NEXTcast 2.10: Geoff Lachapelle on the Educational Value of eSports

In this episode, NEXTcast producer Kristin Valois speaks to Geoff Lachapelle–Humber's Humber's eSports coordinator and a lecturer in the Game Programming program–about the educational value of competitive gaming.

Kristin Valois: Welcome to *NEXT*cast, a podcast about teaching and learning at Humber College. I'm Kristin Valois, and editorial assistant with Humber Press. On *NEXT*cast, we talked to some of the faculty and staff who are leading innovation at Humber both inside and outside the classroom. Today, Geoff Lachapelle joins me in studio. Geoff is the game programming lecturer and the eSports coordinator in the School of Media Studies. We learn more about why video games aren't just for kids anymore.

I'm so pleased to have you in the studio. We met back in November, and I had the opportunity to tour the at the time, the newly unveiled eSports gaming space at the North Campus. It's really incredible, high performance computers and accessories, soundproof walls. So can you tell me a little bit about this space and how it came to be at Humber?

Geoff Lachapelle: Yeah, absolutely. The gaming space, which we jokingly call the Dojo because it's designed for closed private practice sessions and competition, came about after [laughter]... Good. That was exactly the reaction I was hoping for. It came about after a lot of discussion and a lot of effort to create an efficient and effective training space that our players could use, not just to play online, but as a place where they could play together.

A really important factor that comes in when you're making a space like that is making sure that it's isolated and making sure that players can't be a disturbed when they're trying to focus. When you're playing these kinds of games, there's a huge cognitive load happening in terms of how much stuff you have to process, how much thinking you have to do around strategy. It doesn't help when you've got three people standing over your shoulder going, "What are you playing? What game is that?" So especially for our first space, we wanted to ensure that our players had a good area where they were separated out and they were able to focus and able to work on improving their play.

Kristin Valois: Right.

Geoff Lachapelle: That's part of the thought process behind ... If you go down by the Dojo, which is in LB building, you'll notice that there is a joking vinyl

that we put on the door ... on the window at my request, which is, "Please do not tap on the glass. Please do not feed the gamers."

Kristin Valois: So for the uninitiated, can you explain a little bit about what competitive gaming really is? And I know you've done this many times.

Geoff Lachapelle: Yeah. No worries. So competitive gaming at its core is, in a lot of ways, a replication of the amount of focus, and dedication, and application of skill that comes into play with most traditional sports. When you're playing sports, it's not just about who's stronger, unless you're in a football lineup. And even then there's a lot of tactics and a lot of technique to that. It's an application of skill and focus and understanding of the game's mechanics and the game's operations.

When you're playing a competitive video game, the same principle applies. But instead of dealing with a lot of physical and stress based mechanical reactions and interactions, instead of basically pushing each other and kicking a ball when you're playing a video game, it's more about reaction times and cognitive processing on a much faster level. A lot of the time, I jokingly say it's like playing chess, but you're both making moves at the same time while flicking elastic bands at each other's pieces.

Kristin Valois: Okay.

Geoff Lachapelle: You're trying to tackle ... Essentially, you're trying to accomplish a goal, an individual, single goal that wins you the game, exactly like you would in a traditional sport. Except when you're playing video games, you have to be factoring in math. You have to be factoring in a lot of interactions that may not be happening directly to your knowledge. And typically you're playing it with a much smaller team or even one on one.

Kristin Valois: I think when we were talking about this before, we were saying how gamers are actually, like literally athletes and that's why you need this room, because they need space to train.

Geoff Lachapelle: Yes.

Kristin Valois: And you had mentioned that at one point in a game they could be doing university level physics.

Geoff Lachapelle: Yes.

Kristin Valois: Which is wild to me. So what are some of the other skills that are involved in competitive gaming that you might not realize.

Geoff Lachapelle: Obviously, it's easy to say you click a lot, but then you have to start considering every one of those clicks, every one of those button presses does something, which means you need to be working fast. And the faster you work, the faster you are, the faster you are than your opponent. And the faster you are and the faster you are than your opponent, the more likely you are to win. So yes, they're clicking a lot, but we're getting into actions per minute, number of key presses, mouse clicks, whatever, that range into the two to 300 per minute, which is two to four mouse clicks a second, actions per second. That's spread across your keyboard and your mouse when you're playing a PC game.

                    Additionally, you have a lot of fine motor control skills that need to be done. In games like Counter-Strike, you have to be pixel perfect in your aim. In the same way that when you're doing like the classic film image of the standoff where you both pull your gun, it's not just about who's quicker, but you have to be accurate, and that's at play every second that you play counter strike.

                    Then you get into soft skills where you have to be communicating, you have to be interacting, you have to be sharing information as quickly and concisely as possible because you need to be faster. You need to be more accurate. You need to be more precise.

Kristin Valois: When you're describing this, this sounds an awful lot like a workplace…

Geoff Lachapelle: It can be.

Kristin Valois: ... where everyone has a different skill, people play to their strengths. So I guess how does that ... How does being on an eSport team fit in with the Humber curriculum? Because we're all about teaching and learning on this podcast, so how does that better prepare student ... We can call them student athletes, gamer athletes ... for the future?

Geoff Lachapelle: That's an excellent question. More than anything, obviously there comes the motivations around academics. We can talk about the math behind a game all day, but that's not necessarily universal. I think you hit the nail on the head by comparing it to a workplace.

                    These people when they train, when they play together, they're trying to win or lose, which means you have very clearly delineated

successes and very clear failures when you don't want a game. And when it's that stark of victories and defeats and you're locked in a room with four to six other people for three to five hours at a time, workplace tension becomes a very real thing.

Kristin Valois: Right.

Geoff Lachapelle: One of the biggest things that any players on any team have to work on, and something we stress a lot in taking the time to do right, is making sure that players communicate and players work on the issues they have with each other productively because they need to be able to work together as a team. They need to be able to communicate.

Simple things like learning how to lose, learning how to take a defeat with grace and dignity and to do it in a way where you grow as a person is a very, very important skill for-

Kristin Valois: Absolutely. That might be one of the most important thing you could ever learn in college.

Geoff Lachapelle: So what video games can do at their core is show you how to create better practice tools, better improvement tools, how to look at your performance in whatever you're doing and be critical and constructive with yourself and how to improve. It can teach you how to be a better communicator, how to be a better worker with your team, and how to productively discuss issues with people in a workplace.

The whole point of what we're trying to do right now is create opportunities for students who are motivated enough to jump through all of the hoops that we've set.

Kristin Valois: Right. So they had to submit, like, a written proposal and quantify what their skills were.

Geoff Lachapelle: Paperwork, plus describing what training programs they're going to be putting their players through, strengths and weaknesses of players, how they expect their coaching to go, expectations around tournament performance and how they plan on improving that performance. Essentially, they have to think through from top to bottom how this team is going to run, because this is not about creating a space for some kids to just show up and play video games after class.

Kristin Valois: Absolutely.

Geoff Lachapelle: This is about creating work opportunities for people who are going to take a competitive environment seriously. And there's a lot of thought process that has to go into being successful at any competitive environment.

One of the last images is I show the kids in the last week of career connections, spoiler alert for any career connection students here, is this beautiful image of all these stairways and ladders and ropes that all lead upward. It's like all clear cut, delineated pathways, and they all lead to one point. There's person's standing at that one point where all these pathways lead to. And in front of them is just empty, infinite expanse where you can go anywhere you want. And it's incredibly intimidating, and it's honestly the most perfect summary of graduation I can give you. All the structure, all the guidance that you've had since we've started kindergarten is gone. Now you can do whatever you want, and now you get to learn about the words decision paralysis.

Kristin Valois: *NEXT*cast is produced by Humber Press and the Creative Productions team at The Centre for Teaching & Learning. Special thanks to Santino Pannozzo and Nathan Whitlock.

To suggest stories for future episodes of *NEXT*cast or just to let us know what you think, email HumberPress@Humber.ca. Thanks, and see you next time. That's still not a pun.