Esports, Digital Professionals, and Higher Education: An Autoethnography of an Administrator's Experience with Liminality

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Completed Research Paper

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Abstract

Professional identity is a means for continued livelihood and, in this digitizing world, is in constant flux. Constantly changing occupational roles and professional classes are liminal, that is, they are increasingly "betwixt and between" formerly legitimized, stable categories. If, as current writings on the future of work suggest, a need for liminality in work identities persists, how will institutions of higher education help their students acquire "permanent" liminality? Through the eyes of an administrator at a mid-sized higher education institution, we examine how a university creates a new learning environment under the umbrella of esports. The findings raise questions about digital transitions in higher education and about liminality and the future of work by highlighting esports as a liminal category. The study contributes to the literature on the future of work by offering insights into higher education challenges to "institutionalize" liminality and to prepare future digital professionals.

Keywords: Liminality, digital transitions, higher education, future of work, esports

Introduction

Technological developments continue to have profound effects on professional work and professional identities (Kellogg, 2019; Vaast and Pinsonneault, 2021; Vaast, 2023). Professions are commonly understood as comprising specialized knowledge, autonomy, authority, and individual responsibility for their norms and ethical codes (Leicht and Fennell, 1997). Digitization is rendering these elements less bounded and more cross-occupational (Kellogg, 2011, 12, 18); new digital occupational roles and professions are springing up while others face risks of irrelevance (Vaast and Pinsonneault, 2021). These roles and professions are constantly being negotiated as technologies reconfigure markets and societies change (Cross and Swart, 2021; Pollock et al., 2022).

Because digital roles and professions are emergent and evolving, professional identities are less institutionalized and more open-ended to the point of being "betwixt and between," or *liminal.* "Being a liminal professional" involves engaging in a "varied and ambiguous professional terrain that is increasingly seen to be indeterminate and fluid" (Reed and Thomas, 2021, p. 219). Future work requires a reconceptualization and recognition of its liminality; it is "less finite, more open-ended or even [less] permanent in nature" (Ibarra and Ododaru, 2016" 49). Moreover, in these terrains, there is little guidance from elders or from ready-made communities, and individual self-initiation and self-crafting are being touted as crucial (Ibarra and Ododaru, 2016).

Preparing students for workplace realities is a central part of the mission of institutions of higher education. Such preparation calls for students' ability to engage in "provisional trials of possible future selves" (Ibarra and Odobaru, 2016, p. 56). For these identity excursions and to support this variety-seeking, the full campus terrain needs to be available. On U.S. campuses, this terrain can be divided into three areas for undergraduate students: academic programs, student activities, and inter-collegiate sports. Yet so far, "digital learning spaces" have been limited to academic programs with externally "given" and legitimized categories of professionalism, rather than including students' self-directed "made" and "remade" identities or categories.

Our research question asks: How are higher education institutions introducing environments that prepare students for the future of work? To date, the mainstream academic literature on future of work has not positioned higher education institutions as liminal environments from neither the individual student's nor the collective viewpoint. When higher institutions take the challenges of liminality seriously, students would ideally be able to repeatedly forge new identities, hold and transition between liminal positions, and occupy spaces that promote lived student experience of liminality. At the collective level, the university would introduce possibilities for liminality in its governance mechanisms, hiring, and both academic and non-academic spaces. Working at both levels is needed to emphasize liminality and to reduce tensions that arise in a transitioning context.

In this paper, we examine how one medium-sized, U.S.-based, state-funded university, with a mission of both educational and research excellence, positions esports as a way to prepare students to become digital professionals, ready for the future of work. The introduction of esports was initially student-led and externally enabled by a private donor. A university academic administrator then found himself, unexpectedly, in charge of the university's emergent mission-enhancing strategy of esports.

As this central administrator sought to make sense of his experience in orchestrating collective solutions to enable student liminal experiences, the concept of liminality (Ibarra & Obodaru,2016; Soderlund & Borg, 2018) helped. Both the administrator's and the students' "in-between" experiences required adaptation of their roles in interweaving academics, student services, and athletics, often with competing value systems. The new esports environment required that the administrator respond to conflicting loyalties and contrasting obligations as liminal spaces and roles for students and staff were created. Reflection on the dynamics of such lived liminal experiences can shed light on how to "institutionalize" liminality in higher education, for the benefit of students, future work spaces, and evolving institutions.

Conceptual Background

We briefly review the literature on higher education and future of work, on liminality in the future of work, and on esports as liminal experience.

Higher Education Institutions and Future of Work

Advanced digitization (artificial intelligence, blockchain, Internet of Things) leaves no category of occupation, profession, or work unchanged (Brown, 2020). Moreover, such change profoundly affects how individuals orient themselves in a work context and to their work-based self (Moser and Ashforth, 2021). Work identities are less tied to stable categories of professions (e.g., librarians, artists, scientists, engineers, lawyers, bankers) and are much more self-induced, self-crafted, and fluid (Ibarra and Ododaru, 2016).

Scholars broadly agree that higher education has a vital role to play, but there is much skepticism about how the change-resistant, bureaucratic, higher education institutions might transition to this context (Pucciarelli and Kaplan, 2016; Chamorro-Premuzic and Frankiewicz, 2019). Higher education institutions have invested in digitization of administrative systems and digitizing subjects, but these investments have been criticized for failing to disrupt the "student experience" (Henderson et al., 2017, p. 1578). For some researchers, digitization in higher education has been less about disruption of identities and business models, such as described by Vial (2019), and rather more about infrastructural change (Bygstad et al., 2022). Digital infrastructures, defined as the "interplay of affordances at the user level, and the

interconnected technologies with representations of the domain" (Bygstad et al., 2022, p. 4), enable infrastructural change along two possible tracks (Bygstad et al., 2022): (1) top-down educational solutions that introduce digital resources, such as such as learning management systems, library resources and e-books, course websites, and new user interfaces into the learning experience; and (2) digitizing of particular subjects through the use of interconnected technologies and the representation of digital domains, such as people analytics, forensic finance, or medical informatics. Researchers have called for integrating these tracks into "digital learning spaces" that would allow role reversals for students and teachers, render boundaries of subjects more blurred, and bridge the campus and external networks through hybridization of the digital and physical (Øvrelid et al., 2023). The question is whether these digitized learning spaces would be sufficient to promote fluid, self-induced or self-crafted work identities for budding digital professionals – that is, are they supportive of practicing liminality?

Liminality and Future of Work

Liminality refers to "the 'subjective state [or experience] of being on the 'threshold' of or betwixt and between two or differential existential positions" (Ybema et al., 2011: p. 2). Liminality originates from anthropology, where it is used to refer to temporary rites of passage where a person or a collective is "at once no longer classified and not yet classified" (Turner, 1967, p. 95-96). For example, adolescence is a transition "betwixt and between" childhood and adulthood. Liminality, or between-ness, disrupts the prevailing and everyday social structures and evokes intense sense-making, reflection, and provisional or paradoxical identities. The transitional experiences are equated to powerful learning zones where first separation, then transition, and finally incorporation take place (Wagner et al., 2012; Soderlund and Borg, 2018). While liminality can provide many benefits, including creativity, reflection, and learning, it also is constructed as social limbo and as involving significant psychological and economic costs (Soderlund and Borg, 2018).

In the organization and information systems literatures, liminality is associated with innovation, creativity, and institutional entrepreneurship. Conceptually, it characterizes individual or collective transitional experiences that are fluid, temporary, ambiguous, and uncertain (Stein et al., 2015). Research on liminality proposes three different forms (Soderlund and Borg, 2018): *process* (transition, e.g., Henfridsson and Yoo, 2014); *position* ("liminar" worker betwixt and between categories, e.g., Elbanna & Idowu, 2022; Stein et al., 2015); and *space* (physical, virtual, or mental) (e.g., Wagner et al. 2012). Soderlund and Borg (2018) further distinguish liminality at the level of the individual and the collective.

In the future of work literature, Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) reconceptualize liminality at the individual level as no longer bounded by a "finite, bracketed time period" but as "open-ended," even "permanent." They also note that it is under-institutionalized, involving new and ever-evolving scripts that are dependent on the choices of professionals, rather than being socially guided or obligatory. Liminality involves "self-made communities and incomplete or culturally problematic narrative where new scripts emerge" (Elbanna & Idowu, 2022, p. 132). Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) identified two key processes for this rather permanent liminal process: *exploration* and *delayed commitment*. Explorations require "questioning one's identity givens and actively exploring alternative identities" (p. 53). Delayed commitment requires delays in "making choices among options considered and [in] engaging in activities to implement these choices" (p. 53).

At the collective level, liminal processes, positions, and spaces consist of environments that foster "play" (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2010), characterized by both enjoyment and discovery. The type of emotionally intense, fantasy or imagined worlds of liminal engagement have received much attention (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2010; Ibarra and Ododaru, 2016; Cross and Swart, 2021), but how to construct environments that foster liminal experiences is not well understood. One recent study on job crafting "stepped into the shoes of [U.S.] federal professionals" who had taken opportunities to engage in temporary assignments to "explore new skills, establish new professional ties, and claim new professional identities unavailable in their full-time jobs" (Rogiers et al., 2021, p. 367). The study described failures to create appropriate environments by their current supervisors. For example, employees who were considered successful in their current jobs found that liminal experience was not available to them. Garud et al. (2022) describe Uber technologies' permissionless market entry as engaging in liminal movement. The market proved hostile to

Uber when it entered "betwixt and between" the existing Taxi and Limousine categories. Even when the environment has been studied, it has failed to span both individual and collective experiences. For the most part, the call by Soderlund and Borg (2018, p. 985) remains unanswered: "…how best to introduce liminality into an organization, how organizations may use self-induced liminality to drive growth and innovation, and how organizations use and deal with boundary-breaking projects that can strain and stretch the collectives and individuals."

Esports as a Liminal Category

Esports, a term commonly used to describe the ecosystem of competitive video gaming, is a liminal category (Delmestri et al., 2020; Steigenberger et al., 2022). Esports lie in a betweenness of sports, business, and information technology; its core dimensions are professionalism, game features, competition, information technology, and spectatorship (Ke, Wagner, Du, 2022). When esports sought cognitive realignment to shift from "players" to "athletes," stakeholders of the traditional sports industry pushed back (Steigenberger et al. 2022). The esports industry involves occupational roles commonly associated with computer science and information systems, as well as roles in live events management, psychological research, sports science, marketing, public relations, video (including livestream) production, community management, coaching and communications, and policy roles (Scott et al., 2021). Individuals' entry into these roles remains self-directed, with little understanding of career paths. Moreover, many professions and forms of work in esports and gaming have yet to be determined (Känsälä et al., 2019).

In higher education, there is no agreement about what esports is. At some higher education institutions, esports is categorized as sports or an alternative sport; or as a set of components of an academic program, and as a student services offering (see Table 1).

But could esports be an umbrella category that encompasses aspects of sports, academics, and student services? Because video games are already part of students' daily life, esports can provide a connection for a prospective student that otherwise may find little affinity to attend a university. Having opportunities to join and participate in a video gaming and esports community for any or all the purposes of academics, esports competition, and leisure may help increase the retention of students – an important function of universities and critical for student success. Access to participation in coursework related to the video gaming and esports industry may increase the post-university success of alumni and lead to benefits for the university, including larger mission-enhancing donations from these alumni.

Our study explores how esports introduced liminal environment (process, positions, and spaces) in an institution of higher education, creating opportunity to reorient and re-envision the institution's role in preparing students for the future of work.

Methods

The setting is a 23,000-student, Carnegie Research 1 public state university in the southern United States. The university is known for its strong liberal arts foundation and for being a member of the largest Division 1 intercollegiate athletics programs under the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).

A series of unplanned events led to an institution-wide initiative related to esports. In 2017, an esports club at the university was formed by a few students who approached the department chair of computer science and asked if they could use computers in the department's lab to play video games together. The department chair and her assistant (who became a strong voice for students) saw the lab as a good place for students to form social relationships outside of class. The students eventually persuaded the department chair that there was enough interest in video games to stage competitions on campus, in a form similar to a football "bowl game." The students and department chair shared their vision with the provost, the Chief Academic Officer of the university, who was familiar with esports because his children and family friends regularly played. What esports might become or mean as an umbrella category of alternative sports, student activities, and academics was nowhere in sight. As part of the provost team, an

associate provost (and co-author of this paper) was appointed and became associated with the esports initiative.

Institution	Observed category	Web address
Fisher College	Student Teams	https://www.fisher.edu/esports
Hanshin University	Academics	https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20211028000823
Hong Kong University	Academics	https://www.hkmu.edu.hk/ba/programmes-and-courses/sports-and-esports-management/
HS Mittweida	Academics	https://www.me.hs-mittweida.de/studienangebote/informationen-fuer-bewerber/medienmanagement.html
Maryville University	Student Teams	https://www.maryville.edu/studentlife/esports-clubs/
Shenandoah University	Student Teams	https://www.su.edu/esports/
St. Clair's (Canada)	Student Teams	https://stclairsaints.ca/
St. Gallen university	Academics (Research)	https://iff.unisg.ch/projects/competence-center-on-gaming-entertainment/
UC Irvine	Student Teams	https://esports.uci.edu/
University of Cologne	Student Services	https://www.esportwissen.de/en/philosophie/
University of Jyvaskyla	Academics (Esports Management)	https://studyguide.jyu.fi/2022/en/courseunit/ress2220/
University of Muenster	Student Teams	https://muensteresports.de/
University of Oulu	Student Teams	http://www.oulugamelab.net/
University of Tampere	Academics (IT / Communications)	https://webpages.tuni.fi/gamification/yes/esports/

Table 1. Categorization of Esports in a Sample of Universities

To present and analyze several key episodes in the initiative's history, we use an autoethnographic research method (e.g., Bourgoin, Bencherki, and Faraj, 2020; Boyle and Parry, 2007; Schultze, 2000). Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that describes and studies researchers' own lived realities, analyzing their organizations or other phenomena to which they have natural access (Alvesson and Einola, 2018, p. 212); in this case, the phenomena include future of work (Anicich, 2022; Cameron, 2021) and learning in academic institutions (Hibbert et al., 2022). Dating from 2018 to the present day, the episodes we present convey rich accounts of what was involved in introducing and shaping a liminal environment, and of how the administrator experienced liminality in the process.

The first-person accounts are analytical and meet the standards of autoethnography (see Anderson, 2006), which replaces professional distance with deep and rich personal field engagement (Anteby, 2013).

The liminality framework provided by Soderlund and Borg (2018) played an important role in constructing this research method. Thus, in weekly meetings, the insider-outsider research team discussed how the vignettes involved liminal process, position, and space and how they incorporated individual and collective

elements. This discussion helped in making decisions about what actions to include in the vignettes and how to build their flow and plot. For example, we see focal individuals finding themselves in liminal positions – some as students engaging esports in identity play, some as administrators seeking a landing place for their own role in the changing landscape. We propose that the administrator was being tasked with finding the best route, or indeed any route, by which to move the organization through a collective liminal process. In addition, contrasting views on position emerged when discussions of esports energized a donor to provide funds to build a physical space, even as the "most important esports activities" are undertaken in wholly virtual spaces. To separate the first author's "dual positions as analyst and character in the events being analyzed" (Bourgoin et al., 2020, p. 1139), we identify the administrator as Paul in the vignettes. The focal institution is referred to as "the University."

Following Schultze (2000), Table 2 illustrates how autoethnographic research requirements related to authenticity, plausibility, criticality, and self-revealing writing were activated in preparing the vignettes.

Criteria (Schultz 2000)	Description
Authenticity (immersion in the field)	Every workday involved encounters (i.e., talked, read emails and reports, attended meetings and presentations, observed behavior) with staff (e.g., esports director, members of provost team) and faculty (e.g., entrepreneurship faculty) for perpetual immersion. Field notes, email archives, and institutional repositories were used to reconstruct events and reflect on consequences.
Plausibility (relevant and common concerns of research audience)	Ordinary state university in a small university town; familiarity with higher education digitalization and liminality literatures; vignettes on experiences that the audience can relate to or that parallel popular headlines, such as "name, image, and liking" (NIL) in NCAA sports.
Criticality (propel readers to reflect and consider their own taken-for-granted assumptions)	Use the researchers' own reflection to challenge readers to think about a specific situation; raise questions; highlight what was different from what was expected; incorporate questions in vignettes; rely on insider-outsider research team. Reviewer of prior version stated that "the paper transformed my understanding of the role of esports for students' learning experience."
Self-revealing writing (describing the researcher, disclosing unflattering actions, disclosing problematic or unusual conditions)	Note inaction, access, personalized experiences; include feelings of being a reluctant actor that may put the researcher in an unfavorable position; include background involving no prior knowledge of esports
Interlaced "actual" and confessional account (triangulating with non-autoethnographic material, limit analysis to subject and focus of research)	"an insider-outsider research team" (Bourgoin et al., 2020, p. 1142). Second author, not affiliated with the university, participated in interviews with president of the esports club, the provost, other administrators, and faculty and in external interviews with college esports directors or staff elsewhere (see Table 3). Interviews of approximately one hour each were used to triangulate with vignettes, to avoid self-absorption and private muses in rich description, and to ensure that the vignettes captured experiences that resonated with others or could take place elsewhere.

Table 2. Criteria for high-quality confessional ethnography

The data analysis involved four steps focusing on the administrator's daily experience, including informal conversations with insiders; various field documents (emails, meeting minutes, memos, deliverables,

strategy notes, etc.); weekly meetings with the second author; and the literature on higher education, future of work, and liminality. In the weekly meetings, the authors discussed the administrator's chronicling of how he saw things and how he saw others seeing things, as well as the second author's comments on how things looked to an outsider. The researchers knew each other but had not collaborated before and were employed at different universities.

The three-step process was as follows:

1. Produce a timeline of key events in terms of their setting, triggers, actors, tensions/conflicts, outcomes with impact.
2. Write and rewrite drafts of vignettes, which entailed moving between different sources of data and conveying evolving and unfolding events with the composite of a set of actions, feelings, and reflections that were ordered to build a plot. The most impactful events became the focus of the vignettes because these events were the context for liminality. The authors intensively discussed and debated these vignettes. Carry interviews (October 2022-July 2023). Triangulate vignettes with the interviews (see Table 3).
3. Rewrite to flesh out the transitions of identities, positions, and space more clearly, based on empirical evidence; but remain true to the events and feelings. The evaluation criteria by Schultze (2000) were important to ensure that we kept only details that were relevant to the issues of the research question.

Interviews	No.	Rationale
University administration	4	Understand the present status of esports, past accomplishments, and future goals; also the relationship to national esports leagues and athletics locally and nationally
University faculty	8	Understand plans for curricula and integrating with student life activities and esports teams
Students and alumni	3	Understand motivations to join esports club, esports teams and benefits gained
Esports directors and staff in other universities/colleges (via Zoom)	3	Compare and contrast esports developments in other universities
Table 3. Interviews Conducted		

Findings

Vignette 1: Esports – Why should I care?

> "I am supportive of having esports teams on campus, facilitating their success, recruiting players, dedicating space, and promoting the fact that we have active esports teams.... [That said,] I need to appoint a person to champion this and run with it."

This statement, made to Paul by the provost of the University in May 2018, was Paul's introduction to the world of esports in higher education. The provost was referring to the 100+ enthusiastic students of the new esports club. Compared to other student groups Paul had sponsored or mentored in the past as a faculty representative, this was a much larger and more motivated set of students. The provost's statement was accompanied by an email thread that included, for Paul's benefit, this side note: "Paul, in case you don't know what e-sports are, check out Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ESports." Paul's initial reaction was "...of course I know what esports are." He found he did not. The Wikipedia link proved very helpful.

Even though Paul researches and teaches in management and information systems, he was unaware of the size of the video gaming industry and the nature of amateur and professional competition that led to the esports side of the industry. Similarly, he was unaware of and had dismissed learning about the student-led gaming community at the university. To him, this was another high-growth digital industry that could

provide employment opportunities to graduates but seemed rather distant from his role as an administrator. Paul questioned how he could possibly help when he struggled to explain even to his wife, herself an academic administrator, why the provost would ask him to be involved. This program needed a champion with knowledge of and enthusiasm for esports. Paul found he was unsure if he should embrace this lack of knowledge head-on or simply slow his efforts until an opportunity came along to force things one way or the other. "What a dilemma," he thought, searching for a process to follow: "just how do I move forward?"

Vignette 2: First attempts to organize an esports "coalition of willing"

In May 2018, shortly after his charge from the provost, Paul organized a first meeting of faculty and staff. Importantly, this assemblage represented a set of collisions between previously disparate groups; although they were enthusiastic supporters of the students involved in esports, they did not have expertise with esports student clubs, academics, or sports groups. Similarly a non-expert, Paul felt much discomfort during the meeting; discussion was chaotic and, even though such chaos was not unusual when starting something new, he wondered, "Why does it feel like this particular time there are too many different intersecting interests for this to work? Is this coalition of the willing and enthusiastic going to be enough?"

The conversations at this first and subsequent meetings steadily revealed that esports was *different* from existing institutional entities: It was not really an academic program, yet it could have academic implications. Esports was not an NCAA or even an accepted intramural sport, yet it had elements of practice, semi-organized play, and competitive matches. "Organized" appropriately, the winners here could be the students, whether they engage in casual play or intense competition. In contrast, those most closely connected with the esports program, students and administrators alike, often noted that "we need to keep out of the way of the esports club so that we don't ruin what they have created." This distancing was confusing and unsettling: Was Paul supposed to provide cover for esports as they evolved organically into sports, leisure, academics, or all - or none - of these? Would this "coalition of the willing" from the first meeting help to dampen this feeling – or provide a convenient exit strategy?

Vignette 3: Inaugural Esports Egg Bowl 2018, early donor support, and a search for an academic director

The inaugural Esports Egg Bowl was held in the university's impressive new basketball arena on October 13, 2018. The provost and the Chief Information Officer (CIO) attended the event; Paul did *not* attend. He felt his direct input into the event would be minimal because he still did not know anything about the games being played and lacked the desire to learn. It seemed that by sheer force of enthusiasm, the students, staff, and administrators (other than Paul) made this inaugural event a success.

Soon after, Paul regretted not having participated in what would have been a golden opportunity to improve his understanding of esports. Engaged in what might be termed "identity dissonance," Paul himself struggled to find his place as an enabler of the esports movement at his university. In retrospect, Paul and the outside researcher saw that being able to engage in identity play, as an administrator, was going to become critical if he was to be useful in helping to set up an infrastructure appropriate for the development of the esports students. Reflecting on this, they asked: Could Paul become as genuinely enthusiastic about esports as others? Was this even a necessary condition for him to be able to contribute to its development?

An alumnus who was an established donor to the university was urged by his son to make the several-hour trip to campus on that fall Saturday to attend the inaugural Esports Egg Bowl. Unaware of esports as an industry or culture, his initial reluctance was dampened by his son's enthusiasm. At the competition, the enthusiasm of the students as both spectators and competitors and the online viewership also had a transformative effect. "My son is into gaming more than football, and at first it was something fun for us to do together…. Then, I started to see the tournaments, the athletes, and all that went into holding these events." Soon after, he began discussions that led to his family's becoming a major academic esports program donor. To this donor, the betweenness, the liminality, of esports was a strength when considering where his donation would have the most leverage: "The most appealing part to me is that it doesn't come with any baggage because esports is so new and there are no rules limiting how it can grow, …[and the] impact we can have in supporting it will be a thousandfold on what you can have on a traditional [NCAA sports] program." In addition to monies for scholarships for esports students, the donor also gave funds to

build an esports lounge and esports competition and practice center which sees high use by the students, but due to COVID-19 and other delays took from spring 2021 to spring 2023 to be fully operational.

For Paul, the prospect of a major donation for the esports program provided evidence that esports might just be "for real" – and that esports influence could extend beyond student activities to include academic programs. The shift in perspective began a new phase: With the potential for scholarship support, Paul felt esports had the impetus to transform from a student recreational activity to an academic program. This potential was evident as he and his colleagues began to articulate how students could be better served by giving them opportunities with an esports club *and* an academic program (e.g., academic courses, minor, and/or major). Paul was interviewed for the university's newspaper "…[P]rofessionals can work in esports marketing, graphic design, management and even the business of online sports. In contrast to attitudes in years past – when online gaming was considered a hobby – it serves as a potential career path." To Paul, esports was starting to take on elements of programs that, if he really used his imagination, he could recognize. Would this external donor be the push needed to motivate Paul to commit the energy and effort, to mobilize the resources and creativity needed to help the esports program?

An important step in mobilizing resources and creativity came with the realization that a competitive esports program would need an experienced director. As a result, a search committee was formed that in the summer and fall of 2021 developed a position description and conducted a nationwide search. This new group functioned as an updated version of the earlier "coalition of the willing," and the discussions of its members seemed to Paul to be both a much needed injection of actual knowledge about esports and a still-confusing exchange of ideas that had no place in a traditional academic environment. Collectively, the group persevered and developed a novel organizational structure for the esports program (see Figure 1 – Esports Organizational Structure at Focal University). The structure was highly creative and valuable – and so innovative, in fact, that tense negotiations with the Human Resources (HR) department resulted about the lack of industry comparisons to set the new job's salary level and administrative category. Unintentionally, the search committee's work triggered a betweenness for the university's HR staff because it required a transition in thinking about new and innovative positions.
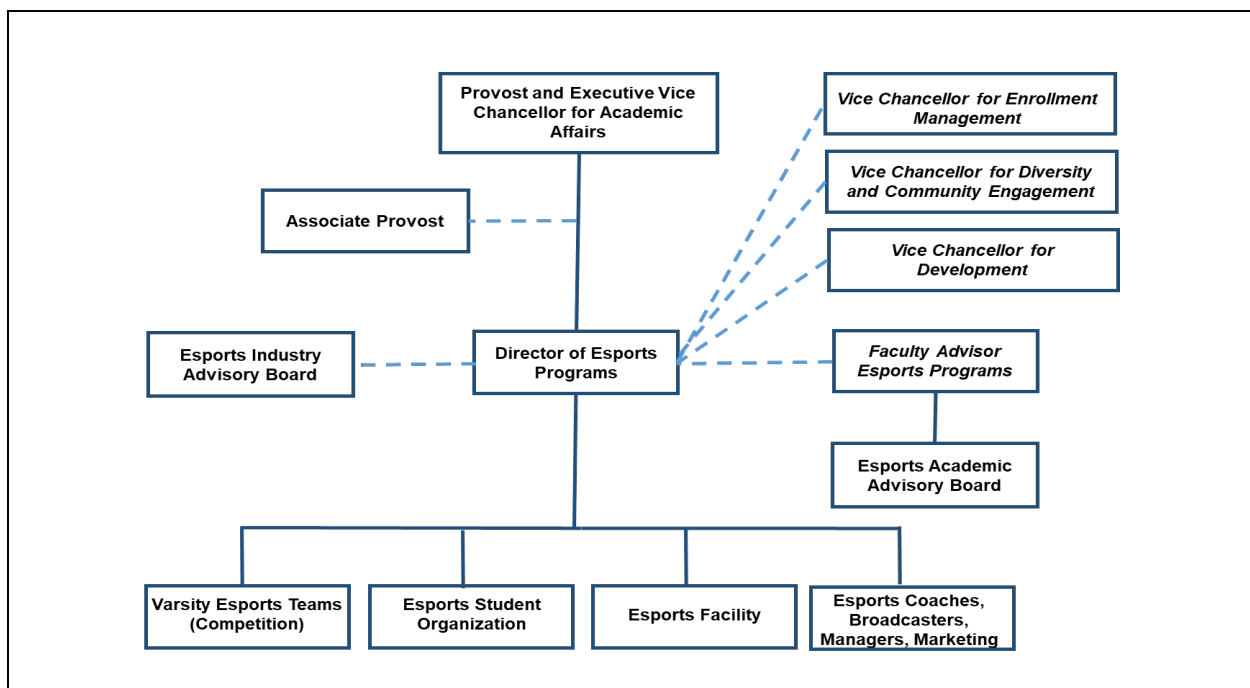

Figure 1. Esports Organizational Structure at Focal University

Vignette 4: Paul's transition in action: "I know a little… and baby I can guess the rest" and "Wow, this is really making a difference with students"

Another pivotal moment in Paul's transition came during a presentation he gave with the university's Chief Information Officer (CIO), titled "What would I do with $10 M dollars?" Set up like the popular "Shark Tank" television series, it was delivered to a small group of major donors to the university. The CIO presented facts about the size of the video gaming industry and the concept of esports and esports audiences as an important component of the industry, while Paul presented visions of how building a strong esports program could attract and retain students and could also help students to develop marketable skills, thus moving video game play from an individual and virtual activity to a team and real-world problem-solving activity.

The CIO's portion generated animated discussion and revealed a wide variety of perceptions about the esports industry and the culture's enthusiasts. A donor who was a legend in the commercialization of the internet struggled to understand why esports enthusiasts would gather in arenas. His questions indicated that he clearly understood how the digital space worked: For example, he asked "…why would groups want to gather in a physical space and watch a game that was essentially played in virtual space?" This line of query represented a collision of intersecting knowledge domains, enabled by knowing a lot about one domain (here, digital infrastructure) and trying to transfer this knowledge to the other domain (esports). Creative conversation ensued as they struggled to connect the dots. Paul realized then that people had to willingly go through a lot of betweenness just to understand the world of esports. His portion of the presentation, on how providing an affinity group and marketable skills would attract and retain students, engendered far less discussion, and he felt disappointed. Sensing he had missed an opportunity, Paul noticed he was fired up by the new challenge: "How can I spark interest in providing unique opportunities to students for honing skills by practicing both the face-to-face and virtual collaborations that use these skills?"

After a hiatus from in-person meetings, due to COVID-19, the Esports Egg Bowl returned in 2022. This time, Paul decided he would not miss the opportunity to attend and was excited to witness so much passion, creativity, strategizing, and collaboration among students – key skills for their future careers. Paul's favorite story, repeated often, was about an alumnus from the university, "Robert":

> *Robert was the marketing director for Omega Strikers, a new game that incorporated elements of air hockey and was debuted at the Egg Bowl. The students had to adjust to a brand new game environment "on the fly," with their roles and strategies. After the matches were completed, teams from both sides ran off the stage, mobbed Robert, and peppered him – and each other – with questions about tricks they had learned and how their competing strategies sometimes worked and sometimes did not.*

To Paul, the event had clearly introduced "new learning spaces" that had digitally disrupted students' experience. Another story that Paul liked to relate was how one of the esports club members used their involvement in esports as the basis for all class assignments when they had the option to choose their own topic, and that this crossover led to improved grades in these classes for this student. Paul felt he was changing, too, as he shared stories like these. To what degree was Paul buying into the claim that esports can help transform the university's learning spaces? Could it actually offer continually created opportunities for students to practice experimenting with their identities or understandings of who they were?

Paul also pondered at length how a hiccough – a synchronicity – in an information system at the university created a range of student reactions to a temporary incorrect categorization of their student status. A miscoding error in the student information system around 2020 caused all of the esports club members to be suddenly designated as official NCAA student athletes. Almost immediately, students began to report that when they tried to make changes to their schedules, the information system "locked them out until they met with their athletics academic advisor." They did not have such an advisor, and Paul found it interesting that the esports students' reactions were mixed. Some felt that not having such an advisor – in addition to their academic program advisor – was an example of how they were not as well respected as students in

athletics programs. Others felt that this level of administrative oversight and lack of autonomy was too constraining and was something that they did *not* want. Curious, Paul thought, that some team members enjoyed trying on the NCAA student-athlete role while others, even from the same team, did not.

Vignette 5: Scholarships and quality of education as tools to recruit esports players to come to college; consequences of the state's blocking access to key games

The new esports director, from his first day at the university in August 2022, hit the ground running as he recruited players and offered scholarships. For Paul, as an academic administrator, offering scholarships for esports performance was very new territory – and he was even a member of the esports scholarship selection committee. Paul thought, "we usually only award scholarships based on academic merit. How do I provide oversight when I don't have a clue about what makes a player valuable to us?" He had that uncomfortable feeling again because clearly the world had changed, and the new esports director held all of the expertise in selecting scholarship awardees. However, Paul was reminded by one of his colleagues that the university commonly offered donor-funded scholarships based on academic merit *plus* some extra criteria identified by the donor – for example, participation in high school clubs, geographic location of the recipient, or a parent's membership in a credit union or community association. Making the mental leap, Paul saw that having esports ability as the extra criteria is not so different from other scholarships and thought, "why didn't I think of that in the beginning?"

Another new experience came in the form of recruiting professional gamers. The most successful esports colleges were predominantly small and private and had high tuition costs – tuition that was waived for good players. In contrast, Paul's public university charged much lower tuition, but students coming to the university would still have some tuition charges. When he asked the esports director how the university would be able to compete (new, yet to be established program, plus tuition costs), Paul was heartened to discover that his university *was* competitive, likely for several reasons: It was a reputable public state school with a large range of degree options, a large (300+ member) esports club, a Carnegie Research 1 designation, and membership in one of the NCAA Power 5 athletic conferences. Just as interesting to Paul, these were not criteria that previously would have been widely considered among college esports competitors. Paul was becoming excited; he and his colleagues were well-versed in communicating the "college experience" value proposition to parents and students. For Paul, this was one of the most unanticipated and welcome realizations: The esports-focused student should have similar aspirations for a good education as a student who was less esports-focused. Importantly, the legacy systems that were in place to attract, retain, and help students graduate on time and to be well prepared should work for the esports students as well. Similarly, the added benefits of offering opportunities for identity play should be valuable to both esports and non-esports students. Paul thought: "Things are really looking up!"

In August 2023, the new scholarship esports students, some former professional players, began to arrive on campus. They are interacting with club members and playing with some of these less experienced students as teammates. Paul imagined that the scholarship esports students would have identity-testing experiences, too, as they adjust to being in college and integrating their esports life into an ecosystem that is much broader than esports. How would these former pros react to their younger and less esports-focused teammates and classmates? How would the esports program evolve?

On September 1, 2023, the esports program faced another challenge. As had occurred in a handful of other states, a new state law went into effect that prohibited the use of technologies from specific companies based in China. As a result, more than 80% of the games in which the esports club and teams competed could not be accessed via the university's internet gateway, nor could they legally be played on university computing equipment or over the wifi networks. The esports director informed Paul that "this law places a large number of my esports scholarship players at risk of leaving the university because they will be motivated to leave for other universities or professional teams where they are allowed to compete." To Paul and the esports director, this law was a threat to the existence of the esports programs. The two most feasible options available were either to request an exception from the state or to purchase computers and an internet connection for the esports club with private funds. Paul noted that success in either option depends heavily on changing the understanding of either state legislators or major donors about what an esports program can offer to the university, beyond being a student club. Who would be more willing to change their thinking about esports: state legislators or alumni donors?

Vignette 6: Why not have a "football minor"? The development of an esports academic program

Discussion among the search committee members in 2022 included talk of creating academic programs, such as courses, minors, and a major that focused on esports. Paul understood there to be two goals: first, to prepare students from any academic major for work in the esports industry, and second, to prepare students for work in any modern industry, with esports as an exemplar of the skills needed for future work in digital industries. The committee also seemed to Paul to believe that students would be inherently interested in both the sports and the video gaming aspects of the topic and that this might keep them more interested in their studies. Finally, students' ability to participate in gaming play and to "try on" the support roles, such as broadcasting, streaming, and event planning and provisioning, would be helpful. Paul noted that he himself – now a self-styled disciple of esports – had only in 2022 begun to include esports as an industry to study in his MBA course on management of technology and innovation. How to convince other faculty of its unique potential to advance their academic programs?

In March 2023 an esports minor, created by the business school, was formally approved by the university, with courses to begin in the Fall 2023 semester.[1] The minor initially contained six business courses, and faculty in other disciplines (e.g., computer sciences, education, exercise sciences, and journalism) met with the business school administrators to propose courses from their disciplines to be added to the minor. Departments saw participation as a way to attract students to their major and, as an added bonus, to receive revenue based on their credit hour production (because the courses would be taught online). However, the college with the largest potential number of courses did not propose courses because the minor, from their perspective, did not seem to represent, or could not be recast in their "mental space," as a coherent academic area. This perspective was evidenced in comments that it "seemed to lack adequate academic focus" and "why not have a 'football' minor?" Intentionally or not, these observations highlighted a tension between under-institutionalizing, with modest amounts of structure around experiences, and the more traditional route of defining and constructing academic programs in terms of attainment of learning objectives and mastery of networks of knowledge.

Paul felt some frustration, therefore, that the new esports minor was viewed negatively by some for its "betweenness" – not sports and not a program adhering to the traditional academic infrastructure. He felt that similar issues thwarted efforts to establish multidisciplinary research programs and to develop tenure and promotion guidelines that span academic units. Disparate disciplines seemed unable to deal with disharmony or imbalance in the quality and impact of disciplinary contributions. Paul and his colleagues wanted an esports academic program to thrive. Would it even survive if it could not be seen as a legitimate area of academic pursuit? Could academics in disparate disciplines use liminality to recast their mental or cognitive understanding of esports?

Vignette 7: Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL): Permanent liminality or flash in the pan?

"If we could get NIL deals for our esports players, the other esports directors across the country would hate me." This statement from the esports director in the summer of 2023 was both exciting and confusing for Paul. In his liminal position, he had to remain open to learning. Why would the esports director be hated? Is it because the university would have some unique advantage? If so, what is NIL from the esports perspective, and why does it offer such a powerful advantage? Why do collegiate esports players not already have NIL contracts?

Paul was to learn – very slowly, in pieces, and still not fully sure what it all meant – that NIL arrangements are vehicles for providing NCAA student athletes with income by allowing the athletes to be paid for promoting products. The amount of compensation often correlates with the student's athletic potential and, for example, with the social media presence of both the student athlete and the university they play for. Also critical is the university's ability to mobilize supporters, creating a private platform to broker deals between

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[1] Initial student response was positive and the inaugural sections of the introductory course filled to capacity (40 students), requiring the opening of a second section, which also filled to capacity.

student athletes and entities interested in developing promotions for their products, attracting high-quality student athletes to their alma mater, or both. Thus, NIL agreements were seen by some to be the future in recruiting NCAA student athletes to university sports programs. But Paul did not want to take the time to become acquainted with another area that seemed to be overrun with endless, wildly divergent, and overly opinionated statements on the benefits and future of NIL and college sports or even how NIL should be defined. He wondered: "Is NIL even for real? If yes, then what could our esports director have had in mind?"

Serendipitously – which, Paul reflected, seemed to be the way a lot of things happened in his esports odyssey – that same summer, a vendor connected with the university's private NIL platform contacted Paul and the esports director. The vendor proposed to host an esports competition with a rival university at the esports facility. The university student body would be invited to a watch party to be streamed live, and the high definition footage would be offered to ESPN's College GameDay (a very popular weekly college football show). In short, the vendor would provide the national exposure that the esports team has lacked to date.

Interestingly, while esports would be the main event, almost all of the broadcasting time other than the esports games were to be taken up by appearances with the university's NCAA student athletes – mostly football players and most of whom were under some form of NIL agreement. Paul wondered if this was the opportunity to live out what might have been the esports director's vision – that is, esports could be showcased by piggybacking on the hype and popularity of NCAA college football across most American university campuses. If NIL was for real, Paul wondered, could a connection be made between NIL and NCAA student athlete recruitment and recruitment of esports players? Could the change in the NCAA affect the esports students?

Discussion and Implications

Our research question asked how higher education institutions are introducing environments that prepare students for the future of work. This study is not about how the university in question has created a successful environment for liminality in the name of esports nor how the students are being well prepared for self-initiated and self-guided occupational roles and professions in digital or digitizing industries. Rather, it is about struggles and challenges in introducing and institutionalizing liminal environments in a highly bureaucratic institution. In the form of advancing questions, the study makes three contributions to the literature: higher education and preparation of digital professionals, liminality, and esports as a liminal category.

Higher Education and Digital Transitions

What digital transitions in higher education are needed to align with market expectations for digital professionals? Who will lead the transitions? Higher education has been the target of criticism for the lack of disruption of student experiences (Henderson et al., 2017). Some suggest that the transitions are infrastructural (Bygstad et al., 2022), whereas others call for transformational identity and business model changes (Henderson et al., 2017). Transformational changes include new beliefs such as the value of academics versus other categories. One clear message from Covid-19 is that the experience of students goes well beyond academics (Pinheiro et al., 2023). Thus, academic programs will remain part of the central core but not the only reason-for-being for universities in the future.

Paul might have felt "infrastructural change" (Bygstad et al., 2022) early on (e.g., donor naming a physical esports facility) but went well beyond this. The esports program has influence well beyond academics and can affect students' experience more broadly. In fact, a big attraction of the minor for the faculty in several colleges was a changed business model, in which more money would flow to the departments directly by engaging in the esports minor. While esports was not the cause of this changed business model, for some it was the first instance where their department had the opportunity to participate in this model.

Who will lead these digital transitions in higher education? As a management and information systems researcher and educator with a seasoned administrative career, Paul may have seemed an ideal candidate to lead the creation and institutionalization of a new digital institution to his provost. Paul knew the university well and had a recognized standing with its key actors. He taught a course at the master's level that covered emerging technologies in business. Yet, only in 2022 did he begin to include material on the

esports industry. In fact, he clearly struggled to understand what esports could offer to the academic mission. After the donor's financial pledge, he had to recognize the reality of the opportunity and its irreversibility. But all along, he reacted rather than initiating. Had he comprehended the obstacles and delays, he would have doubted even further his own and others' actions. Similarly, while not a stranger to state politics, he would not have imagined being involved in an institution whose survival would be affected by a government ban on Chinese companies' digital assets.

Higher education comprises decentralized structures that thrive on self-management and control and generally are resistant to top-down transformation processes. Compared to the institutional "entrepreneurial heroes" depicted by Henfridsson and Yoo (2014) in the literature of institutional entrepreneurship, Paul felt he was helplessly reactive. Any visions and plans seemed highly emergent and driven by other actors, both external and internal. Will transitions leveraging liminality need rethinking in decentralized bureaucratic organizations? What about the leaders? Do transitions need deeper dismantling of the foundational structures of higher education than what is portrayed in the focal university's experience?

Liminality and the Future of Work

Inductively and analytically, what constitutes liminality as a process, position, and or space and how are they related? The vignettes convey confusion, ambiguity, heterogeneous meanings, and feelings of being apart or a semi-outsider. These depictions convey partial or incomplete or "in progress" liminality at best. At best we see glimpses of "provisional trials of possible future selves" (Ibarra and Odobaru, 2016: 56). We see no vivid depictions of fantasy or imagined worlds and reality, juxtaposing dreams and giving birth to new esports occupations. The vignettes convey modest, localized disruption. The esports players were categorized as athletes and could not register for class. With the new state ban, the newly arrived esports recruits saw their scholarships under threat. But much of these disruptions are hidden from those not present in the moment. Neither do we see rituals celebrating an "after" state, or consummation of passage, as suggested by Turner (1967). Much continues at "betwixt and between." Is this incompleteness or partiality in the vignettes an indication of permanent liminality?

How is incompleteness sustained in order to sustain liminality? The answer seems to be through individual transitions. The introduction of new structures as esports director and new physical (esports lounge) and mental spaces (esports minor) have rendered the esports program solutions "permanent" in the sense that financial and capital assets have been allocated. Undoing them would take additional financial and capital assets and would face inertia. The structures also convey to the broader audience that the esports program has been rolled out, giving a sense of irreversibility. To maintain liminality, our vignettes cautiously suggest that the actors involved would need to *continue* experiencing transitions. So far, the unstable external broader state and internal university institutional environment has required constant individual transitions by the institutional actors, as well as students. What are the psychological consequences of extended permanent liminality for individual actors? Will incomplete liminality scale?

How are individual transitions sustained if collective liminality becomes institutionalized in rituals? With regards to the future of work, Ibarra and Obodaru (2016) discuss when liminality remains open-ended: Without the guidance of elders and established support communities, without cultural scripts and predetermined outcomes, liminality remains under-institutionalized. Such under-institutionalized experiences are more subjectively challenging but offer more individual agency and latitude to craft roles and professions. While the esports program remains open-ended and with constant shifts and transitions at the individual level, a number of rituals are already evident at the collective level. These rituals come in the form of recognition – academic scholarships for the esports player recruits. The timing of these scholarships matches the academic cycle of academic scholarship. This collective level institutionalization may help to manage uncertainty and ambiguity in the broader institutional context. Also, in the first meeting of the "willing coalition," there was much reference to existing institutional arrangements. The esports bowls were organized in the ceremonial space that signaled esports with a national mission that drew an external audience, such as the young son and the alumnus who became a major donor to the program. The esports director job description, along with the creation of the organizational chart, can be viewed as rituals providing authoritative guidance and rendering a stable legitimate narrative of how the program operates in the broader institution. Similarly, the committees and steering committees were

common coalition-building processes that would be expected in a decentralized higher education institution. Will these rituals reduce ongoing ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings in the individual level transitions?

Esports as a Liminal Category

How does the role of digital technology in liminal environments change when the technology phenomenon (esports) is associated with a liminal category? The liminal category of digital technology can provide "permissionless entry" (Garud et al., 2020: p. 449) that can be the key that unlocks the decentralized bureaucratic organization. The multiplicity of meanings and general lack of understanding of esports renders it fertile ground for liminality. A deep understanding of esports is not required to move forward. On a daily basis, Paul and the esports director "bounce ideas off each other," which keeps both of them transitioning. Paul has learned a new logic; that is, understanding is not needed for sponsoring ideas. A frequent "yes, go ahead" approach keeps experimentation going; yet not without reflection. Self-reflection is not just a choice but is being forced by this study (and the second author) and has helped him articulate how he sees ideas and how others see ideas, thereby engaging him in dialogic construction.

To university administrators and faculty, the current study provides food for thought in terms of preparation of students for future of work. Admittedly, the study is highly contained not only because it is limited to one university but also because the journey is still unfolding. Yet, esports is just one possible liminal category to begin to introduce digital transitions to prepare students for the future of work. What the administrators should take away is celebration of liminality and openings of occupational roles and professions that are not limited to datafication, and overly credentialized, closed, and controlled career trajectories with social legitimacy (Reed and Thomas, 2021). The liminality discussion can maintain ongoing dialog about how universities go beyond production of digital professionals as "well-trained robots" (Goulart et al., 2022) and help students to reconfigure themselves "betwixt and between two or differential existential positions" (Ybema et al., 2011: p. 2) as markets and technologies change. In "On Being a Liminal Professional," Reed and Thomas (2021) refer to the ideally liminal professional as someone who demonstrates "heterogeneous multiplicity" (a term from Weiskopf and Loacker, 2006: 407) and capable of being "like a snake, s/he is adaptable, willing and able to modify its appearance, stripping off and building a new skin according to changing conditions" (Weiskopf and Loacker, 2006: 407).

Conclusions

The study contributes to the literature of future of work by offering insight into higher education challenges to institutionalize liminality and prepare future digital professionals. A further contribution of this research is to suggest that contemporary organizations also need to wrestle with these liminality considerations as they evolve their workspace for these future digital professionals. The paper's scope has been limited to the experiences of the central administrator; future work needs to analyze multiple sources so as to triangulate and expand the work done here.

The paper's theoretical contribution is threefold. To the literature of digital transitions in higher education, the findings suggest that infrastructure changes are not sufficient. Digital transitions need identity reconfiguration and new business models. Second, the paper contributes to the liminality literature by describing what is involved in introducing liminality in a large bureaucratic environment. The study is unique by examining liminal transitions, positions, and spaces and spanning across individual and collective levels. Third, the paper integrates liminality with digital technologies. Esports, a wholly digital entity, is also a liminal entity, moving betwixt and between many different categories. We believe that this heterogeneity enables esports to become an umbrella category, and exemplar, for learning spaces that transcend academics, student activities, and sports.

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