

# Are gamers athletes? Study examines perceptions of students on 'esports' scholarships

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College students have been banding together to play video games for decades. But the popularity of online gaming has grown so much that colleges are now offering athletic scholarships for "e-sports" participants. University of Kansas researchers have authored a study in which they interviewed e-sports athletes who compete at a university where they receive athletic scholarships for their gaming abilities. The study examined if the e-sports athletes do in fact consider themselves

athletes, what their motivations are for taking part in the new venture and if the experience adds to their social capital like that of a more traditional college athlete.

While many a parent has worried about their child failing out of school because of too much time with a game controller in hand, [students](#) are now earning scholarships specifically for their gaming skills. For the 2015-2016 school year, five schools in the U.S. were offering scholarships through their athletic departments to students to take part in e-sports. Dozens more have club teams in which students compete without scholarships. In 2015 ESPN2 first aired a show titled "Heroes of the Dorm" in which University of California-Berkeley students competed against Arizona State University in a multiplayer online battle arena game called "Heroes of the Storm."

The KU researchers interviewed 33 students on e-sports scholarships to learn more about their experiences and what the growing trend can mean for other institutions.

"They openly acknowledged there are stereotypes against e-sports athletes. Many people would say they're 'just a bunch of nerds,' but they viewed themselves as athletes," said Claire Schaeperkoetter, KU doctoral student and one of the study's authors. "They felt being part of a team contributed positively to their experience at the university."

The respondents cited their intense practice hours—as much as six hours a day, six days a week—the fact that they have coaches dedicated solely to working with them and the skills and focus required to compete at a high level as justifications for the athlete tag. The students compete, either remotely or at a shared location, against other teams in online, strategy-based games such as "Halo," "League of Legends" and "Heroes of the Storm."

The students' motivations for taking part varied, but one jumped out at the researchers. Like other star athletes, students had dreams of making a career out of their field of competition.

"One thing we were surprised by is that a lot of them said they wanted to go pro. Whether it was to continue playing and making money, or to meet people in the business and have a career in the industry. In that sense they're just like many other college athletes," said Jordan Bass, assistant professor of sport management and faculty adviser for the study.

Respondents said they also took up e-sports at the college level simply because they enjoyed gaming and wanted to continue in college, or the fact they were offered a scholarship sealed the deal.

College athletics have long been shown to help athletes and students gain [social capital](#) on their campuses. When asked if their e-sports participation helped in that regard, respondents said they formed strong relationships with teammates but didn't necessarily gain capital outside of the team within their university. They reported not interacting much with athletes from the school's other sporting programs, but they also attributed that largely to the intense time and emotional investments required for competition. The majority did report being proud to wear their school's athletic apparel on campus and represent their team, despite not necessarily gaining capital and inclusion through their participation.

The findings can help shed light on a growing field that will likely spread to more campuses in the near future. While there are only five schools offering scholarships as of the study, there are more tournaments taking place across the country every year, and more players are making money through online gaming and sponsorships. E-sports are not currently sanctioned by the NCAA or NAIA, but if they were, schools would face

a litany of questions to answer before deciding to add a program, or how to address questions facing current programs. Not least among them, students who can now win money through tournaments would have to meet amateur eligibility guidelines.

Before that happens, e-sports have a potential to be a recruiting tool and moneymaker for schools. Those offering scholarships through their athletic department are all relatively small, tuition-driven institutions.

"I can see a lot of small colleges and universities saying, 'This is a way we can attract students who wouldn't come to our school otherwise,'" Bass said.

Understanding the students' motivations could also help administrators boost student retention while avoiding a potentially high rate of burnout, as well as boosting sponsorship and strengthening the campus community as a whole, the authors wrote.

Schaeperkoetter, Bass and Brent Oja, a sport management doctoral graduate, presented the findings last month at the College Sport Research Institute conference in Columbia, South Carolina. They conducted the study with several other KU graduate students: Jon Mays, Kyle Krueger, Sean Hyland, Ron Christian and Zach Wilkerson.

A better understanding of e-sports, which many likely would not even consider sport, can help colleges and universities guide their way through a growing cultural and financial phenomenon.

"It doesn't matter if we think e-sports are actually sports or not," Bass said. "Athletic administrators across the country have determined it is sport. It's a highly competitive activity that requires a special set of skills. If we can accept that, it can give a whole new set of people a college sporting experience."

Provided by University of Kansas

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