

An unexpected journey through eSports

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Image courtesy of Duncan Trickey

“However, in the end, the real importance of good computer and video games is that they allow people to re-create themselves in new worlds and achieve recreation and deep learning at one and the same time” (Gee, 2003, p.3)

My name is Duncan Trickey and I am the teacher in charge of sports at Otago Girls’ High School (OGHS). For some time I had been wondering, “Why was it that the ākonga at OGHS did not play eSports?” (eSports is a form of sports competition that uses video games). This question made me curious. Why did this matter to me? Why did I think it mattered to the school? This became my research focus as a Dr Vince Ham eFellow in 2020.

Why was it that ākonga were not playing eSports?

I conducted a survey of OGHS ākonga in 2019, before the eFellowship began, and it showed that students were not competing in eSports though some of them thought they would like to. In response to this, I arranged to run a duty time in the innovation hub called the eSports and Gaming Club. We had two new gaming computers purchased through community funding which meant ākonga were not reliant on their own devices. During the

lunch times students could play any games they wanted. We had between five and ten ākongā attend our weekly meets which showed that there was definitely an interest in playing eSports.

At first, Brawlhala and Minecraft were the most popular free games. We then found League of Legends. This game requires a team of five players to play but forming a consistent team was a challenge. Ākongā in the eSports club were from different year groups and the team members changed depending on their afternoon timetables. Though friend groups came in, they often had different games they wanted to play. In addition, though we had just started this group all too soon we had to leave the school walls for our home bubbles.

Te pou herenga – navigating education through tricky times

Through our journey this year at OGHS, a colleague used the metaphor 'te pou herenga', the hitching or mooring post for our waka. Through the turbulent times of lockdown, we relied on our leadership to hold together the diaspora that school had become in 2020. Every educator had a part to play as we led our respective students, whānau and community through tricky times.

My research project on eSports and education became something I could relish. While all other sports paused during lockdown, my athletes were in the position where they were the only sport still going. Our communication through discord meant everyone could schedule games and though the digital divide meant I lost a number of ākongā, our meets were well-attended. For a number of students it was the first time they had been in a game chat and they seemed genuinely surprised to have a teacher talking through discord.

The eSports team was very new and it was unclear to me what we actually were. I did not teach any of the students, and the games we were playing were also completely new to me. I quickly realised that lunchtime sessions were not perfect. It was difficult to get the students into the game and complete the game within 45 minutes. This is when we initially started to do evening games, after dinner. This was an exciting move and was a foreshadowing of how the group would meet in the future. Within this distance setting it gave the group added excitement about finally meeting as a team and presented me with a hidden learning.

The hidden learning

The hidden learning was why our eSports team needed to be a recognised part of our school community and what the ākongā would gain through it. As with traditional sports, the social learning within eSports is the same. Like preparing for a rugby game, you similarly need to be prepared for an eSports match; you need to understand your role within the side; what tactics to use; how to complement each other; and how to communicate clearly during high stakes (digital life and death). Furthermore, basics like remembering your power cord and log in; organising your calendar; communicating with home and an endless number of other skills are needed that relate to being part of a team who can rely on each other.

There has been a huge amount of learning around who the ākongā were who joined the group. It was completely voluntary and attracted a diverse group of students and transcended conventional boundaries of year groups; it also attracted students from outside our school community. The ākongā had to adapt to who was in the team, negotiate what roles each student would take, and what character they were able to play. We also initially

had to find common ground on what games we wanted to play and who we were to play against. Though my focus was gender equity it was quickly apparent that the ākonga at Otago Girls' High School wanted to play, and beat the boys.

We aren't going anywhere

Setting up our first competitive game against Otago Boys' High school was an exciting step for the group. The tension and excitement through the week was tangible as the match approached. The game itself was hugely one-sided and the team coming in had thousands of hours experience on the OGHS students, being mostly Year 13 students. This did not put off the squad though we continued to meet and train and arrange games. In Dunedin we were breaking new ground as schools were often initially wary about eSports. The news of our eSports team quickly flowed through to others who were interested in playing against our team, even when their schools didn't necessarily have a recognised school team.

Face-to-face games with other schools break down the often social silo associated with gaming: the image of teenagers isolated and playing games in their darkened bedrooms. Basic practices around sport like saying 'good luck' and talking to the captain before going into a game is just as important in developing the social skills within the team. The level of excitement at a win or simply just knowing the team has performed really well is akin to the emotions experienced by any team sport I have known, and as a manager and coach in other sporting codes, the 'buzz' is similar.



The next step – this project will not let me stop!

The next steps are to develop a sustainable Dunedin league and develop a support network for these students. If we ensure we value them as much as other athletes, we will reap benefits. Already I have offers to help coach our team from some of the students from the boys' school. When looking at how we continue as a group I think this is a really interesting area going forward. Will these sports teams look like traditional teams, or will they take more of a cultural model with students from other schools joining teams where they feel

comfortable and being managed that way? The possibility could be of a sporting hub model where students interested meet and form teams before looking to compete in regional or national competitions. Either way it is clear to me that the students are not only enjoying it but learning and gaining important skills. There is an exciting future ahead of us.

[Find out more about the Dr Vince Ham eFellowship and read Duncan's research report](#)

References

Gee, J. P. (2003). *What Video Games have to Teach us about Learning and Literacy*. (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan)

Ngā kupu

- Pou herenga, "(noun) hitching post, mooring post, rallying point." Retrieved from [Māori Dictionary](#)
- discord, a chat room where gamers often meet



Duncan Trickey

Duncan Trickey, Social Studies and Economics teacher at Otago Girls' High School, was a recipient of the Dr Vince Ham eFellowship in 2020. With a personal interest in strategic gaming, Duncan has introduced gaming into learning at OGHS. His research explored the under-representation of his ākonga in eSports and how eSports could support engagement and achievement of marginalised ākonga.