CHAPTER 10.

SO YOU WANT TO TEACH AN ESPORTS CLASS? LESSONS AND STRATEGIES FROM THE FRONT LINES

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ABSTRACT

This piece, which is a written version of what was delivered as an extemporaneous talk from notes, offers an overview of how Miami University launched the first (as far as anyone has found records, anyway) academic course on esports and built from that moment in 2016 to now. The campus now offers a seven class, 18 credit hour graduate and undergraduate certificate in Esports Management and is looking to introduce both undergraduate and graduate specialization tracks within their Interactive Media Studies degree and Games and Simulation degree programs in 2020 and beyond. The piece closes with a set of ten practical pieces of advice to anyone looking to develop esports coursework based on Dr. Alexander's experiences over the last three years.

Introduction

In September of 2016, a semester that now seems long, long ago, I offered what we believe was the first academic course on

esports history, organizational structure and culture. I team taught that class with a student, Stelanie Tsirilis, who used the experience as her senior project. Stelanie was a big part of the esports movement at Miami; she was the president of our esports club for two years, and in addition to working with me on this course, she was the student who initiated the effort that created our varsity esports program. Our varsity program also started in 2016, with myself and Dr. Glenn Platt serving as the founding directors, with Tsirlis as our student director, and with at that time three varsity teams: Hearthstone, Overwatch and League of Legends.

I'm not sure Stelanie and I realized where we were positioned in that moment as relative pioneers in the space. We were building the sixth varsity esports program in the country, the first at a school with division one sports, and we were also teaching a class that had no precedent, offering what would be the first class of its kind. As a games professor, I was no stranger to creating new coursework, but working with something as ever-evolving and as student-owned as esports, I wanted us to work carefully. Luckily for me Stelanie was embedded in esports culture, so any ethos I lacked she could provide.

How That First Class Worked

That first esports class, IMS 390e- The Study of Esports, was meant to be an overview of all things esports. Looking back, the class looks as if it has aged far more than it actually has. Overwatch was "new," and there was no Fortnite. The class focused on the idea that if we could build a useful academic lens to observe esports by combining three key concepts: understanding games (genres) + understanding of game cultures (scenes) + understanding of the business around those games.

That resulted in a course that looked like this:

- Anchoring everything in the existing history (some of

which was being made as we taught the first class)

- Playing a game every week (for 12 weeks of the 14 week class)
- Observing the online scenes of those games as we went
- Studying and critiquing the business models of the game producers as well as the organizations involved in the professional scene (teams, tournament organizers, etc.)

Each student was tasked with researching a professional player, a professional team, and then developing an individualized research project which they designed in consultion with Stelanie and me. The projects ranged from detailed overviews of a specific game's competitive history to developing plans of action to elevate local scenes and organize existing tournaments.

Where That Went

Stelanie graduated in 2016 (in December, right after the course ended). She went on to work for a couple of years with Blizzard on the Overwatch Esports team and now works for 343 Industries. Her leaving meant that I needed to re-think now to develop ethos, but I also had a group of students who were clamboring for a class in game streaming/Twitch as well as a backlog of students who wanted the original class. It was at that point that Dr. Glenn Platt—the chair of our program—and myself started working on what is now our graduate and undergraduate certificate in Esports Management. It consists of six classes and two practicum experiences that map like this:

- First Semester (fall)
    - Esports Ecosystems (the class described above)
    - Esports Broadcasting
    - Esports Event Management

- Winter term (between semesters): Practicum (working with a professional team or organization for 2-3 weeks)
- Second Semester (spring)
    - The Business of Esports
    - Esports Branding and Community Engagement
    - Current Topics in Esports
- Summer: Practicum II: Organizing and Executing an Esports Event

All of those courses include work with industry partners, and the completed, ready-to-roll in February of 2020 version will offer content online through a partnership with Twitch.tv. The first semester of courses are in a second pilot at this point, having been offered last spring and this fall.

Important Things to Know About Teaching Esports

When I delivered this as a talk, I interpersed stories with these key points. To attempt to maintain coherence in written form, however, I'm going to attempt to run through the list without any major digressions, leaving my other comments for the conclusion. Based on teaching esports at a research minded university with a reputation for teaching excellence, here are ten pieces of advice that should help you as you consider building an esports curriculum (or even a just a single class).

Make sure you aren't presenting this as a class on how to play Esports

This will likely be the first thing that any administrator fears, but it will also be a thing you'll want to make sure you head off before you even get to the point of putting up fliers to attract students. You shouldn't try to create a class that would take as its primary task making students better competitive gamers, and you don't want the students to think that's what is happening. Now I did find that many students in the class also got better at

their favorite games through studying them carefully and better understanding the resources that existed, but this is a class that uses games the way a literature class uses Moby Dick or Hamlet. The idea of the class is to develop skills while looking at the esports landscape.

Don't ignore the importance of playing games to learn, and relatedly, don't let your own desire to be scholarly give the students culture shock

In contrast to the first point, you will want to stress that students need to play the games that you're teaching them about. You also want to make sure that you recognize that in almost all cases, there will be a student or more in the room that are vastly superior to you in playing the game itself. Allow them to be experts and allow the students to balance the academic activity of studying the game with some (not too much, of course) time just discussing their enjoyment of the game or lack of enjoyment. Those of us who research games have to be careful not to let our desire to be game nerds to essentially colonize the game space. I remember saying "heuristic" when talking about my research of World of Warcraft and watching eyes glaze over and roll. Remember you're in their world. Show it the respect we want them to show our classrooms (e.g. "don't be a melvin").

Realize that if you're an academic, even if you've published on esports, you do not know the games well enough to offer this class without help.

Two points to illustrate this one. The first is that I'm a published author who has done extensive research on World of Warcraft (WoW). That's my ethos card to get into the discussion. Years ago, as a graduate student, I raided almost 20 hours a week with a progression guild that was good enough that fans knew who we were. But that was a long time ago. I'm not even versed on current WoW, let alone on other major games. I was also teaching this class when Fortnite hit, and within a matter of a week or so, the "biggest" game in the world was something that

I'd only seen in a few tentative beta moments. And I'll admit it. I dismissed Fortnite because of the building mechanic which I thought the gamers I knew would resist. I was so wrong on that one.

Esports classes work best if the focus is split among looking at games/genres/competition, looking at business/organizations/events, and looking at jobs/opportunities

These hit those three major concepts I mentioned earlier. Students need to understand the games, how they're played, and what they can do to contribute. Dividing the class experiences into moments where the focus is on how the game works, how competition works, and how the students can apply their skills to the esports world is by far the most successful approach I've found to draw in every student and to maximize what the students can learn and digest in a 14 week session.

A key element of teaching about Esports is engaging the culture around Esports head-on. You will need to do smart diversity and inclusion work

One of the other hats that I wear as an academic—and as a mixed-blood Cherokee—is talking about diversity and inclusion. The esports space needs to have this discussion, and it's something we have to foreground. Gamers, through no fault of their own, have been conditioned to not think about diversity in game spaces unless there is a disruptive moment that surfaces it, but the population of gamers has become truly diverse. In order to avoid making some feel invisible, and to counteract the stereotype of the "gamer," we have to do careful, astute work with issues like gender, race, sexuality, ability, religion, etc.

While your classes will need to "live" in a certain place on your campus, you should do everything you can to make your classes interdisciplinary

This is where I have the benefit of my program. I work in a program that is already multi-disciplinary and has faculty in every major division on our campus. Having those relationships

has helped me to develop coursework and to make sure that the expertise that is needed is available when needed. You'll want to build this kind of network around esports on your campus. From media production to anthropology, from writing programs to art programs, various expertise are needed to create and maintain the esports industry. The same is true of classes.

This is true of all games classes, but you will have to establish to students that you will be playing games to learn. It's okay if they don't like them. It's not okay for them to not engage

I mentioned Moby Dick before, so I'll return to it as an example here. My degrees are in writing/rhetoric, which means I come from English departments. I've taught classes that assigned novels and poetry as homework. Students didn't like those pieces in many cases, but they still had to read and respond. It can be difficult to create this same culture in a games class, but it is critical. Students will "hate" certain games for one reason or another. It's important to allow them that feeling, of course, but they still have to play and discuss and participate. Making sure to set this up from the start as playing-to-learn (even if the student loves the game) will be extremely helpful when a moment comes where a student or a set of students hate a particular game. Just remind them day one that they might not want to read the books in their other classes but they do. This is the same thing with games.

Leverage the Esports activity on your campus to augment the class(es). If your campus has an active club or a varsity program, those are valuable resources

I mentioned that our varsity program started at the same time that we built the first class here at Miami. I mentioned that because the whole unit of "esports at Miami" is one thing in my mind: our clubs, our varsity program, our academic efforts and research. We need experts on games for classes. There are few better experts than a captain on a competitive team. We need

groups for the students to study, to visit with, to game with. The club offers that. The level of expertise in esports on most campuses is staggering, but it's talent that is mostly hidden if you don't do the legwork to find the people who have it. Find them and use them. They'll come in handy when there's a brand new game that you have no clue how to talk about intelligently. A group of students on your campus are already figuring out the meta and strategizing.

Be ready to sell the potential jobs/experience that other programs on your campus could find in the Esports space. Most other programs just won't know, and you can create partnerships easily

If you find yourself in the position we have at Miami, you'll discover that you have a whole host of faculty and students willing to get involved with what you're doing, but you need to build yourself up as an evangelist for Esports. It's not that anyone will be opposed to it—that's actually fairly rare—but many of your colleagues will be disconnected enough from esports that they simply don't know what skills are needed in the industry. The faculty in your communication department, for example, might not have thought about streaming in the same way they have television production. The people in your writing program might not realize how much volume there is to social media for esports. Your Sports Management program might not have thought about the team stuctures being so similar to athletics. There is something esports related that works with almost every academic discipline. Be ready to explain that and you'll recruit helpers to your cause quicker than you can imagine.

Use the nature of Esports to your advantage. Guest speakers via streaming, discussions via Reddit and Discord, the ability to experience tournaments online… these are all ways to anchor your class in the overall ecosystem

This was one of the most difficult points for us at Miami at first. When you hear (or read) Miami, you probably think of Florida,

but we're actually in landlocked southern Ohio. It's a great place to live, but it's not a region that has a strong professional esports presence. But we also don't need that, really, to be able to offer high quality esports instruction. This is an industry that is used to daily use of Discord and Twitch. Physical space only matters if you feel like you need to see a person in the room. It's easy to talk to, play with, watch competition, etc. remotely. Use that to your advantage. You'll find that you can bring in a large number of high quality guest speakers for a very low budget if you're using video teleconferencing.

Some Closing Thoughts

As I look at what we've built at Miami, it's obvious to me that esports education is going to be a key part of the next decade of course development. What is important for all of us is that we remember that there's a balance to make between making this something that feels too much like it's "playing games" but also doesn't assert so much of our existing academic methodology onto esports that we risk damaging something that is a vibrant part of the student landscape. The way we do that is by constantly balancing student agency. If you have a student who is amazing at streaming, let that student lead a few of the class meetings on how to utilize OBS, the most popular streaming software. If you have an Overwatch player who is good enough to play against pros, let that player talk to the class about the game.

Because esports as an industry touches so many of the things we teach students to do and involves so many of the careers our students want to have upon graduation, it's fertile ground for powerful learning. We have a chance to do amazing things. I hope that my notes from being one of the first on the scene has helped you to think about how all this should work. If you have questions or comments, I welcome correspondence at phill.alexander@miamioh.edu