eSports in Tourism Education:
A Study of Student Attitudes and Career Prospects in the MICE Industry

Eric Hawkinson

Professor, Kyoto University of Foreign Studies, erichawkinson@gmail.com

Abstract

The eSports industry is increasingly influential in various fields, including tourism. This study explores the integration of eSports into university tourism programs. Survey data from students reveal their gaming habits and views on eSports. The results show, while not many tourism students are active gamers, a majority believe that knowledge and experience in eSports would be beneficial for a career in tourism and hospitality. This perspective aligns with the growing significance of eSports within the MICE industry. The research evaluates the feasibility and advantages of including eSports in tourism education. It also outlines initial efforts to implement eSports as part of the curriculum and as an extracurricular activity. The findings suggest that integrating eSports could keep tourism education in step with industry trends, preparing students for emerging areas in tourism.

1 Introduction

Over the past 20 years, eSports, or electronic sports, have seen an unheard-of increase in popularity. The world of competitive video gaming has evolved from being a niche pastime for a select few to a worldwide phenomenon with millions of viewers and increasing budgets (Mangeloja 2019; Hamari et al. 2017). Many eSports competitions currently compete with traditional sports in terms of audience and prize money thanks to the development of streaming platforms, improvements in game technology, and the support of major corporations (Pu, Kim, and Daprano 2021). The International Dota 2 Championship and other competitions like the League of Legends World Championship regularly draw bigger crowds than many other traditional athletic events. The popularity and reach of eSports continue to grow as technology advances and the generation of digital natives matures. Highlighting the enormity of the industry, the 2018 League of Legends World Championship had a staggering prize pool of USD 6.45 million. Such figures, both in terms of player base and monetary rewards, signify the meteoric rise of eSports. With the advent of streaming platforms, advancements in gaming technology, and the backing of major corporations, eSports tournaments now rival traditional sports in viewership and prize money (Novak et al. 2020).

1.1 Research Purpose

The primary purpose of this study is to explore the intersection of eSports and tourism, particularly focusing on the potential of integrating eSports into the curriculum of Tourism Departments in higher education. Given the growth trajectory of eSports and its increasing significance in the tourism sector, it is imperative for future tourism professionals to understand and navigate this landscape. The objectives include:

- Assessing the current perception and understanding of eSports among university students in Japan.
- Identifying the potential interest in eSports-related events and activities.
- Evaluating the feasibility and benefits of incorporating eSports into tourism education.

1.2 eSports in Contemporary Tourism

With the rise of eSports tourism, sports tourism, which was once only connected with live sporting events, has changed, morphing into 'hybrid' events where online and live participants mix. This new aspect centers on competitive events in electronic sports that take place in specific locations as well as online. As in more traditional sports tourism, eSports tourism incorporates regular tourist activities including dining, hotel, and entertainment in addition to the virtual aspect of the events, which are both

online and in-person (Çetin and Coşkuner 2021). This hybrid model has challenges and opportunities in tourism contexts, including the ability to market destinations to new markets, and allowing participants to participate remotely, at little cost. For these reasons, past research as pointed to advantages of developing tourism destinations like Central and South America, as the events are accessible to many online participants and only need to host a relatively small number of in-person visitors and thus the ratio of facilitation needs to number of participants could potentially be very high (Leon et al. 2022). This could allow for high exposure and low-cost marketing to take place at the same time as lower-cost small to mid-size event hosting. This means less developed MICE organizations that at least have some technical expertise could host events with large numbers of participants but only need to host a small percentage of them at the destination.

1.3 eSports in Tourism Education

At the onset of this study, it was envisioned that eSports would bring a new level of motivation to tourism studies by incorporating the interests and hobbies of the student population. This concept was put to the test in the student survey distributed as a part of this study. There are other, more tangible reasons for considering the inclusion of eSports in tourism studies programs. As eSports continue to shape the economic, cultural, and social landscapes of cities globally, future tourism professionals must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to harness its potential. Some possible integrations to tourism studies curriculum could include courses like eSports Event Management, this could cover the logistics of organizing large-scale eSports events, from selecting venues and coordinating with game developers to ensuring the necessary digital infrastructure is in place. Other options could also include eSports marketing, eSports management, and Digital/eTourism integrated studies. Due to the rise of eSports globally, there is also the potential of employment of students who have both tourism industry experience and skills/knowledge of eSports.

There are challenges also to the integration of eSports in higher education programs as well. There is often the combining of the concepts of eSports and video games and playing games. Video games might be viewed by faculty, parents, and even students as a non-academic pursuit. While eSports revolves around playing video games it might be important to emphasize that eSports now includes all the industry aspects of more traditional sporting events and leagues and has become much more than just the games (Leon et al. 2022). Another popular criticism of eSports is the perception of the low level of 'physicality' of gaming, thinking eSport athletes are more like chess players than tennis or hockey players. While the comparison can show a stark contrast, the reality is that eSports is a highly demanding and highly competitive endeavor that requires many of the same attributes of more traditional athletes. Finally, the legal, licensing, and publishing of the games that the eSports revolve around is many times a messy, binding, or limiting cloud that could hinder any university from implementing the games in collegiate play or even as a part of coursework (Pizzo et al. 2022). In eSports, the publishers own the rights to the game and how it is used in eSports, and thus can lead to challenges with agreements with publishers to play the games, having control over the games for educational use, and using the games in educational content like textbooks and student events.

As an educational technologist, I am most excited about eSports as it can blend in-person students/studies with distance education, or eLearning very well. This could help facilitate interaction between students of distance programs online and students in the classroom.

Esports' explosive expansion has prompted academics all over the world to consider whether it has any place in higher education. Esports teams or clubs are already present in more than 2,000 American universities, a sign of the growing interest in the sector's employment prospects. Given the novelty of the business, there is a vacuum in academia's knowledge of these opportunities. Business executives have emphasized the need for in-depth research into the eSports industry. Even while the number of esports-related educational programs is growing, few of them are industry-specific, with most of them concentrating on the business side. Higher education must acknowledge esports as a hub for various professional positions tied to numerous academic subjects, not merely as a niche of professional gaming, which makes up a tiny portion of the ecosystem. The integration of eSports into education mirrors the rise of game-based learning but is more intricate, spanning various disciplines from game development to live event management, indicating a need for a holistic educational approach to eSports (Scott et al. 2022).

2 Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods approach to examine the potential for integrating eSports into higher education tourism courses by utilizing both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. An introductory lecture on eSports was given before the study began to make sure the students had a basic comprehension. Following this lecture, a survey tool was made available to the tourism students in order to record their opinions. The implementation of a prototype eSport event marked the process' conclusion and provided a concrete environment for extrapolating ideas and determining the practical ramifications of integrating eSports into academic settings.

2.1 Pilot Lecture on eSports

At the Kyoto University of Foreign Studies, all first-year students of the Global Tourism Department were presented with a lecture as part of a required series on June 1, 2023. The introduction of new courses related to eSports, set to commence from 2024, was announced. A projection was made, suggesting the potential of eSports to surpass traditional sports in viewership in the coming decades. It was emphasized that eSports had a significant economic impact and that their sector was bigger than the combined industries of music and film. Different eSports stakeholders were identified, and various revenue sources like sponsorships, publisher fees, media rights, and merchandising were explored. It was noticed that important companies like Microsoft and IBM became involved in eSports early. A range of career opportunities within the eSports sector, from players and broadcasters to analysts and salespeople, was explored. Games and projects created by students were showcased, emphasizing the contemporary ease of game creation with modern tools. The growing significance of eSports in Japanese culture and its future trajectory was highlighted. The potential utilization of university facilities for eSports-related activities was suggested. In conclusion, attendees were prompted to conceptualize an eSports event, considering various logistics and marketing strategies.

2.2 Survey Instrument

The survey was conducted after a pilot lecture given to first-year students of the Global Tourism Department at Kyoto University of Foreign Studies. It aimed to gauge students' perceptions, interests, and understanding of eSports and its relevance to tourism studies. There were a total of 121 respondents, which is over 95% of the entire first year cohort. So, the sample and collected data can be a good indicator of perceptions of incoming tourism students toward eSports.

This survey delves into the engagement and preferences of students concerning video games and eSports. Initially, respondents are asked about the frequency with which they play video games, providing insight into their gaming habits. This question gauges the range of avidity among participants, from those who play regularly to those who seldom or never play. Next, the survey explores the genres of video games that resonate most with the respondents. By allowing multiple selections, this question captures diverse gaming preferences, highlighting popular genres and potentially revealing niche favorites. Students are also asked about whether they watch eSports competitions, either online or in-person. This question identifies the overlap between gamers and eSports enthusiasts and can pinpoint potential opportunities for increasing viewership. Lastly, students are asked to provide an idea of an eSports event that could take place at the university they would be interested in creating. This was done in an effort to inform possible trial events and subsequent activities to ramp up eSports programs.

Table 1. Survey Instrument Questions

Survey Instrument Questions
How often do you play video games? (Also in Japanese)
What genres of video games do you prefer? (Select all that apply) (Also in Japanese)
Do you watch eSports competitions (online or in-person)? (Also in Japanese)
How frequently do you watch eSports competitions? (Also in Japanese)
Do you participate in eSports competitions? (Also in Japanese)
How much do you enjoy eSports? (Also in Japanese)
How viable do you believe eSports to be as a career option? (Also in Japanese)
How difficult do you perceive the challenges to be successful in the eSports industry to be? (Also in Japanese)
How interested would you be in taking part in an eSports related course or module? (Also in Japanese)

2.3 Pilot eSports Event

At the Kyoto University of Foreign Studies, an immersive eSports event was held, paying homage to the early days of competitive electronic gaming by centering

around "Spacewar!", one of the pioneering video games in the realm of design and competitive play. Originating during the space race of the early 1960s, Spacewar! was initially conceptualized not as a game but as a simulator for potential astronauts. However, it morphed into a game designed for the PDP-1, a massive computer developed by the Digital Equipment Corporation, accessible primarily to large entities like major companies and universities. In the context of the university's modern-day event, the game was showcased in the "Future Hub" on a 180-degree, five-meter diameter immersive screen, the U theater.

Figure 1. Spacewar! Pilot eSports Event

Accompanied by brief lectures on the game's history, students had the opportunity to engage with the game, experiencing its simple controls and quick gameplay sessions, which typically lasted between 30 seconds to a minute. The ease of play made it ideal for beginner tournaments. The historical significance of Spacewar! was underscored, highlighting its role as a vector for the proliferation of eSports and its eventual evolution into the robust competitive gaming industry we see today. The event not only celebrated the past but also hinted at future sessions, with the next milestone being "Space Invaders" on the Atari 2600, marking the first international gaming tournament.

In this study, it's important to note that at the time of the research, there were no specific eSports-related courses or clubs at the university. However, the students involved were part of the tourism department, where they are required to engage in coursework related to MICE, event management, and various other aspects of the tourism industry. This foundational education is critical, as it equips students with a broad spectrum of skills relevant to organizing and managing events, which can be directly applied to the burgeoning field of eSports events.

Despite the lack of formalized eSports education, the students' existing experience in tourism and event management plays a pivotal role in their potential to successfully run eSports events. The pilot events held as part of this study served as a practical application of their academic knowledge. While detailed specifics of these pilot events were not the primary focus of this study, it is evident that the students applied their learning in event management to the organization and execution of these events. This included not only the logistical aspects of event organization but also the creative and strategic elements necessary to attract participants and audiences.

This hands-on experience in managing pilot eSports events, combined with their academic background in tourism and event management, suggests a promising outlook for the future integration of eSports within the tourism sector. The ability of these students to adapt and apply their learned skills to a new and dynamic field like eSports underscores the value of a comprehensive educational foundation in tourism studies. The integration of eSports into such programs could further enhance this skill set, making students even more adept at navigating the multifaceted requirements of modern event management in the tourism industry.

3 Findings

The pilot lecture and the process of exploring educational content was at least anecdotally telling on the depth and breadth of information that is available and relevant to tourism students. The lecture took about 90 minutes and the follow up questions from students indicated that they were thinking eSports would be an opportunity to connect with faculty, staff, and fellow students by playing games together.

3.1 Survey Results

The survey results showed a mixture of attitudes and preferences connected to eSports and tourism. This theme of variety in video games and eSports presented itself in the responses of almost every question. This is leading to a growing finding that a large challenge to incorporating eSports in the university is dealing with the large variety of preferences in games, activities, and to games in general. When looking at video game habits. The largest group were casual players, reporting that they play 'rarely', but still a significant portion played every day and never.
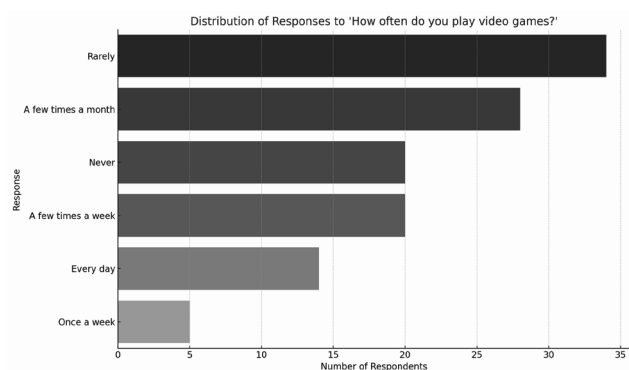
Figure 2. Frequency of Playing Video Games

Casual gamers do make up a large portion of the gaming market, as casual mobile games make up the lion's share of the industry revenue in past years (Rutz, Aravindakshan, and Rubel 2019). So these results make sense, but do not yet help paint a picture on how useful eSports studies would be to students.

A large grouping of the questions asked students to rate responses on a 7 point Likert scale, these questions asked about how students feel about eSports as a leisure hobby, a possible career, and a learning course.

Table 2. Student Responses (7-point Likert Scale)

Question	Average	Variance
How much do you enjoy eSports?	3.0	4.2
How viable do you believe eSports to be as a career option?	4.4	2.2
How difficult do you perceive the challenges to be successful in the eSports industry?	3.3	2.6
How interested would you be in taking part in an eSports related course or module?	3.5	3.2
Do you think learning about the eSports Industry will help you in other careers?	4.6	2.2
How much do you agree that the presence of eSports on campus enhances school spirit and camaraderie?	4.9	2.7

From the table, we can observe that students strongly believe in the viability of eSports as a career option and think that the presence of eSports on campus significantly enhances school spirit and camaraderie. There was a high variance in the responses to how enjoyable eSports are, but a relatively low variance and like score of career outlook. This would seem to suggest that students that didn't necessarily like gaming and eSports still view it as a viable career path. So, this cluster of responses seems to paint a picture of students having the general perspective that eSports can be a useful set of skills/knowledge in the tourism industry for a career, even though they may not personally follow or enjoy following or participating in eSports.

The most nuanced and possibly most informative responses from students were open proposals for eSports events. This asked the students to consider an eSports event they themselves would like to organize. This was designed to help identify possible next steps students might rally around to help jump start eSports programs and activities. It was hoped that themes, game titles, and event types would emerge to help solidify the high expected variance in the kinds of eSporting activities students would be most interested in.

Firstly, the essays were categorized by basic event type by using simple keyword searches connected to the event type and counted.

Table 3. Proposed Event Type Mentions

Event Type	Mentions
Competitions	68
Social Event	25
Training Camp	7
Other	1

The majority of event proposals were around having a competition in some fashion, this included tournaments, season play, faculty/student matches, and other competitive types of play. This can seem obvious as gaming, as related to traditional sport is competitive in nature, but some popular game titles simply ask players to socialize or create. This goes to basic gamer psychology and might be correlated to the motivations to play games.

Searching for game titles, at least 20 different game titles were found, some of which linked to the same game of a different version or direct competitor.

Table 4. Game Title Mentions

Game Title	Mentions
Mario Kart	11
Animal Crossing	9
Splatoon	7
League of Legends	6
FIFA (or similar)	5

Mario Kart was the game most mentioned by students as a choice they would be motivated to create an eSports event around. This could be due to many reasons, the most obvious being the popularity of the game, but also its ability to be a social game as well as a competitive game, also allowing 2 to 8 players and different types of play to be flexible in creating events. The next most popular was Animal Crossing, which is an interesting find as this is a game that isn't a competition at all but rather a social game that invites players to simply be in a virtual setting together, perform tasks together, and collect items. Students suggested networking and social events around this game.

3.2 Pilot Event

As a pilot event and to teach the history of eSports, an event was created to model the first ever eSports event around a game called 'Spacewar!'. The first video game tournament was held on October 19th, 1972. This was chosen not only for its historical aspect, but because the game was very simple and could be learned in seconds, matches were finished in a minute or less, and students could come and go freely if they were not actively in the tournament. The event was scheduled during a lunch break a week following the special lecture and was on a completely volunteer basis. Only 9 students came and 6 participated in the tournament. The design of the event was simple, using online brackets to show results, deploying large screens so spectators could watch each match, and having practice areas for students to try before and after matches off to the side. The hope was to see the motivation of students to gather and play eSports. The pilot event showed potential for hosting hybrid style eSports events in the future, looking to understand equipment needs, logistics, planning, and promotional considerations.

4 Conclusions and Discussion

This study, encompassing an introductory lecture, a comprehensive student survey, and a pilot event, has underscored the significant role of eSports in tourism education. The findings reveal that a majority of students are casual gamers, indicating a foundational familiarity with gaming culture. Additionally, a notable minority of students are actively engaged in eSports, either as spectators or participants. This engagement suggests potential for skill transfer within an educational setting focused on eSports in tourism.

The survey results reveal a dual insight: while not all students exhibit a profound interest in studying eSports, there is a strong consensus that incorporating eSports in their education would enhance their future career prospects in the tourism industry. A considerable number of students expressed interest in enrolling in eSports-related courses or programs. Intriguingly, many students envisioned eSports events that diverge from traditional competitive gaming formats, indicating that educational programs could adopt diverse and innovative approaches to integrating eSports.

The pilot event demonstrated the feasibility and adaptability of eSports-related events within an academic framework. Students with a keen interest in eSports readily assumed leadership roles, facilitating event organization and execution. Although the need for specialized training and equipment was identified, these requirements did not pose insurmountable barriers, particularly for initial forays like the pilot event. These experiences collectively affirm the potential of integrating eSports into tourism studies programs, offering students valuable skills and knowledge pertinent to their future careers while harnessing the motivational power of gaming. For universities, this integration promotes increased student engagement, both in physical and digital spaces.

Incorporating eSports into tourism studies curricula is not without challenges. Potential obstacles include securing permissions or licenses from game publishers, acquiring the necessary equipment for hosting and broadcasting events, and maintaining a balance between the entertainment value of gaming and the academic rigor essential for higher education. Nevertheless, the integration of eSports presents promising opportunities for both students and educational institutions. The potential benefits, encompassing skill development, industry relevance, and enhanced employability, are substantial and align well with the evolving dynamics of the tourism industry and MICE sector. This study thus contributes to both tourism studies and educational methodologies, advocating for a progressive approach that embraces the intersection of gaming, education, and industry needs.

5 Future Research

Further possibilities for study related to this research are plentiful. A cost-benefit analysis of the time/energy/budget of eSports programs and their contributions to the program could be employed, looking at how eSports is a cost-effective way of also hosting events, promoting the institution or program, and the cost for students who want to participate in eSports. More trials and experiments can be done on the promotion, implementation, and hosting of eSports events in a MICE context, meaning how eSports could be managed and supported by the various stakeholders in the tourism industry, from hotels to technology providers.

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