THE IMPORTANCE OF STAKEHOLDER RELATIONS IN COLLEGIATE ESPORTS INTEGRATION

by

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Author's Declaration

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Abstract

From its humble beginnings to global mainstream success, the rise of esports has brought with it a litany of opportunities and challenges relating to regulation, varsity integration and professional institutionalization. Even with its proliferation around the world and relative brand name recognition, the relationship between esports and traditional sports continues to be a contentious one, leading to many universities and colleges taking a limiting approach to the flourishing esports market. In this paper I review the growing body of research available to understand the struggles, achievements and potential value of collegiate esports integration. While competitive gaming at the varsity level often finds itself at the behest of athletic departments, I argue that there is a need to refrain from trying to fit esports into conventional models. A lot can be learned from athletics, but the department's expertise does not lie in esports. I make the case that with the continued adoption of esports into academic institutions there is a growing need to establish new frameworks, where finding a balance between competition, technology and education lies with the unified academic community.

Keywords: esports, competitive gaming, stakeholders, integration, regulation, legitimation, athletics department

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Introduction

Poised to break into the mainstream, competitive gaming is no longer a niche pastime but a multi-million dollar industry reshaping the way spectator sports are consumed, marketed and analyzed (Pizzo et al., 2018). With a global audience that is slated to exceed 600 million by 2023 (Tran, 2018) and worldwide revenue that will reach $1.8 Billion US by 2022 (Pannekeet, 2019) esports has become nothing short of a cultural phenomenon. Worldwide tournaments have pulled hundreds of millions of viewers, top prize pools worth millions of dollars have inspired more amateur and professional players to pick up the gauntlet and compete on a national level while streaming services and social media platforms have allowed unprecedented access and interaction with star players (Schultz, 2017).

Coinciding with the increased global popularity, collegiate esports is also growing at a rapid pace with some universities and colleges in North America appealing to prospective students and gamers by offering new programs along with enticing scholarship opportunities (Kane & Spradley, 2017). Unlike their varsity counterparts in traditional sports, however, esports players still do not have the support and infrastructure they need to thrive in the academic world (Fadal, 2019), although this is quickly changing. With the continued adoption of esports into academic institutions (Keiper & Olrich, 2017), there is a growing need for a postsecondary vanguard to lead the charge for this emerging field. Ryerson University has the opportunity to be a leader in this regard, promoting and nurturing competitive gaming on an institutional, curricular, and research level. While varsity interest in integration continues to gather steam, for longterm institutional success it is incumbent on the student body, faculty, administration and external partners to bring esports into the academic fold and ensure it has the support to thrive.

Literature Review

Background

Esports can trace its humble beginnings back to the late 1970's with arcades laying the bedrock of what would become a multi-billion dollar industry (Kocurek, 2015). Games like Computer Space And PONG attracted a youthful, largely male demographic to test their hand eye coordination against computer controlled opponents (Wolf, 2008). Even in the early days of arcade tournaments, ranking systems started being incorporated within games as a means of establishing skill and fostering a strong sense of competition within the community (Alexander, 2020).

A bi-product born out of the digital age, the growth of esports into the worldwide phenomenon it has become would not have been possible without the advent of the Internet (Scholz, 2019). The dawn of the information age not only brought about disruptions in television, broadcasting and content distribution, but changed the very nature of media consumption by providing audiences with an endless supply of entertainment delivered with a convenience that had not been possible before (Uricchio, 2009).

As the 1990s ushered in a new era of technological advancement, improved Internet bandwidth, computer hardware along with a renewed mainstream appeal of video games set the stage for esports expansion as both an active and passive medium, with actual gameplay on par with the act of spectating (Smith et al., 2013). Having a stable internet connection not only made multiplayer gameplay possible, but freed gaming from its domestic confines, empowering players from all around the world to play, compete and communicate with one another, ultimately leading to the creation of large-scale digital communities (Hamilton et al., 2014). Consumption evolved from solitary-based individual play to couch co-op experiences, to multiplayer gaming

with people across the globe, all without having to leave your living room. Online streaming platforms like Twitch, YouTube and Mixer have provided new levels of audience engagement and integration through immersive community opportunities including live chat, commentary, analysis and direct player interaction (Adams et al., 2019).

Never before have so many industry players coalesced around an emerging form of new media, blurring the lines between many different modes of entertainment. The games industry forged a kind of symbiotic relationship between the game, player and fan, fundamentally changing how the medium is consumed: through play, spectatorship, analysis and community participation (Seo, 2013).

The rise of esports paralleled the mainstream appeal of video games in pop-culture, leading to the development of games like League of Legends (LOL) and Dota, pure competitive platforms intended to both challenge players and entertain spectators alike (Hewitt, 2014). What began as a local past-time quickly evolved into an international global success drawing in more viewers than most traditional sports events (Troupe, 2020). Modern competitive gameplay made the leap from arcades in the 1970's and 80's, to basements in the 1990's, to large scale spectacles filling arenas and stadiums across the globe by the early twentieth century (Schwartz, 2017).

Consumption, Identity and Fandom

The rise of esports has as much to do with media engagement as it does with developments in event marketing and the growing experience economy, bridging the gap between spectator and athlete through social media, live events and marketing (Borowy & Jin, 2013). The correlation between the global expansion of esports and the advent of the digital age has brought with it all of the benefits of unfettered access to both a global economy and

world-wide audience through the leveraging of online channels and offline experiences (Scholz & Stein, 2017). According to Scholz and Stein (2017), because of the decentralized nature of esports and its current lack of regulation, esports has had greater potential to tap into a much larger audience, while bringing more industry and media companies on board.

With technological progress, consumption habits have changed as well, allowing viewers greater access not only as fans, but as integral actors in the esports ecosystem. Esports players have become brands onto themselves, relying on audience perception to validate success and maintain popularity (Musabirov et al., 2019). As with nearly everything in the twenty-first century, esports being no exception, new access to a constant stream of information places greater scrutiny around talent development and team integration, much like traditional sports. Burton and Gawrysiak (2017) make the case that when it comes to reaching fans, social media has levelled the playing field, allowing greater community engagement through integrated advertising campaigns and synergy between league and tournament collaboration. One of the big challenges of esports broadcasting has been to make gameplay both accessible and entertaining to the average viewer, a struggle which has been largely mitigated through streaming, commentary and a greater importance on data collection and analytics (Block et al., 2018). These factors are integral to making competitive gaming palatable and highly engaging for the masses.

When addressing spectator motives, Lee and Schoenstedt (2011) claim that competition, peer pressure and skill building are the three components crucial to understanding the mass appeal of esports culture. Their paper highlights that professional players competing at top-tier levels, have achieved that status only through dedicating substantial time and effort in training to better oneself. Athletic skill is not only a major draw for spectators and a higher ranking

motive for esports consumption vs that of traditional sports, but key to the creation of an immersive viewer-centric digital environment geared around playback and analytics (Pizzo et al., 2018). Esports benefits greatly from a symbiosis between all parties within the competitive gaming community working in tandem to strengthen the value of the market through play, live competitions and corporate integration (Seo, 2013). Companies and players depend on the success of one another to remain relevant in an ever-evolving media landscape.

Esports vs Traditional Sports

Despite the gains in popularity and economic success, there continues to be a stigma surrounding esports and its relationship with traditional sports remains a contentious one.
To better understand the strained relationship between esports and traditional sports one has to understand what defines a sport, a term already marred in ambiguity (Loy, 2012). At its simplest, sport can be considered as a show of skill to win or defeat the opposing side (Pankin, 1982). The term 'game,' often associated with sports, refers to attaining a specific goal, within a framework of rules with players on opposing sides (Edwards, 1973). Many of these definitions elude to sporting culture as one bound by rules and an established framework steeped in tradition, to be respected and followed. Morgan (2017) lays out the claim that there are four requirements for defining a game as a sport: "(1) that the game be a game of skill, (2) that the skill be physical, (3) that the game have a wide following, and (4) that the following achieve a certain level of stability" (p. 38). But there is more to sports than a singular show of strength or physical achievement. It's not about the individual victory but a community-building endeavour regulated by an ethical and moral structure where virtues are intended to be carried out to preserve the integrity without external influence (Arnold, 1997). This emphasis on a long established ethos

is key to understanding the cultural significance of traditional sports. These takeaways from prominent sports psychologists underscore the importance of sportsmanship within competition. The core tenants of athleticism, like teamwork, leadership, listening and carrying out directions, are directly responsible for the wholistic development of an athlete as a well adjusted human being and a contributing member of a larger community.

Born out of the digital boom, esports fans today can fill arenas and stadiums to enjoy the live spectacle of competition, but unlike traditional sporting events, as a purely digital medium, competitive gaming takes place behind a computer screen (Borowy & Jin, 2013). Sung-Min (2007) argues that competition-based gaming that takes place in the virtual realm lacks physicality, a fundamental component in traditional sports and contributes little in the way of societal value. Concerns have been raised about not only the addictive qualities of video games and esports, but the detrimental effects on physical health and the potential to disrupt one's academic and social life (Smyth, 2007). Video games have often been tainted as a sedentary activity, associated with an unhealthy, antisocial lifestyle (Williams, 2005), with some students opting out of higher education all together to pursue dreams in professional esports (Hewitt, 2014). These claims are nothing new, but should be acknowledged when discussing esports integration at the collegiate level as they do have merit.

Governance and institutionalization are the other major factors preventing esports from being recognized as an equal of traditional sports (Huiberts, 2014). A study conducted by Xen (2017) found that esports is not self-regulated, leaving much of the responsibility to corporate stakeholders, the video game companies themselves and individual leagues to set up some form of administration. Currently, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) plays no role

in esports governance, largely due to the concept of amateurism, where collegiate sports are considered a hobby, to be participated in at the academic level without compensation (McCarthy, 2020). It makes sense that with so many financial incentives and monetary prizes that esports has become a wild-west of sorts, with so many forms of play, a litany of organizations, and the sheer number of video games making it difficult to standardize.

While the shift from recreational activity to institutionalization has been a gradual process for many sports, the rapid expansion of esports over the last four decades would not have been possible without technological innovations and deep seated corporate integration (Summerley, 2019). While there are many comparisons that can be made between esports and its traditional counterparts, esports is beset with a number of unique obstacles. According to Anderson-Coto et al. (2019), glitches and bugs in the gameplay along with the presence of artificial intelligence make it difficult for outsiders to view the industry without some skepticism. These are unique obstacles that relate directly to the 'electronic' component of esports, of little significance to traditional sports unless focusing on the implications of technological improvements, like goal-line technology in soccer.

Collegiate Integration of Esports

With name recognition and potential for massive revenue generation, esports has already begun to infiltrate and stake its claim within institutions of higher learning. According to Keiper et al. (2017), there is a case to be made for the integration of esports into intercollegiate athletic departments, with benefits including revenue generation, Title IX compliance and fostering greater diversity in academia. The Title IX law "prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender in educational institutions receiving federal financial assistance" (Valentin, 1997, p.1). Keiper

(2017), makes it clear that competitive gaming can be advantageous in attracting diverse audiences interested in non-traditional sporting events.

The costs associated with setting up esports infrastructure are relatively low when compared with traditional sports accommodations (Kane & Spradley, 2017). Their paper maintains that digital mobility, live streaming and corporate sponsorship can be leveraged in order to keep costs low and revenue generation high for both students and colleges. Esports teams are smaller than regular sports teams and with the infrastructure in place and the competitive aspect taking place mostly online, the need for travel is greatly diminished.

There continue to be conflicting points of view surrounding esports at the collegiate level, fuelled largely by a lack of understanding, with many stakeholders unsure of what to make of it leaving some administrators torn between waiting for more oversight or missing out on a potentially lucrative opportunity (Pizzo et al., 2019). The study conducted in 2017 by Pizzo et al. is significant in highlighting the challenges of esports integration within colleges and universities, especially when it comes to placing them under the umbrella of the athletics department. Academic departments each have their areas of expertise, but placing a relatively new area of study under a well established academic branch based solely on name recognition can be detrimental.

The stigma surrounding esports as an unproductive pastime and not a viable career option can be mitigated through professionalism. Adding esports under the academic umbrella has had a profound effect on collegiate players. Kauweloa and Winter (2019) argue that giving players a home at the collegiate level provides valuable skill-building opportunities associated with being part of a varsity team and legitimizes competitive gaming in the eyes of both internal

and external stakeholders. Players feel like they are not only part of a team, but part of a larger community, where upholding the tenants of athletic sportsmanship are tantamount to academic life as a student.

Anderson et al. (2018) believe that esports can serve as an invaluable marketing tool for attracting students engaged within the gaming community to STEM disciplines, with a greater need to highlight parallels between passions and career paths. Having grown up with video games and seeing first hand what the industry has grown into has made it abundantly clear that there are no limits when it comes to creative opportunities within the world of gaming. It has become a mecca industry for content creators, developers, designers and programmers. It seems like more research has to be conducted into the number of students that identify as gamers that end up pursuing careers in the industry.

Interest for collegiate esports integration often begins at the grassroots level, with students organizing recreational clubs and fostering support on campus (Close & Griffin, 2019). Without the backing of faculty, however, the student body has limited contact with the administration, making it difficult to pass requests up the chain of command (Close & Griffin, 2019). Close and Griffin's paper makes the case that there is a need for industry professionals on campus to partner with and support student-run organizations and infrastructure. What better way to approach collegiate integration than with the support of people in the industry, bringing their experience and expertise directly on campus.

Collegiate esports is not immune from the same social issues that hinder its professional equivalent, including fostering a toxic environment. Schools will have to grapple with issues of harassment, bullying and racism through novel policy creation and enhanced internal scrutiny to

ensure spaces remain safe and inclusive to all students (Knutson et al., 2019). Though the male gamer stereotype has been perpetuated through media, marketing and in the games themselves, making it difficult for women to escape a culture that is often adverse to their association with it, the number of females who identify as gamers is growing (Paaßen et al., 2017). With anti-discrimination mechanisms in place and a more supportive atmosphere, collegiate esports could prove to be a fruitful environment for co-ed electronic sports.

One area that cannot be overlooked in this discussion is the role of video games in education. Gamers are able to understand and analyze complex systems at work, develop digital skills and flex multiple cognitive abilities simultaneously (Cain et al., 2012). By incorporating competitive gaming into learning environments, proper research can be carried out to study their effect on the brain. As a gamer myself, it only makes sense to try and leverage the dopamine hit of playing a game and applying it to enhance and expand teaching modalities. As microcosms of individual and collaborative informal learning, esports can provide invaluable understanding in the development of game-based education systems (Richard et al., 2018). Universities have the resources at their disposal to study and research the social, psychological and cognitive effects of video games to develop new more immersive teaching platforms.

Similar Projects

Robert Morris University – Chicago, Ill

In 2014, history was made when Robert Morris University (RMU) became the first collegiate institution to recognize esports as a collegiate sport under their athletics department and offer scholarships for gamers (Kauweloa & Winter, 2019). RMU's integration of esports into the university was spearheaded by Associate Athletic Director Kurt Melchor (Bambury, 2016).

Melchor, who at the time was the women's soccer coach and athletic administrator, was an avid video game enthusiast, initiating the process after experiencing the esports phenomenon firsthand by becoming immersed in League of Legends (Melcher, 2016). Enthralled by the level of skill and talent involved with competitive gaming he went to the administration with a proposal. Melchor saw parallels between the principle tenets of traditional sports and esports (Newsmax TV, 2015). After getting the green light, he hired a coaching staff, recruited top players and created a full scholarship program to attract talent, even reaching out directly to League of Legends developer, RIOT Games for advice (Ruby, 2014).

The $100,000 arena (Kane & Spradley, 2017), sponsored by iBUYPOWER and the first of its kind in North America is equipped with state-of-the-art hardware and was built as a training facility, to be used only for practice and competitions (Hoang, 2014). It was built for a singular purpose in mind, precluding it from use as a classroom or a computer lab during off times (Melcher, 2016).

To counteract detractors and fight the stigma surrounding competitive gaming, RMU implemented a strict academic framework where college athletes would need to maintain their GPA to be eligible to play and compete (Bambury, 2016).

RMU is an interesting example for a number of reasons, not least of which that their integration was initiated by a faculty member. While the support for varsity esports often starts at the grassroots level, with calls to incorporate competitive gaming stemming from the student body (Close & Griffin, 2019), Melchor took it upon himself, as someone who knew how to navigate both sides, as an athlete and avid gamer. Not only did RMU garner global publicity around its decision, but maintained interest from within, leading to internal PhD and MBA

studies on the program (Melcher, 2016). Unlike other universities, RMU is not an NCAA member, but part of the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (Kane & Spradley, 2017).

University of Pikeville – Pikeville, Kentucky

Shortly after RMU, the University of Pikeville (UPike) became the second university to make League of Legends an official varsity sport, launching its esports program in 2015 (Rad, 2015). Students approached director of new media Bruce Parsons to start an esports club (UPIKE Film and Media Arts, 2015). After receiving backing from the administration, they skipped the club step and began a varsity team as a means of attracting a different demographic, one that hungers for team-based competition, but outside of the traditional athletics department (Gaffney, 2015). With RMU having already set a standard there wasn't much push back from the administration and once a plan was in place the university gave its blessing and support (Gaffney, 2015). With plenty of sponsors and corporate donations from the likes of Asus, iBUYPOWER and Steelseries, UPike was able to build a dedicated esports arena with top-tier gaming rigs along with motion tracking technology to be used in collaboration with the College of Optometry (Parsons, n.d.). They created an environment where League of Legends gamers are treated like traditional athletes (Gaudiosi, 2015). Once established, UPike joined the Collegiate Star League (CSL) and began competing in intercollegiate tournaments in North America (Burton, 2019). Similar to RMU, students are held to the same academic standards as other athletes and are expected to uphold a GPA and attend weekly practice sessions (Gaffney, 2015).

With three hours of practice per day, many students have expressed benefits from being in the same room with other players, turning what is generally considered to be a solitary experience into a cooperative social experience (UPIKE Film and Media Arts, 2015). There

seems to be a priority in putting forth the message that being a good esports player also means being a good student, proving that the two aren't mutually exclusive. The aim of incorporating esports into the UPike was to peak students interest in pursuing careers in the games industry (Burton, 2019).

Durham College – Oshawa, Ontario

Having gone from club to varsity status in 2018, Durham college currently has the largest esports arena in North America which has been used to host camps and available for rent (CityNews, 2019). Their state-of-the art arena, equipped with top-of-the line gear and a seating area to accommodate spectators, has individual sections allotted for training and broadcasting purposes (Follert, 2019). Funding for the arena came from a number of sources, including in-house financing, private and corporate donations (Fadal, 2019). The space is open for recreational and competitive play, allowing access for current students, employees and alumni, though priority is given to its Durham Lords Esports (Follert, 2019). Durham placed a lot of emphasis on removing the stigma around gaming being a lonely experience, focusing instead on community building (Breakfast Television, 2019). The goal in having the varsity team operated under the athletic department was for gamers to receive the same treatment as traditional athletes, with the administration officially recognizing esports as a varsity sport (Kauweloa & Winter, 2019). Prize money for all of the provincial tournaments Durham has hosted takes the form of a scholarship fund, like the $7,000 that was on the line for the Rocket League Finals in 2019 (Streck, 2019). Having the ability to host other teams live at the facility not only added a sense of legitimacy to competitive gaming at the collegiate level, but garnered needed publicity for the school attracting prospective students and big level sponsors to subsidize costs (Jones, 2019).

Durham's integration of esports had another aim, to turn the passion its students and players have about esports into employment opportunities within the global esports industry through curricular integration (Fadal, 2019).

Humber College – Toronto, Ontario

Humber launched the first phase of its esports initiative in 2018 with the creation of an esports training room for their students (Valois, 2018). Conceived as a means to better support students and generate interest in career opportunities through the Faculty of Media & Creative Arts, Humber's esports initiative was the brainchild of esports coordinator and game programming instructor Geoffrey Lachapelle and professor of video games, design, programming and esports infrastructure, Kris Alexander (Burdi, 2019). The implementation of the training room had the backing of faculty, the student body and members of the community and was a way of integrating students from different programs like journalism and broadcasting to gain in-person experience through their participation in live events and competitions (Valois, 2018). Rigorous training regiments were deployed to develop talent and hold esports players to the same standards as traditional athletes on a team (Chen, 2018). In April 2019, Humber expanded its esports initiative into phase 2 which included the opening of the Barrett Centre for Technology Innovation as an additional training facility (Shah, 2019). During a casual League of Legends tournament that was hosted in March of 2019, Humber brought Microsoft on-board, who in turn provided laptops for players (Maingon, 2019). In the fall of 2019, Humber took part in Canada's largest video game expo EGLX (Enthusiast Gaming Live Expo), bringing its Usability Lab to highlight different programs on offer, esports work and to host a few tournaments during the three-day event (Humber College, 2019). Incorporating video

games not only into its curricular framework, but campus foundation, has allowed student's to leverage the technology and core mechanics of gaming and apply them within an educational context. Peter Tran, a Humber game programming student is in the process of developing a VR based experience to make virtual gameplay accessible for the blind (Chen, 2018). Humber is an example of collegiate esports integration where technological innovation, competitive gaming and pedagogy have gone hand in hand.

Methodology

To assess whether esports integration is beneficial to institutions of higher learning, I will attempt to hold up the implementation of a competitive gaming hub through the lens of R. Edward Freeman's Stakeholder Theory. Freeman (2010) believes that the success of a company is dependent on the continued partnership and mutual support between all concerned parties. It is also important for the business to provide some form of value to each of these stakeholders (Freeman, 2010). These internal and external parties may include, but are not limited to the following: suppliers, governments, owners, community, customers, employees etc. (Freeman, 2010). This ethical business approach runs counter to the capitalist credo proposed by Milton Friedman, that the sole purpose of a business is to make money for its shareholders (Friedman, 1970).

In his book, *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, Freeman (2010) postulates that everyone involved in a corporate venture has a stake in its success and as such the number one priority should be relegated to managing all of the diverse groups at the table. In this way, it is easy to understand each stakeholder as a unique building block to corporate success. If one is removed or fails to support the weight of another, the entire foundation collapses.

It is incumbent on the business to make sure each group has a voice and that all concerns are heard and understood. Arrangements should be made to ensure appropriate resources are allotted to its members to work at peak capacity, something Freeman (2010) refers to as "stakeholder management" (p. 25). This is no easy feat as many firms have a diverse range of stakeholders to contend with. Internal forces tend to shape an institution as much as external forces. As such, it is important to take the time to build strong relationships with the people that make up these groups to ensure a strategic approach to operational prosperity.

By using Freeman's theory as a guide, I will examine the value of implementing a competitive gaming hub into a varsity institution by examining the needs, wants and reality of collegiate esports integration as it pertains to each stakeholder group within the university. Only through having a better understanding of the academic stakeholders that make up the institution, can I gauge whether esports integration will add value to those who have a stake in its success.

As a group, we have taken an entrepreneurial approach to this Masters project, utilizing a more experiential framework to undertake the daunting task of uniting these different collaborators under a common goal to bring our vision to fruition. With our business venture, we intend to embed a microcosm of the esports industry into a fully functioning academic ecosystem with its own stakeholders and organizational hierarchy. In this way we will be able to piggyback the resources and infrastructure of one to nurture and promote the other.

Phase 1: Community Outreach & Faculty Interest

Building upon the project-based entrepreneurial simulations we experienced in our digital media classes and applying our knowledge of competitive strategies and business models, our group developed a start-up proposal centred around a very specific but growing varsity market

segment, competitive gamers. Using an entrepreneurial approach, the interviews we carried out during the fall semester with members of Ryerson's esports community as well as casual gamers yielded interesting results. We were able to identify three recurring pain-points: fast, reliable internet connection, top tier equipment and the need for a convenient and accessible training space (for both professional and recreational players). An overwhelming majority of the students we canvased expressed the desire for a campus-based solution that would cater to both competitive teams and casual players alike with infrastructure also conducive for use as a learning space (See Appendix A, Figure A-1). Leveraging the research collected, we formulated a unique start-up proposition that combined these gaming necessities while relying on Ryerson's extensive digital media resources for support. To validate our proposal we approached Dr. Kristopher Alexander at the Faculty of Communication and Design whose areas of expertise include esports infrastructure, games user research and virtual production studio development. With faculty support we were given the green light to proceed with our project and continue refining our idea in the form of a Masters research project.

Phase 2: Refinement & Expansion

This proposed esports hub tentatively code-named "*The Armoury*" would provide opportunities to partner with companies outside of the academic sphere, in turn expanding the scope of the project to include a dedicated gaming space, research lab and media production studio. The facilities would house state-of-the-art gaming machines, direct Fibre-Optic Internet, streaming booths, a private team room, post-game analytics and screen casting for events and coaching. Hardware provided by corporate partners would in return output performance data for future revisions and updates. In this way we would create a symbiotic ecosystem where the

University, student body and external partners would work closely with one another to ensure success. With interest from the Dean of FCAD, Charles Falzon, we were informed of a potential location for the hub on the second floor of the Rogers Communication Centre. The two rooms tentatively designated for *The Armoury* are the Catalyst Learning Centre (RCC-223) and adjacent RTA Lab (RCC-229). With a clear picture in mind we reached out to the architects of The Catalyst to procure original schematics for the second floor to begin ideation on the layout of the space. We created floor-plans for the two rooms (See Appendix B, Figure B-1) along with illustrated renderings (See Appendix B, Figure B-2) to better visualize the area and shape it to our needs.

Phase 3: Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Coming to terms with the fact that the creation of *The Armoury* will likely end up being a multi-year project and the COVID Pandemic delaying progress further, we intended to use VR to effectively visualize the proposed space and convey its relevance to the Ryerson community and importance within the overall campus. This digital walk-through would be an invaluable marketing tool to garner internal and external support as the project moves ahead. As a team, realizing our limited capabilities in VR and augmented reality and driven by a new goal in mind, we reached out to professor Vincent Hui within the Department of Architectural Science for his background in experiential learning. After an initial strategy meeting where we outlined the scope of our plan, Professor Hui gathered a diverse team of architecture students who volunteered their time and expertise to undertake the challenge of turning our dream into virtual reality. During our meetings with the architecture students we went over the hardware we would need, power requirements, space allotment for teams versus recreational use, streaming and broadcast specifications and sponsorship opportunities. We referenced photos from our site

visits to competitive gaming arenas and internet cafes around Toronto (See Appendix C, Figure C-1). On May 8, we regrouped with the architecture team to review the first round of digital renderings. Informed by our research and site visits, they exceeded our expectations, delivering a thoughtful and beautifully designed series of schematics and digital renderings.

Phase 4: Administration Approval

With the digital development of *The Armoury* well under way, our next step was to bring the Dean of FCAD on board and prove to him that the desire for a competitive gaming hub on campus was a student driven initiative, by students for students, fuelled by interest within the Ryerson community. Currently, Ryerson has one competitive esports club with nine teams (Bala, 2019) but no dedicated space for them to play and interact with one another. With the help of Professor Alexander and current Master's student and Humber alumni, Geoffrey Lachapelle, we secured a meeting with Charles Falzon on April 6. He offered us a chance to elaborate on our vision and defend our proposition. Upon updating him on the progress we had made to date, he informed us of a possible change in location, potentially moving *The Armoury* behind the Allan Slaight Radio Institute on the first floor of the RCC (a proposition which was later rescinded). Our next steps were to continue refining our investor pitch for a digital groundbreaking event tentatively scheduled for mid-June.

Phase 5: Branding

With a background in graphic design, I undertook the personal journey of creating the branding for *The Armoury*. I knew this unique logotype would need to be bold and flexible enough to scale up and translate for use on different media platforms while retaining strong bonds with the university. My road map to success began with careful planning and research,

examining goals and existing strategies. The creative process was initiated through the creation of a word association document, identifying key terms and descriptors relating to our gaming hub. The development phase consisted of producing a series of design concepts (See Appendix D, Figure D-1) and soliciting feedback through group meetings and presentations. Once a consensus had been reached, work began on refining the logo design with the development of a proper grid system, typeface selection and colour exploration. The triangular, self-contained nature of the 'A' letter form integrates both curved and geometric elements (See Appendix D, Figure D-2). The interior of the shape resembles a flag, often seen as a symbol of team spirit and pride in sporting competitions and originally as a military ensign on the battlefield (Eriksen, 2007). Gotham Condensed was chosen as the accompanying typeface for its bold and angular forms. The agreed upon colour palette consists of pairing orange with dark grey. Grey was chosen for its association with technology and sense of control, while orange evokes warmth and strength (Samara, 2007). The main logotype was arranged in a horizontal alignment that would scale well with size and pair nicely with the Ryerson logo as a sub-brand lockup (See Appendix D, Figure D-3). A vertical version was created as an alternate to be used on oversized applications like banners and signage. The completed visual identity was sent to the architecture students to be included in the updated renderings and virtual walk-through (See Appendix D, Figure D-4).

Phase 6: Community & Partner Engagement

On May 27, The Catalyst hosted a live panel discussion that was streamed on YouTube about collegiate esports and included group member Robin Kang, Professor Kristopher Alexander, Geoffrey Lachapelle and Liam Parmar, the president of the Ryerson esports club. The

online forum was organized as a community outreach event to generate interest in formal esports integration at Ryerson and as a way to gather data and engage with the community directly through a live Q&A and discussion about future plans.

After the first reveal presentation by the architecture students, Todd Carmichael, Executive Director, Strategic Planning and Advancement, was brought on board to help expedite our plan and facilitate partnership opportunities with external investors. He also provided an important point of contact between our group and the Ryerson administration. With our pitch going through multiple rounds of changes, the finalized version began circulation among Geoffrey Lachapelle and Professor Alexander's extended network. Additionally our group was in charge of creating a two-page promotional handout prior to the digital groundbreaking event, highlighting key features and support opportunities (See Appendix D, Figure D-5). Garnering interest from Inven Global, an online magazine specializing in esports media, we have been eagerly preparing for an investor roundtable event to bring external capital and resources on board.

Analysis

Throughout the different stages of development for *The Armoury* our group had the opportunity to interact with different stakeholders within the Ryerson community to better understand the needs, wants and reality of esports integration. Through community engagement and supplementary research, I focused on the five groups with a vested stake in integration: students, faculty, administration, partners and parents.

Students

Incorporating competitive gaming at the collegiate level is a way for students to integrate their passions into their academic mission. Along with access to high-end hardware and

technology, there is a real benefit for students to be physically present within the same space as their teammates and fellow students and proudly identify as collegiate esports players (Kauweloa & Winter, 2019). *The Armoury* would be a space to flex a wide range of skills with special opportunities to learn new abilities and expand current skillsets. It would serve as a communal space bringing students together to interact, game and learn, incorporating two fundamental components of game play, personal development and social growth (Lee & Schoenstedt, 2011).

Collegiate esports integration can provide a valuable pathway to professionalism, not necessarily to becoming a pro player, but through different opportunities, arm students with the necessary skills to navigate a constantly evolving job market. With partner support, an on-campus hub can grant them access to networks out of their reach. Play is an essential component to learn about jobs in the industry (Anderson, 2018). *The Armoury* would also provide potential employment and volunteer opportunities for currently enrolled students and recent graduates with positions in operations, management, communications and general upkeep.

Citing the need for more research and studies around the growing esports industry, the NCAA's decision to refrain from collegiate esports involvement has made it necessary for universities and colleges to take it upon themselves to create a safe environment for everyone (Schonbrun, 2017). This can only be achieved through thoughtful and thorough policy crafting (Knutson et al., 2019). It's time to rethink collegiate esports by drafting an extensive code of conduct and facilitating a push for more inclusivity within the gaming space. Having academic regulations in place would be invaluable for combating toxicity, discrimination and harassment. *The Armoury* needs to be a barrier free space for everyone, but the only way this can be achieved is to establish clear policy frameworks through engagement and feedback from the community.

The path towards regulation should be student driven, but ultimately faculty enforced.

According to the Entertainment Software Association of Canada (2016), 49% of gamers are female. This doesn't necessarily translate into the world of esports, which is still a largely male dominated activity (Ruvalcaba, Schulze, Kim, 2018). There is a need for gender equity and cultural diversity in competitive gaming and nesting it within a varsity athletics department could potentially bring co-ed appeal to collegiate esports and an allocation of resources. The seeming lack of female gamers only perpetuates the belief that most gamers are male, while the female gamer segment makes up about 40% and remains a growing demographic (Paaßen et al., 2017). It is time to start catering to underserved groups and provide not only opportunities, but marketing to push a different narrative. According to Gurin et al. (2002), "more attention should be given to the types of experiences students have with diverse peers inside and outside the classroom" (p. 362). Integration would also provide an accessible option for students unable to participate in physical activities and for those uninterested in traditional sports (Hewitt, 2014).

When approached with the prospect of collegiate esports integration, many colleges and universities place the responsibility on their athletics department (Keiper et al., 2017). There is a lot to learn from athletics, but the department's expertise does not lie in esports, with unfamiliarity leading to diverging perspectives among faculty and administration (Sasso, 2019). This method of academic acquisition often relies on molding competitive gaming to fit in old school models. The evolving and decentralized nature of esports makes it not conducive to being constrained at the collegiate level by conventional systems. Another approach and potentially more lucrative in the long run, would be to house *The Armoury* under the umbrella of social clubs as opposed to athletics. There would be less egos and personalities to contend with on

the path to legitimation, while peripheral support systems and additional resources would be available from other departments if needed. This way a university-based esports branch could maintain autonomy, relying on students and faculty well versed in the gaming industry to make it successful and sustainable.

Faculty

The video game industry is growing (Burton & Gawrysiak, 2017) and there is a need for academics to understand the magic behind this new medium. A push is needed to convince faculty members how important it is to learn about the burgeoning video games industry and to educate those who aren't part of the community to recognize its relevance (Pizzo et al., 2019).

Collegiate esports integration is not possible without academic publication and faculty support to substantiate the need for it, with more research needed to investigate the implications of technology and differences between competitive and casual players (Faust et al., 2013).
It is imperative to engage faculty in advocating for new fields of study and crafting relevant curriculum to correspond with emerging fields. According to Bavelier (2012), action video games contain key ingredients for improving brain plasticity, learning attention and vision, making it imperative to measure the impact of technology on the brain. This research can yield results to deliver better games for education and for rehabilitation purposes. *The Armoury* would provide data-driven research capabilities in the form of a lab, with a steady supply of eager participants ready to validate their love of gaming. Having broad data will allow the University to have conversations with different actors, potentially finding new allies and partners in industries otherwise precluded from academic institutions.

There remains, however, a general misunderstanding between many athletics departments

and esports integration. There are few in the realm that are familiar enough with it, leading to incongruity between esports and its traditional counterpart (Pizzo et al., 2019). As mentioned earlier, one solution may be to identify it as a social club, to receive the best of both worlds. In this capacity a competitive gaming hub can leverage resources from different departments while remaining relatively autonomous.

With esports incorporating many different streams of technology and communication (Seo, 2013), integration would not only benefit students, but faculty as well. Professors would be able to formulate new pedagogy, creating more experiential learning opportunities for their students to correspond with the increase in jobs in the video game and esports industries (Nguyen, 2017). It is important for those numbers to be published and circulated. More information needs to get into the hands of program directors where it can be used to create congruent curriculum that matches the jobs available. In an anonymous survey conducted by The Catalyst, students that expressed interest in esports at Ryerson verified that they come from a diverse pool of disciplines (See Appendix E, Figure E-1). *The Armoury* would provide real-world engagement for students in broadcasting, journalism, fashion, event management and interior design, to name a few.

Administration

As collegiate esports continues to gain traction, more colleges and universities are becoming excited about the prospect of integration (Keiper et al., 2017). With attendance for esports events, both digital and physical, rivalling that of traditional sports, there are lucrative opportunities for those willing to invest in the industry (Lee & Schoenstedt, 2011). Collegiate integrated esports remains one of a few industries where there is potential to generate revenue

without a lot of upfront investment (Stein & Scholz, 2016), with a relatively low implementation cost when compared to on-campus sports infrastructure and reliance on digital platforms for gaming and streaming as opposed to physical spaces (Kane & Spradley, 2017). Intended for both training purposes and recreational use, students and faculty would gain access to *The Armoury* through either their student card or a supplementary keycard. A pay-to-play structure would be implemented for the lounge, with access during and outside of school hours.

Esports integration at the collegiate level is lacking in Canada when compared to the United States (Goff, 2016). With a larger population and considerably higher tuition rates, US colleges and universities have more freedom in the creation of less traditional teaching approaches and flexible resource allocation (Miller, 2018). There needs to be an exclusive format for esports in Canadian universities. We do not need to follow in the footsteps of the US. There should be standardized spaces with clear mandates regarding how talent is developed through practice and competition.

Whether under athletics or the recreational club umbrella, it is clear esports should exist in its own area of operation as opposed to being tied to another department. Crafting successful esports framework and developing new venues lies on educating the stakeholders about finding a balance between athletics and technology. Why attract skilled players if we do not have the facilities to foster that talent. There needs to be systemic infrastructure that will last for a long time supported by a sustainable business model (Scholz & Kordyaka, 2019). The academic lifespan of a student is rather short, they study to complete their degree or diploma and then graduate. There is a need for permanence in whatever infrastructure is set up. *The Armoury* needs to be able to continue its mandate with new cohorts of students, faculty and administration.

Even amidst the COVID-19 pandemic esports continues to thrive (Heinrich, 2020). The pandemic has provided an important educational period, highlighting the opportunities that video games can provide as a socially safe activity. There has been more outreach and interest from athletics departments, with competitive gaming as the only electronic sport still active during the quarantine (García-Bullé, 2020). Colleges and universities are looking for some form of continuity for their students and staff during the pandemic (Loriggio, 2020). There are ancillary fees to contend with and facilities remain closed to everyone except essential staff. Esports can provide an outlet for students and a way to stay connected with their peers amidst uncertain times.

Partners

One of the main challenges of getting a venture like ours off the ground is finding funding and incentivising companies to partner with us. Propagating congruent curriculum and positive faculty engagement with regards to esports, would all be beneficial in attracting Triple A backing. Highlighting students' integration of video games into their paths of study would also substantiate the need for resources at the academic level. With 40% of video game players between the ages of 18-35 (Gough, 2020), the very demographics esports companies target, the varsity scene is the perfect microcosm to tap into. Brands can participate by reinforcing the esports experience and promoting their content while supporting the student-driven structures that maintain their popularity and growth (Seo, 2013). With the proper infrastructure in place, *The Armoury* would provide lucrative opportunities to integrate brands through sponsorship opportunities with leagues, tournaments and live events. Infrastructure support and resource distribution would provide the baseline revenue we would need to be able to compete in those tournaments. Bringing brands on board would also add to the legitimacy of modern competitive

gaming and support the cultivation of new talent. Esports integration would provide effective pathways from the schools to these companies, whether in the form of employment or athletic professionalism post-education.

According to Jenny et al. (2018), "eSports researchers and experts should be sought after for outside companies to gain the insight needed to manage successful eSports events and develop quality venues" (p. 45). What can developers and students learn from each other? Collegiate esports can provide companies a direct line into academic institutions, giving them access to the population they are looking to reach, while providing students, via curricular ties and infrastructure, a way to move their career paths forward through a lens they are excited about.

Parents

The stereotypical gamer identity conjures up images of sedentary teenagers glued to screens with controllers in hand or fingers flying across a keyboard accompanied by a flurry of mouse clicks. This has had a profound affect on another demographic, one with a large stake in higher education. While a general sense of uncertainty persists for most parents when approaching esports (Pizzo et al., 2019), things are changing. With some universities creating scholarship programs centred around esports and players attaining athlete status with national travel visas, the path to legitimization is well under way (Kane & Spradley, 2017).

Much of the concern comes down to a lack of communication or miscommunication (Kang, 2020). More outreach is needed to substantiate to someone who does not understand the vernacular and platforms. This is why it has been necessary to consider scholarships as another solution on the pathway to legitimization, demonstrating there are academic and financial benefits to the movement (Pizzo et al., 2019). But evaluation cannot be left to people who do not

understand the industry and its athletes.

Creating engaging experiences for people through data-driven storytelling, personalized content and transparent analytics can help in bringing non endemic players into the fold (Block et al., 2018). In order to gain support people need to understand. Gathering key performance indicators, such as the number of students that play games, how successful they are, how well graduates do post-university and publicizing these statistics can promote esports as developmentally beneficial. *The Armoury* would ensure that students are not professional players and as such should not expect monetary compensation for playing games. Time spent at college and university is for learning. That does not mean that skilled collegiate players cannot go on to the esports big leagues, but it should not be the academy's responsibility to get them there. Measures will be put in place to ensure students maintain their academic standing along with their esports participation.

Video games are a powerful tool that can be used as a conduit into STEM disciplines, through congruent curriculum and the development of new skillsets (Anderson et al., 2018). This interest extends into employment opportunities and navigating the 21st century job market. According to the Entertainment Software Association of Canada (2016), there are 472 studios in Canada employing over 20,400 people in the industry. There is a huge ecosystem of people who have different jobs and a variety of skills in the industry. The trick is to incorporate programs of study where students can integrate their passions into their academic pursuit. With sites like hitmarkerjobs.com completely devoted to esports positions and a constantly growing and diverse job pool, there has never been a better time to join the industry (Nguyen, 2017).

Conclusion

The world is currently undergoing massive technological disruptions on a scale we have not seen thus far. Virtually no sector has been left untouched. There is an ongoing need for academic institutions to stay up to date with the latest technological trends, emerging fields and avoid taking a limiting approach when it comes to integrating unorthodox activities into the learning environment. Implementing what needs to happen on an infrastructure level and having the ability to conduct research in that space can propagate the benefits of esports integration to Ryerson's students, faculty and administration. There is a need to examine how other provinces are approaching this and what can be done to standardize frameworks and implementation. Having humans who are interested, that will allow us to ask these questions is paramount in moving forward and drawing necessary connections between students, the games they play, their programs of study, their grades and how they relate from a job acquisition standpoint. We need more opportunities to articulate and elaborate on our findings, produce thoughtful material and publish statistics in order to change minds. Education is key in this regard.

It is crucial for students to not only provide information and expertise on the viability of the growing competitive gaming industry but become leaders in it. We know we have tapped into a flourishing industry and have identified established infrastructure. The question remains, how can we bridge those two to set up a successful structural framework that is profitable to both the students and the academic institution at the same time, while promoting the real reason people are there, to learn and educate themselves. *The Armoury* is a start and by garnering internal and external support, according to Close and Griffin (2020), "can be a space that demonstrates how equitable, equality-minded organizational structures and cultures evolve" (p. 49).

Appendix A – Determining Our Value Proposition

Figure A-1. The results from our survey helped us to finalize the value our solution will create for the target customer.

Appendix B – Planning & Ideation

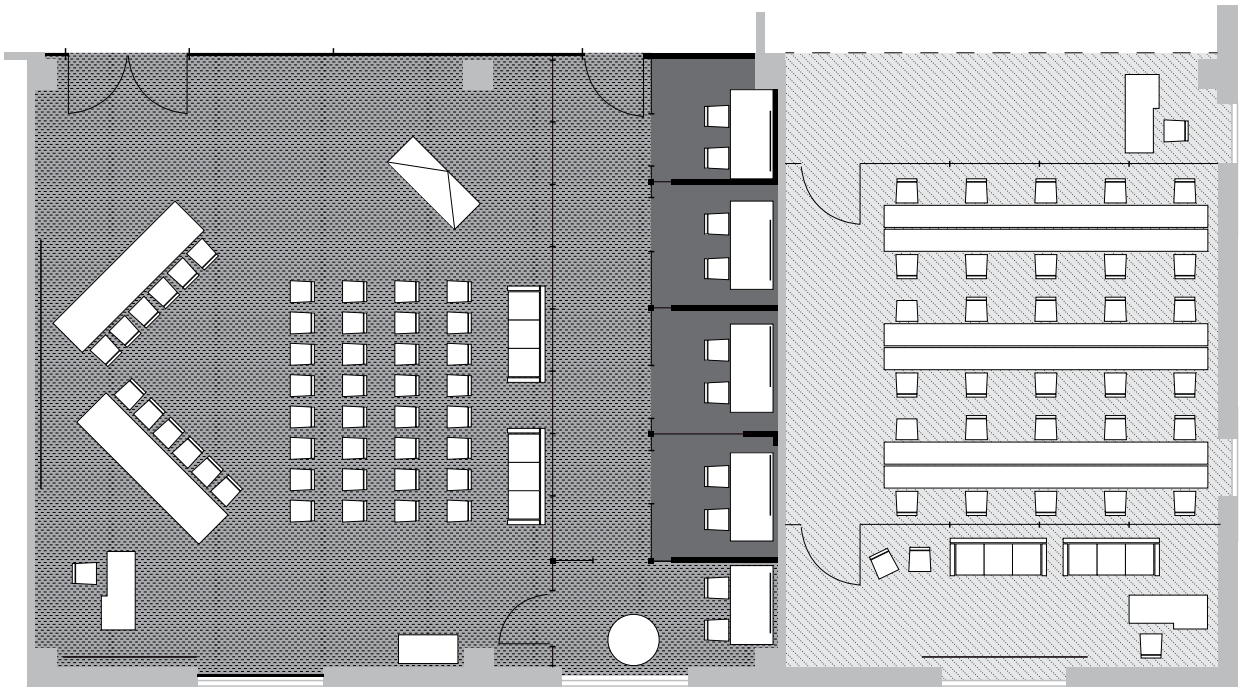

Figure B-1. A redesign schematic of RCC-223 and the adjacent computer lab.

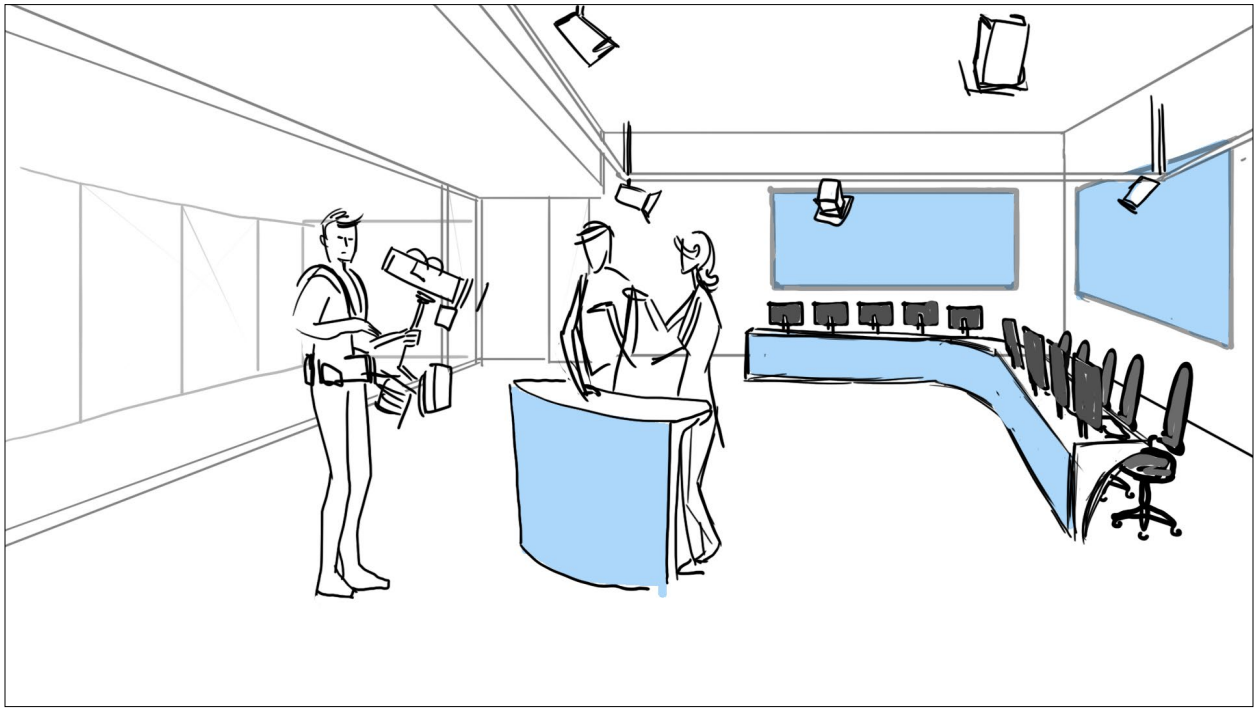

Figure B-2. An illustrated rendering of the proposed space in RCC-223 (by Stefan Grambart).

Appendix C – Site Visits

Figure C-1. Photos showcasing the hardware, amenities and set-up from our many site visits to gaming arenas and cafes around Toronto.

Appendix D – Branding, Architectural Renderings & Marketing Collateral

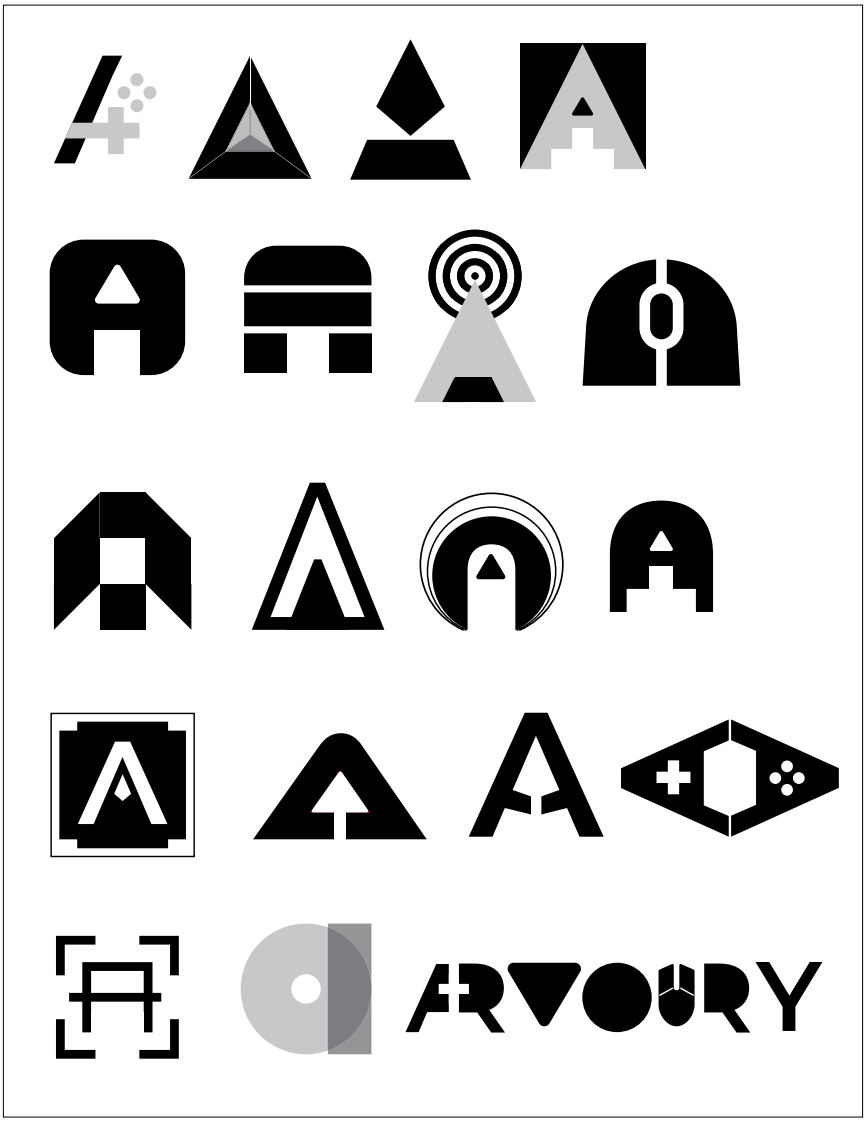

Figure D-1. A typical page of design concepts for *The Armoury* logomark.

Figure D-2. Standard *Armoury* logo clear space diagram. Clear space is determined by the width of the orange line in the logomark.

Figure D-3. Ryerson sub-brand lock-up with *The Armoury* logotype.

Figure D-4. Architectural rendering of *The Armoury* exterior (created by Alvin Huang).

FCAD
Faculty of Communication and Design

The Armoury

Gaming/Esports Lab at FCAD

Architectural Rendering

CONTEXT

The world of competitive video gaming is moving into the mainstream as the rise of popularity in online video games, live streaming, and professional leagues have paved the way for esports to reach nearly 500 million viewers in 2020, up 11.7% year over year.

Ryerson University is embracing esports culture and growth by creating the Armoury, a first of its kind centre for gamers, researchers, and industry partners to produce and develop innovation and opportunities in advancement of the industry. The collegiate gaming sector is a rapidly growing market, requiring partnerships to help drive creative collaboration between students, faculty, and esports professionals.

1. Interdisciplinary experiential learning
2. Centre of excellence in training
3. Development of teams & esports community
4. Professional congruence and skill-building

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Armoury at FCAD will consist of three separate areas: PC centre, live streaming booths, and console lounge. Each area specializes in different aspects of training, broadcasting and community building through a dedicated gaming space, research lab, and media production studio. The Armoury provides an opportunity for the University and student body to partner with industry experts to enrich hands-on learning, forwarding research, and development of commercial applications for esports.

Hardware and software provided by corporate partners will return performance data and analytics—useful for future revisions and updates. In this way, we would create a symbiotic ecosystem where the University, student body, and exterior partners would work closely with one another to further the ongoing success of varsity esports.

The Armoury welcomes industry partners who can offer domain-specific interest/expertise to collaborate on the development of our operational agenda. In turn, founding partners would receive data relevant to their business, public acknowledgment, and brand awareness, as well as a hand in developing the future of esports at the collegiate level.

Ryerson University | Faculty of Communication & Design

@ryersonfcad | ryerson.ca/fcad

Figure D-5. A two-page document intended for circulation among potential partners and investors prior to the digital groundbreaking event.

Appendix E – Community Interest

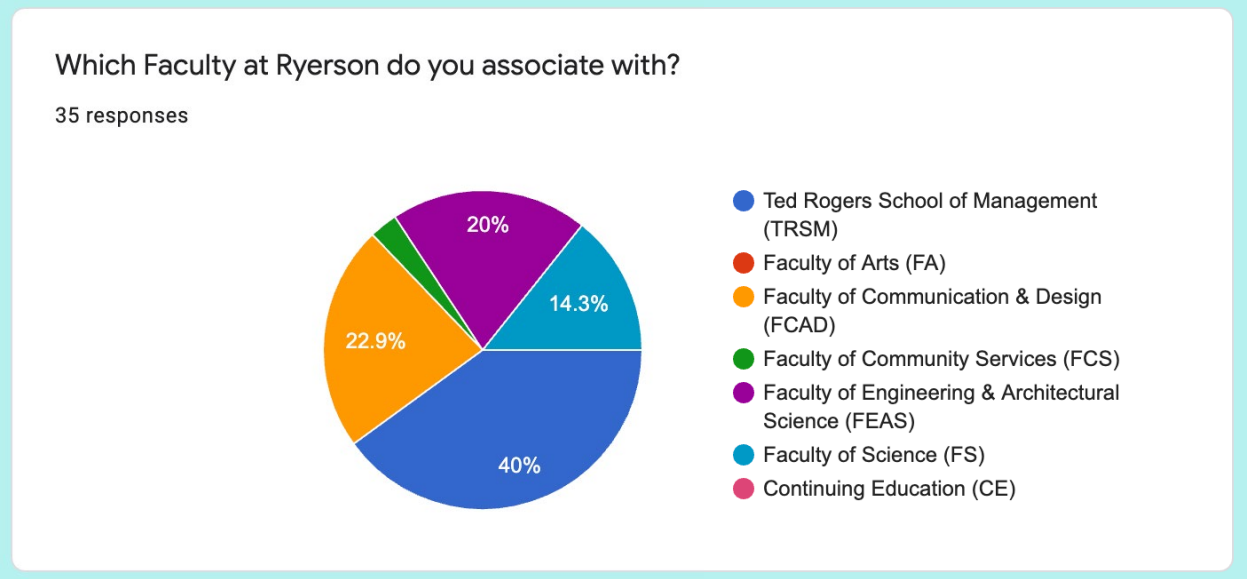

Figure E-1. A breakdown of the academic programs students are currently enrolled in who have expressed an interest in formal esports integration at Ryerson.

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