

eSports in Indian Education: A Case Study

by

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B.S., University of Oklahoma, 2004
M.P.H., University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center, 2007

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2024

Abstract

This case study explores the experiences of student/players (n=2), coaches (n=2), faculty/staff advisors (n=2), and Lone Wolves' (n=6) experiences in eSports environments relevant to American Indian education¹ and cultures. Specifically, this study explored the intersection of eSports, 21st century skills, and Indigenous futurisms and was guided by theoretical frameworks of Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005), Indigenous futurisms (Dillon, 2012), and P21 Framework (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2019). This case study analyzed data from six individuals who are affiliated with higher education sponsored eSports programs, with added interviews of six players unaffiliated with sponsored eSports programs but still heavily engaged in eSports (i.e., Lone Wolves). Semi-structured interviews were used to explore individuals' perceptions associated with eSports programs at Southern Plains Tribal College, State University, and Lone Wolves operating in the unstructured "Wild West" of eSports. Findings showed that participants were experiencing growth in various specific 21st century skills, such as technological, global awareness, health literacy, and business. Indigenous values were also found to be part of structured eSports programs, as well as foundational ideas related to Indigenous futures and leadership. Findings also show that Indigenous ways of knowing are present in eSports through humor and re-imagining eSports futures, which privilege Indigenous voices, yet also revealed complex tensions of using Indian humor in unstructured environments. This humor shows up as a unique cultural layer of student/player experiences, but also presents a need for important conversations among educational leaders about ethics, racism, structure, and expectations when thinking about the differences between unstructured "Wild West" eSports environments, and programs sponsored by institutions of education.

¹ American Indian education is referred to hereafter as Indian education.

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Abstract

This case study explores the experiences of student/players (n=2), coaches (n=2), faculty/staff advisors (n=2), and Lone Wolves' (n=6) experiences in eSports environments relevant to American Indian education² and cultures. Specifically, this study explored the intersection of eSports, 21st century skills, and Indigenous futurisms and was guided by theoretical frameworks of Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005), Indigenous futurisms (Dillon, 2012), and P21 Framework (Partnership for 21 Century Skills, 2019). This case study analyzed data from six individuals who are affiliated with higher education sponsored eSports programs, with added interviews of six players unaffiliated with sponsored eSports programs but still heavily engaged in eSports (i.e., Lone Wolves). Semi-structured interviews were used to explore individuals' perceptions associated with eSports programs at Southern Plains Tribal College, State University, and Lone Wolves operating in the unstructured "Wild West" of eSports. Findings showed that participants were experiencing growth in various specific 21st century skills, such as technological, global awareness, health literacy, and business. Indigenous values were also found to be part of structured eSports programs, as well as foundational ideas related to Indigenous futures and leadership. Findings also show that Indigenous ways of knowing are present in eSports through humor and re-imagining eSports futures, which privilege Indigenous voices, yet also revealed complex tensions of using Indian humor in unstructured environments. This humor shows up as a unique cultural layer of student/player experiences, but also presents a need for important conversations among educational leaders about ethics, racism, structure, and expectations when thinking about the differences between unstructured "Wild West" eSports environments, and programs sponsored by institutions of education.

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Acknowledgements

First, I wish to acknowledge and extend my sincere Aho (Thanks) to my committee chair, Dr. Alex Red Corn, for his guidance and nurturing approach to mentorship through my education path and doctoral path. He exposed me to many educational opportunities that I never thought possible. I am grateful for all he has taught me, especially about Indigenous educational leadership and how to use it in my studies, research, and presentations. I am grateful to him for the encouragement of putting myself out there in spaces that were unfamiliar and at times scary, but his support gave me confidence to continue my work as an Indigenous scholar.

Second, I wish to acknowledge and extend my sincere Aho to Dr. Cornel Pewewardy, as he is the one who inquired about my interest in pursuing a doctoral degree and introduced me to Dr. Alex Red Corn. If not for the introduction, I do not think I would have pursued a doctorate in Educational Leadership. Learning the ropes of academia was a daily lesson, and I would not be the educator and researcher I am now if it wasn't for Dr. Pewewardy. Traveling and speaking with him was, and is, an honor and I look forward to much more collaboration.

Third, I wish to acknowledge and extend a sincere Aho to my committee, Drs. Royce Ann Collins, Jerry Johnson, Robert Hachiya, and Deepak Subramony, for their support and encouragement in pursuing my research in eSports. eSports is something I am truly enthusiastic about and have felt much comfort and confidence in researching the topic. I also want to acknowledge and extend a sincere Aho to my colleagues/friends who have supported me throughout my doctoral process, Drs. Susan Faircloth, Hollie Mackey, Anna Lees, Anthony Craig, Daniella Sutherland, Loni Crumb, Jenny Seelig, and Lisa Tatonetti.

Last, I would like to say Aho to my cohort members. There were times when we laughed and cried together during the doctoral process. In the end, they helped me make sense of the process and encouraged me to trust the process.

Dedication

I wish to give a big shoutout to my family through this journey, who have constantly shown me LOVE and support from the day I submitted my application to my defense. To my Dad, Bill, who is here in spirit, and my Mom, Donna, Aho for teaching me and encouraging me to keep going whether it was on the baseball field or in the classroom, I always heard nothing but positive encouragement. To my Sister, Amanda, Aho for always supporting and making sure I had what I needed to succeed in my program, whether it was a book or technology equipment, you made sure I had it. To my Brother, Tennyson, Aho for the long nights of editing my papers and giving me insight into critical questions I needed help with. For my entire family, Aho for traveling this doctoral road with me!

As Green Day's song, Good Riddance, says, "It's something unpredictable, but in the end it's right. I hope you had the time of your life." If you ask me, I did!

Chapter 1 - Introduction

It was 2005, and I was driving back to my apartment from Walmart as I had just purchased the new Xbox 360 gaming console along with the new NCAA Football 2005 video game. I had cleared my schedule the rest of the afternoon and completed my sociology homework earlier that morning. The last time I bought a new video game, I remember playing for fifteen hours straight without any breaks. I hooked up the console's cables to the television, signed into my Xbox online account, and proceeded to set up a 1v1 football game with another online gamer. As we exchanged pleasantries on our headsets, I remember him yelling, "You ready for this 1v1 and this butt-kicking?" Ahh, the banter of eSports, and life in the digital Wild West³ as Lone Wolf⁴.

The term Wild West is discussed later in this study. It refers to the unstructured eSports ecosystems of online gaming, where coarse language appears at times to be the norm (also discussed later in the study).

Fast forward to 2022, and my major professor and I are having lunch at Harry Carey's Steakhouse in Chicago, as we were in town for the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Conference as attendees and presenters. I recall that I was making headway on my original dissertation proposal, but our conversation that day changed the whole trajectory of where I was headed with my research, which in the long run seemed like a better fit and more enjoyable research. I had originally planned to see what the perceptions of Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) principals' perceptions of change during the evolution of COVID-19, but our

³ Term my gaming friends/gamers/I use to reference gaming outside of structured eSports programs, which is the type gaming that I engage in the most at this point in my life.

⁴ Video gamers who play outside of structured eSports programs, who value independence.

conversations always seemed to tilt towards video games, maybe it was because I always brought my Nintendo Switch with me whenever I traveled to conferences and always had it in my hands when I was unwinding in the evenings in my hotel rooms. My major professor is a self-identified novice gamer, but we always talked about both his son and me being gamers. As we ordered our burgers, I remember him saying, “You know you always seem enthusiastic when you talk about video games, and you talk about these schools that are constructing these eSports programs, specifically the boarding school you previously taught.” As I listened to those words, I thought, “Man, I guess I am. I mean, I’ve gamed for the past 35 years or so, and won a few gaming tournaments, and was ranked high on online college football video games.” Then he asked me the question that changed my thinking and direction. “What would you say if you changed your dissertation to eSports in Indian education?” and so it began.

This case study explores the lived experiences of students/players⁵ (n=2), coach (n=2), faculty/staff advisors⁶ (n=2) and Lone Wolves (n=6) with associations to eSports program at two institutions of higher education serving Native students, with an affiliated interview study of Native Lone Wolves qualitative comparison. Here, I begin with a brief background on Indian education systems, followed by a brief overview of the growing eSports movement in education. This is followed by a rationale for this research, my research purpose and questions, and then

⁵ Since eSports typically refers to these participants as “players,” I will most often use this term but wanted to start with the term student, to emphasize that they are students at educational institutions.

⁶ Since faculty/staff are labeled as advisors for eSports programs, I will most often use faculty/staff but wanted to start with faculty/staff advisors to emphasize roles of faculty/staff.

theoretical frameworks, methodological frameworks, limitations, delimitations, and glossary of key definitions.

Background of Indian Education

While educational systems existed in and across Indigenous communities long before Euroamericans ever arrived on the shores and started settling what is now called the United States (RedCorn et al., 2023), many educational ecosystems speak of formal Indian education “beginning” during the Federal Indian Boarding School Era (1819-1956). As Szasz (1999) explains, “the Bureau of Indian Affairs became involved in Indian education in the late nineteenth century when the United States Government accepted its responsibilities for educating the Native American” (p. 1). These responsibilities not only included forced learning of written and spoken English and Eurocentric religion and agriculture, but a process of stripping one’s culture in what General Richard Henry Pratt saw Indian boarding schools as a way to take the “Indian” out of the student (Reyhner & Eder, 2017). It is in this process, Reyhner and Eder (2017) explain “missionaries, in their ethnocentric zeal, assumed that once exposed to Christianity, ‘civilization,’ and the English language, Native peoples would be eager to change their lives for the better” (p. 4). With over 400 boarding schools in operation in the United States and Canada during this era of attempted cultural genocide, Indigenous students were forcibly transported across the country, sometimes thousands of miles to a foreign environment, which many students, sadly, never made the trek back to their homelands.

It is this process of assimilation that many Indigenous peoples are still wrestling with, as these colonial entanglements (Dennison, 2012; RedCorn, 2016; 2017; 2022) of the past continue to manifest in today’s modern educational systems. As Calderon (2009) argues, “education in the United States today is not merely a legacy of the colonial project – it is a functionary arm of

colonialism that acts to absorb even progressive educational movements” (p. 53). This process of assimilation, curriculum, methodologies, and pedagogy was predicated on Eurocentric views. As Szasz (2003) argues, “course work in boarding schools was usually unrelated to the environment and culture form which the student came from” (p. 2).

Whether these conditions were accepted or hidden from view, the Merriam Report (1928) sheds a light on Indian education at the time. According to Szasz (2003), “the report attacked the physical conditions of the boarding schools, the enrollment of preadolescent children, and the inadequacy of the personnel” (p. 3). The Merriam Report (1928) provided an in-depth view of Indian education at that time and offered a sharp criticism of the damage being done by the boarding school system. While this helped start the process of changing the narrative and purpose of what boarding schools would look like, changes were slow, as evident in the 1969 Kennedy Report entitled *Indian Education: A National Tragedy – A National Challenge* (Committee on Labor and Public Welfare – U.S. Senate, 1969; Szasz, 1999). As you will read more about in Chapter 2, these boarding school systems for American Indian children, have evolved with a new mission and vision in the current context which places value on cultural and language learning. Additionally, while there are still assimilationist tendencies in our systems of education, the last 50 years have seen a slow evolution in prioritizing tribal sovereignty in education, allowing Native nations to exert more autonomy over their tribal futures, as in the case of the growth in tribal colleges in this country.

Background of eSports

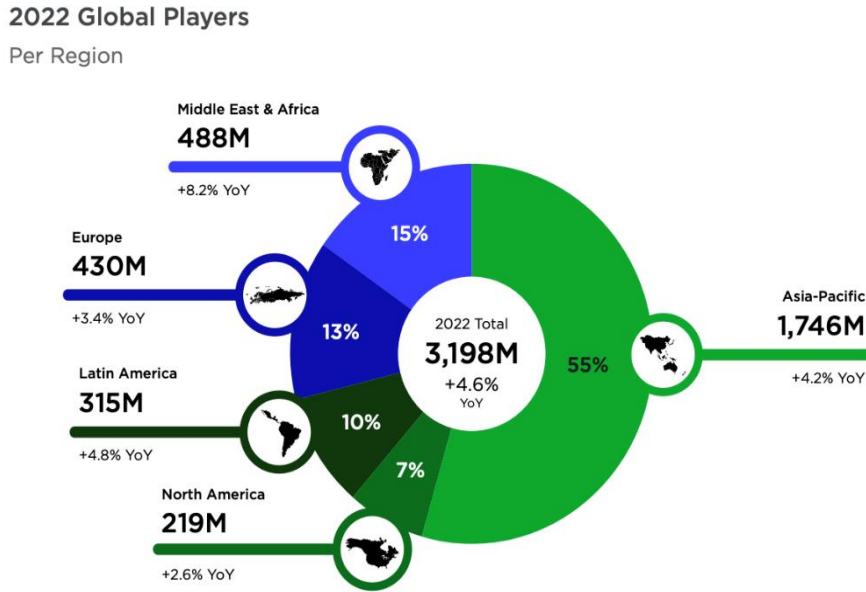
eSports, or electronic sports, video games began as recreational activities for casual gamers, and early on were played without goals of world championships, cash prizes, or the limelight of televised gaming tournaments. This recreational play also preceded the explosion of

streaming venues broadcasting eSports tournaments around the world. However, this recreational activity has evolved from fringe activity to a popular sport entertainment product (Funk et al., 2017) over the last fifty years. Looking through history, there is considerable debate when the earliest account of an official eSports competition took place, with many arguing that it took place in October of 1972 with Stanford University advertising the first *'Intergalactic Spacewar Olympics'* (Phillips, 2020; Rohan, 2022; Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019), which saw the participation of five students. Others will argue the first eSports venture was birthed in 1958. As Scholz (2019) argues, “eSports was developed at MIT on an analog computer as *Tennis for Two* launched the first multiplayer game that had the characteristic of being played with a joystick and offered two players to play against each other” (pp. 19-20). Although many gaming enthusiasts point to the 1950s and 1970s as the starting point of eSports, public access to gaming opportunities was limited as video games and consoles were not mass marketed as they are today.

According to World Football Summit (2022), a leader in industry evolution, “as of July 2022, there is an estimate of 3,198 million players in the world (a number expected to reach 3,534 million by 2025) where 55% are in Asia-Pacific, 13% in Europe, and only 7% in North America” (p. 1), as seen in Figure 1. While the number of eSports players in North America appear to be increasing, institutions, specifically, high schools in the United States are also joining the movement as more than 8,600 high schools have started video-gaming teams since 2018 after the National Federation of State High School Associations recognized the sport. There are more than 20,000 high schools nationwide (Morrison, 2022).

Figure 1

Number of eSports Players (Globally)



Note. The number of eSports gamers continues to rise as seen in Image 2, with Asia-Pacific having the highest number of players. From the *World Football Summit*, November 8, 2022.

As indicated in Figure 1, the expected number of eSports players is on the rise, as it has started to become a mainstay phenomenon in societal circles. For this reason, Wimmer et al. (2021) argue, “it was only a logical step that first attempts were made to integrate the topic of eSports into everyday school life” (p. 578). Bringing eSports into school teaching and learning has shown value in enhancing student learning, as Baud (2023) explains:

Increasingly, educators and librarians are recognizing the value of role-playing games to bolster SEL [socio-emotional learning] skills among their students. The inherent elements of collaboration, relationship building, and creativity in the game world help to strengthen those very same strengths in the real world. (p. 1)

This movement and growth with eSports also have an inherent overlap with the growing attention on preparing students with 21st century skills (e.g., P21 Framework). According to Kim et al. (2019), “the 21st-century skillset is generally understood to encompass a range of competencies, including critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, meta-cognition, communication, digital and technological literacy, civic responsibility, and global awareness” (p. 99). Not only are social-emotional learning skills enhanced by incorporating eSports in student classroom learning, but eSports education is instrumental in building and cultivating 21st century Skills in developing character and practical skill sets, which have a profound problem-solving capability to excel in it (Industry Articles, n.d.).

Existing research on eSports has indicated that eSports is instrumental in the development and growth of students’ practical skill sets. According to Hennick (2019):

For years, eSports has been a fringe activity relegated to recreational activities. However, recently (specifically) during COVID-19, educational institutions have seen a rise in the adoption of game-based learning into the classroom, as the perceived educational benefits are the driving force behind the intersection of eSports and education with the past year seeing an increase of involvement in high schools, from 200 schools to more than 1200 in the United States. (p. 1)

While many teacher educators have some familiarity with eSports as a tool of instruction, there is pause in how game-based learning is utilized by teachers. According to Negrin-Medina et al. (2022), “teachers who are digital migrants may experience difficulties with students, which new teachers, who are already considered digital natives, do not. Therefore, teachers of older generations often need more training to meet these challenges” (p. 2). Not every teacher will be able to effectively use eSports in their classroom instruction to the benefit of student learning, as

many older instructors are new to digitizing their classroom instruction. Sheninger (2019) describes how, “the stakes have become higher as changes in a globally connected world are far outpacing those in our schools. The proliferation of technology in the world is making it much more difficult to engage our students” (p. 58). This illustrates how the need for professional development and training workshops should be implemented into educational institutions as eSports is becoming a new instructional technique that benefits not only student learning but instruction as well.

While these skill sets mentioned above are not exhaustive, other skills developed through eSports include information, media, and technology skills, life and career skills, as well as learning and innovation skills. Other technology education frameworks include the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE; Trus, 2018) and Standards for Educators (Brooks-Young, 2017).

While the intersection of Indigenous ways of knowing and eSports has minimal research, *Indigenous futurisms* is a point of emphasis in the fields of Indigenous studies and Indigenous education. Unpacking Indigenous futurisms, LaPensée (2018) explains:

It was coined by Anishinaabe scholar Grace L. Dillon in 2003 to articulate how Indigenous expression conveys Indigenous scientific teachings, Indigenous futurisms refers to honoring the past and living fully in the present to enact futures for the next generations. (p. 1)

With what we know about the growth of eSports globally and how emerging research is showing how eSports are developing critical skills associated with future readiness and 21st century skill development, there is value in exploring how this unfolds in Indigenous specific learning contexts. In particular, there is value in exploring how eSports skills and knowledge

development influences how Indigenous students envision Indigenous futurisms and the necessary skills to lead in the future. While current eSports discourse is centered around student learning, it is also important to explore how educators perceive this new way of instruction combined with the development of digital leaders using eSports as a vehicle for change.

Rationale

eSports has been on the outer fringes of student learning for years, as video games have been around for the past 50 years or so with the focus of playing for entertainment. However, in those 50 years, since the creation of the first eSports game, the number of eSports gamers have grown, and eSports have found their way into our educational ecosystems. Only recently has the focus changed from entertainment to topics of inquiry such as the benefits of eSports in student learning, and there is minimal literature on this as it relates to relevance of Indigenous ways of knowing in eSports contexts. Therefore, there is a need for more research at the intersection of technology and Indigenous ways of knowing emphasizing, 21st century skills, and Indigenous futurisms.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this case study is to examine an eSports program at two institutions of higher education serving Native students (Southern Plains Tribal College and State University) and how the players (n=2), coaches (n=2), and faculty/staff (n=2) perceive eSports in educational learning. Specifically, this study examines how 21st century skills and Indigenous cultures and futurisms are conceptualized and experienced through the practice of eSports programming.

Through this qualitative case study, three critical questions drove this inquiry:

1. How do participants describe and experience their growth/learning participating in an eSports program as it relates to 21st century skills?

2. How do participants describe their visions for the future as Indigenous leaders in an increasingly digital world?

3. How do Indigenous cultures present themselves in an eSports learning environment?

Additionally, through the execution of these research questions as a case study, there were some key delays in coordinating IRB approval processes across multiple institutions. Recognizing encroaching summer timelines and decreased activities in eSports programming, and the need to gather more data to deepen the research, opportunities arose to interview Native Lone Wolves (n=6) who identified as gamers but were not part of a program. The Lone Wolves were added in the fourth week of the study, therefore, the following question was added to explore lived experiences outside of the above case through a supplemental interview study (Bhattacharya, 2017).

4. How do the lived experiences of “Lone Wolf” players offer a deeper understanding of eSports social environments as it relates to the institutionally sponsored program experiences explored in questions 1-3?

Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks

Here I outline the core theoretical frameworks I employed in this study, Indigenous futurisms (2012), 21st century skills (P21 Framework) (2009), and Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005). Following a discussion of each theoretical framework, I discuss my methodology and methods for this study.

Indigenous futurisms

With the ongoing and evolving emphasis on technology in educational ecosystems, schools serving Indigenous communities and nations are also weaving Indigenous ways into the classrooms as they intersect with Indigenous futurisms. Lidchi & Newman-Fricke (2019)

explain, “Indigenous futurisms use the images, ideology, and themes in science fiction to envision a future from a Native (Indigenous) perspective and create a newly valid... way to renew, recover, and extend First Nations peoples’ voices and traditions” (p. 99). While Indigenous futurisms aim to create a future where Indigenous teachings are commonplace, it is a deliberate attempt to show how Indigenous peoples’ knowledge are vital and deserved to be included in Eurocentric teachings. According to James (2016),

Indigenous futurism is a deliberate, intentional, and purpose-driven position that addresses not only inclusion but intersectionality for its protagonists and themes. While not limited to portraying heroines, it explores the vital role of young women in coming worlds that, while difficult and dangerous, are neither random nor pointless. In doing so, these fictions question received ideas of agency, gender, and ethnicity, uses of violence and technology, and even the meaning of survival and triumph, while extending more nuanced concepts of tradition, community, scientific exploration, environmental and social consciousness, power, and responsibility. (p. 152)

While Indigeneity is an integral part of Indigenous futurisms, it is much deeper, as Indigenous peoples are pushing back against broader colonial narratives. According to Henry (2022),

Indigenous futurisms is exploring the various ways in which Indigenous peoples are using their own technological traditions – their worldviews, their languages, their stories, and their kinship – serves as the guiding principles in imagining possible futures for Indigenous communities and their members. This is being done across a variety of mediums, including but not limited to video games and digital media, literary works, comics, and the visual arts. (p. 54)

This weaving of Indigenous technological ways of knowing into possible futures includes having Indigenous voices and perspectives in the designing and implementation of video games such as *Never Alone* (Kisima Ingitchuna), which is the first game developed in collaboration with the Iñupiat, an Alaska Native people. Nearly 40 Alaska Native elders, storytellers, and community members contributed to the development of the game. Other video games such as *Assassin's Creed 3* have infused Indigenous voices into game design and gameplay. The main character in *Assassin's Creed 3* is of Mohawk descendance and game designers hired individuals from the Mohawk Kanien'kehá:ka Onkwawén:na Raotitióhkwa Language and Cultural Center to provide assistance in helping them make decisions on what was and what was not appropriate to depict in the game such as clothes, jewelry, and music. While these games are not necessarily the focus of the games being played at Southern Plains Tribal College and State University, where this research was conducted, they represent the ongoing assertion of Indigenous futurisms and innovation that are a focus of this study.

21st Century Skills

Due to globalization and advancements of technology, schools are encouraged to implement 21st century skills into curriculum and instruction as employers have an eagerness for individuals who exhibit what are known as 21st century skills (P21 Framework). According to Stehle and Peters-Burton (2019), “not only do 21st century skills help students be successful in all areas of formal school, but these skills are also necessary for a person to adapt and thrive in an ever-changing world” (p. 2). This study focused on the Partnership for 21st Century Skills P21 model (2009), which emphasizes 1) Life and Career Skills, 2) Learning and Innovation Skills, 3) Information, Media, and Technology Skills, and 4) Core Subjects and 21st Century Themes.

With 21st century skills, we must be cognizant of the core tenets utilized in developing these skills, which include life and career skills, learning and innovation skills, and information, media, and technology skills, core subjects and 21 century themes. Within these paradigms, Partnership for 21st century skills (2009) argue, “within the context of core knowledge instruction, students must also learn the essential skills for success in today’s world, such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication and collaboration” (p. 1). From my experiences as a teacher educator, I have always maintained that eSports and other video games expose individuals to skill sets that can be useful in their future or work areas.

Tribal Critical Race Theory

Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) is also used to position my research project within an Indigenous space, an extension of scholarship associated with a larger family of theories in Critical Race Theory (CRT) created from legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Allan Freeman, and Richard Delgado, among others. Crotty (1998) argues, “Critical Theory suggests a coherent body of thought but given the turbulent history of the Institute and the varied backgrounds, widely different disciplines, and strong personalities of its membership, it would be most surprising if a unified approach, and therefore a ‘School’ in the true sense of the word, had emerged” (p. 130). CRT is situated in the core idea that racism is endemic, and assimilationist aims of settler-colonialism continue to be an issue. To meet the needs of Indigenous Peoples, TribalCrit emphasizes that colonization and its original trajectory are still in motion and embedded in American society.

Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) finds its roots in Critical Race Theory (CRT), which evolved during the Civil Rights Movements. Taylor (1998) explains:

Critical race theory is an eclectic and dynamic form of legal scholarship that evolved in the 1970s in response to the stalled progress of traditional civil rights litigation to produce meaningful racial reform. The founders of the critical race theory movement include such legal scholars as Derrick Bell, Charles Lawrence, Lani Guinier, Richard Delgado, Mari Matsuda, Patricia Williams, and Kimberle Crenshaw. Topics addressed encompass affirmative action, race-conscious districting, campus speech codes, and disproportionate sentencing of racial minorities in the criminal justice system. (p. 1)

Below are the five major components or tenets of CRT:

1. The notion that racism is ordinary and not aberrational.
2. The idea of an interest convergence.
3. The social construction of race.
4. The idea of storytelling and counter-storytelling.
5. The notion that whites have actually been recipients of civil rights legislation.

CRT interrogates issues affecting racial minorities but is limited, as it is not inclusive of other issues affecting minorities, such as colonialization. Brayboy (2005) argues,

While CRT serves as a framework in and of itself, it does not address the specific needs of tribal peoples because it does not address American Indians' liminality as both legal/political and racialized beings or the experience of colonization. CRT was originally developed to address the Civil Rights issues of African American people. (p. 4)

As CRT emphasizes the experiences of African American peoples, Indigenous peoples share some of those experiences but also have other unique nuanced layers not shared by these communities.

Brayboy (2005) asserts that, “much of what TribalCrit offers as an analytical lens is a new and more culturally nuanced way of examining the lives and experiences of tribal peoples since contact with Europeans over 500 years ago” (p. 430). Calderon (2019) also argues, “TribalCrit is a powerful tool that we should continue to use to expose the complex positioning of Indigenous peoples in the context of colonialism on the one hand and Indigenous traditions, knowledges, and inherent rights to self-government on the other” (p. 2). Below are the nine tenets Brayboy includes in TribalCrit.

1. Colonization is endemic to society.
2. U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and desire for material gain.
3. Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of our identities.
4. Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification.
5. The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens.
6. Governmental policies and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation.
7. Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups.
8. Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real, and legitimate sources of data and ways of being.

9. Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change.

With Tribal Crit as an area of focus in this study, this study is also inherently informed by Indigenous research methodologies (Smith, 2021). Indigenizing this research study provides a unique way of thinking how colonization has had lasting and damaging effects on Indigenous cultures, both physically, mentally, and culturally. Indigenous methodologies incorporate our knowledge, oral and written histories, beliefs, ways, etc., into discourse to provide cultural knowledge and ways of thinking. It is the community that is at the forefront as far as research is concerned. As Smith (2021) explains, “the idea of community is defined or imagined in multiple ways: as physical, political, social, psychological, historical, linguistic, economic, cultural, and spiritual spaces” (p. 146). Interviewees hail from Native communities, and they are the descendants of individuals who may have suffered historical and psychological effects with different forms of change. These Indigenous specific contexts are ever present in this study, as well.

Methodological Frameworks: Case Study and Supplemental Interview Study

For this research study, I use what Stake (1994) would call an intrinsic case as “the researcher wants a better understanding of this particular case” (p. 136). For this specific case study, the case is defined as two eSports programs in higher education that share similar contexts and units of study, players (n=2), coaches (n=2), and faculty/staff (n=2) in institutionally sponsored higher education programs. The specific bounds of the case were over the course of eight weeks of data collection across those two programs. Bhattacharya (2017) explains, “this type of research involves in-depth contextual study of a person, people, issue, and place, within a predetermined scope of study” (p. 26).

According to Merriam (1988), “case study research in education seeks to understand specific issues and problems of practice” (p. 23). The history of case studies is embedded across many disciplines and time. Flyvbjerg (2011) explains, “case studies have been around as long as recorded history and today they account for a large proportion of books and articles in psychology, anthropology, sociology, history, political science, education, economics, management, biology, and medical science” (p. 302). Using a case study to analyze eSports in educational spaces, such as Southern Plains Tribal College and State University, will assist in understanding why and how eSports is seen as beneficial to student learning, while understanding the intersection of eSports and cultural identity. Within this case study, I collected data through interviews and artifacts. Documentation of all relevant participant data was utilized in this case to further explain who the participants are and their association with the eSports program.

Interviewing

According to Merriam (1988), “in case study research of contemporary education, some and occasionally all of the data are collected through interviews. The most common form of interviews is the person-to-person encounter in which one person elicits information from another” (p. 71), which I employed as the primary means of data collection during the research study. Desiring to achieve rich understandings of the eSports program at institutions of higher education, construction of interview questions underwent a demystification process. According to Bhattacharya (2017):

There are various ways of asking questions during the interviews. Your theoretical perspective, research purpose and questions, and information gained from literature review should guide your constructions of interview questions. However, since

qualitative research, to a large extent, is about reconstructing narratives shared by participants, the best interviews are those that help generate rich, thick descriptive stories, which contribute to an in-depth understanding of the topic of your study. (p. 132)

Having a long-standing background of being a video gamer, my interest lies in the eclectic stories each participant brings to the table of their experiences being associated with an eSports program. As Seidman (2019) writes, “in doing interview research, we clearly are using our participants as a means to accomplish our ends. But we can begin to treat participants as ends in themselves when we express real interest in their stories” (p. 150). As many times, I have been in online video game chat rooms and heard other gamers speak about their likes and dislikes of gaming, this study presents an organized process of observing and listening through interviews of how eSports benefit student learning and what role culture plays through eSports.

Additionally, due to IRB processes found across multiple institutions which delayed data collection, the encroachment of summer vacations and ceremonies created the need to explore additional data collection to deepen the research. With this in mind, there was an opportunity to add six Native Lone Wolves as mentioned above in research question 4. These participants received the same interview questions as the participants in sponsored programs within the case, but this was conducted in a more traditional interview study, Rubin and Rubin (2012), assert:

When using in-depth qualitative interviewing, one of the key naturalistic research methods, researchers talk to those who have knowledge of or experience with the problem of interest Through such interviews, researchers explore in detail the experiences, motives, and opinions of others and learn to see the world from perspectives other than their own. (p. 3)

This form of data collection was the primary means used in this study in exploring

eSports program in Indian education.

Artifact Collection and Personal Memos

Artifact and Personal Memos are an integral part of this research study, as I engaged participants in a variety of capacities (i.e., gamer, interviewer, teacher, learner, etc.). During this study, I was the interviewer, however. Bhattacharya (2017) argues, “regardless of whether a qualitative researcher is an active or passive participant in the event, the researcher is a participant in the environment that s/he is observing by being present in the environment” (p. 52). No matter how I was received by the gamers, just introducing my presence to the program shaped my participatory role. As described by Saldana (2021), I constantly engaged in personal and analytic memo-ing after interviews, always remembering as Saldana (2021) writes, “memos are data; as such they, too, can be coded, categorized...” (p. 59). During the interviews, as topics were brought up, I inquired about various artifacts that might be associated with eSports and gaming experiences. Examples include information about gaming consoles, video games, video game characters, eSport conferences, programmatic materials, and processes, etc.

However, with the priority of Indigenous ways of knowing being embedded into this research design, while I was interested in systematically collecting information to deepen our collective understanding of the research questions, I first prioritized local Indigenous cultural protocols and built relationships in appropriate ways. In other words, gathering and collecting information was not the top priority, but a secondary or tertiary benefit of building relationships and being part of a community in a good way, culturally speaking.

Coding

Data analysis from interview transcripts and personal memos was conducted through the NVIVO platform. The NVIVO platform was my primary program for coding and memos. Before

doing a deep dive into coding transcripts, a pre-coding process was conducted, as to never overlook the opportunity to pre-code by circling, highlighting, bolding, underlining, or coloring rich or significant participant quotes or passages that strike you – those ‘codable moments’ worthy of attention (Boyatzis, 1998).

Using an inductive coding approach, as Saldana (2021) explains, “coding inductively is entering the analytic enterprise with as an open mind as possible – a ‘learn as you go’ approach that spontaneously creates original codes the first-time data are reviewed” (p. 41). Due to in-person interviews, the use of in vivo coding method to accurately capture participant voices as Saldana (2021) explains, “in vivo coding is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for beginning qualitative researchers learning how to code data, and studies that prioritize and honor the participants voice” (p. 138).

Using the methodological framework of a case study afforded me opportunities to understand how an eSports program is structured and organized and what knowledge and experiences participants glean while participating in eSports. From observing and memos, to interviewing, to coding, I gained a deeper understanding of an Indigenous eSports program.

Significance of Study

While eSports has been around for decades, specifically, the 1970s, eSports is played by many different ethnicities and cultures including Indigenous peoples. However, there is not much written of case studies of an educational institution’s eSports program, specially, at institutions of higher education serving Native institutions. There appears to be a gap in the literature regarding how eSports is being implemented in classroom spaces and how eSports is beneficial to teaching and student learning, while including diverse Indigenous perspectives.

This study adds to a growing body of literature at the intersection of eSports and Indigenous ways of knowing, which appears in its infancy. More specifically, it seeks to explain how institutions of higher education serving Native students are incorporating eSports into student learning, into traditional teachings, teacher and student perspectives, and developing 21st century skills necessary to navigate future careers and ideas.

Other higher education institutions, i.e., the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), are currently in development or implementation stages of an eSports program. Many institutions are realizing how eSports can enhance not only gaming skills but also those of 21st century and leadership skills and help grow cultural knowledge through Indigenous futurisms and Indigenous educational frameworks. The growth of eSports programs and players is on the rise due to various reasons such as education benefits, university scholarships, social components, etc., while the number of gamers is increasing, having reached into the high millions of global gamers. While eSports is new to educational institutions, many are adapting to the change of time and using game-based tools in their praxis.

Subjectivity Statement

I am of the Plains Indians, more specifically, I am an enrolled citizen of the Apache Tribe of Oklahoma, with affiliations to the Kiowa, and Choctaw Nations of Oklahoma. I come from the Red Tipi Clan of the Kiowa Tribe through the Tsoodle family, and I also from the Mopope, Goombi, and Wolf families of the Kiowa Tribe. I am Indigenous, but I am also Caucasian and Hispanic. Even though I am mixed, I am Indigenous in my heart and on paper.

When I say I am an avid gamer, I do not say this lightly as I own almost every gaming system ever invented starting with the original ATARI 2600 gaming system released in 1977.

From time to time, I still unpack the system from my closet and play for hours such games as *Combat*, *Space Invaders*, Baseball, etc. I still remember receiving my first gaming system for Christmas. It was 1985, and my parents asked me what I wanted as my big present. I told them I wanted this game system I saw from a television commercial. I remember tearing the wrapping off the box and seeing the original Nintendo console lighting up my eyes, as I could not wait to play for days on end. One could say my gaming hobby began in 1985 and has continued to this day.

Throughout the years, when gaming entities would advertise their new systems, I would immediately begin saving money to purchase the console the first day it was available in stores. I will admit that I have stood in line for hours to purchase a game system. Currently, I own nearly twenty-five game systems ranging from the newest Xbox Series X, PlayStation 5, and the Nintendo Switch to older ones not in production anymore, like Dreamcast, Sega Saturn, Nintendo Game Cube, etc. And, I just purchased an unopened Star Wars Xbox 360 connect, which sells for about \$500 on eBay. I like to refer to myself as a gaming enthusiast, but I have been referred to as a gaming junkie, who plays video games twenty-four-seven.

There is a difference between types of gamers, and I have floated between recreational, competitive, and Lone Wolf. I have been a recreational gamer almost all my life, which means I just play video games for entertainment and relaxation. I experimented with the competitive side of gaming for a few years with various football video games. When I say competitive, I played in tournaments and 1v1 games for cash prizes, championships, bragging rights, etc. I truly played in competitive games to test myself against online players to see how good I was at football video games.

Today, I only play video games for recreation and to relax from my coursework and job-related tasks. The days of being a competitive video gamer are long past, as it became an obsession in some ways, as I would “jump” online and play a 1v1 competitive game for money or bragging rights, but I also have that Lone Wolf mentality, where on some days I am in the mood to play solo and ignore any game invites or any opportunities to play with a team. I used to play games like *Left 4 Dead*, where I would love playing 4v4 games, but as the team I ran with a few years ago started to go our separate ways, I started to play as a Lone Wolf. An added reason is that I did not find any games that I saw as interesting to the point where I wanted to run with a group of gamers. I started to find games that I found fun and interesting just playing the game by myself. Games that find me playing more and more as a Lone Wolf include *Minecraft*, *Mario Go Kart*, and *Red Dead Redemption*.

In addition to gaming, for the past thirteen years, I have served in various capacities of Indian education, from teacher, instructor, director, evaluator, student, scholar, etc. These positions have afforded me the opportunity of being an insider, as eSports, Indigenous ways, and 21st century skills inform not only this study but my praxis, scholarship, and research as well. Even though I have played video games for over three decades, I consider myself to be an outsider in actively participating in an institution’s eSports program as I have never been associated with an organized program at an educational institution. My experiences with eSports have always been a solo endeavor without any teammates, external coaching, organized structure, etc. If I do run in a group that is playing eSports, it is in an unstructured environment where anything goes, which means that language is not monitored, and gamers use curse words and racial slurs in chat rooms and during gameplay – all important things that need to be considered as schools start to create programs. Sometimes the use of language is for giggles and

lighthearted fun, and sometimes it is used to dehumanize and insult individuals which should be a concern for educational leaders.

As an Indigenous instructor, I have always felt it was my duty as a teacher educator to infuse and have my students learning about Indigenous ways of knowing, whether that be through incorporating oral stories, songs and dances, technology, etc. eSports is my way of reclaiming the narrative from colonial paradigms and textbooks that only give a surface history and cultural knowledge to students.

Through the Indigenous futurisms framework, I explained to my social studies students how to re-imagine what video games can look like from Indigenous perspectives, leaving behind the egregious stereotypical Indigenous characters long dominated in previous video games. Video games that perpetuate Indigenous stereotypes only hinder people's view of what our culture is and was, but as time and instructions tools change that involve the likes of eSports, truly and factual representation of Indigenous ways on knowing in the classroom are being realized. I tell my students of the possibilities of re-imagining eSports with our voices such as having an Olympic video game that has Billy Mills (Oglala) as a runner that we can play as or having a baseball video game, where we can play as Jim Thorpe (Sac and Fox) or Louis Sockalexis (Penobscot).

Limitations

One limitation manifested in the actual contact and identification of participants. One of my goals in this project was to interview five to eight individuals involved in an eSports program. However, due to summertime vacations and ceremonies, interviewing the target numbers presented obstacles in conducting face-to-face and follow-up interviews. Due to timeline restrictions, I was only able to interview players (n=2), coaches (n=2), and faculty/staff

(n=2) associated with the two programs in the case. However, acknowledging the need for more data, I added a 4th research question which allowed me to include Lone Wolves (n=6), college students who are unaffiliated with a college eSports program. Also, this project initially started with an interest in K-12 contexts, but as it evolved this research became entirely situated in higher education and Lone Wolves eSports' experiences which means that future research could focus specifically on K-12 contexts. At the same time, there are findings and discussions in this dissertation that could still inform K-12 educational leaders' decision making while exploring eSports program development.

Also, interview responses were limited with initial rounds of interviews as players (n=2), coaches (n=2), and faculty/staff (n=2) did not have prior experience sitting for interviews or having been recorded through audio recording devices prior to this study. And, during some interviews, there were moments when participants were having to work through some discomfort and unwillingness to offer many detailed stories. However, as they became more comfortable, they were able to provide insight.

Another limitation manifested with the gender makeup of the participants. Of the 12 participants in the study, 11 were male with only one female participant. Several female lone wolves did contact me of their interest in participating in the study, but due to summer vacations and tribal ceremonies they were unable to participant. While this limitation did present itself for this study, future studies could conduct a deep dive into this area of eSports in Indian education.

Delimitations

A delimitation of this study involves players (n=2), coaches (n=2), and faculty/staff (n=2) working or enrolled in an institution of higher education serving Native students. Not all individuals working at the institutions included in this study have an association with eSports

program. Some administrators were notified and aware of my presence on campus as a researcher, but not all administrators had associations with the eSports program. These individuals with the program were excluded from the study. It is quite possible that other individuals at the institution (e.g., upper administration, technology instructors/faculty, other staff peripherally involved) could possibly offer more nuanced perspectives, but in order to maintain focus on the units of study, their perspectives were not included. However, it would be of value to include new perspectives and units of study, such as upper administration's experiences, in future work.

Also, only students participating in eSports were included in the study, and all students not part of the program were excluded. Even though several schools in the surrounding locals have an eSports program, those institutions were excluded from the study, as this study is confined to institutions of higher education serving Native students.

Glossary of Key Definitions

In exploring eSports programs at institutions of higher education serving Native students, I wanted to provide clear and quality definitions of the following terms in this study.

Alienware: Type of gaming laptop

Apache Tribe of Oklahoma: Federally Recognized Indian Tribe headquartered in southwestern Oklahoma.

Amerian Indian, Native American, Indian, Indigenous: Terms used interchangeably that refer to Indigenous peoples of North America.

Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA): Governmental entity entrusted to protect and improve life for Americans Indians.

Bureau of Indian Education (BIE): Governmental entity under the U.S. Department of the Interior dedicated to providing quality education to meet students' tribal and cultural needs.

Cheyenne: Federally Recognized Indian Tribe headquartered in southwestern Oklahoma.

Choctaw: Federally Recognized Indian Tribe headquartered in southeastern Oklahoma.

Digital Citizenship: Able to navigate nuances of technology with competencies.

eSports: Type of gaming which combines electronic sports with video games – can be recreational and competitive.

eSports Coach: individual who serves as manager for team/program

Federal Indian Boarding School: Educational institutions created by the United States Government and religious orders to oversee education for Indigenous students and culturally assimilate Native children.

Federally Recognized: Able to exert tribal sovereignty and have Nation to Nation workings with governments.

4v4: Playing with a group of four players against another group of four players in an online setting.

Gamer: An individual who plays video games (recreational or competitive).

Gamer Handle: Nickname used in online video game circles for personal identification.

Gaming Platform: Any system that allows an individual to play video games.

Indigenize: Implementing or incorporating Indigenous perspectives, oral stories, or characteristics.

Indigenous futurisms: Using the past, present, and future of Indigenous culture weaving traditional ways of knowing, i.e., oral stories, dances, languages, technology, games, etc., in re-imagining stories of survivance and resistance to colonial paradigms.

Kiowa: Federally Recognized Indian Tribe headquartered in southwestern Oklahoma.

Lone Wolves/Lone Wolf: Gamer(s) who desires to play solo during practice and gameplay; seeks independence in gaming.

Noob: rookie or amateur

Off-Reservation Boarding School: Boarding schools located off American Indian reservations.

OG: Original gamer – gamers who played early eSports games during the 1990s and early 2000s.

1v1: Playing against another person in an online setting.

Playstation 5: Newest Sony Gaming Console

Switch: Newest Nintendo Gaming Console

21st century skills: Skills necessary for individuals to navigate today's modern markets, i.e., career, technology, social, etc.

Wild West: Unregulated ecosystem of eSports

Xbox Series X: New Microsoft Gaming Console

Conclusion

Chapter 1 introduces the audience to the nature of this intrinsic case study, while providing a rationale for the theoretical frameworks used to inform this work. The chapter also provides an in-depth discussion of my subjectivity to eSports, while serving in various capacities of Indian education, where the intersection of eSports, Indigenous futurisms, and 21st century skills were on display in my teachings, research, and scholarship. A background of eSports and Indian Education was acknowledged as well. Chapter 2 will provide a detailed literature review for this study.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This literature review exhibits a focus on relevant scholarship, frameworks, and histories that inform this research study. The literature review highlights previous research that has emerged concerning the intersection of eSports and Indigenous education and seeks to understand how eSports is used in educational settings and how it connects to cultural knowledges in institutions of higher education. Since eSports has been situated in spaces outside of education and there are existing gaps in the literature, this literature review provides a foundational understanding of how eSports is emerging as a technological educational tool to be used by teacher educators.

For Chapter 2, I begin with a discussion of an evolving educational landscape for the 21st Century followed by a brief history of what eSports is and the many varied interpretations of how eSports is defined in many circles of debate and how playing eSports serves as a catalyst in cultivating digital leadership skills alongside 21st century skills necessary to advance in a global technology world. I then offer an overview of Change Theory focusing on how to navigate new visions and usage of technology, which in this case would be the utilization of eSports in educational spaces. This is followed by a discussion of the background on Indigenous education followed by Indigenous research and leadership frameworks in education. Lastly, I offer discourse of Indigenous research and leadership frameworks used to inform this case study.

An Evolving Educational Landscape for a 21st Century

Education has experienced changing and new forms of instructional techniques and technological use in recent years, and that is no truer than the introduction of eSports into classroom settings, while infusing Indigenous research frameworks coupled with 21st century

skills. The intersection of these paradigms is in its infancy, and the literature is not complete, which this study will add to the emerging literature.

eSports

While eSports has emerged as a prevailing trend in sports, business, leisure, technology and digital media, debates amass accepted definitions, educational value, health impact, etc., one fact for certain is eSports is quickly becoming one of the world's largest entertainment industries with a net worth exceeding 650 million US dollars in 2017 and estimated to increase to 1.5 billion US dollars by 2020 (Block & Haack, 2021; Gough, 2020; Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019). eSports has evolved in varied ways from its earliest beginnings, where individuals played video games by human-computer interfaces in the confines of home to presently participating in global-wide competitions. Since the emergence of eSports onto the global stage, many have put forth a question that continues to be debated across all disciplines, "What is eSports?"

eSports are organized video game competitions, also commonly referred to as cybersport, virtual sport, and competitive game (Jenny et al., 2016); however, it should be noted that not all video games are of the sport nature and debate revolves around what is considered a sport. Popular eSports video games include sports-based (*Madden Series, NCAA College Football, Olympic Series, NBA 2K Series, Mario Kart*), fighting style games (*Mortal Kombat, Smash Brothers, Mike Tyson's Punchout*), First Person Shooting (*Call of Duty Series, Sniper Elite, Halo Series*), and other genres of sports related games (*Top Gun, Star Fox, Rad Racer, League of Legends*) not necessarily common to eSport discourse. The basic premise of eSports is for an individual or a team of players to face off against each other head-to-head or livestream themselves (Streamers) on a specific gaming console with the goal of defeating the other player/team. As Funk et al. (2017) explain, "eSport includes individual (e.g., *StarCraft II*) and

team-based (e.g., CS: GO) games featuring teams of five competitors battling against each other in head-to-head matchups. The predominant organizational model for eSports centers on competitive events before live, online, and broadcast audiences” (p. 8). While most gaming competitions are held via gaming consoles, a popular trend has emerged in recent years with a significant overlap between mobile, console, and desktop/laptop gamers with nearly 9 in 10 digital gamers playing mobile games, which means just over 10% of gamers are strictly committed to desktop or console (*Insider Intelligence, 2023*). The relative ease of mobile phones, laptops, e-books have made eSports a multi-platform industry with competitions occurring 24/7 globally.

As much as eSports is advertised as a sport and played by competitive and casual gamers alike, conceptualizing and determining a definition of eSports has been limited by the lack of research and accepted academically sound definition. Hamari & Sjoblom (2016) argue:

That many (especially the fans of “traditional” sports) are of the opinion that eSports cannot be call a sport, simply because the player competence is not measured via either their physical prowess or finesse as the esports athletes appear to be simply riveted to their chairs. (p. 212)

Perhaps the best known and widely accepted definitions of eSports is by Wagner (2006) who writes, “eSports” is an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies” (p. 4). However, this definition is not without its detractors. Critics of Wagner’s definition include the use of information and communication technologies and the use of “or” to distinguish between mental or physical. eSports can include both abilities as evident by Nintendo’s Wii Sports, where the player exerts themselves physically and mentally using a controller to mimic real live sports

(e.g., baseball, tennis, basketball). New video games platforms continue to merge both physical and mental abilities to achieve objects or complete tasks as through the PlayStation VR and VR2 headset with virtual reality becoming a centerpiece in gaming.

As eSports continue to evolve, definitions of eSports continue to emerge across disciplines adding perplexity to existing convoluted discourse. Much of the literature revolving around eSports fails to mention the physical abilities of an individual, as referring to eSports as non-sporting would be widely accepted and categorized as non-physical in nature (Hallmann & Giel, 2017).

For years, eSports has been a fringe activity relegated to recreational activities. However, recently, educational institutions have seen a rise in the adoption of game-based learning into the classroom, as the perceived educational benefits are the driving force behind the intersection of eSports and education. As Zhong et al. (2022) argue, “eSports has become more widely recognized throughout the world, they have captured the interest of educational practitioners and researchers” (p. 2). At the same time, Rothwell & Shaffer (2019) argue:

It is becoming increasingly important to know how these programs are influencing the children who participate in them. Currently, there is limited empirical evidence regarding the impact of adolescent participation in eSports programs. However, research has suggested that eSports programs have the potential to positively influence the development of communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills. (p. 154)

Through game-based learning, teachers and students are continually exploring new worlds of teaching and learning, while developing soft skill sets beneficial not only to critical thinking but professional careers as well. Certain games are seen as stronger than others for developing skills, as Fortnite is recommended for communication, critical thinking, visual

perception, self-motivation, perseverance, and teamwork, while *League of Legends* is seen as the strongest for leadership, multitasking, and perseverance (Van der Merwe, 2023). Mentioning these games and their development of skills is not without caveats, which must be noted as playing a game does not always constitute displaying of particular skill sets. Like any sport that requires iteration of practice, eSports requires the same dedication and commitment to hone skill sets; eSports games like *Rocket League* or *FIFA Soccer* boost awareness and attention as well as the ability to concentrate and focus...but these skills need further training and exercises (Wimmer et al., 2021).

Developing of skills is seen as a major priority of incorporating gaming into a variety of disciplines including STEM locales, where technology skills can be honed and developed, as skills that gamers develop naturally help prime them for their pick of careers in IT, coding, statistics, software engineering and more. Typing proficiency sets up gamers to be efficient in the modern workplace (Savage, 2022). While benefits of eSports in curricula have shown it to be beneficial to student learning, it must be noted that not all schools support eSports programs for students beyond team competition. Arguments and counterarguments for eSports in educational systems range from lack of productive activity, safety, benefits, educational learning, etc.; however, Chung (2019) explains, “eSports is neither cure-all nor curse for engaging students. Like any activity, the devil is in the execution. How esports are implemented in schools by politicians and administrators will have an impact on whether our students get the best version—one that is healthy, safe, and balanced” (p. 1). While many leaders and institutions still situate in teaching students to work in operate in a digital-less word, Sheninger (2019) explains, “all too often, technology is infused into the learning environment where the teacher is still employing a direct approach to instruction” (p. 88). In today’s global technology society, course instruction

without technology becomes detrimental to student learning as we are not providing students with the necessary competencies to effectively use technology.

Digital Leadership

Whether utilizing minimal digital technology or navigating the onslaught of digital spaces the challenge for school leaders is why, how, and where to begin (Sheninger, 2019). The onus of instituting practical digital change is incumbent upon leaders, with many lacking necessary knowledge to effectively integrate readily available technology. Championing the Pillars of Digital Leadership, while aligning with the International Society for Technology in Education's (ISTE) Standards for Educational Leaders, Sheninger encourages and challenges leaders to embrace new digital pedagogical skill sets, while issuing cognizance that not all technology is beneficial to teaching and learning. New digital skills sets are unfamiliar to many in leadership positions as technology has advanced in recent years.

Transforming Learning Spaces and Environments

Learning spaces and environments are often confined to physical spaces and does not consider pedagogical skill sets and integration of technology. In many cases, transforming the landscape involves emancipating individuals from their own past, as they experienced little to no technology in the classroom (Sheninger, 2019). As leaders transformed learning spaces, unexpected opportunities integrated themselves into teaching and learning. Sheninger (2019) writes, "there was a clear movement away from teacher-led learning environments and transitions to learner-led environments, where teachers and students were learning together" (p. 128). Digital literate students matched and collided with digital inexperienced teachers and leaders to transform teaching and learning in varied changes and formats.

Professional Growth and Learning

Professional Developments (PDs) border on the label of a crashout, as they are seen as beneficial or lacking in development and practical goals. Sheninger (2019) writes:

Let's face it, in many cases traditional professional development has been done to us. We all have at least a story or two, maybe even more, where we have been forced to sit through mandated trainings that are a mix of "sit and get," on material that truly isn't very relevant to the diverse needs of educators today. (p. 142)

For PDs to be effective, they must be leveraged by learning that includes traditional and digital knowledge for leaders to gain ideas and enhance their schools with necessary resources to which many leaders are incognizant of what digital tools are available.

Communication and Branding

Communication is highlighted as a vital component of leadership, which is not necessarily found in all leadership positions. Sheninger (2019) argues, "leaders who effectively communicate listen intently, facilitate dialogue (hear, respond, add thoughts), ask questions, get to the point clearly and concisely, create an open environment for discussion, and employ a multifaceted approach" (p. 160). Effective communication need not be limited internally, as leaders need efficient communication with parents and other stakeholders as well.

To effectively brand our educational systems, leaders need to communicate that teaching, learning, and leadership need to transform to something yet undefined, where individuals are prepared for anything and just not something (Sheninger, 2019). Branding is much more than a school's mission, much more than a logo, much more than a staff and faculty, etc., leaders must be able to communicate their brand as a sum experience of traditional and digital resources, while communicating their institution's relationship to teaching and learning.

Opportunity

Leaders sometimes find themselves too consumed with the notion that adding new curriculum, especially digital, means an overhaul of the existing curriculum. In most cases, this is not correct. As Sheninger (2019) expounds, “digital leadership focuses on finding innovative solutions to deliver authentic learning experiences and support to continuously provide the best learning opportunities for students” (p. 208). Not every single digital product is beneficial to instruction; it is the responsibility of leaders to understand how to best implement into student learning.

21st Century Skills

As technology becomes more and more advanced, it is necessary for individuals to maintain up-to-date knowledge of specific skill sets. Mahmud and Wong (2022) explain how “the emergence of advanced technologies has contributed to the significant emphasis placed on the 21st century skills” (p. 2). While there are disagreements regarding what 21st century skills are, there is a reasonable consensus as to the main skills that individuals are encouraged to learn, which include knowledge construction, real world problem solving, skilled communication, collaboration, and technology literacy skills. Not only do 21st century skills help students be successful in all areas of formal school, but these skills are also necessary for a person to adapt and thrive in an ever-changing world (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2009). Mastering, or at the very least having, competencies of specific 21st century skills will provide a roadmap for individuals in becoming future ready citizens across a wide range of disciplines. As Almazroa and Alotaibi (2023) argue, “the demands imposed by change in work requirements, technological environment and the general approach to life have made it necessary for all stakeholders to put greater emphasis on defining more clearly what future readiness means” (p. 1).

While the evolving landscape of education continues to change and advance, specific intersections of instructional tools and techniques are still a work in progress. Research is limited and still emerging of the intersection of eSports, Indigenous futurisms, and 21st century skills; however, many institutions are having conversations, constructing, and implementing eSports programs for teaching and learning benefit. What that landscape looks like is still a work in progress, and this study has a possibility of being on the forefront of such an intersection.

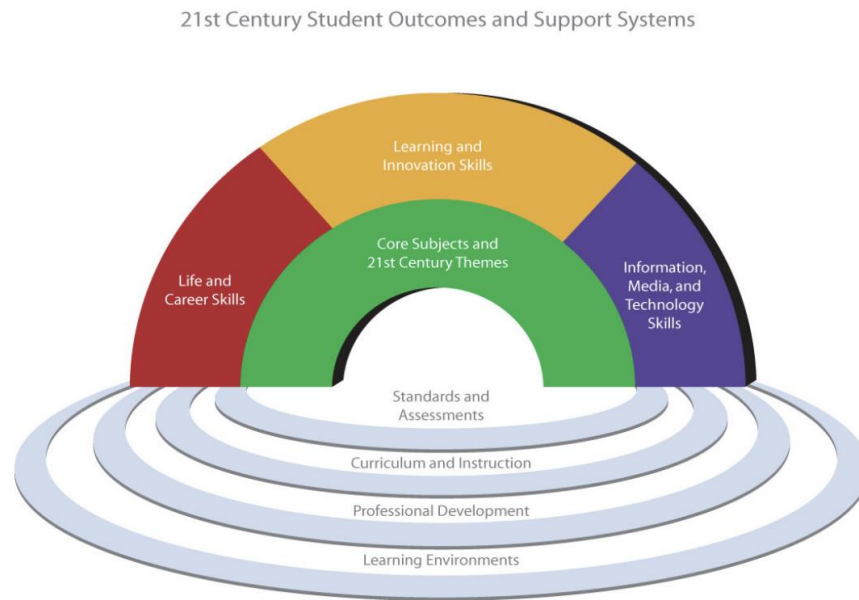
One of the most well-known frameworks is the Partnership for 21st Century (P21) Framework (See Figure 2). This framework emphasizes skill sets developed and nurtured through Standards and Assessments, Curriculum and Instruction, Professional Development, and Learning Environments, while also emphasizing 21st century themes.

Life and Career Skills

As students navigate evolving education landscapes, certain life and career skills are needed to navigate a more competitive life and work environment that requires students to be cognizant of becoming more self-initiated while being more of a time manager, who is adaptable and flexible in high pressure situations. Students must realize of the urgency to become masterful in their skills sets to work in diverse environments, while being able to adapt to change in terms of short- and long-term goals, while using these skills to not only guide themselves but those around them.

Figure 2

21st Century (P21 Framework) Skills



Note. The image reflects the 21st century skills (P21 Framework) from the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2009).

Learning and Innovation Skills

Students must be cognizant of the ability to demonstrate creativity and originality in their thought processes, as they navigate the evolving world around them. Students are encouraged to see complex systems through a holistic lens, while being able to critically reflect their own views and how to navigate such systems of change. It is imperative that students become masterful in communication skills in learning the diverse environment locally, while being open to positive and negative feedback. These learned skills seek to help and prepare students in recognizing that future success is dependent on maximizing their creative talents through the use of their combined skill sets.

Information, Media, and Technology Skills

Becoming technologically literate in the evolving education landscapes is much more important and urgent as there is a need for students to exhibit a plethora of skill sets working with technology, such as accessing, researching, absorbing, and disseminating information over a wide range of networks. Students must be cognizant of becoming technologically fluent and exhibit critical thinking skills through tools of information, media, and technology. Students must be responsible technology citizens in living in a technology driven society, while understanding that information, media, and technology is transient.

Core Subjects in 21st Century Themes

To navigate the evolving landscape around them, students are encouraged to become masterful not only in certain skill sets, but masterful of core subjects, i.e., Arts, Science, History, Economics, etc., in order for them to work and live in the 21st Century. Students must be cognizant of issues affecting the world around them, as students must have understandings of the challenges facing financial and environmental literacies, as well as their own civic literacy. Understanding the complex nuances of nation to nation building as relevant to their local, state, and federal contexts, while understanding how the cultivation of 21st century skills are useful in a global environment will prepare students to exercise their citizenship at various levels of a global society.

Change Leadership

Change management and leadership are complex networks of actions that require individuals to step in and step out, while repeatedly asking, “What do I need to know in learning to lead?” Using a balanced framework of delicate give and take between specific leadership actions: between directing and supporting, providing answers, and asking questions (Goodwin et

al., 2015), twenty-one leadership responsibilities were identified that influenced actions and behaviors of positive leadership. Working in concert, the twenty-one leadership responsibilities are mixed with key elements of the Balanced Leadership Framework, which include: being an effective leader requires establishing and maintaining clear and attainable goals, but this can represent challenges for any leader. Goodwin et al. (2015) say, “when leaders focus on right classroom and school practices, they can have a powerful positive effect” (p. 9). As leaders are constantly trying to evolve and adapt with an ever-changing technological world, they are constantly balancing states of change management and leadership styles.

While schools change often and most changes are surface changes, real change requires leading people to the unknown (Goodwin et al., 2015). With change often comes a new vision, which can upset the status quo by nullifying any actions of change. Leading institutional change is often unfamiliar territory for leaders as the need for change to improve institutional achievement is often either ignored or marginalized as cognizance of enacting change is a sign of ineffective leadership.

While change is inevitable in any organization, leaders must have a good theory of action to travel well and exert a sense of positivity in organizational spaces. Fullan (2008) synthesizes and authenticates six secrets of change, based in theory but grounded in practice, for leaders to provide good direction, while building capacity. Heavily nuanced, Fullan’s six changes provide a blueprint for leaders to value and love their employees, while maximizing results or what Fullan calls mobilizing a million change agents (p. 11). While leaders focus their commitment on customers, the fault lies in the inability to make the same commitment to their employees. Leaders who ignore their employees and their contributions run the risk of fracturing mindsets,

meaning, relationships, company goals etc. While good leaders find ways to value employees, many devalue their employees by not creating the conditions for them to succeed (Fullan, 2008).

While articulating connecting peers with purpose would be simple in saying, “Giving employees a voice in all matters,” purpose is more heavily nuanced than described. Fullan (2008) puts forth a more grounded approach in for positive purposeful peer interaction under three conditions:

- (1) when the larger values of the organization and those of individuals and groups mesh:
- (2) when information and knowledge about effective practices are widely and openly shared: and (3) when monitoring mechanisms are in place to detect and address ineffective actions while also identifying and consolidating effective practices. (p. 45)

Along these lines, leaders who integrate employees into practice and allow for their perspectives create a purposeful atmosphere, where contributions are encouraged, and input is sought.

How leaders build capacity is the main question, and many build it in varied ways. Fullan (2006) says, “capacity building as new competencies, new resources, (time, ideas, expertise), and new motivation (p. 13). Whether it is through professional developments (PDs), new skill sets, new technology knowledge, hiring talented people, etc., positive theories of action are the most effective means of building capacity without criticism, punitive consequences, or what Fullan (2006) refers to as judgmentalism (p. 59).

Fullan (2008) discusses how work is sometimes seen as repetitive or roboticized, but learning to work can be enunciated in a much sounder way in finding the best methods for reducing variation in favor of practices that are known to be effective, identifying the few key practices that are crucial to success (p. 79). While leaders are trained in their work, there is a constant call for learning how to improve.

Transparency has many meanings in varied capacities of leadership. Fullan (2006) defines transparency as clear and continuous display of results, and clear and continuous access to practice (what is being done to get results) (p. 14); however, in educational ecosystems, change is continuous yet evolving and non-linear, but change is envisioned as for the positive, as Hargreaves & Fullan (2009) explain, “education is entirely about change – about drawing things out of people and creating the generations of the future. And effective change is inalienably about learning – figuring out the best way forward for the greatest good” (p. 5). How and the best way for change to evolve is wide-ranging as many have put forth competing theories of what positive change looks like but with little consensus. As Hargreaves & Fullan (2009) write:

Change does not come passively or always peacefully. Sometimes positive change has to be something for which we fight together – not in a way against each other, but in a hopeful struggle against the odds of drift, despair, and despondency (p. 5).

With any change or how one author refers to reform, there are entities who would challenge or resist such reforms for varied reasons. As Shirley (2008) argues, “it is becoming increasingly clear that educator’s classroom-level resistance to certain aspects of the recent reforms has reached such a critical mass that redesign of school improvement strategies is a matter of the utmost urgency” (p. 139).

When change is discussed, it tends to be from the viewpoints of those in authority. We often see students as the beneficiaries of change, but having no seat at the table Hargreaves (2009) explains:

Students are usually the targets of change efforts and services; they are rarely change partners. But students are highly knowledgeable about the things that help them learn,

such as teachers who know their material, care for them, have a sense of humor, and never give up on them. (p. 27)

Although institutions are highly encouraged to include students in conversations any time change to learning is implemented, many times, we are so preoccupied with one sided conversations amongst teacher educators that we forget to include student voices even though they can provide valuable, insightful, and beneficial knowledge of learning,

For this study, Fullan's Change Theory (2008) fits perfectly in how institutions of higher education serving Native students have changed its perspectives of teaching and instruction to incorporate eSports in learning while navigating nuances of acceptance, resistance, apathy etc. Fullan (2006) articulates, "change knowledge does represent deep cultural change, which many people resist, tacitly or otherwise" (p. 13). Change Theory represents a way to understand how change affects entities and how such change is seen through different lenses. Teaching with games involved the creation of new and relevant pedagogical activities, many of which were unfamiliar to teachers, as Nielson et al. (2021) argue, " This involved planning game-based teaching units, orienting students toward games, facilitating game sessions, and expanding upon game experiences after gameplay (p. 2). However, this puts forth an important caveat. Many teachers do not have the background to effectively teach with games and seemingly put in gaming positions without any formal training, but Fullan (2008) writes that, "learning external to the job can represent a useful input, but if it is not in balance and in concert with learning in the setting in which you work, the learning will end up being superficial" (p. 14).

Fullan's Theory of Change

Using Fullan's framework (2008), *Six Secrets of Change*, which includes six secrets of change:

1. Love Your Employees.
2. Connect Peers with Purpose
3. Capacity Building Prevails
4. Learning is Work
5. Transparency Rules
6. Systems Learn.

This study will focus on Secret 4, Learning is Work.

Institutions that have incorporated eSports into educational learning have addressed the goals and benefits of an eSports program. Fullan (2008) argues, “The essence of Secret Four concerns how organizations address core goals and tasks with relentless consistency, while at the same time learning continuously how to get better and better at what they are doing” (p. 76). If the goal of educational institutions is to enhance and improve student learning and if eSports improves student learning, then it is necessary for institutions to construct an eSports program designed to improve student education regardless of resistance and changing to a new form of digital instruction.

Background on Indigenous Education

Indian education in the U.S. has gone through many distinct changes on the road to self-determination beginning with the policy of assimilation, which dictated that Indigenous children be absorbed into the dominant culture. Ellis (1996) argues, “although the U.S. Government’s civilizing agenda embraced a variety of means, none was more important, or problematic, than education” (p. 1). Giving some contextual background, Szasz (2003) explains:

In 1819, Congress established the “civilization fund,” which provided for a small annual sum for instruction. Between 1783 and 1871, when the treaty period ended, a number of

Indian treaties set aside portions of tribal annuity payments for education or included specific provisions for school. Although the federal government funded these efforts, missionary groups administered most of the schools. (p. 9)

As government-to-government relations between Indigenous nations and the federal government began to take form with the signing of treaties, these set-aside provisions, such as education, became the foundations for the federal trust responsibility, but as Redcorn et al. (2019) assert, "...it is important that those involved in education policy and practice understand the following: American education finance is rooted in Indigenous land dispossessions and assimilation..." (p. 2). The statement above sets the backdrop of the federal government's trust responsibility to provide education for Indigenous peoples.

With the federal funding initiated by Captain Richard Henry Pratt, the era of assimilation began the first distinct era of federal Indian education in the United States, which felt the attacks early on through the education portion of the Meriam Report. W. Carson Ryan, Jr. painted vivid pictures of Indian boarding schools and their failures. As Szasz (2003) argues, "Ryan summarized their failures by stating "frankly and unequivocally" that "provisions for the care of Indian children in boarding schools are grossly inadequate" (p. 18), with many focusing on the conditions of boarding schools as catalysts for the conditions of American Indians today.

The first era of Indian education was marked by assimilatory boarding schools and government control. According to Reyner & Eder (2017), "many humanitarians saw education and assimilation into non-Indian society as the only hope for Indians..." (p. 3). The second era was marked by a return to culture reform movement and advocacy from the new Commissioner of Indian Affairs, John Collier. Szasz (2003) explains:

Collier brought a perspective to the Education Division that went well beyond his Progressive background. His Progressive background. His conviction that Indian education should be rooted in the community and should, in turn, stress the values of native culture was reinforced by his awareness of the international implication... (p. 46)

During Collier's time as commissioner, federal policy diverted to an era of termination. During this same time period, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) formed.. As Szasz (2003) argues, "that Congress was not more successful was largely due to the National Congress and, in particular, to Joseph R. Garry (Coeur d'Alene) who was president during these crucial years" (p. 113). The fight against termination seemed to unite Indigenous peoples and allies setting the stage for the era Indian education of self-determination as Szasz (2003) explains:

The late 1960s witnessed the beginning of self-determination in Indian education... Events from 1966 to 1970 included the development of Indian education organizations; the establishment of individual schools under tribal or community control; a growing Indian participation in public-school direction and in federal aid programs; and a renewed interest in the study of Indian culture. (p. 156)

It is during this time-period of self-determination that for the first time American Indian tribes begin to actively have a voice in their futures, reflective of tribal sovereignty, not experienced over the span of 500 years since first contact.

As a renewed sense of self-determination of tribal nations dominated the latter half of the 20th Century, ways to educate our Native students took a new meaning from the days of forced matriculation to boarding schools. According to Reyhner and Eder (2017), "in 1988, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) operated 103 elementary and secondary schools and 9 peripheral

dormitories and funded 65 elementary and secondary schools and 5 peripheral dormitories operated by Indian tribes or tribal organization” (p. 301). As part of this call for self-determination, there has been a call to recognize and consult with Indigenous tribes about the direction of education for students. In the past 50 years, there have been more developments that open up opportunities for sovereignty and self-determination for school.

Landmarks in Indian Education Finance and Law

As found in Red Corn et al.’s (2022) overview, there have been landmarks in Indian education that have resonated from generation to generation. “Formal” education for Native American children began in 1819 with passing of PL 15-85 PL 15-85 Civilization Fund Act. This Act authorized the federal government to contract with “capable persons of good moral character” to teach European-style agriculture to adults and reading, writing, and math to children as part of the federal government’s “civilization” program (p. 6). From this act, which focused on the education of Native children, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School was founded in 1879, marking federal expansion in the direct administration of Indian schools. As a direct result of the act, over 408 Indian boarding schools were operated by the federal government and missionaries between 1819 and 1956. In 1966 that the Rough Rock Demonstration School was the first school to open under an all-Indian elected governing body reflecting an act of self-determination. A few years later in 1978, The Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act (TCCCA) was passed securing stable funding for tribally controlled postsecondary educational institutions.

In 1934, PL 73-167 Johnson-O’Malley Act was passed (Red Corn et al., 2022). This law initially was passed to allow the federal government to contract with states to provide for education, healthcare, and other needs of rural Native communities, conveying federal funds to

states to compensate for the non-taxable trust lands on which many Native students live. Today, it provides funding for educational programs that meet the unique needs of Native students, including programs to revitalize Native languages and cultures. Also, PL 115-404 Johnson-O'Malley Supplemental Indian Education Modernization Act of 2018 requires the Department of the Interior to annually update the number of Indian students eligible for the JOM program. The JOM program previously used student counts from 1995, and in 2018, the Johnson-O'Malley Supplemental Indian Education Modernization Act was passed and requires the Department of the Interior to annually update the number of Indian students eligible for the JOM program. The JOM program previously used student counts from 1995, which allowed student number counts to be more accurate and align with sovereign realities on tribal citizenship rolls.

For Native languages and their importance, PL 102-524 Native American Languages Act was passed in 1991. It was separated from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), and it authorized the Department of Health and Human Services to administer grants to tribal governments and Native organizations for Native language revitalization programs. Also, language revitalization programs were included in PL 109-394, the Esther Martinez Native American Languages Act of 2006, which amended the Native American Programs Act of 1974, and provided financial support for Native language revitalization. As a continuation of support for language revitalization, PL 116-101, the Esther Martinez Native American Language Programs Reauthorization Act of 2019, reduced the number of required enrollees for grants and reauthorized the program through 2024 (Red Corn et al., 2022).

According to Sabzalian (2019), “advocacy for schools to recognize and consult with nearby Native nations and urban Indigenous communities, then must be seen as an important, yet complex, intervention” (p. 195). There has been much needed progress in consultation with tribal

nations, as Sabzalian (2019) writes, “due to the ongoing advocacy of Native educators and allies, there are already pathways for institutionalizing trust responsibility in public schools. Title VI/Indian education programs, for example, require Native parent consultation and involvement” (p. 193).

One glaring achievement during the latter part of the 20th century came via local control over tribal colleges. Szasz (1999) argues, “Local control means that colleges have been responsive to local needs. Hence, they have balanced their offerings between career training skills, such as teaching degrees, computers, carpentry, secretarial skills, and preserving and studying the tribal culture” (p. 238). This lays the foundation for this study in that a present day tribally controlled institution offers an eSports program partnered with Indigenous ways of knowing, which demonstrates what Sabzalian (2019) argues:

... recognizing the various ways of Indigenous peoples continue to chart meaningful futures for ourselves in spite of colonial violence, and telling stories of how Native youth, families, and educators carve out spaces of survivance within and in spite of US Indian policy, in spaces such as Indian education. (p. 3)

This illustrates how Indigenous peoples have persevered for hundreds of years facing obstacles that have hindered our Indigenous ways of knowing. Education is the only area of colonization we have faced, but for this study, education is the focus.

Indigenous Research and Leadership Frameworks in Education

While there is a plethora of Indigenous research and leadership frameworks in education to choose from for this study, I utilized the Transformational Indigenous Praxis Model (TIPM) (Pewewardy et al., 2021) and Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005) for this study. In this

section, I conduct a deep dive into how each of these is relevant to an institution's eSports program. According to Ciotti et al. (2019):

School leaders in Indigenous-missioned schools (schools that formally *proclaim* either Indigenous educational outcomes or teach through an Indigenous or culture-based approach) face a daunting task: to not only meet culturally specific priorities of Indigenous communities such as self-determination and language revitalization... (p. 2)

The intersection of Indian education and technology shows a critical need to address how institutions are addressing Indigenous ways of knowing in technological curriculum and instruction, as many institutions seem to be incognizant and perpetuate the ongoing colonization of teaching and learning that many Indigenous students have grown accustomed; however, contemporary technology, specifically eSports, has presented opportunities for Indigenous peoples to decolonize ongoing curriculum and learning by self-determining opportunities for tribal citizens. According to Boechler et al. (2022), "technology opportunities have not always been self-determined and/or led by Indigenous Peoples, and the consequence of that is a gap in skills" (p. 23). By infusing eSports with Indigenous research and leadership frameworks, Indigenous peoples should determine the necessary skills sets and opportunities for tribal citizens.

Transformational Indigenous Praxis Model (TIPM)

Arguing for the conception of the TIPM (See Figure 3) to guide and support educators in decolonizing, deconstructing, and challenging eurocentric school of thought, while empowering students into a higher level of critical thought, provides a comprehensive model for resisting and colonial paradigms prevalent in institutional processes. Drawing from collaborations with educators, assimilatory tactics maintain a prevalent role in institutions while opposing any effort

to Indigenize curriculum. Pewewardy et al. (2021) argue, “The TIPM challenges readers to critically examine how even the most well-intentioned educators are complicit in reproducing ethnic stereotypes, racist actions, deficit ideology, and recolonization” (p. 1). Constructed from community-based collaborations, TIPM sets forth a multi-level framework to counter eurocentric schooling and lays the groundwork for educational sovereignty emphasizing decolonializing Indigenous education. In a sense, The TIPM lays out a decolonizing praxis framework for guiding both infant and seasoned educators in moving to a higher level of critical thinking. The framework allows individuals to situate themselves within a specific dimension and allows for introspection to the degree of the amount of colonization an individual is engaged within their praxis.

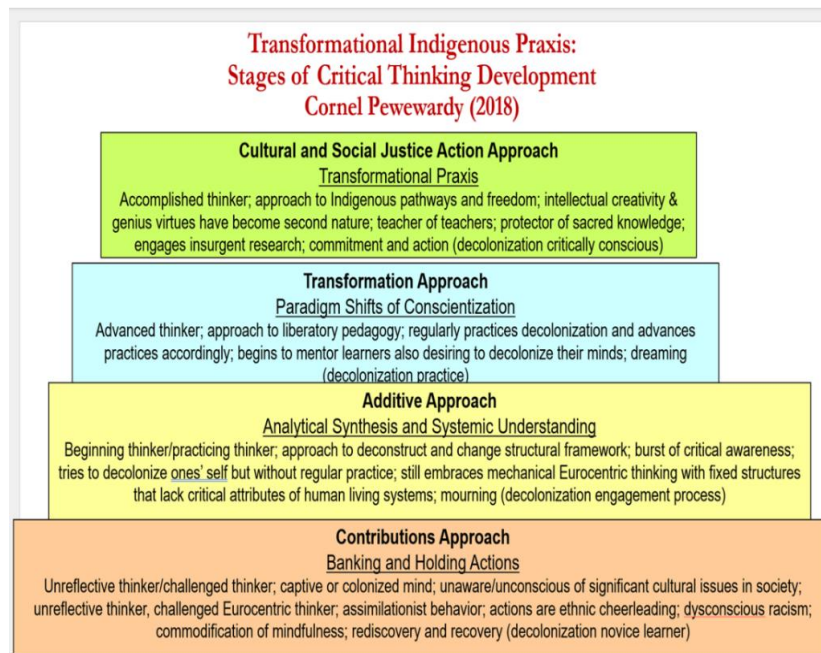
Moving between stages is not without obstacles, as individuals will encounter internal and external elements inhibiting one’s transformational progress. These obstacles not only include individuals themselves but institutional policies, hierarchies, cultural mindsets as well. Pewewardy et al. (2021) write:

To enact cultural and social justice action, educators must hold deep commitments to their work and be grounded in their belief of a more positive future for the next generation, rather than change to secure a better experience for themselves. (p. 7)

Coupled with the TIPM, Wave Jumping is a valuable resources in hastening one’s decolonization. According to Pewewardy et al. (2021), “through a metaphor of wave jumping, educators working to decolonize their practice can gain forward momentum with time and energy even while facing resistance” (p. 3). This aligns with years of moving up and down through the dimensions of the TIPM. As Pewewardy et al. (2021) write, "the TIPM was shared for decades at multiple settings, including national conferences and invited speaking events.

With each presentation – followed by discussion, critique, and feedback from colleagues, the authors modified, further developed and published the TIPM in article form” (p. 3). This framework further evolved in an edited book volume, *Unsettling Settler-Colonial Education: The Transformational Indigenous Praxis Model*, designed to showcase examples and lived experiences from teacher educators.

Figure 3
Transformational Indigenous Praxis Model

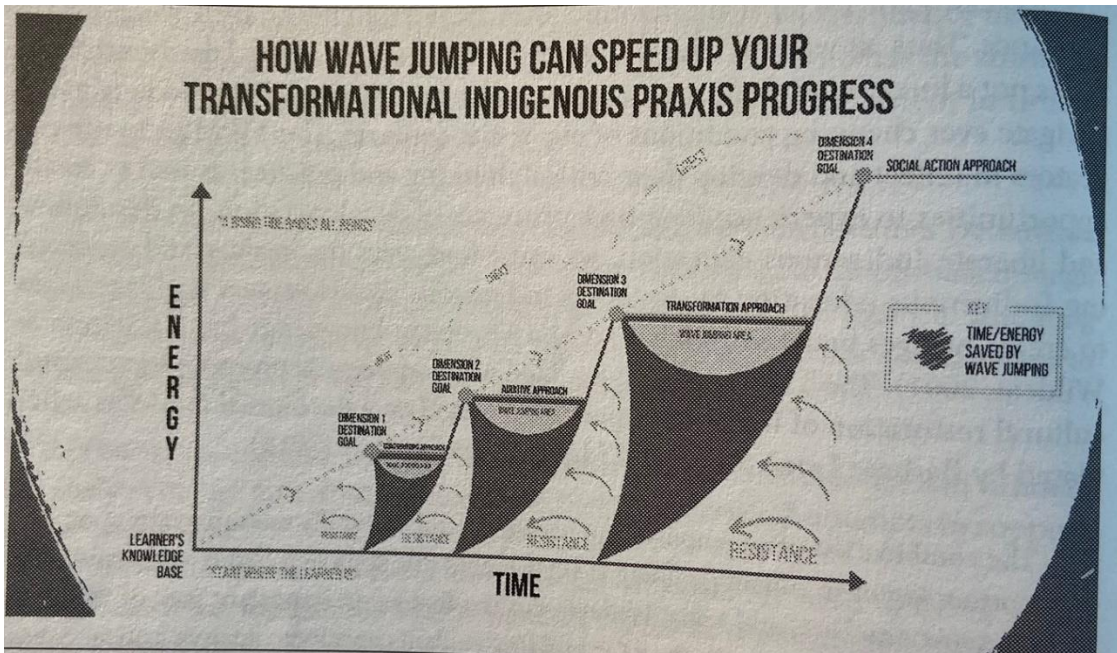


Note. The Dimensions of the TIPM as one progresses from the Contribution Approach to the to the top tier Cultural and Social Justice Action Approach. From *Unsettling Settler-Colonial Education: The Transformational Indigenous Praxis Model* (2021).

The TIPM serves as a self-assessment of transformation, as individuals are solely responsible for their progression through each dimension. Traversing TIPM’s stages of decolonialization allows educators to confront and interrogate the complexities of a settler-colonial state and reject the notion of colonial constructs of absolutisms that would view this

model as static or linear hierarchical progression (Pewewardy et al., 2021). As the TIPM assists in disrupting and dismantling colonial constructs, individuals need to be cognizant of their starting point as improper situating negates true transformation from one dimension to the next.

Figure 4
Wave Jumping



Note. Teacher educators are able to move across dimensions in decolonizing their praxis as they face mountain resistance from various entities. From *Unsettling Settler-Colonial Education: The Transformational Indigenous Praxis Model* (2021).

Tribal Critical Race Theory (Tribal Crit)

Brayboy (2005) illustrates an in-depth overview and tenets of a theoretical framework to address the complicated and sometimes arduous relationship Indigenous Peoples maintain not only with the federal government but within their own community. Constructed out of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Brayboy (2005) argues the necessity of TribalCrit to address the needs of

Indigenous peoples especially articulating the often-neglected multi-facets of colonization in educational-settings and impacts upon Indigenous Peoples. Brayboy (2005) argues:

The colonization has been so complete that even many American Indians fail to recognize that we are taking up colonialist ideas when we fail to express ourselves in ways that may challenge dominant society's ideas about who and what we are supposed to be, how we are supposed to behave, and what we are supposed to be within the larger population. (p. 431)

While TribalCrit aims to dismantle forms of stratification in structural and institutions affecting Indigenous Peoples, Brayboy (2005) notes:

For TribalCrit scholars who embrace this line of thinking in their work, we must expose structural inequalities and assimilatory process and work toward debunking and deconstructing them; it also works to create structures that will address the real, immediate, and future needs of tribal peoples and communities. (p. 440)

The relationships between Indigenous Peoples and pre-dominantly white institutions (PWIs) have been problematic emphasized by competition, but TribalCrit (re)centers such emphasis. As Brayboy (2005) argues, "knowledge of these current relationships allows researchers to better analyze interactions between Indigenous students and institutional structures" (p. 434). Education has always been one-sided with colonial practices, but TribalCrit emphasizes the need for educational systems to recognize and meet the needs of Indigenous Peoples.

Educational sovereignty for tribal nations has always been limited in praxis as many educational systems tend to be situated in tired habitual assimilatory practices envisioning the need for educational leaders in Native nations to liberate educational sovereignty. Red Corn

(2020) argues for a working model to help leaders in Indian education envision how to improve access and influence in the education of their citizens while navigating entangled educational systems and bureaucratic realities (p. 2). While many Indigenous leaders are already working in fractured colonial systems, leaders have yet to express any type of sovereignty influencing education for their peoples. As Red Corn (2020) asserts, “many leaders in Native communities have inherited the habits of Westernized systems and/or their employees works experience within them” (p. 6). Without exhibiting collective critical consciousness, expressing intellectual sovereignty, and understanding educational, cultural and community landscapes, leaders, actively working to liberate sovereign potential will reside in positions without the ability to exert any influence of educational opportunities for their tribal nations.

Certain leadership positions with the authority to influence educational sovereign potential should be prioritized as they can exert change in settler-colonial institutions. Red Corn (2020) argues:

A larger look at the professional ecosystem of educators (paras, teachers, specialists, principals, superintendents, board members, program coordinators, etc.) spanning all programs and schools in the community is a logical way of identifying access points to influence change, as well as gauge a nation’s sovereign potential in education. (p. 11)

We tend to surmise individuals with credentials encapsulating knowledge will move the needle away from settler-colonial consciousness, but as Red Corn (2020) asserts, “leaders should identify individuals connected to the community who already possess a certain degree of efficacy and comfort with critical indigenous paradigms, as these individuals are individuals who can help infuse critical place-based understandings into professional learning” (p. 13).

Since the beginnings of Indian education, dominant populations have controlled and directed how and what Native students should be taught and learned in educational settings, but this can prove detrimental for students. As Red Corn et al. (2019) assert, “conversations about Indian education in the U.S. must therefore begin by acknowledging that tribal sovereignty and treaty rights shape how Indigenous peoples participate in contemporary American education systems” (p. 2). These conversations emphasize the resistance to what has been centuries of colonization status quo.

With years of dominance and colonization over Indian education, it must be understood that the United States education system is rooted in Indigenous land dispossessions and assimilation (Red Corn et al., 2019). Seeing education as a tool of imperialism, settlers weaponized education as a way to assimilate Native children, as institutions formulated ways to prohibit students from practicing and knowing their culture.

As Indigenous research continues to be vigorously debated and challenged by Indigenous scholars, Smith (2021) argues:

Communities and Indigenous activists have openly challenged the research community about such things as racist practices and attitudes, ethnocentric assumptions, and exploitative research, sounding warning bells that research can no longer be conducted with Indigenous communities as if their views did not count or their lives did not matter. (p. 10)

While decolonizing methodologies may seem like a straightforward process, Smith (2021) argues, “the challenge for researchers of decolonizing methodologies as a set of knowledge-related critical practices is to simultaneously work with colonial and Indigenous concepts of knowledge, decentering one while center the other” (p. xii). Describing twenty-five

projects of decolonizing methodologies, Smith (2021) writes, “what is frustrating for some Indigenous researchers is that, even when their own communities have access to an Indigenous researcher, they will still select or prefer a non-Indigenous researcher over an Indigenous researcher” (p. 10).

For one to decolonize methodologies, one must become cognizant of the colonized world that surrounds them daily. One must confront and interrogate their colonized consciousness and not believe in what Smith (2021) says:

It is not enough to decolonize or to think one can Indigenize consciousness simply by changing the language we speak back to our native language. Colonization colonized minds, consciousness, our sense of being and even our language for trying to describe that experience. (p. 198)

While leadership is evident in many institutions, we must not forget leadership at the highest levels of education and its intersection with Indigenous cultures. Indigenous leadership in higher education can and does take many different forms – from a professional and also student perspective; however, there is one constant of this specific kinds of leadership in institutions of higher education. According to Pewewardy (2015), “mainstream universities are in great need of Indigenous leadership because they will benefit from Indigenous ways of knowing” (p. 3). To infuse higher education with these ways of knowing, many times the onus is upon the student, as they should see it as necessary to interject their own journey of growing up Indigenous into PWIs.

Other forms of Indigenous leadership in institutions of higher education include faculty becoming knowledgeable in the ways of Indigenous culture as a method to transform students to a higher level of critical thought. According to Pewewardy (2015):

The first thing that comes to mind when someone introduces themselves to an Indigenous leader is to inquire about their battle scars within their profession life, meaning what history lessons do these educational leaders have to share about their efforts to decolonize themselves and their professional career. (p. 71)

While faculty instruction is one form of Indigenous leadership, leadership also takes the form of service, specifically service to the community. Service to the community is seen as individuals undertaking leadership roles for the continued amelioration of their community.

Summary of Literature Review and Introduction of Conceptual Framework

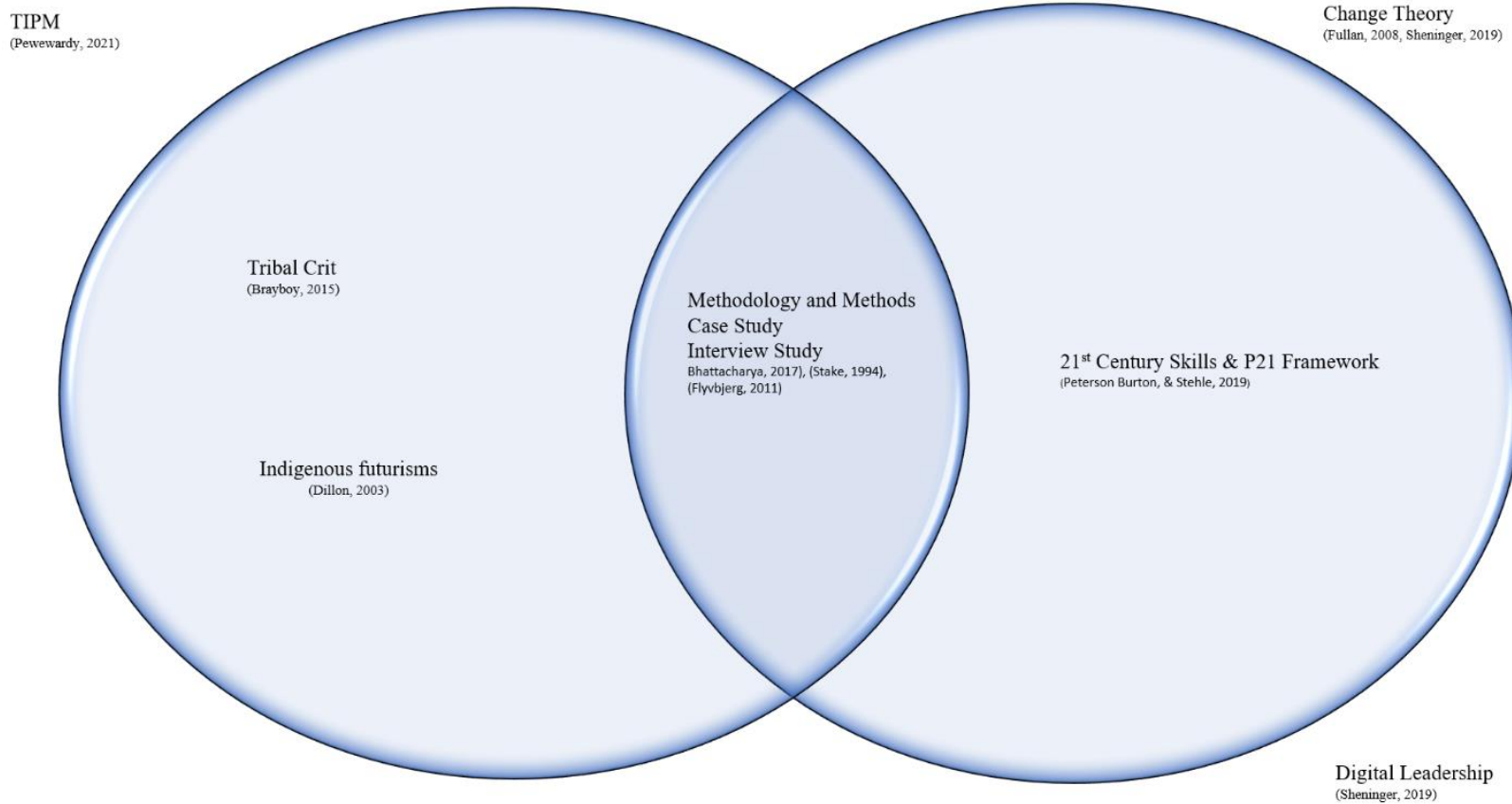
The focus of this literature review was intentional as there is a critical need in better understanding the intersection of eSports, digital learning/21st century skills, and Indigenous futurisms. As there are critical gaps in the literature of such an intersection, it was imperative for me to do a deep dive into scholarly journal articles, databases, books, websites, etc., to see what has been written of the intersection and find what emerging literature is available and what research scholars are currently immersing themselves.

For this study, there are overlapping theoretical and Indigenous education frameworks, methodologies, tenets, etc. that inform the case study of an institution's eSports program, which will allow for structure and focus of the study. At the same time, the overlapping will privilege Indigenous peoples' perspectives across this study. While not the specific focus of the methodological portions of the study, this framework (Figure 5) is informed (broadly speaking) by the TIPM (Pewewardy, 2021), as well as Change Theory (Fullan, 2008) and Digital Leadership (Sheninger, 2019). The TIPM will serve to help in showing how students, teachers, and administrators associated with an eSports program that is Westernized in its development can use technology in decolonizing their instruction and learning. The moving across the

dimensions of the TIPM allows for not only reflection but a real time analysis of the level of colonization of an individual or program (Pewewardy et al., 2021). Change Theory (Fullan, 2008) will provide discourse of eSports' transition from a recreational activity playing for fun and championships to a beneficial tool for instruction and learning. Change Theory (Fullan, 2008) can also help make meaning of student and teacher perceptions of how eSports can be advantageous in the classroom as an instructional technique. Digital Leadership (Sheninger, 2019) is also relevant to this study as students, teachers, administrators, etc., learn how eSports can expand technological skills, while exploring infusion of technology with that of Indigenous futurisms and 21st century skills.

Figure 5

Conceptual Framework



Note.
The
figure

represents a basic outline of the overall framework for this study that is informed and discussed in more detail during the study.

More specifically, the methodological processes of this study is informed by TribalCrit, Indigenous Futurism, and 21st century skills. TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005) served as the basis for this study discussing four of its nine tenets that are designed to meet the needs of Indigenous peoples. The tenets discussed in the next chapter will show how TribalCrit can still meet the needs of Indigenous peoples through its examination of power, knowledge, culture, and self-determination.

The study focused on Indigenous futurism (Dillon, 2003) as Indigenous peoples have opportunities to use the past and present knowledge to re-imagine a technological future of various genres to move further away from the colonial narratives currently privileged. Instead of playing eSports games through Eurocentric visions, there is a push by Indigenous artists, scholars, teacher educators who are decolonizing technology and science fiction, e.g., video games showing how Indigenous perspectives can be infused into gaming with a critical Indigenous lens. Also, a focus for this study is 21st century skills, as participants develop and enhance specific skills such as, communication, social, critical, technological, etc. These skills are learned through gameplay, problem-solving, teamwork, etc., all of which are skills sets associated with eSports.

This literature review seeks to better understand the literature how the intersection of eSports, Indigenous futurisms, and 21st century skills are becoming vital components of evolving educational landscapes meant to meet the needs of student learners. While studies have been done on pertaining to individuality of eSports, Indigenous futurisms, and 21st century skills, there is limited research that focuses specifically on such an intersection and how they are being implemented in educational institutions and as to what benefits school and cultural wise they produce.

As technology continues to advance educational learning, it is imperative research continues in the area of eSports to better understand how eSports are being decolonized and contributing the students learning cultural knowledge through a tool that was once relegated to entertainment and relaxation purposes.

Chapter 3 will provide readers with an outline of methodology, research purpose, research design, and procedure.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter will explain the methodologies I used to inform the qualitative case study and outline the research design, while also outlining how I situated this qualitative research study within Indigenous Communities. Additionally, I outline how the previous frameworks from the end of Chapter 2 are employed in the research design, and how they align with the four research questions. The chapter also outlines the parameters and inner workings of the case study as Southern Plains Tribal College and State University's eSports program using theoretical tenets, the criteria for participants, membership roles, ethical procedures, and data collection process.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this case study is to examine an eSports program at two institutions of higher education serving Native students (Southern Plains Tribal College and State University) and how the players (n=2), coaches (n=2), and faculty/staff (n=2) perceive eSports in educational learning. Specifically, this study examines how 21st century skills and Indigenous cultures and futurisms are conceptualized and experienced through the practice of eSports programming.

Through this qualitative case study, three critical questions drove this inquiry:

1. How do participants describe and experience their growth/learning participating in an eSports program as it relates to 21st century skills?
2. How do participants describe their visions for the future as Indigenous leaders in an increasingly digital world?
3. How do Indigenous cultures present themselves in an eSports learning environment?

Additionally, through the execution of these research questions as a case study, there were some key delays in coordinating IRB approval processes across multiple institutions.

Recognizing encroaching summer timelines and decreased activities in eSports programming,

and the need to gather more data to deepen the research, opportunities arose to interview Native Lone Wolves (n=6) who identified as gamers but were not part of an eSports program. The Lone Wolves were added in the fourth week of the study; therefore, the following question was added to explore lived experiences outside of the above case through a supplemental interview study (Bhattacharya, 2017).

4. How do the lived experiences of “Lone Wolf” players offer a deeper understanding of eSports social environments as it relates to the institutionally sponsored program experiences explored in questions 1-3?

Situating Qualitative Research with Indigenous Communities

A qualitative research design was used for this study, and this project aligns with AERA Standards for humanities-oriented research, as humanities-oriented research seeks to examine the role of education in human existence through experience (American Educational Research Association, 2009), as well as Tracy’s (2010) Big Tent (to be described later in this chapter). Also included in the standards is the commitment to practice ethics in protecting confidentiality of the participants, participant voices, their experiences, and perspectives are valuable in qualitative research. As Creswell (2013) explains:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretative/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and the data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns and themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of

the researcher, a complex description, and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or call for change. (p. 44)

eSports programs within institutions of higher education serving Native students are new phenomena, which will allow for exploration of how these new programs are benefiting or meeting the educational needs of our Indigenous students. Even though I am an eSports gamer, a subjectivity I bring to this study, it is important to allow the participants to form their own responses regarding their experience of eSports without my subjectivities interjected into the study. As a citizen of a federally recognized tribal nation, it is important to make sure this study is done in what I describe as the *right way*, meaning in a traditionally culturally way. Too often outside academics enter Indigenous communities and perform extractive practices of Indigenous knowledge for their needs and benefits without providing curiosity and giving voice to the communities in the study. Gaudry (2011) argues, “rarely are the people who participate in the research process as participants or informants considered to be the primary audience when it comes time to disseminate the research” (p. 113). As I was raised in traditional Indigenous ways, there are, as we say, *Good Ways* that must be practiced to honor and respect Indigenous communities, and the use of Indigenous research methods is part of these *Good Ways* in honoring participant voices instead of practicing imperialistic research as many have done before. As Smith (2021) articulates:

Communities and Indigenous activists have openly challenged the research community about such things as racist practices and attitudes, ethnocentric assumptions, and exploitative research, sounding warning bells that research can no longer be conducted with Indigenous communities as if their views did not count or their lives did not matter. (p. 11)

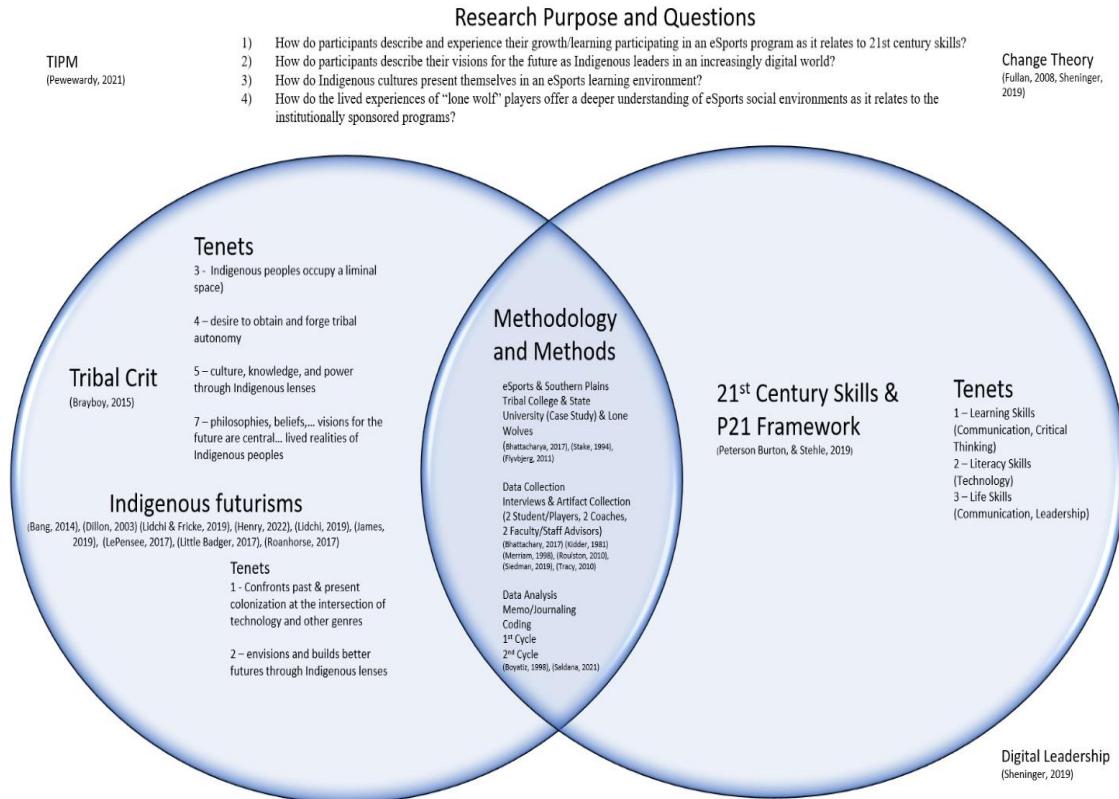
With Gaudry's (2011) and Smith's (2021) words, I am cognizant of my role as not only an Indigenous scholar and researcher but a tribal citizen as well. It is my duty to make sure Indigenous voices are heard and represented in this study and not repeat any academic extraction as many outside academics have done so before me. As Cavender (2004) argues, "our empirical and scholarly understandings substantiate the connection between the reality our circumstances today and the five hundred years of terrorism and injustice we have faced as a consequence of European and American colonialism" (p. 71). It would not be difficult to conduct this study from a Eurocentric viewpoint without any Indigenized concepts or perspectives if this is the aim of the study, but the aim of this study is to explore the intersection of Indigenous ways of knowing and eSports.

Theoretical Focus: TribalCrit, Indigenous futurisms, and 21st Century Skills

Here I expand upon my theoretical and methodological frameworks outlined in Chapter 2

Figure 6

Research Purpose and Questions with Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks



Note. This image was created to guide the overall framework with research purpose and questions and articulate how I am mobilizing them into research design (see Figure 6).

TribalCrit and Indigenous Futurisms

Due to TribalCrit’s enormity as a framework, four tenets – 3, 4, 5, and 7 - were the primary focus during this case study. Each tenet is relevant to Indigenous ways of knowing, exerting educational sovereignty through teaching and learning, and the intersection of technology (eSports) and Indigenous futures.

Tenet 3: Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of our identities.

Only recently has eSports begun to make its presence known in educational spaces. In other words, eSports is considered a Noob in educational teaching and learning. Since the 1970s, eSports or video games have been relegated to subculture status and not considered mainstream enough to be beneficial to educational learning. With the emergence of eSports programs being incorporated into educational institutions, the perceived benefits and learned skill sets beyond just playing eSports for wins and losses are only in its infancy at institutions of higher education serving Native students and are in the transitional stages of incorporating eSports into learning but not at the stage where all benefits and skills are realized.

Tenet 4: Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification.

Institutions of higher education serving Native students have progressed and thrived in exerting their educational sovereignty infusing Indigenous ways of knowing into Eurocentric academic standards of learning. Native-serving institutions are equipped to provide students with a holistic atmosphere of learning that encourages self-identification through cultural learnings and culturally relevant pedagogies. Furthermore, these institutions are some of the primary vehicles for Native Nations to forge tribal sovereignty and self-determined futures.

Tenet 5: The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens.

Since the early invention of video games and their iterations, Indigenous peoples have been depicted and perpetrated as various Indigenous peoples' stereotypes. A classic example of video games perpetrating stereotypes of Indigenous peoples is the ability to transform into various animals, as the character, Night Wolf (Cuevas, 2019), in the *Mortal Kombat* fighting games does so to defeat an adversary with the ability to shoot a bow and arrow. Listed as the

worst video game in history, *Custer's Revenge* (Prager, 2020), released in 1982, glorified the raping of an Indigenous female, is another example of video games marginalizing Indigenous cultures.

Only recently have video games connected with tribal nations to incorporate Indigenous voices and perspectives into gaming as mentioned previously with Indigenous futurisms (Dillon 2012), and how Indigenous peoples are reimagining video games through Indigenous lenses. Two video games of note that include Indigenous voices include *Never Alone* (Kisima Ingitchuna), which is the first game developed in collaboration with the Iñupiat, an Alaska Native people. Nearly 40 Alaska Native elders, storytellers and community members contributed to the development of the game, while *Assassin's Creed 3* depicts a Mohawk character developed with input Individuals from the Kanien'kehá:ka Onkwawén:na Raotitióhkwa Language and Cultural Center to provide assistance and helped them make decisions on what was and what was not appropriate to depict in the game such as clothes, jewelry, and music.

Tenet 7: Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future

This allows Indigenous peoples to reclaim the narrative previously dominated by Eurocentric paradigms, as in this case of decolonizing eSports, to include Indigenous ways of knowing into student learning. These Indigenous ways are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups.

21st Century Skills

For many gamers, sitting down and playing a video game is an art. It is about mastering a controller and scoring enough points to win a game, but for many individuals who see 21st century skills as an added benefit of video games, the knowledge learned beyond sitting down,

turning on a video game, and just playing is a priority. It is through 21st century skills, i.e., technology, social, critical thinking, that many gamers are learning to explore and implement in spaces external to eSports. While my data collection and analysis efforts remained open to all areas of emphasis across the four main categories of the P21 framework, below are some examples of areas of focus that represented starting points informing data collection and analysis.

Technology Skills

Individuals who partake in eSports will automatically garner some form of technology skills. One of the main technological skills associated with eSports is learning how to use a controller and headset or a keyboard. Most eSports games use a controller and headset to play 1v1 or 4v4. Games that are played in online arenas teach individuals how to navigate online game rooms and online chat rooms. The use of a keyboard is common with eSports, as those games that are played using a personal computer utilize many keyboard combinations; plus, most online chat rooms give the option of typing for conversations using a keyboard.

Social Skills

Through many eSport games that utilize the 4v4 format, gamers are able to play cooperatively with other gamers. Many games are strategic, so the goal of the game is to work together to win the game. Gamers communicate back on forth using their headsets to call out instructions, locations, game time, enemy advancements, etc., while working together as one unit. The gamers who are referred to as Noobs usually enhance their social skills through active listening. That was me when I first began to play eSports; I had other veteran gamers tutor me in gameplay, how to communicate, how to work together in 4v4, etc., to make sure I was cognizant of the rules of gameplay. Unbeknownst to me at the time, I was developing and enhancing my social skills through gameplay.

Critical Thinking

One of the games I play to enhance my critical thinking skills is that of *Tetris*. *Tetris* is a puzzle solving video game that uses various shapes to complete a puzzle, and it makes an individual think about what shape of blocks are next and how it fits into the puzzle in mere seconds. In games such as *NBK 2K*, *Madden Football*, *MLB: The Show*, players have to think about what defenses, play call, or the baseball pitch to throw next, especially if you are playing against a live person, in an attempt to outthink each other. Just like in real life sports, coaches and players are always using their critical thinking skills to outthink or outplay the other team.

Recently, critical thinking, Indigenous perspectives and voices have been (re)emerging as voices of creative expression. Although often mistaken as being limited to science fiction, Indigenous futurisms can take many forms in areas of focus as well as types of expression. For Indigenous people who live in an urban place, Indigenous futurisms can mean learning about that place as it was before colonization in order to restore plants, waters, and land in the present with hope for continuance in future generations (Bang et al., 2014). For scientists, writers, and artists, it can be a space within which to express culturally rooted science ideas through, for example, comics (Roanhorse et al., 2017). In games, imaginings such as dystopias, utopias, spacetime travel, robots, and planetary interweaving are represented not only through aesthetics, but through design and mechanics as well (LaPensée, 2018).

Although the institutions for this particular study do practice and compete in eSports competitions playing non-Indigenous Eurocentric video games such as *Mario Go Kart*, *League of Legends*, *Smash Brothers*, etc., the programs commit, albeit in increments, to exposing the players to video games with Indigenous voices, *Assassins Creed III* and *Never Alone*, even though these games are not designated as eSports games. It is though this exposure that the

eSports program honors the cultural heritages past, present, and future by Indigenizing their playing and learning, which many eSports' programs do not actively participate in.

Case Study

The specific institutions of higher education serving Native students, where I conducted a case study operate in varied fashions of prioritizing Indigenous ways of knowing campus life and into curriculum and instruction. One is a Southern Plains Tribal College that commits their ways of learning through cultural values that are ingrained into student and campus life that has an eSports program with 100% Native players. Another institution is a state university of higher learning that has a high population of Native students, with a high population of Native students playing eSports.

For the study, a case study is utilized, and it is important to note that Merriam (1988) argues, “the qualitative case study can be defined as an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit” (p. 16). In situating this case around a pair of higher education eSports programs involving Native students, it falls within the parameter of what Yin (2013) asserts, “the case study allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events-such as individual life cycles, organizational and managerial processes, neighborhood change, international relations, and the maturation of industries” (p. 3). As such, real-life events are the focus of my research on eSports programs.

Defining the Case

For this study, I explored the perceptions of eSports players (n=2), coaches (n=2), and faculty/staff (n=2) in newly developed eSports programs at institutions of higher education serving Native students. Specifically, this study was focused on deepening our understanding of these institutions' educational experiences as they constructed eSports programs, how

participation in these program influences how they envision their future, skill sets they learn, and how Indigenous cultures and futures intersect with eSports learning environments, as well as 21st century skills (Kim et al., 2019). One institution is in its third year of operation in eSports, and the other is in its fourth year of operation of eSports. Both institutions began with the idea of providing students with a space to play eSports for entertainment and for competition and to develop their skills in new and exciting ways. As evident by participant responses you will read in Chapter 4, both institutions' eSports program have provided education benefits and incorporated important values and skills into the gameplay.

Southern Plains Tribal College (2 Year)

Having familiarity with a tribal college during my service as faculty and director at a tribal college, this particular institution was selected because of its eSports program. Additionally, this institution has invested copious amounts of monies into the program and continues to upgrade the necessary technology and gaming components in order for the program to be competitive in gaming competitions. Technology resources within the school have steadily increased over the past few years. In years past, the institution had one computer lab designed for students to work on homework and other projects, but the institution has dedicated six state of art gaming monitors, towers, and gaming chairs to make sure students feel comfortable when playing eSports.

In choosing this particular institution, I was not familiar with any students participating in the eSports program. Furthermore, I had not maintained employment in a tribal college institution for more than two years prior to this study.

State University (4 year)

Having served at various four-year universities with a high Native American population as an instructor and research associate, State University was selected due its eSports program and my familiarity with players and being a current student at the institution.⁷ The eSports program currently has state of the art monitors and workspaces, which allows for students to feel comfortable when playing in 1v1s or 4v4s. The program has one coach and currently has six players on the team. Since this study was conducted during the institution's transition to summertime, the eSports program was not officially in session and not conducting practices.

Participant Selection

Familiar with the make-up of an eSports program, I utilized a method of criterion-based sampling. According to Merriam (1998), "it requires that one establish the criteria, bases, or standards necessary for units to be included in the investigation; one then finds a sample that matches these criteria" (p. 48). For selection of participants, the following criteria was used.

- **Players:** Any individuals within the institution and enrolled as a college student, who occupies space as both student and eSports program team member.
- **Coach:** Any individual who occupies spaces as both coach and teacher, who organizes practices, practice space, or essential teaching, learning, and competition related to eSports programming in this school.
- **Faculty/Staff:** Any individual within the institution who is not a coach or administrator but has affiliations with the eSports program.

The population identified for this study included Native American college students who are members of their tribal college's eSports program and enrolled citizens of a federally

⁷ I am enrolled in a certificate program at the State University. No participant in the study was a student in or affiliated with my certificate program.

recognized tribal nation or descendants of a tribal nation. The head coaches' ethnicities were Native American, and faculty/staff were also Native American. In the case of knowing student ethnicities beforehand, all students participating in eSports are either enrolled in a tribal nation or is a descendent of a tribal nation. For participant demographics, see Table 2.

Table 1

Participants

Participants	n size
Players	2
Coaches	2
Faculty/Staff	2
Lone Wolves	6

Note: The image represents the number of participants in the study (n=12). The Lone Wolves were added in the fourth week of the study.

Table 2*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Location	Status	Experience (Years)	Participant Information
Efv	Southern Plains Tribal College	Coach	30+	Efv serves as a coach of his institution's eSports program. He is an experienced gamer knowledgeable in over 30+ years of playing video games and has led the process of building the eSports program from the ground up.
Great Mountain	Southern Plains Tribal College	Coach	30+	Great Mountain serves as a coach at his tribal college. He is an experienced gamer with over 30+ years of experience playing a variety of consoles. He also serves as a recruiter on campus.
Jeff	Southern Plains Tribal College	Player/Student	30+	Jeff is a sophomore at a tribal college and is a team member of its eSports program. He has 20+ years of gaming experience and is now tutoring his son in the ways of gaming with experiences on PCs.
Bob	Southern Plains Tribal College	Player/Student	20+	Bob is a sophomore at a tribal college and a team member of a its eSports program. He is preparing to graduate and plans on moving on to a four-year institution. He is an experienced gamer with over 20+ years of experience. He has sights on possibly moving towards a career as a game developer.

Timmy	State University	Lone Wolf	35+	Timmy is a graduate student working on a master's degree. He is an experienced gamer with over 35+ years of experience. He is a self-admitted Lone Wolf gamer, who values playing solo and independence and is very technologically savvy. He has played competitively eSports for several years and still plays competitively on occasion.
Calvin	State University	Lone Wolf	35+	Calvin is a graduate student working on his master's degree. He is an experienced gamer with over 35+ years of experience. He enjoys playing 1v1s and 4v4s but has a tendency to play eSports as a Lone Wolf. He is very skilled at gameplay and technologically savvy.
Gabriel	State University	Lone Wolf	35+	Gabriel is a college student working on his second bachelor's degree and has been gaming for over 35 years. He is a self-admitted Lone Wolf and enjoys playing in the Wild West online eSports arenas. He has played competitively in numerous eSports tournaments.
Chuckie	State University	Lone Wolf	35+	Chuckie is an undergraduate student and a toy and video game shop owner. He is business, gaming, and technology savvy. He has over 35+ years of experience in video gaming and is a former competitive eSports gamer and enjoys playing as Lone Wolf

Charlie	State University	Lone Wolf	10+	Charlie is an undergraduate student who is a self-admitted Lone Wolf. In terms of gaming experience, he is relatively new to gaming with only 10+ years of experience.
Jeremy	State University	Faculty/Staff Advisor	25+	Jeremy is faculty/staff for State University's eSport program. He is a casual gamer and enjoys 4v4 gameplay. He has over 25+ years of experience as a gamer.
Rob	State University	Faculty/Staff Advisor	16+	Rob is faculty/staff for State University's eSports program. He has over 16+ years of gaming experience. He also oversees the campus fitness center.
Sinha	State University	Lone Wolf	25+	Sinha is a graduate student and works for a tribal nation. She has years of experience as a gamer and has many years of professional experience in the business side of eSports in areas of streaming and competitive gaming. She plays as a Lone Wolf.

Note: All students are at different levels of schooling, and the self-identified Lone Wolves are students but are independent of their institution's eSports program.

Interview Study Outside of the Case: The Lone Wolves

Additionally, through the execution of this research and with the acknowledged need to deepen the inquiry in substantive ways, opportunities arose to interview Native Lone Wolves (n=6), who identified as gamers but were not part of a program; therefore, research question four was added to explore lived experiences outside of the above case through a supplemental interview study (Bhattacharya, 2017). While Lone Wolves are outside of the case identified for

this study, these participants provide an extra layer of data collection as they operate in what gamers refer as the Wild West in Chapter 4, which revealed important considerations for structure and safety as the educational institutions bring on sponsored programs. However, these participants were given the same interview questions in pursuit of the newly added fourth research question mentioned previously.

Because eSports operates outside of structured programs also, that particular space is not always familiar to those who are not gaming enthusiasts. As Rubin & Rubin (2012) assert when describing interview studies, “qualitative interviews let us see that which is not ordinarily on view and examine that which is often looked at but seldom seen” (p. xv), which lays the foundation of exploring Lone Wolves gaming experience and their stories.

In adding the Lone Wolves, I was intentional that their gaming experience might provide deeper and creative insights of eSports through their interviews. As Booth et al. (2016) assert, “be creative when using people as primary research, don’t ignore people in local businesses, government, civic organizations” (pp. 81-82). eSports gamers do not just play eSports in structured organizations, they play online in the confines of their own homes, so it was necessary to include how the intersection of eSports, 21st century skills, and Indigenous futurisms operate in unstructured eSports spaces, as well.

Membership Role

During my role as a researcher for this study, I was a doctoral candidate in Educational Leadership at Kansas State University, Indigenous Initiatives Research Associate, and former faculty at a four-year institution and a tribal college. Because of my role as researcher, it was an experience to step inside both Southern Plains Tribal College and State University and not have to worry about or have to create lesson plans or teach every single day and not have to worry

about classroom management. I freely conducted my research and reflected on the task at hand, which is the purpose of study to take notes of the eSports program within the institution. Within this study, I was a student of learning, interviewer, gamer, editor, writer, transcriber, and a citizen of a tribal nation.

To explore the intersection of eSports and Indigenous cultures, I was very strategic in which tribal college and four-year institution serving Native students I chose to conduct my research due to the fact not all tribal colleges and four-year institutions have an eSports program. Both the Southern Plains Tribal College and State University are at various stages of constructing an eSports program into their institution. Some institutions have full-fledged programs that have been in operation for years; some are in the early stages of discussing what it is like to have an eSports program and trying to figure out how it fits into their learning institution. Some are in the discussion stages to see if the program is conducive to teaching and learning, and some are in the non-discussion and non-committal stage.

Insider.

I have previously taught at a tribal college and a four-year institution serving Native students. As an Insider, I acknowledge that I know the inner workings of a tribal college and four-year institution in their commitment in meeting the learning needs of our Indian children. Having this prior knowledge and being an insider in both institutions in different kinds of ways, it allowed me to seek the support of administration and the students as I conducted my fieldwork of studying their eSports programs.

During my time employed in a tribal college and a four-year institution, I cultivated a plethora of professional relationships from various institutions of higher education throughout the United States and experienced various curriculum and instruction, but no institution had an

existing eSports program. I was fortunate to have many early conversations with faculty and administrator from across various institutions of higher education about implementing an eSports program into teaching and student learning, but early discussions with colleagues were hindered by their unfamiliarity with eSports and video games and learning a new tool for teaching and learning. Even though the unfamiliarity was prevalent in early discourse, many colleagues were open to discussions, especially if it benefitted student learning.

Overall, as an insider, to help provide transparency to my subjectivities while I present my findings in the following chapter, you will also find my interpretive personal reflections which serves two purposes: 1) This helps add a layer of transparency to my subjective thoughts, as an extension of my personal memos (to be discussed below), and 2) this also helps me serve as somewhat an interpreter for the reader at the intersection of Native cultural norms and eSports cultural contexts.

Outsider.

While I do carry that title of Insider from prior working experiences, I was cognizant that I was seen as an outsider due to the fact that I no longer work for a tribal college or four-year institution of higher education learning, as I no longer hold any privileges at a tribal college or four-year university. Also, with reference to participants, I had varying degrees of relationships with all participants interviewed, which changed the interview dynamics in that I played video games for several years with the Lone Wolves and have educational and colleagues' relationships with the participants from Southern Plains Tribal College and State University.

Enrollment Procedure and Ethics

Once the IRB application was approved by Kansas State University's University Research Compliance Office (URCO), I contacted the president of Southern Plains Tribal

College via email to seek permission to conduct a case study of the eSports program which includes conducting interviews. For the initial seeking of approval, I explained the purpose of the study, my role as researcher, the role of participants/interviewees, their option to choose to participate or not in the study, and confidentiality. As Tracy (2010) explains, “as a method of procedural ethics, researchers safeguard participants from undue exposure by securing all personal data, in a locked office or drawer, or a password-protected website” (p. 847). In the case of this research study, all documents, recordings, emails, etc., were stored on a password protected computer only accessible to me. All interviewees were stored using pseudonyms to protect all participant identities during all phases of the research project, and as the researcher, I have access to participant identities but will protect these in any public display of findings, such as dissertation and journal manuscripts. All and any data, interviews, transcriptions, emails, etc., collected and analyzed are kept under lock and password on my computer. Data stored on the computer is only accessible to me through password protection, and data collected in hard copy is stored in a locked cabinet, which is only accessible by me. Transcriptions of interviews are saved to a specifically named file on my desktop computer and are under lock and key only assessable to me. All data is under lock and key for a duration of three years and will be destroyed after that time period expires.

Once permission was approved by Southern Plains Tribal College’s IRB Office to conduct my field research at the institution, I began eight weeks of ongoing interviews with the eSports program and its players (n=2), coaches (n=2), and faculty/staff (n=2). This included forming relationships with players (n=2), coaches (n=2), and faculty/staff (n=2), specifically, a gaming relationship was formed between me and the participants due to our affinity for recreational and competitive gaming. As mentioned in Chapter 1, through the execution of these

research opportunities arose to interview Native Lone Wolves (n=6) who identified as gamers but were not part of a program. The Lone Wolves were added in the fourth week of the study.

Because this is a case study, I contacted the chair of State University's IRB office to seek approval to conduct my research over the university's eSports program. After all IRB forms and my application request to conduct research on campus were approved by State University, I began eight weeks of ongoing interviews with the program and its players (n=2), coaches (n=2), and faculty/staff (n=2). All interviewees were assigned pseudonyms to protect all participant identities during all phases of the research project. As the researcher, I have access to participant identities but will protect these in any public display of findings, such as dissertation and journal manuscripts. All and any data, interviews, transcriptions, emails, etc., collected and analyzed are kept under lock and password on my computer. Data stored on the computer is only accessible to me through password protection, and data stored in hard copy is stored in a locked cabinet, which is only accessible by me. Transcriptions of interviews were saved to a specifically named file on my desktop computer and are under lock and key only assessable to me. All data is under lock and key for a duration of three years and will be destroyed after that time period expires.

Data Collection

For this study, I conducted 25 interviews over an eight-week time span with the eSports programs and their membership upon receiving approval from both IRB offices. Developing gaming and social relationships predicated on trust and openness was at the heart of my association with these programs, as I was coming to this study as an outsider and/or Noob to some of the unfamiliar eSports programs. Many of the eSports players on these teams have been practicing for months and years, while I have not played competitive eSports in years.

The primary method of data collection for this study was in the form of interviews and

artifact collection. Because there were delays in receiving IRB approval across targeted institutions of higher education serving Native students due to summer vacations and ceremonies, Lone Wolves were invited to participate in the study. A total of six Lone Wolves were added to this study to add an extra layer of data collection. Participant interviews included one focus group interview with two players, two rounds of individual interviews, with three Lone Wolves having a follow-up third interview. Originally, the plan was to conduct more focus group interviews but scheduling and the transition to summer break, as well as Native obligations to various summer ceremonies, made this impractical. Week 1 included one focus group interview with two players and individual interviews with coaches from Southern Plains Tribal College. Week 2 included individual follow-up interviews with players and coaches from Southern Plains Tribal College. Week 3 included the focus of my data analysis. Week 4 included interviews with the Lone Wolves. Week 5 included the first round of interviews with participants from State University and the second round of interviews with Lone Wolves. Week 6 included the second round of interviews with participants from State University and follow-up interviews with three Lone Wolves. Weeks 7 and 8 included member checking, 2nd round of coding, and writing up findings.

During the research study, semi-structured interviews were decided upon to give a sense of flexibility of the questions. As Roulston (2010) writes:

In these kinds of interviews, interviewers refer to a prepared interview guide that includes a number of questions. These questions are usually open-ended and after posing each question to the research participant, the interviewer follows up with probes seeking further detail and description about what has been said. (p. 15)

According to Merriam (1998), “in case study research of contemporary education, some and occasionally all of the data are collected through interviews. The most common form of interview is the person-to-to person encounter in which one person elicits information from another” (p. 71). The interviews for this study were conducted in-person, and all participants were given choices of where and when they were interviewed. Collecting data for this research study was making sure confidentiality of all interviewees is preserved.

Table 3

Data Collection Timeline

Week	Data Collection Information	Data Management
Week 1	Focus Group Interview with players and Individual Coaches Interview (1 st Round) – Southern Plains Tribal College	Ongoing Analytic Memos; Transcribe Focus Group interview Transcribe interview
Week 2	Individual Interviews players and coaches, (2 nd Round.) – Southern Plains Tribal College	Ongoing Analytic Memos; Transcribe interview
Week 3	Focus on Data Analysis	Ongoing Analytic Memos;
Week 4	Interview Lone Wolves (1 st Round)	Ongoing Analytic Memos: Prepare for 1 st Round Coding to prepare for 2 nd round of interviews
Week 5	Interview faculty/staff (1 st Round) – State University. Interview Lone Wolves (2 nd Round)	Ongoing Analytic Memos; Transcribe Focus Group interview; Start 2 nd Round of Coding
Week 6	Interview faculty/staff (2 nd Round) – State University; Interview Lone Wolves (Follow-up 3 rd Round) Member Checking	Ongoing Analytic Memos; Transcribe Focus Group interview; Continue 2 nd Round of Coding
Week 7	Member checking	Continue 2 nd Round of Coding; Write up findings
Week 8	Member checking	Continue 2 nd Round of Coding; Write up findings

Note: The image represents data collection timeline for the study.

Semi-Structured and Open-Ended Interviews

As Bhattacharya (2017) writes, “there are various types of interview studies, such as in-depth interviews, open-ended interviews, critical incident interviews, feminist interviews, etc.” (p. 26). For this study, I utilized in-depth open-ended interviews. According to Bhattacharya (2017), “in-depth open-ended interviews usually focus on digging deep into one’s experience with a few key questions prepared in advance” (p. 127), which aligns with what Merriam (1988) writes: “interviewing is more open-ended and less structured” (p. 73). For this study, I utilized open-ended interviews, but entered these conversations with semi-structured interview protocols and guides for more casual conversations with participants. This allowed me to bring structure and focus, yet adapt to the various insider-outsider dynamics that were present since I had differing levels of familiarity with some of their eSports perspectives, and the depth of my existing relationships with participants varied. In other words, the semi-structured and open-ended approach allowed me to adapt to each person but maintain focus with some structure in place.

All interviews with all participants were recorded using the Voice Recorder & Audio Editor, which was downloaded from Apple App Store to my iPhone. All recordings were saved to the recording app and then emailed to a secure email account, which was my current institution’s email server. I used audio recording, which also allowed me to maintain focus on all participants’ facial and body reactions during their responses to the interviews, which in turn allowed me to have deeper understandings of their responses to interview questions. I did conduct some additional follow up with a few participants to clarify any questions or uncertainties I had about their interview responses as a layer of member-checking and deepening the findings. In doing this, I contacted participants by email or cell phone to schedule a follow up

to make sure I had complete understanding of their responses. This allowed for the interviews to run smoothly without the interviewees worrying about any interruptions. According to Seidman (2019):

Often an interviewer is more interested in something the participant says than the speaker seems to be. While the participant continues talking, the interviewer feels strongly tempted to interrupt to pursue the interesting point. Rather than doing, however, the interviewer can jot down the key word and follow up on it later, when doing so will not interrupt the participant's train of thought. (p. 92)

All interviews were transcribed and coded utilizing NVIVO transcription and coding services. To lessen the number of transcriptions done in bulk, once an interview was completed, I began the transcription process immediately. To ensure that all transcripts were completed with accuracy, I jotted down any uncertainties that I ran across during my review of the audio recordings.

All participants received an interview guide, which was developed prior to any scheduled interviews, and all participants were given the opportunity to ask questions or voice any concerns they might have regarding the questions to be asked during interviews. Also, by giving the participants the interview questions beforehand, this allowed them the opportunity as well to formulate responses to questions and prepare relevant responses. The Lone Wolves were provided with the same interview guide as participants from institutions of higher education serving Native students to ensure no questions deviated from focus and aligned with the research questions.

Collection of Artifacts

During my initial meeting with all participants, I collected information regarding relevant artifacts pertaining to participant eSports experiences, (i.e., gaming consoles and monitors, video games, gaming chairs and towers, gaming characters, any gaming conferences, student government associations, etc.), as participants discussed these artifacts during interviews. As an example:

- Gaming consoles included Xbox, PCs, PlayStation, Nintendo Switch, Nintendo, Super Nintendo.
- Video games included *Smash Brothers*, *Mortal Kombat*, *League of Legends*, *Turok: The Dinosaur Hunter*, *Left 4 Dead*, *Call of Duty*, *Modern Warfare*, *Mario Go Kart*. Gaming characters included: Night Wolf, Turok, and Ratonhnhaké: ton.
- Gaming conferences included the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA).

The collection of artifacts aligns with what Bhattacharya (2017) states, "...the investigation is strongly focused on cultural objects, artifacts that already prominent visual representations with their own meaning for the cultural insiders" (p. 119). As an experienced gamer, I understood every eSport cultural artifact the participants mentioned or discussed, from every gaming console, every video game character, any gaming conference, and student associations. While I did not collect their physical items, I logged them and searched for affiliated information. For example, one participant discussed eSports experiences, while he played *Left 4 Dead* in a 4v4. I then searched the Internet and collected information on the video game and inputted information into an Excel spreadsheet. I continued this process for every artifact that was mentioned by participants. According to Merriam (1998), "...problem with

documentary materials is determining their authenticity and accuracy” (p. 106). While I prepared to focus on a straightforward eight-week schedule of actively interviewing, I had to alter my schedule to fit summer vacations and ceremonies.

Data Management and Analysis

Realizing that gathering data through interviews is a large part of the study, the act of data analysis became more intensive after all the data has been collected. According to Merriam (1998), “data analysis is the process of making sense out of one’s data” (p. 127). Sifting through all the data collected, i.e., interviews responses, allowed for understanding and informed my research questions. While data analysis became more intensive after the data had been collected, this is not to say that data collection and analysis did not take place at the same time. According to Merriam (1998):

Data collection and analysis is a simultaneous activity in qualitative research. Analysis begins with the first interview, the first observation, the first document read. Emerging insights, hunches, and tentative hypotheses direct the next phase of data collection, which in turn leads to refinement or reformulation of one’s questions, and so on. It is an interactive process through which the investigator is concerned with producing believable and trustworthy findings. (p. 120)

While I am very familiar with the nuances of eSports, having been a recreational, competitive, and now one of the Lone Wolves, the case study of Southern Plains Tribal College and State University and the addition of the Lone Wolves presented a deep exploration of the experiences of eSports in structured and unstructured environments meaning the study looked at the experiences of eSports on university campuses and that of the Wild West of eSports in online gaming. The findings provided from the study showed a wealth of experiences and deep insight

of gaming experience through which many participants expressed critical thoughts and examples relevant to the beforementioned research questions, with specific themes emerging from interviews and data analysis.

Coding Process

After completion of interviews and transcriptions, many themes became apparent from interview responses. The analysis of all interviews was conducted through first cycle coding methods, In vivo and Value, and second cycle coding methods, Pattern, provided an initial report of prevalent themes from interviewees. Saldana (2021) asserts, “coding is a cyclical act. Rarely is the first pass or first cycle of coding data perfectly attempted” (p. 12). For this reason, I needed to replay interviews several times to improve and enhance the coding process.

First Cycle Coding

Through repeated words and thoughts from participants, common themes from interviewees manifested during analyzation, which reflected an In Vivo Coding method. According to Saldana (2021), “the root meaning of in vivo is ‘in that which is alive,’ and as a code refers to a word or short phrase from the actual language found in qualitative data record, ‘the terms used by [participants] themselves” (p. 137). To check the validity of common themes, I listened to interviews many times over to make sure I heard the same words, thoughts, and themes over and over, while I highlighted repeated word and thoughts, and created categories for common themes derived from the verbatim responses from interviewees.

Using the first cycle of coding, values coding, I created categories reflecting participant values, attitudes, and beliefs. As Saldana (2021) writes, “values coding is the application of codes to qualitative data that reflect a participant’s values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview” (p. 167).

Second Cycle Coding

Using pattern coding as a second cycle coding method, I created a category of certain perceptions of change utilizing eSports in student learning. According to Saldana (2021), “pattern coding is appropriate for searching for causes and explanations in the data” (p. 322). Pattern coding allowed for a deeper context of the individual perceptions of eSports educational learning.

Analytic Memos and Journaling

The study also included analytic memo and journaling. As Saldana (2021) writes, “analytic memos are somewhat comparable to research journal entries or blogs – a place to ‘dump your brain’ about the participants, phenomenon, or process under investigation by thinking and thus writing and thus thinking even more about them...” (p. 58). During my interviews and coding processes of the eSports program, anytime a thought came to mind I made a journal entry of how I felt, saw, and what I sensed.

Tracy’s Big Tent

Tracy’s Big Tent was utilized for this case study, it represented quality standards for research. In this section I connect my specific research to the structure of expectations relevant to the tenets, Worthy Topic, Rigor, Sincerity, Credibility, Resonance, Significant Contribution, Ethics, and Meaningful Coherence, of Tracy’s Big Tent.

Worthy Topic

eSports have been experienced across the globe for decades but have not been viewed or incorporated into educational settings until recently. Similarly, eSports are still in their infancy in Indian education. In researching the intersection of eSports, Indigenous futurisms, and 21st century skills, this study aims to explore how institutions of higher education that are serving

Native students are incorporating eSports into campus life, specifically in educational benefits, leadership, and 21st themes and core studies.

Rigor

Working through a busy time of the year due to summer vacations and ceremonies, I worked hard to ensure I obtained multiple rounds of interviews with 12 individuals, as well as circled back with them for member-checking. Three Lone Wolves were asked to give a follow-up (Third round) for a total of three interviews for some of the participants. A total of 25 interviews were conducted for this qualitative case study. Additionally, systematic coding was conducted using NVivo to ensure I analyzed the data from multiple angles as it relates to deep exploration around my research questions.

During the course of the study, there were a plethora of artifacts that were mentioned or discussed in participant interviews. These artifacts included eSports and video games characters, eSports and video games, eSports gaming conference, and gaming consoles.

Sincerity

I subscribe to the notion that *gamers know gamers*. This notion was never more apparent than my relationships with all the participants. There were a few times during interviews that I imagined sitting side-by-side with these gamers as they described their gaming experiences in 1v1s or 4v4s, playing *League of Legends*, *Mario Go Kart*, and other eSports games. I stepped away from gaming for a few years, but listening to participants' stories made me want to get back into gaming, so I purchased gaming gear to get ready for the new *EA Sports College Football 2025* game on Xbox. Anytime participants used slang, such a *noob*, or mentioned the Wild West, it brought me back into familiar territory of playing video games for hours on into the night.

During transcriptions, participant responses of eSports kept bringing up memories of gameplay running with my crew listening to each other crack jokes of each other or on other teams, especially listening to that rugged Indian humor that participants knew intimately. As Deloria (2000) asserts, “Indians have found humorous side of nearly every problem, and the experiences of life have generally have been so well defined through jokes and stories that they have become a thing themselves” (p. 39). Because of my various relationships with participants, it was easy to understand their mindsets as the vivid imagery of their responses, such as experiencing racial slurs or sharing wisdom in eSport gameplay, resonated with me in my thoughts and memos.

Credibility

Engaging in the use of multivocality, participants holding a wide range of positions in eSports were interviewed (multiple times) for this study. Players (n=2), coaches (n=2) and faculty/staff (n=2) from multiple institutions of higher education serving Native students were part of the interview process. Adding extra layers of interviews to the research study, Lone Wolves (n=6) were interviewed as well. These Lone Wolves were college students but had no affiliation to their college’s eSports program for varied reasons, which are discussed in Chapter 4. The Lone Wolves provided responses from playing in the Wild West eSports program in an unstructured environment different from the structured eSports programs found on college campuses. Even though the participants were all eSports gamers and Native American, they provided varied responses about eSports, 21st century skills, and Indigenous futurisms.

Resonance

Words can induce mental images of past, present, and future images. A few participants discussed experiences of racism through racial slurs during eSports gameplay, while other

participants discussed racial imagery used for humor. These words and imagery hopefully will provoke aesthetical resonance through the study. These images show the distinct difference between the different venues of eSports, where participants in structured programs discussed, including rules and ramifications of using coarse language in gameplay or practice. Participant stories and experiences hopefully provoked imagery of practical descriptions of specific values, skill sets, and Indigenous ways of knowing eSports gamers exhibited in eSports programs. With so many new eSports program being created, this work can resonate with these rapid changes in practice across educational institutions.

Significant Contribution

As there is minimal research being conducted of the intersection of eSports, 21st century skills, and Indigenous futurisms, this study will be one of the first studies at this intersection. This study has potential make a significant heuristic contribution as it offers added information regarding eSports programs operating at institutions of higher education serving Native students, which could propel researchers, gamers, and other interested parties to conduct further research in this area.

Ethics

Each and every participant was frequently reminded of their right to ask questions or share concerns with my university's and their university's IRB office and participants could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. All facets of the interview study were addressed with all participants to ensure all participants' rights to confidentiality, anonymity and identities, and privacy were protected at all times. All participants received copies of unsigned and signed informed consent forms, and were made aware that information from this study will be kept confidential and under lock and key for three years and then destroyed.

Participant Jeremy used the motto, “Be a good relative”. I heeded this motto in all facets of the study. To me all participants are family, not necessarily through blood, but as in Native cultures, we see family through Indian Ways. We treat all like family and with respect due to the seriousness and sensitivity of some of the participant responses.

Meaningful Coherence

For this study, each section and chapter provides insights into eSports in Indian education. Through the purpose of the study, the focus was exploring the intersection of eSports, 21st century skills, and Indigenous futurisms through a systemic literature review. Utilizing Indigenous education leadership frameworks to inform my critical research questions, 12 Native American gamers with a plethora of eSports experiences participated in semi-structured interviews (multiple rounds) to gain insight to the intersection of the units of study. Data collected through interviews provided themes and critical questions to be of further use by entities interested in conceptualizing and building an eSports program.

Summary

A clear discussion of the frameworks and methodologies was provided in this chapter. Due to not all nine tenets of Tribal Crit not aligning with this research study, four tenets (3, 4, 5, 7) were discussed as they are relevant to the research questions. In using a case study to inform my research, I gained a clear understanding of Southern Plains Tribal College and State University’s eSports program, the purpose, players, coaches, faculty/staff perceptions, and their intersections with Indigenous ways of knowing in teaching and learning environments and 21st century skills (P21 Framework).

Chapter 4 - Findings

This study allowed for a deep understanding of eSports focusing on structured programs situated (school sponsored) on college campuses. Additional layers of insight were added to this study with Lone Wolves, who game in unstructured eSports programs (non-school sponsored) situated in what gamers refer to as the Wild West of eSports of online gaming. However, there were distinct differences described from participants' responses in the Wild West, where coarse language and stereotypes are prevalent during gameplay in ways not evident in structured college eSports programs (i.e., the case). With this in mind, I feel it is important to notify the reader that this chapter brings forward some old stereotypes of Indigenous peoples which were discussed by participants in ways that connect to other very entrenched and problematic stereotypes known in various fields of study (i.e., stuck in the past war-like stereotypes found in curriculum, media, mascots, etc.). Furthermore, participant responses include mentions of derogatory and racially charged language, but they also bring some of these topics forward through what Native folks call "rugged"⁸ Indian humor, which adds some depth and complexity to this research. Overall, Indian humor has a tendency to lean into absurd stereotypes with sarcastic undertones, and these mentions were more so coming from the Lone Wolves operating in the non-school sponsored eSports environments. I feel it is important to acknowledge the presence of these problematic stereotypes, but simultaneously, the contrasting findings between the structured and unstructured eSports environments have some very important implications for future research and practice that are discussed in Chapter 5.

⁸ Dark, crazy, overboard humor.

While this Wild West layer will not appear until the latter sections of this chapter, I first offer findings connected to research questions 1-3. In research question 1, participants describe their experiences of growth/learning in eSports as these experiences related to 21 century skills through technology, learning and innovation, business of eSports, life and career, and motivations. In research question 2, participants describe how Indigenous cultures present themselves in an eSports learning environment through Indian humor, Indigenous futurisms, and representation and stereotypes of Indigenous cultures. In research question 3, participants describe their visions for the future as Indigenous leaders in an increasingly digital world through values, specifically responsibility, wisdom, leadership, and integrity. In research question 4, participants, i.e., Lone Wolves, describe their lived experiences and deeper understanding of eSports social environments as they relate to the institutionally sponsored programs. I conclude this chapter by offering overarching themes found across both the case and the interview study with the Lone Wolves.

To add a layer of transparency to my findings and make my subjectivities clearer, as well as incorporate narrative aesthetic, my personal reflections (*italics*) are added into findings to help serve as a translator to readers who consider themselves as outsiders to Native gaming contexts. As Tracy (2010) asserts, “researchers must be transparent about how they accessed the context of the study, their level of participation and immersion, field note practices, and level of detail in transcription” (p. 5). My personal reflections stem from hearing participant interview responses and recalling my personal gaming experiences tied to eSports as a Lone Wolf with a history of participating in eSports in a variety of contexts.

Case Study Findings: Participant Responses from Southern Plains Tribal College and State University eSports Programs

Here I discuss findings as they relate to each research question, making sure to represent and blend direct quotes from each unit of analysis in each section - players (n=2), coaches (n=2), and faculty/staff (n=2) - as often as possible. Participants who play in structured Southern Plains Tribal College and State University eSports programs discussed various 21st century skills, as well as their thoughts and experiences around Indigenous cultures and futures throughout their time in the programs. While each participant did not experience eSports the same as other participants, there were some interesting commonalities. For categories listed under each research question, there is also at least one response from participants from either the Southern Plains Tribal College or the State University eSports program for each research question.

I knew going into both Southern Plains Tribal College and State University that I would feel right at home. I mean I am a student at a university; I teach at a university; I worked and taught at a tribal college, so walking down the halls was just another day to me. Going and visiting with gamers would be easy, as I am a gamer. I am a gamer who plays in the Wild West; I am a gamer that has developed skills, values, and experienced racism just like many of the participants in this study. I really felt like I was coming home in many ways. These participants are my people - gamers.

Research Question 1: How do participants describe and experience their growth/learning participating in an eSports program as it relates to 21st century skills?

In discussing 21st century technology skills, participants describe learning various nuances of eSports through their experiences of eSports such as technology, learning and innovation, business of eSports, health literacy, life and career, and motivations.

Technology

In this section, participants described their use of various forms of hardware and software that included cameras; microphones; PC, Apple, and OS; and You Tube. In discussing 21st century technological skills through coaching, Great Mountain (coach) described what skills they have developed or experienced at their institution.

I've learned how to use cameras and microphones; I have gotten better playing games on my phone, and I am begging to mod⁹ my switch now. You have to be able to maneuver around console marketplaces. I look at my pops, and he would probably throw the controller out the window if he tried to play *Call of Duty*. Also, posting to YouTube. You have to know how to do that and that requires tech skills. eSports or any video game, you aren't going to last long without the tech skills.

Efv (coach) also described how the eSports program is learning about the different OS systems and learning how to navigate various Apple and PC platforms, as well as deepening their understanding of how to update our computers and software to ensure updates are in place. Furthermore, he discussed their improved streaming knowledge, and learning how to cut, edit, and stream these videos. Additionally, both coaches expressed an increased knowledge in A-V equipment and nuance, and how they are then able to impart that knowledge on their students.

Bob (player) also discussed the learning curve of different gaming consoles and shows how different components of technology are linked together in eSports.

I was more of just a console gamer. 'Cause it was so much easier. All I had to do was load up and then I click a button and all my games are there updated. With PC, I feel like it's a

⁹ Modify or reconfigure gameplay.

little bit more difficult having to worry about if your CPU or graphics card can handle that game. With the set up here at the college, I can legit just come in and walk in and I just sign into my personal email and my Discord, my Xbox, my Steam, all that's already linked to that personal email. And I don't have to log into it every time, remember passwords or anything like that.

The thing I have to remember is that gamers aren't as tech knowledgeable as I am or others. I mean, I grew up learning this technology for the past 35 years, but some gamers are just now learning this technology because they've been used to laptops being for school, and gaming consoles being for gaming. Some of the OGs¹⁰ have learned technology through other means like computer classes in high school that has helped us out and have transferred that technology knowledge into eSports and gaming. I would say my tech knowledge is about an 8 on a scale of 1-10, but all gamers are at different levels, some lower and some higher.

Bob (player) also explained the technological skills growth he's experienced through eSports programming, on a 1-10 scale, with 10 being proficient:

Before I started here at eSports, I would say it was a six, seven. I had some classes in high school that helped me learn the computer and then obviously, you had your word and PowerPoint and Excel sheet, workshop stuff, but it didn't get in depth on how the computer worked. Now, I'm sitting at 7, 8, 9, maybe a nine, but I feel like it's definitely expanded a little bit.

Jeff (player) also explained his technological skills growth, on a 1-10 scale, during his experiences playing eSports.

¹⁰ Original Gamers – early online eSports gamers

I'd say I'm about; I've gone from a five to a six. I've always done a lot of manual labor, not a whole lot of PC use in my day-to-day living stuff, which I own my own company and its gutters. So, I don't use computers a whole lot for that other than bid process and standard internet stuff. I have the capacity. I have the capacity to increase that to probably eight.

eSports requires gamers to have technology skills, not only in using a controller or a keyboard, but eSports also develops and nurtures technology skills as evident from Bob's (player) and Jeff's (player) responses of how much eSports has increased their technology skills. At the same time, participants discussed other technology they have experienced through their eSports programs, as Great Mountain (coach) discussed how he has learned how to navigate a camera and microphone during his eSports experiences.

Communication

Utilizing the P21 framework, communication can be used for a range of purposes including instruction, as well as to communicate effectively in diverse environments. During eSports, participants conveyed stories that demonstrated how communication is a must when gamers are playing a 4v4 in *Rocket League* or *League of Legends* or streaming on YouTube. Communication was highlighted by a Great Mountain (coach) at Southern Plains Tribal College. "Students can actually market themselves. Especially when they're starting in the stream. 'Cause they're learning how to communicate with an audience, whether it be through a live chat, or they're learning how to talk between their teammates."

This quote by Great Mountain (coach) highlights how eSports and communication are linked as certain games such as *Rocket League* call for communication between players. If gamers venture into the world of Streaming, that calls for communication as well, due to

speaking directly to an online audience, which the eSports program at Southern Plains Tribal College is exploring their options of incorporating Streaming into the program.

Business of eSports

When gamers say they are going to jump online and play eSports, the imagery does not conjure the behind-the-scenes business aspects of eSports. It costs money to purchase gaming equipment, play online, and build an eSports program, as evident by participant responses in their experiences with the business of eSports.

Using a business take on eSports, Rob (faculty/staff) explained that money is needed to build the eSports program on his campus.

I'm trying to think of how much it all adds up to. I wanna say for 40,000 roughly.

Honestly, you could spend 10 grand and get some consoles and get some TVs. Get some furniture and you have a basic gaming lounge; you have some sports. 'Cause we have yearly expenses that go with that too, like we have software licenses and stuff. So every year we have to pay a big chunk of money to keep that software that lets us have this lounge open. So, there are cheaper ways to go about it. I would assume if you had multiple consoles, it's gonna be yearly cost of like \$600 to \$800.

Jeff (player) also provided a business take on his eSports experience. He articulated his amazement of individuals purchasing gaming equipment.

What surprises me, and this is just because of my own racing and framing what surprises me is that there are people out there that are not Esports programs that will spend \$4,500 for a cheap gaming rig and consider that a cheap gaming rig. Something they just threw together real quick to get through this weekend. That blows my mind that people have disposable income like that. Obviously, they do, otherwise the industry would not be as

big as it is and it wouldn't be on track to do the numbers it's on track to do over the next 10 years.

Playing eSports in a structured program like the one at State University requires much more business skills than purchasing a gaming console and gaming equipment. Rob (faculty/staff) and Jeff (player) described their learning business skills of money management of eSports, i.e., how much does it cost to purchasing eSports equipment, how much money is involved in building an eSports lounge, how much money for software licenses, etc.

Health Literacy

Utilizing the P21 Framework, health literacy is described as a necessary skill in preparing individuals to live and work in the 21st century. Three participants described in their interview responses how health literacy presents itself in their institution's eSports program.

Rob (faculty/staff) explained how his position as a fitness center director related to 21st century theme (Health Literacy). His response aligned with athletes in other sports who have mandatory workouts as part of their sport.

There's some discipline that comes with eSports. Which you're not used to having with games, you're not used to having discipline with gaming. So, I think there's some discipline. I actually work at the fitness facility. And we've had them have fitness as part of their club as well. Just like other sports, we have mandatory workouts here at the fitness center for the eSports team members, so we've had a lot of different ways to try to get them, 'cause that was just part of like having them stay healthy, but also having them be disciplined.

The quote above emphasizes how eSports is considered a sport just like baseball, soccer, and football to name a few. In any sport, training and working out are part of the regimen and are

ways to stay healthy and active. This was the first time in the interviews that a connection was made between eSports and health literacy.

Jeremy (faculty/staff) also explained how health, specifically age, is involved in eSports. You get to points where you have different health issues and things where you can't stay up all night anymore. I remember staying up three or four days to beat one video game. Like putting in 25 to 60 hours straight on a video game just to beat it in one day. But now it might take me two or three hundred hours to beat a game. So, I can't just stay up two or three hundred hours.

The question of is eSports a sport is explored in Rob's (faculty/staff) response to health literacy. At universities, athletes have workouts as part of their training regimen for their sport, and the response of having eSports players highlights the focus of fitness as part of State University's eSports program. Jeremy's response related to health literacy focuses on how older an individual gets, the more difficult it is to sustain the number of hours playing eSports as a younger eSports gamer.

Utilizing the P21 framework, participants appear to be cognizant of how to incorporate exercise, risk avoidance, and stress reduction in enhancing one's health lifestyle, as one faculty/staff discussed how his institution's eSports program mandates players workout at the fitness center; another faculty/staff mentioned how he understands now as an older gamer that staying up at night to play a game that may take hundreds of hours to complete no longer exists for him.

Life and Career

When participants proceeded to discuss life and career skills, many of the responses contained aspects of various skill sets found in other 21st century skills, such as technology,

learning and innovation, business, health literacy, life and career, and motivation. Great Mountain (coach) discussed skills that players are focusing on as well as the program's ability to cultivate skills to follow a specific career.

We're going to develop classes in video editing. We're going to develop classes in filming and social media relations, to be able to give them those skills, 'cause we're noticing here in the area that video production, TV studios, movie studios, coming to our area to film. If we have people here ready to film, ready to be a part of that, ready to engage in that, then they've already got a spot sold. And so giving them the upper hands in this media environment, if we can help them with that, that's great. With me, I took a coaching class to have that in my background. I had to go through a coaching seminar.

By this quote, it is evident that this participant is able to see and gauge future skills and career paths students are desiring and/or focusing on. With his coaching responsibilities, this participant is cognizant of his coaching responsibilities as well. Any coach in any sport has either taken or participated in coaching seminars or coaching clinics and knowing that eSports is just like any other sport, he understands the need to have a coaching background and certificate.

I completely understand his direction of taking a coaching seminar in his position as an eSports coach. When I was coaching high school and college softball, I had to take all kinds of coaching classes, i.e., CPR, coaching management, NAIA coaching certification, CDL. The classes were at times boring but necessary, as they either certified my position or gave me credibility as a coach as seen by colleagues in the sport.

In discussing life and career Great Mountain (coach) explains that the eSports program is preparing players to be self-directed learners as they will be exposed to skills such as video editing and social media relations during their time in the eSports program. Great Mountain

(coach) will be able to help the players advance in their knowledge skills as well for future and career use.

In discussing 21st century skills and how they present themselves, participants provided deep insight into how specific skills are experienced, developed, and nurtured through gameplay. Technology skills appear to be a skill that is vital to eSports, as there are many avenues of learning various aspects of technology in eSports. Through interview responses, participants in eSports program do exhibit growth through such skills as technology, learning and innovation, business, health literacy, life and career and through motivating factors of why to participate in eSports.

Motivations

In playing eSports, there are varied motivations as to why gamers play. Each participant described their motivation, and no two participants appeared to have the same motivations of playing. Participants have varied motivations for participating in eSports, as evident by participant responses, motivations include communication, being part of a structured eSports program, gaining of skills, and a place to escape to from real-world distractions.

I have my own motivations. When I first began playing eSports, it was because I liked the people I met online and had fun and laughter. Those motivations are not the same now. I think now if I jump online and play eSports, it is just because I need time to kill or time away from my studies. I don't really need to play with anyone in a group now.

Some gamers play for fun, some play for competitive motivations, and some play for the social aspects. For example, Bob (player) indicated his interest in eSports as his presence as a gamer, who comes from an organized eSports program and mainly sees eSports as a vehicle for his presence through communication.

Great Mountain (coach) indicated other motivations for students to join a structured eSports team on campus.

Most of the students in the eSports program have their own set up at home, but they don't have the same technology as we do here in the lab. Most of students/tribal citizens at the tribal college come from low-income communities with not good computers, and if they are competing in eSports usually, they are not on the same level as someone coming from a non-traditional middle-class family that have a more disposable income.

The whole gaming set up is a must for any gamer, and the better, pretty much more expensive equipment one has, tells a lot about the motivation of a gamers. I identified 100% with Great Mountain's assessment of not having the nicest gaming equipment. As a gamer, I want the \$600 gaming console; I want the special edition of a video game that costs \$150 instead of the regular edition that costs \$65. When I walked into the gaming lab and saw the nice shiny monitors, gaming chairs, and people standing around the new 3D printer they were going to use for the eSports program, I thought these guys are serious about this eSports program. Even in casual conversations with the coaches and players about the eSports set up, I could hear in their voices, "We got a clean set up." Compared to my set up at my homeplace, which is a gaming console and a headset, I was in heaven seeing Southern Plains Tribal College's gaming lab.

Great Mountain (coach) also discussed the responsibility of not only GPA requirements, but also gaming outside of eSport's program required practice schedule.

Students have to be a student athlete, so if they want to be part of the team and get some of our gear they have to maintain a GPA requirement, so not only are they coming in for that, they have to actually work at the school to make sure they can be part of the team, or A lot of students would play two or three nights a week on their own, so they wouldn't

fall behind the other students in terms of gameplay. So embodying that Native spirit of competitiveness, none of them wanted to be the worst player and playing on their own and not be the worst.

It was the same way when I played baseball in high school and college. I had to keep my GPA up or be ineligible to play, and I can remember running extra laps after practice and lifting extra weights, so I would be varsity and not be on the bench. eSports is just my baseball memories in a different sport.

Efv (coach) explains how motivation ties to standing up for oneself or the team during eSports.

Now there has to be some giveaway with that because you also can't be the ones going into these eSports matches and just willing to take it. You have to be willing to give a little fight back. And so that's kind of my thing with my players is I'm like, here's what I expect of you. Other teams need to know that they can't just run us over and take advantage of us, that we're gonna stand and fight because we come descendants of warriors and we're gonna, we're gonna represent that. But we're also gonna be respectable in a way about that too.

Efv (coach) also sees motivation in terms of what a player is gaining from eSports, which gamers embody through their gameplay.

If you're competing against somebody it's an eSport because no matter what you play you play enough of it, you're practicing, you're gaining skills and it's not the skills that are shared across everybody, not everybody can pick it up and play.”

Jeremy (faculty/staff) also expressed his reasons for playing eSports. He indicated it was a place for him to be away from distractions.

I think it's that escapism 'cause a lot of times when I play by myself, I'll be listening to, like, playlists, or I'll be listening to podcasts and those types of things. Like, I'm multitasking, having my own alone time, some meditative time while engaging my brain and playing those video games. I know not everybody's brain functions like this, basically it's just like you have your headset on, you're hearing the 360 sound, you have your controller or your keyboard, and it's just like fully immersive. I think it gives people escapism. And when I say escapism, I mean like taking away from your normal day to day, same shit, different day type stuff.

I completely agree with Jeremy's response of his motivation for playing eSports. There are many times when I would turn my Xbox on and play Left 4 Dead to get away from my studies and course work. There were times when there was nothing good on television, and I would just turn on Mario Go Kart and immerse myself in gameplay. For me, gaming just allows me to, as in Jeremy's words, escape life or distractions and enjoy time spent online gaming.

Research Question 2: How do Indigenous cultures present themselves in an eSports learning environment?

In discussing how Indigenous cultures present themselves in eSports, participants discussed specific ways they have experienced Indigenous culture in their gameplay of eSports. Humor is a big part of Indigenous cultures, and in this section, participants describe how Indian humor is present in eSports programs. At the same time, participants also discussed how Indigenous futurisms present themselves in eSports in how individuals re-imagine colonized eSports games to privilege Indigenous voices in gameplay.

Indian Humor

Indian humor can present itself in various forms as evident by participant response, and to outsiders it can feel awkward. If an individual is fluent or familiar with and how Indian humor is used and what it sounds like, then one understands the lingo and slang. For those not familiar with Indian humor, it can come off as a foreign language and sometimes it can be tame or what we call “rugged.”

Jeremy (faculty/staff) provided an experience of his own version of Indian humor. “We'd be talking crap about somebody who's playing. I was like, or some native person and be like, ‘Dang, it's probably your cousin.’” Jeremy (faculty/staff) also explained certain words that he and other gamer friends use in their gameplay in Destiny. “One of the people I used to play with a lot in that Destiny group was, he's also native grew up in some of the same communities I did, so we would joke a lot back and forth. We would say things like, *Aye*¹¹ and *Buh*.¹²”

Efv (coach) also explained how he uses Indian humor in the eSports program. “We got the Native humor going on. I'm gonna joke on you and you don't show up for something, you're not gonna not hear the end of it.”

I remember those Indian jokes like it was yesterday, mainly because I was present when those jokes were said. It seems like anything you get a bunch of Natives who really understand what Indian humor is the jokes start to flow, plus I played with these Native gamers who are what we call Pow Wow people in that we all go to pow wows and either dance in the circle or sing at the drum, which I do the latter. Pow Wow People know and understand how Pow Wow Indians communicate...I'll talk more about Indian humor later in this chapter when I discuss my interviews with the Lone Wolves.

¹¹ Slang for joking.

¹² Slang for being surprised.

Indigenous Futurisms: Yearning for More

eSports video games have been told or imagined from colonized perspectives, where the story is told not through the eyes of Indigenous peoples but from Eurocentric viewpoints.

Utilizing the framework of Indigenous futurisms, non-Indigenous peoples and Indigenous peoples can re-imagine how eSports can tell stories and gameplay privileging Indigenous voices.

When we think of Indigenous futurisms, most individuals point to re-imagining specific points in history, where the events are told from the colonizer's point of view, as evident with First Contact, where supposedly Christopher Columbus discovered this New World filled with inferior peoples. Textbooks utilize this point of view, but now game designers and gamers are beginning to re-imagine these points in history to incorporate Indigenous voices and tell the stories from our views.

Participants provided insight into how they would like to see eSports become more Indigenous, incorporating our ways of knowing into gameplay. This is evident in Great Mountain's (coach) response below.

Any kind of those big open world survival games, like that would be a perfect setting to go kind of explore more of the Native American aspects, the different tribes kind of actually different scene and being able to see from the Native American perspective., I would love to see a Native American still having trouble living on the rez and then go into the city on the Grand theft auto game.

In my mind, I had a joke ready about throwing Tomahawks at people instead of grenades in these first-person shooting games that Great Mountain mentioned. As I mentioned before, Gaming knows Gaming, but each gamer brings unique perspectives and adds details that I have never thought about before. For me to re-imagine eSports to privilege Native voices, I would

love to see an Olympic games where I could play as Billy Mills or and NFL game, where I can play as Jim Thorpe. Maybe this is just my imagination running wild and beginning to NERD out because of the company I am in – GAMERS.

Bob (player) added to this re-imagining of eSports that incorporates in a tribal-centric way, in which he discusses using artwork of his tribe.

There are definitely a couple games that I've played that have tried introducing some Native cosmetics. I know there's a couple skins in Fortnite that have an Indigenous culture behind it. I know SMITE, which is a battle arena game, I think has a couple.

I really thought that the responses would hover around First Contact when the participants re-imagined points in history to privilege Indigenous voices. I honestly didn't think that I would hear and experience the breadth of personal insights about how to use the term Indigenous futurisms in show the stories from our perspective. I thought I would only hear about re-imagining First Contact because most know the song, Christopher Columbus sailed the ocean blue, when in fact, I heard a plethora of perspectives of how to move our culture forward in ways so as our perspectives dominate the conversation, teachings, and curriculum. I should have kept an open mind throughout this process. But they were keenly aware of those stuck-in-the past stereotypes.

Representation and Stereotypes of Indigenous Cultures

All though the history of video games and eSports, Native characters have not always been true to representation. In fact, many of the characters in video games have been made in stereotypical images presented though old western movies such as The Searchers and Broken Arrow, where the Native characters are played by white men painted to look Native. Old television western shows are no different, with shows such as Gun Smoke and Bonanza that

perpetuate the use of the word, Injun, or show our people as stoic emotional people only good at shooting bows and arrows. In responses below, participants added much depth in their experiences gaming and experiences misrepresentations during gameplay. Some participants indicated minimal Indigenous knowledges and chose to skip cultural questions.

During my 35 years or so of playing video games, specifically eSports, I can recall numerous times playing certain games that had egregious images or characters of who my people look and act like. I can remember seeing and experiencing the character of Night Wolf on Mortal Kombat, but here is the thing with that. I was so young that I didn't see anything wrong with the character. I just saw a Native player and wanted to fight with him to win, but that changed as I got older and started seeing the many wrongs with the character, which I could expand on here, but I'll let the participants expand as some of them focused on Night Wolf and other ways our culture has been butchered through video games.

Great Mountain (coach) made a general statement of why these stereotype are prevalent in video games.

It really depends on who is designing those games – Non-Natives. They are taking what they see and know of old movies, textbooks, and images of what Natives are supposed to look and act like. Even in a Southern Plains State, most people just don't really know that there are still a lot of Natives here. Still a lot of misinformation where we live in teepees, everyone does pow wows where we are Pan-Native where all tribes are the same but in reality, we have our own culture and ways. So hopefully we see more distinctness in games.

As evident by the responses above, the participants focused on some of the negative representation and stereotypes of Indigenous peoples in video games, but as with the negatives,

there are positive as well in video games with Native peoples. This is viewed as a recent addition to gaming.

Because of my knowledge of games and years of playing games on various gaming consoles, I was familiar with the few games that truly represent my people, but the caveat is that if I didn't actively research these very few games, I probably wouldn't even know the name of the games or that they existed in the first place. Two reasons why I know about such games as Assassins Creed III and its true representation of a Native character is that this game was mass marketed on the newest gaming consoles, and I use this game in my computer and history classes to expose students to a platform that teaches audiences more about the revolutionary war than do the textbooks. I wasn't surprised by the few responses to video games or eSports that accurately depict Native characters, as many of the participants admitted knowing being familiar with such games as Assassin's Creed and Never Alone, mentioned earlier in the study. For the majority of my gaming experience, I was only focused on games that had Native characters, but I was incognizant of how colonized the Native representations was, until I began in my doctoral journey and two of my Indigenous mentors provided articles and frameworks of decolonizing Eurocentric paradigms. Now, if I play a video game that has a Native character, I point out the flaws in representation if any.

Indigenous cultures have been a part of video games for decades now, but images, characters, and stories have not always been presented in favorable light of Indigenous cultures. Indigenous stereotypes have been rampant in video games from the shapeshifting mystical character to the bow and arrow, dinosaur fighting character to the sad imagery of a Native female being raped by George Armstrong Custer. Currently, there is progress in having factual representation of Indigenous cultures in video games, such as *Never Alone* and *Assassin's Creed*

II, where game designers privilege Indigenous voices with the assistance of tribal communities. Indigenous peoples are able to re-imagine how the culture is presented in eSports, as evident by participant responses.

Research Question 3: How do participants describe their visions for the future as Indigenous leaders in an increasingly digital world?

Participants in this study provided responses focusing on three avenues pertaining to their roles as Indigenous leaders through values they develop or nurture during eSports. Participants were able to connect their responses with insights especially through values, i.e., responsibility, wisdom, leadership, integrity, present in eSports that will guide them and nurture them going forward in and outside of eSports.

I was surprised and amazed at the responses by the participants related to values, goals and aspiration, and educational experiences. These were unknown to me before this study. In 35 years of gaming, I have heard some of the raunchy and rugged stuff said from other gamers, and when a some of the Lone Wolves discussed this, I just shook my head in agreement, but for the audiences who are unfamiliar with eSports and playing online, it may come as a shock. Even though that is only one part of the current discussion, the goals and aspirations and educational value add extra layers to roles as future Indigenous leaders.

Values

In participant responses to values, several of the participants discussed core values that either they live by, or as an institution, or experienced in online gameplay, which include humility, respect, integrity, responsibility, wisdom, and honesty. These core values are embedded in Southern Plain Tribal College's everyday values, which are posted in classrooms,

offices, and buildings all over campus, and due to the visibility of these core values, it was simple to incorporate them into the study via interview questions.

Great Mountain (coach) presented an overall statement explaining how values at his institution work.

We have our core values that are tied to our Native roots. humility, respect, integrity, responsibility, and wisdom. We have our students have to live by those values by a student and player. As a sport, Natives have always had competitions whether it be stickball or hunting and gathering – friendly competition, but as far as eSports, we have that competition branch. We all have community, but we are still competitive, which is fitting for eSports because that is what we do. We go out and battle and we come back and joke around after.

Efv (coach) provided his version of how institutional core values live campus wide. He indicated these values are embedded across the campus and instilled in all players, coaches, and faculty/staff.

They are respect, integrity, responsibility, humility, and wisdom. And so, in every room in this building, in a building on campus, we have those put up and you'll see them on the walls in the hallway, and then it's a way of life here at this college. And they, they truly guide us. Not only as me as an administrator, coach, or our, my other coaches, but our players as well.

The quote above shows how players can heed the core values and learn to operate in those spaces of value, but sometimes values in eSports are pushed aside in competitive areas. But, as evident I the quote from Efv (coach), true to the nature of our cultures there are respectful ways of being competitive. Efv's (coach) quote also highlights differences between a structured program versus

an unstructured program (to be discussed later in Lone Wolves section (Research Question 4)). Efv mentions certain lines the team won't cross, which stem from the core values the institution embodies, such as respect and integrity.

Presenting an overview of values that either manifest or are embedded in eSports, participants provided responses that focused on specific values experienced through gameplay. As I discuss below, some of the participants focused on the same two or three values, and others focused on other specific values that will be discussed.

During the interviews, I think I kept sort of daydreaming back to my gaming days, where running with my team in 4v4s on Left 4 Dead or Mario Go Kart presented all kinds of values that at the time, I didn't know see or think of any values. I know I didn't sit there playing telling my teammates that I am using wisdom or be respectful when we're playing, but as I was listening to participants and transcribing their interviews, I found myself thinking back and seeing me dole out my wisdom to younger players and teammates about tricks of the trade when playing Left 4 Dead. If I could interview myself, I would probably put down the same values as the participants and add more from what I have seen and experienced, but participants really gave detailed responses of values.

Responsibility

Responsibility presented itself in varied ways, with each participant providing insight to areas of eSports not just in gameplay. Responsibility came in diverse ways inside and outside of eSports gameplay as evident by participant's responses below.

Jeremy (faculty/staff) provided an alternate take on his view of family responsibility. His take on responsibility stems from a cultural responsibility. "In our culture, we talk about being a *Good Relative*, which means we treat everyone like family. We always try to support one another

and lift them.”

This quote above shows an aspect of eSports that appears to be hidden or lightly discussed in eSports. People tend to see eSports as players on a gaming console playing a video game, but in reality, the side responsibilities are just as prevalent as others. Family responsibilities in eSports appear to play an important part of gaming, with many of the older eSport gamers have family responsibilities unlike the younger generation of college players. I guess it is different for me in that I don't have a family with a wife with kids like some of the gamers. I don't have to worry about if my son is keeping his grades up in order to play on an eSports team, nor do I have worry about my wife upset with me about almost breaking her foot on my controller. Nor do I have to worry about my son learning to cuss from me playing on eSports...like one of the Lone Wolves discussed (later in this chapter).

Other participants provided responses of responsibility directed to their studies in college. Responses vary by participant, but responsibility manifests in other areas of eSports as indicated by Efv's (coach) response below.

When a player gets to be on the team, they're responsible for their station. So, each one is given a station in here, and they're responsible for cleaning up their headphones, making sure their controllers get back on the chargers that they're using the controller. If they brought anything in with them, it's cleaned up. If they move the monitor up high and it stays down low, then they put it back. They unplug something, 'cause they want to plug something else, and they put it back how they found it, or the students will message me on.

Bob and Jeff (players) both agreed on the same responsibilities as players they have to abide by to be a member of the eSports team.

If you're on the team, you got to be here. If it's practice day, you got to be here. If it's tournament day, you got to be here. Your grades have to stay up, otherwise you can't be here, and We have to keep our grades up, we have to keep coming to practice, we have to keep working as a team.

The quote agreed upon by Bob and Jeff (players) highlights how a structured eSports program operates in the confines of college environments and operates as other college sports, where athletes are held to performing in the classroom, in other words, staying academically eligible and abiding by the requirements of being on the eSports team.

As Bob and Jeff (players) discussed the requirements to be on the eSports team, it really took me back to my college days, when I played baseball at a college in New Mexico. I remember having to wake up at 6 AM for morning baseball practice and then go lift weight at 7:30 AM and then had to be in class at 8:20 AM. It sucked some days because there were days I wanted to sleep in and not go to practice, workouts, and class, but I knew that if I wanted to stay on the team, I had to take care of my commitments and responsibilities to the team and my studies.

Jeremy (faculty/staff) took a different approach in that he discussed responsibilities to the eSports program while incorporating Indigenous values.

If you think about being a good relative, Indigenous communities teach that you may be an individual, but you are an individual in a lot much larger group. Like a lot of Indigenous communities are a group think world. We have to elevate everyone, so that we can be at the top, we have to bring people with us. So, in eSports, bringing in these younger people, like these freshmen, these sophomores, bringing them in and teaching them the ways of eSports.

Being a good relative is what I tend to say in Native culture. I use relative in a

sense to describe anyone who is Native as family. Even though we are not kin by blood, I still use the term relative. If a person is younger than me, then I would call him my nephew or my niece; if a person is older than me, then I would call him uncle or grandpa. Even though we are not related by that blood connection, we are all relatives in the culture, so I do have responsibilities to help kin out, no matter what it is or where we are at. If one of my nephews or nieces calls me today and says they need some gas money until Friday, then as a good relative we are supposed to help them if we can.

Wisdom

Through eSports, wisdom presents itself in varied ways, as gamers can pick up wisdom through hours of gameplay and practice, through navigating the nuances of playing in 1v1s or 4v4s, or gamers sometime will not share wisdom with other gamers.

Bob (player) described his experience of those not sharing knowledge of gameplay.

With wisdom, it's all about sharing knowledge. The worst thing I hate is being a gatekeeper. If you have knowledge of the game, please share that knowledge, and help us win. I get that some players are unable to share how they do certain things during gameplay. That's why some players aren't good coaches; they are unable to tell me what to do in this situation or how to get past this level.

I didn't want to say anything, but Bob's (player) response about disliking those gatekeeper gamers kind of hit home. It brought back stories of a few times that I acted like a gatekeeper to other gamers, especially the little kid gamers. What I do recall during a 4v4 of Left 4 Dead is a little kid gamer asked the team if anyone ever played Mike Tyson's Punchout to which I said that I played all the time growing up and having beaten the game one time. The kid asked me what the secret to beating Mike Tyson was. I knew there was secret in watching and

timing his punches and then counterpunching, but maybe it was my mood that day and just said, 'Gotta figure it out on your own kid.'

Leadership

Leadership in eSports manifests in many different ways in knowledge, actions, or vocalism. As it is sometimes said that leadership is bestowed upon someone, and sometimes an individual or people step up in leadership roles. Several participants discussed how they have seen or experienced attributes of leadership during their time in eSports.

Rob (faculty/staff) expressed a requirement for his eSports program at his institution in that clubs must have a leadership structure.

All clubs on campus are required to have leadership roles made up by students. I think it is a president, vice-president, secretary, and treasurer, but if students want to have an eSports club, then people have to step up and fill those roles. Also, we have gone through some restricting, and we have to find coaches and find advisors for the eSports program, so we told the players that while we work on this part to find coaches and advisors, we need you to figure out who will hold a captain's position and who be responsible for other logistics such as finding which tournaments to play in and what is the practice schedule.

This quote shows the importance of having the students share leadership roles and not have a coach or an advisor assume all the responsibilities of an eSports program. Affording students the responsibilities of picking captains and shouldering a plethora of responsibilities allows students to experience making decisions on their own and nurturing skills they will encounter in the future and outside of eSports.

Efv (coach) saw leadership as a love-hate relationship to the point where sometimes being direct is necessary in leaders. He also understood his leadership responsibilities to the students, as indicated below. He had other responsibilities for himself and for his family, but he made it known and was available to be there for the students.

I'm very much, if you're not gonna put the time in, I don't need you here. And I know that comes across really direct and it really, can be harsh at times, but it's just one of the things, if you're not... Excuse me, if you're not gonna work, I don't need you here.

Because that's kind of like an underlining core value that falls within those core values is that you're expected to be a hard worker, but I know one of my students always tells me, says, "I don't know how you are up till 2 o'clock in the morning almost every night. And yet I know you can leave your house around 6:30 every morning. I don't see how you do it. And I was like, I'm here for you guys. I'm here for this.

A true sign of a leader. 'I will be there for you' is one of my favorite responses in this study. Efv (coach) made me think of the saying through rain or shine when he discusses his dedication to his position and to his students. There are times when I could be doing something else, but if a student of mine is presenting somewhere, I make every effort to be there for support. A teacher colleague summed it nice and neat. For the kids Kelly, for the kids, but at the same time, Rob's (faculty/staff) response of having students shoulder some responsibilities is familiar to me, as I had to learn how to play competitively in finding tournaments to play in, how to pay for it, as my parents weren't knowledgeable about video games and didn't have a lot of money for gaming tournaments, so his response really resonated with me.

Integrity

When participants discussed integrity in eSports, they described integrity in terms of how one conducts themselves online during eSports participation. Efv (coach) discussed all entities a player is representing in eSports, and Jeff (player) discussed how his team reacted to losing an eSports match against an opponent.

Efv (coach) responded to the question of integrity with how he teaches the students in the eSports program how to conduct themselves because they are not only representing the eSports program, but themselves and the institution as well.

We're gonna show you, hey, how do you conduct yourself online? What does it like to have a self-image that's outward just from you, like a digital presence? What's your social media look like? There's no cheating allowed. They're putting the time and effort into not need that type of cheat.

I thought about Efv's (coach) quote about no cheating allowed, and I thought back to playing eSports online and experienced and witnessed countless times of gamers cheating to win a game or a cash prize. That's what I grew to like about these structured college eSports programs like the one at Southern Plains Tribal College. Integrity is one of the embedded values, and there is no way around that if you want to play eSports at that institution. That is what I took away from that Efv's (coach) quote.

Jeff (player) followed up with a player's point of view of integrity. "... they mopped the floor with us, and some people might've gotten upset but everybody that was there pretty well took it in stride and was happy to shake hands and admit defeat."

Values are an integral part of eSports, especially for the participants who abide by values at their institution. Gamers hold values in varied ways, and not all gamers play by values during eSports. Many eSport gamers do not think about values during gameplay, which some of the

participants had to think about the values they play by in eSports. The participants from Southern Plains Tribal College did not hesitate, as specific values are embedded in their studies, courses, and eSports program. In embedding values in eSports, players (n=2), coaches (n=2), and faculty/staff (n=2) are committing to the notion that you are going to conduct yourself in *good ways*¹³ in representing yourself, your tribal nation, and the institution during your time and beyond the institution.

Research Question 4: How do the lived experiences of “Lone Wolf” players offer a deeper understanding of eSports social environments as it relates to the institutionally sponsored programs?

With the addition of the Lone Wolves for research question 4, I found many parallels, but I also found different experiences and responses for some of the findings in research questions 1-3 within the case. Even though the Lone Wolves operate as the Wild West (meant to be interpreted as a bit of sarcastic Indian humor with stereotypes in mind), outside of the structured eSports programs on college campuses, they still participate in eSports gameplay and embody many of the same eSports experiences as participants in structured eSports programs, which the Lone Wolves’ responses do deviate some but not too much from the responses from college institutions. Because of their experiences in eSports, the same headings in research question 4 are found in research questions 1-3 above in this chapter. In this section, however, Lone Wolves and their connection to the Wild West is an added layer to this research. As a result, this section also includes sections on racism and integrity, alongside parallel discussions as found above, including technology, learning and innovation, business of eSports, 21st century themes, life and

¹³ Term for professional and respectful representation and interactions in the Native American cultures.

career, motivations, humor, tame Indian humor, rugged Indian humor, Indigenous futurisms, representation and stereotypes of Indigenous cultures, responsibility, wisdom, leadership, and independence.

Lone Wolves and The Wild West of Gaming

Through the execution of this research opportunities arose to interview Native Lone Wolves (n=6) who identified as gamers but were not part of a program. So, this question was added to explore lived experiences outside of the case explained with research questions 1-3, through a supplemental interview study.

Gaming knows gaming was on my mind as I set out across town to interview the first of the Lone Wolves, who to the outside of the gaming world, are known somewhat as Loners, but in reality, they are just another part of gaming. I mean they play the same eSports games as the rest of us; it's just that they have varied values and reasons why they play solo during game play or separate from an organized structured eSports program. I know these guys, these Lone Wolves. I grew up playing with and against them during the early days of online gaming in the Wild West of gaming spaces, but in some ways, I was walking into a space, where many Lone Wolves are so secluded they rarely talk about their experiences preferring isolation, but since I call some these wolves my friends, I felt I could get a deeper insight into their perceptions of eSports. In many ways, I am a Lone Wolf, as I decided to give up playing on an eSports team many years ago and now play solo, so in a sense, Lone Wolves know Lone Wolves.

Using the P21 Framework discussed earlier in Chapter 1, the skills described as being developed or nurtured by these Lone Wolves showed an eclectic array of skills varying by gamers. The skills communicated by these Lone Wolves did not surprise very much, as they deviated somewhat from responses by gamers in an organized eSports program. It appears that in

a structured eSports program, the skills of gamers manifest themselves somewhat differently than those skills developing in the Wild West of gaming. But before diving into those parallel findings related to 21st century skills, I want to first highlight the contrasting experiences of the Lone Wolves as they operate in the unstructured Wild West of gaming.

Racism and Integrity

The Wild West of eSports can be shocking to those who are unfamiliar with the language that people spew, sometimes joking and sometimes painfully serious. There were only a few responses participants shared that they have seen, heard, and/or experienced by gamers in the vast lawlessness of online eSports, but the responses stand out as there is a distinct difference between an organized eSports program and that of Wild West eSports programs. This section provides Lone Wolves' interview responses that show these contrasting responses I found between participants from Southern Plains Tribal College and State University and that of the Lone Wolves.

Timmy's (Lone Wolf) response gives insight into the thinking of a section of gamers who spew racial and derogatory language in the Wild West.

During my gaming career, I have heard gamers being racist. Just talking crap, but it really seems that ever since January 6th (J6) and Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement, players online are really spewing that hatred against other people of different races. Let me give you some examples and language verbatim from gamers online ever since J6 and BLM, I was in a chatroom after gameplay after a 4v4, and players who identified themselves as White started angrily calling the black players, "Stupid N...rs" and that we need to bring lynching back to teach those people a lesson. I have also been called a "Fu....g Prairie Ni...r." by other gamers.

This quote from Timmy (Lone Wolf) expresses the nature of language that is used in the Wild West. Racism is prominent in the lexicon of gamers who use such language with ease during chatrooms or gameplay; however, this coarse language did not appear to be evident or experienced in structured programs like Southern Plains Tribal College and State University, as rules and regulations prohibit gamers from exhibiting certain actions or language during official gameplay and tournaments, which sets a good introduction for integrity in eSports.

When I asked Gabriel (Lone Wolf) about this experience, he mentioned that specific language is common during online play, whether it be an eSports game or during another video game not labeled as eSports. He also mentioned another instance where so-called freedom of expression marred eSports gameplay. He stated:

I was playing a 4v4 on *Mario Go Kart*, and one of the other players had a Confederate flag as his avatar, and one of my teammates was half African American and asked the opposing player why he had a Confederate flag as his avatar. The other player just said that it's a symbol of hope where he lives in Mississippi. I guess we shouldn't have been surprised cause his gamertag was something like WhSuthrnBoi.

I was there. Years ago, I saw the Confederate flag on a gamer's avatar. I didn't see it as Hope, and I don't think my teammates saw it as Hope either. I think the situation could have turned ugly if someone had said something perceived as wrong or racist, but luckily nothing was said between the gamers, but I still remember seeing the Confederate flag and the name like WhSuthrnBoi, and it made me uncomfortable.

Gabriel also mentioned a time he was playing *Rocket League*, and a gamer was saying, "F..k..g Homo" every time the other team scored, and he did not know the player. He indicated that this player would just throw those slurs around like it was nothing.

One participant who values integrity in eSports either through gameplay or in mannerisms is Timmy (Lone Wolf). Much like the structured eSports program participants. He explained his integrity as learning from how he gamed which he is teaching his son not to act like when he plays eSports.

I make sure to emphasize integrity and not talk “trash” like I did when I played eSports back in the day. Looking back, when I was talking “trash,” it just made me look like an asshole online, and I think people assumed I was just a d..k, when they played me, so I tell my son to just play the game the right way, and just win with integrity. Make sure you go shake people’s hands and say good game. I also know that my son is a better player than his current eSports team and many players he plays against, so I tell him to practice what is called Humility. You don’t have to brag and show up anyone.

In my early days of eSports, I am pretty sure I came off as a d..k in gameplay. I would talk trash to any gamer I was playing against, especially in Madden Football. For a while, I was undefeated, and no one beat me, but I think my trash talking either calmed down or ceased after I started playing gamers, who were better than me, and they started talking trash to me.

Gabriel (Lone Wolf) mentioned integrity as a value that he follows during his eSports gameplay, but he indicated that there are times when he doesn’t follow integrity.

There have been times when I cussed people out during gameplay. I remember playing *Call of Duty*, and a teammate was shooting his mouth off about me sucking at the game because I only had one kill. He was getting under my nerves, and I just let loose and started calling him the B word and calling him M-Fer.

Playing in the Wild West, gamers will see and experience actions and language that is racism or the lack of integrity by gamers. Are there questionable norms in the Wild West? Do I

dare say that racism and lack of integrity are norms in the Wild West? Play long enough in that space, and you might shake your head Yes, to those questions. Play long enough and you might be called a N...r or Prairie N.... r. Play long enough and you might see something that lacks integrity and borders on racism in the Wild West.

Overall, this brings forward some very important considerations for educational leaders exploring or overseeing eSports program development, which will be discussed in the following chapter. However, these Lone Wolves also offered some parallel 21st century skill learning experiences, as well, albeit also having some unstructured Wild West contexts surrounding that skill development.

Technology

Lone Wolves exhibit many of the same technology skills as participants, who play eSports in structured college programs; however, Lone Wolves provided deeper insight regarding specific eSports technological skills they honed in the Wild West, where they play eSports.

At times, images were conjured by the mere mention of the Wild West. We see two cowboys standing 15-20 feet apart having a Mexican standoff, and usually one of the participants ends up dead, but in reality, the Mexican standoffs¹⁴ were just one part of the Wild West, where shootings were common, hangings were common, stealing cattle and cheating at card games were just as common. Basically, we just sum it up to, “Anything goes.”

For the Wild West of gaming, we can use “Anything goes” to identify certain skill sets put forth or developed within Lone Wolves. Participants described in their own way how playing eSports has honed their skills when it comes to technology, but as one will see there is a

¹⁴ Confrontation where no party has an advantage.

difference between what skills became evident between organized eSports gamers and Lone Wolves. As Calvin (Lone Wolf) describes his skills through eSports:

I am very tech savvy, but I am always trying to learn more of the technological side of things as a player. Like I will be honest with you, I mod. which some people say I cheat and when people find out that I do mod, they don't like playing me in 1v1 because if I win, then people say he only won because he mods. I play *Minecraft*, and sometimes I will mod for a specific type of block to build something, and you know about this one where I modded my gun in *Call of Duty* before to shoot faster. I have modded my controller for different games. One time I modded a player in a football game, where he was taller and faster than other players.

Modding appears to be a skill that many gamers who play eSports and other video gamers have practiced or have the know how during gameplay or just general gaming. In the Wild West spaces of the gaming world, individuals can run across modding in online chat rooms, gameplay, or tutorials on YouTube that will demonstrate a step by step of how-to mod a gaming system or an individual character. As Chuckie (Lone Wolf), said:

A Nintendo Wii is the easiest one to mod. It takes one memory stick. After you put that stick in there, you can put a thousand games on your Wii. That is... And then the Raspberry Pi program same thing, you can turn a Nintendo cartridge into a Nintendo. It modding my own stuff and opening things open and kind of looking at this and that and seeing what circuit does what, it was a learning process.

While participant Chuckie (Lone Wolf) mentioned Raspberry Pi, Gabriel (Lone Wolf) discussed what a Raspberry Pi is, how it is used in eSports, and how this mod is relevant to his technical skills in eSports.

There is this thing that I use to put all kinds of retro sports video games on a Raspberry PI, which is a small like computer that can hold a number of video games and lets you play older games not in circulation anymore, and have little eSports tournaments playing older games like Bases Loaded 1000 or Baseball Stars, which were on the original and Super Nintendo gaming consoles back in the 1980s and 1990s. You don't see those games being played in present organized eSports tournaments, but you see them in what you called the Wild West of gaming or how I would call it unsanctioned eSports tournaments.

I am all too familiar with the Wild West of online gaming. I am not even remotely surprised by the responses from the Lone Wolves. Hell, I was there for many of the stories they discussed about modding. I know what modding is, and I may have modded in the past to win certain games or at least used the Raspberry Pi instrument to play older sports games without having to purchase the game. I know what people say about us Lone Wolves and modders; we cheat or live on the fringe of illegal stuff in gaming, but I live sometimes on a quote from one of my favorite professional wrestlers, Eddie Guerrero, who said, 'If you aren't cheating, you're not trying.' That is in gaming, not my course studies. It makes me reflect, however, why do we change our expectations as we move between structured and unstructured contexts? Not just why, but also: How do we shapeshift between those spaces?

Learning and Innovation

Using the P21 Framework and hoping to identify what or if any 21st century skills were being developed through eSports, I was surprised at how many participants directed some of their responses towards Learning and Innovations skills with participants providing vivid

imagery of the various 21st century skills as evident by the Timmy's (Lone Wolf) quote of mind games during eSports.

For me, it's all about critical thinking and how I apply that to trying to see what the next player is or what a player will do for the next play. I would like to see if I can predict what the opposing team will do next time, especially when I am playing Madden football. When I play Madden football, you have to be able to predict what the opposing player will run for the next play. It's all about reading tendencies for the next play. Plus, I am always thinking about what I can run for the next play. It's all about mind games.

I am in agreement with Timmy 100%, and that was what I took away from my days of playing baseball in high school and college. In high school and in college, on the days we didn't pitch, the head coach had the pitchers trying to identify what pitch the opposing pitcher would throw next either by thought process or by any Tells the pitcher had during his windup or pitch selection. During my games of Left 4 Dead or Madden football games against other online players, I tried to dissect the next play to get an edge over my opponent.

Sinha (Lone Wolf) also shared how eSports has enhanced her learning skills through her experiences. She also discusses how these skills have translated into her every day job in learning how her streaming skills translate into her video editing day job.

So, the job that I have right now is basically thanks to my interest in video games and content creation and getting my gameplay out there because I know how to promote myself from being a streamer. And I learned video editing, to be able to make my own YouTube videos and my own content. On Overwatch League they would always share their clips online, so that's something that I started doing online. And when I got interviewed for the job that I have now, my job is basically involving media and they

were like, do you know how to video edit? Do you know how to use Audacity?¹⁵ I know how to do all of that because I do that in my personal life for my streaming and for my video games.

Business of eSports

In discussing the intersection of eSports and business, the participants provided vivid imagery of their experiences of business and eSports. One of the aspects coming out of the interview responses was directed towards the learning of the business side of eSports that Lone Wolves experienced in eSports gameplay. Several Lone Wolves discussed their eSports experience in terms of sponsorships from companies. Timmy (Lone Wolf) responded:

If people want to be productive and look towards the future, then one thing they need to be aware of is money. The newest technology that is today will sometimes be outdated next week, so you need to be away from what things cost, such as monitors, towers, gaming consoles, your chair, headsets, controllers, tournament fees, travel fees, and gaming subscriptions. eSports and video games are cheap. You and I both play *Modern Warfare* and *Call of Duty*, and those games are like \$70 each, so if you like five to seven players in an eSports program, then that is \$420 just for everyone to practice and play the game.

As evident from the quote above, eSports does not exist unless money comes into play. This is why some participants discussed having sponsorships in gaming to help with fees and costs. Calvin (Lone Wolf) explained how he had/has sponsors that assist with his gameplay and tournament fees during eSports. He had a sponsor for a controller he used during gameplay, and

¹⁵ Audio and Recording Software

now his son has a sponsor for his eSports play as well. Calvin also discussed the sponsorship side of eSports in that his son's eSports team has an energy drink sponsor, and Calvin indicated that he was sponsored by a company that produced gaming controllers. His son's team has sponsors named on his eSports' team jersey, and one sponsor provided free energy drinks. According to Calvin (Lone Wolf), "My son's team gets free energy drinks when they play in competitions and even have jerseys with the sponsors name." Calvin went on to comment:

I had a few sponsors that would send me items to use and promote, like that one company invited me to promote their brand of controller, which by the way was trash, but they gave me some money to advertise it, so I was learning the business side of eSports while also learning more and more technology. If I turn on YouTube, then I see a million people advertising themselves and showing them playing games. I see people advertising products such as energy drinks and sunglasses.

Hell, when I was playing online eSports back in the early 2000s, I never even thought playing video games could get you sponsored. I was just up my junior college dorm room playing baseball teammates on college football games. Maybe I should have looked into sponsors to get paid or at least get free energy drinks.

Echoing Calvin's (Lone Wolf) sentiments, Timmy spoke of his experiences with business aspects of eSports that he is currently partaking in.

Me and a few others do a podcast, but we also have a few sponsors that we make a little money off for travel to tournaments, as long as we rep their company name. I do have a small sponsorship with an energy drink, which came about back in the day when I was winning tournaments. The company will pay my entry fees and travel expenses. For them

to sponsor me, I have to make sure I am seen drinking their energy drink or have an open can by monitor that can be seen by the audience.

eSports provides many avenues and opportunities of life and career skill sets.

21st Century Themes

21st Century Themes presented themselves in a variety of ways during the interview. Specific 21st Century Themes included: global awareness and health literacy. Discussions over a plethora of topics take place all the time in the Wild West. Gamers are playing against each other with headsets on, then conversations over varied topics seem to happen.

Global Awareness

Global awareness is one of the skills listed under 21st Century Themes that individuals are encouraged to have competency in to work and live in future society. As Timmy (Lone Wolf) explained, eSports' discussions focused the exchange of cultural knowledge between him and a gamer from Japan.

I get more of a geography lesson play eSports than I do in the classroom. With gamers all over the world, many times we will just chit chat during game gameplay and talk about where we are from. I was playing Madden Football against a player from Japan, and he was just telling me about food and landmarks in Japan. It was more in depth than I ever got in my geography classes. He asked me about my state, and I gave him the rundown of the food and landmarks here and even talked about how bad the education system in my state versus Japan is. I have done the same with players from Australia, and Canada, and other tribes in the US as well. I have learned different words, in Japanese, Chinese, and in other tribal languages.

One highlight from Timmy's (Lone Wolf) quote is his engagement and networking with various tribal nations across the U.S. With the focus of this study exploring eSports in Indian education, Timmy's quote shows how Indigenous languages are present in his eSports experiences as he has learned not only words from various cultures globally but from other Indigenous tribal locally embedded in eSports play.

Aligning with Timmy's (Lone Wolf) response to global awareness, Chuckie (Lone Wolf) gave his insight about topics, specifically politics and weather, discussed through gaming, from his personal experiences in that he and online gaming friends have spoken of the political climates here in the United States, including discussions of President Joe Biden. Furthermore, they have had discussions of Chuckie's state being referred to as Tornado Alley as per their weather exchanges through eSports.

Gabriel (Lone Wolf) explained his global awareness experience during his eSports gameplay.

Video games are definitely a global commodity. Many of the gamers that I kind of still run with online live in different countries, and through them I have learned about a wide range of topics. One of the gamers I used to run with lives in the United Kingdom, and I got to hear from him about all the royal stuff going on with Prince William and Prince Harry, and he educated me about the Invictus Games¹⁶, and just different nuances of European history, much more intimate than what I learned in my world history courses.

As seen with interview responses, each participant became more knowledgeable of the world around them through eSports. Through chatting through gaming headsets, cultural

¹⁶ Multi-sport event to honor wounded or sick service members.

exchanges tend and do happen in eSports, which aligns with Gabriel's discussions of eSports being a global commodity.

*I remember many of my conversations during gameplay, especially during my time playing Mario Go Kart against other gamers on the Wii. My gamertag kind of gives away what ethnicity I am, albeit it after I explain what it means. To Native gamers, they automatically know what it means and just laugh about it. My gamertag has the term WarParty **in it, another sarcastic nod to the Wild West stereotypes.** You don't know how many times I've had to explain it to non-Native gamers. Many gamers who see it for the first time automatically think it has to do with this heavy metal band, GWAR, because they had an album named War Party. I think when I explain what War Party means in the Native culture, some gamers get quiet (laughing), but many of the conversations center around my culture once gamers find out my ethnicity.*

Online conversations are interesting to say the least, especially cultural ones. Many gamers I have run into during gameplay have no clue about Native Americans, so I get to do the famous Indian 101 with them. I even got to hear stories of Auschwitz from a player in German who shared stories of his visits to Auschwitz and how he could still sense the smell of the gas chambers and finding pieces of what he thought were human bones around the incinerators. After a while, the stories became a little too graphic describing the concentration camp, which made me uncomfortable.

Health Literacy

Health literacy takes various forms, and through eSports health literacy is present during gameplay. Many eSports games have a form of exercise components attached to gameplay, which allows for gamers to understand how eSports and health literacy are connected.

Gabriel (Lone Wolf) provided an example of health literacy from a game that was played back in the 1980s.

I recall exercising and trying to live a healthy lifestyle from his days of playing World Class Track Meet on the original Nintendo. Gamers could use what was call the power pad, which was a pad with red and blue buttons, and you could stomp on the buttons to make a character run. The faster you stomped the pad buttons the faster the runner would run. My friends and I would have races on the game to see who the faster runner was. Sometimes, we would be at a dead sprint in trying to win, and people would be sweating and out of breath after each race. I think I might have lost like five to ten pounds using the power pad, but I know that the power pad gave us exercise, and at least for me got me into shape.

The quote by Gabriel (Lone Wolf) highlights the notion that he understands how the use of the power pad promoted losing weight through stomping buttons. Understanding the health aspects of eSport allows for gamers to become informed of health-related opportunities through eSports.

Life and Career

In explaining life and career skills, some of the Lone Wolves provided deep insight into specific skills through eSport play. The responses below provide insight regarding communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills that eSports develops or nurtures through gameplay.

Calvin's (Lone Wolf) response deviated from other respondents and gave his input regarding life skills, specifically time management and communication, he had to learn outside of eSports with family obligations.

I think as I get older and now have a family, finding times to jump online and do a 1v1 is a challenge now. Like for this interview, I had to make sure my wife wasn't going out to shop and leave me to babysit the two 5-year-olds. I had to make sure she was at home. So, when they say life happens, it happens, and something gets put on the back burner. A game of Madden takes about an hour to play, so in that hour, you might have to run and clean up a spill that your son dropped his drink or your wife wants you to mow the lawn. Because Life and Career Skills encompass a plethora of varied skills, one participant provided another life skill. As Sinha (Lone Wolf) described:

So, I actually started streaming like four years ago, which is before I started playing league. But the main reason I started streaming was because I wanted to make friends. So, I wanted to meet more people online who played the same video games as me. That's why I have my own team now, and they're all people who I met online. And I'm still streaming because I still want to make friends and have more people to play games with.

I am pretty sure that was one of the reasons why I played video games for as long as have. I am not sure if this is sad to say, but I have over 300 hundred people on my friends' list on Xbox. Now, do I talk to every one of them? No, but each time I jump onto play a game, we will start messaging each other what's up. When I was playing Left 4 Dead, I enjoyed making new friends and was able to run with a new group of friends from all different kinds of backgrounds and locations. That was back then, now, it's more like I don't need any new friends on Xbox.

Sinha (Lone Wolf) discussed how eSports has enhanced her problem-solving skills related to her current job.

So, the job that I have right now is basically thanks to my interest in video games and content creation and getting my gameplay out there because I know how to promote

myself from being a streamer. And I learned video editing, to be able to make my own YouTube videos and my own content. On Overwatch League they would always share their clips online, so that's something that I started doing online. And when I got interviewed for the job that I have now, my job is basically involving media and they were like, do you know how to video edit? Do you know how to use Audacity?¹⁷ I know how to do all of that because I do that in my personal life for my streaming and for my video games.

Communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills are staples of learning and innovation skills that gamers can utilize in eSports. As skills are used, many of the learning and innovation skills learned through eSports can be applied to current job spaces.

Motivations

Because Lone Wolves choose to be separate from any organized eSports program, there is a motivation factor or feeling that they can do what they want and not have to answer to a coach or institution or run by the rules. Mainly, Lone Wolves just want to experience eSports solo. The opportunity to play by oneself motivates Lone Wolves. Chuckie (Lone Wolf), who has played video games since the early days of online gaming, describes himself as a solo player, especially on a video game, Mind Craft, renowned for solo adventures. He shared:

I enjoy the solo aspect of gaming. You get to discover the whole new world on your own.

I enjoy playing *Minecraft*. *Minecraft's* one of my favorite games, always has been,

always will be. *Minecraft's* that game that you can go figure it all out on your own and

¹⁷ Audio and Recording Software

build it up. Cause sometimes I just wanna put myself in a world by myself where I control it.

Gabriel's (Lone Wolf) response aligned with a movie, *Young Guns*. In the movie, there is a cowboy, Charlie, who is preparing to fight an unnamed cowboy. The unnamed cowboy says, "It's you and me" This is how Gabriel sees his eSports experience, as it is only him playing against one other person with no team assistance.

Charlie (Lone Wolf) explained his Lone Wolves' mentality during eSports. "I like the fact that I can just go into a game and play by myself racking up points or increasing my stats in a game all on my own." This quote demonstrated why in-game achievements are important for those games who desire to play solo in various eSports games.

Calvin (Lone Wolf) indicated why he does not play with a team and prefers to play solo by himself.

While my college does have an eSports team, I don't really want or see a desire to be part of the program. Honestly, I don't like some of those guys in the program. I tried to be part of the program one time last year, but I just did not feel my personality meshed with the players. I have always been a loner even going through school, I didn't play athletics or join the band team. Nowadays, it just feels tiresome having to "talk" in a team and having to spend time strategizing with others. Also, if you look at my institution's eSport program, it's not very active. The coach tried to set up practice schedules, but many of the team members work jobs in the evening, so they couldn't make the time.

Calvin's (Lone Wolf) quote highlights that not all players participate in their institution's eSports program for a variety of reasons. In this case, players could not show up for practice, so in a

sense, there is an eSports program on campus, but there really is not an eSports program on campus due to inactivity.

Calvin (Lone Wolf) also mentioned his motivations for modding in eSports, which is a skill he developed in the Wild West.

For me it is about learning different techniques on how to mod. One gamer online taught me how to mod my character and how to have unlimited speed on John Elway's Quarterback. I like learning new mods from other gamers, and it keeps playing eSports interesting.

In one instance, Gabriel (Lone Wolf) described his interest in eSports. He described how it makes him feel after his course of studies. In particular, he particular views his playing of eSports as Family, which no other participant had mentioned in their interviews.

I use video games mostly for relaxation. Overall, it helps with stress relief because it allows me to take my frustrations out on other people without any kind of direct confrontation and consequences. It also allows you to play against others and test your skills against others. I love the communication that is involved in games like *Rocket League*. In team play, we were always shouting where each team member is at and yelling strategies and plays that we worked on in practices. It really like Family when you are playing with other players. We may have our disagreements during practice or outside of practice, but when we are playing together, it's the family atmosphere.

Family does plays a part in eSports. I can remember when I ran with a team playing Left 4 Dead and we each came from different states and countries, but we treated each other like family. Even though we don't run with each other anymore online with Left 4 Dead, we are still friends on Facebook and say what's up once in a while.

Chuckie (Lone Wolf) offered more insight regarding relaxation as a motivator in his gameplay. His response comes from experience as a business owner.

You're always on a time crunch. When you're playing video games, a lot of the time, it's what I call my eating delight. When you get off work, you go home, you've had your family time, then it's your time. And you unwind, you play that game that lets your mind just wander. If it's a fighting game, a shooting game, it just gives you that unwind time. I'm going to be honest with you, nothing better than going on a video game and wiping out zombies. Killing a bunch of zombies helps you sometimes just release anger of having to deal with a co-worker or boss that day.

Sinha (Lone Wolf) provided a different take on her motivation for partaking in eSports. Her response comes from her drive to win.

My motivation is a bit selfish and it's mostly that I want to be better than the other people who enter the tournaments. I want to be better. I want to be recognized that my team is better than their team, because I'm the captain of my team and I put together my team and I want people to acknowledge that the team that I put together is probably gonna be the best in the tournament.

I remember that mindset. My early days of eSports I thought I could whip anyone's butt in whatever eSports game. I ain't going to lie; these days it's most likely I'll get my butt whipped by all these younger gamers.

Timmy also provided an explanation for his motivations for playing eSports and getting an education.

I didn't grow up with money, and I had to work like three jobs if I wanted a game system or sometimes a video games. When I saw my friends going to college and getting a

degree, I told my parents that I wanted to get a degree but, I had to think of different ways I could pay for college. That is when I saw that eSports tournaments were offering cash prizes for winners, and I just started winning tournaments to pay for college.

From these responses, the players' motivations in playing eSports show a wide range of reasons from the desire to play solo, to wandering the gaming landscape all on their own, to dislike of playing with individuals. Timmy (Lone Wolf) explained his sentiments.

It gives me a place to express myself by playing video games. I mean, it's something that I've always loved doing, and with all the workload from the college, doing the classes, being able to come after hours and just play video games with a couple of your friends for a while. It just is a lot of fun being able to express yourself learning how to communicate with another teammate. The thing about playing eSports online is that it gives people the opportunity to express themselves in a variety of ways, mainly through speech.

In my online friends' network on eSports, I have all kinds of characters who express themselves differently. I have the quiet ones, the loud ones, the ones who cuss a lot, the ones who show up late to 4v4s, the ones whose Internet connectivity is unstable all the time, the ones who ask to borrow money during 4v4s. I could probably keep going with all the characters I have as online eSports friends, but I'll be here all night.

Humor

As described by the structured program players, humor is a big part of eSports, as anyone who plays eSports is going to experience humor through gameplay, watching a player mess up, or hear a player cuss in a laughing manner. For this study, humor was part of participant

interviews; however, a distinct kind of humor presented itself that originates from Indigenous cultures.

Before the interviews began, I don't think I even contemplated what would possibly come out of interviews with Native gamers. I played with Native gamers in eSports and other video games, and there aren't that many games if any in the eSports realm that strictly involve our culture. One thing I didn't realize would be so prevalent in their responses was that of Indian Humor because on one hand, you have the tame Indian humor, which is laughable and enjoyable. But on the other hand, as mentioned previously, you have what we in Indian Country¹⁸ call rugged Indian humor.

Tame Indian Humor.

Tame Indian humor is like any other tame joke. It just adds a cultural context to it, and some of the Lone Wolves are fluent in tame Indian humor. It's harmless but funny. In interview responses, participants either went with the tame or with the rugged Indian humor, but some went both ways and provided jokes that I was familiar with as I was present during gameplay when the jokes were said out loud. This is evident in Calvin's (Lone Wolf) response below.

Well, we always joke about having that Indian humor whenever we talk. I would say part of it would just how we use that Indian humor when we play. It gets funny when we're playing with non-Natives, and we start joking about scalping the other team and doing our war cry when we win. One time when one of our teammates talked about trying to smudge¹⁹ before our 4v4 on *Left 4 Dead*. He was like we're playing a good team, so we

¹⁸ A reference to broader Native communities and Nations in the United States.

¹⁹ Burning Sage (plant) to provide protection from dark entities.

need to prepare ourselves for battle. Dang, we got beat bad too, and afterwards we were like maybe we should have smudged.

Timmy (Lone Wolf) also provided a story of using eye black in certain situations to express Indian humor.

We would get hyped up for a 4v4 back in the day. We would say we are going into battle and use that eye black, like they use in baseball and softball to shield their eyes from the sun, to paint our faces for our war paint, and we joked about how that gave us protection from the other team's strategies. Indian humor will come out with Natives. I remember when we would wave and shake our hand at the other team and told them we were trying to Witch²⁰ them and affect their gameplay.

Gabriel (Lone Wolf) also discussed Indian humor from time playing in 4v4s, which highlights the term Indian Time.

We always joke of running on Indian Time²¹, and we actually did that for one tournament, and the tournament organizer and the other team graciously waited us to show up, which we were like 20 minute late, and the organizer made a comment to us when we walked in like, "Running on Indian time I see." It was all in laughs, and we said we should make that our trademark and show up to every tournament on Indian Time.

As participants explained, Indian humor can present in a myriad of ways. Indigenous people will find anything to laugh and tell a joke about. Nothing is off limits, and even something as mundane as eye black can be tied back to Indian humor.

²⁰ Put a curse or hex on someone.

²¹ Running late to anything.

What I find funny is that I'm not good at telling tame Indian humor. Timmy and Gabriel had a knack for telling that kind of Indian humor, but I've been known to be involved in more of the rugged Indian humor.

Rugged Indian Humor.

Once I heard the tame Indian humor come out in responses, I had a thought and was waiting for the rugged Indian humor to present itself. I didn't know some of the participants before interviews with the structured program participants, but I knew the Lone Wolves, and I knew they could tell some rugged Indian Jokes if they wanted too. And, what I heard in the interviews were those jokes that make you shake your head and laugh at over-the-top absurdity at the same time.

In explaining rugged Indian humor, participants displayed the ability to be mean, sarcastic, and funny at the same time using cultural ways and knowledge in humor. Calvin (Lone Wolf) went straight for the rugged humor right out of the gates. He spoke of traditional ways of warfare that tribes conducted in the past and current social issues of the tomahawk chop.

Well, you know me, and we always joke about having that Indian humor whenever we talk. It gets funny when we're playing with non-Natives, and we start joking about scalping the other team and doing our war cry when we win. In that one tournament for *Left 4 Dead*, I started playing the tomahawk chop music and said we're burning the wagons tonight boys. I think you could hear a pin drop when they got quiet and didn't know how to respond to wagon burners. Also, I always Counting Coup²² in gameplay. I will run up behind an enemy and touch them or hit them with my weapon and run away

²² When a warrior would go into battle and run up to the enemy and touch them with a stick, arrow, or their hand and ride away without getting hurt, or steal someone's weapon.

Timmy (Lone Wolf) interjected his musings of rugged Indian humor that he experienced during his time playing eSports during the video game, *Left 4 Dead*. His response aligned with the same humor, albeit a different joke that still falls into the category of that rugged Indian humor that is prevalent in Native cultures.

When we had a team going a few years ago playing 4v4s in *Left 4 Dead*, we always tried to recruit Native players to keep it all-Native, and I'm reminded of the time we played with that Crow guy, who was straight trash. I remember him doing some stupid move to get us killed by the other team, and I'll yelled, 'You suck! I don't know why we let someone who scouted for the U.S. Army²³ play with us,' and I remember that Crow guy say, "Shut the F..k up" and left.

Timmy also explained another experience of rugged Indian humor during his time in eSports.

I also remember that time when we were playing *Left 4 Dead 2*, and that Cherokee guy made a stupid mistake, and we lost to a team that was trash. I was so mad, and plus I didn't like that he barely talked during the game, and he made a comment about modders, and I yelled, 'Quit acting Civilized²⁴.'

I ain't going to lie. I laughed at this one by Timmy, as it brought back memories when he said to that Crow guy and then to the Cherokee guy. The team just busted out laughing. Now, I kind of feel bad now that I've gotten older. Maybe we were a little rough in our joking, but Indian humor can be rough sometimes.

²³ Crow Tribe scouted for the U.S. Army during the late 1800s.

²⁴ One of five tribal nations now in Oklahoma often problematically referred to as the "Five Civilized Tribes" (Cherokee, Choctaw, Seminole, Muscogee/Creek, and Chickasaw).

Humor plays a huge part in our culture, no matter where a group of Native, either at a pow wow, at church, or at a funeral, chances are high that someone will bust out an Indian joke that is either tame or rugged, and no one really knows what kind until it is said. Our humor is said to be that *Good Medicine* to help in times of healing. As I pointed out earlier, no matter where a group of Natives are, humor will be part of the conversation. At times, Indian humor can go overboard in coming off as being mean to someone. At times, Natives use stereotypical ways and images as ways of injecting humor into conversations, as evident by the wagon burner joke and the use of the tomahawk chop joke provided by participants.

Indigenous Futurisms: Yearning for More

Regarding Indigenous futurisms, some of the Lone Wolves discuss historical events in this section, yet they were emphasizing that Indigenous futures need to bring visibility into the media and gaming ecosystems. By doing this, the Lone Wolves are asking for accuracy and wanting to see themselves in future game development.

Calvin (Lone Wolf) explained his thoughts and his version of Indigenous futurisms as he sees or desires how eSports can incorporate present Native athletes into gameplay and honor our voices in such video games as NBA 2K.

Advocate for us to play as Lindy Waters of the OKC Thunder on NBA 2K. He's Native, and he's on the roster or play as one of the Native girls that was in the college softball world series in a softball video game.

Gabriel (Lone Wolf) discussed combining U.S. History and eSports, specifically history battles to incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing. He makes a point to use two specific wars, Plains Indians Wars that involved the U.S. Cavalry and Indigenous peoples that has typically been discussed from the federal government's point of view and ignores Indigenous

perspectives. The other war, World War II, and the peripheralization of the use of Native code talkers during the war was brought up by Gabriel (Lone Wolf).

I am a big, big Battle of the Little Bighorn buff. Everything that you read in articles and textbooks always give an account of General George Armstrong Custer, but you barely hear anything from the Indian side. Why is that most people have never heard of the Battle of Greasy Grass²⁵? I use that name in my classes, and my students look confused. How come we can't develop a game that honors and incorporates the battle from our perspective and allow the players to play as a Sioux or Cheyenne warrior to defeat Custer? How come we can't play as Crazy Horse or Gall to defeat Custer?

I didn't disagree with anything Gabriel (Lone Wolf) said about having a game about the Battle of the Little Bighorn, as he is the one that got me started on researching the Battle of Greasy Grass. I'm thinking how cool would it be to re-imagine the battle from the Native camp and see the U.S. Cavalry coming over the hills? If we really could privilege our voices in this game, how cool would it look to do a first-person perspective of a Native warrior riding on horseback to fight the U.S. Cavalry?

Gabriel also asked, "Why can't we have a World War II game, where players can play as Native code talkers? Why can't we have a lacrosse video game that honors the Iroquois Nation as lacrosse was given to by the Creator or have a basketball video game that is located on the reservation?"

I was thinking the whole time that Gabriel is on a roll. He really got me thinking about the many different ways that we could re-imagine video games to put our voice first. When we

²⁵ Traditional Sioux Name for the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

talk about decolonizing video games, this is really decolonizing video games. In my mind, I had a joke ready about throwing Tomahawks at people instead of grenades in these first-person shooting games that Gabriel mentioned. As I mentioned before, Gaming knows Gaming, but each gamer brings unique perspectives and adds details that I have never thought about before. For me to re-imagine eSports to privilege Native voices, I would love to see an Olympics game, where I could play as Billy Mills or an NFL game, where I can play as Jim Thorpe. Maybe this is just my imagination running wild and beginning to NERD out because of the company I am in – GAMERS.

Some of the Lone Wolves are very creative in connecting eSports and Indigenous futurisms, as they are very knowledgeable of historical events that involve Indigenous peoples and very knowledgeable that those specific events are eurocentric dominated. Gabriel discussed how the Battle of the Little Bighorn is always told in classrooms from the U.S. Army side but gave an insightful quote of how to re-imagine the battle to privilege Indigenous perspectives. Other re-imagined historical events include World War II video games; at the same time, participants provided other eSports games that could privilege Indigenous voices such as NBA 2K and lacrosse.

Representation and Stereotypes of Indigenous Cultures

eSports and video game have used Indigenous peoples to as characters who exhibit stereotypical traits and images. Some characters are attributed a head band with a feather, and some are attributed mystical powers. One participant made his opening discussion of Native stereotypes in gaming focused straight on Night Wolf. While others share the same take on the character in the video game, *Mortal Kombat*, as evident by Calvin's (Lone Wolf) response.

If I had to name one, it would be *Mortal Kombat*. In *Mortal Kombat*, there is a character by the name of Night Wolf, who is all muscled up and shapeshifts, is a shaman and shoots arrows. People who play the game ask me if I am a shaman too. I can't shapeshift into a wolf, or people will ask if I ever heard of a Skinwalker because that is what they think of when they see Night Wolf. What most people don't realize is that not all Natives can shoot arrow. His representation of who we are is really egregious and sad, and the worst of all is Custer's Revenge, where Custer basically gets to have sex with a Native female is wrong on so many levels.

Before my doctoral journey in 2021, I always chose Night Wolf to play because to me he was a Native character. I liked how he was dressed and thought it was cool that he could change into a wolf. After my doc program started, I really was taken back in my thoughts asking myself how I could not notice all the stereotypical images the game developers attributed to Night Wolf. Sad on my part.

Timmy (Lone Wolf) shared similar insight into his view of how Night Wolf and *Mortal Kombat* perpetuates Indigenous stereotypes.

I usually point to *Mortal Kombat* and the character of Night Wolf. It depicts him as able to be a shapeshifter. I know we have stories of shapeshifters, but I don't know if we can really shapeshift into a wolf. I get asked all the time if Indians can really turn into a wolf. I used to joke and say if I could, I would come in the night and kill all your chickens and cows. But people who don't know assume that I can shapeshift like Night Wolf, but I think many games do a disservice to our culture and present us as this mystical people who practice magic.

Gabriel (Lone Wolf) mentioned the movie, *The Searchers*, and how other specific video games are giving certain attributes to Native characters.

It feels like for the character of Night Wolf for *Mortal Kombat* that game developers were taking what they learned from such movies as *The Searchers* with John Wayne and gave the game character attributes from the movie, such as shooting a bow and arrow and being that real stoic Indian. Progress is in increments, but it's something. At least now we have some games that gives players and audiences a true sight of who we are as a people and not some muscled up person who fights dinosaurs as in *Turok*, but players will only be aware of this representation if efforts are made to include those games in the list of games that are played.

Calvin (Lone Wolf) mentioned other games that do not portray Natives in games in positive lights. This is evident in his description of the video game, *Custer's Revenge*.

I have played more games that have a wrong interpretation of our culture than games that get it right. Some of the ones that get it wrong is *Oregon Trail*, *Turok*, and the worst of all is *Custer's Revenge*. Custer having sex with a Native female? Come on!

As evident by the responses above, the participants focused on some of the negative representation and stereotypes of Indigenous peoples in video games, but as with the negatives, there are positive as well in video games with Native peoples, which is seen as a fairly recent addition to gaming. Calvin (Lone Wolf) and Gabriel (Lone Wolf) focused on recent games that portray Natives in a positive light as discussed in their interview responses.

There is one game that I play that truly represents our culture is *Assassins Creed III*. If I am not mistaken, the game designers reached out to the Mohawk Nation and asked for their input to design the character to reflect our culture. His dress is said to reflect how

Mohawk dressed in period times, and his mannerism is supposedly on point. Now *Assassins Creed III* is a game that I play and just learned of as being as close to accurate in character, as the game had input from one of the Iroquois tribes in how he looked and dressed. I thought that was cool they reached out to a tribal community and wanted tribal input to use in gameplay. You don't see that too often.

As one can see from the participants' explanations of representation and stereotypes of Indigenous cultures in eSports, there are specific video games that are pointed to in showing how Indigenous stereotypes are prevalent in eSports. Participants point out *Mortal Kombat* and the character of Night Wolf, which is one of the main eSports games that is referred to when discourse turns to Indigenous stereotypes in gaming. The other games the participants mentioned are just as stereotypical with Custer's Revenge.

Responsibility

With Lone Wolves' responses to interview questions, responsibilities manifest in a variety of ways, such as family and academic responsibilities. The types of responsibilities manifested in vivid stories from the Lone Wolves as they describe responsibilities not only to themselves but externally as well.

Calvin (Lone Wolf) discussed family responsibilities and that of eSports; as he has gotten older, certain responsibilities have become priority.

Even though the eSports team he plays on has a certain GPA to be on the team, I tell him my criteria for a GPA to play on the team is higher than the team's GPA. If the team says you have to have a 3.0 to play, then you will need to have a 3.5 or higher for me to say you can play on the team. If you don't keep your studies up or if they begin to fall, then you will not play. I tell him all the time, when you are out in the real world, your boss

isn't going to tolerate someone who doesn't put the work in and has low satisfaction marks.

Timmy (Lone Wolf) further echoes Calvin's response to family responsibilities that come first before eSports.

For responsibility, I can use my wife and her mandates whenever I play eSports with a team or solo. Since we have kids in the house, she said that there is to be no cursing loud enough where the kids can hear it. I made a promise to her about be responsible about cussing loud enough on eSports, so as my children can't hear it, and we don't want them saying the F word around the house. I know one time I was playing Madden, and I threw an interception, and I said, "Shit" real loud, and my son started Shit.

Calvin also mentioned how his wife almost broke her foot when he left his controller on the floor after playing eSports. Since then, he has had to promise his wife to clean up his eSports equipment after he plays, so she does not hurt herself stepping on his controller.

Gabriel (Lone Wolf) also provided insight into family responsibilities.

I gotta remember I have kids now, and I can't just game all night and sleep in nowadays. Last week there was a gamer who sent me an invite for a 1v1 on Madden around 11 PM, and I told my wife, and she just basically shot that down because she said that I will be on all night, and we still have to take the kids to summer camp at 7 AM. I have to pick them up from camp at 3 PM, so I can't even start a 1v1 or 4v4 after 1:30, or I won't make it in to drive and pick them, and then I will hear it all night from me on why I can't pick up the kids on time.

Timmy (Lone Wolf) also highlights differences between playing eSports in an unstructured eSports team such as playing in the confines of one's own home versus that of

playing in a college's structured program, where rules and values govern the program. Cursing while playing in the Wild West is such common practice that such language has been a norm since the earliest online eSports gameplay, where every curse word in the human dictionary is part of gamers' lexicon.

In discussing responsibility as a value in eSports, participants discussed family responsibilities in that family and kids take priority over playing eSports for hours. Timmy discussed having the responsibility of not cussing in front of his son, and Calvin discussed academic responsibilities. Responsibilities present themselves in various ways in eSport, as evident by some of the Lone Wolves' interview responses.

Wisdom

From participant responses, the value of wisdom manifested in varied ways in the Wild West similar to those participants in structured programs of eSports on college campuses. The gamers who gave examples of imparting wisdom were able to provide instruction, tips, strategies, and cheats to fellow gamers in 1v1s and/or 4v4s. One noteworthy response was provided by Timmy (Lone Wolf). During his time playing eSports, he mentioned how he shares tips and strategies to fellow gamers because he was tutored by those gamers that came before him.

With wisdom, I tend to share a lot of tips and strategies when I feel like it during the times I actually do play with a team. One time in *Rocket League*, there was a player who looked like he was playing for the first time, so I gave him a tip on how to play. Many of the OGs that played before me taught me in gameplay and the least I can do when I feel like sharing advice. I also remember when the OGs were teaching me how to do the combinations to do the fatalities in the first *Mortal Kombat*.

As Timmy (Lone Wolf) was providing his response regarding how wisdom plays a part in eSports, I was reminded of the many times I help those noobs on Left 4 Dead play the game just like all those OGs did for me in taking me under their wing when I first bought the game at Walmart and made stupid rookie mistakes, getting people killed, and showing my inexperience. As I became cool with some of the modders on Left 4 Dead, I remember them sharing cheat codes like how to reappear behind someone and kill them automatically; I remember sharing that trick to my friends, and they shared it to their friends and so on. It's funny how we spent all these year playing games and sharing knowledge, but it took a research study on eSports to think about specific instances of wisdom shared.

Other participants echoed Timmy's (Lone Wolf) response to wisdom. Chuckie started sprouting off a button combination during his response, which I did not recognize at first. He repeated it and it finally dawned on me which game, Contra, the button combination was from and what it did if you mashed your buttons correctly. He mentioned that he shared that combination with so many people online before websites started mass sharing it with the world.

My favorite shared knowledge of any game ever is *Contra*. Up, up down, down, left, right, left, left, left, right, A, B, B, A, select start. That gives you 100 men. The Konami code. One of the original Konami cheat codes. And that is one of the best shared knowledge I have shared. I have shared so many of these tips and tricks to fellow gamers, that after all these years.

In the Wild West, gamers do these cheat codes all the time. Hell, I've even provided cheat codes to other players to beat an opponent of a game. I was playing Madden last night, and one of my friends jumped online and messaged me that the player I was fixin' to play likes to mod a

player's speed to make him faster. I took his message and sent a polite decline to my opponent's game invite before we started the game.

Calvin (Lone Wolf) had the same sentiment of sharing knowledge with other gamers, but he provided a response with family as the focus.

My wisdom comes from playing video games for years now, and now I know how to share my knowledge of eSports with my son to make him better. He came to me and said he wanted to start playing eSports competitively, specifically eSports. I watched him play a game solo, and I wanted to put on my coaching hat and see how good my son was at the game. After watching him, I set up the game, so he and I could go 1v1 to show him how good gamers online are going to be if he wanted to play competitively. I pretty much trounced him, but my plan was to break him down to show him how bad he was and then build him back up.

It is worth noting the intersection of intergenerational relationships and the sharing of wisdom that is present in Calvin's (Lone Wolf) response. Calvin (Lone Wolf) played many years of eSports in which he collected vast amounts of eSports know how, and now he is sharing his wisdom of eSports with his son.

I remember this time period well, as Calvin (Lone Wolf) reached out to give his son some tips too on certain games. I didn't break him down like his dad did, but I did have his son play against me, like a sparring session in boxing, to see where I could help him get better.

Chuckie (Lone Wolf) also explained an instance during eSports when wisdom was not shared between gamers.

I remember playing Grand Theft Auto, and I could get passed a certain stage. I tried and tried for days, maybe even weeks. I was playing another game online with a team; I think

it was *Mario Go Kart*, and this one player was telling everyone that he knew the secret to outrunning the police on GTA, and I had politely asked him if he could show or tell me how to successfully run from the police on the game. His response said, “Hell nah” saying that no one helped him when he was growing up playing video games, so why should he do anything to help others.

This quote by Chuckie exhibits some of the ways gamers in the Wild West operate. Some in the Wild West exhibit a gatekeeper mentality to the point where they refuse to share any tips of the trade; some gamers say you only get better if you learn on your own.

Sinha (Lone Wolf) explained that her name has come up in various circles, reaching out to her for knowledge of gameplay.

When people are interested in this type of thing, and they're like, oh, let's talk to Sinha about it or let's ask her experience. And I like helping people improve in *League of Legends* too. Because League is a difficult game to fully understand.

Wisdom through eSports is shown in a variety of experiences and ways that some of the Lone Wolves discussed. Wisdom manifested through button combinations for Contra; wisdom manifested through tutorials, as evident by Calvin's quote, and wisdom manifested through just the simple fact of helping other gamers become better at eSports. Wisdom of eSports does not manifest in just one way but in a variety of ways with which Lone Wolves have experiences.

Motivations & Business

For this study, one participant explained how he has experienced the combination of motivations and business all in one through eSports. Timmy (Lone Wolf) explained his rationale in that after playing eSports and seeing how winning eSports tournaments could be beneficial, eSports became a mainstay for him.

After winning several tournaments, I started paying tuition, and pretty soon, I had two degrees paid for by eSports tournaments, and I also was able to help my sister get her associate and bachelor's degrees from eSports winnings.

This quote is noteworthy as Timmy (Lone Wolf) discusses his motivations of playing eSports for business in finding ways to pay for college through eSports. He committed himself to using his skills to win tournaments, which in turned paid for his college education and his sisters too.

Independence

In interview responses, some of the Lone Wolves did discuss a value that was different from participants in a structured college eSports program. Many Lone Wolves value that of Independence in their eSports experiences, as Calvin (Lone Wolf) reiterated his response earlier from his motivations of playing eSports.

As I said earlier, I don't like some of those guys in the program. The coach tried to give me tips on playing, and I was like, I got 20 years on you of playing eSports. I think I know more than you do. Plus, how come I never saw you playing in the Wild West? I don't need cats telling me how to play, so that was another reason I just play by myself.

Chuckie (Lone Wolf) reiterated his reasons for what he refers to as solo gaming, which he discussed in relation to *Minecraft*.

As I discussed before. You get to discover the whole new world on your own with *Minecraft*. You get to figure that game all on your own. That is all you in that game. You mess up; that is on you and no one else.

Charlie (Lone Wolf) also explained that he prefers solo gaming because he is more of single-player eSports gamer than a multi-player.

I always lean more towards the Lone Wolf part because I've always been more of a solo gamer, I like one-player games where I can build up, build my stats and upgrade along the way in such games like Dante's Inferno and God of War where I can play single player by myself.

Nowadays, I can play a solo game all night and not once accept an invite or send an invite for a 4v4. I don't need to unmute my headset and chit chat with other gamers. Just let me be.

Identification of Overarching Themes

As participant interviews were transcribed through Scribie and analyzed through the use of the platform, NVIVO, specific themes across both the case and the interview study began to emerge throughout participant interviews. The six themes that emerged are:

1. The Wild West of eSports tends to be unregulated, while structured higher education institutions eSports programs are guided and nurtured by institutional and cultural values.
2. Current eSports video games are void of Indigenous voices or factual representation.
3. Different skills for different people.
4. Indian humor, whether tame or rugged, manifested with Native players while gaming in eSports.
5. We are here for business.
6. Money talks in eSports.

Theme 1: Wild West of eSports tends to be Unregulated, While Structured Higher Education Institutions eSports Programs are Guided and Nurtured by Institution and Cultural Values

History tells us that the untamed areas of what is now the southwest and western part of the United States were once referred to as the Wild West with much of this area characterized by its lawlessness. Today, this is apropos where many of the unstructured online eSports's programs and Lone Wolves reside. Participants indicated that in the Wild West, pretty much anything goes as far as language and the displaying of specific skill sets. Modding is rampant in the Wild West as Lone Wolves discussed modifications they did to characters in gameplay and modding consoles to play retro games to have eSports tournaments with games not played in present competitions. There are times when gamers who are 11-13 years of age have been known to cuss other gamers out during gameplay. Adults and little kids have been known to use racial slurs and derogatory language during gameplay. As a gamer, I have heard and seen such language with no repercussions. I am also guilty of this, as I have cussed other gamers out for gameplay, but even after I was reported to Xbox for coarse language, I never received any reprimands or warnings. However, this coarse language with the use of racial slurs has not been seen in structured college eSports program, as institutional and cultural values are embedded into the programs and institutions. At Southern Plains Tribal College, core values of respect, responsibility, wisdom, humility, and integrity are embedded into the eSports program that all players and coaches abide by and incorporate into gameplay. Participants who either work or attend the college discuss how players are going to respect other players in practice and at competitions as well. Participants discussed sharing wisdom with other players on the team, but one Lone Wolf indicated sharing wisdom all depends on his mood for the day.

Theme 2: Current eSports Video Games are Void of Indigenous Voices or Factual Representation

Until recently, eSports and video games had Native American representation in gameplay as characters, but these games were full of false narratives and stereotypical images of what the game designers created to portray Native American cultures. Images and gameplay were replete with Native characters as shaman with mystical powers; raping of Native women; associated an action with all Natives, such as shooting bows and arrows; and bartering for sweaters as in the video game, *Oregon Trail* discussed in Chapter 5. Some participants were able to convey how they desire eSports in the future to incorporate Indigenous peoples into gameplay by accurately referencing historical events. It was mentioned how game developers could create a lacrosse game that honors the Iroquois Nation due to their knowledge of the Creator's Game and its reference to lacrosse. One participant mentioned how games could add a part on NBA games where we can play as Lindy Waters, who is Native and plays for the Golden State Warriors, or create an Olympic eSports game and play as Billy Mills, who is Native and won the 10,000-meter run at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. Participants noted that the games that are played in competition eSports such as *Rocket League*, *Smash Brothers*, and *League of Legends*, do not have any Native characters to choose or play from. The use of Indigenous futurisms allows us to be able to re-imagine what future eSports games would and could look like if Native voices were privileged in gameplay.

Theme 3: Different Skills for Different People

Skills manifest in various ways in eSports, whether gamers are playing in the Wild West or in college eSports programs, the skills vary from gamer to gamer. Many participants seemed surprised as to skills that were either developing or being nurtured through eSports, as the

participants all had years of experience playing eSports in one arena or another. Participants highlighted specifically skills such as technology, which were on display through learning how to stream, using the keyboard, and controller skills; however, some of the Lone Wolves mentioned learning or using the skill of modding in gameplay. Not all participants discussed modding, which tended to manifest itself in the Wild West and not in structured college eSports programs. One particular skill discussed by some of the participants was that of 21st Century themes, specifically global awareness. Some of the participants discussed how they have gamer friends in different countries. For example, Chuckie, said he has gamer friends in Japan who talk about politics, and Sinha discussed how she learned what provinces are in Canada from gamer friends who live there.

Theme 4: Indian Humor, whether Tame or Rugged, Manifested with Native Players while Gaming in eSports

Before interviews begin for this study, Indian humor was not on anyone's radar for manifesting itself in participant responses. Language and traditional ways of knowing, i.e., songs, dances, and mannerisms, were assumed to be how Indigenous ways of knowing would be linked to participants; however, when Lone Wolves were added to the study to give extra layers of depth to interviews and insight, I began to make other assumptions that Indian humor would be part of the study with the Lone Wolves being deeply ingrained in Pow Wows and knowledgeable of tribal cultures and ways.

Indian humor can come off as sarcastic and dark at the same time, as evident by one participant's response regarding asking why the team let a Crow tribal gamer play when his tribe scouted for the U.S. Army or when a gamer yelled at a Cherokee tribal gamer to "Quit being civilized;" however, Indian humor can also embody a tame sense of humor such that new gamers

to a team have a Giveaway before the player can officially become a member of a eSports team. Sometimes the humor is as little as a certain word that a Native who knows Indian humor says just once, such as the words Aye²⁶ or Ennit.²⁷ Because of my familiarity with Indian humor as I incorporate it into my lexicon, having it manifest as part of the study cultivated many laughs and enjoyable moments.

Theme 5: We are Here for Business

The theme of the business aspects of eSports emerged though listening and analyzing participant interviews regarding how streaming, marketing, competition, and caring for a gamer's eSports station works for them as a business. In the early days of video games and consoles, there were minimal avenues for eSports gamers to have any sort of side hustles in making money or learning business aspects of eSports. When I was coming up as a gamer in the 1980s and 1990s, we either just played against the computer or played against another person sitting right beside us. There was no online gaming, no You Tube, and minimal, if at all, gaming competitions; however, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, widespread internet usage really sparked the online gaming that we see now with eSports competitions. Participants communicated how gamers are not just gaming for fun anymore, they are taking their eSports experiences to the next steps. Some participants discussed how they are learning to stream their matches online on such platforms as You Tube for the world to see them play, which is them learning how streaming works and how to make money streaming.

One participant discussed when he decides to game in an eSports competition, his sponsor mandates that he has an energy drink sitting near his monitor, so the audience can see

²⁶ Tribal slang for Just Joking.

²⁷ Tribal slang for Oh Yeah?

who his sponsor is. He does not have to drink it or even have it open; the bottle just has to be seen, and that is how he pays for travel and entry fees for an eSports tournament. Another participant talked about how he is taking his son to eSports tournaments to display his skills in front of college eSports scouts in an effort to earn a scholarship to play in college. Participants also mentioned how they are in the process or already have eSports jerseys with their institutional name just like any other sports in college to advertise their institution. Another participant mentioned a business-like atmosphere in his institution's gaming lab. He discussed how the players are responsible for their gaming station, i.e., cleaning up headsets, if a player moves anything to put it back in its original position, plugging anything back in if it was unplugged. It is a business like atmospheric, especially if you are on scholarship, you have certain responsibilities in keeping your part of the bargain. I know when I was in college on a baseball scholarship, part of my responsibilities was maintaining a good GPA, so cleaning may not seem like it has a business aspect in eSports, but it is part of your commitment as a player especially with how much each gamer's station costs, which is discussed in Theme 6.

Theme 6: Money Talks in eSports

In setting the stage for how money talks with eSports, one participant said his institution has put \$40,000 into its eSports lounge. I will repeat that - \$40,000. I was able to see the lounge up close, and it was complete with the newest gaming chairs; it had multiple gaming stations with state-of-the-art monitors and towers. Some participants view eSports as a place where you have to spend money to create or sustain an eSports program. One coach talked about how his program has the newest gaming monitors, which I was able to lay my eyes on in person, and these monitors plus the high-tech gaming towers with fluorescent lights stood out when I walked into the lab. The coach did not say how much each gaming station (6) cost, but he did indicate

that the whole set-up was not cheap in order to entice recruits or retain the current players. Timmy indicated that as a gamer, you do not want to have a cheap gaming set up because he wants to feel good and comfortable while he is player. In an interview observation, Sinha had a nice gaming microphone she used during her interview. It had flashing lights, and to mute herself, she just touched the microphone, and it muted her. Gabriel indicated that a nice gaming laptop, i.e., Alienware, that has a fast internet connection, will run a gamer somewhere around \$2,000 to \$4,000. Another participant mentioned having Indian Taco sales as a way to raise money for travel and tournament fees. I know damn well of the costs to play eSports; my new Xbox Series X, alone, cost me \$500 plus the new *EA Sports College Football 25* Game that came out July 9th cost me \$150 for the bundle plus \$50 for a 12-month Xbox Live subscription to play online. When participants say Money talks in eSports, it really does talk, and it does not stop talking.

Summary

This chapter presented a description of the findings that were collected as part of this case study, as well as the Wild West layers of experience brought forward by the Lone Wolves. Participants provided deep insights regarding their eSports experiences, which connected back to the critical research questions guiding this study. Specific themes emerged from participant interviews that connected to the critical research questions that drove this research study. In the next chapter, I reconnect with the literature and provide recommendations for a variety of practitioners and leaders, as well as areas for future research.

Chapter 5 - Discussion, Critical Questions, and Recommendations

The units of analysis within this case, alongside the Lone Wolf perspectives explored in this study, are not exhaustive of all eSports programs currently operating in Indian education. In

a sense, these findings represent a conversation starter for researchers, leaders, and practitioners who are working in or with communities operating at the intersection of eSports and Indigenous education. As a Native gaming insider, I worked to confront my subjectivities throughout the process, but it is also important to acknowledge that this work was collected, analyzed, and written with these subjectivities present – and should also be interpreted accordingly. That being said, the programs and participants were identified for the study in an effort to help new audiences define and understand this environment.

Therefore, this work not only helps leaders, researchers, and educational practitioners understand how eSports programs operate, but they have been conceptualized and implemented according to specific values that incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing, and specific 21st century skills that manifest and are nurtured through participation and gameplay in eSports program. This chapter will discuss connections of the findings to the research questions identified and themes in this study and will offer recommendations and posit questions for future research, as well as implications for practice insights on varied experiences of eSports, structured and unstructured, which provide a holistic understanding of eSports in Indian education.

Synthesizing Findings with Literature on eSports and Indigenous Education

This section will make connections to findings from this case study to the literature. Specifically, this section will make connections to literature related to eSports and 21st century skills.

Given that eSports has been relegated to the fringes of educational learning it is significant that many educational institutions are currently conceptualizing and building eSports programs into their learning environments; however, as the number of eSports players in North America appear to be increasing, institutions, specifically, high schools in the United States are

also joining the movement as more than 8,600 high schools have started video-gaming teams since 2018 after the National Federation of State High School Associations recognized the sport (Flannery, 2021). There are more than 20,000 high schools nationwide (Morrison, 2022); however the number of eSports programs in Indian education is unknown at this point in research. As Morrison (2022) highlights the number of high schools nationwide that have started video-gaming teams, it aligns with Zhong et al. (2022) who assert, “eSports has become more widely recognized throughout the world, they have captured the interest of educational practitioners and researchers” (p. 2). For this study, two institutions of higher education serving Native students that had already built eSports programs were identified. In addition, Native Lone Wolves were added to the study to highlight how eSports are operating in other areas of Indian education.

Given that eSports include a plethora of video games that are void of true representation of Indigenous culture, this case study utilized an Indigenous leadership and Indigenous futurism framework to begin conversations of decolonizing eSports video games for gameplay. These Indigenous frameworks provided contextual and Indigenous cultural support in exploring the intersection of eSports and Indigenous futurisms and ways of knowing. Pewewardy (2021) argues, “the TIPM challenges readers to critically examine how even the most well-intentioned educators are complicit in reproducing ethnic stereotypes, racist actions, deficit ideology, and recolonization” (p. 1). While this framework targets educators, this framework can be applied to video game designers as well. This framework also connects to *Theme 2: Current eSports video games are void of Indigenous voices or factual representation*. Calvin (Lone Wolf) discussed how a video game character in the game *Mortal Kombat* exhibits stereotypical images of Indigenous peoples being shaman and shapeshifting into coyotes. By video game designers

continually showing audiences stereotypical images of Indigenous peoples in video games, it limits audiences' knowledge of how Indigenous peoples are citizens of distinct sovereign nations not defined by a few select stereotypical images.

By utilizing the TIPM framework (Pewewardy, 2021), the study allows for discussion and connection to Indigenous futurisms (Dillon, 2003) to re-imagine eSports through Indigenous voices. Through Indigenous futurisms, we can re-imagine how Indigenous peoples are viewed in video games, as some of the participants referenced historical events re-imagining eSports with Indigenous voices. Gabriel (Lone Wolf) discussed how he would like to see The Battle of the Little Bighorn be re-imagined with playable characters from the Native side to defeat General George Armstrong Custer. These Indigenous frameworks are necessary in Indian education, and education leaders, teacher educators, and video game designers are encouraged to use such frameworks in efforts to decolonize Eurocentric eSports video games that perpetuate Indigenous stereotypes through character and gameplay.

Given that there is minimal literature on this as it relates to the relevance of Indigenous ways of knowing in eSports contexts, various forms of Indigenous ways of knowing, (i.e., Indian humor), presented themselves through participant interviews, which connects with *Theme 4: Indian humor, whether tame or rugged, manifested with Native players while gaming in eSports*. Since many of the participants are familiar with Indian humor, it was not a surprise when several participants discussed their experiences with Indian humor through eSports. As Deloria (2000) asserts, "Indians have found a humorous side of nearly every problem, and the experiences of life have generally been so well defined through jokes and stories that they have become a thing themselves" (p. 39). Gabriel (Lone Wolf) discussed tame Indian humor in having his eSports team smudge before a 4v4, while Timmy used rugged Indian humor in his interview, asking a

fellow gamer, who was of the Crow Tribe, how did they let him play with the team when his tribe scouted for the U.S. Army. Usually with Indigenous peoples, Indian humor is present. As a culture, laughter is a norm, so it is well advised to researchers, and teacher educators that Indian humor will be present when interviewing Indigenous peoples.

Given that eSports involves the use of controllers, keyboards, headsets, and various other gaming equipment in gameplay, it is reasonable to assume that specific skill sets will be developed or nurtured through eSports. The first connection of findings to literature begins by understanding a plethora of skills developed through eSports. It must be noted that not all gamers who play eSports will develop the same skill sets. Before eSports began its inclusion into educational systems, past research suggested that eSports had potential for developing specific skills. As Rothwell & Shaffer (2019) argue:

It is becoming increasingly important to know how these programs are influencing the children who participate in them. Currently, there is limited empirical evidence regarding the impact of adolescent participation in eSports programs. However, research has suggested that eSports programs have the potential to positively influence the development of communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills. (p. 154)

This quote by Rothwell and Shaffer (2019) connects with *Theme 3: Different Skills for Different People*. Several of the participants explained how they have developed specific skills such as technological skills through eSports. Participants discussed how various gaming equipment is being learned, as evident by Great Mountain (coach) in his discussion of video streaming and the use of a camera and microphone learned through eSports. Developing of skills was also evident from Efv's (coach) discussion of learning how to update computers and making sure they update properly for eSports gameplay. Since eSports relies on technology for

gameplay, developing technological skills is needed and must be understood by individuals and institutions when conceptualizing an eSports program.

Given that 21st century skills are present in eSports, it must be noted that specific skills are developed through gameplay and such skills are necessary for future readiness. As Almazroa and Alotaibi (2023) argue, “the demands imposed by change in work requirements, technological environment and the general approach to life have made it necessary for all stakeholders to put greater emphasis on defining more clearly what future readiness means” (p. 1).

The quote by Almazroa and Alotaibi (2023) connects to literature on the P21 framework utilized in this study. Within the P21 framework, specific core subjects in 21st Century themes are embedded, which connect global awareness in the understanding of other nations and cultures. Chuckie (Lone Wolf) discussed his global awareness learning through eSports in that he indicated he learned about the country of Japan through his network of online gaming, and at the same time, his friends from Japan learned of American culture through eSports as well. This shows that eSports has the necessary ingredients to develop individuals and institutional learning on a global scale, providing understanding and readiness of academic content.

Given that eSports is a staple of entertainment in society, there is also a booming business side of eSport. One fact for certain is eSports is quickly becoming one of the world’s largest entertainment industries with a net worth exceeding 650 million US dollars in 2017 and estimated to increase to 1.5 billion US dollars by 2020 (Block & Haack, 2021; Gough, 2023; Rothwell & Shaffer, 2019). With business a part of eSports, there are also other forms of business that presented themselves during participant interviews, which connects with *Theme 5: We are here for Business*. One participant, Calvin (Lone Wolf), discussed business and eSports

sponsorships. “My son’s team gets free energy drinks when they play in competitions and even have jerseys with the sponsors name.” What used to be fun and games through eSports has grown into a world-wide business with sponsorships, cash tournaments, and marketing with a monetary value upwards of a billion dollars.

Prompting Discussion Within Institutions of Higher Education Serving Native Students

This study’s findings are significant as they contribute to further research on eSports in Indian education, specifically the intersection of eSports, 21st century skills, and Indigenous futurisms. Even though there is research on eSports, there is minimal research at this specific intersection.

At colleges and universities institutions that serve Native students, findings from this eSports study can be shared with educational leaders and practitioners to show how eSports is operating in Indian education and in structured eSports programs. More specifically, the findings of this study can lay foundational understandings to develop a blueprint for those higher education institutions that are thinking about or conceptualizing an eSports program on their campus.

From a practical operations and management standpoint, while this study wasn’t entirely focused on costs of start-up and operations, it shows hints of expense considerations when providing what materials are needed for a program, such as equipment. As evident by Rob’s (faculty/staff) response, his institution’s eSports lounge has \$40,000 already invested into the program. Furthermore, with the contrast between the Lone Wolf experiences in the Wild West of eSports, and the presence of racism and other problematic interactions, there is also a need to consider how codes of conduct, structure, and expectations, are necessary when bringing those

types of environments into an institution of higher education. This has important legal and ethical considerations, as well.

Also, this study can provide institutions with the knowhow of how Indigenous ways of knowing and Indigenous futurisms are incorporated into eSports; or, rather, how they could be. This study also connects already known understandings about stereotypes in media, curricula, and educational systems. As Fryberg et al. (2008) assert, "...the views of most Americans about American Indians are formed and fostered by indirectly acquired information (e.g., media representations of American Indians)" (p. 209). Not only is media responsible for fostering stereotypical images of Indigenous peoples, curricula also bears responsibility for perpetuating such images as well. As Shear et al. (2015) argue, "textbooks present Indigenous Peoples in negative ways" (p. 72). Many video games and eSports are replete with stereotypical images of Native Americans. As Leavitt et al. (2015) argue, "Native Americans are typically depicted as 18th and 19th century figures (i.e., as teepee dwelling, buckskin and feather wearing, horse riding people)" (p. 40). These stereotypes range from Native characters who have mystical powers, who can shapeshift into a coyote or a wolf with the notion that all Native Americans can shoot a bow and arrow, but institutions can use these findings in becoming knowledgeable of video games and their stereotypes. Furthermore, as leaders become aware that more games are being developed that privilege Native voices, such as *Never Alone* and *Assassin's Creed III*, this awareness will give leaders and institutions avenues to infuse Indigenous ways of knowing into student learning through eSports. At the same time, participants shared their desires and visions regarding how to move eSports forward with the infusing of Native voices and culture. A few of the participants discussed creating a lacrosse game that privileges Iroquois culture - to them lacrosse is referred to as the Creator's Game in that the Creator gave them the right to play the

game. Also, one participant mentioned how game designers can have an NBA 2K game, where gamers can play as Lindy Waters as he is Kiowa, or have a track and field game where they can play as Billy Mills, who is Lakota, or as Jim Thorpe, who is Sac and Fox.

These findings also can be shared with middle and secondary institutions (grades 7-12) administrators, staff, faculty, and eSports coaches about the opportunities for students to play eSports beyond the secondary level. Both institutions of higher education participants discussed how scholarships for eSports are transforming, thinking about why students are playing eSports. At the same time, these findings can be shared with leaders, faculty, staff, and parents of children who play eSports at these lower levels – whether it be in clubs, or full programs.

Participants discussed distinct differences in playing eSports in a structured program and playing eSports in the Wild West, which is an important realization when thinking about these students' learning. In the Wild West, participants discussed how common modding is during gameplay, and what many consider cheating during eSports. Calvin (Lone Wolf) described having rapid firing on his gun versus players who do not have that mod, and Timmy (Lone Wolf) indicated, the Wild West of eSports is replete with coarse language (i.e., racial and homophobic slurs) that is rampant as that arena of eSports is unregulated.

In the structured college eSports programs, there are a plethora of rules that programs and plays must abide by in order to the institution's eSports programs to play in tournaments, and there is a decorum that is expected of all programs in respecting all facets of gameplay. More than that, there was a clear emphasis on important values that can lay a more appropriate foundation for learning to be future leaders in their communities. These highlight the distinct differences between these two arenas of eSports that all entities in eSports should know before the implementation of a program.

Recommendations for Practice

School Administrators, Program Leaders, and Coaches

The Lone Wolf gaming experience was added to identify extra layers of how eSports is operating in Indian education. One notable highlight of Lone Wolf responses is how eSports is operating in the Wild West, where rules and regulations appear to be lax and anything goes, i.e., racial slurs are commonplace. To combat aspects of racial speech that are in unstructured eSports programs operating in arenas such as the Wild West, it is recommended that school administrators, program leaders, and coaches implement rules and regulations coupled with specific values to heed by all participants in their eSports program. These values (respect, humility, responsibility, integrity, and wisdom) could mirror those embedded into the Southern Plains Tribal College's eSports program as discussed by participants associated with the program. Having rules and regulation against certain conduct detrimental to the eSports program could negate behavior and speech that could be cause for alarm by institutional personnel and parents.

Also, there must be an understanding by entities that building an eSports program requires money must be invested for the program to competitive and successful for recruitment of players. Gamers, and I know this from experience, want to have a nice gaming set-up with decent or high-priced monitors, chairs, laptop, controllers, and headsets when they "battle" in eSports. I just added to the costs of gaming set up with a new head set and controller that cost me around \$250. State University has poured in \$40,000 into their gaming lounge to ensure their eSports program is kept adequately resourced and enticing for players and recruits to the program. As the old saying goes, "Nothing is Cheap in this world," and that includes eSports.

Educators Exploring eSports Program Development

In building an eSports program in an education institution, there are many moving parts from recruitment of players, to treating it as a traditional sport, where players must keep their GPAs up, to developing practice and game schedules through the semester. In participant responses, different individuals had many responsibilities to the eSports program, which included showing up to practice and game times, taking responsibility for their gaming stations, showing respect to other gamers in competitions, and even having a healthy living while playing eSports, as evident by a participant's response of having the eSports team go through workouts at the fitness center. Those individuals exploring eSports development in educational systems are also encouraged to understand how eSports can impact a student's choice to go to college on an eSports scholarship, which means traveling and showcasing their gaming skills in competitive tournaments.

Gamers

For the longest time as I played eSports over the decades, I never once was cognizant of the plethora of skills that I was either developing or having nurtured through eSports gaming. I sat in my gaming chair with my headset and controller and went into "battle" in whatever video game I was playing against another gamer. I did not really understand or know what skills I had or developed through eSport until I began this study and through participant interviews. From what I saw and heard from participants, I truly believe they did not or had not thought about their skill sets at any time before their interviews and guiding questions unlocked skills other than just playing a video game. I highly recommend gamers do a deep dive into what skills they are experiencing through eSports that can translate into other disciplines. Participant responses

indicated skills learned through eSports include leadership skills, technology, business, and 21st themes such as global awareness, which are cultivated in 1v1 and 4v4 gameplay.

Also, gamers need to be aware of playing in structured and unstructured eSports programs. If any gamers are new to the Wild West of eSports, experiences of hearing coarse language and racial slurs are sometimes common in eSports gameplay. Modding is also common in the Wild West with gamers using modifications to affect gameplay and characters, but in structured programs, specific experiences of coarse language and modding appear to be non-existent as rules and regulations and values of players and the program guard against the Wild West gameplay.

Game Developers

As discussed earlier in the study, eSports/video games of the past have provided characters of Indigenous ethnicity; however, these characters have embodied stereotypical characteristics long held in old western television shows of the bow and arrow, muscled-up, mystical Indian that can shapeshift into a coyote. Some of the participants mentioned *Mortal Kombat's* character of Night Wolf as the most common stereotype of Indigenous representation; however, using Indigenous futurisms, participants were able to provide insights into how game developers and content could privilege Indigenous voices going forward with gaming content. Participants discussed creating a lacrosse game with Iroquois culture and creating a playable character like Lindy Waters (Kiowa) in NBA video games. Going forward in creating eSports content, it is highly recommended for game developers to reach out to tribal communities to ensure content in eSports games are reflecting accurate representations of Indigenous peoples.

Looks, regalia²⁸, mannerisms, songs, dances, and languages are important to accurately portray Indigenous peoples in eSports content. Failure to involve tribal personnel in the construction of game development, such as *Never Alone* and *Assassin's Creed III*, falls back into tired old Indian stereotypes prevalent in earlier video games such as *Turok* and *Custer's Revenge*.

League and Tournament Administrators

As the Wild West of eSports is replete with opportunities and ways of knowing that allow for coarse language and racial slurs, eSports league and tournaments organizers are highly encouraged to put into place rules and regulations to ensure no team or individuals engage or experience hateful speech or actions that violate the integrity of sportsmanship during eSports gameplay, which aligns with the values and respect, discussed from participants and embedded in Southern Plains Tribal College's eSports program.

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to understand how eSports programs are operating in Indian education and to study the intersection of eSports, 21st century skills, and Indigenous cultures and futurisms. In analyzing the findings of this qualitative case study, there are opportunities that present themselves for future research into eSports. Potential further research opportunities include connections of eSports to socio-emotional learning, balance and moderation in eSports environments, cultivating a family atmosphere through eSports playing, bridging the digital divide in terms of accessing expensive gaming set ups and consoles/pcs, cultural connectedness vs disconnectedness in terms of comfortability of playing in a structured eSports program, culturally inappropriate interactions and exposure to romanticized

²⁸ Traditional Native American dress.

representations of Native cultures in eSports, and exploring how racism unfolds in both structured and unstructured eSports environments. The following critical questions serve as opportunities to connect this work at the intersection of eSports and Indigenous education, to new pockets of research and areas of focus moving forward. The topics below are likely to have been researched in some manner, but this is an effort to prompt future research to connect the unique qualities of my work to other layers of research relevant to eSports.

Critical Question 1: In what ways do eSports programs help provide mental health benefits?

A few of the participants homed in on the mental health side of eSports. Jeremy (faculty/staff) discussed how eSports is a form of escapism for him in which he is able to use eSports to distract from real life. Gabriel (Lone Wolf) pointed out that he is using video games for relaxation as a form of stress release, where he can take out his frustrations out on other gamers. Gabriel (Lone Wolf) also pointed out playing *Minecraft* with his friend's son, who has autism, that helped him with his communication skills and emotions. Chuckie (Lone Wolf) discussed how he releases anger through eSports. "I'm going to be honest with you, nothing better than going on a video game and wiping out zombies. Killing a bunch of zombies helps you sometimes just release anger..." Relevant to this quote, further research could also provide deeper insight into how eSports affects mental capacities of gamers.

Even though these responses only reflect a few of the participants' mental health reasons for eSports, there are a plethora of gamers who are using eSports for mental health reasons that are different than the ones discussed in this study. Further research in this area could provide a deeper understanding of various mental health benefits can have for gamers,

whether they game in structured eSports environments, i.e., college institutions, or in the Wild West.

Critical Question 2: What can we find out about balance and moderation in eSports environments?

As mentioned above, two participants discussed mental health reasons for playing eSports, escapism, and relaxation. Further research could provide deeper insight into how hours spent playing eSports effect a person mentally, and do these hours of playing eSports provide a health social component? Several participants discussed playing video games for hours into the night. Further research could help to understand how playing eSports affects course studies and grade point average (GPA) for college students.

Critical Question 3: In what ways does eSports cultivate a family atmosphere?

As the word family has many various meanings, family is cultivated through eSports by who you “run” online with during gameplay. Whether you run with a clan or a party during gameplay, the term family usually gets thrown around when you become friends with other gamers. Gamers may not be related through blood, but gamers can form a connection through eSports to the point where gamers refer to individuals as online family, as evident by Jeremy’s (faculty/staff) explanation of responsibility stemming from cultural responsibility. “In our culture, we talk about being a *Good Relative*, which means we treat everyone like family. We always try to support one another and lift them.” Further research will be valuable as not all gamers who play eSports use the word family, as only one or two participants in this study used this word to describe eSports experiences.

Critical Question 4: In what ways do eSports bridge the digital divide in terms of billing for expensive gamer set ups and consoles/pcs and what does that say about motivations?

When I walked into the two institutions of higher education's eSports lab/lounge, I could tell these institutions were serious about their eSports program, as the gaming set up in each location appeared to pour monies into the program by purchasing the newest gaming towers, gaming chairs, gaming keyboards, and PCs and Xbox consoles. Rob (faculty/staff) explained how his institution poured thousands of dollars into the institution's gaming lounge. Further research could provide and answer such questions of what do motivations look like if the newest and most expensive gaming gear and set ups are not able to be provided or purchased? How does the inability to purchase gaming gear affect gameplay and the socio-emotional thinking of eSports gamers?

Critical Question 5: What is the level of comfortability if a culturally disconnected tribal citizen joins a culturally connected eSports program?

The question of culturally disconnectedness kept appearing in my personal memos after the cycles of data analysis due to the responses of the Lone Wolves who are pow wow people, meaning they are heavily involved in Indigenous culture, through song and dance. The Lone Wolves who are knowledgeable of their culture were fluent in Indian humor, as evident by Gabriel's response of having new team members do a Giveaway before they can officially be a member of the team or Calvin's discussion of having the team smudge before a 4v4. Through interviews with players (n=2), coaches (n=2), and faculty/staff (n=2) at a Southern Plains Tribal College and State University, at times some of the participants had hesitations and difficulties in discussing how Indigenous culture was present in eSports, while the Lone Wolves had no difficulties explaining with deep insight their experiences of how Indigenous

culture is present in their eSports gameplay. For those gamers who may not be as culturally connected as the Lone Wolves, further research could provide insight to the level of comfort of tribally disconnected citizens exhibiting participation in a culturally connected eSports program.

Critical Question 6: What can we learn from the parallel and dissonant presence of sarcastic Indian humor and participant complaints about the presence of stereotypes and racism in eSports environments?

Culturally inappropriate experiences and racism were clearly experienced by some of the participants, revealing some hypocritical, dissonant, and contrasting layers. Specifically, rugged Indian Humor was handed out to fellow Native players, but also non-Native players. This offered a form of sarcasm that leaned into stereotypes, yet participants were also simultaneously conscious of the presence of old-stuck-in-the-past stereotypes and saw them as problematic. As an example, Calvin (Lone Wolf) made the comment of playing the tomahawk chop music which is commonly done at the Florida State Seminoles football games, when his 4v4 eSports team beat a team of game battlers.²⁹ The tomahawk chop and its music is a sensitive subject in Native American culture, with plenty of research showing the detrimental effects to mental health related to mascots and imagery. As Leavitt et al. (2015) argue, “media portrayals of Native Americans also constrain self-understanding for Native Americans; inhibiting the opportunity to explore a variety of atypical identities” (p. 44). Many Natives are against anyone doing the “chop” and singing along with it. There have been protests at football games and even the major league baseball team Atlanta Braves do the chop, and protests have

²⁹ Serious eSports players who give 100% each game.

taken place at their games as well, but there are times when rugged Indian humor takes this culturally inappropriateness and is used for jokes and laughs with other Natives and non-Natives. Another instance of using perceived culturally inappropriate humor is when Calvin (Lone Wolf) said his team will be “burning wagons” tonight during gameplay.

At the same time, popular images of Native Americans can be taken from television, movies, and books long before they were imprinted in eSports gameplay. According to Ullah & Murtaza (2022):

Stereotypes were created for three main reasons: (a) to confirm the superiority of Western civilization, (b) to perpetuate the myths on which the American nation was built, and (c) to offer entertainment through literature, art, and film. Stereotypes were very entertaining, and therefore, profitable. The stereotypes simplified and standardized images shared by members of a collective group that remain unchanged in light of new data that persist as frames in modern media date back to the White man’s first contact with Native Americans and have continued to infiltrate books, magazines, television, and commercial advertising. (p. 1)

The images put forth in television, movies, and books have been prevalent in eSports and video games as well. Only recently have game designers infused eSports with images of Native Americans that truly reflect who we are as a culture. Only a few games are mentioned in the preceding pages as portraying stereotypical images of Natives in gameplay, but other games that warrant analyzing of future research include Oregon Trail, where Native Americans are seen as wanting to trade for clothes (See Figure 7) or Super Street Fighter II (See Figure 8), which depicts the Indian character as wearing a headband and feather, muscled up, and dressed

in 1970s American Indian Movement (AIM) clothes.³⁰ It must be noted that this study mentions eSports games as depicting Native Americans as having mystical powers such as *Mortal Kombat*; however there are various games utilizing the image of the mystical Native in gameplay such as the Indian janitor in *Elvia II: The Jaws of Cerberus* (See Figure 9), where the Indian character sits “Indian Style”³¹ and speaks of a peace pipe. Only a handful of video games in recent times have accurate Native representation, but future research could shed light on future eSports games set for gameplay with Native characters.

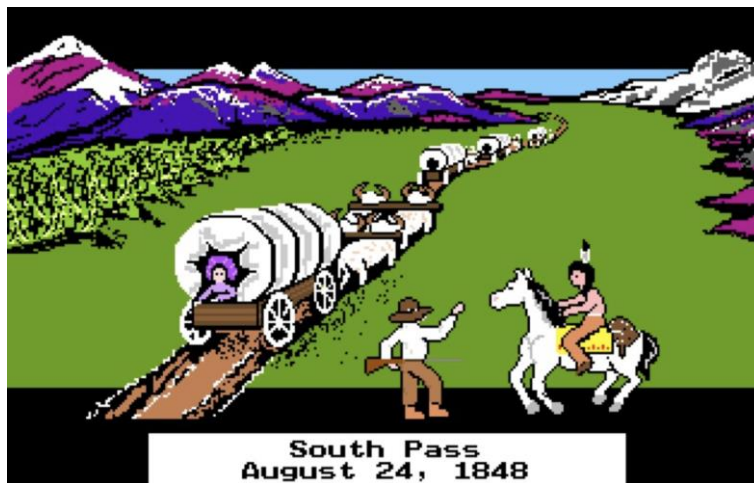
As evident by participant responses, racism unfolds in the Wild West of eSports gaming with racial and derogatory slurs; however, there is minimal, if any, research on how racism unfolds in the structured college eSports programs. In analyzing data from interviews, no participant discussed racism as being part of their structured eSports program. Is that to say racism is present or not present? No. A limitation of the interviews could be that participants were unwilling to pinpoint that racism is present in the program, which could be cause for their program to be seen in an unfriendly light; however, it is entirely possible that racism is not present in structured programs due to the rules and regulations forbidding any type of detrimental gameplay in a college’s structured eSports program set forth by institutional or gaming competition authority. Great Mountain (coach) mentioned briefly how his institution is looking at joining an eSports conference, National Association of Collegiate E-sports (NACE), which would give them more credibility, but it is this gaming competition authority that would set rules and regulation of no racial slurs used towards any team or individuals during competition.

³⁰ Jean, Vests and beaded head bands.

³¹ Sitting on the ground with legs crossed.

Playing in the Wild West of eSports affords gamers opportunities to use stereotypical images of Native Americans, but at the same time, use the same stereotypical images to invoke Indian humor. Participants such as Calvin (Lone Wolf) used stereotypical portrayals (tomahawk chop) of Indigenous people as tool of humor during eSports, while video game designers used Oregon Trail, Super Street Fighter II, and Elvira II: The Jaws of Cerberus as continued means of stereotypical representations of Indigenous characters (although inaccurate) in gameplay. Taken as a whole, these statements and actions can be interpreted as hypocritical since Natives are also protesting and pushing back against institutions using racial imagery such as the tomahawk chop, and media propping up these old stereotypes of teepee living bow and arrow shooting people, but yet in a way condoning it with Indian humor during eSports gameplay.

Figure 7
Oregon Trail



Note: Scene depicts an Indian character who helps travelers in exchange for clothes, i.e., sweaters during gameplay (Schilling, 2019).

Figure 8

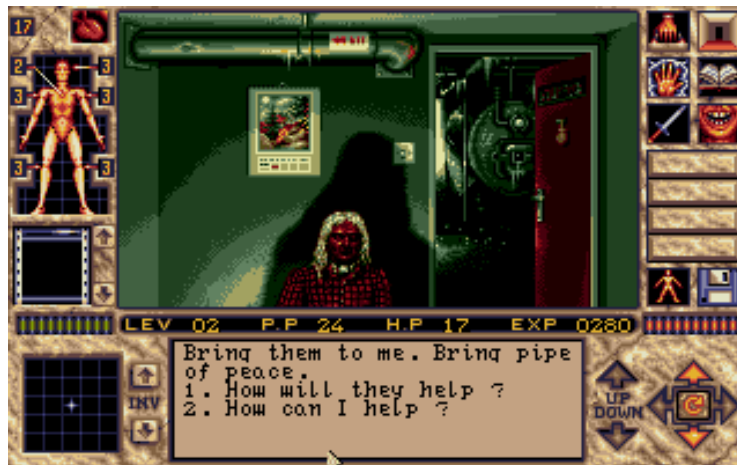
Thunder Hawk



Note. Scene depicts the Indian character from Super Street Fighter II (T Hawk, 2024).

Figure 9

Elvira II: The Jaws of Cerberus



Note: Scene depicts an Indian character sitting stereotypical “Indian Style”³² during gameplay (Depictions, 2022).

³² Sitting on ground with legs crossed.

Critical Question 7: What can we find out about the eSports experiences of females who play eSports?

In the Wild West of eSports the term *gamer* is identified as a male dominated category, as there term *gamer girl or gamer chick* are used to describe female gamers. Even though the term *gamer* is associated with male video gamers there are a number of females who participate in eSports, as Race Communications (n.d.) argues, “women make up almost half (41.5%) of all gamers in the United States. Additionally, 42% of Xbox owners are women, mostly aged between 25 to 34.” In my 35 years of experiencing eSports, I have come across and played 4v4s with female eSports players, and future how gendered experiences unfold in these contexts. Also, studies could focus on sexism in eSports, with attention on structured program experiences along with how they experience Wild West and unstructured contexts.

Critical Question 8: What are the generational differences in lived experience in eSports gaming?

For me having been born in 1980 in the era of Generation X, I played video games during the era of the first Nintendo gaming console that came out in 1985. With over 35 years of gaming experience, I have experienced playing against all ages of gamers from 10-year-olds to 65 years old on various gaming consoles and video games. In this study, the participants all had varied numbers of eSports/gaming experiences with some having 10 plus years of eSports and some having over 30-35 years of eSports gaming experiences. While participants who had more years of eSports experience under their belt provided deeper insights into interview questions, future research could deep dive into the generational make up of eSports gamers. As Knezovi (2024) argues, “according to Newzoo’s data, Gen Alpha leads the pack, dedicating 22% of their entertainment time to gaming. Gen Z is not far behind at 19%,”

followed by Millennials at 18%. Gen X allocates 14% of their time, while Baby Boomers lag with only 11%.

When I played the recently released *EA Sports College Football 25* games on Xbox, I played a 1v1 against a gamer, who sounded very young. I asked him how old he was, and he said he was 14 years old, and with that answer, it modified the manner in which I interacted with him in comparison to peers my age. Future research could explore these nuanced social dynamics, and potential intersect with other fields such as adult learning.

Critical Question 9: What is the role of capitalism-based models when conceptualizing new game design to address these known issues of representation found in the media?

With the recent release of *EA Sports College Football 25* for various gaming consoles, its revenue has grossed in the millions of dollars, as Parks (2024) says, “Electronic Arts shared that *EA Sports College Football 25* brought in 5 million unique players to the game through its first week. Moreover, the game has made a reported \$500 million already” (p. 1); however, the college football video games lack any Indigenous voices such as *Never Alone* and *Assassins Creed III*. While gamers can make a trip to Wal Mart, Target, and Best Buy and purchase the *EA Sports College Football 25* with ease, it has become difficult to find *Never Alone* to purchase. At times, one can purchase the game on STEAM³³, but at other times it says not available to for purchase. While specific video games are mass produced based on estimates of how many video games will sell, Indigenized video games appear to be at the mercy of video game designers and corporations, who control the market of which games to design and market. Overall, it does not appear that Indigenized video games are not seen as mass marketable based on sales. Looking to other media breakthroughs, such as the success of

³³ Online video game marketplace.

Reservation Dogs, which was created entirely by Indigenous creators and authors, there may be ways to break through “Native” themed content into mainstream markets successfully. Future research could shed light on how Indigenous video games can become marketable and available to public purchase than isolated to one online marketplace.

Conclusion

This case study contributes to providing deeper cognizance of how eSports programs are operating in Indian education, as well as exploring the intersection of eSports, 21st century skills, and Indigenous futurisms. Participants at Southern Plains Tribal College, State University, and the addition of Lone Wolves provided deep insight into their experiences of eSports. Through interviews, participants described many years of eSports experience, from 10 years plus to over 35 years plus, and in those years of playing, they have developed and nurtured many distinct skills through gameplay and associations in eSports ecosystems. Participants provided vivid stories of their Indigenous cultures as they intersect with eSports, from humor to values, as well as racial slurs and stereotypes. From data collected through interviews, there is an immense ecosystem in need of further research, specifically how eSports operates in Indian education outside of the three units of study utilized for this research, and how eSports operate in the Wild West even beyond the six Lone Wolves who participated in this study.

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