eSports—Transcending the gender gap

Duncan Trickey
Otago Girls High School
Vince Ham e-Fellow 2020
Over the past few years I have noticed a growing interest in eSports. There have been stories of ākonga spending time in class playing Fortnite, and some competitive gamers were earning vast amounts of money through gaming. A basic look into the world of eSports showed that there seemed to be a gender gap. I wondered firstly if the ākonga at Otago Girls High School (OGHS) were competing in eSports, and if not, what benefits they would gain from participating.

My name is Duncan Trickey and I am a Social Studies teacher at OGHS. In 2020, I won a Vince Ham eFellowship to investigate the gender politics of eSports. My action research project investigated the feasibility of an eSports club in an all girls school as a way to bridge the gender gap. I wanted to support our existing eSports player by socialising the idea of gaming. The following questions guided my research design:

1. What are the perceptions of eSports in our school?
   - Student perceptions
   - Teacher perceptions
2. What are students’ ideas on eSports and gender?
3. What might gaming look like in our school?

This report describes my journey and the key findings.
eSports at Otago Girls High School: The initial picture

I ran a survey of OGHS ākonga in 2019 which showed that the 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 club 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 lunchtimes students could play any games they wanted. We had between five and ten ākonga attend which showed that there was definitely an interest in playing eSports.

At first, Brawhala 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. Ākonga 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.

To support ākonga, we set up coaching sessions. We realised that ākonga were very naive about both the language and the strategies of eSports. Our coaching sessions focused on familiarising them with the everyday nuances of eSports.

New opportunities through lockdown

March 2020 saw a nationwide lockdown imposed due to Covid-19. Although other sports groups had to adapt, our pivot was rather easy! By this time we had between eight and ten ākonga regularly participating in games. Before the lockdown, we had an established Discord channel to communicate in so we continued with our coaching via that channel. Not only could we game, but we also continued to coach. During the lockdown, the interest was so high that we also set up meets for after school.

Setting up games took quite a bit of effort. We had to figure out who was on each side and ensure the matches didn’t roll into other classes. Some ākonga sounded genuinely surprised when they realised there was an actual person they knew in the chat channel. Talking this way became a skill the team developed. A favourite activity was to play eSports with teachers versus students.
I refined my initial student questionnaire and wrote a questionnaire on eSports and gaming for teachers. The questions started by asking if they played computer games competitively. Of the 44 responses from ākonga, 29 said ‘No’. For those who answered ‘Yes’, 59% had never played any of what were considered the biggest eSports games of the moment - for example, Fortnite, League of Legends, StarCraft and Counter Strike.

When asked about a gender bias in the games most respondents felt there was, and that games were designed for males. One respondent wrote:

“There are always more male characters than females but I think it is getting better. I often don’t blame games much for being gender biased as generally more males are interested in gaming in the first place and I really don’t mind”.

The teachers were also surveyed to find out about their attitudes towards eSports. Like the ākonga cohort, not many staff had played any of the popular eSports. When asked about the difference between eSports and traditional sport there were a range of different perceptions.

“I personally do not think they are in any way similar to real time sport. They differ in the sense the physical contact you have with others in real sport the team cohesion that can exist when attending meetings, practices, games, warm-ups etc - the social interactions are so important and they build such important social skills that are transferable to society.

I do not see eSports give this to people. Kanohi ki te kanohi (face to face) is so important [as] is reading body language and dealing with people in a range of situations. I think society needs these interactions more not less. I am sure there can be thoughts to counter my thoughts and would be happy to listen to these ideas.”

This comment reveals attitudes towards eSports and perceptions about how an eSports team works together. While it is definitely not physical, all the other points made in this comment can be disputed. Our ākonga meet, train, practice and strategise together as a cohesive, collaborative team.
For some teachers, their comments reflected their current opinion about the internet, online games and their efficacy. Are they as good as, or equal to, traditional sports?

“The difference between esports and traditional sports seems to be a reflection of society’s view on the difference between electronic mediums and physical mediums. e.g. physical voting accepted, but electronic, not. I think this will gradually change.”

After analysing the survey data, overall, it was clear that staff did not value eSports in the same way as they did other team and individual sports across the school.

**Writing the new script: ‘Somewhat like organised chaos - fun!’**

With this information in mind, I set up a steering group of ākonga who had indicated interest in an eSports club. We met as a small group in class time where we discussed the findings from the surveys.

Our steering group, photo by Duncan Trickey.

An important question for this phase of the research was to understand ākonga views about the shape of an eSports club. My research design indicated that, if wanted, the eSports Club should be co-constructed with ākonga. To change attitudes to eSports at OGHS, representing ākonga interests from the start would hopefully influence the overall school culture to show the benefits of the club in a new sport which has been male-dominated. This certainly fits with the vision of OGHS to be inclusive, innovative and future focused.
Below is a selection of comments from ākonga about their eSports Club. It was clear that they saw the club as more than just a place to game and, interestingly, some of the criticisms teachers had about eSports as not being places to develop team spirit, are proved wrong. As one of the ākonga said, the club is:

“Somewhat like organised chaos - Fun”.

I love this opening quote from one of the ākonga. The idea being that setting up for club sessions may take a while, with the possibility of many different games happening in the room at the same time, is potentially chaotic but in this case, that was regarded as fun too. Fun is important to the club members because to their way of thinking, if it isn’t fun there is no club.

This comment became guidance for the whole team:

“Supportive, mixing good players, and giving everybody the chance to develop and grow.”

Feeling supported was really important. Ākonga acknowledged how much they had learned in a short time and how much they had grown and improved as players through getting the chance to practice. One ākonga talked about how in most sports, if you are seen as a bad player, you do not get the chance to play in the team whereas eSports was a supportive environment where you could improve.

‘Make it normal, let people try’

A slightly leading question I posed to the steering group asked “Do you think eSports should be recognised alongside the other sports in school?” Ākonga mostly said ‘Yes’. They acknowledged that although not everyone is interested, they thought eSports should be more widely advertised throughout the school. The students talked about how sport is generally seen as a lifestyle yet eSports are not. They felt that there is a stigma attached to eSports. They recognised that there are career opportunities in eSports, but these are not necessarily being acknowledged.
The last question I asked the steering group concerned the future growth and development of eSports in our school. This raised quite a few issues. Ākonga talked about the mindset of women wanting to be the best and feeling pressure when things are competitive. This is relevant to my investigation because these ākonga demonstrated they were interested in competing as a way to learn how to improve their gaming skills. I worked hard to make sure that the environment was inclusive and non-threatening.

One suggestion we followed up was a request for an after-school activity day. Ākonga wanted to play inter-school games, and requested we invited Otago Boys High School to play an inter-school match. They thought this would be a level playing field where they could compete and win. Surprisingly (for me) the girls wanted to combine with the boys as an eSports team.

Most of all they wanted eSports to be seen as normal and not stigmatised. Their insights were invaluable. When asked, one ākonga said “I didn’t know if I liked gaming!” and this led to a mantra that rang in my head while looking through the data: “Make it open, let people try”. We needed to ensure the door was open for all ākonga to come in and experience what eSports was and could be.

**Competitive gaming**

With this data gathered I then made my next move. It was clear that ākonga wanted to compete and the locality of Otago Boys High School made it easy to arrange a competitive game. Luckily they had an established gaming club and their students had been playing our chosen game - *League of Legends*. With the match arranged and amid much excitement, the boys came to visit.

On paper this team was far more experienced than our students, with player levels indicating that they had a good 1000 hours more experience than us at the game. From the start of the match it was clear that the competition was indeed a real mismatch and a number of the girls were noticeably flustered early on. It was interesting to hear the discussion amongst them. The OGHS Vice Captain was barking orders to the team and many of them did not understand her high-level game-speak. It took the Captain to step in and reassure the students that everything would be OK. Our ākonga made lots of mistakes and were soundly thrashed.
For the second game the participants merged to create mixed teams of students from both schools which made it competitive and challenging for both teams.

We reviewed the whole experience at the end of the session and the OGHS ākonga concluded firstly that they had really enjoyed the game and secondly that they would like to play competitively but needed more practice. Consequently, the team continued to practice at lunchtimes and attend after school scheduled games.

Following our match against Otago Boys High School, Logan Park High School played against us remotely then we played against Mangakino Intermediate which was our first win. For our end of season match we went to Kings High School for our first ever away game. This was nerve wracking for the team and for many it was their first ever team trip to another high school yet alone to an all boys school.

Once again, our ākonga were beaten quite soundly but this time they had developed a strategy, had a plan in action and proved capable of communicating really well with each other in high pressure situations. Much like any other sports team, they had grown. Their opposition had also done their homework and in a nod of respect to our girls had researched which characters they liked and how the team played.
Although the competitive games were the highlights of the week, it was amazing to see how the group had bonded through the Discord chat. Ākonga were talking not just about gaming, they were sharing artwork, fanfiction was put up for critique, they collaborated on playlists, recipes were exchanged and so much more. When junior exam times came the senior ākonga offered support to the juniors and the same was true when the senior exams started. Under the watch of three teachers as administrators, these ākonga used social media in a responsible way and it helped them share a multitude of passions.

**Growing into roles**

It was interesting to see the growth of social skills within the group. The Captain was initially quite shy but developed into her leadership role; she worked hard with others to ensure they understood their roles within the team. Teachers had noted an improvement in her work. She missed a Level 2 speech assessment to appear on an expert panel at the PAX convention to talk about the benefit of eSports within schools. Her English teacher said that while she would have felt self-conscious speaking in front of the class, something she found challenging, our eSports Captain held her own on a panel of highly academic strangers.

The Vice Captain initially struggled to remember people’s names and found relating to others difficult. By the time we were in our final match she demonstrated her highly effective communication skills during quite high pressure situations. She also developed her confidence, communicating with strangers during the matches when we mixed our teams.

Notably, other ākonga also grew in confidence. Our meets were eagerly awaited and well attended. The group supported each other in unexpected ways. For example, they planned birthday cakes and even inquired about dietary needs of the whole party. Plans started for tournaments and other ideas were raised as we started to dream of where this adventure would lead us.
A thriving club

Our eSports and Gaming Club continues to thrive. The game Among us proved to be very popular and easy to access, and dozens of new players have joined our Club.

The eSports team trained and worked together in the same room with another teacher helping with the coaching. The after-school gaming time has encouraged students from other schools to come because they felt comfortable with our team. The eSports team itself attracted a diverse range of students who were not represented in more traditional sports.

My recommendations - Give eSports a go

The findings from my project revealed these ākonga:

- Understand what sleek designs and user interface mean
- Critically evaluate digital design and suggest improvements
- Persist and strive to hone their skills as individuals and as team members
- Collaborate in highly effective ways
- Schedule their time well taking multiple engagements and pressures into account
- Manage themselves really well, and, finally
- Throw themselves into unfamiliar situations and dare to be different.

All these characteristics are needed in a creative workforce.

I would recommend any school, but especially girls schools, start an eSports and gaming club to allow the students time to experience the potential benefits of eSports. This is not about the career pathway of eSports athletes but more about helping students develop social skills and experience around gaming.

I believe this is important particularly in an all girls school as you have to create a sanctuary where they are not intimidated by toxic behaviours that can be experienced within the gaming community. When picking what to do, do not dictate which games are played but point your team towards age-appropriate multiplayer games and see how your team develops from there. Seek out local opponents or other schools to play against as this makes for a more real situation.

In Dunedin we were breaking new ground as often schools were 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 ‘social silo’ often 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 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 steps

The next steps are to develop a sustainable Dunedin eSports league and support network for these students. If we ensure we value them as much as other athletes, we will reap benefits. Already I have had offers to help coach our team from some of the students from the Boys School.

As one student athlete told me recently:

“We’re not going anywhere, Sir”

Neither am I and I really look forward to the next steps in our journey. Like any Sports team we will grow and develop new players will come into the school and new opportunities will arise. As I look forward I will hopefully build a suitable environment for the ākonga to grow in one that will try and ensure adheres to gender equity. Will this look like a traditional school sports team, will we have more mixing of schools to ensure that students feel comfortable with the team they are in? Either way with increasing interest and my ākonga enjoying the sport we have an exciting future ahead of us.