taken on board to make improvements or to meaningfully address his concerns. It was apparent that not being listened to or having one’s opinions taken into consideration exacerbated the labor of communications at UCI Esports.

Observing the difficulties that Nelson experienced through his role as shot caller highlighted, and further located, where the labor (as communications) existed within the enactment of esports, but Nelson believed that the surface-level issues that the team was having with communications indicted deeper interpersonal problems that people were having with each other. When Nelson recalled the communicative practices he was accustomed to on previous teams, he clarified that he was not describing relationships with players who allowed him to get away with being silent, unresponsive, or lazy. Instead, those experiences showed Nelson that as a team becomes progressively more familiar with each other’s playstyles, communications become less frequent and more indirect. Where others, from the outside, saw a highly communicative environment with UCI’s Overwatch team, Nelson saw interpersonal issues between team members that were being played out within the game.

8.3.1 Not Being Listened To

Nelson’s morale regarding collegiate esports was low when I met him. One of the primary reasons I kept running into issues when scheduling meetings with Nelson was that I was never able to pin him down right after his practices. As I learned, Nelson purposely left the
Arena right after his games. Initially, I assumed, Nelson left quickly due to his academic responsibilities, but the reality was his frustration working with his team demotivated him to stay around. He explained that his routine was that he “show[ed] up for practice, finished, and left.” Unlike many of the other players, however, Nelson was not necessarily bothered to leave. He managed to cultivate a social life outside of the team. He was one of the few players, for instance, who I saw socialize frequently with the UCI Esports staff and interns.

Although he was the youngest person on the varsity team, Nelson was also one of the more talented players. Rather than being a guiding voice, however, he struggled to have his opinions recognized. While pressure from coaches to be more communicative was a major source of tension, when Nelson did have something to say, he found himself shut out of conversations, explaining that he became frustrated with “having no voice on the team.”

The absence of “voice” was about the lack of control or input players felt when belonging to part of the team. Because Nelson was regarded as one of the more skilled members of his team, he felt that the coach and staff did not think he needed guidance. Just as Robert, Logan, and Barron were regarded as “star players,” Nelson explained, with a slight laugh, that he was also given the title of “superstar player.” This time, the star-like status and recognition were not being granted by Max but by his teammates. I assumed that the distinction of being called a “superstar player” meant more to Nelson because it was coming from his teammates, but it did not.

Feelings of being ignored, or not listened to, resonated with many of the participants. While those feelings started with one’s team, as I explored the topic further, the sense was that concerns were not being listened to by leadership, staff, and even Max. At some point, certain players became cynical about how the program operated, and in some situations, resentful. For
instance, when UCI Esports earned the distinction as a championship program for the 2018 cLoL win, the event also became an example of where players pushed back against how UCI Esports prioritized its goals and its budget.

While the teams were thrilled to finally see the UCI Esports program earn a national championship win, Noah, as one example, questioned the celebratory purchase of championship rings. When Noah mentioned the rings, I was not sure what he meant. At that point, I had not seen anyone wearing UCI Esports championship rings, but I also was not looking out for these items as well. It was during my attendance of the UCI Esports preconference in 2019 that I was able to see the championship rings. Max had treated the nearly twenty invited guests to a local Italian restaurant for an after-dinner party. At the party, I was able to socialize with several people who were not at the pre-conference but were clearly part of the wider group at UCI whom Max had depended upon to build out UCI Esports.

As I sat next to a UCI administrator, we struck up a casual conversation about our pasts. I was able to learn a lot about the guests that had visited UCI for their pre-conference summit. Eventually, at one point in the conversation, the administrator turned to me and showed me his UCI Esports championship ring. I was initially shocked at how large it was. It looked just like a professional football or basketball championship ring, with personal engravings of names on the side, and the UCI logo at the center. I had assumed, when I first heard about the rings, that they were strictly for the players, but the ring was one of roughly twenty-two rings that were given by Riot to the players, staff, and other designated individuals that Max believed were pivotal to the program’s success.

When I first saw the rings, I immediately wondered what the players thought. I asked if I could take a picture of it, which was allowed. I had never seen championship rings made for a
collegiate program before. However, I was also not surprised. UCI Esports believed itself a threat to traditional college athletics (at least on the campus), but Max also wanted to emulate the very athletics culture, institutional practices, and even the congratulatory awards that are beloved in college sports. The existence of the championship rings, however, annoyed players, such as Noah. Technically, although the ring was never purchased by the program, perceptions were that Max bought them. It was seen as excessive, as well as out of place. While there were clear reasons to celebrate the achievements of UCI Esports, and its League of Legends team win, the rings also represented what Noah believed was wrong with the program—that of being overly concerned with its public image at the cost of not listening to the players.

Being not listened to was difficult to handle. Players had a wealth of ideas about how to better the program. Although the star players were the first to have been tapped for their guidance, students who came through the program without that star status were also keen to provide UCI Esports with their own recommendations and feedback. Barron lamented how the program had changed, explaining that, “[t]he first year, they were really communicative with me, and would ask my opinion if this should be done or not.”

Barron was accustomed to being asked for his views on a variety of issues when the program first began, even if his recommendations were not adopted (such as the debate over the positioning of the computers in the Arena). After Barron returned from his stint with Team Liquid, however, he recalled that his input was not as openly accepted as before; moreover, the program became more assertive of what it had expected from him.

This is not to say that UCI Esports refused to hear feedback or input. Rather, as the leadership became more confident about the direction and development of UCI Esports, the program took a more calculated stance in how it solicited information. As one example of how
UCI Esports strategically planned to garner feedback from players, I was invited to a brainstorming session connected with a fledgling North American Esports Federation (NASEF). The session was scheduled for around 11 a.m. in the morning. Fold-out tables were placed near the community corner of the room. A mixture of varsity players, interns, and staff were all sat ready with blank pieces of paper and markers.

One of the staff members informed the group that they were called to the session because NASEF (the high school division of esports) wanted to hold a series of semi-competitive tournaments with a host of different games that are generally more popular in high schools, which included games such as Fortnite, Super Smash Bros., Overwatch, Hearthstone (Blizzard Entertainment, 2011), and Minecraft (Microsoft Corporation, 2011). Sitting at the table were Robert, Nathan, and Nelson, but also students and staff with whom I had also interacted with. The group was required to discuss and describe the competitive modes and formats for each of the games, then to write down their thoughts on how they would run a season on blank pieces of paper.

With four large pizzas, UCI Esports had the undivided attention of nearly a dozen students who possessed a broad knowledge base of some of the more popular competitive video games. The session went on for over two hours, with each of the participants teamed together in pairs. As I watched the session, I walked back and forth behind Max, who stood watching over the entire session, right behind Nelson. Near the end of the meeting, Max placed both his hands on Nelson’s shoulders, a gesture that one would more likely see between a sports coach and his player, perhaps right before they are about to join their team on the basketball court or football field. I remember being impressed by the sheer knowledge that the students had for each of the
games. This was not just knowledge of the game, per se, but how to run an entire season of competitive play.

Evidence of that knowledge was the dozens of A4-sized papers that filled the table at the end of the session, with various instructions written out in markers about possible “8 week” or “6 week” seasons, structured as “round robin play” with a “top 8 for playoffs, lasting a single week leading to a week-long final. The “Smash 4” group wrote on their paper, “more accessible to younger,” along with various ways that the game Super Smash Bros. could be rendered more competitive, but still welcoming to players who may not have significant experience with the game, with suggestions of how “each school decides their own way,” with tournaments that “take walk-ins,” and “random seeding.” This was knowledge, wisdom, and experience that video game publishers would seek when running esports events, and it was here, strewn across a few tables, along with some empty boxes of pizza.

Halfway through the session, I stood next to Max and hinted at how shocked I was that he was able to summon a group of students, both players but also non-players, to dedicate hours to one of his projects. He smiled back, asking me to “imagine how much a market research company would pay to have this kind of access.” He was right, but for all that the students knew about games, the ruleset, or the competitive modes, they lacked institutional polishing when it came to the public discourse about the games. Right in the middle of the brainstorming discussions, one of the students had to be corrected when he said that they could determine winners of each Fortnite match based on “kills.” One of the staff quickly interrupted, explaining that it was not “kills” but “eliminations” when talking about beating an opponent. The student acknowledged the misstep, and for the rest of the session, the use of “eliminations” was deployed in the discussions.
As helpful, interactive, and participatory as the brainstorming meeting was for UCI Esports, the session was an example of how the program oriented the players’ input to be narrowly focused on certain UCI Esports programmatic outcomes, such as having the players and staff provide feedback for UCI’s high school initiative (NASEF). While that was understandable, long-standing grievances from the players continued to be unaddressed. Choosing when, or when not, to listen to aggravated tensions between leadership and teams, Victor summed up his annoyance by telling me of the familiar pattern of having his views repeatedly brushed aside, which started with him “saying something” to leadership, then it “gets processed,” and eventually, “nothing happens, or maybe something happens.”

Requests started off small. For instance, occasionally, I heard from players about how they wanted UCI Esports to invest in backpacks for the team. When I first became aware of the request, I thought it would have been nice for the program to get something as small, but still useful, for the players. Given the consistent output of jersey designs, I saw each time that I was back on campus, I assumed that a backpack would have been an easy request to grant. And yet, the teams never got one. Although the players did not need a UCI Esports backpack, the failure of the program to meet the simple request that many of the players wanted was indicative of larger issues at UCI Esports.

Having the program not follow through on a request for something as straightforward as a backpack, argued Logan, could be forgiven, but for concerns more pressing (such as the growing interpersonal issues on both teams), he could not understand why Max lacked urgency. For example, Noah spoke about his attempts at getting Max to understand the troubling relationship difficulties that had developed among his teammates, problems that he saw coming “from a mile away.” Initially, Noah’s aggravations were directed at the players because of the lack of
commitment directed towards practices, scrimms, and competitive play (a topic that I discussed in Chapter 6). As time progressed, however, Noah’s issues were no longer directed at his teammates, pointing out that he had become “frustrated with [Max] and the organization.” The longer Noah dwelled on the topic of where the program had failed to support its teams, in this case, Overwatch, the more charged his reactions to the questions became.

While everyone appreciated the work and effort that Max put into finding sponsors, partnerships, and connections to the industry, the perceived snubs, slights, or disregard for players’ perspectives colored anything good that the program did. When looking back at how UCI Esports handled one of their more recent Overwatch tryouts, as one example, Noah described the process as “unprofessional.” He was in disbelief when he learned that Zack was not told that he needed to be on campus for tryouts. In a rush to make sure that he would not miss tryouts, Zack explained that he had to borrow cash for tickets to fly to UCI. Noah let Zack stay at his house during the tryout which became an opportunity for the two players to get to know each other. In retrospect, Zack held fond memories of what had happened, perhaps because the outcome was in his favor having made the varsity team. However, Noah was at a point where he no longer could forgive, overlook, or “deal with” what he saw as poorly made decisions by the program.

Charges of not being listened to evolved. Players felt that they lacked control over their aspirational destinies at UCI Esports. Noah believed that the Overwatch team was being treated as secondary to the League of Legends team because it had not won a national championship. And yet, the sense that one lacked control was also apparent even for Victor on the League of Legends team. When Barron decided to unilaterally take a step back from his responsibility as a shot caller, for instance, Victor found himself on the team’s “comms” making the calls by
himself. Victor became so frustrated about the lack of communication coming from Barron, not fully understanding why the program was allowing him to get away with not communicating with the team, that he sought advice from “literally everybody” he could talk to, which included not only his teammates, staff, and team leadership but also the professional development personnel. Yet, Victor felt that his concerns were not being dealt with by leadership. The frustration, as Noah also commented of having “zero control” over his team, had taken root with Victor, who then questioned whether he was squandering his efforts in the program, especially because he was also positioning himself to look for a professional team to join.

Although Noah did not leave the program, the increasing pessimism he held about his involvement with UCI Esports became apparent. During our interviews, he began to speak about a “before” and “after” with regard to his collegiate experiences. When I asked Noah how he would describe himself when he first joined the program, he returned with the description of a “[w]ide-eyed, freshmen UCI boy.” Just like so many of the other players, such as Victor and Zack, he was excited by the prospects of joining a team that trained, improved, and succeeded together. When I had asked him how he felt about himself a year later, he explained, “[p]robably, pessimistic, frustrated. A little bit dead inside.” Noah wanted to leave, but he also could not risk leaving his education. To leave UCI Esports was to forego his schooling, he told me, unless he was to take out loans.

The description of being “dead inside” was revealing to hear, given just how different I had remembered Noah when I first met him. He was one of the few varsity members who was visibly excited about their participation with UCI Esports. I would later see that same kind of zeal with Zack, one of his teammates. It was clear just how demotivated he was to continue through with his time on the team, but he assured me he would. Suddenly, the features of the
program that had been celebrated as a benefit of the varsity program, such as scholarships, were spoken about in purely instrumental terms. No longer did Noah look forward to preparing for the upcoming year of competition. Rather, he wanted to make sure he was just doing the “bare minimum” so that he would not get “kicked off the team.” The goal was to make sure that he was satisfying his role as a player, but, ultimately, Noah explained that “I really don’t want to play. I just want the free stuff. That’s all I am here for.”

The term “burnout” was used by Barron, Peter, and Nathan to describe the overall pressures that beset the competitive players. Noah added that beyond the usual stressors of collegiate esports, being blamed for creating an unstable environment on the collegiate team wore on him over the year, to the point where he intentionally stifled the emotions that animated his involvement with the team. This was not the first time one of the players had described themselves feeling “dead inside.” Barron also spoke of the “zombie”-like existence of also feeling “dead inside” during his time when he was also pursuing his professional career. This was unlike how Barron normally felt, describing himself as someone who used to be “popular,” “charming,” and “attractive.” Likewise, Noah was also someone who also had changed over time. My initial observations of Noah had him characterized as shy and reserved, but just as Logan had been warned to control his emotional exuberance and excitement in the Arena, Noah was also reprimanded to do the same.

Noah described himself as “very passionate” when it came to his love for esports, telling me that he “just really cares” about his team. While he described himself as trying to be “more calm,” the reality is that he had a very hard time with the emotional labor of having to confine himself to a prescribed script on how to behave with his teams, or in the Arena. Noah fed off the excitement that he created himself. When things went well for the team, he was “really
passionate and would say good things,” and when the team failed to achieve success, his reactions would “be the opposite.” There was no nuance to how the more impassioned players at UCI Esports behaved, as Noah detailed, because with one’s interest in video games “comes the emotions, frustration, and happiness and all that stuff.”

As Rojeck (2010) argued, emotional labor is not only the “preparation and application of emotional attitudes and competencies that are commensurate with the requirements of organizations and civic culture,” but it also involves the “labour performance” that calls for the expression of “positive emotions, the repression of negative” (p. 22). The realization that collegiate esports demanded multiple forms of labor, that of intense communicative effort and the suppression of one’s emotional character, and possibly the subordinating of one’s passion for competitive play, was completely unexpected in collegiate esports. To protect himself from what he saw as unfair accusations about creating a contentious environment on the team, Noah ended up shutting down emotionally. Rather than risk himself getting in trouble once again, he explained that the lesson he learned over the year was that he “should not care as much.” If Noah was being asked to repress his passion and excitement for esports, he thought, then what was the point of investing himself into the game or the program?

The disillusionment with UCI Esports was far more profound for Noah. He was prepared to tackle the demands of being a top-tier player. The reason why he was at UCI Esports was to be the best collegiate player possible, but the events that pitted Noah against his team, and from his perspective, Max, were ruinous. Noah felt betrayed that Max had believed his teammates over him for what had transpired with starting the Open Division team (discussed in Chapter 6). Being able to make Max proud was one of the main reasons why Noah was motivated to do well as a
player. As he repeatedly would tell me, that his “number one priority” was to get that “’W’” for Max.”

The role Max played at UCI Esports was important to the players, and not just because he was the director of UCI Esports. Along with wanting to have that “whole package” experience, the players wanted to show their appreciation to Max for playing a crucial part in why they were at UCI Esports. However, not being listened to, being ignored, or having little control over the direction of their future within the program overshadowed the good that Max did. Noah was unsure how, or whether, to trust Max moving forward. The disillusionment felt personal, which was unfortunate to see. Noah considered Max as one of the few adults within esports that he could trust, see as a mentor, and make proud.

Losing that connection with Max was a significant consequence for Noah. Suddenly, being doubted by someone whom Noah respected touched upon familiar territory. This was how he felt during his years in high school and community college, when he tried to convince his parents that esports was a worthy path to pursue, and all that he asked was a chance to prove it to them. Eventually, he was able to win approval from his mother, when he won his first cash-prize money tournament. The win provided Noah with a framework for how to approach his parents about his plans as a competitive gamer. What Noah needed to do, he believed, was to continue to demonstrate the potential earnings he could acquire as a top-tier player. And yet, when it came to applying the same logic with Max, he was suddenly blamed for putting competition ahead of the team, devastating what motivated Noah to pursue his interests in collegiate esports.

Initially, I had not appreciated just how profound that disillusionment had been for players. Either there was a deep sense of hurt, or feelings that Max did not have the players’ interest at the forefront, which were to support their competitive pursuits. Once individuals
questioned Max’s motivations as the director, that started to color almost everything that UCI Esports did. Things turned personal. Significant decisions made by the program were often cast in pessimistic terms. Eventually, as I poked at the slightest of grievances, players would end up confessing to what appeared to have long-held opinions of how they felt wronged.

8.4 Unremunerated Collegiate Labor & Scholarships

The sense that UCI Esports had stopped caring was a feeling that had characterized much of Logan’s tenure at the program. He was ready to stop completely after having been confronted about his behavior. Logan spoke openly about his issues with anxiety and depression. During our talks, he acknowledged the differences between the person he was with me and the person who first entered the program. The language that he used to speak about the personal changes he went through almost painted UCI Esports as a program that was about reform. For instance, when reflecting on the reasons for his being benched, he was self-aware of different perspectives about the reasons, both from himself, but also from the program, stating that the most important lesson he learned was that “he needed to change as a person.”

The impetus for change largely stemmed from Logan’s seeing the team suffer without his input, given his role of being coach and analyst for the program. Reflecting on a question that I had asked about what “concerns” or “anxieties” he had about being part of UCI Esports, Logan noted the “realization” that he should “never be part of a reason why [the team] lose[s].” Logan meant what he said and often demonstrated that he wanted to be someone who was not seen as a problem on the team.

Ideally, Logan wanted to be seen as a mentor to the other players. The age differences among the older, veteran players versus the incoming recruits are large enough for Logan to sometimes feel a bit distanced. Friendships among the star players and the younger cohort were
harder to create. Logan commented on how the age gap contributed to the separation, where he noted that “one out of every three sentences they say is some garbage from the Internet.” The types of connections I observed between the players often had ties to the complementary roles inside the game, but because Logan transited quickly into manager and coach, his relationship with the team differed from that of a player.

Yet, to understand Logan as having only one role was to underappreciate the versatility, experience, and background that he brought to the team. Logan was always willing to help. I saw firsthand, for instance, how accommodating he was to taking part in the research. I never got the impression that I was disrupting his schedule. He was eager and excited to discuss my research, and we would end up spending more than the 60 minutes that I allotted for our interviews discussing subjects that spanned his love for travel, his own academic interests in sociology, and politics. However, perhaps most illustrative of just how far Logan would extend himself to be helpful was the first international trip that UCI Esports took after their first championship win in 2018.

After having secured the national cLoL championship during the early summer of 2018, the varsity team was then invited to participate in Riot’s summer International Collegiate Championship (ICC) in China in August 2018. The ICC offered the UCI League of Legends team the opportunity to play on a global stage against a collection of teams with a much higher caliber of play. The ICC was the type of event that was almost impossible to ignore, with the UCI League of Legends players promising each other that they would invest their summer efforts into preparing for the August 2018 event.

The effort that Logan, and others, placed into that summer to prepare for the China events was extraordinary. At first, Logan had considered forgoing the international tournament, given
that he wanted to continue progressing through his academic year by taking summer courses. At
that point, Logan had experimented with several majors and was not quite settled on what to
study. After UCI Esports had qualified for the international collegiate event, Logan explained
that he “sacked [his] summer to just play.” Moreover, he “ended up turning down an opportunity
to work for Team Liquid as an analyst, and had to cancel three summer school courses that [he]
was prepared to enroll in.”

After the UCI cLoL win, I assumed the players were going to have the summer off.
Preparation for the spring cLoL 2018 finals was intense. While most of the other schools that
UCI played against were done with their finals, the UCI League of Legends team had their class
finals right after they finished the tournament. During my visit, I had tried to carefully plan
interviews around the League of Legends players during my spring visit, cognizant that time
spent with them was going to directly affect their preparations. But the players really did not
have that much time off after their spring quarter win.

Summers were an important period within the academic year for the players. Because of
how busy many of the players were throughout the year, I thought a stretch of a few months free
of college esports obligations was a needed break. However, I learned, it was not. While I had
focused my time during the academic school year (spring and fall quarters) for my research
visits, summer was not necessarily a time that I considered crucial to understanding the pressures
the players were under. The qualification for the ICC, instead, highlighted just how important
summers were to the players. After UCI Esports qualified for the international event, Logan
could not bear to let this chance go by. Reminiscent of the way he used to chase after LCS teams,
Logan repeated a familiar pattern of taking extreme risks on his future for that one last chance of
trying to go professional, explaining to me how “playing a Worlds-like tournament stage is an experience [he] will probably never have again.”

With an academic year that was filled with a growing list of responsibilities, summers were the only “free time” that the players had some level of control over. Depending on one’s goals, summers could be used to fulfill a variety of aims, such as landing a coveted internship that had repeatedly alluded many of the varsity players; seeking out top-tier tournament opportunities with teammates or friends in the hopes of furthering one’s visibility; earning extra money to help offset the financial costs of attending UCI; or participating in one-off events (of which the “one-off” event became so numerous that they could easily fill a summer schedule).

With the ICC events, however, Logan did not want to only have international experience by himself but wanted to ensure the younger players on his team would have an experience that they would never forget. However, taking on a leadership role for the ICC events in China meant incurring more responsibilities. Someone needed to fill a leadership role to help prepare players for the summer event. Summers were usually periods during the year when UCI Esports did not have player support or coaching under contract. Yet, with UCI Esports qualifying for the international event, the team was excited to have many in the program pulling for their success in China.

Given the messiness that can define how summers are prioritized, Logan took on the responsibility of helping, along with the League of Legends coach, to train the younger players to prepare for the special summer event in China. The idea of giving up time, effort, and possibly income to help the program was nothing new to Logan. Throughout our time spent together, Logan had, either explicitly or implicitly, noted that he “was working for free” at UCI Esports. What he meant by the comment was related to how the structure of financial aid is handled
across many public higher education institutions. Logan explained his financial situation accordingly:

My family makes a little under 44[K] a year. They haven’t been paying for anything that I have been doing since I was 17 or 16, I think. I have been sustaining myself off of League as a full-time job since then. I had to move out when I was 18 ‘cause I got kicked out. So, the scholarship did in fact affect my financial aid in a way, that before I got the scholarship, I was getting 19 thousand dollars of grant money from UCI, a full-ride. Once I got the scholarships, they literally just minused $5,600 from my grant. And did it like that. It was like I got no money. It also affected my subsidized loans, the amount of loans I would get from the state as well. Since I was getting a scholarship. So, it hit both ways.

Usually, the topic of scholarships was never discussed much in-depth by the players. When I brought up the subject of financial aid, it was normal to check that players were receiving it as a means of confirming that they could participate in my study. My assumption going into the research was that scholarships benefited the players equally. The reality was that students with greater financial aid needs, whether that came from merit-based or needs-based grants and scholarships, were not seeing extra money added to their total aid package. Hence, when Logan spoke about “working for free” for the previous two years for the program, what he was arguing is that he was not seeing any financial benefit (that of being “paid”) from his esports scholarships to participate in the program.

Although Logan was resentful about what had become a pattern of his “working for free” for the program, he also kept finding himself caught up in projects that repeated the same dynamic—and volunteering as a mentor for the ICC event in China was a particularly relevant example of the regret that Logan ended up harboring. Because Logan occupied several roles
within the program, starting off as a player, then moving on to being an analyst, coach, and team captain, he brought to the program multiple talents, which ended up becoming valuable in preparation for going into China.

I had previously discussed the topic of going to China with Jonathan. He was excited about traveling there for the championships. For many of the players, this was their first trip outside of the United States. While the players noted just how much they had enjoyed the trip, the team was already aware of how hard the ICC tournament was going to be for them to win. Before arriving in China, Logan had already started scouring for information about the other teams. Jonathan noted that “it was really hard to research China players,” explaining that,

If you didn’t play in China, then it would be really hard to know how to research Chinese players. They use different websites to look up players. Applications and stuff. They had a thing to look up players, but we didn’t know what it was or how to use it or whatever. Obviously, the coordinators and translators didn’t really want to disclose how you find China players, right. It’s their teams.

Playing a collegiate tournament in China presented the UCI varsity players with an entirely new dynamic. Not only was it the first time to travel to a different country, but it was twinned with the pressures of having to deal with a tournament under the context of international competition. I had watched the tournament with keen interest, just learning of the competition only days before it had begun. Rather than seeing familiar North American university names, such as Utah (Utah), Miami (Ohio), Harrisburg (Pennsylvania), or Texas (Austin), I was seeing schools such as Chunnam Techno University from South Korea, The University of Porto (Portugal), and the Federal University of ABC (Brazil). The mix of international schools was slightly shocking to see. None of the schools looked familiar, nor did I know anything about there being a “program”
at the international institutions. I remember wondering whether Barron felt at ease with the tournament, given that he believed that collegiate programs in North America were severely underdeveloped. Thus, if that was his opinion for North America, which has invested far more in college esports than what was invested internationally, I wondered if he viewed the ICC as an easy win?

It was not. UCI Esports ended up losing early in the ICC bracket. However, the effort needed to make sure players were prepared for the international event was illustrative of how roles, responsibilities, and labor in collegiate esports have yet to be clearly defined—and even more so when put into an international context. For instance, beliefs about there being collegiate team VODs available for review were not the type of “lateral surveillance” (Andrejevic, 2004) practices made available by all teams participating in the international event. While gamesmanship and deception are found at all levels of competitive play in esports, both in the East and the West, the UCI Esports varsity players had felt incredibly disadvantaged prior to their matches in China. The competitive environment of international collegiate esports at the ICC created an atmosphere where it just felt harder for teams to learn about each other. Details, such as how some of the Chinese collegiate teams had different in-game names versus their stage names made it difficult for opposing colleges to look up information about the players on data collection websites.

This created an uneven playing field between teams, one where, as Jonathan commented, “it was really hard to research [them]. On the flip side, it’s really easy to research us, because our stuff is really transparent.” At the time of the ICC events, UCI Esports had recently created their Twitch channel and were actively creating videos and content about the program, which included uploading collegiate matches and tournaments regularly. The attention paid to content and
broadcast was part of the ever-expanding scope of the varsity program (discussed in Chapter 6) that included the creation of a small, but active, content creation team. The goal of the content team, however, was not only to highlight UCI Esports program offerings, but also to provide exposure to the individual collegiate players, who often did not have the time, energy, or knowledge about creating their own “brand,” and even questioned its usefulness because it would just ultimately take away time from playing their game. For instance, when reflecting on how one-sided the exposure of UCI Esports was during the events in China, Jonathan commented that the team “was kind of thinking” about hiding their own information as a strategy.

Concealing tournament and match information, however, was not a strategy that UCI Esports took seriously. Instead, Logan put the onus on himself to make sure that his team was well informed about the international teams they were going to compete against. Information about potential opposing teams was, perhaps, one of the more important methods that UCI Esports used to prepare, and ultimately, win its 2018 championship before their qualification to China. In China, he knew that the same investigative esports data collection strategies that were used successfully in a North American league could be helpful internationally. Logan discussed the tactics that went into the searching and gathering of data on the various collegiate teams at the tournament. Here, he described the investigative process of getting information about the Australian team once UCI was in China:

[T]he process varies from team to team. For example, the Australian team, all of their account names were pretty similar to the account names they used on their broadcasted matches when they played their nationals. So, you would look at whatever account names they would use in nationals, sometimes they don’t bother to change the account names, so
when you go on OP.GG or U.gg and switch the server to Australia and Oceania and look at their VODs and copy whatever account names on their VODs. If those don’t work, then the next thing I would do is I would look at the top 200 ladder on the Oceanic Solo Queue server, since OP. GG and U.gg also show ladders. So, look through the ladder, control-find. Maybe type the first half of the account name you saw in the stream, then there’s a good chance you will find something through there. If that doesn’t work, if you were able to find one or two of the players on the roster through an account name on a stream, you could look at their match history and see what players they are playing with. More often than not, they play with their own teammates. So, you would be able to find a couple of other people through those first accounts.

Taylor (2020) provides important context to the continued practice of “athlete-as-analyst” seen in esports, stating that “in collegiate esports, the separation between athletes and analysts—between those who produce and those who collect, analyze, and operationalize the data—has not (yet) taken effect” (p. 137–138). Players, such as Logan, appeared to fully epitomize the non-separation between, and among, roles that UCI Esports encouraged with the expansion of the program. Part of the motivation, Taylor (2020) argued, was that the application of data within the college esports appears to be part of the ongoing institutionalization, and legitimization, effort to “push past limiting conceptualizations of what constitutes ‘sport’” (p. 138).

However, Logan could not shake the feeling that, perhaps, “athlete-as-analyst” was just another way for UCI Esports to utilize his talent to promote the program without compensating him for multiple forms of expertise. In addition to being an analyst, the events at the ICC illuminated just how broad his esports data surveillance practices were to provide the team with intelligence about the other teams. The quote provided by Logan about the different search
techniques he used for collegiate teams from different counties illustrated just how much investigative work it takes to track down each team, and that just included teams from the English-speaking part of the world.

The work continued to be daunting. Weeks before the event, Logan was doing rudimentary translation work, moving among Chinese, Japanese, and Korean language websites, trying to reveal any useful information that would give the team some idea of the university players they were going to go against. Consequently, before Logan was able to play the role of the team’s athlete-as-analyst, he needed to gather the data first. Where Logan could not summon enough information about the international teams, he described how the data gathering process continued once the team was in China. Logan explained,

Other methods could be just asking around. That’s been one of the most effective ways. Just asking every team there. What information do you have? This is what we got. This is what we are willing to share with you. We ended up working a lot with Australians and Russians in gathering VODs of Vietnam, Korea, and China. The Western world ganging up on the Asian world

Hence, Logan found himself committed to a far wider range of responsibilities once he was at the ICC, taking on the job of being someone who needed to search, sort, translate, and archive various forms of data and media to prepare for the tournament, operating more in the role of an archeologist, and collegiate esports data trader, before that of an analyst at the beginning of the events. Logan was happy to take on the various responsibilities, and to some degree, he was the only person who could have accomplished the task. On the one hand, he was already accustomed to doing data collection as part of his other job in helping to create League of Legends “guides.” He would spend “every evening” for “2 to 3 hours…shifting through unusual websites gathering
information” for each team. He noted that “it wasn’t that big of a deal” to add a couple of hours to add collegiate data into the existing paid work he was doing for another company.

On the other hand, Logan reminded me that the summer work he did was not financially compensated by the program; he had taken out loans and passed up other work opportunities. He understood that he was operating within his capacity at the 2018 ICC events as a player. At the same time, his contributions outside of the context of being a player (i.e., information gathering) were pivotal to their preparation to be at their best. While he acknowledged, as Taylor (2020) described the “hybrid subjectivities” that constitute the emerging roles of collegiate esports players, Logan also wanted those roles to be recognized and remunerated. Perhaps because of his age, experiences, and perspective, Logan was keenly aware of the labor he was providing for the program, and consequently how the program treated him in return. Whereas, with other players who were torn between going professional or staying in school, Logan had settled the question—he was not interested. Instead, he concentrated on how he could make collegiate a better space by supporting the students and players around him.

8.5 Seeking Solidarity

Towards the end of my research, I continued to engage with several of the players after they had graduated from UCI. I followed Robert, Nathan, Noah, Logan, Barron, and Jonathan post-graduation, curious to learn about their perspectives once they had graduated from school. While I had originally demarcated the “end” of my research as the last time I was on the UCI Esports campus (October 2019), I still kept in contact with participants through Facebook. Continuing the study outside of the context of the program brought a new dynamic to the research. For instance, individuals who were normally not openly reflective about their time at
UCI Esports started to think about their time in the program. This was most apparent with Jonathan.

Throughout our interactions at UCI, Jonathan was silent on most issues that stood outside of going professional and being a top student. As discussed in Chapter 5, I was introduced to Jonathan as the “unicorn” because of the exceptional talent he possessed, both as a student and as a player. Jonathan wanted to graduate with perfect scores, meaning a GPA of 4.0. While he held incredibly high goals for himself, he described the drive to perfection stemming from a sibling rivalry with his brother. On his team, Jonathan was someone who was well-liked. The veteran players viewed him as a little brother—someone who was young, innocent, inexperienced, but eager to grow at any opportunity given.

During the most recent interview held with Jonathan (July 2020), however, he opened up about his experiences at UCI Esports, and for the first time, had been openly critical of the program. As discussed in Chapter 5, players new to UCI Esports had a difficult time cultivating their own voice when providing feedback. Part of the worry from Robert, as one example, was that feedback could be misconstrued as criticism. Jonathan shared those concerns as well, telling me that he “can’t criticize people whom I like.” However, the manner in which UCI Esports handled events over the summer of 2019 had triggered doubts in Jonathan about the way the program had failed to think about the players’ well-being and concerns.

During the closing weeks of the spring quarter, for instance, Max insisted that the players take a break over summer. Jonathan appreciated that the program was thinking about summers, and the need for there to be delineated “off” and “on” seasons. As a way of ensuring that the players took “time off” from their relentless schedule of competitions, Max took staffing and
coaching off the payroll for the summer. However, Jonathan was annoyed by what he saw as mixed signals being sent about what Max expected from teams to do with their summers.

While the UCI Esports leadership wanted the teams to take time off over the summer months of 2019, before everyone left for their summer “break,” Max had informed the team that they were expected to be ready to play in the West Coast Invitational tournament on their return for the fall of 2019 quarter—a tournament that UCI Esports hosted previously in 2018, with the finals held on the campus (UCI versus the University of Colorado Boulder). Players on the League of Legends team were worried about Max’s plans for the invitational tournament in the fall because people were already committed to using their summer to prepare to join amateur teams and therefore did not have the time to practice for both events.

During the interview, Jonathan expressed that he “definitely felt the program had some to blame” for the situation. He rehearsed the possible reasons why Max wanted to hold the West Coast Invitation for the fall of 2019 when he knew that the team was not going to be prepared. Trying to put himself into Max’s position, Jonathan walked through each step stating,

I am not really sure what he was thinking actually. If we want to host this tournament, it’s the best thing is if we win it. Our team has to be ready, but our team hasn’t been practicing so what’s the point of holding this thing that is going to make us look bad.

To hear Jonathan be critical of UCI Esports was unexpected, but he had clearly been thinking about what had transpired in the summer of 2019. Even in this rare moment of outward criticism, he would hint at where he could have been more cognizant of Max’s plans. For instance, I had asked Jonathan “[w]hen did you know about the west coast invitational?” to understand how far ahead, or not, did the team know about UCI’s plans for the tournament. Jonathan quickly returned, saying, “I probably should have expected it because we did the same thing the previous
year.” I remember thinking that this was the type of explanation, perhaps excuse, I was accustomed to hearing from Jonathan. He was trying to lay some blame back on himself. Yet, at the same time, the interjection did not feel the same.

For instance, Jonathan’s concerns about holding the tournament only “if we win it” or UCI being hosts under the conditions that “[o]ur team has to be ready” were valid points to raise, but he also had other reasons to have been upset for what he saw as disregard shown for the players’ priorities. Specifically, the summer of 2019 was important to Jonathan and Victor because they were trying out for Scouting Grounds (a path-to-pro structure operated by Riot). Normally, Jonathan would have conceded to the program’s plans, and prepared for the fall tournament, never wanting to be seen as a burden to his teammates, or UCI Esports. However, the summer of 2019 was different. Jonathan decided to be intentional about his commitment to going professional in 2019. Jonathan did not necessarily want it to be assumed that he could always be counted on to support the program’s ambitions. Rather, Jonathan wanted to have his interests, desires, and goals acknowledged. One of those goals was to favor esports over his academics if he was given professional opportunities in esports that were particularly valuable.

Having the extra time after graduating from UCI provided Jonathan room to reflect on issues, with how UCI Esports treated the teams during the summer of 2019 triggering in him new ways of thinking critically, and less selfishly, about his place at UCI Esports. For instance, he regretted not speaking up for players, offering helpful advice about how to improve the conditions of the players, or not thinking about the “bigger picture” of collegiate esports. And yet, when asked why he found himself limited with what he could do, Jonathan stated that “I didn’t even know what change I wanted.”
Logan was the only other player I was aware of who was consistently thinking about the “bigger picture” of esports. What that “bigger picture” meant for Logan often revolved around being valued as part of the team, and perhaps more importantly, finding solidarity (support) with teammates. However, Logan found deeper connections with teammates difficult to forge. For instance, although Logan belonged to a cohort of “star players” that made up the inaugural League of Legends team for UCI Esports, within the first year of his tenure in the program, that cohort was complicit with getting Logan was benched.

For players who faced the prospect of being benched, the act could be devastating to one’s confidence, or it could be a catalyst for positive change. As I discussed in chapter 6, Pizzolato’s (2005) concept of the “provocative moment” is useful here in the analysis, where she argues that certain life experiences can lead to “high levels of disequilibrium propelling them to reconsider their goals and/or conception of self with the intention of possibly acting on their reflections” (p. 629). For instance, I was at UCI Esports in the aftermath of Noah’s benching. Attempts to change his behavior were to avoid causing trouble by keeping his “head down,” with little energy or time in understanding how he should have managed the situation. Noah ended up graduating from UCI, still taking part in the varsity program, but he left resentful for having been blamed for causing trouble.

Alternatively, Logan took his benching seriously, making efforts to correct what the program wanted to see in his behavior (especially when he was in the Arena). He became friendlier with staff, more aware of his habits in the Arena, and encouraging with teammates. He was especially appreciative of the second chance that Max gave him to stay on the team, with the benching providing him with the “the biggest realization” that he “need[ed] to change.”
Having gone through being benched, Logan turned a critical eye, not necessarily away from the UCI Esports program, but towards the relationship with his teammates. Logan explained that during the events that led up to his benches, which included “routable meetings” and “testimonials” by individuals whom he “didn’t know the names of” or “talked to before,” Logan wondered where were his teammates in all of this? He felt alone, picked on, and targeted. While feelings of betrayal were painful, the provocation focused Logan’s attention on the larger questions about why there was a lack of solidarity from the players on his own team.

The question of solidarity in collegiate esports is an important point given that the topic has escaped meaningful engagement. As often happened, Logan became the first individual with whom I broached issues not commonly covered by other players, but towards the end of the research, Jonathan joined that discourse. Because the topic of solidarity was novel, new, and unfamiliar territory to the sensibilities of many of the varsity players, discussions were underdeveloped and exploratory, but Jonathan was already hinting at his being sensitized, as he stated, to the “bigger picture” of collegiate esports.

Eventually, Logan told me that he went to each of the players on his team, “one by one” asking them, why didn’t you step up for me?” Although Logan’s approach to the situation was an honest, straightforward, and genuine attempt at finding out answers, I wondered if confronting the players individually was the right choice given the already existing tensions about his behavior. What he learned from the players, as he explained, was that they were essentially afraid of speaking up:

All of them said, “We had no idea this shit was going on until it happened. [Max] didn’t ask any of us for any opinion. He just listened to the people who told him to bench you and decided to bench you. All of us regret it happened. We were afraid.” They had been

259
frozen by fear and [to] not say anything about it because of how abruptly it happened out of nowhere that it could happen to me.

Early in the research, I picked up on the fear of players speaking back at the program. The worry that something like this could “happen to me” resonated, reminding me of what Robert shared about the consequences of when he spoke up about wanting to go back to school while he was playing for a professional team. What appeared to surprise Logan was the revelation that players were fearful about reprisals were they to defend him, as if some of the darker and unsavory parts of professional esports had found its way into college esports.

If Jonathan was unsure, as he explained, about the “change [he] wanted” in collegiate esports, Logan had some ideas. Surprised by the fears his teammates expressed about advocating on his behalf, Logan was relieved to hear that their hesitations were about the fears of speaking up. Rather than there being animus against himself, Logan was pleased to learn that his teammates were “dumbfounded by the organization” and how they were acting. The players were fearful that if “he [Logan] wasn’t doing anything [wrong]…[he] was performing well…and he just got removed. What is going to happen to us?” At the very least, Logan thought, he had a set of friends that he could return to.

Logan’s benching took place early in the program’s debut, being the first major example by UCI Esports in disciplining one of the players. Accordingly, what Logan learned was that the star players could “not rely on the program to make informed decisions” and instead, needed to “rely on each other.” Logan believed that so long as the friendships the players had between themselves were strong enough, they could address issues that were deemed unfair or out of the power of anyone, individually, to handle alone. As Logan states, this became a “core value” of his at UCI Esports.
And yet, that core value was constantly put to the test. Logan wanted to find ways players would learn to advocate, support, or defend one another. Logan believed that one way around the perceived failures of the program to protect players was to further strengthen the friendships that were created when the team began. Harkening back to the reasons that brought players to UCI Esports in the first place, as Zack explained, was the hope players could “eat, sleep, do everything together” as a team. The promise of practicing, socializing, and interacting among fellow peers was a significant reason (the “whole package”) for why many of the players selected UCI to begin with.

I could see what Logan was wanting to achieve. If players were not necessarily speaking up for themselves, they could find help in others. I first noticed how it may have been easier to develop one’s own critical voice by orientating it towards helping friends or teammates. At the start of the dissertation (Chapter 5), for example, I examined how Robert was reluctant with being vocal about his criticism of the program. Lessons from his professional past, he argued, taught him that how transparent, open, or upfront he was with concerns inside an esports organization could jeopardize his spot on a team.

However, even for players who did not have the professional experience to draw from, the act of developing bonds with other players by looking out for their own good was a result of the strong friends the players did form with each other. For instance, Victor, after a year in the program, was curious about turning professional and wanted to learn about the process to get that started. Even though the fiasco that was Barron’s experiences with Team Liquid was relatively well known to his teammates, the ensuring policy decisions to make sure that professional teams were prevented from unilaterally tempting college students to leave school for the professional
scene (the [Barron] rule) was not. Victor was angered that UCI Esports had not discussed the rule with him before signing his UCI contract, stating that

In our contracts for UCI, if you want to talk to an org, then you have to talk to Max.

That’s what we had in our contracts. But there was nothing like that. So, for me, that was like a slap in the face. I was like, “That’s not transparency at all.” I felt like I was being jailed by an org.

While Victor described the situation as a “slap in the face,” upset because the rule was absent in the contracts that the players signed, he translated his own frustration about the [Barron] rule to Jonathan. Because Jonathan was generally someone who did not question authority, teammates around him became protective of him. Everyone on the League of Legends team knew that Jonathan had been preparing, since 2016, to make the move to turn professional, but once the [Barron] rule became public among the team, as Victor described it, “I felt like that was a really messed up, especially not just for me. I was more mad for [Jonathan] than anyone. Jonathan wasn’t as mad for himself as I was for him. I was pissed.”

The development of interpersonal relationships, along with intrapersonal and epistemological ways of knowing, offers an important avenue for learning. This was true for Victor, whom I observed at UCI Esports as someone who enjoyed the team’s social settings. The relationship between Victor and Jonathan was strong. Because Jonathan was so likable, almost a little brother to many of the players, even if they were also the same age, it was easy to want to look out for his best interests. Consequently, rather than focusing attention on oneself, redirecting it to helping out friends became a way of building confidence in speaking back. This core value I saw Logan try to cultivate within his team, believing “as long as we[teammates] are
good enough friend, it doesn’t matter how little respect we get from the program, in terms of our opinions. We can make it work.”

However, I also observed how efforts to create solidarity were repeatedly undermined. I use the term “undermined” not to convey that Logan’s teammates were intent on sabotaging relationships but to highlight how the priorities of players were not always aligned. Perhaps the clearest example of the tensions and disunity between the solidarity with one’s teammates versus the individual pursuits of the players happened when opportunities to engage with the professional esports industry were presented—as had taken place with Barron in 2017 when he left to play for Team Liquid.

When Barron left UCI Esports to pursue the professional dream, while his teammates ultimately supported his decision to leave, they were also aware that it would have season-ending consequences for his collegiate teammates. UCI Esports, for example, was no longer able to field a team to participate in the 2017 cLoL championships, ending UCI’s year-long season in collegiate League of Legends. Barron was also torn by the decision to leave, knowing the consequences this would have both on the program and the players. And yet, I repeatedly heard players express that if given the choice, as Elijah detailed in Chapter 7, to play for his favorite team, he would be ready to say, “peace out” to UCI Esports. They did not blame him.

Because professional opportunities are never really planned for, but often appeared without warning, players were placed into situations where they are required to make rash decisions about their futures. In Barron’s case, for instance, when he was scouted by Team Liquid, he needed to make sudden and impactful decisions not only about whether to turn professional but also to drop his major, leave teammates, and quit school. The reality was that several players faced conditions where they needed to place the promise of a professional
experience above the future of the program, where the very act of going after the dream of a professional career was disruptive to everyone on a collegiate team.

8.5 Summary

In this chapter, I examine the theme of disillusionment as a means of explicating, and mapping back to, the guiding question of “How do collegiate esports scholarship players understand their experiences as gamers in relation to their academic and personal development in college?” The process of disillusionment began with the realization that one’s competitive prospects for becoming a professional player through participation at UCI Esports were increasingly questioned. However, that sense of disillusionment grew to include experiences with collegiate esports, where the sense that one’s opinions, feedback, and concerns were not being taken into consideration either by the esports program or by teammates.

The topic of quitting or leaving college esports, at the time of this research, has had no treatment in the relevant literature, but the perspective wore heavily on the experiences of the participants in the research. Unexpectedly, the communicative labor (Lazzarato, 1996) of collegiate esports burdened varsity players as they realized that the competitive experience of collegiate esports fell short of the imagined collegiate experiences of team play. Rather than having a cohesive team-based experience with peers, as Nelson from the Overwatch team noted, the lack of responsible and mature players whom one could learn from was pointed to as a significant drawback of staying in the program.

However, the process through which players experienced disillusionment was not entirely negative. As I have discussed throughout the dissertation, highlighting various themes (agency, historical turn, contested identities) that provided participants in the research the space to work
out how they would reconcile the dissonance, tensions, and frictions of being a collegiate esports player, disillusionment becomes the last touchpoint in the analysis.

Consequently, I draw on Bergstrom’s (2019) work on quitting or leaving video games to highlight parallels to what I found in the research and to ask if it is possible to leave. Logan, a member of the cohort of star players, discussed the drawback of having taken on a scholarship position when he first joined UCI Esports. Rather than gaining financially from his work with the program, the structure of his financial aid package ended up nullifying the entire offer of aid that UCI Esports made to him. Because scholarships have been central to the promotion, and popularity, of college esports programs (since their advent with RMU in 2014), to have a player question the effectiveness of the underlying financial incentives of the scholarships struck me as a revolutionary act, thus raising questions about the visible and invisible inequalities inherent at multiple levels (access, infrastructure, and participation) within collegiate programs in the first place.

Players spoke of the different, and indirect, ways in which labor was extracted from their participation in esports. Because of the administrative and funding logic that governs financial aid packaging that ultimately rendered his scholarships null, Logan regarded his time at UCI Esports, during which he was a scholarship player, as essentially “working for free.” While this was true, the nuanced relationships that Logan established between himself and UCI Esports, from a scholarship player to paid employee, were complicated, allowing him to develop a fresh perspective about his evolution as a player/coach/analyst in college esports. In other words, he was working for free, but that dynamic, under a tacit understanding by Logan, was also “[s]imultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited” (Terranova, 1967).
In certain cases, the internal struggle, and conflict, between wanting to participate in an environment where labor is seen as not being fully compensated versus withdrawing oneself completely from the program became critical to the landscape of how individuals experienced personal development and growth. Players battled with this uncertainty when they were called upon to draw from skillsets that were not necessarily part of their jobs. Logan, for instance, knew that his skills with esports data gathering and analysis, that of being the “athlete-as-analyst” (Taylor, 2020), were tremendously valuable to the team’s success, but he also understood that this type of labor, hybrid in nature and therefore easily recruited into other forms of work, sat tangential to his role as a player.

As covered in chapter 7, Elijah’s return to UCI Esports after a semester break presented him with a pause to reflect and reconsider the terms of his return. In this chapter, I revisit the act of players leaving, and then returning, within the context of the theme of solidarity, which aided the question of how players understood their development in the program. Through the research, I was able to follow players as they transitioned out of UCI Esports by graduating, where the time, space, and leeway to think openly, yet critically, about their experiences yielded important insights. In particular, Jonathan, who was originally given the nickname the “unicorn” in the program, reflected that he wished he had been better informed about the politics, structure, and governance of UCI Esports so he could help or advocate for his teammates, but his complete focus on just playing the game, as he admitted, “blinded him” to the broader issues within college esports.

Finally, Logan, in his capacity as a paid employee on the team, similarly touched upon the idea of returning to support his teammates but in the capacity, as wished for by Nelson, of being a mentor to other players. The notion of having Logan, who admitted he was also a “work-
in-progress” himself, on the team as someone with experience, wisdom, and age was important to his development as a player. It was because of Logan’s presence as a non-scholarship player and worker that the theme of solidarity was attuned toward understanding that the players could operate as a collective to have their voices heard.
CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

Taking part in a collegiate esports program involves a complex, and ongoing, negotiation among a series of demands that are shouldered by its participants. This study set out with an ethnographic focus to explore how college esports players traversed intrapersonal, parental, academic, and career challenges as members of a competitive collegiate esports team. In the research, I followed the varied paths taken by members of UCI’s Esports teams, trying to unravel a still-emerging digital gaming culture, both grassroots in origins but institutionalized in its aspirations, of college esports. Ethnographic descriptions and investigations about how players navigated their various responsibilities constituted a central part of the research aims of this study. With that goal in mind, I intend for readers to come away from this dissertation with the understanding that collegiate esports entailed a constant negotiation between the hope and promise of opportunity versus the unquestioned uncertainty and ambiguity of one’s future in esports.

While the research was principally focused on the participation of UCI Esports “scholarship players,” I also brought together perspectives from UCI Esports staff, interns, student workers, and program leadership, as well as considering internal programmatic changes (Amazan-Hall et al., 2018), relationships with video game developers, and the creation of collegiate esports policies (“Restrictions Regarding College Players,” 2020) to provide a richer account of what it means to be a collegiate esports player. Moreover, because of the longitudinal nature of the research, the inquiry also traced the institutional changes that UCI Esports went through in its inaugural years as a program, especially during the global COVID-19 pandemic starting in 2020, which left lasting impacts on the varsity esports program.
Throughout the research, I had on-the-ground access to a program over the course of two years that provided me with important insights into my research. I learned and observed how careful, measured, and yet uncertain it was for the leadership to develop a program as ambitious, forward-thinking, and innovative as UCI Esports. It was through my taking a step back, reflecting throughout my inquiry, and integrating numerous sources of data that sensitized me to themes relevant to the everyday experiences of the collegiate players. The themes that emerged in the research included the sense of agency possessed in the buildup to becoming players for UCI Esports, the historical turn/redemption for why players participated in college esports, the contested identities that were challenged as part of being a collegiate esports player, and the growing disillusionment/solidarity within UCI Esports as the players neared the end of their tenure in the program.

9.1 Agency, History, Identity, and Disillusionment

I take up the call to put “in conversation” leisure studies with game studies (Bergstrom, 2018, p. 4) by examining the committed orientation to leisure and gaming within the context of a collegiate esports program. Throughout this research, I engaged with participants who exercised a serious orientation with their activities as college esports players. Stebbins (2007) has defined the serious leisure experience as one where participants normally exhibited six characteristics of seriousness vis-à-vis a leisure activity, which include perseverance of the individual, the articulation of a career, and the identity of the practitioner, each of particular importance to this study.

Throughout the research, I return to the frame of the “Crossroads” (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012), drawn from the theory of self-authorship as a means of understanding how varsity players negotiated the significance of their being in a collegiate program at UCI, and the
demands placed on them to fulfill their roles at UCI Esports. Seriousness was nearly always a fundamental part of the lived experience of participants in the research, a perspective that helped frame the formative years of skilled, competitive progression before attending UCI Esports, but also continuing to do work in guiding understandings of how being serious in collegiate esports was also constituted.

With my initial research question (“How do collegiate esports scholarship players articulate commitment, effort, and dedication to their pursuits with esports?”), in Chapters 4 and 5, I examined the role that agency played in answering the question of how players were able to express and display their dedication to skilled development, and how that aided the players to be serious about their competitive play. The path I traced with the players showcased how one’s committed disposition towards esports, while foundational to the research, was not linear, defined, nor settled. Rather, seriousness, as arranged within the context of the UCI Esports program, was always negotiated, contingent, and situated (Law, 1993), according to the personal changes and goals of the individuals who belonged to the team, as well as the institutional changes and evolution of the program.

While the principal aim of this dissertation was to examine the tensions, demands, and uncertainties that constitute the lived experience of being a collegiate esports player, mainstream assumptions about participation in collegiate esports have often been contextualized as happening in the present (or future). Yet, players also repeatedly turned away from a forward-facing interpretation of their reasons for participation in the varsity esports program, looking instead to the past as part of a crucial framing for their involvement in the program at UCI when strategies, workarounds, and approaches to balancing the demands of one’s academics responsibilities and gaming interests began (Aquilina, 2013; Kristian, 2017).
For the participants, things were simpler before UCI Esports, where the only concern players recalled was a focus on the “core activities” (Stebbins, 2014) of playing games for the sheer enjoyment of competition. Participants in the research looked back fondly on the slightly shambolic, informal, and grassroots environment of amateur play that they had formed with peers, one where the progress and development of their formative careers were also under their control and direction.

In chapter 4, I highlighted the recursive paths taken with the serious leisure orientations of the players, where individual skilled play alone did not fully account for how players articulated competitive development. Rather, it was strengthened by the work of fostering supportive relationships with family members who backed their children’s serious leisure activities with video games (Gillespie, Leffler, & Lerner, 2002; Lamont, Kennelly, & Wilson, 2012).

Because the expression of skilled development was never in isolation from one’s family, and was often situated within the home, after a certain point, individual acts of proficiency, skill, and merit in gameplay (Paul, 2018) alone did not explain the totality of the work of collegiate esports. Rather, the work of collegiate esports entailed the pressures of not only being an excellent student in school, along with having to be an exceptionally skilled player, but also drew on the interpersonal labor of establishing relationships and sustaining emotional work (Rojek, 2010) between parent and child that was invested into over years to convince family members, most often parents, of the viability of esports as an industry and potential career path.

Thus, the ability to take seriously one’s efforts in competitive play, beyond individual effort and determination, eventually called upon the recursive, and mutually beneficial, relationships within one’s family. While each of the varsity players was able to push, extend, and
exert efforts that crafted skilled expertise, after a certain threshold, those efforts were
constrained, and one’s ability to articulate seriousness was eventually aided by leaning on social
and parental relationships.

In Chapter 5, I build on the themes of the historical turn, where UCI Esports was seen as
redemption and a means to correct the past. Accordingly, the dissertation contributes to situating
the sociological analysis of collegiate esports within an already established context of
international, networked, gendered, and institutional canon of early esports scholarship (Chee,

Specifically, central to the dissertation was the grounding of the qualitative inquiry into
the context of the UCI Esports program. While participants in the study believed UCI to be the
“whole package”—an opportunity to go to a UC school that is a “really good school, and it’s
really good at gaming,” players also viewed the varsity program as redemption—a second
chance to revisit, correct, and account for personal mistakes made in the past. In a volume of
ROMchip: A Journal of Game Histories, Partin and Bull (2021) ask the question “what is esports
history a history of?” The question is relevant because so much of what is given attention and
visibility by the public and popular media about collegiate esports is often one-directional and
future-oriented in its outlook.

Perhaps the biggest surprise of my findings, then, was how I was consistently redirected
away from looking forward in the research, and instead made to incorporate the lived
experiences of the past into the analysis. The historical perspective shared by participants in the
research about their redemption through collegiate esports was an important theme reinforced by
a group of students known as the “star players.” Their reference to the past informed feelings of
personal responsibility to mend the broken relationships between themselves and their parents.
Repeatedly, players wanted to use their time at UCI to return to the past of unmet, or failed, promises to live up to parents’ expectations.

The question about the history of esports asked by Partin and Bull (2021) was turned back onto the participants and adds a more nuanced layer of understanding to the initial research question that I posed in the dissertation about ways in which players “articulate commitment, effort, and dedication” to esports. I did not focus on the past with the intent of fitting collegiate esports into a grander narrative or timeline, but to pick at the intimate histories, often unseen, between collegiate and professional esports to understand why the UCI Esports program was especially important.

What this dissertation highlights as a key finding as part of that historical turn, then, is that skilled expertise developed by the players became a mechanism to rectify, and address, past trauma and emotional pain that was brought into the collegiate space by having some of the veteran players return to a university or college setting. While the players articulated that they faced the pressures of having to balance the expectations and demands of a lifestyle typically seen by traditional athletes in college, the need to rectify the historical hurt of one’s family and parental expectations became an integral part of using their competitive expertise to mend the fractured relationships.

At UCI Esports, the varsity players confronted a series of contested identities due to the evolving mission, structure, and scope of the program. The appeal of being a collegiate player at UCI stemmed from the “whole package” option of having the best of both worlds, and consequently, not necessarily having to choose between one’s commitment to academics versus their aspirations in esports—the ability to play both ends and assume dual roles—with the option to pivot when the participants felt it was the right time. These findings support previous research
on the tradeoffs made around one’s collegiate esports identity, highlighting the continued ambiguity (a sense of pride but reluctance) of openly staking out identification as a collegiate esports player due to the judgment of peers (Kauweloa & Winter, 2019).

In chapter 6, however, I explore in the research a counter dynamic: The UCI varsity players were ready to push back and demand more from the varsity program to assert their categorical identity as dedicated competitors. Leading with the research question of “How do collegiate esports scholarship players understand their experiences as gamers in relation to their academic and personal development in college?”, I explored the consequences of players challenging the impositions of contested identities confronted as a lens to explore personal development of the participants in the study. Because UCI Esports expanded its programmatic offerings (Amazan-Hall et al., 2018), taking on tasks, projects, and plans that sat beyond its competitive mission, the varsity players countered efforts to redirect resources away from the program’s primary mission of competition by either openly rebelling against the rules of the program or finding workarounds to find time to compete on their terms. The results were that participants were catalyzed to seriously consider when, how, and to what degree they realistically had the power to assert themselves as agents of change in their competitive collegiate careers.

For players, time at UCI Esports was also intended to help with discovery, exploration, and confirmation of a potential career as a professional player that has often been black-boxed and shrouded in unfamiliarity. The esports varsity program was seen as a means of reducing the precarity that clouded the path to being a professional and the uncertainty associated with building up the “networked careers” that are vital in esports (Witkowski & Manning, 2018). However, rifts between the leadership and the players over what activities (an array of services,
projects, and plans that spoke to the distinctive character that UCI Esports was seeking) should be given priority created frictions over the question of who ultimately had control over one’s aspirational, instrumentalist, and competitive identity as a collegiate player.

My longitudinal analysis showed that while competition remained a core “pillar” of the program, the organizational mission and focus of UCI Esports went through changes that enlarged its scope (including bystander training, inclusion and diversity initiatives, a Summer Girls Camp, workshops, conferences, gaming festivals, and professional development) to a degree that entailed redirecting the program’s focus away from replicating institutional know-how from conventional sports (Abanazir, 2018; Summerly, 2020) to one where the boundaries of UCI Esports blurred between a nationally competitive esports program, on the one hand, to a program spearheading a cutting-edge hybrid esports and education curriculum at the post-secondary level, on the other (Scott et al., 2021).

Accordingly, addressing the research question on how players understood their development in relation to their experiences at UCI Esports, I took a constructivist approach (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012) used to illuminate, foreground, and recognize players’ efforts to assert, then reconcile, their interests within the UCI Esports program. Because the varsity players were frequently exposed to a discourse and framing of their being “student-athletes,” the players assumed their aspirations as competitors would have the full support of UCI Esports.

However, the rejection by UCI Esports to conform to the players’ expectations created tremendous dissonance, and a fractured reality, that the expression of one’s identity as the consummate collegiate player, as well as directing a future with professional play, was never guaranteed by belonging to the varsity program. The assumption ever since the inaugural year of UCI Esports was that once players were ready to pivot towards a choice (that between academics
or player), they would have the full support of the program. Thus, at a time when a cacophony of perspectives, representing interests from higher education, educational technology, to video games companies, competed (and still do) over the future of collegiate esports, the identity of a collegiate competitor was ultimately circumscribed, and threatened, by a program that was also busy looking to find an institutional identity for itself.

Thus, an important contribution of Chapter 6 illuminated the decision-making processes (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012) players navigated once threats to their identities were known. Because the research aim of the dissertation was to examine the intersecting interpersonal, social, and cognitive pressures entailed by being a collegiate esports player, even if participants spoke of the excitement of joining an esports program, flush with expert training, infrastructure, and mentorship, the reality was that the dream of a professional, or semi-elite, a career in esports was an unrealistic prospect for many of the UCI Esports players. The findings of that harsh reality forced the more impassioned players to completely rethink, and create further meaning, about the years of dedication invested into esports.

Lastly, the dissertation examined the sense of disillusionment that overcame certain participants in the program, where expectations of having a more fulfilling competitive experience, along with closer relationships with teammates, had been largely unmet. In relation to the final research question of this dissertation, unexpectedly, among the list of demands that needed to be juggled, players included whether they would quit UCI Esports. Thus, just as momentous, and significant of a decision it was to join UCI Esports, so too was the decision about whether to leave the program.

The use of a co-constructivist approach revealed a deeper analysis of the research aims—among the tensions, uncertainties, and demands entailed with being part of the UCI Esports
program, navigating whether one is going to quit or leave the program became a reoccurring question in the research. For players who were clear about their leaving UCI Esports, the decision presented a level of clarity and finality that many players wanted.

The topic of leaving, or quitting, however, has had little to no academic attention within the domain of esports research. Because this dissertation breaks new ground in exploring the topic within the context of college esports, the analysis acknowledges that “quitting” was a far more complex act than just walking away from the team. I was motivated to examine, as Bergstrom (2019) noted with her research about “non-participation” with playing video games, whether it was ever true that players could ever stop playing for the program? Of course, players did. However, walking away from the varsity program depended on how well someone could remove themselves from the social, technical, and institutional entanglements that constituted the structure of collegiate esports on the campus.

It was that in-betweenness of leaving and not leaving, however, that motivated and enriched the analysis. On the one hand, the sense of disillusionment was significant. The topic of unrecognized and unremunerated labor moved players to lament the realities that exist within collegiate esports, where individuals are called upon to work multiple roles without explicitly having that work compensated. On the other hand, the unwillingness to leave, abandon, and forget friends, peers, and teammates in that space inspired the players to reimagine how they wanted to reengage in the program, often within the context of being mentors for younger players. Consequently, it was within that reimagining, or solidarity, that I saw how players were generating a new set of meanings for their continued participation in college esports.
Limitations

UCI Esports at its Height

While UCI Esports presented a unique location for the chosen context of the dissertation, the limitations of the study also relate directly to the restricted applications of the findings to other varsity esports programs—except, possibly, for the most “developed” programs. UCI Esports stood as a highly cultivated environment of support for esports that was an outlier among the growing list of collegiate programs nationally.

I conducted my research at UCI Esports at a time (2018-2020) when the program was the object and attention of tremendous institutional interest, support, and backing. What made UCI Esports unique ranged from being a program that was situated within a system of other highly reputable research institutions, to operating a robust organizational structure that had over 20 individuals (from students, interns, paid staff, players, and professional development staff) reporting to the head of the program, to commanding an inaugural budget that stood roughly at “$1,000,000 of committed funds” from partnerships with technology and video game companies (UCI eSports Business Plan, 2016).

Not only was UCI Esports unique in the level of support offered, but the timing of the research caught UCI Esports during a “golden era” of programmatic expansion. Accordingly, the findings in the research need to always be interpreted within the context of just how unique, and advantaged, the UCI Esports program was in comparison to collegiate esports nationally. In fact, the UCI Esports program of the 2016-2020 period is one that no longer exists because of the restructuring that happened because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the original leaders that I had included as part of the research—students, interns, and staff—left the program, partly
due to the significant blow that COVID-19 delivered to the program’s financial support via the Arena.

**The Centrality of the Esports Arena in Research**

While the longitudinal research allowed me to engage with the players, staff, interns, and students within the context of their work environment inside an ever-evolving site, such as an esports arena, a richer account of the lived experiences of the players could have been seen outside of the context of the Arena. I became aware of the limitation of principally situating the analysis within the Arena once I had understood that interpersonal tensions on the team meant that the esports Arena was not just a technological space where “things happen,” but where social realities were reflected. As common with spaces that are infused with social, community, and relational meanings (Elkington & Gammon, 2015), the UCI Esports Arena was used by the players both as a geographical space for competitive purposes, at certain times, and for particular social and community interactions, on others.

While the esports Arena was central to many of the interactions of the teams, research that takes on multiple sites as part of the fieldwork, which can include different domestic settings such as apartments, homes, and bedrooms, could have enriched the analysis. Although I had written of the significance of the players’ domestic environment in relation to their evolution as competitors in Chapter 4, I was not able to have those discussions collaboratively with parents. Instead, the interactions that I had with the families on the UCI campus tended to be happenchance and piecemeal, scheduled when parents were going to be at UCI Esports, limited in duration, and a one-time event. I would have preferred to have included home visits as part of the scope of my fieldwork, although aware that research situated within the home can present unique methodological challenges, especially when it involves younger participants (Adcock,
2016). However, by having part of the research situated away from the Arena, interactions could have been more nuanced, open, and deliberative to explore what complex feelings existed between parent and child with regard to esports as a career.

**Outside the Academic School Year**

The study was focused on specific time frames during the academic quarters (spring and fall) when the players would be in school. As I discovered in the research, however, limiting my on-campus visits to the academic quarters curtailed some of the analysis to a time when players were largely focused on their schooling and esports activities, and missed the importance of how summers were an important time utilized to think about the direction being taken with their careers. Rather than being a time off, as discussed in Chapter 8, I highlight the fact that summers, by virtue of being the only time participants could pursue interests in esports outside of the context of their collegiate activities, represented a time of the year that crystalized the impact of decisions made to either concentrate on one’s school or esports interests.

As I discussed in Chapter 8, for a championship program such as UCI’s, the academic calendar year becomes a domain of control for the varsity program, due to a host of obligations, both related to team tournaments, but also to the broader program mission. Consequently, where pockets of unaccounted-for time did exist, it was highly coveted because it allowed the players to pursue several different goals, both dealing with their prospects in esports, but also with the everyday responsibilities of being a student (grades, credits) or securing financial security opportunities (summer work). Because of my focus on the spring, fall, and winter quarters of the academic year at UCI, I was unable to apply the same ethnographic focus and effort to a period that could have provided further insight into the stark decisions that needed to be made during this particular time of the year.
Where were the Women Players?

Throughout my time at UCI Esports, the leadership, staff, and faculty were able to execute important, groundbreaking, and forward-thinking initiatives unforeseen in the collegiate space. As I discussed in my rationale for selecting UCI Esports as my field site, I highlight the unprecedented participation, from clubs to task force, of women in the program. Even with the efforts that a program, such as UCI, had with generating the needed attention to diversity and inclusion (Amazan-Hall et al., 2018; AnyKey, 2016; UCI Esports, 2017), the absence of women in player roles at UCI Esports stifled the research. For individuals whose work is intertwined with the creation, running, and sustaining of programs, that there continues to be a lack of women who have shown interest in joining a more structured “varsity” program is nothing new and continues to frustrate practitioners and researchers who work to make sure diversity is kept as the fore of programmatic development. In a Vice News article entitled College esports are trying to go co-ed, but trolls might ruin everything (Parker, 2017), the director of RMU Esports provided an early warning to everyone about the one-sidedness around gender participation in its formative years, stating that “[y]ou always see stats on gaming that say 50 percent of gamers are now women—but that doesn’t translate into esports.”

Before my research at UCI Esports, I had anticipated there being women players, but throughout the research, men made up the entirety of participants on the teams. To some degree, things have continued to stagnate (Taylor & Stout, 2020), or have become worse. In 2015, I met one of the first women players to have been on a collegiate scholarship varsity team. However, her tenure on the team was brief, as she sought to fulfill other supportive roles, and subsequently left as a player (Kauweloa & Winter, 2019). Having to pivot from a player to a support/managerial role is something that is not uncommon to see in the collegiate space, and
ethnographic data like this would have only enriched the analysis given that the dissertation was focused on the tensions, demands, and junctures of major decisions made as collegiate players.

Moving Forward

The direction for future research in college esports should further explicate the motivations, desires, and uncertainties associated with the still-emerging grassroots, organizational culture, and institutions of digital gaming on college campuses. As discussed in Chapter 2, collegiate esports is embryonic as a topic of serious academic inquiry. It largely draws on the broader foundational work from games studies scholars who have traced a path of work exploring the grassroots and community-driven aspects, but also the mutual shaping of technology present in early competitive communities and practices (Chee, 2006; Taylor, 2009; Taylor, 2003; 2012; Witkowski, 2012a).

I hope that this dissertation spurs future work in college esports research, honoring those existing research traditions by examining the boundary work that illuminates evolving contours of what college esports research represents, where it sits in relation to the broader canon of literature in esports, and what opportunities exist with academic inquiry to provide novel approaches, questions, and context to the field.

When looking to the future of what could be an exciting, and possibly fertile, area of research, I argue that a productive path forward needs to build on questions of agency of the players—both as competitors, but also as individuals who are still developing identities, perspectives, and politics about the world. Frequently, as this Kotaku article’s headline shows, the intersection of games and social justice issues of “Keep Your Politics Out of My Video Games” (Hamilton, 2013) emerge in the media when digital video games become the objects of expressions for political, social, or national urgency. Whether implicating the developers, the
players, or the industry itself, video games are profoundly political, social, racial, and gendered (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Gray, 2020; Voorhees & Orlando, 2018).

Collegiate esports, equally, is a political space. With collegiate esports programs developing nationally in a piecemeal, fragmented, and uneven fashion, researchers need to heed the who, where, and under what context are programs (colleges and universities) being selected for study. In this research, while I argued that the motivations for my selecting UCI Esports were driven by its rationalist drive to be a competitive powerhouse, only a year a later, changes to the scope of its mandate increasingly took on (gender and racial) diversity in esports, with the inclusion of traditionally marginalized players (women and minorities) and attempts to address equity issues with access to high-end gaming technologies.

During one of my last interviews with Max, the director of UCI Esports, he reflected on the global pandemic and the significant impacts COVID-19 had on his program. Much had changed in just two years, but perhaps most impactful was the loss of most of his original staff. Reflecting on the matter, Max believes that the combination of being away from each other, physically, and the trauma of witnessing the significant social and political events (such as George Floyd’s death with the #BlackLivesMatter movement) during the summer of 2020, had ultimately burned out some of his most talented, caring, and involved staff at UCI Esports.

The social and political unrest had caught the program off guard. Thus, when thinking about a future stream of research in college esports, I would like to see greater political and social justice engagement with how issues of race, gender, income inequality, and economic justice, to just name a few, become integrated as part of the collegiate esports experience.

Before concluding the chapter, I want to draw attention to the broader role of governance in collegiate esports in relation to the dissertation findings. Currently, there is no unifying
governing institution in North America similar to the NCAA that provides policy guidance for programs. While completing my research visits to UCI Esports, the NCAA addressed the question of its involvement, after a two-year fact-finding study of the collegiate esports landscape, by determining that they would “table the topic for an indefinite period” (Smith, 2019). The NCAA was never a central topic of concern for the players on the UCI Esports team, and yet, from the players to the leadership, the need for guidance was apparent throughout the research.

Even with the NCAA removing itself from governance consideration, the question of whether the NCAA should be an organizing force in collegiate esports continues to galvanize discussions about the future of college esports. As I discussed in “The Emergence of College Esports in North America” (Kauweloa, 2021), however, the community of collegiate stakeholders initially remained divided about the presence of the NCAA in esports. Although the NCAA was acknowledged as having the administrative knowledge to guide the development of esports, there was a reluctance to accept governance by an institution that has been implicated in a range of controversies, from creating the condition of a heavily commercialized environment in college athletics, the intense athletic demands made on the players, to the lack of recognition of athletes’ work as unpaid labor (Clotfelter, 2019; Hawkins, 2013; McCormick & McCormick, 2010).

While I observed that my informants at UCI Esports were reluctant to accept the NCAA as a governing body, the need for accountability, guidance, and direction was apparent. Where the director of UCI Esports acknowledged mistakes made, the creation of broad-sweeping policies indicated that UCI Esports took seriously the need for guidelines that protected players, as well as the program, and to engage video game publishers with those changes. The absence of
an umbrella-like, rules-governing body, so far, has meant that the changes have been enacted in a piecemeal fashion. In the case of UCI Esports, for example, I observed how one of the most successful policies endorsed (the “[Barron] rule”) in collegiate esports was partly the result of how much of a public scandal Barron’s absence was for UCI Esports. In that case, changes were swift and impactful because of the key personal relationships that the director of UCI Esports was able to personally draw on at Riot Games to enact changes need to be made. The “[Barron] rule” is now part of the official LCS ruleset (discussed in chapter 7), providing the needed protection for all schools with collegiate programs. However, would those changes have happened as consequentially with another program—a program that lacked the visibility, anticipation, and support that UCI Esports had received?

Considering my dissertation’s findings and observations, I return to the discussion about the relevance of having a governance body back at the negotiating table to discuss what I see as topics that are crucial to address. In the absence of women in this study, and others—see Taylor & Stout (2020)—this research continues to provide evidence of a lack of women player participation in college esports. In addition to a lack of women player participation, however, the research also revealed the missing continuity of women who were already in the space. At the end of my research, I learned of the exit of all the women leaders at UCI Esports. Often, the collegiate community can point back to its origins to highlight important women who have been central to the creation of key video games and esports clubs on college campuses, and Angela, who I met initially as the Arena coordinator and had moved up the ranks to be the Assistant Director at UCI Esports, was certainly part of that canon of women collegiate esports leadership. She was one of the few women who I saw make the important transition from a student into a hired leadership role after she had graduated and maintained influence in the program.
In many ways, the UCI Esports program that I selected as my chosen case for research no longer exists. UCI Esports represented significant moves forward for women in esports, offering the first compressive inclusion and diversity task in college esports (Amazan-Hall et al., 2018) by working with AnyKey (2016). Women at UCI Esports undergirded changes that were foundational to some of the most forward-thinking initiatives that still operate across a variety of programs. However, the unique set of students, staff, and players that had made up, and created, UCI Esports had either all graduated or left. The mirage of a program that was once central to my research leaves only traces of a past that was fundamentally shaped by women. I point back to chapter 6 with the creation of Heidi’s varsity esports calendars as an example of the relics of women’s invisible labor that has been crucial to UCI Esports. While Heidi disagreed with me about the importance of her work, with calendar files buried away in her computer, the example was illustrative of the larger reality that much of what women have done in collegiate esports needs to be resurfaced, preserved, and institutionalized.

Finally, An NCAA governance body should also take into consideration that collegiate esports players come into their positions with a fluid sense of their identities. In my research, the self-perceptions and understandings of what it meant to be on a varsity team or varsity player were frequently questioned, accessed, and re-evaluated in light of programmatic changes. Unlike what has been researched with traditional student-athletes, the question of one’s identity in sports had raised concerns about how athletes experience premature “identity foreclosure” (Ryba, Stambulova, Ronkainen, Bundgaard, & Selänne, 2015) or “role engulfment” (Gayles, & Baker, 2015), as students may end up leaning heavily on, or prematurely identifying with, their sporting identities to the detriment of their academic ambitions. Consequently, what I identify in this dissertation is not only the complex and nuanced ways the collegiate esports players have
approached their identities but also how those identities were increasingly placed under pressure, to be foreclosed on, from outsiders to have the players framed as “student-athletes.”

For administrators, educators, and parents, the framing of the players as student-athletes was an initial attempt to cognitively, but also institutionally, understand how to situate the players within the structures, and logic, of a university to be legible to the system. As I discussed in Chapter 6, the legal designation of students who play sports for a university as “student-athletes” draws from a controversial and problematic past (Comeaux, 2019) that has tried to elude defining students who play sports for a school as employees. This research further embeds that analysis of esports player identities into broader discussions about governance. What has been brought forward about the internal negotiations in which collegiate esports players are involved is a tendency to favor, or to lean into, characteristics that foreclose quickly on normative sporting identities of the self. This was perhaps most evident in my study during the time I spent with Barron, who, throughout the research, spoke of his being at UCI Esports largely for its competitive focus.

However, the dissertation’s findings on the identity work of collegiate esports players highlight that premature foreclosure is just one of several considerations in which identities can complicate the experiences of the players. Specifically, I argue how either a loose affiliation by players, between extreme pride and guarded acceptance of their collegiate esports identities, (Kauweloa & Winter, 2016), on the one hand, versus novel forms of “hybrid subjectivities” (Taylor & Stout, 2020), on the other, would need policy guidance in accordance with issues related to unremunerated, or unacknowledged, labor in collegiate esports. As discussed in Chapter 8, Logan felt compelled to serve as a mentor to his teammates, and the program found the hybridity of his skill sets to be extremely useful. Consequently, while Logan felt incredibly
useful to the team with his multiplicity of talents, he saw himself underappreciated in his role in the program. Thus, as Bauman (2005) explained, the effect of hybridity, on the surface, is largely about “mixing”, but the undercurrent that animates this mode of “being-in-the-world” is actually about “separation” (p. 29). Hybridity, in which collegiate esports players find new meaning through the dualities of one’s social and technical expertise can, thus, operate as a mechanism through which ambiguity, precarity, and exploitation became easier avenues to explore (Chia, 2021; Murgia & Pulignano, 2021).

While at first glance, the topics that I have motivated in this discussion—about the intentional effort to raise the continued visibility and longevity of women in collegiate esports, along with a thoughtful look at how identity is communicated, shaped, and articulated as part of a still-emerging and yet-to-be-defined digital (e)sports culture—may appear unrelated to each other or the broader college sports landscape, these are topics that are also deeply familiar to the NCAA. Based on the findings in the research, I argue the need for a governance body that, while cognizant that college esports introduces a new set of relations between “athlete”, “sport,” and the increasing technoscience links to digital technologies, sees the continuity between the existing attempts, history, and work needed to improve the living conditions, sense of agency, and empowerment of student-athletes/players’ rights, and how that should extend to a novel set of (undetermined) subjectivities that do not hold the same set of assumptions about institutionalized sports.
Appendix A: Summary of Games Noted in This Work and Paths to Professional Status

Two popular esports games in collegiate esports are League of Legends (LoL) and Overwatch. Both video games offer players a team-based competitive environment, with each team defending or destroying a target. The game League of Legends (LoL) is one of the more popular esports titles played by millions (estimated at nearly 150 million players in 2022) (Spezzy, 2022) of people around the world. Created by the video games publisher Riot Games in 2009, LoL is a top-down “MOBA”, or multiplayer online battle arena game, that pits two teams of five people at opposite ends of a map with the goal of either team destroying the enemy’s base. Individuals select one of several roles that can include over a hundred unique characters (or “Champions”) with sets of powers. Alternatively, the video game Overwatch is a more recent addition to the list of esports titles that have also garnered popularity around the world. The game is regarded as an “FPS” (first-person shooter) title, created by Blizzard Entertainment (a subsidiary of Activision-Blizzard) in 2016. While both video games represent premier examples of professional esports, the creation of the video game Overwatch marked the first time that a publisher had expressly wanted to create a video game intended to be accepted as an esports game.

For both titles, a similar structure around the global ambitions of Riot Games and Activision-Blizzard has created vast competitive empires that sit across the Asian, North American, and European continents. For League of Legends, the League Championship Series (LCS) represents the apex of competition in North America, where winners of that tournament are afforded the opportunity to enter Riot’s global tournament called the Legends Worlds Championships (or just “Worlds”). Over a decade of holding large-scale and global competitions
has created tremendous expectations among amateur players, fans, and also aspiring professionals to turn their competitive leisure pursuits into a career.

While the journey into the professional ranks has usually lacked structure, video game publishers have understood the longevity that esports provides to games and have invested more into creating guidance on how to become professional. For both titles, that process begins with the “ranked” mode that players enter as beginners. Through ranked play, the players climb the game’s ladder system, accumulating points and ranks. For League of Legends, the highest rank is referred to as “Challenger”, and for Overwatch, “Grandmaster.” The progress of players through ranked play, at the early stages, depends on automated matching to organize teams. However, the decision to turn professional requires players to divert attention away from ranked play (with strangers) and to find a more consistent set of teammates to train with.

Making it into the professional ranks of League of Legends or the Overwatch League (OWL) becomes an exercise of making sure one is visible to the relevant amateur teams. The transition from playing “solo queue” with a set of strangers online to one that requires a reliable set of teammates represents a significant step forward in taking that path to professional esports seriously. The publishers of both games have created pathways that help them to identify developing talent. For Overwatch, however, the creation of the OWL as an esports league was intentional, where the trajectory from amateur to professional is meant to instill a sense of continuity and stability. Unlike any of its predecessors, Blizzard intentionally created an esports title, given that the league planned for the creation of a minimum guaranteed salary for the professional players from international teams in North America, Europe, and East Asia and a “home-and-away stands” experience in different cities for fans.
Because of the instability that has characterized the transition from amateur to professional in esports, publishers have created structures to help guide the progression from one level of elite play to another. For both League of Legends and Overwatch, the process looks similar—the publishers draw from the elite ranks (“ladders”) of the game to filter out players who are not just experimenting with the “Open Division” system that the Overwatch League created but to allow up-and-coming talent to be discovered. The key to the Open Division is the access that the OWL wanted to create for anyone who has a copy of the game and who has advanced up the ranks inside the game. Given that the OWL was the first esports league with intentions to make this a sustainable and core part of the Overwatch franchise, the league created Open Division that led to the “Contenders Trial,” which is a testing ground for the various development teams to allow them one final link into the professional OWL.
Appendix B: Interview Guide

Before commencing with the research, I inquired into demographic backgrounds of the interviewees. Questions asked to gather information on age, ethnicity, gender, and education (present year at university).

**Background questions:**

1) Could you tell me about your gaming history? When did you start playing? What is your major? Why did you decide to study this topic? Where did you grow up?

2) Could you tell me about your family? How involved are they in your life at university?

3) How did you find out about UCI’s esports program? What did your parents and family think of it?

4) What would you describe as enjoyable in being part of a collegiate esports program?

5) What would you describe as being *less* enjoyable in being part of a collegiate esports program?

6) Could you tell me about your interest in video games? What got you into gaming? Do you identify with being a “gamer?” Do you play games with family and friends?

**RQ1: How do collegiate esports scholarship players articulate commitment, effort, and dedication to their pursuits with esports?**

7) Would you say you have become a better person, in your perspective, after having experienced being a collegiate esports player? In what ways?

8) How has being a collegiate esports player shaped the person who you are today?

9) What is the social life of a collegiate esports player like? Do you have a new set of friends now? How important are your relationships with your fellow teammates?

10) What was your journey like in arriving at where you are now, as a scholarship esports player?
    a. What were some major milestones for you as a collegiate scholarship player?
    b. What were some of the obstacles you faced as a collegiate scholarship player?
RQ2: How do collegiate esports scholarship players understand their experiences as gamers in relation to their academic and personal development in college?

11) Why did you select this college to attend?
   What did you expect it to be like to be a college student here?
   Are there ways in which your expectations have been met or not met being here?
   What are your plans when you finish college?

12) How would you describe the nature of your involvement in college life?
   What has been some of your most memorable or significant experiences so far?
   Could you tell me about some of the challenges you’ve encountered?
   a. If not mentioned: Ask to talk more about how he or she would describe their involvement in the esports program?
   b. What were some memorable or significant moments from the esports program?
   c. What were any challenges? Tell me more about how you felt about that situation?
   d. Would you consider these moments and challenges meaningful to you?

13) Who/what are your support systems? Have you had interactions with people you perceive as different than you? Have you had to face any difficult decisions?
   a. If not referenced in the answers above: In what ways do you find support within the UCI esports program? Who do you depend upon for support?
   b. Have you had interactions with people who perceive you as different because you are an esports scholarship player?
   c. Have you had to face difficult decisions or situations due to being an esports scholarship player? How did you react? Why did you react that way?

14) Has there been a time when what you wanted and what others wanted from you conflicted?

15) Have you been in a situation where you struggled with doing the right thing? What was the best or worst thing about that situation?

16) How do you think coming to college has affected you? Thinking about your overall experiences, what did you gain from college this year?
   a. If not mentioned above, what did you gain (how did you grow, change) from being in the esports program this year?

17) How do these collective experiences, and the way you have interpreted them, shape who you are right now?
a. If not mentioned above, how has being a collegiate esports scholarship player shaped who are you now?

18) What are the consequences or implications of your “x” year in college year?
   
   a. for how you think about things?
   b. for how you see yourself?
   c. for how you relate to others

19) How has your first (depending on the student) year experience helped you with where you would like to be next year?

20) What are your ambitions or goals after you finish college?
Appendix C: Consent Form (Sample)

Consent to Participate in Research Project:

The College esports Experience: Gaming, Identity, and Development

My name is Nyle Sky Kauweloa. I am a Ph.D. student at the University of Hawaii at Manoa in the Communication and Information Sciences program. The purpose of the study is to investigate how collegiate esports players (competitive personal computer (PC) and console gamers) conceptualize their own gameplay within the context of leisure and student development. I am asking you to participate because you are a collegiate esports (competitive) gamer at your university and are 18 years old or older.

Activities and Time Commitment: If you participate in this project, I will meet with you for an interview at a location and time convenient for you. The interview will consist of 20 open-ended questions. It will take approximately 90 minutes. Interview questions will include questions such as, “What would you describe as enjoyable in being part of a collegiate esports program” and “What did you expect it to be like to be a college student here?” I will audio-record the interview so that I can later transcribe the interview and analyze the responses.

Benefits and Risks: There will be no direct benefit to you for participating in this interview. The results of this project may help to understand how esports (and competitive gaming) is understood by mainstream culture. I believe there is little risk to you in participating in this research project. You may become stressed or uncomfortable answering any of the interview questions or discussing topics with me during the interview. If you do become stressed or uncomfortable, you can skip the question or take a break. You can also stop the interview, or you can withdraw from the project altogether.

Privacy and Confidentiality: I will keep all information in a safe place by keeping notes and audio recordings physically locked away on my transit back to Hawaii, keeping the data on me as I travel. Electronically, the data will be stored independently of a personal computer, or cloud-storage 3rd party service. Only my University of Hawaii advisor and I will have access to the information. Other agencies that have legal permission have the right to review research records. The University of Hawaii Human Studies Program has the right to review research records for this study. After I write a copy of the interviews, I will erase or destroy the audio recordings. When I report the results of my research project, I will not use your name. I will not use any other personally identifying information that can identify you. I will use pseudonyms (fake names) and report my findings in a way that protects your privacy and confidentiality to the extent allowed by law.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this project is voluntary. You may stop participating at any time. If you stop being in the study, there will be no penalty or loss to you.

Questions: If you have any questions about this study, please call or email me (Nyle Sky Kauweloa) at nsk@hawaii.edu or phone # 808.679933. You may also contact my adviser Dr. Jenifer Winter at jwinter@hawaii.edu or phone# 808.956.3784. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the UH Human Studies Program at 808.956.5007 or uhirb@hawaii.edu.
If you agree to participate in this project, please sign and date this signature page and return it to:

Please keep the section above for your records.
If you consent to be in this project, please sign the signature section below and return it to Nyle Sky Kauweloa

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
Tear or cut here
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**Signature(s) for Consent:**

I give permission to join the research project entitled, “The College esports Experience: Gaming, Identity, and Development”

Please initial next to either “Yes” or “No” to the following:

_____ Yes  _____ No  I consent to be audio-recorded for the interview portion of this research.

**Name of Participant (Print):** ___________________________________________________

**Participant’s Signature:** _______________________________________________________

**Signature of the Person Obtaining Consent:** _______________________________________

**Date:** ____________________________
References


[Brandon's] comment. (n.d.). https://i.imgur.com/t7lEm5K.png


UCI Esports. (2020). About. [UCI Esports](http://esports.uci.edu/about/)


