

Social Inclusion of Vulnerable Youth Through Esports Education

Thorkild Hanghøj¹, Peter Bukovica Gundersen² and Anna-Katrine Frørup²

¹Aalborg University, Copenhagen, Denmark

²University College Absalon, Denmark

thorkild@ikp.aau.dk

pgu@pha.dk

akf@pha.dk

Abstract: In Denmark, there are increasing problems with school refusal and marginalization of vulnerable youth. At the same time, joint gaming activities may have a positive influence on young people's social relationships and experience of being part of communities. In this article, we focus on how esports education with games such as *Counter-Strike* and *League of Legends* can contribute to engaging vulnerable and isolated young people (age 16–25) at Specially Planned Youth Education (STU). Specifically, we look at how esport teachers and municipal educational guidance counsellors experience the isolated young people's participation in gaming activities as a process of social inclusion that helps young people to cross boundaries between different domains - e.g. leisure, education and/or internship. Our analyses are based on interviews with teachers and guidance counsellors affiliated with three STUs, who are participating in the research project "Esports as a learning space and bridge builder for vulnerable young people at STU". We understand the young people's participation in esports education as a process of social inclusion, which involves bridging of experiences across different domains that have specific knowledge practices and social norms for what counts and does not count as legitimate participation. More precisely, we understand esports education at STU as social inclusion through an interplay of four domains: 1) the young people's gaming domain in their leisure time, 2) the STU as an educational domain, 3) the young people's adult domain, as well as a 4) guidance domain. Based on thematic analysis of the interview data, we identify three themes: 1. Esports education as an introduction to STU, 2. Esports education as a safe and structured framework, and 3. Esports education as a springboard to participation in new communities. Lastly, we discuss the potentials and challenges of social inclusion of vulnerable youth through esports education.

Keywords: esports, Vulnerable youth, Special education, Social inclusion, Autism

1. Introduction

Although many young Danes today are objectively thriving and doing well, current research shows trends that point to a decrease in young people's well-being (Katznelson et al. 2021; Ottosen et al., 2022). This can also be seen in an increasing tendency for school refusal, which can lead to lower academic performance, as well as a lower likelihood of completing later education and getting a job (Knage & Kousholt, 2023). This increase can partially be explained by a rise in the number of children, who are diagnosed with autism and/or ADHD (Nordin et al., 2024).

In connection with the political objective that 90 percent of a youth cohort should complete a youth education before they turn 25 (Ministry of Children and Education, 2017), there has been extra focus on the so-called 'NEET youth', i.e. vulnerable young people who are neither in education nor employment (Not in Employment, Education or Training), and who typically have a background characterized by significant primary school absence and psychological distress in adolescence (Bolvig et al., 2019; Ottosen et al., 2022). Educational activity and work experience throughout the teenage years and up to the young people's 20s are considered crucial here to ensure that these young people do not end up in permanent vulnerability.

Among vulnerable young people, there are also significant challenges with loneliness, which is particularly prevalent among vulnerable young people with special needs, especially including young people with autism, ADHD or mental challenges (Ministry of Education, 2017). Socially vulnerable young people with special needs are thus lonelier than young people in the general population. While many vulnerable young people experience marginalization, several studies show that young people can gain positive social benefits from participating in gaming activities by, for example, strengthening relationships or making new friends (Eklund & Roman, 2017).

The positive experiences are often linked to online multiplayer games such as *Minecraft*, *World of Warcraft* or *Counter-Strike*, where players have to cooperate and communicate to achieve jointly defined goals. In continuation of this, studies have shown how the use of multiplayer games in schools can contribute to strengthening academic and social inclusion in the classroom (Hanghøj et al., 2018a). Similarly, multiplayer gaming can be used as a conversational framework to create better relationships between citizens and therapists in forensic psychiatry, when the therapist, for example, plays together with the citizen as part of a course (Terkildsen et al., 2022). Other studies show that vulnerable young people from the NEET group can benefit from

their gaming experiences in relation to seeking education or employment (Væksthusets Forskningscenter, 2022). As the examples suggest, there is increasing research interest in investigating how facilitated gaming can be used as a pedagogical tool to socially include vulnerable groups, also in other services outside the STU framework.

In this article, we will focus specifically on facilitated gaming activities at three STUs (Specially Planned Youth Education), all of which offer esports courses where vulnerable young people game together in teams. More specifically, we investigate the following research question: *How do STU teachers and municipal guidance counsellors, who are in regular contact with the young people at STU, experience the vulnerable young people's participation and benefit from the esports courses?* Our analysis is driven by an educational domain perspective (Hanghøj et al., 2018), where we are particularly interested in the ways in which facilitated gaming can contribute to creating new possibilities for participation across specific domains in the young people's lives.

2. Specially Planned Youth Education

STU is a specially designed youth education program for young people (16-25 years old) with special needs who, for various reasons, are unable to complete another youth education program despite special educational support. The purpose of the STU program is for young people with special needs to "gain personal, social and academic skills" to support "independent and active participation in adult life" and provide them "with the prerequisites for further education and employment" (STU Act, 2023).

The target group includes a broad group of young people with various physical and mental challenges. Approximately half of young people at STU are referred due to general learning difficulties and approximately one third due to developmental disorders such as autism or ADHD (Ministry of Education, 2017). Moreover, STU students often suffer from longer periods of school refusal. There are approximately 250 different STU offers in Denmark (stuguiden.dk), which are offered by both private and public institutions. According to the Guidance Act (2017), municipal youth counsellors are tasked with guiding young people about educational and employment opportunities and referring them to relevant programmes after completing primary school. Some counsellors may have followed the individual young person throughout their entire education and have a good knowledge of his/her life and school situation as a basis for an STU course. The counsellors have conversations with the young person before, during and at the end of the STU programme, in which both teachers and parents often also participate.

3. Esports Education at STU

Esports is a common term for competitive approaches to playing digital games, often multiplayer games such as *League of Legends* or *Counter-Strike*, where two teams play against each other. Esports as a course or elective is offered at almost 20 STUs nationwide (stuguiden.dk). The young people who take the esports courses have often chosen the courses themselves in consultation with their youth guidance counsellors based on their gaming interests. The primary purpose of the esports education at the three STUs participating in our project is to qualify the young people's professional gaming skills, but first of all to promote the young people's opportunities to be part of a physical community as well as to promote personal and social skills that can also be important outside the esports course.

Esports education is organized in different ways at the three STUs participating in this project. At STU 1, esports take up two half-days of teaching, while at STU 2 there are three full days of esports education and one day of other gaming activities. At STU 3, esports is part of a programme that also includes media subjects and fitness, and the number of hours varies during the year but corresponds to approximately one day per week. All three STUs have specific "gamer rooms", where the tables are set up so that the young people can sit in rows or in groups of 5, which is the typical number of players on an esports team. The team size varies from approximately 5-20 young people with one to two associated teachers. Esports education often follows a fixed pattern with a short teacher introduction, where, for example, focus is placed on specific roles or tactics in a game, followed by exercises in the game and then a match, which can be between two teams in the class or with other online players.

4. Theoretical Perspectives

We understand the young people's participation in esports education as interplay and crossings between different domains that involve specific knowledge practices, framings and social norms for understanding what counts and does not count as valid knowledge (Hanghøj et al., 2018). More precisely, we understand esports education at STU as an interplay between four domains: 1) the young people's *gaming domain* in their leisure time, 2) the STU as an *educational domain* that also includes other pedagogical activities than esports education,

e.g. cooking together or trying out other programmes such as music or media production, and, 3) the young people's *adult domain* in the form of e.g. internships, help with everyday life, further education after the STU, etc., as well as a 4) *guidance domain*, where municipal youth guidance counsellors have meetings with the young people, often together with STU teachers and possibly parents. The model below shows how esports education at STU relates to the four domains:



Figure 1: Domains related to esports education at STU

In relation to our study, it is important to understand the significance of different social norms and values associated with playing computer games - both at home with young people in their leisure domain and as part of esports education at STU (the educational domain). According to Goffman (1961), gaming activities are always associated with situated norms and frameworks for playing. The social norms of gaming have both been empirically explored within the context of leisure gaming (Deterding, 2019) and educational gaming (Hanghøj, 2011).

In this paper, we understand esports education at STU as a form of *social inclusion*, which involves the students' level of participation in their communities, access to schools, and opportunities to build and sustain friendships (Koller & Stoddart, 2021). In this way, social inclusion of the STU students can thus be understood as a way of increasing their participation in a formal education programme through development of social and communicative skills as well as friendships and other positive social relations. Building on the involved domains (gaming, education, adult life, guidance) in esports education, we might further hypothesize that the process of social inclusion involves translation and legitimisation of the students' gaming experiences across domains. According to domain theory (Hanghøj et al., 2018), crossing boundaries between domains are often associated with negotiations and discontinuities that can accommodate many different and even opposing values and perspectives. We thus understand the young people's participation in esports education at STU as a process of social inclusion that requires negotiations, but which at the same time provides the opportunity to translate, explore and reflect on gaming experiences in relation to several different domains and thus create meaning for the individual young person.

5. Methodological Approach

The empirical material in this article is based on 10 semi-structured interviews with five youth guidance counsellors ("KUI-counsellors") from three different municipalities and five esports instructors from STU 1, 2 and 3, respectively. Each of the three STUs has appointed two guidance counsellors for the purpose of conducting interviews, of which five agreed to be interviewed. Two of the five guidance counsellors had a teaching

background, while the other three were trained educators. In addition, some have furthered their education through master's degrees and/or guidance counsellors training. The five KUI-counsellors had several years of experience working with vulnerable young people. The esports instructors at the three STUs also had different educational backgrounds: schoolteacher, educator, multimedia designer, master's degree in pedagogy, diploma in special pedagogy. The guidance counsellors all had gaming experience, but in relatively different ways and levels. Some of the teachers identified strongly with playing esports in their free time, for example, one of them was the head coach of the local esports association.

The two sets of interviews with guidance counsellors and STU teachers, respectively, were planned and conducted independently of each other. Interviews with the teachers focused on their educational background, gaming experiences, the purpose of the esports education, and the organization and benefits of the education. Similarly, we asked the guidance counsellors about their educational background, as well as their knowledge of the esports courses and the benefits they experienced. All interviews were then transcribed as a basis for an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), where we condensed and coded data based on the various informants' understanding of the STU target group and their experiences of the opportunities and limitations of the esports courses. Examples of coding include the informants' experiences of the STU students' prerequisites in the form of specific diagnoses and psychological challenges, experiences from previous school courses, gaming preferences, or their social and professional benefits from the education. In addition, we have drawn on theoretical perspectives to identify patterns in data that address young people's social norms and experiences across the different domains (Hanghøj et al., 2018b), which we describe in more detail below. All informants have been anonymized and given pseudonyms.

6. Analysis

We will now present three analytical themes that have emerged from our work with both data-based and theory-driven coding of interview data: 1. Esports education as an entry point to STU, 2. Esports education as a safe and structured framework, and 3. Esports education as a springboard to new communities.

6.1 Esports Education as an Entrance to STU

This theme is about how the guidance counsellors in particular view esports education as an entrance for the young people to the STU, where the young people cross boundaries from predominantly being at home (leisure domain) to participating in the teaching at the STU (educational domain). This transition to the STU is referred to by both teachers and the KUI-counsellors as an "entrance", i.e. a way of getting the young people out of isolation and into an education. The counsellors describe in detail the young people's prerequisites and challenges during their entrance, as in several cases they have followed the young people through the school-leaving period and therefore have good knowledge of their life and school situation. Several of the KUI-counsellors characterize the young people as predominantly boys with autism diagnoses who often suffer from school refusal and loneliness:

"They are often young people with some autism and maybe also some learning difficulties. They are often young boys who have been sitting at home and have had a lot of school refusal, right? ...And have not been part of a school environment for a very long time and have turned their circadian rhythm upside down" (Klara).

The STU teachers also describe how the young people often live extremely isolated lives in their room at home, with virtually no contact with the outside world:

"We have a young man of 16. He has had severe school refusal for two years and a pedagogical home support, who has been unable to do anything other than throw small notes under his door. 'Do you want to come out today?' And he didn't want to. When he came here, he smelled stuffy. He was unkempt, and he didn't say anything. He had to be driven to and from school. He could be here three days a week. He could be here from 9:30 to 12:30, and then he was driven home again." (Martin)

The STU teachers describe how the young people are so isolated and socially challenged that they simply have to learn to enter into ordinary social contexts and communicate with others. In addition, both KUI-counsellors and teachers mention that young people often have difficulty regulating their circadian rhythm in relation to their gaming activities, which has an impact not only on the young people's social skills, but also on their physical well-being and appearance:

"With hygiene and getting up in the morning and things like that, those are some tendencies that may be associated with these gamers. They don't sleep at night, then they play, and maybe they don't care

so much about health, diet and exercise and outdoor life and all that. It's a tough knot to solve, I think"
(Karen, KUI-counsellor).

Another common point for KUI-counsellors and teachers is that the young people at STU have a particular need for structure and predictability and for learning to deal with very ordinary everyday things:

"Many of them need structure, fixed frameworks. They need to know what is going to happen, all the time. There are also some who need peace and quiet around them. It is also often the case that they do not really need a big social life." (Karen).

In contrast to the STU teachers, who all have many years of gaming experience, the KUI-counsellors do not know much about gaming and esports. The counsellors do not necessarily see their lack of knowledge as a problem, but rather as something that can be disarming and open to conversation with the young people. However, several counsellors express that they have been concerned that esports as an STU line would help to keep the young people in some inappropriate behavioural patterns, if they, for example, play too much in advance. However, the KUI-counsellors no longer have that concern, as they can see that the esports education strengthens the community and their motivation to attend:

"I have so many young people who can't get started with anything because they can't change their circadian rhythm, and (...) I find that worrying! Not that I think gaming is only bad, because I think there are really many young people who get a huge social community out of [gaming] and get an insane amount of benefit" (Klara).

"Right at the beginning I thought, oh no, [gaming] already takes up so much, and now it should also apply at school, but the young people are motivated, so I've changed my attitude towards it" (Karen).

The motivation aspect of esports is also central to the teachers, who say that there are generally major problems with absenteeism at STU. Many of the students have had a long history of school refusal and have low motivation to attend classes. One of the teachers says of a young person that: "... as soon as something looked like a classroom, he was on his way out the door." (Peter). Conversely, the teachers experience that the young people are generally motivated to participate in esports classes: "We had a young person who hadn't been to school for a long time who suddenly comes to school every day because it's about esports – and can just as easily be in the other subjects" (Niklas). For the same reason, it is an advantage that esports classes are held in the morning, so that the young people are more willing to come to STU.

Thus, both teachers and KUI-counsellors experience a transformation of the young people occurs, when they are admitted to STU. This can be described as a translation process, where counsellors and teachers differentiate their view of the young people in relation to the fact that they can both draw on their identities as "gamers" at home (leisure domain), but also seize the opportunities, skills and new identities that are made available to them as esports athletes under the auspices of STU (educational domain). Both supervisors and teachers thus experience that the young people move from being lonely and isolated gamers at home to being active participants in the physical learning community of STU.

6.2 Esports Education as a Safe and Structured Framework

This analysis theme focuses on what happens in esports education. The theme is based primarily on interviews with esports educators, as they have direct experience with teaching. One of the goals that is clearly reflected in the STU educators' descriptions of their teaching is a desire to create a safe framework with fixed structures for the young people.

"My experience of what esports can do for these young people (...) is that it is a space that many of them know about, and which is safe to land in, for many of the profiles we have. In this way, there is a recognizability in meeting up at a computer and being together around it" (Martin).

The teachers agree that they have chosen certain computer games - primarily Counter-Strike and League of Legends - as a consistent starting point for the teaching.

"[The framework] is 100 percent set by me, no matter what their wishes are. Of course I am responsive, but as a starting point I have set a framework because it works. If there are 10 young people sitting around and each playing their own computer game - Roblox, Terraria, Minecraft. First of all, I have no knowledge of that, and secondly, I don't think it has anything to do with esports. We need to have something in common, preferably where some have some kind of preconception, and where some are

completely new. Because then we can create a learning space together. So, the framework becomes LoL, and that's what we have" (Niklas).

The teachers emphasize the importance of esports lessons following the same structure and rhythm. In addition, both teachers and KUI-counsellors emphasize how the fixed framework in esports education allows young people to try to communicate precisely and focused when they have to solve tasks in a game together with their teammates. A KUI-counsellors reflects in the following way:

"It's like, you're forced together, you're sitting and playing with some other people from school in a very, very defined context, and they really benefit from that with that context defined" (Lise).

Communication is also about creating a reflective awareness in young people about how they speak to each other in the heat of battle, and how important it is to have a good tone of voice:

"So, we talk a lot about what is good and bad communication. Good communication can be precise, relevant messages. Relevant communication is not what I had for dinner last night, or 'I think your mother is ugly and she smells'. That's really bad" (Martin).

Many of the young people are used to the fact that there can be a harsh tone when gaming, also known as being "toxic". Similarly, it is also relatively common for online players to have difficulty controlling their temper, a behavior known as "tilting". Regulating tone of voice and outbursts of anger takes up a lot of the teaching. Some of the teachers further describe how the young people can learn to give and receive feedback within the framework of the game:

"They are incredibly good at influencing each other. They can sometimes tell each other a little rawer and more unsweetened what they should have done differently. I actually think that many times Søren and I give them space to do that – to correct, it may sound a little harsh, or to set demands on each other. I really think they benefit from that: 'We meet here, we solve it together. When it's difficult, we can tell each other'. But they are also incredibly good at giving each other positive feedback" (Martin).

As the examples show, esports education is largely about being able to create a safe and structured space for togetherness, where there is room for the players to be challenged and practice communicating with others. Communication on esports teams is thus very different from the ways in which young people are used to playing online from home "in the wild", where there is no facilitator present, and where they are not obligated to each other in the same ways as in the physical space of the STU. In the STU context, they have to communicate together in order to cope and gain joint momentum in the games through team performance.

6.3 Esport as a Springboard to new Communities

If we look at the benefits of esports education at the STUs, the experiences of the KUI-counsellors are generally positive - especially in relation to the young people's social skills and the opportunity to strengthen their relationships. The KUI-counsellors primarily see the STU as a legitimate springboard to be able to socialize the vulnerable and isolated young people to get out of the room, into the physical community of the STU, where there are also opportunities to participate in other activities:

"I often use the esports programmes (...) as a springboard. It is something safe, something they know, and they can say that they are interested (...) It can get the young people out of bed and into a school and that is really positive... The young people come out and suddenly find out that it is actually very cool to be part of a community. (Klara).

"I use [esport] as an entry point (...) [When the young people] have been there for maybe half a year or a whole year, they become curious about what they are doing [elsewhere at STU]: 'It's new, but now I dare to step out of my comfort zone and I would actually like to be up in the kitchen, because they are also doing something exciting there'" (Pernille).

In this way, physical attendance at the STU can give young people the opportunity to enter into mutually committed communities, become better at forming relationships and try new activities that may be relevant to their future. The KUI-counsellors therefore not only see esports and gaming at STU as a springboard for young people to continue their education, but also as an opportunity for young people to gain some experiences and knowledge that will benefit a healthier and less isolated adult life:

"It's something about getting ready for adulthood in some way, right? And it includes both the private part, something about being able to get up in the morning and maintain a fairly normal circadian rhythm

and personal hygiene and things like that. And then there's the social part. It's something about having a leisure life (...) Having different opportunities, at least when you suddenly find yourself alone [later in life] (Karen).

"Well, I find that they get a community, and they meet other people socially who have the same interest. So, I think that's the social part, so of course I make a big deal of explaining that it's not just about sitting around and playing. It's also about being able to get along in the community, and that also requires that when we train, you have to be part of it too" (Pernille).

Across our interviews, the KUI-counsellors thus highlight the social aspect as the great strength of esports education. It is particularly the experience of being part of and engaging in a community that recurs when the counsellors have to describe the benefits of the education. In addition, the KUI-counsellors contrast the negative aspects of the young people's gamer life at home, such as isolation, disrupted circadian rhythms, unhealthy and sedentary activity, etc., with the advantages that they experience associated with gaming under the auspices of STU. In this way, they attribute formal educational legitimacy to gaming, as the activity can pave the way for this particular vulnerable group of young people to be lured out of their rooms and into a physical social community with the opportunity to find their way out into the large communities that are associated with adult life.

Where the relationship-building and community-supporting aspects are clear, the academic benefit and not least the academic relevance for both career opportunities and the students' adult lives are more unclear to the counsellors. For the KUI-counsellors, the academic benefit appears weak and although they express a curiosity about esports academics, they have difficulty both understanding it and finding information about it in general.

"This thing about esports that they have created as programmes... Without really thinking about the academic element and thinking about what we really want with this?... I perhaps don't think that it is something that the STUs themselves describe much, what exactly academically they get out of it. I think [that] there is actually a lot that they learn and become skilled at and such, but you can hear my ignorance. I actually don't know exactly what it is" (Klara)

Moreover, the KUI-counsellors request descriptions of the academic content and tools that can help translate gaming-related competencies into labour market-relevant competencies. Tools that the young people themselves can use in meetings with, for example, job centres.

These two general findings are repeated among the STU teachers, who also emphasize the community that esports education facilitates with a special focus on the students' social and communicative competencies, while at the same time downplaying the academic benefit of esports education. Some of the teachers tend to describe the academic content as being about social and communicative competencies. Another teacher goes so far as to call the academic benefit sparse, but at the same time points out that the academic aspect is mainly about "communicative skills" (Niklas).

The unclear academic aspect means that esports education by other actors, for example parents, is experienced as a kind of introductory subject before the actual academic content at the STU starts:

"It's a misconception of what esports is, that they just sit there and play computer games. When we meet the parents, it's a "soft subject," and "when are they going to come over and have something professional?" We meet that all the time" (Martin).

Both KUI-counsellors and teachers experience that the primary benefit of esports education is that young people become part of and can act in new communities. The specific esports subject is thus connected to the skills required to be part of such a community, such as being aware of one's own behavior and role, and the ability to communicate with others.

In summary, teachers and KUI-counsellors experience how the young people at STU, through their crossing of domains, move from gaming at home to being gamers who are legitimate participants in STU education. This also means a change in the way young people can become active participants in communities and even develop friendships at the STU. The esports content is often unclear to the KUI-counsellors and to some extent also to the teachers. However, the unclear professionalism is largely offset by the many positive opportunities that open up for young people in terms of attending the STU, forming social relationships and becoming aware of other activities at the STU.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Our analysis shows that both the teachers and the KUI-counsellors generally have positive experiences of the participation of vulnerable young people in the STU's esports courses. This applies both to the "entrance" of the young people to the STU's esports programmes, the esports education itself, and the benefits thereof. It is clear that the KUI-counsellors only have limited insight into the young people's gaming experiences and have difficulty identifying the professionalism of the esports courses and possible links to other domains outside the world of games. Despite this, the counsellors are predominantly positive about the young people's increased motivation to attend the STU, their active participation in social communities and their increased motivation to try other courses or activities at the STU. The teachers are also positive, and highlight specific activities in the teaching, where they particularly use the games to work with communication in relation to strengthening the players' mutual cooperation in the game and regulating the young people's tone of communication.

It is a clear limitation of this study, that it does not include data on the actual "doings" of the esports programmes. For further analysis of this, we refer to on-going work on how the STU students participate in esports activities (Jensen et al., in review) and how the STU students perceive the esports programmes (Jensen et al., 2024).

In conclusion, both KUI-counsellors and teachers experience that esports education can help vulnerable young people cross boundaries between being at home (leisure domain), where they are often isolated, and transforming into active participants in the STU (educational domain). The young people are socially included into communities where they are given the opportunity to draw on their gaming interests, but at the same time new opportunities are opened up and offered.

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